

The Agua Caliente Story Takes Root in School Curriculum

Unique partnership ensures Tribes' history, culture and modern-day stories shared authentically.

BY MEREDITH JORDAN



THE STORY OF THE AGUA CALIENTE PEOPLE spans generations since time immemorial

The unique partnership between the Tribe and the Palm Springs United School District to create an authentic curriculum on local Native American history moves from the 3rd grade classroom to the 8th and 11th grade classrooms this year.

"When the students learn

about the Agua Caliente people and our Cahuilla ancestors, and they visually go into the Indian Canyons and view our ancestral lands and they go and touch the rattles and the ollas and the baskets, they get this deep, deep connection and understanding of who we actually are," Tribal Council Member Anthony W. Purnel said.

The collaboration between the Agua Caliente Band of

Cahuilla Indians, PSUSD and the PSUSD Foundation is one of the first in California to meet state standards and teach students about their local Native American tribe.

"As a teacher and administrator for 34 years, this is the single most rewarding project I have been a part of," said Mike Walbridge, the executive director of student learning at PSUSD. "It's been an honor to work with the

Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians."

The 8th grade lessons blend into existing curriculum contained within social sciences, which includes both U.S. history and geography. Tribal Council Vice Chairman Reid D. Milanovich, Council Member Anthony W. Purnel and Tribal staff oversee the curriculum development for the Tribe. That has been paramount to the success of the project, Walbridge said. The final product "reflects authentic history and issues that affected the Agua Caliente Tribe while following California (educational) standards." And that means a better curriculum for all students.

"For many years, students across the country, including those in my own social science classes when I was a teacher, have been receiving information about Native American culture and history and traditions, but without any input for the Native Americans themselves," Walbridge said. "Often here in California, students are learning from text books and materials that refer to tribes from long ago and from way back east when we have this rich cultural tradition among Native Americans right here in our own Coachella Valley."

The effort was rolled out to about 1,800 third graders in the first half of the 2019 school year. The 3rd grade unit of study — 10 lessons — is a big success. Similar coursework, just one or two lessons, will eventually will be taught for 4th through 7th graders, to bridge the gap between full units. It expands to students in the 8th grade with eight lessons this school year. Students in the 11th grade will have a unit of study of four lessons, which will be rolled out in 2020.

Foundation President Mark Gauthier said the project is right on target with the original goals of co-creating the curriculum with the Tribe to tell the true story of the indigenous people of our valley.

“Our goal is that it would not be filtered through others’ eyes,” Gauthier said. “It would be a story told by those who own it, live it and have rightfully

“

As a teacher and administrator for 34 years, this is the single most rewarding project

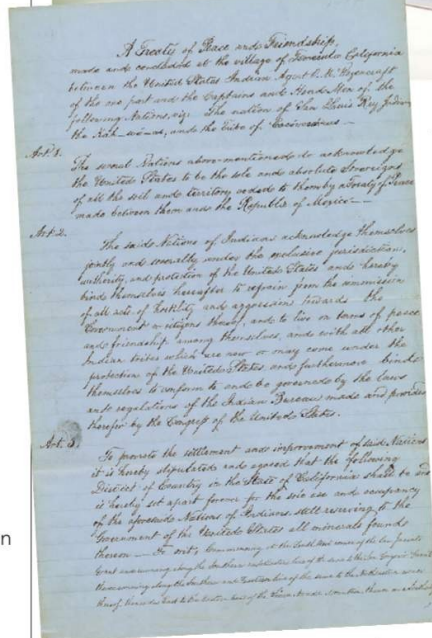
I have been a part of.

**Mike Walbridge,
Executive Director of
Student Learning at
PSUSD**

”

inherited it. What’s most remarkable about this, apart from the curriculum itself, is it represents, as far as I know, a unique three-part collaboration among a Native people, a public school district and a philanthropic foundation.

“As such, I believe it is a model for school districts across America who have substantial indigenous cultures within their regions, whose stories deserve to be told in as historically accurate and culturally sensitive of a way as possible, free from



focus on history, culture, traditions, and modern life. The general structure of the social sciences curriculum over the higher grade levels is to examine history in sequence. For example, middle school grades are learning about the 19th century with lessons that fit into that time period. Higher grade levels will focus on more recent times, so the lessons fit into the 20th and 21st centuries.

“There are too many lessons we would like to teach, and unfortunately there’s only a certain

amount of time that we have, so we developed the lessons of what we thought was important for the kids to learn,” Tribal Vice Chairman Reid D. Milanovich said.

“Hopefully as the kids move from 3rd, 4th 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th

appropriation, interpretation, cliché or stereotype.” The educational materials for the older students build on ideas and concepts covered at the elementary grade level, but is expanded in depth and sophistication. All units

OPPOSITE: Vice Chairman Reid D. Milanovich with students at Sunny Sands Elementary School. **ABOVE:** Tribal Council Members reviewing California Treaty K (pictured left) at the National Archives in Washington, D.C.

grade, they will be able to learn more about us — why water is important to us, for example. We’ve been here for thousands and thousands of years, and there are certain things that I’m not sure very many people in the community quite understand about the Tribe, and hopefully this is a good starting point to begin when the kids are young so they will grow up and learn more and more about us and why we are here.”

It’s been a big project, Walbridge said. Everyone is looking forward to the final roll out, particularly teachers at this point. “It’s really exciting to see it come together.”