



THE HARVARD PROJECT ON AMERICAN INDIAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

John F. Kennedy School of Government • Harvard University

HONORING NATIONS: 1999 HONOREE

Rosebud Tribal Education Department and Education Code Tribal Education Department, Rosebud Sioux Tribe

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In the 1980s, statistics showed that the 3,000 elementary and secondary school-age members of Rosebud Sioux Tribe attained disproportionately low levels of academic attendance and achievement at both tribal and public schools. Seeing these numbers, tribal leaders felt strongly that the students' extremely low attendance and performance rates put an entire generation of Lakota in jeopardy.

In response, the Rosebud Sioux Tribe engaged in four years of research and planning and gathered input from tribal leaders, educators, parents, and others* about how the Tribe might improve its children's educational experiences. These efforts culminated in 1990 with the enactment of a Tribal Education Code and the creation of a Tribal Education Department. The Code, which is administered by the Tribal Education Department, regulates and coordinates the work of tribal schools, public schools, and federally funded Indian education programs, and in so doing, assists in sifting through the web of Indian education offerings, programs, and funds. Together, the Department and Code create a role for the tribal government that co-exists with and enhances the roles of school boards, program directors, and parents. And, significantly, because it applies across geographic and political boundaries, the Code upholds the belief that education is important for all Indian youth—whether they live on or off the reservation or attend tribal or public schools.

Because the Rosebud Tribal Education Code is comprehensive, it serves many different functions. Under the Code, the Education Department's general responsibilities are to review school policies, plans, and budgets; monitor and assess schools, education programs, and student academic performance; and recommend corrective processes and procedures. Specifically, the Code charges the Department with developing or overseeing the development of tribal curricula and education standards, tribal parental and community involvement programs, teacher training programs and re-certification courses, and other educational improvements. The Department also serves as a liaison between parents, schools, and the tribal government; coordinates resources on specific education problems and issues; provides technical assistance to schools and education programs; and advocates for education accountability by the state and federal government.

Through these initiatives, the Education Department and Code have resulted in considerable improvements in student attendance and achievement. For example, because the Code made school attendance a priority, the Department developed outreach efforts to specifically combat truancy. Two full-time professional staff whose sole responsibility is to make sure

Indian students attend school now work for the Department. These staff members have established a close and much-needed relationship with the students who miss school and their parents, and have been able to influence all parties, including school officials, to work together to keep children in school. Since the Code's introduction, one school has seen attendance improve from 89 percent to 97 percent, and confirming the strong tie between school attendance and school completion, another has seen graduation rates rise from 24 percent to 69 percent. Much of this success can be attributed to the staff's ability to use cultural and community resources and knowledge to help solve attendance problems.

Notably, the Education Department and Code do more than ensure a better education for Lakota students. By addressing a significant public issue that affects the nation's future, the Tribal Education Department has strengthened Rosebud Sioux self-governance. Further, the implementation of the Code in non-tribal schools and outside the boundaries of the reservation is a critical exercise of self-determination. Large percentages of the Tribe's school-age members attend public schools (Natives comprise 94 percent of the Todd County High School student population) and off-reservation schools (reservation diminishment summarily placed many tribal citizens under the jurisdiction of five surrounding counties), and the Tribe must be able to influence these schools if it is to affect the education of all member children. The Tribal Education Department and Code make this possible. The Code makes it clear that all schools serving Rosebud citizens must adhere to the standards and curriculum mandates of the Tribal Education Department, and the Department is empowered to pursue these policies.

By supplementing state and federal law, the Tribal Education Department and Code have enabled the Rosebud Sioux Tribe to play a greater role in the education of its youth. The Tribe is now involved with critical components of formal education—curriculum, staffing and funding—that for decades had been managed by non-Indian governments, and it is able to bring unique resources to bear on the problems of school attendance and academic performance. Because the Education Code gives the Rosebud Tribal Education Department the power and resources to affect school policy, the Tribe has been able to achieve results where narrower efforts have failed.

*Input from the Native American Rights Fund (NARF) was particularly instrumental. They provided legal assistance to the Tribe in developing and implementing the Department and Code's unique exercise of tribal sovereignty.

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