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HONORING NATIONS: 2006 HONOREE

Morongo Tutoring Program Morongo Band of Mission Indians

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Located in the Banning Pass between San Bernardino and Palm Springs in southern California, the Morongo Band of Mission Indians has worked to address low academic achievement and high dropout rates among its high school students since the early 1990s. Despite the Band's economic successes, few citizens finished high school or attended college. In 1991, with concern among elders and parents mounting, the Band began to offer tutoring services on a small scale. Today, the program has grown beyond offering tutoring services only; it now works in partnership with the local school district and is a complete life skills program that helps students grow as learners, giving them the tools necessary to achieve the academic success they want. Absenteeism is down, graduation rates are up, more people are enrolling in college, and students are testing at or above district levels in all grades. The Morongo Band has transformed the educational experience for its children, creating lasting benefits for the Band and its people.

Following the establishment of its reservation in 1876, the Morongo Band of Mission Indians, comprised of Cahuilla, Serrano, Luiseno, and Cupeno people, struggled with chronic unemployment and many of the social ills related to poverty. It is only within the last thirty years that the Band has begun to see lasting positive changes. Beginning with a modest bingo hall in the early 1980s, the Band's economy is now supported by a resort casino and other tribal enterprises. Today it employs approximately 3,000 people in the region.

Desiring to go beyond strengthening the Morongo economy, tribal leadership sought holistic nation building, and began addressing low academic achievement within the community. In the early 1990s, students were performing poorly in school, with some not graduating from high school. Those who did graduate often chose not to attend college. Poor relationships between Morongo citizens, the neighboring community of Banning, and the local public school district, further complicated matters. Parents did not interact with the schools, cultural misunderstandings existed, and students went underserved.

While the economic context may be specific to Morongo, the educational challenges are shared by many tribal communities. American Indians throughout the U.S. experience high school graduation rates and college entrance and completion rates that are markedly lower than the general population. According to the 2000 Census, approximately 71% of the American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) population 25 years and older had at least a high school education, while the total population had an 80% high school completion rate. Only 11% of AI/ANs had at least a bachelor's degree, as compared to 24% of the total population. Tribal leadership wanted to reinforce and strengthen education as a priority for Morongo.

The Morongo Band believes educational success will provide its citizens with a stable foundation for individuals, families, and the community. In 1991, the Morongo Band hired its first tutor to improve academic skills, accelerate reading levels, identify at-risk students early, and develop self-esteem. The tutor went to each of the schools within the Banning district and worked with students individually, built relationships with teachers and administrators, and bridged communications between Morongo families and the schools. In seven years, the one-on-one tutoring made a noticeable impact on the academic performance of students and the Band began to invest more in the Tutoring Program.

Today, the Program has 15 full-time tutors, including a Morongo descendent. Through close cooperation with the Banning district, Morongo tutors work seamlessly inside the Banning schools during school hours, and the Band has expanded its offerings to include after-school services, a summer program, and even early childhood help. The Morongo Tutoring Program has increased graduation rates; improved relationships between schools, parents, and students; helped to make education a top priority for the Band and its citizens; and established the Band as an effective sovereign in regard to its neighbors. These successes are attributable to a number of factors, including the hiring of high quality and caring individuals, remaining flexible to handle and anticipate new situations, striving continually for effective communication inside and outside the organization, and injecting itself professionally into another government's school district.

The Morongo Tutoring Program assists students in specific subject areas to improve school performance. It also nurtures and assists the development of life-long learners. Even as knowledge within specific subject areas is honed, a priority is placed on fostering internal motivations for students. For example, the summer program curriculum is built upon a general theme. The 2006 theme was water and students were given related assignments such as learning about marine animals. Students conduct independent research using materials from the internet and other sources, then engage in problem solving. Tutors help students to formulate questions, providing guidance when necessary. From early childhood to high school, the Program teaches life skills and provides continuous support, encouragement, and specific subject matter tutoring in order to maximize the chance that Morongo students will succeed in school and ultimately make a lasting contribution to the nation.

Academic achievement is supported through creative learning environments. All Morongo students can access the Tutoring Center facility, complete with computers, printers, and a library. There are also private desks and rooms for group work. During the summer school session, the Center is transformed according to its selected theme. For the water theme in 2006, a number of aquariums with live fish, turtles, and sea monkeys were displayed, and the tutors transformed their work spaces with materials on the water cycle and cultural knowledge from a number of Native nations.

One of the factors key to the Tutoring Program's success is its strong partnership with the Banning school district. Tutors work on-site and are regarded by the schools as employees of the district, working with Morongo students in designated classrooms or offices. Whether helping students on a school project or providing counseling on class options, the tutors are trusted and appreciated resources for the school district. They attend to the direct educational needs of students and provide academic guidance, monitor assignments and attendance, and mark milestones toward graduation. District faculty and administrators see the tutors and the Program as critical assets in that the tutors are valued supplemental educators, counselors, and communicators between the schools and families.

The Tutoring Program has demonstrated its effectiveness in a number of impressive ways. From 2003 to 2006, the Band reported a 94% graduation rate of tribal citizens and an 89% graduation rate of citizens and second generation descendents. In the 2005-2006 academic year, the after-school program averaged 37 participants while the summer program enjoyed its largest

enrollment of 70 students. Parents also note a change within their children. As one parent describes it, "I feel the program boosts their self-confidence and allows them to achieve a positive attitude." Another parent comments, "Since [the tutor] has been a part of [my son's] education, he has shown outstanding improvement with all of his academic studies. When he first started school his grades were below the grade average. It was a big concern for me because I haven't had the proper education myself growing up... At this present time my son is above grade level thanks to the help [the tutor] has given him... The one thing I am thankful for is teaching my son positive studying habits."

Effective communication has also increased between tribal families and the district schools. The tutors act as a bridge between the Band and the Banning schools, helping to translate cultural values or practices to the school administrators. Likewise, they help the tribal citizens to better understand school policies, procedures, deadlines, and requirements. The results include parents having better interactions with school personnel; more parental involvement if their student begins to fall behind; teachers, counselors, and administrators having better understanding of the cultural foundations of the people at Morongo; and students staying on track.

Education is now a top priority with Morongo's families. The Program shows students that learning is fun and an important factor in bettering their lives. Program participation is common and is reported by parents and students to be just the way we get things done when it comes to homework, preparing for classes and exams, and staying on track toward high school graduation and life-long learning.

The Morongo Tutoring Program is an excellent example of how a tribal government can support and nurture the academic goals of its citizens. It is positively impacting the education of Morongo citizens. The Band currently does not have its own school system, and the relatively small size of the student population has led it to utilize the local public schools for its efforts. The Band takes this step, while simultaneously investing in a proactive strategy of improving the outside school system and supporting Morongo students. The Morongo Tutoring Program is a very impressive innovation, particularly for its context as a small nation. By fostering learning skills within the individual students, building resourceful learning environments, and partnering with the local school district, the Morongo Band is improving its future.

Lessons:

- Tribes can increase opportunities for learning, raise academic achievement, and inspire lifelong learners by reorienting perceptions of how and where education occurs.
- Tribal sovereignty is strengthened through mutually respectful government-to-government partnerships with local school districts; such partnerships are especially critical for small Native nations.
- By working to improve academic success among citizens and descendants, Native nations help ensure that they will have capable political and civic leaders, skilled business owners and managers, and informed community members well into the future.