

Arapaho School students get creative in a new spin on learning culture

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Transforming one's spiritual identity onto a shield believing that it will provide physical and psychological/spiritual protection is a traditional Indian concept.

That same concept was applied to Dr. Stephen Sroka's presentation at the Fremont County School District 38 schools in Arapahoe recently as part of his "The Power of One-Teaching to a T-Native Style."

Sroka, from Ohio, added his own twist to the belief using T-shirts to emulate a shield.

"It is a brain-based teaching strategy developed to reach and teach at-risk native youth," Sroka said. "It deals with sex, drugs and violence, all within a personal native historical, philosophical and realistic perspective."

Students designed the center of their own T-shirts with a four-piece wheel. Each quarter of the wheel then was designated for what the students interpreted for their specific dreams, here, what they are proud of and pet peeves.

District 38's Arnella Oldman, who assisted with getting Sroka to visit Arapahoe, said each T-shirt design is unique to the student.

"It comes from themselves and expresses who they really are," Oldman said.

Sroka said the concept of the project was for students to address the issues they are confronted with today and develop their own life skills on how to deal with them.

"It teaches that students have choices and have consequences," Sroka said.

The bottom of the T-shirt was reserved for a safe-sex message and the back was for a drug-free message that each student created.

"The sleeves were where the students illustrated how they were going to protect themselves," Oldman said.

Sroka said the program attempts to allow students to gain a deeper understanding of their culture.

"The students were encouraged to draw on their native culture to reflect colorful, powerful and culturally sensitive messages," Sroka said. "The resulting T-shirts were spectacular, insightful, colorful, humorous and thought-provoking."

This was the first time Sroka applied the new teaching technique.

"Sensing the passion, concern and urgency in Arnella's request and knowing that native youth are some of the most at-risk youth in America, I created The Power of One-Teaching to a T-Native Style to help educate, inspire, and motivate each Native youth to make a difference in his or her school, community and life," Sroka said. "My goals were to involve all the students in an activity that would be interesting, fun, insightful, useful, and let them explore their creativity, their native spiritual heritage, reflect on their life and develop relevant life skills to deal with the adolescent risk factors of sex, drugs, and violence."

"I wanted them to think about who they were and where they were going. I wanted them to become involved with their learning."

Sroka said his concept involves students to be their own educators.

"It starts by having students look at themselves to see who they are, what they are most proud of, the people they admire, the things that bother them and identify their dreams," Sroka said. "It lets each student learn about critical adolescent life issues and then create their own unique message to address the issues."

"To me, one of the most significant points about this teaching



Arapaho High School students Rhys Lopez, Donald Antelope and Whitney SunRhodes designed T-shirts as part of a workshop given by Dr. Stephen Sroka.

strategy is that it could be easily used with native youth on all reservations."

Sroka said this strategy could improve several education statistics such as graduation rates.

"The high school graduation rate for American Indians is the lowest among Asian, Hispanic, Black and White students in the United States. Wyoming has one of the lowest graduation rates in the country for American Indian students,"

Sroka said. "Although there are many factors that impact graduation rates, I believe that if students are not learning what we are teaching, we must change the way we teach."

Arapaho Charter High School sophomore Whitney SunRhodes said she took home several messages from the workshop.

"I felt it was very educating because a lot of students learned a lot about themselves," SunRhodes said. "There was a Power Point being shown while we were doing our shirts showing us a lot of messages and facts about sex and drugs that I didn't even know about."

Edward Wadda, Eastern Shoshone Tribal Liaison to Gov. Dave Freudenthal's office, who attended the workshop, said he thought the students gained much from Sroka's teaching.

"I thought it was a good opportunity for the students to express some of their thoughts and feelings in a creative way," Wadda said. "His philosophy allowed them to apply it to their own life. It got them to think about some concepts and, 'What do

I think about teen sexuality?' and, 'What are my goals?'"

School District 38 superintendent Roger Clark said he was impressed with the workshop.

"I thought it was very helpful and the message was very timely with topics and issues we are dealing with right now," Clark said. "I saw students who were engaged and reflecting that day."

Clark said he was so impressed that he will bring Sroka back to Arapahoe during the summer to work with staff on "what we need to do to create a culture that really personalizes the school."

"It was a good exercise for the students and I want it to carry over to our staff," he said.

Sroka and the students from Arapahoe are being considered to present the teaching technique at the National Indian School Board Association's national conference this summer.

Sroka has been recognized nationally for his speaking, writing, training and educational consulting on sex, drugs and violence education.

He is the president of Health Education Consultants and an adjunct assistant professor in the School of Medicine at Case Western Reserve University. He has written a dozen books and more than 30 articles.