

Helping Foreign Teachers be Prepared to Work with Indigenous Students

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Introduction

This paper is about the need to support the foreign teachers we hire in the district to be prepared to work on the reservation and what we can do as a district to help support them while they are here. Most Native Americans deal with a threefold challenge: 1) poverty, 2) living in rural communities, and 3) being part of a racial group that has been marginalized and forced to assimilate into this country's education system that often does not align with the culture and values of Indigenous communities.

Most research and conversations about Native Americans focus on Indigenous tribes as one homogenous group that is all the same. The reality is that Indigenous students comprise 566 unique recognized tribes (Gentry et al., 2014). As a result, an education system or educational program designed for one Indigenous population may not be culturally responsive for another tribe. Education systems must recognize the unique characteristics of each tribe and make sure programs fit the needs of the students in each school district serving Indigenous populations.

In this paper, we will discuss what districts can do to support international teachers. While they come prepared to be a teacher, they typically do not have that experience with needing classroom management. As a result, the school district is burdened with creating and staffing a program. Most rural districts lack teachers and so they reach out to foreign entities to help fill their staff. While there may be a strong mentoring program, we identified the need to create something designated and differentiated for our foreign teachers. A program to introduce them to the unique characteristics of Indigenous students and prepare them for what they might encounter on the reservation.

This Leadership Practice guide will focus on the needs of foreign teachers serving Native American students. This guide recommends some policy changes and professional development for districts that serve Native students to help prepare these teachers to work on the reservation and support them for the time they are employed. As general recommendations, the district must first create a plan that will help them understand where they are located and the remoteness of the reservation. Then, they need to offer professional development and mentoring support on classroom management and PBIS so they can be prepared to teach in our classrooms. Finally, they need to offer social activities to make them feel welcome within the community and at home and help them create connections to keep them supported while they are here. Only by working in a culturally responsive way can we truly meet the needs of our students and ensure they are prepared for their future.

Context

As an educator working on the Fort Apache Indian Reservation in eastern Arizona, I serve as a district administrator for the Whiteriver Unified School District. I am the Director of Curriculum and Instruction and oversee professional development, curriculum, mentoring and assessment for teachers.

Whiteriver Unified School district has approximately twenty-five hundred (2500) students from PreK to 12th grade. The school district is 99% Native American, with most students identifying

as White Mountain Apache. In addition, the school district serves the Indigenous populations of Hopi, Navajo, and San Carlos Apache.

I have worked for the school district in various positions since 1999. I started as an instructional assistant, advanced to a teacher, then an instructional coach, and finally a principal before my work as a district administrator. My parents moved to the White Mountain Apache reservation as missionaries in 1996. My family lived on the reservation for more than 20 years. Both passed away and are buried in the tribal cemetery. I am a Latina woman who grew up and attended school in Los Angeles, CA.

The research in this Leadership Practice Guide was conducted on the Fort Apache Indian Reservation, home of the White Mountain Apache tribe. The Western Apache, also known as the White Mountain Apache, is one of the tribes of Apache, who live primarily in New Mexico and Arizona. The Apache Tribe are among the few tribes living on their ancestral land because they invited the U.S. Cavalry to set up a camp at Fort Apache and live there in peace with the tribal village (InterTribal Agency, 2011).

The Apache first went to Carlisle boarding school in Pennsylvania. Then, in 1891, the first school began in one of the barracks at Fort Apache by Castleberry (Archaeology Southwest, 2024). Whiteriver Elementary was the first school of the Whiteriver Unified School District, opening its doors in 1955. Then Alchesay High School began serving students a year later, in 1956 (2020). In 1891, Theodore Roosevelt Boarding School was started at Fort Apache by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (2020). Theodore Roosevelt Boarding School, a 6th-8th grade middle school, is one of two Bureau of Indian Education schools still operating on the reservation. There is also K-8 John F Kennedy School in Cedar Creek. The reservation has three public school districts- Whiteriver Unified School District, McNary School, and Cibecue Community School. McNary is a K-8 school, while Whiteriver and Cibecue are K-12 districts.

