

NIEA 36th Annual Convention a Success!

Jon Reyhner

The National Indian Education Association held their 36th annual convention on October 6-9, 2005, in Denver, Colorado, the ancestral homelands of the Ute, Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes. Indian educators from around the United States gathered to discuss the conference theme "Cultural Resiliency: Educating Minds and Moving Mountains."



Dr. Henrietta Mann (Northern Cheyenne) surrounded by NIEA Members including Board Members Dr. Pauline Begay and Toni Lee Tsatoke

Indian educators came together for four days to discuss the needs of the 600,000 school age Native children in the United States, listening to leading Native educators and tribal officials along with getting to choose from among 200 sessions focusing on the improvement of education for Indian children.

One of the greatest concerns today of Native educators is the impact of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act signed by President Bush in 2002. Outgoing NIEA president Dr. David Beaulieu presented a preliminary report on the NCLB's impact on Indian country based on eleven hearings held across the country from Washington, D.C., to

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36th Annual Convention 2005 Award Winners

At the October 2005 NIEA Annual Convention in Denver, Colorado, several professionals were honored with awards in the six categories of Lifetime Achievement Award, Educator of the Year Award, Elder of the Year Award, Parent of the Year Award and Community Service Award.

Lifetime Achievement Award

NIEA has presented the Lifetime Achievement Award to honor members who have made lifelong exemplary contributions to the association.



Dr. Will Antell (White Earth Ojibwe) accepts the NIEA 2005 Lifetime Achievement Award

Dr. Will Antell
White Earth Ojibwe

Dr. Antell was the first President of NIEA, serving three consecutive terms until the Indian Education Act was passed in 1972. He was founder of the National Indian Education Association and helped frame the Indian Education Act and guided its early development and implementation being

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Arapahoe Warriors Post #84 presenting the colors for the 36th Annual Convention

Honolulu, Hawaii, where Indian educators were critical of the fact that the changes in education coming from NCLB have not included the Native voice.

The school accountability requirements are a positive aspect of NCLB, forcing the government to look at the achievement gap between American Indian youth and white middle class students. However, the Title VII Indian Education provisions of NCLB only give lip service to the importance of culture-based education and some members have had phone calls from Washington that they can't offer Native languages in their schools. But it is not just Native language instruction that is in jeopardy. NCLB was found to be "narrowing the broad public purposes of schools" with its emphasis on reading and math, so that music, literature, the arts, and Native studies and taking away attention on improving the social, mental, and physical well being of Native children.

NCLB was seen in the testimony as promoting a "one-size-fits-all" curriculum that makes it harder for teachers to "connect education to the lives of students in their communities," resulting in schooling becoming "increasingly boring and disconnected

from student lives," thus increasing the drop out rate and driving good teachers out the profession. In Hawaii, six thousand teachers have indicated they want to leave the profession because of the effects of NCLB. The NCLB accountability system is flawed in that it makes only what can be tested important and focuses on year-to-year school results on standardized tests rather than focusing on the gains made by individual students.

Richard Williams (Oglala Lakota), president of the American Indian College Fund, gave the Thursday general session keynote address. In it he stressed that Indians should not view themselves as victims and "could become the best educated people in America." He noted that education should be made "fun, exciting, and challenging." He went on to declare that, "Families first must make a commitment to education" and shouldn't use schools as a scapegoat for their children's failure and that tribal governments must make education their number one priority. He called on schools to change systems that have failed Indian children. He gave strong support to Native language immersion programs because "students involved in language immersion outpace their counterparts not in language immersion."

He called for Native students and educators to excel and exceed, never giving up, to eat fresh fruit and everybody in school walk one mile every day, promoting healthy food and a healthy environment. He noted the importance of students demonstrating persistence and resilience. He declared that the government's emphasis on education without funding to back up that emphasis is hypocritical; he noted, "an educational commitment without cash is counterfeit"

Addressing the Thursday general session, Cecelia Fire Thunder, President of the Oglala Sioux, spoke about her gratefulness for the sacrifices her Indian ancestors made and the need to have an identity and belong somewhere. In her youth, her reading specialists were the National Geographic and Readers Digest magazines that her parents subscribed to and which she got to practice her reading with when they were through with them. She affirmed, "I speak English well because I spoke Lakota well.... Our languages are value based. Everything I need to know is in our language." Language is not just communication, "It's about bringing back our values and good things about how to treat each other." And she called for total immersion head start programs in Indian country.

Dr. Henrietta Mann (Cheyenne) spoke about the importance of cultural resilience and spiritual rootedness in the land/earth as we all walk together with humility on the road of life. She also applauded immersion schools and the importance of respect: respecting ourselves, others, and all life around us.

Leland Leonard, the head of the Navajo Division of Education, spoke about the change in Navajo law to create a new Diné Department of Education to give the Navajo Nation more say in the education of their