Seeking Balance & Health in the Navajo Nation

Founded by:
In an area the size of West Virginia, spanning across parts of Utah, New Mexico and Arizona, sits the Navajo Nation. The traditional land of the Native American Navajo people was returned from the United States (U.S.) government in the Treaty of 1868 and has been a sovereign entity since that time. The Navajo Nation is surrounded by four sacred mountains and the people believe they are there to seek and to maintain balance on earth.

Efforts to maintain balance and to preserve the traditions of the Navajo people are put in jeopardy, however, by high rates of unemployment, poverty and disease. Rates of overweight, obesity and type 2 diabetes are extremely high in Native American communities. A 2011 report from the New Mexico Department of Health found that 42.7 percent of Native American kindergartners were overweight or obese and that 49.7 percent of third-graders were obese. In 2009 the New Mexico Youth Risk and Resiliency Survey (YRRS) found that 34 percent of Native American middle school students self-identified as overweight and in 2011, 40.5 percent of high school students identified as such.¹

Exact numbers on overweight/obesity and diabetes in many New Mexico tribes are hard to access for a number of complex reasons. Olivia Roanhorse, Research and Evaluation Manager for the Notah Begay III Foundation (NB3F), a group focused on improving health in Native American youth, explains that tribes hold their data close. “There is historical trauma and distrust around who is collecting data, why it’s being collected and what it will be used for,” said Roanhorse. “In addition, some communities do not have the capacity to collect and analyze their own data.”

This trauma stems from the fact that the majority of data collection in Native American communities in the past has been done without the full consent and participation in the planning and analysis of the studied community. Native American communities have often been the subject of research or programs designed by those unfamiliar with Native American culture and history. This practice has eroded trust in the process and created a “cultural disincentive” to participate in research and policy.²

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¹ New Mexico Department of Health Youth Risk and Resiliency Survey. [www.youthrisk.org/](http://www.youthrisk.org/)
² Turning the Tide for Native American Children: Combatting Childhood Obesity and Type 2 Diabetes in New Mexico, Notah Begay III Foundation, Nov. 2012
Some Native Americans are concerned about what this means for efforts to improve the health of their communities. Roanhorse and colleague Kristyn Yepa, Chief Health and Wellness Programs Officer for NB3F, are on a mission to show tribes that health data are empowering. “We need to ask—why are we dying from cancer and diabetes?” said Yepa. “Why are our children obese? Tribes need to recognize that if they want a strong community where language and culture can survive then they need to address the health issues to ensure that the next generation will live long, healthy lives to carry on these traditions.”

The NB3F was formed in 2005 by Begay, the only full-blooded Navajo golfer on the Professional Golfers’ Association (PGA) Tour. The goal of the foundation is to provide health and wellness education to Native American youth. With funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the NB3F hosted four convenings in 2012 with over 250 participants, including tribal leaders and key health stakeholders, to think through these issues as they pertain to obesity and type 2 diabetes in Native youth. “We have to show tribal leaders that obesity is an issue. These convenings helped show the need to build capacity and to make this data collection a priority.” A final report of the convenings with recommendations can be found on the NB3F website.

In addition to issues around data collection and sharing, sustaining programs in these communities can be very difficult because of high turnover in tribal governments where officials often serve only one year. Traditionally, the tribal communities have been very focused on treatment and self-management of diabetes. Roanhorse explains that the mission of the Notah Begay III Foundation is to shift the focus to prevention and to build capacity in tribes for implementing and evaluating best practice programs.

Yepa and Roanhorse want to start discussions in these communities about the historical context of food in their culture. Like so many other communities struggling with obesity and poverty, there has been a shift towards quantity of food over quality. “We are always feasting in honor of saints or celebrations,” said Yepa, “and we must remind people where our food comes from. It just takes one generation to make a change, to make things flip.”
The Alliance for a Healthier Generation, founded by the American Heart Association and the Clinton Foundation, works to reduce the prevalence of childhood obesity and to empower kids to develop lifelong, healthy habits. The Alliance works with schools, companies, community organizations, healthcare professionals and families to transform the conditions and systems that lead to healthier children.

As the nation’s largest school-based obesity prevention program, the Alliance’s Healthy Schools Program (also primarily funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation) is currently working with more than 20,000 schools and plans to keep growing. The program is based on a framework of best practices developed by a panel of national experts that encourages schools to build a school wellness council, assess what is currently happening, create an action plan to make sustainable changes and implement effective policies and programs. Schools receive training on this continuous improvement model as well as professional development, access to a customer support center, success stories, networking opportunities and hundreds of science-based resources.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention published findings from the first peer-reviewed evaluation of the Healthy Schools Program in its Preventing Chronic Disease Journal in March 2012; the study found that participating schools made significant changes in programs and policies in areas such as employee wellness and school meals regardless of location, population and socioeconomic status. In essence, the report showed that the Healthy Schools Program model works.