Currently, these schools have a high need for teachers, so we have been hiring foreign teachers on J-1 visas to work in our buildings. J1 visas are temporary visas that last for three to five years. They are visa exchange teachers, so the teachers return to their country to share what they learned with their country. This leads to a constant revolving door of foreign teachers that need to be documented and supported by the district.

Previously Whiteriver Unified hired H1B visas. H1B visas are paid for by the district but they are more permanent residents and can lead to a green card or permanent residency. However, a few years ago we stopped hiring H1B teachers because we were not maintaining the teachers we were hiring. As soon as they got their H1B visa, they would leave for a place that paid more. So, Whiteriver switched to J1 visas. This visa is an exchange visa where a teacher gives three years to the district and this can be extended to a total of five years before they have to return to their country. After doing two years in their country, Whiteriver Unified will allow them to return and then we are helping them get an H1B visa. The difference between the two visas is the district pays for an H1B visa and the teacher pays for a J1 visa.

Rationale

Research states that about 11 percent of teachers in the United States are foreign born (Furyuya, et al., 2019). Nevertheless, there is a huge shortage of teachers in Arizona. This is especially true in rural and Title 1 schools. According to Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College (2020) the composition of teacher in underserved communities, including Indigenous schools are international teachers (89% of all international teachers), emergency certified teachers (93% of all emergency certified teachers), emergency certified substitutes (93%), alternative certified/interns (72%), and substitutes serving in full-time positions (69%). This contributes to the high turnover rate across the state. Additionally, as teachers in this state age, this problem is becoming more prevalent as there is a need to replace the positions of all these teachers that are experienced and make up for the extensive longevity in the field of education that we are losing with their retirement.

Teaching in the United States is desirable to foreign teachers because the pay scale ensures a good life and salary unlike their home country. Teachers in a study shared that in the United States they are paid here up to ten times more than they are earning back home (Macapagong, 2023). Currently in the Whiteriver Unified school district almost one half of our teachers are foreign born and we have been hiring foreign teachers since 2004. Some of these teachers are now permanent residents or United States citizens and are continuing to work for the district because in the past we hired teachers on an H1B visa.

Most international teachers have been in education programs and have teaching experience in their own country; however, these programs prepared them to work in their own country and their own country's culture, not in a new place such as Arizona where there are different cultural norms and different standards taught in Arizona. Also, United States disability laws and policies are very different from where most international teachers are from. Research on foreign teachers in the United States shows that these teachers face unique challenges of being away from home, new living conditions and climates, culture shock, the teaching load in the US, and classroom management issues (Macapagong, 2023). These challenges require the district to recognize the need for training and support for their foreign teachers.

Topic Summary

When teachers are successful, their students have a better opportunity to be successful. If a teacher is not successful or does not feel effective, they will not stay in a position and then the training and work that a district did with the teacher will have to be repeated again with a new teacher. It is vitally important to recruit good teachers, train them well, and prepare them for work on the reservation.

Because of the rural location of Whiteriver Unified School District, the district has difficulty hiring teachers. As the district loses the ability to hire certified teachers that live in Arizona, school districts have to look to other places to fill these positions. For many school districts, that means they have to recruit and hire foreign teachers. These teachers are experienced in teaching

in another culture and have teacher training but also have unique issues that need to be addressed for them to be successful in the school district in which they were hired.

A recent issue of Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development Educational Leadership magazine (August 2024) was focused on helping new teachers thrive in your district. The articles emphasized the need to help new teachers, including international teachers, with student behavior and motivation, lesson planning, and focusing on basics (Goodwin, 2024). The articles emphasized that while international teachers are not necessarily new teachers, they are new to the things in America including the behavior difference of students in their home country and here in America. The articles also speak to the recommendation to have a supportive mentor that can help guide them and be their go to person. Specifically in one article they discussed the importance of not just mentoring with a random mentor but being intentional about the selection and having a formal mentoring program (McKibben, 2024).

