

Menominee Indian Middle School



A Community School With Voice and Heart

The Menominee Indian School District is a K–12 public school district with 1,000 students that is located almost entirely on tribal lands in Wisconsin. This uniqueness has led the district and, in turn, the schools to recognize the cultural importance of the Menominee Nation and American Indians. To do this, Menominee culture is infused into daily learning. The goal is to help students take pride in who they are and to help them succeed culturally, intellectually, academically, emotionally, socially, and physically.

Menominee Indian Middle School has seen significant growth in each of these areas over the last four years. The school has moved from being classified as needing improvement to being named a Wisconsin Middle School of Excellence for two consecutive years. The challenges continue because Menominee County ranks as the unhealthiest and poorest jurisdiction in Wisconsin and the ninth poorest municipality in the United States. Superintendent Wendell Waukau is passionate about emphasizing the richness of the human resources within the community instead of focusing on what it doesn't have. That view permeates the 131-student middle school where Principal Stephanie Feldner has guided the change process.

When Feldner arrived four years ago, the majority of students were not proficient in reading or math. She decided to observe, listen to staff and community members, and analyze every piece of data she could get her hands on. She learned that all the stakeholders had the same goal: they wanted the

students to take pride in their work and achieve academically. She also learned that those caring stakeholders had had no voice in the school. The solution was obvious to her: give everyone a voice. She promised to support staff member decisions to implement structures to improve the school. Her only requirement was that every adult be accountable for improved student achievement. The objective was clear: every student was to be engaged and focused on learning.

In describing that chaotic time, one 10-year veteran said, "We came to work, went into our classrooms, and closed the door. While we cared about our students, we had no meaningful connections with them or each other." But when they were given a voice and asked to work together, staff members used data from state and local assessments as well as school attendance and discipline records to come up with the following structures:

- A positive behavior management team to create a consistent schoolwide approach to discipline including response-to-intervention strategies that all staff members would use
- A common planning time



Menominee culture is respected, celebrated, and integrated into school life.

(CPT) for grade-level student-focused teamwork and subject-level curriculum design and implementation

- A leadership team to oversee the work and coordinate the professional development.

Finding time to meet on a regular basis was a challenge given the schedule and small size, but staff members pushed to adjust school hours and made a commitment to come to school early so that the teams could have uninterrupted time together. Staff members also identified two very important missing elements: a scope and time sequence for instruction and a framework for reaching out to the students and their parents. The staff worked with consultants to create simple documents that aligned their curriculum to the state standards and embraced the strategies in *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* by Ruby Payne. Recently, a new team has been added to focus on the whole child through an interdisciplinary, interagency team that includes parents. The team also solves attendance problems that keep students from school and learning. The result is a 90% and steadily

improving attendance rate.

The results of teamwork are evident throughout the school. Students talk openly about how good their school is and how important it is to do well and plan for college. The College of Menominee Nation and the University of Wisconsin-Madison now offer after-school and summer programs that reinforce academic achievement to Menominee students. Teachers marvel at the changes. Everyone feels competent and respected. Community leaders feel that by recognizing the importance that culture plays in their lives, the school is enhancing each student's education, laying the foundation for students to carry on traditions, and broadening future economic possibilities. Principal Feldner says it was all about having a voice and the opportunity to follow what was in their hearts.

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Building the Path to Success

Stephanie Feldner took on a big job when she arrived to take the principalship at Menominee, but with the help of her staff members and the community, it was manageable.

I started at Menominee Indian Middle School in the spring of 2006. At that time, there hadn't been an assistant principal in over three months and there was an interim principal. I found a staff that had been through a great deal of turmoil and a school with a bad reputation. In the midst of it all, the one thing that stood out most to me was that the staff still had a belief in the kids and wanted to do what was best for them.

Consistency and Support

From the very beginning, I felt the most important thing I could do was help the teachers feel supported in their classrooms. To do that, we collaboratively developed a discipline plan to address some of the negative behaviors in the school. Consistent rules and procedures were put in place so that the students could understand that behaviors yielded predictable consequences. We also researched positive behavior management as a way to move to a new level of teaching appropriate behaviors and building in a system of reinforcements. Over the summer, we drew on that research to put together the first version of the positive behavior management (PBM) plan, which is still a work in progress but has shown incredible results.

Attitude

After being in the district for a few years, I learned that upon meeting me for the first

time, staff members placed bets as to how long I would last—none being over a year. They said that I smiled too much; I acknowledge that their observation is probably correct, but I also realize that attitude is contagious. It may seem like a simple thing, but I firmly believe that my attitude sets the stage for how staff members interact with one another and with students. I take great pride in knowing that my staff enjoys coming to work every day, and that attitude is passed along to the students.

Data-Driven Decision Making

At the beginning of each summer, we analyze state assessment data to discover areas in which our students may be struggling and to brainstorm ways to help them be successful. Since the test is given in the fall, however, it's not a great way to analyze data. Two years ago, we started using the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) assessments available from the Northwest Evaluation Association. Getting that almost-instant feedback about student progress has allowed us to make programmatic changes and target individual student needs. In addition to assessment data, we also monitor attendance and discipline on a monthly basis.

Empowering Staff

Over time, I have learned that one of my main duties as principal is to grow leadership from within my building. Many of our transition activities, parent nights, and assemblies are organized by staff members. Through such frameworks as common planning times, leadership, and PBM teams, we develop many more ideas and initiatives than I could ever do alone. This has also given the staff a sense of ownership over programs that we have in place.

