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**Akwesasne Freedom School
Friends of the Akwesasne Freedom School
Akwesasne Mohawk Nation**

Contact:
PO Box 290
Roosevelttown, NY 13683
Phone: 518-358-7073

In the fight for sovereignty, the citizens of the Mohawk Nation recognized that self-determination was critical in education. The Akwesasne Freedom School (AFS) was created as a place for wholly Mohawk education. Grounding learning and teaching in Mohawk lifeways, the School has survived political, financial, and institutional challenges to become a respected and supported institution of the Mohawk community. Through the ongoing efforts of parents, families and the larger Mohawk Nation community, AFS has played a critical role in the formation of Mohawk identity, citizenship, and nationhood for the past twenty-five years, extending even beyond those who attend the school and into the next generations of Mohawk leadership.

Modern Mohawk history has been characterized by series of struggles against the U.S. and Canadian federal governments, New York State, and the provinces of Quebec and Ontario, as well as by internal political skirmishes. These struggles even the internal ones have centered on questions of sovereignty and self-determined self-government. Notably, one theme has remained clear and uniting even in the face of other disagreements: the citizens of the nation desire to retain and nurture a Mohawk identity.

The Akwesasne Freedom School was born from both of these forces the struggle for self-determined self-government and the commitment to Mohawk identity. In 1979, during a standoff with New York State concerning the rights of the nation, a number of Mohawk Nation parents with the support, encouragement, and sanction of the traditional tribal government decided that the education of their children was a critical factor the state should not control. Seeking to reclaim their right to determine the education of their children, the parents founded the Akwesasne Freedom School (AFS). The school founders were concerned with the lack of cultural teaching and Mohawk language in mainstream schools. The school was begun to rebuild the nation and to reverse the assimilation process.

For the last twenty-five years, AFS has served as a crucible for grassroots nation building. It is a place where the dominant if not only language children hear during the school day is Mohawk. The rhythm and structure of the school day and school year are guided by Mohawk traditions and sensibilities, marked especially by the opening and closing of each school day with the traditional Thanksgiving Address. Graduates from the AFS have had a transformative impact on other schools, assumed leading roles in the community, and often remained engaged with AFS, training a new generation of Mohawk Nation citizens.

Education is the most fundamental way to ensure the next generation of Mohawk Nation leaders has the necessary teachings and that Mohawk Nation sovereignty will continue. However, many generations of tribal citizens across Indian Country have been educated in externally controlled schools that suppress their native cultures, leading to an ongoing loss of language, traditions, and identity. Establishing schools that are run by tribal citizens and supported by the Mohawk Nation government is an effective way to not only reclaim education, but also to maintain Mohawk language, history, identity, and a sense of nationhood.

The Akwesasne Freedom School is a Mohawk immersion school for grades pre-kindergarten through six and a transition school for grades seven and eight. However, unlike the typical immersion program in which a non-English school uses a different language, but maintains the pattern, flow, and logic of teaching found in a mainstream school the Akwesasne Freedom School immerses children in an entirely Mohawk way of thinking and learning. Mohawk philosophy and cosmology motivate the curriculum, teaching methods, and even the pattern of the school day and year.

For example, the school day begins and ends with recitation of the Ohen:ton Kariwahtekwen (Words That Come Before All Else, or Thanksgiving Address). Because the Address pays respect to all things, the school has been able to base its curriculum on it. The Address frames curriculum instruction in math, science, history, geography, reading, writing, and more. AFS teaching methods incorporate traditional and contemporary art, song, and stories, an approach that also serves to instill the Mohawk values of respect, peace, and community. The School's community garden and students' daily walks provide opportunities for learning about traditional medicine plants and reflection on human relationships within the natural world. The School operates year-round to take better advantage of teaching based on the seasons. Students also learn about and attend traditional Longhouse ceremonies. In sum, this is an entirely different non-English and Mohawk-led paradigm for teaching and learning.

For seventh and eighth grade, instruction shifts to include English language in order to facilitate transition into the public school setting. Students continue their Mohawk education through ongoing language classes and cultural activities. Because of the heavy concentration on Mohawk in the earlier grades, the transition also includes supplemental instruction, making sure that graduates have appropriate grade level knowledge when they enter high school. In this way, graduates of the Akwesasne Freedom School achieve what one 1970s Mohawk education leader termed a 200 percent education: they have a 100 percent Mohawk education and a 100 percent mainstream education.

Because of this approach, very few AFS graduates have trouble in high school. While the transition to an all-English, Western system can make the first post-AFS semester difficult, most graduates go on to excel in high school and beyond. In fact, some AFS alumni have been awarded a place with the National Honor Society and others have met the criteria to be valedictorian. One graduate even went on to become a Gates Millennium Scholar. And, AFS appears to have an effect even after high school, with Tribal leaders reporting a high proportion of AFS graduates who go on to college. Some parents believe that the AFS students' foundational experience in a non-mainstream environment, while still living in a world that is English speaking, taught them good adaptation and coping skills. In other words, students learn how to learn, and that makes them good high school students.

Over its 25-year history, many strategies have kept the school open and operating in its consciously Mohawk way. First, the school is a community effort, involving the support and involvement of each of the Mohawk Nation's governments and their citizens. Traditional

chiefs and clan mothers assist in cultural instruction, from visiting the school, to present feathers and flags, to conduct tobacco burnings, and to teach about Long-house ceremonies. These leaders also have provided support and encouragement to the school's staff and managers. The northern side's (Canadian) elected council has been able to provide AFS with some federal education funds, while the southern side's (United States) elected government supports the school through its environmental division by working on joint projects with AFS students.

