



THE HARVARD PROJECT ON AMERICAN INDIAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

John F. Kennedy School of Government • Harvard University

HONORING NATIONS: 1999 HONOREE

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By the early 1960s, residents of Rough Rock, Arizona, a town on the Navajo Reservation, had become deeply concerned about their children's lack of knowledge of Navajo ways. Community members felt strongly that a primary cause of the problem was the "foreign" educational system imposed upon its children. Not only did the U.S. government and state institutions—that is, non-Indians—control Navajo education, but in their hands, education was a means of assimilating American Indian children into mainstream society, removing all traces of Native culture and language. In earlier generations, children had at least received a cultural education at home. But the progressive impact of non-Indian schools meant that fewer and fewer families were able or inclined to teach Navajo traditions.

Thus, in 1966, in an effort to prevent the educational system from further eroding Navajo culture, Rough Rock became the first Native community in the United States to assume control of a Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) school. By contracting with the BIA to take over school management, local educators gained authority to create a culturally appropriate educational system based on Navajo ways of thinking, learning, and teaching. Through their efforts, the high school soon offered a unique pedagogy, one that combined western educational models with Navajo traditions.

In the mid-1990s, however, school administrators determined that the School could—and should—teach Navajo knowledge in a more intentional way. As a result, they created the Rough Rock Community School's Navajo Studies Department, which consolidates and augments the School's Navajo culture and language programs. Through the Department's efforts, the School now offers 23 Navajo Studies courses, teaching topics as diverse as conversational Navajo, Navajo philosophy, and contemporary issues facing the Navajo Nation.

The success of the Navajo Studies program is evident in several ways. For example, the Nation's Tribal Council has recognized Rough Rock as the only Navajo Studies school on the Reservation. In response to demand, the School has both grown in size and opened enrollment to students from any of the Navajo Nation's 110 chapters. In other words, Rough Rock has effectively become a magnet school for training in Navajo Studies. The Department is also developing a comprehensive Navajo Studies curriculum to be used by other reservation schools. Its availability will help combat the persistent, reservation-wide loss of cultural knowledge—despite high language retention among the Nation's general population, 80 percent of students entering reservation Head Start programs do not speak Navajo.

Clearly, the Rough Rock Community School has had an important impact on the Navajo Nation. First through the integration of western and Navajo teaching approaches, and later through the development of the Navajo Studies curriculum, the School has helped to ensure the survival of Navajo ways. But of equal importance is the impact that Rough Rock has had on all Native Nations. As the first school to be controlled entirely by a local Indian community, Rough Rock paved the way for over 200 more contract schools, which allow Indian students from all tribes to attain a western education and, at the same time, learn about their own history, traditions, and language. And, because the U.S. Congress' 1975 legislation providing for tribal self-determination in all federally funded Indian programs was motivated by the need for self-determination in Indian education, local control at Rough Rock was a critical part of a larger—and transforming—movement in Indian Country.

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