

# Tackling tribal dropouts

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On the wood walls of a church camp meeting room, lists scrawled on butcher paper defined reasons American Indians drop out of school.

Bullying. Teachers don't show they care. Not being pushed by teachers. Teen pregnancy. Drinking. Depression. Gangs. That's what the kids said.

What keeps them in school? The 20 middle school and high school students from Montana's reservations had answers for that as well.

Friends. Sports. Activities. Family. Because you want to go to college. Parents who force you to stay in school. Cool teachers.

The students, along with an equal number of adults - educators, tribal leaders, government officials and nonprofit representatives - got together to tackle the tough problem this week. They met for four days during the second annual Montana Wyoming Tribal Youth Summit.

The gathering took place in the bucolic setting of the Luccock Park Camp, nine miles south of Livingston. The summit was put on by the Montana-Wyoming Tribal Leaders Council and the United Way of Yellowstone County and was sponsored by a national organization, America's Promise Alliance.

There's no dispute over the gravity of the problem. According to the Office of Public Instruction, the 2008 graduation rate for American Indian students was 62.5 percent - the lowest of all Montana ethnic groups measured.

But solving it will take creativity. That was the idea behind the summit, which brought together youths and adults to talk about the reasons for dropping out and possible answers.

Steven Sroka, an educator and national speaker on dropouts and related issues, facilitated the summit. He also is founder of an organization called "The Power of One."

Research on school dropouts, Sroka said, suggests that four major components must be addressed to turn the problem around. They are students, school, family and community.

"It's like a chair," he said. "If one of those legs breaks, the chair falls over."

To turn the concept into a hands-on exercise, Sroka asked each participant to decorate a white T-shirt. On one side, he had the students and adults draw or write what they're proud of, who their hero is, their pet peeves and their dreams.



Craig Falcon, Tyesha Vaile, Superintendent of Public Instruction Denise Juneau and Joe Aims Back, from left, pose for a photo Thursday. They were attending a Montana Wyoming Tribal Youth Summit at Luccock Park near Livingston, trying to find ways to prevent high school dropouts.

BOB ZELLARY/Gazette Staff

On the other side of the shirt, they shared strategies to support each of the legs of the chair to keep kids in school. One of the youths, Josh Black Elk, suggested that students need to work hard, schools need to offer better careers, families need to give more support and the community needs to be more involved.

Norma Bixby said students need to keep mentally and physically fit, families must love their children, schools need to educate students and communities should support their schools.

Bixby, director of the Northern Cheyenne Tribal Education Department and a former state legislator, also wrote the word "persistence" on the T-shirt.

"The message is never give up," she said, "no matter how tough things get."

Craig Falcon, who works with the Community Care Program in Heart Butte and is a student at MSU Billings, said that as a student, he would be a role model 24/7. He suggested that schools should improve their curriculums, while families and communities need to stay involved in the education system.

Superintendent of Schools Denise Juneau, pointing to the lists on the wall, observed that the adults who talked about what keeps students in school wrote down a number of ideas. The students, she said, focused on relationships.

"And that's pretty much all they talked about, was to have caring adults, people who cared about them, people who pushed them to their limit without going too far and people who listened to them," Juneau said. "So why don't we create a community of caring people?"

Juneau, an enrolled member of the Blackfeet Tribe, told the group that she has driven through communities where she sees students walking down the streets while school is in session. But no one stops to ask why they aren't in school.

Adults, she said, might be afraid they'll be cussed out by parents, or admonished and told that it's the Indian way to let kids do what they want.

"But education in today's society is way too important to let that happen," she said. "We need to pull together, and I guess that's really where we'd like to move. We know what students want - we hear it over and over again."

Juneau asked the students how many knew what OMG stood for? Then she asked about BFF, and got the same result. But when she asked how many know what AP stands for, no one knew its meaning - advanced placement - and only a few knew the terms SAT and ACT.

"We need to switch our language so they know all the acronyms and they know all the language and have all the skills they need to be successful," Juneau said. "That's why we're here. We're here to support them, and we need to put those supports in place and make sure that's the agenda we push."

By the end of the summit, participants agreed to form a statewide coalition and meet regularly to continue working on solutions to the dropout problem.

Bringing diverse groups together will be crucial to coming up with solutions, said Richard Wells of the Washington, D.C.-based America's Promise Alliance. His organization is holding similar summits in all 50 states and in 55 selected cities.

"My challenge for you is not to make this just a meeting but to make it a movement," he said. "It's about action, but it's also about being strategic, so think through and come up with a plan that's going to transform Montana."

That way, Wells said, the youths at the summit will be able to open a time capsule in 20 years and see the things that seemed so insurmountable in 2009 weren't.

"They can say, 'Oh, yeah, we fixed that a long time ago.' "