The Alliance has focused on recruiting schools in areas with the greatest need. The Healthy Schools Program launched in 2006 in 13 states and now has a presence in all 50 states in addition to the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. Staff from the Healthy Schools Program have spent the last few years cultivating relationships with stakeholders and schools in the Navajo Nation and for the past two years has employed a full-time staff member to work in the region. Her name is Tara Gene, from the Black Streak Wood clan, born for the Water Flow Together clan. Gene has traveled back and forth across the reservation, encouraging schools to join the Healthy Schools Program. “My goal is that the majority of schools in the Navajo
Tara Gene, Healthy Schools Program Manager, Alliance for a Healthier Generation

“I really think schools here can benefit from the Healthy Schools Program because it gives them a comprehensive way of organizing what they are doing within the school and district as a whole.”

The Alliance for a Healthier Generation recently signed an agreement with the Bureau of Indian Education to introduce the Healthy Schools Program in Board of Indian Education (BIE) schools across the nation. According to Roanhorse, “The tribes know what is appropriate culturally and linguistically for their people. We want tribes to define their own success and to empower them with the knowledge and support that they need. We hope we can build on the great work that the Alliance has done with the Healthy Schools Program and potentially be a bridge builder for working in Native American communities.”
Although data collection can sound intimidating and technical, it is really just another way to tell a story, or to take a picture of reality. The stories below demonstrate that anyone can be involved in the process of collecting and analyzing data about their surroundings and everyone can and should be empowered to use the data to advocate for healthier schools, worksites and communities. Here we share three stories of hope from students and schools working to make sure that the next generation of Navajo children can live long and healthy lives.

**Alliance for a Healthier Generation Healthy Schools Program Member**

**Chee Dodge Elementary, Yatahey, New Mexico**

On top of a dry, sandy hill in the northwest corner of New Mexico in a town called Yatahey, sits Chee Dodge Elementary. The school is in the Gallup-McKinley School District, which is the largest district by land in the country, although it only has 35 schools. This is an area so vast that the student population density is only two students for every square mile. Students may travel up to 30 miles by bus to get to Chee Dodge Elementary, but when they arrive they are greeted by a friendly staff, ready for an active and healthy day.

The wind in Yatahey is powerful and often dictates what activities can be attempted on any given day. Buses start arriving at 7:15 in the morning and, if the wind is tame, the students play outside before heading in for breakfast in the classroom. After breakfast the students are up again for a quick dance break before settling down for the first lesson of the day.

Chee Dodge has a 98 percent Navajo student population and is able to offer a daily Navajo culture and language class. During this class period students can often be found playing active games, dancing, walking or running on the outdoor trail. “In Navajo culture we talk about keeping your physical health because life gives you a lot of obstacles,” said Navajo culture teacher Eldora Garcia. “Our elders used to stress the ex-
Exercise—getting up early to run. In our (coming-of-age) ceremonies you have to run. We teach our children to overcome obstacles by exercising, staying positive and maintaining balance between the physical, emotional and spiritual lives.”

At lunch, students line up for a Chef salad with breadsticks or Sloppy Joes with sweet potato fries, green beans and fruit. Cafeteria Manager Manual Carl admits that the sweet potato fries added to the district menus this year have not been a hit at Chee Dodge. “It’s just not something our students are familiar with. But we hope that if we keep offering them they will start to like them.” The salads, on the other hand, sell out every day.

“We used to allow parents to bring in fast food to eat with their kids,” said teacher Danny John, “but we outlawed that. If parents do it now the kids have to go eat it in the parking lot. We got rid of all our pop machines even though that was a big money maker. We have juice machines but they are not on during the day. It’s just too much sugar.” Most students start with milk and then go to the water cooler to hydrate before heading outside for recess.

Danny John, kindergarten teacher Marilyn Ellison and school health assistant Dornelia Tsosie are the bedrock of the school wellness council at Chee Dodge. John and Tsosie coach basketball and run the afterschool program. This group, in addition to physical education teacher Marcella Wayne, received training in the SPARK PE curriculum, a nationally recognized, research-based physical education program, and decided that, in addition to using the activities during the traditional physical education class, they would also use them after school.

