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Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community hosts academy to improve Native American history in schools

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Odia Wood-Krueger, left, stands with Rebecca Crooks-Stratton for a photo on Tuesday, April 18, at Mystic Lake Center Prior Lake.

Photo by Jacqueline Devine



Over 200 educators across the state convened at the first-ever Educator Academy hosted by the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community on Tuesday, April 18, at Mystic Lake Center in Prior Lake.

In an effort to enrich and update the narrative about Native Minnesotans, SMSC, through its Understand Native Minnesota campaign, offered free professional development workshops to introduce K-12 educators to the rich variety of ways to teach Native American topics in their classrooms.

According to Understand Native Minnesota's official website, the initiative is a multifaceted philanthropic campaign focused on Native American narrative change in Minnesota's schools. The campaign aims to improve public attitudes toward Native Americans by incorporating greater awareness and sensitive treatment of Native Americans, along with accurate information about their history, culture and modern tribal governments into Minnesota's K-12 education system.

Rebecca Crooks-Stratton, secretary and treasurer of the SMSC Business Council, said the goal of the Educator Academy is to share accurate information through the campaign to improve younger generations' understanding of the state's tribes and Native peoples.

"The Educator Academy is part of a professional development series that we put together that came out of the Understand Native Minnesota campaign and the research report that had some recommendations," Crooks-Stratton said. "One of those recommendations was more robust professional development opportunities for educators across the state. Looking at that advice, we created this Educator Academy."

Crooks-Stratton said the report examines what curricular and professional development resources are used in the state's schools, which ones should be shared more broadly, what gaps or inadequacies exist among those resources, and what the most pressing needs for resources are.

"Here in Minnesota, tribes make wonderful contributions to local communities, yet many Minnesotans don't know we exist or they don't know there are 11 tribes here," Crooks-Stratton said. "They don't know a lot of times that the tribe is one of the largest employers in the county and all those contributions really go unnoticed because there's this gap in our K-12 education where they don't talk about Native American people."

Odia Wood-Krueger, the study's author and a member of the Métis Nation from Saskatchewan, Canada, said SMSC has committed \$5 million to support Native American narrative change in Minnesota's schools through its Understand Native Minnesota campaign.

"This Educator Academy is really a creation of Understand Native Minnesota through SMSC's \$5 million, that is essentially a grant to create this amazing multiyear project to really work on narrative change in Minnesota," Wood-Krueger said. "In October 2019, SMSC announced that they wanted to do this narrative change campaign and this is one of the activities. There are several activities under the auspice of Understand Native Minnesota that have been rolling out, have happened, and will continue to happen as we go through the year."

Event highlights, survey findings

Wood-Krueger said the educational event filled in less than 24 hours and capped at 220 registrants.

"We capped at 220 and then we had close to 60 presenters," she said. "The event filled in under 24 hours and we had to open up additional spots and had a wait list. So, we were really excited."

The event also featured over 30 professional development workshops and presentations and a tour of the Hočokata Ti's 3,805-square-foot public exhibit — the Mdewakanton: Dwellers of the Spirit Lake.

Wood-Krueger added she thinks it's not only important to teach Native American history in general, but through the voices and experiences of Native Americans themselves.

"All books contain something about Native American people, but the narrative is never written by Native people. It's always an anthropologist, historians or a curriculum writer who may have no experience with Native people," she said. "We often see in a lot of texts that our history is past tense and inaccurate. Throughout this campaign it's been really exciting to introduce and build relationships and have people gain a new perspective that they've never had before."

When organizing the event, Wood-Krueger said she and an advisory team conducted large-scale surveys for Minnesota educators. She said respondents were asked to describe what, if any, challenges they experienced when incorporating Native American content into their respective workplaces.

"I asked folks what the challenges were in teaching Native American content and a few of them said money. The number one answer they gave was curriculum resources," Wood-Krueger said. "They said they don't know what to use and don't know how to integrate it and the cultural knowledge is lacking. That's when I thought how we can create a meaningful day of learning and offer these things to everyone."

According to some survey findings, a lack of age-appropriate, culturally authentic resources topped the lists for educators and curriculum leaders at 28% and 24% respectively. For educators (21%) and curriculum leaders (24%), respondents acknowledged how they questioned their ability to incorporate Native content with fidelity, citing concerns around perceived lack of respect and/or a gap in facilitation skills.

Wood-Krueger also said surveys showed 90% of Minnesotans support teaching more Native American content in K-12 schools.

"In a 2021 statewide public opinion survey conducted by SMSC, 9 out of 10 Minnesotans showed that they support increasing the teaching of Native American history, culture and tribal governance," she said. "That's 90% of people surveyed in every demographic. It shows that people are ready for this."

Building relationships

Wood-Krueger said for SMSC, the Educator Academy is very important to the tribe because it opens their door to the community to build relationships with the community.

"When I look at this event it's not only a learning opportunity but a really great representation of the work that they're already doing," she said. "I hope that we build relationships with the folks here and they feel comfortable reaching out to people in tribal communities. They've been welcomed with open arms."

Crooks-Stratton added that she hopes educators walk away feeling inspired and confident from the event in teaching Native American topics in their classrooms.

"I hope they walk away inspired. Inspired by all the possibilities that they can incorporate Native American information into current curriculum. I hope that they're inspired to find ways to incorporate that into their classrooms every year," she said. "Stay tuned. We're just getting

ready to take the recommendations from the report and create a great program. Hopefully this summer we will have more dollars to offer educators across the state to help us reach our end goal of providing a better and different narrative about Native Americans in the K-12 system.”

For more information on Understand Native Minnesota, visit

<https://www.understandnativemn.org/>.

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