Commitment to the school from the general community, including parents, also runs high. Parents are deeply involved, running the school by committee and taking on many of the responsibilities of keeping the school functional. For example, parents maintain and clean the school; build, remodel, and expand its physical infrastructure; and some serve as teachers. These responsibilities establish a deep commitment to the school and help ensure its survival. The commitment now extends over several generations. Teachers and former students send their children and grandchildren to the school, and some former students even return as faculty members. This regeneration demonstrates that those touched by AFS feel it served them well. It is not surprising that elected tribal leaders on both the northern and southern side of the territory send their children to AFS.

Additionally, AFS has innovative approaches to education, from teaching and learning to the actual management of the school. Not only is AFS centered in Mohawk identity, but its curriculum and instruction also reflect learning and teaching grounded in a Mohawk way of being. For example, everything taught in grades Pre-K through six is rooted in the Mohawk Thanksgiving address. Coupled with a school day schedule and school year calendar that further immerse students in Mohawk culture, the school succeeds at Mohawk socialization. AFS students consciously see themselves as part of Mohawk society and the Mohawk nation. In addition, the school focuses on experiential learning, for both school-based and cultural-based knowledge. Students learn about grocery shopping, counting money, and budgeting by going to a grocery store while they learn cultural activities like singing and stories by visiting elders and participating in ceremonies. Even the school management structure is innovative. The school manager takes most of the day-to-day responsibility for the school but has much less power than a traditional school principal. Instead, the manager is more of a problem-solver for the faculty and implementer for the parent board. This model of greatly constrained hierarchy provides a workable alternative to the strict hierarchical structures common in mainstream society and is better suited to the Mohawk community.

Another strategy for sustainability has been the school's independence and its unique structure. Because the dynamic political environment at Akwesasne often results in dramatic changes in leadership and programs, the school maintains its continuity by remaining independently run. Thus, while the traditional government had an important role in the school's formation, and all three governmental bodies continue to support the school, the fact that the school is organizationally independent from all of them tends to keep it farther from the fray. Given its independent status and the fact that AFS is effectively a private school that does not charge tuition, this independence can sometimes limit the school's financial resources. Assistance in many forms from parents and the community enable AFS to maintain its separate identity. In fact, parents run the school, giving it another layer of autonomy. The Parents Committee hires all school staff, including the manager, assists with financial management and fundraising, and takes responsibility for building maintenance. Additionally, the school manager is always actively engaged in fundraising from the philanthropic sector, and seeks partnerships that help keep its doors open.

Finally, the school plays an important role in grass roots nation building and ensuring the

sovereignty of the Mohawk Nation. As one representative of the traditional council stated, “We need a school that focuses first on our language and culture, because in order for the Mohawk Nation to survive, we need our language.” Others put it more starkly by saying, “You can’t be sovereign if you don’t know your language and live your culture.” By teaching Mohawk language and culture, the school is strengthening sovereignty and engaging in nation re-building. But more than this, the tight linkage between the school’s curriculum and Mohawk thinking and being helps students see that it is possible to be fully Mohawk and yet live in the contemporary world. Mohawk lifeways are represented as ways of being and living that have resonance, relevance, and meaning today and everyday. By engaging in this sort of deep decolonizing effort, the school is engaged in the fundamental training in self-determination and self-governance.

Year after year, the school has generated a cadre of knowledgeable Mohawks who have proven capable of asserting greater Native control over non-tribal institutions and building more self-determined Mohawk institutions, including the Haudenosaunee Environmental Taskforce. In fact, through the advocacy of AFS graduates, the local public Salmon River school district now offers advanced Mohawk language classes in high school, provides opportunities for the school day to open and close with the Thanksgiving Address, flies the Mohawk flag alongside the US and New York State flags, and sanctions traditional apparel as graduation regalia. In addition, graduates are accepting leadership roles within the community and taking responsibility for passing on the cultural foundations they themselves received. These activities are strengthening the nation and, in turn, creating ongoing demand for the school’s services.

For tribal nations asserting control over education, AFS offers an innovative paradigm of what schools are and what schools could be. In the words of AFS leaders, “Look to your traditions, your language, for your equivalents of the Thanksgiving Address, ideas and practices fundamental to your culture that can serve as the basis for your school’s curriculum. And, don’t be bounded by Western ideas of how to structure and organize the school day and school year or the learning that needs to occur at school. Look instead to your nation’s beliefs, customs, and lifeways.” In accepting its charge to teach Mohawk language and culture, AFS created a space for families and community to come together in providing a 200% education for all its youth.

Lessons:

- Education is fundamental to tribal sovereignty, particularly when it’s grounded in tribal beliefs, customs, and lifeways. It gives students the tools to excel academically and personally, while creating new generations of committed tribal citizens and future leaders.
- Schools developed out of and deeply rooted in a tribal community become valued, self-sustaining institutions, able to overcome political, financial, and institutional challenges and provide a reservoir of experience, knowledge, and resources.
- Commitment by parents, community, and tribal government to run a school independently from tribal politics ensures continuity and common goals in educating all of a nation’s youth.