Implementation Plan

The first recommendation for implementing a culturally responsive mentoring program for foreign teachers is to create a guide to prepare them for living and working on the reservation and its remoteness. Working with foreign teachers to change districts and schools to better support international teachers is a good first step. Adding sections to the mentoring handbook specifically for foreign teachers to understand where the reservation is located and give them the list of community resources to help meet their needs. Including information such as the closest Asian market is 3 hours or 180 miles from the school district is helpful to ensure international teachers feel supported and informed. In addition, giving international teachers information on local banks, stores, internet access and other things they will need is pertinent to the transition phase they will experience. Changes to the district or school handbook or even creating a specific handbook for international teachers help the district focus on specific ways to be more supportive of our foreign teachers.

Mentors need to be assigned from the district to new teachers. For foreign teachers, it is important or at least preferred that their mentor is a foreign teacher as well. International teachers that can become mentors are better prepared to talk to the teacher about cultural differences and the adjustments they made when they came to the district. Districts creating a foreign teacher mentoring handbook is valuable. It can include specific sections on cultural adaptation, info about the community and policy information for teachers to understand why we do things the way we do.

The second recommendation for a robust cultural preparation program is training to help staff understand the unique behavioral issues of Native students. Discussions around cultural sensitivity needed to be communicated such as sensitivity working with elders due to their experience with the boarding schools. Training needs to acknowledge the importance of culture and incorporate tribal identity to personalize it for students. Especially in Native American families, historical trauma from school makes it difficult for them to have a relationship with the school. These teachers need context to understand how to best develop relationships with Native American families and be culturally responsive in their classroom.

Offering a New Teacher Orientation on culture and language can help international teachers adjust to their new cultures. It is recommended that this class is repeated throughout the year when new teachers come on board that were not present at the initial orientation meeting.

Finally, in addition to these recommendations, it is important that the district provides opportunities for social activities so international teachers feel welcomed and make social connections. If international teachers do not make social connections, they will not stay and continue in the district. Then the district has to start the hiring process again and try to develop a new teacher. As a district, try to host things quarterly and invite teachers to attend. A suggested activity is to try to organize Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners, outdoor activities, and hosting community barbecues in teacher housing (if available).

Assessment

A good mentoring program has assessments to support the program. A recommendation is to have an assessment for the overall program. The assessment should include both the mentee and the mentor. One measure is to complete an evaluation at the end of the year (see appendix). This allows administration to evaluate the effectiveness of the program and the mentor relationship. The mentor can keep the mentee for up to three years. It is important to look at the surveys and address issues with both partnerships and identify what needs to be added to the program.

The second level of assessment is to implement an exit survey for teachers leaving the district (see appendix). It is important to know why teachers are leaving the district. By having all teachers complete an exit survey, administrators can evaluate the effectiveness of the district. Whether they are foreign teachers or not, districts can get an idea of systems that need to be improved or changed and work on creating new systems to support the employees of the district.

Finally, surveying teachers about activities they would like to participate in may increase the opportunity to present social activities within the district. If teachers are not integrated into the community, they can feel isolated and not want to stay, causing the district to start the hiring process again and repeat training which is costly and ineffective. By offering engaging activities teachers can feel connected and the desire to stay increases. The more teachers we can keep for longer periods of time the more stability the district feels, and this supports student achievement.

