

Placing importance on relationships

Jo Earp

In follow-up to our article on [Indigenous student retention](#), Teacher editor Jo Earp talks to the founder of a school in the US that could offer inspiration to educators here.

On the edge of the Navajo Nation, in the state of Arizona, sits a remote, rural, learning community that is the first off-grid, solar and wind powered charter school in the country. There's much more to the STAR School, however, than its impressive energy efficiency.

From humble beginnings in 2001 (built on the site of a former junkyard), this small school with deep cultural roots and values is now 'thriving'.

Co-founder Dr Mark Sorensen had been an administrator at several tribally controlled schools in the Navajo Nation before starting the STAR School.

'[It] just became obvious to me that we were spinning our wheels and ending up with a very mediocre educational system for our native kids,' he recalls.

'And, the pattern that I saw, over and over again, was schools that would either devote themselves to getting the kids to score well on tests, or they would focus on the culture - and in either case they didn't seem to succeed very well.'

Sorensen and his wife, determined to develop a school that did both, bought a piece of land near their home. In Arizona, although charter schools can have their own education philosophy, the state doesn't provide funding for facilities.

'So, my wife and I put the first building on our credit card.' He admits it was quite a struggle, but adds 'We started with 23 kids and today I think you could say we're thriving, we have 130 students ... and a waiting list of kids to get in to our school.'

The name of the school embraces two key concepts for Native communities; STAR stands for Service To All Relations. '... the idea of being of service to everyone around you, to actually have that sense that you're part of a larger family. Then, of course, 'relations' is a key thing. In Navajo culture it's ... kinship, or clanship.'

There are four core values (the 4 R's) that the STAR School operates by every day: Respect; Responsibility; Relationship and Reasoning. Sorensen explains that all four come out of the values that are the base of Navajo peacemaking – a traditional way of resolving conflict that has been practised for many generations.

'My colleague Thomas Walker and I ... worked together to develop an approach to peacemaking that could actually be integrated into the structure of a school. In particular, we wanted to find an alternative to the very punitive approach of suspension and expulsion that most western style schools adhere to.'

[STAR Peacemaking](#) from [STARSchoolMedia](#) on [Vimeo](#).

The peacemaking process is about healing, rather than blame or punishment. ‘... getting to the core issue of damaged relationships and mending of relationships with sincere feelings.’

As we discuss possible lessons from the STAR School model for Indigenous educators here in Australia, Sorensen says introducing a high quality, culturally-based preschool program for three- and four-year-olds (a modified Montessori model that has been operating for eight years) has helped improve student’s academic performance.

He’s also keen to point out that culturally-based doesn’t mean simply including content that relates to Native communities. ‘I’m talking about the way you talk to kids, the way that you interact with them. Our approach as educators has to reflect cultural values.’

‘I see this missing so many times in so many schools throughout the reservations that I visit ... people will think that by just talking about content that they’re Indigenising, and I strongly believe that Indigenising education requires taking an approach that reflects the 4Rs I talked about - first and foremost, Relationships.’

‘So, that’s one thing I would say is - start with the early childhood experience, but whatever you do in whatever grades it’s so vital to recognise the importance of relationships and the primacy of relationships over content and over other kinds of pedagogical techniques.’

STAY TUNED: In part 2 of this article, Dr Mark Sorensen talks more about the curriculum, the impact the STAR School approach is having on students, and challenges for the future.