

Teacher Institute rejuvenates rez educators



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Fifth-graders Peyton Holmes, 10, left, and Keira Greyeyes, 10, right, listen as their teacher, Jolene Smith, teaches the class Friday morning at Kayenta Middle School.



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Peyton Holmes, 10, holds up a poster of an animal cell while Elluraine James, 10, affixes labels to the cell structure last Friday morning in Jolene Smith's 5th grade classroom at Kayenta Middle School.

BY CINDY YURTH
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KAYENTA — In 2011, Jolene Smith was ready to retire. She had been teaching elementary school for 27 years.

She felt burned out and didn't know how much she had left to offer her students.

"I thought, 'Maybe it's time to do something else,'" recalled Smith, now a 5th-grade teacher at Kayenta Elementary School.

Then a friend in the Department of Diné Education told her about the Yale National Initiative, a program of Yale University that reaches out to public schoolteachers in challenging, low-income districts (mostly urban at that time) to strengthen their subject knowledge and help them develop new teaching strategies geared to the specific students they teach.

Smith didn't know how much more she could learn after 27 years in the classroom, but she decided to apply.

"I had never been East," she

shrugged. "I thought at least I would get a nice trip out of it."

It was a Wednesday and the deadline was Friday. Smith quickly got her application together, and, to her surprise, was accepted.

She and another Navajo teacher, the late Marilyn Dempsey of Window Rock, were the first rural, Native American teachers to enter the program.

By the time Smith got back from Connecticut that summer, she had forgotten all about retiring and was writing a whole new curriculum for her next school year.

"It completely changed my attitude," she said. "I'm now on my 35th year and have no plans to retire."

Smith has gone back to Yale every year since, and has recruited and helped train other participants. But last year, something special happened.

Since 2016 (largely due to the efforts of Smith and other Diné teachers), there had been an im-

petus to start a local program based on the Yale methods and premises, but geared specifically to teaching Navajo students on the reservation.

Northern Arizona University had agreed to host it, and after much planning and preparation, the institute for Navajo Nation Educators, was launched at NAU in 2016.

Ron Lee, vice president of Native American Initiatives at NAU, said it was a natural fit for the Flagstaff-based university.

"We have 2,000 Native American students from 115 different tribes across the U.S. and Canada," said Lee, who is Diné — and many of them struggle.

"As much as we are engaged with the communities out there, we're still not graduating more than 35 percent of our Native American students," he pointed out. "We thought this would be a great opportunity to get in at the front end of this problem and engage with their

curriculum while they're still in elementary or secondary school."

The metrics aren't in yet, but for all intents and purposes, the institute seems to be a great success. Of the 10 teachers from nine different schools who participated, "all plan to apply again," noted Angelina Castagno, planning director for the program, "so that tells you something."

This year, the program will expand to include up to 50 teachers from any kind of school on the Navajo Nation — public, grant or Bureau of Indian Education. The program has a budget of \$300,000 funded by DOBE, NAU, the participating school districts and private donations. Applications are due Feb. 19.

What makes the Diné Institute different from the myriad other professional development opportunities for teachers?

"Number One," said Lee, "it's completely teacher-driven. They select the program, the people they want to collaborate with —"

"All the heavy decisions," added Castagno.

The second thing that makes this program unique is "how central culturally responsive schooling is," Lee said.

What exactly does that mean? Well, for instance, said Lee, most English literature classes from junior high on focus on something like a Shakespeare play — which couldn't be more remote from the reservation experience.

"If a student went home and talked to his grandparents

about Shakespeare," Lee noted, "they wouldn't know what he was talking about."

On the other hand, if the subject is "Laughing Boy," which is what Smith teaches in her literature unit, they could relate completely.

The critically acclaimed 1929 novel is basically "Romeo and Juliet," but set in Navajoland. Smith uses it as a launching pad for not only literature but history — "We go into what was happening on the reservation in the 1930s" — and critical thinking — "We watch the movie and talk about how it's different from the book."

There's even some discussion of linguistics as the kids reflect on the Navajo words in the book that are different from the words used now, and grappling with the cultural conflict the novel plumbs.

That's the kind of subject-integrated curriculum the institute encourages. But the acid test is how the kids respond.

A visit to Smith's 5th-grade classroom last Friday turned up the most engaged bunch of students this reporter had ever seen. They were eager to show off the visuals Smith had made for various subjects, and the books each of them had made about themselves and their values.

The current science unit is on space. The kids had already entertained a visit from an astronomer from Lowell Observatory, and on Friday they learned the "Moon Bugaloo," a rhyming chant Smith had made up on the phases of the moon to reach the aural learners ("Waxing

gibbous, waning gibbous, and quarter moon too! Doing the full moon bugaloo! ...").

After the kids learn the chant, they're tasked with reading it to four of their peers (less stressful than reading in front of the whole class, Smith explained) and helping each other with the words they don't know. Next week, they'll learn it in Navajo.

Smith has made a chart for the space unit, too. It's out in the hall because the walls of her classroom are completely occupied, largely with stuff she's made herself.

If this unscripted curriculum sounds like a lot of work for the teacher, it is.

The Diné Institute is "a huge commitment," said Lee. "The teachers do the extra work in the evenings and weekends. Then we have a summer residency here at NAU."

"It's an eight-month commitment," added Castagno. "You're learning the whole time, not just at the residency."

"It's not for the teacher who is out the door at 4," warned Smith, who usually stays after school to catch kids up on gaps in their math education, like multiplication tables. She makes the lessons so fun the majority of her class stays for tutoring.

On the plus side, you don't have to reinvent the wheel ... all the curriculum the teachers come up with is shared on a website, and teachers who have gone through the program already mentor the newbies.

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Alyssa Cutler, 11, left, along with her classmates Adrian Annlee Smith, 10, and Leandro Orona, 11, hold up their project poster of the human body, or ats'lis in Diné bizaad, Friday morning in Jolene Smith's 5th grade classroom at Kayenta Middle School.



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Students in Jolene Smith's 5th grade class Friday morning work on assignment after a lecture.

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"It truly is rigorous," said Bryce Anderson, superintendent for Smith's district. "I've observed the lessons the teachers have come up with and I'm amazed at the depth they go into. It just shows what you can expect if you give teachers some respect and support."

The Diné Institute for Navajo Nation Educators is open to all

teachers from grant, BIE and public schools on the Navajo Nation. Teachers don't have to pay for a thing and in fact get a small stipend, Castagno said.

"You don't have to be Navajo," noted Castagno. "You don't even have to be in Arizona."

Information: <https://in.nau.edu/dine/>

To apply: <https://in.nau.edu/dine/apply-to-be-a-dine-fellow/>