“We did the afterschool program three days a week,” said Tsosie. “It is 90 minutes of active games, dancing, aerobics, walking, diabetes education and working in the garden. The kids love it.” What sits behind
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Chee Dodge Elementary is, given the terrain, what seems to be an exercise in futility. Despite dry soil that lacks nutrients, serious issues with access to water, frequent frost and wind that sweeps seeds away as soon as they have been planted, the school has built and sustained a miraculous school garden. Second grade teacher Kevin Buggie is the first to admit that most school gardens are “a joke.” With limited funding, frequent staff turnover and shifting school priorities, Buggie believes that most school gardens become a pile of weeds.

However, with support from school staff and administrators, occasional funding boosts from grants and a passionate teacher with a green thumb, a school can take a garden bed and turn it into a true outdoor classroom. This “classroom” at Chee Dodge is now one acre, fenced in to keep the wild horses out, with a small greenhouse and water tank. A larger greenhouse, big enough to hold an entire class, is on the way. Part of the space is going to hold a collection of native plants and teachers will be able to expand the integrated lessons on science, agriculture and Navajo history.

Buggie wants the students to see the connection between planting, maintenance and the harvest. And he has high standards for his plants and seeds. “Many adults around here do not have positive experiences with gardening because it is tough in these conditions. I’m determined to do things correctly and to be successful so that these kids do not think that gardening is impossible.”

“I used to do more to extend the season, to fight against nature. Now I take a more traditional approach. We teach the kids about the three sisters; that was the Navajo belief that when you grow corn beans, and squash together the plants protect each other. The squash suppresses weeds, the beans offer nitrogen and the tall corn offers support for the others to grow. The practice was that girls would plant corn and boys would plant beans so that is what we do.”

“In my mind, an elementary school should be a sanctuary. Children can focus on learning because everything else is in place. That is happening here because of this core group of staff that care about these children and this community and they come here to do their best for them.”

Principal Ann Brendal, Chee Dodge Elementary
Last year this school garden harvested more than 1500 lbs. of produce so they held a market to sell it to families. The school and garden have been helped with grants and support from NCASH, the Navajo Coordinated Approach to School Health Program. Diabetes education is a mainstay at this school where the Diabetes Education in Tribal Schools curriculum is used during the school day and reinforced in the afterschool program. As most students at the school know someone with diabetes, teachers hope that the extra education will help students make good food choices while sharing the lessons learned with family and friends. The curriculum encourages students to think about what their grandparents ate, the balance of food and physical activity, and to see the connection between healthy behaviors and diabetes.

Although many of Chee Dodge’s efforts to improve student health started before they joined the Healthy Schools Program, kindergarten teacher and school wellness council leader Marilyn Ellison believes that participating in the Healthy Schools Program helps ensure sustainability of all of these efforts. Ellison sees how the Healthy Schools Program tracking and planning tools are what the school wellness council needs to stay goal-oriented and on track to meet its goals. And with direct support and assistance from Gene, as well as access to the Alliance’s national experts on school meals, health education, physical activity and more, the wellness council is confident that they are using research-based best practices that will make a difference.
When you meet Danyel Marie Johnson she will introduce herself as being from the Many Hogan’s clan (Hooghan-lani), born for the Water-Flow-Together clan (Tó’aheedlinii), and her maternal grandfathers are Salt People (Ashjj’); her paternal clan, the Zuni Clan (Naasht’ézhi Din’e’e). Danyel believes that the work she is doing to improve the health of her Navajo community is the embodiment of a dream she had when she was just four years old. That was when she became a spiritual healer and shared her vision of becoming a person who does good things for humanity.

When Danyel was selected to serve on the Alliance for a Healthier Generation’s Youth Advisory Board in 2011, she felt that her vision had been realized. “I decided to join the Youth Advisory Board,” Danyel said, “because the Navajo Nation struggles with obesity.”

The Alliance’s Youth Advisory Board is one of the only youth-led advisory groups in the country focused on childhood obesity issues. This group of youth leaders (currently 21 members) plays an integral role in advising and providing a youth perspective to guide the work of the Alliance. Board members also serve as national spokespeople for the Alliance and commit to initiating healthy changes in their own neighborhoods and school districts by engaging in service-learning programs in their communities. In exchange, these youth leaders are given the opportunity to connect with each other on monthly calls and in annual training sessions. They share challenges and successes, and bounce ideas off each other which build confidence, public speaking and leadership skills that they take back to their community.
Combining both her love for her Navajo culture and an active lifestyle, Danyel practices her traditional dances and songs in addition to playing soccer, basketball, baseball, softball and running. She hopes to serve as a healthy role model for her peers and for the young and old in her community. She is passionate about keeping her language alive and restoring harmony and health for Navajo youth.