Conclusion

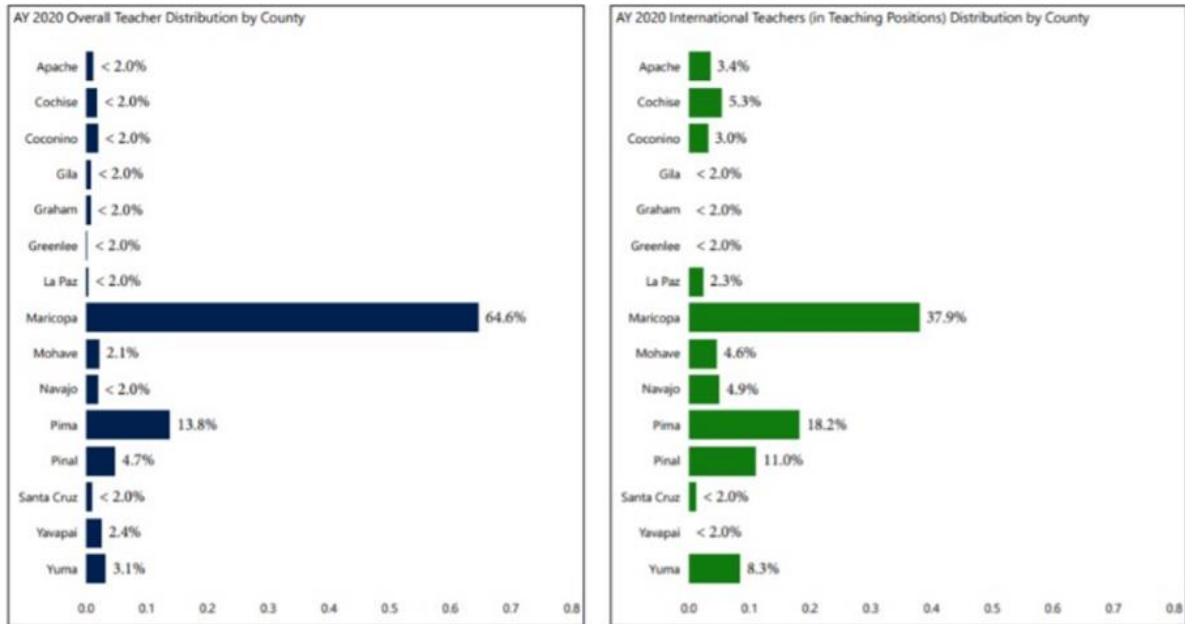
To adequately prepare foreign teachers for working on the reservation, districts must create a plan and not just hire and hope for the best. They need to offer professional development, mentors and support for the teachers to help them succeed. Our students are of the utmost importance and ensuring they are successful is our job. This plan needs to be monitored and evaluated to ensure success for these new hires.

During this past year we began implementing this plan, I created surveys to evaluate our mentoring program and interview teachers that are leaving. The district also created a foreign teacher mentor handbook for use with the new foreign teachers. We created this by a committee of foreign mentors to help address the issues common with foreign teachers. The district will continue to evaluate the effectiveness of both our mentors and our mentoring program particularly in regard to the needs of foreign teachers.

Resources

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- McKibben, S. (2024). School leaders don't leave new teachers "uncoached". ASCD.
- Inter-Tribal Council of Arizona (2011). White Mountain Apache Tribe. <https://itcaonline.com/member-tribes/white-mountain-apache-tribe/>

Appendix I Foreign teachers in Arizona



(ASU's Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, et al. 2020)

Appendix II Mentor Survey

1. How satisfied are you with the current mentoring program?
 - Extremely satisfied
 - Satisfied
 - Neutral
 - Dissatisfied
 - Extremely Dissatisfied
2. What do you find most rewarding about being a mentor in the program and why?
3. Would you recommend the mentoring program to a colleague or friend?

- Definitely yes
- Probably yes
- Not sure
- Probably not
- Definitely not

4. What specific improvements would you suggest for the mentoring program?

5. Are there any activities you would recommend for the district to remove from the mentoring book and why?

6. Are there any activities you would recommend for new teachers that are not currently in the workbook and why?

7. What areas do you feel you need additional support or professional development in to enhance your mentoring experience?

