

Beating a New Kind of Drum

A back-to-basics educator creates fresh hope for students at the American Indian Charter School

By Emily Wilson

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Martin Waukazoo helped establish Oakland's American Indian Public Charter School, which was created in 1996 with the mission of improving the dismal performance of Native Americans in the Oakland schools. As executive director of the Native American Health Center, Waukazoo has dedicated his career to providing services to the region's Native American population. But shortly after the school's founding, Waukazoo ended his involvement, quickly concluding that he didn't like its direction. "They were doing too many fuzzy, warm things like bead-making classes and drum classes," he recalled. "Those are good hobbies, but our kids need to learn to read and write. I felt it was doing more harm than good."

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Chris Duffey

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It wasn't long before others shared Waukazoo's concerns. From the beginning, the Indian school had troubles, including a high staff turnover rate and a lack of money for basics such as books and computers. By early 2000, things had gotten so out of hand that the school board seriously was considering shutting the institution down. "It was clearly failing," said Dan Siegel of the Oakland School Board. "The academic performance was abysmal, the teachers weren't credentialed, and there was all kinds of in-fighting and factionalism. Then they were able to come forward with this new leadership, and I persuaded the board to give them another chance."

That new leadership took the form of Dr. Ben Chavis, who was recruited from an education post at the University of Arizona. Evelyn Lamenti of the school district's Office of Indian Education knew Chavis from when he had taught at San Francisco State and she thought he was the right man for the job because of his background in education, interest in charter schools, and knowledge of urban kids. Chavis certainly didn't have any doubts of his own. "I can turn any school in America around," he boasted

during a recent interview. "They called this place the zoo before I came. The secret to a good school is a good principal. I'm into common sense. Structure -- that's what kids need."

Chavis took the job last June, and when Waukazoo started hearing complaints that the new principal was trying to turn the students into white kids, he figured Chavis must have been doing something right. "I nearly fell off my chair laughing," Waukazoo recalled. "What we're doing is trying to teach our kids to read and write. Who you are can be learned at home."

For the students of this middle school near MacArthur and 35th in Oakland, where 52 percent of the hundred or so kids are Native American, the new principal's brand of structure has proven remarkably successful. While the school's academic performance leaves abundant room for improvement, there have been remarkable gains in the test scores of its students. Last year, no seventh-graders there scored at or above the national average in reading skills, but this year, as eighth-graders, 18 percent performed at the national average. Similarly, in math, not one sixth- or seventh-grader met the national average last year, but this year 26 and 9 percent did, respectively. "They went from pitiful to average," said Siegel, who made it clear that he expects further progress. Chavis, a strong supporter of testing, said he is confident that students' scores will shoot up again when tests are given again next spring.

Starting almost immediately upon his arrival, Chavis recruited nearly a whole new teaching faculty for the school. The principal said he looked for teachers with a strong academic background who didn't see the students as victims, even though their lives often are incredibly difficult. "We meet all the stereotypes," Chavis said. "We have kids who got thrown out of other schools for carrying knives. Twelve to fifteen percent of our kids are homeless, but we don't provide free lunches. You've got to give them some responsibilities."

Jill Rogers, coordinator of the school's "Math, Engineering, Science, and Achievement" program, is the only remaining faculty member from the period before Chavis took over. She agrees with Waukazoo and Chavis that the place to learn culture is in the home, and she says the new principal has succeeded in setting his school's academic bar high. "Before, kids were just roaming the halls," Rogers said. "Now they are in class and actually learning something."

During a recent school day on the campus, students in one classroom were getting a history lesson on Constantinople. In another, they were doing a science project about fingerprinting. In the hallway, drawings by eighth-grade students illustrated scenes from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, one of the books they now read along with *Gulliver's Travels* and *Call of the Wild*.

Chavis is proud of the school's new focus, and scornfully refers to the people who ran the school before him as "drum beaters." "They didn't start school till 9:30 because they said Indians couldn't get up early," he said. "They gave the kids smoking breaks. Did you ever hear of anything so ridiculous? We stay away from ethnic studies and self-esteem. All the self-esteem in the world isn't going to help you if you can't read. What I do is attack myths -- multiculturalism, parent involvement, tolerance. What do those mean anyway? Tolerance -- that's the stupidest thing I ever heard. If the KKK comes in here, am I

going to tolerate that?"

The principal actually makes quite a point of letting students know what sorts of things he will not tolerate. During a recent tour of the campus, Chavis greeted students by name as they walk by. "Do you remember what I told you about skipping school?" he asked one boy. "Yes," the boy mumbled. "What was it?" "Not to be obvious," the boy responded. "That's right," Chavis told him, "I'm not going to tell you not to skip school, but you shouldn't be obvious about it. If you skip three times in a row, that's obvious." Chavis asked another boy about his father who has been in the hospital, and told a third student that he heard he was doing a good job. Then he asked him to remove the silver chain around his neck and the stud in his ear. "You'll get these back after school," he told the student.

Such pep talks certainly seem to have had their desired effect when it comes to improving student attendance on campus. "There were supposed to be sixty kids enrolled, but you were lucky to find one kid in class when you went," said Jean Quan, one of the school board members who wanted to close the Indian school down. Today, the school has an average daily attendance rate of 97 percent, Chavis said.

Consider Norine Eldridge's grandson, who was cutting classes at another school and getting "F"s. As an employee of the district, Eldridge met Chavis when he came to her office to discuss some testing, and after talking with him and visiting the school, she decided to send her grandson there. "I was impressed with his concern for the kids and how it feels like family," she said. "I don't know what it is, but my grandson has made a complete and total turnaround. He just loves it and he's a 4.0 student now."

The Indian school's new mood also has caught the eye of Dirk Tillotson, a lawyer who sits on its board. "A year ago, it could have been a New York subway car," he said. "It was a pigsty -- covered with graffiti and gang stuff. Now it's just really nice." Tillotson concedes that some critics within the Native American community worry that the kids will lose their heritage, but he says most parents are far happier with the school now. "Any criticism Dr. Chavis gets in the community is blunted by the fact that it's a good school," he said. "And you're not doing a kid any favors by handing him a 'By Any Means Necessary' T-shirt and not teaching him how to read."

Waukazoo said when he finally returned to the school, the changes were dramatic. "When I went there last year I almost got knocked over by the kids," he said. But during a recent visit, it was another world. "I couldn't believe it -- a kid walked up to me and shook my hand and said 'Welcome to our school.' He was walking with pride, proud to be a Native American."