

BUILDING Bridges

How one school district strengthened ties with its communities

BARBARA BROWN

When the School District of Bayfield hired a new superintendent in the summer of 2007, school board president Robert Nelson was adamant that the new administrator address one of the board's top priorities — establishing open communication and building relationships between the district and its stakeholders.

"It was a board directive," Nelson said. "[We needed] to develop a formula for building bridges to the five communities within our district."

Those five different communities encompass the Town of La Pointe, which sits more than two miles off the main land in Lake Superior on Madeline Island; the Red Cliff Reservation of the Band of Lake Superior Chippewa (Ojibwa); the Town of Russell; the Town of Bayfield; and the City of Bayfield. Of the

district's 426 students, 76 percent are Native American.

Although the new superintendent was to take office on July 1, 2007, the board asked them to start one month earlier to work with the interim superintendent who had been at the school for 10 months.

That new superintendent was Linda Kunelius, a veteran administrator with 27 years of school district leadership experience. It didn't take long before Kunelius recognized

her first course of action: rebuild a contentious relationship with the Red Cliff community, address morale of the teaching staff, resolve budget issues, and make a major effort to get to know the district's stakeholders.

"This four-prong approach towards improving communication fit the board's vision of shifting from a top-down management style to consensus building to strengthen the district," Nelson says.

Strengthening Ties

On her first day, Kunelius was met by Dr. Dee Gokee-Rindal, a revered tribal member and the executive director of the Red Cliff Early Childhood Center (RCECC). A potential disaster was brewing between the center and the district.





Working for Native American Students

When the School District of Bayfield hired a new superintendent, it took advantage of the opportunity to reevaluate services it provides for all its students. This included educating a student population that is 76 percent Native American.

In order to serve its native students, the district had to reevaluate its Impact Aid. To do this, the district increased its understanding about Impact Aid and how it affects the district and the tribe through training.

The district also asked a team of Native American staff members to organize an all-day in-service regarding the history and culture of Red Cliff. Guest speakers were invited from the Lac Courte Oreilles Community College, the Red Cliff Tribal Council, the Great Lakes Indian and Wildlife Commission and an educational administrator for an overview of Red Cliff's history. Breakout sessions included Ojibwa beadwork, Pow Wow protocol, Ojibwa language and sports and indigenous games.

District administrators also attend monthly meetings of the Red Cliff Education Committee and the AODA meetings of the First American Prevention Center. The positive change in the relationship between the tribe and the district was evident when the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa honored the district with a presentation of the Nation's flag at the district's Sesquicentennial Celebration in May. □

"When Linda first started a year ago, she walked into a bee's nest," Gokee-Rindal says. "The RCECC was in the midst of a huge conflict with the district about the location of special needs services for Red Cliff preschool-age children."

Gokee-Rindal remembers waiting for Kunelius on the doorstep of the district office on Kunelius's first day on the job. The two leaders met before Kunelius even set foot in her new office. The Red Cliff leader was impressed with Kunelius but admits that she was still leery of the new administrator. However, that changed as the two worked together to meet the needs of Red Cliff.

"Linda and I continued to have an on-going dialogue about special needs issues," Gokee-Rindal says. "I

am pleased to say after six drafts, we created a collaborative agreement that made good sense to both entities and insured high quality services for our little ones."

Sensing that there were greater cultural differences that needed to be bridged between Red Cliff and the school district, Kunelius turned to the school board for help. Kunelius posed this question to her board: "What can we do to convey our respect to our Red Cliff parents to build a positive relationship?"

Red Cliff board member, Brian Goodwin, answered her fundamental question. "Brian shared with me the history and generational memory the tribe maintains about their relationship with the Bayfield school district," Kunelius says.



► continued from previous page

Goodwin suggested that Kunelius visit every student's home in Red Cliff to introduce herself and formally acknowledge the parent as the child's first and most important teacher and to ask a very important and culturally sensitive question.

"You have to ask the parents if you can teach their child," Goodwin told Kunelius.

The superintendent agreed and was escorted to every home by Goodwin and Cindy Garrity, another Red Cliff school board member. However, Kunelius didn't stop there. In order to reach all of the parents within the district, she took it one step further and visited all 450 student homes within the district. This was a dedicated act of community outreach by a superintendent in the Bayfield school district.

Getting Down to Work

With a new superintendent on the team, the Bayfield school district went ahead and knocked down another barrier that had stood between Red Cliff and the school district. The

district's Federal Impact Aid assurances and Indian policies and procedures needed to be reevaluated.

Kunelius and the school board applied for Federal Impact Aid and reviewed the district's Indian policies and procedures. Before finalizing the details of these two projects, she submitted the results to the tribal council for review.

"Linda actually invited tribal members to the mandatory Impact Aid Public Hearing and framed it as a listening session," Gokee-Rindal says.

Asking for the tribe's input, Gokee-Rindal says, was a major turning point.

"I am more hopeful about the future possibilities than ever before," Gokee-Rindal says. "She [Kunelius] is definitely building bridges between the school and the Red Cliff community, which have been in desperate need of repair."