Danyel gained some traction at Tohatchi Elementary School where she was a student. The school joined the Healthy Schools Program and after completing the Inventory, the online assessment available on the Alliance’s website, the wellness council was able to take a good look at what areas they were doing well in and what they wanted to change in the future.

The group created an Action Plan focused on increasing physical activity minutes per week and increasing fruit and vegetable consumption. Danyel helped get her friends excited about new salad options, encouraged her peers to move more during recess and helped plan field days to show that physical activity could be fun.

When Tohatchi school counselor Sandra Ki received word that the school had met the New Mexico Annual Yearly Progress expectations she explained, “Success breeds success.” Ki, along with many other education and health researchers, believes that there is a direct link between health and academic outcomes and attributes the increase in school performance indicators to the school’s efforts to keep students active and healthy.

Since then Danyel has moved to a new town and started middle school and has learned the lesson that what works in one place might not work in others. At her new school the administration has been less receptive to starting a new program and the middle school students seem less interested in eating healthy and staying active. If anything, these setbacks have only made Danyel more determined. She has decided to serve a third term on the Youth Advisory Board so she can make an even greater impact on her new school as she sees the need is great.

Danyel explains that in addition to her efforts on changing her school environment, she also works with her sport leagues to teach other kids about nutrition and fitness. She even has helped her family make healthy changes at home where, as the oldest of six girls, she feels a deep sense of responsibility. She rewards

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Sandra Ki, Tohatchi school counselor
her sisters with stickers when they get enough minutes of physical activity, she fills up their water bottles every morning before school and has high expectations that the water will be gone when they come home. Danyel understands that the choices her sisters and friends make today will not only affect their physical health but also their cultural longevity.

Her mother, Bernita, shares that it has been difficult to sit back and watch her daughter feel rejected by her elders; many of whom did not seem interested in addressing the issues Danyel presented, or did not support her ideas to start new programs in the schools. She was only ten when she started this and I would watch her speak to a crowd of people and I would wonder if it had any value. It didn’t always seem like it was getting through to people. But as she has matured you can tell that her passion is real. It is not scripted.” Bernita describes how being a part of the Youth Advisory Board has helped guide her daughter. “She sees how other kids express their passion and that motivates her to continue to speak up, even when it is hard.”
Early one morning in April 2013 a white van pulls into the parking lot of an Albuquerque grocery store and a group of teenagers piles out and heads into the store, fanning out in different directions. The students attend the Native American Community Academy (NACA), a charter school for 6-12th graders, which has joined the Alliance for a Healthier Generation’s Healthy Schools Program. The school is small with 380 students and is temporarily located in a field of portable classrooms while it waits for a permanent location. Students at NACA represent more than 30 tribal groups, although predominately Navajo.

The task ahead of the group visiting the grocery store, an 11th-grade civics class, is to purchase food to prepare and serve to staff at the school. The students want to prove that a healthy meal with more traditional, Native American foods can be provided for no more than two dollars per person. The civics class worked together to complete the Healthy Schools Program Inventory, an assessment tool on the Alliance’s website that helps schools identify the strengths and gaps of health policies and programs. When a completed Inventory has been submitted the website provides instant feedback and shows what steps can be taken to improve in areas such as health education, physical education, school meals, and employee wellness. With this data in tow, school wellness groups are encouraged to create an Action Plan that outlines feasible goals to work towards for the school year. For the students at NACA, the data gave them the information they needed to ask for specific changes in their school lunch program, beyond anecdotes and complaints.
Although NACA is part of the Albuquerque Public School District, the school’s charter status gives it the ability to hire its own school meal provider. The school does participate in the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) National School Lunch Program, so the meals served must meet the nutrition standards of the updated Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. However, the students feel like the current caterer is not providing healthy and tasty meals and the principal has encouraged the class to do its research and put together a Request for Proposals (RFP) to identify a new provider. A school meal advisor from the Healthy Schools Program will be helping the students through the complexities of the process.

To test out some recipe ideas and to build support for the overhaul, the students are serving lunch to school staff and administrators. On the menu for the day; vegetarian chili with beans, blue corn meal mush, an organic fruit cup (strawberries, kiwi, mango, melons) and a dish that they call the “Beez Kneez” which has squash, corn, green chili, garlic and onions. When asked why they chose this name, slang for something that is great, or the best, Isaiah Melk simply said, “Because that is what it is.”