Closing Thoughts

I wish I could say that there's something I did to make the school what it is today. I'm just one person—it's my staff that deserves the credit. All I do is provide them with the support, structure, and resources that they need to get the job done. If I left tomorrow, I know they have what it takes to continue on our path to success.



Collaboration, Consistency, and Community

Going from a school in need of improvement to an award-winning middle school has been a challenge. There have been three key areas that the leadership team believes need to be highlighted as concepts that other schools can learn from Menominee.

Collaboration. As a result of input from the leadership team, teacher teams were developed during the 2007–08 school year to increase staff communication and collaboration across grades and disciplines. Each teacher belongs to two CPT teams on the basis of what grade-level and subject he or she teaches. During grade-level meetings, the concentration is on interdisciplinary planning, developing strategies to reach struggling students, and making parent contacts, whereas the department meetings are focused more on curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

CPT was developed in response to teacher requests for more time to meet, plan, and collaborate. We changed the start time of school to accommodate 40 minutes of uninterrupted time before the students arrived. It is our belief that CPT has created greater consistency within the building, which is of utmost importance when working with middle school students.

We have recently expanded our reach to work more closely with the primary school and high school, especially in the area of curriculum. During our technical assistance or curriculum meetings, we reach out to fifth-grade and ninth-grade teachers to develop a smooth scope and sequence of curriculum, build a common vocabulary, and increase use of standard mental models. Such vertical articulation has created a more seamless transition between buildings. Most recently, we met as a district to align both math and English and language arts K–12.

Consistency. Knowing that middle level learners need consistency, the first focus was to create a discipline matrix so that students

could understand that certain behaviors yielded predictable consequences. Although a decrease in behavior referrals was noted, the team pushed on, first researching and then developing a PBM plan that goes beyond the negative consequences of discipline and adds positive consequences for desirable behavior. The incentives focus on five key areas—also known as the Menominee Nation Manners—which include being on time for class, following directions, being prepared, showing respect, and using appropriate language. Students can earn up to five points per class period for exhibiting those behaviors and later redeem the points in the T-Bird Store for pencils, notebooks, personal care items, and school apparel and for field trips. In the first year of implementation, we recorded a 50% decrease in discipline referrals.

Predictability and structure are key ideas when it comes to creating a safe and orderly school environment. Procedures and processes are taught and reinforced during the first weeks of school, which sets the stage for a safe and successful school year.

Community. At Menominee, we strive to build relationships of mutual respect with our students and incorporate opportunities for community building each day through homeroom. By blending academic enrichment with a time for students to be heard by teachers, homeroom has become a great way to build a sense of community in the school. For example, a few years ago there was a disagreement among the staff about how to celebrate the holidays. In the end, we let the students vote on several options: a school sweatshirt, a trip to the movies, or gift certificates to local businesses. The results were both surprising and heartwarming: they overwhelmingly asked for an activity day to do things like bake cookies, play games, make crafts, and play sports with staff members. What they really wanted was quality time with the staff.

Menominee Indian Middle School

NEOPIT, WI

Principal
Stephanie Feldner



Grades
6–8

Enrollment
131

Community
Rural

Demographics
99% Native American;
1% other; 87% free or
reduced-price meals
eligible; 24% receiving
special education
services





- Importance of culture
- Creative use of resources
- Common planning time twice a week
- Grade-level teams and content teams
- Multidisciplinary, interagency approach to problem solving
- Alliances with Menominee Indian Community College, the University of Wisconsin–Madison, and content consultants.



We are also proud to be a part of numerous community initiatives involving the Menominee Tribal Clinic, Maehnowesekiyah (AODA treatment facility), Tribal Police and Courts, and other youth service providers. This year, we are implementing a program for children who are “unavailable to learn” because of various factors outside of school. This initiative brings together the school and people from numerous community agencies with the common goal of determining how to best serve these children and their families.

Last, but certainly not least, the culture of our community plays a central part in our school program. Far from being limited to the

popular Menominee Language and Culture class that is required in grade 6 and an elective for grades 7 and 8, the culture is infused throughout the school day with activities that include the Menominee Pledge in the morning and lunchtime activities of hoop dancing and drumming. Culture is also incorporated into our classrooms, award ceremonies, after-school activities, and assemblies.

Change like ours doesn’t happen overnight. We went through some rough times along the way, but one thing never wavered: our belief in the kids. If you keep that as your goal, there’s nothing you can’t accomplish. **PL**

Pre-College Enrichment Opportunity Program for Learning Excellence

Students from the Menominee and other tribes are able to participate in programs that reinforce their college aspirations and teach skills that they will need at the University of Wisconsin–Madison campus.

Middle School Summer Program

Rising seventh-, eighth-, and ninth-grade students attend a three-week morning program to explore a subject area in hands-on workshops. Only sixth-grade students who are in the Madison Metropolitan School District or the Menominee Indian School District are eligible to apply to the middle school program. Students are required to maintain a 2.75 GPA in core subject areas and are required to participate regularly in orientations and cultural enrichment activities.

High School Summer Program

High school students attend a three-week residential program that includes math, study skills, and writing development; ACT preparation; science research; and an evening curriculum in the fine and performing arts.

The program for high school students offers a more-intensive six-week residential internship and provides research experiences in scientific inquiry, analysis, and research in humanities and the sciences; hands-on experiences in the lab and the workplace; plus exposure to business, law, media, arts, education, health, public service professions, and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics).

After graduating from high school and upon admission to the University of Wisconsin–Madison, students participate in the eight-week Bridge-to-College program.