Gaining Staff Trust

The challenges didn't end with the Red Cliff community. The year before Kunelius came to Bayfield,

17 teachers had received lay-off notices because of a projected budget deficit.

Teachers had been told the district was going to incur a substantial deficit, which led to the teachers receiving lay-off notices. However, the district then ended up with a surplus in its budget due to the receipt of Impact Aid payments, which were higher than anticipated. In the end, the district didn't have to lay off any teachers.

Despite this confusion, Kunelius says staff was dedicated, knowledgeable, talented and ready to take on tough issues. The educators' dedication became clear when teachers were asked to form work groups to look at relevant data, identify issues within the district, research best practices, and create an action plan for the district.

The district's leaders made a concerted effort to listen to the teacher's opinions and concerns. Art Hay, who served as president of the teachers' association during the turbulent times of potential teacher layoffs, says seeing that the district leaders were willing to listen to what the teachers had to say was encouraging.

"The superintendent makes efforts to keep us informed of the financial status of the district and to include staff on some of the decision making that affects us," Hay says. "Overall, we've had a positive beginning to the school year because of the efforts to communicate clear goals for us all to work towards - high academic achievement, positive community relations and fiscal transparency."

Kunelius also introduced Circle Training to the Bayfield staff. Circle Training provides a safe and respectful space for teachers and community members to connect in a positive way to problem solve and commit to action.

Over 80% of Wisconsin school districts
have joined over 1,300 districts across the globe
using Skyward's administrative software.



- Skyward Headquarters
Stevens Point
- Branch Offices
Stevens Point
Madison

2009 Skyward National Conference
March 25-27, 2009
Buena Vista Palace Hotel & Spa
Orlando, FL

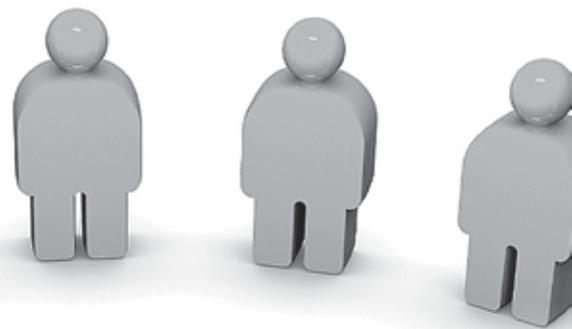
Learn more about Skyward
email: info@skyward.com
call: 1.800.236.7274

Powerful Student, Finance, and HR Administrative software exclusively for K-12 schools - public and private.



“There is a strong belief in this school district that it was created by and for the community.”

— Linda Kunelius, Superintendent
School District of Bayfield



The training underscored the importance of listening and to value and nurture respect for individuals, others, students and parents. Over 40 staff completed the training during summer vacation. It brought staff together and healed many of the misunderstandings that had existed between staff and administration.

Getting to Know the District Stakeholders

Perhaps one of the district's most innovative approaches in connecting with community is its “Coffee Chats.” These are one-on-one, open, frank discussions with individuals in a casual setting to exchange ideas about how to keep the district moving forward. Over ten “Coffee Chats” were held throughout the communities during the 2007-2008 school year.

The school board president also arranged meetings between Kunelius and city council members, town board members and tribal council members. She met with them again in the fall to discuss the school budget, levy and Impact Aid. Kunelius also made it a point to connect with state legislators and state organizations such as the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Wisconsin Association of School Boards, Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators, and Wisconsin Educators Association Council representatives.

Creating working relationships with community organizations, like the Bayfield Chamber of Commerce and Visitor Bureau, was also important to Kunelius.

“The district has reached out to the community over the past year in tremendous ways and developed a newsletter for area residents and an informational brochure for business owners,” Cari Obst, director of the Bayfield Chamber of Commerce and Visitor Bureau, says.

Although the district has made large gains in working with its communities, staff and local and state stakeholders, there is still work to do. As the 2008-2009 school year unfolds for the Bayfield school district, Kunelius says she will continue to implement changes that will strengthen the ties between the school district and the community.

“There is a strong belief in this school district that it was created by and for the community,” Kunelius says. “With three townships, one city, an island community, and indigenous people all vested in the same district, it is imperative to continue to bridge our differences to ensure academic success for all students.

“The progress we have made represents an authentic team effort,” Kunelius adds. “Community members, parents, board, staff and students are working together to ensure our communities’ children receive an outstanding education. This is a wonderful community that genuinely puts children first.” ■

Brown has been a reporter and writer for The County Journal newspaper, a contributing writer for the Daily Press, and a freelance writer since 1998

Formula for Building Bridges

- Embrace the concepts of Circle
 - Convey genuine respect to all
 - Listen to each other
 - Share your stories — Build trust
 - Identify issues
 - Problem solve together
- Build and maintain a team approach
- Be available — have an open door policy
- Establish high expectations
- Seek continuous feedback
- Be visible at school and in the community
- Be positive, enthusiastic and supportive.