- Effective communication
- Conflict resolution
- Mentoring techniques
- Cultural competency
- Time management

8. My initial training was enough to get me started with mentoring.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Disagree

- Strongly Disagree

9. Do you want to keep your mentee for the following year?

Appendix III Mentee Survey

1. What is the most valuable aspect of your mentorship experience?

2. How satisfied are you with the support from your mentor?

- Extremely satisfied
- Satisfied
- Neutral
- Dissatisfied
- Extremely Dissatisfied

3. Did you feel comfortable discussing your goals and challenges with your mentor?

- Yes
- No

4. What areas do you think could be improved in the mentorship program for next year?

5. Which part of the workbook did you find to be most helpful and why?

6. Which part of the workbook would you like to see changed and why?

7. Do you believe your mentorship will help you succeed as a new teacher in this district?

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree

- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

8. What do you wish you had known as a new teacher to the district that was not covered in the mentoring program?

9. Do you want to keep your mentor for this next year?

Appendix IV Employee Exit Survey

1. How many years have you worked for the district?

2. What is your main reason for leaving?

- Health
- Relocation
- Retirement
- Leaving the Profession
- Family
- Other Employment

3. What has been enjoyable/satisfying for you in your time with us?

- Student Activities
- Athletics
- Cultural Awareness
- Professional Development
- School Climate and Culture
- Employee Relations

4. Would you consider working again for us if the situation were right?

5. How can WUSD change systems and communication to make it better in the future? Check all that apply

- Use multiple channels to communicate
- Listen to feedback
- Repeat communication often
- Connect the why to the work
- Get to know the team better
- Start meet and confer committee
- Manuals or handbooks related to your position and work

6. What specific improvements do you think can be made to customer service and employee relations?

Check all that apply.

- Professional Development on Communication
- Cultural Trainings
- Climate Changes
- Leadership having a better understanding of needs of staff
- Follow-Up after a Problem is solved
- Availability of Leadership

7. How could the organization reduce stress levels among employees where stress is an issue?

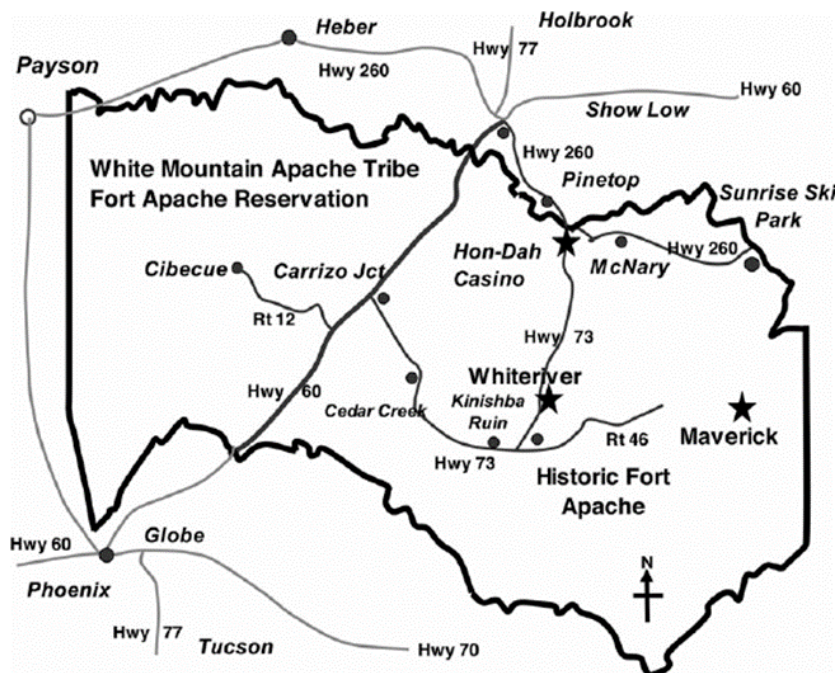
- Celebrate what is going well
- Communicate resources to help with stress management
- Designated break time daily
- Sponsor more activities for staff

- Staff training on Social Emotional Learning and Mindfulness
- Staff exercise classes
- Conflict resolution training
- Mental health support
- Wellness Program for district

8. What training and development that you had did you find most helpful and enjoyable?

- Social Emotional Learning- Kids at Hope, PBIS, KOI
- Content Knowledge
- RTI and MTSS
- Communication
- Programs – LETRS, Saavas, McGraw Hill, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt
- Office Training

Appendix X. Map of Fort Apache Indian Reservation/ Whiteriver Unified School district



Appendix VI Map of the Fort Apache Indian reservation in comparison to Arizona which is the full school district