The class has been reading books and watching documentaries about nutrition and agriculture and discussing behavioral economics and how to encourage better choices. This is where they got the idea to give their vegetable side dish a fun name. Melk said he has been eating the “Beez Kneez” at home frequently because he and some of his friends are experimenting with a vegan diet.

Student Tracy Martinez explains that her blue cornmeal mush is a traditional Navajo dish made out of blue cornmeal, juniper ash, and

“We really try to reinforce why this is important but when our own lunch provider is serving items that are not nutritionally dense... It’s hypocritical to say you can’t bring in fast food and then we serve you corn dogs and tater tots.”
Emily Beenen, Humanities teacher
“You can’t proxy a critical thinking task. I wanted an issue that existed in the native community; one that we could learn about and then do something about. The kids are into this. This amount of consideration, collaboration, and critical thinking? That is the product of being thrown into the fire.”

Civics teacher Josh Krause

water, and “time.” Martinez explains that the ash is a reactant that helps to bring out the calcium and iron from the cornmeal and the Navajo believe that it also serves as a blessing for the dish. She said she would like to see a school lunch that incorporates healthier meals that are indigenous to the Navajo culture while also increasing the frequency of salads.

Humanities teacher Emily Beenen was involved in creating the healthy snack policy for the school and is supporting the class in its efforts to improve the lunch program. She shared that when it came to writing the healthy snack policy, the staff wanted to focus on what snacks should be, rather than what they shouldn’t eat. “That is really anything plant based, that came from the energy of the sun. If you can’t pronounce it, you shouldn’t eat it. Those were our guiding rules.”

Teachers at NACA use a “wellness wheel” and are expected to regularly check in with all students to see how they are feeling in four areas; community and relationships, social/emotional wellness, physical wellness and intellectual wellness. “The idea is to show them how these areas are all connected,” said Beenen. “If you are fighting with friends and performing poorly in school, or if you are feeling tired and not eating well, this helps students make the connection and learn about balance.”

Civics teacher Josh Krause believes it is his obligation to create authentic learning experiences in order to develop 21st-century skills. The Healthy Schools Program Inventory gave his students the tool they needed to assess what was actually happening in their lunch program and then make the case for change based on best practices and research. It provided real-time data and empowered the group to seek out alternatives. What is both exciting and nerve-wracking for this teacher and his class is that the school principal has actually charged the class with finding a new lunch provider for the next school year. “It’s definitely a daunting task as a facilitator, but with help from the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, we have access to resources and staff that are helping us move forward.”
CONCLUSION

“One school I am working with completed the assessment of current health practices and realized they needed to revise their school wellness policy. I’ve provided them with resources to help and it jumpstarted the process, giving them more ideas for things to change. They now see how this process and their data are helpful and empowering. That is crucial in this community. This is how we move forward.”

Tara Gene, Healthy Schools Program Manager, Alliance for a Healthier Generation

So many communities in America are struggling with obesity and poverty; with access to healthy food and finding time for physical activity. Families all over the country are dealing with holding on to traditional food cultures while living in a society that values speed, convenience and quantity. The people in the Navajo Nation are both part of this “fast food nation” and separate; a sovereign nation searching for ways to preserve and maintain a language, culture and beliefs. The relationship between the Navajo Nation and the rest of the country might be described as symbiotic; a give and take of resources, modern conveniences and mainstream cultural shifts. It is a challenging position to be in.

The signs of hope, however, are strong. Childhood obesity prevention and diabetes education are high priorities for the Navajo tribal government and awareness of the problem is high. First Lady Michelle Obama’s Lets Move! Initiative has a Let’s Move! In Indian Country component and Navajo Nation First Lady Martha Shelly is a strong voice for children’s health.

The people of the Navajo Nation are working to pave a path for the next generation of Native Americans. What is clear is that it needs to be their path. As the staff of the Notah Begay Foundation explained, external organizations can share tools, resources and best practice research, and show how collecting data and making data-driven decisions are powerful. But in order for these efforts to succeed, Native Americans need to have their own definition of what is a healthy school, community or nation.

And we see that happening. Schools that have joined the Healthy Schools Program have done so because the school leaders see the value in assessing policies and practices at the school level. School leaders are becoming comfortable collecting data that helps them make school-level based decisions on what can be changed to improve health for students and staff in their community. People get a taste of change and it encourages them to seek out more opportunities to make small changes that make a big difference.