

**SEPARATE AND UNEQUAL**

A STAR TRIBUNE EDITORIAL SERIES | PART TWO OF FOUR



Junior Randall Kingbird sits in the office of counselor Jay Malchow.

‘Enigok. Nimisiwendaamin ji ayaamaangiban  
Oshki gikino-amaadiwigamig.’

(‘WE REALLY NEED A  
NEW SCHOOL.’)

LEECH LAKE INDIAN RESERVATION, MINN. At the heart of the “seasonal” class Richard Armstrong teaches at Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig High School are outdoor activities such as gathering edible plants, tanning hides and building a sweat lodge. But the lesson plan for this Tuesday morning class calls for staying inside Armstrong’s crowded, damp-smelling classroom. The task: dissecting a long legal ruling involving treaty hunting rights.

The popular teacher does his best to coax responses from his students, but he has little luck. Then, the broken-down northern Minnesota school around them inspires a change. Armstrong notes that the federal government’s educational obligations also flow from treaties, and that gets kids’ attention.

The Bug school, part of the federally funded Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) system, is partly housed in a 30-year-old metal “pole barn” built as an auto mechanic school and bus garage. Tribal leaders and staff on the K-12 campus, which has about 200 students, have been

pushing for a new high school for a decade.

But federal funding for new BIE schools has declined precipitously over the past decade and likely remains years away. Students in Armstrong's class want their little brothers and sisters to have a modern high school and don't understand why federal officials responsible for BIE schools aren't advocating for them.

"We're going to school in a tin can," said Terra Warner, a ninth-grader. "If they really cared, we'd have a new school."

Given the federal government's failure at the Bug school, state-level funding — from both public and private sources — is needed and justified.

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That the Bug high school needs to be replaced now, not at some point when federal officials get around to it, is glaringly obvious from the moment a visitor sets foot inside.

While Armstrong's students offer up a list of amenities small and large that their school should have — drinking fountains, more bathrooms, larger classrooms and an auditorium — what they need foremost is a safe, structurally sound building.

Last winter, the roof partly caved in under heavy snow, sending a deluge of water into the main corridor below as students headed to class. The floor is chipped, warped and springs leaks during storms and snowmelt. The waste system for the one set of bathrooms backs up during long winters, sending foul odors down corridors. The heating system is also failing. Mold is widespread.

Electrical cables and other building mechanicals retrofitted onto the interior snake through the building in reach of passersby — one of the most jarring sights to newcomers. Rodents are a problem; a teacher once found a nest of squirrels in her desk.

In this age of classroom shootings, the school also falls well short of modern security needs. Its thin walls could be easily pierced by bullets, and classrooms often lack doors or doorknobs to protect those inside.

Plans were drawn up four years ago for a 72,000-square-foot addition to the elementary and middle-school building. The current estimated cost: \$27 million. U.S. Interior Secretary Sally Jewell, whose Department of the Interior is the parent agency for the BIE and the Bureau of Indian Affairs, visited the northern Minnesota school last August. But in response to questions from an editorial writer, neither she nor BIE's director would say when the Bug school or the 62 other BIE school facilities in poor condition would be overhauled.

Conditions are so alarming at the Bug school that John Parmeter, the school's head of security, makes a daily inspection as sunrise peeks through the tall, green curtain of jackpines sheltering the rural campus. The school's elementary and middle-school building is of more recent, traditional block construction and in good shape. Parmeter's pace is brisk as he inspects it, along with the nearby portables used for the school's language immersion classes, and the log cabin housing the information technology office.

His pace slows as he approaches the high school and scans it for any safety hazards that have developed overnight. His gaze lingers on the roof.

On a recent fall morning, Parmeter OK'd the building's use for a day, but a few hours later the heating and cooling unit malfunctioned. Members of the repair crew from nearby Grand Rapids shook their heads at the system's age and the repairs made to get it through past winters. The cost to completely fix the problem? About \$110,000.

"This building was never meant to be a school," Parmeter said.



**Above:** Among the school's physical flaws is the lack of doors or doorknobs at many classrooms.

**Below:** Senior Chad Roper, an amateur boxing champion, never felt at home at public schools.





Teacher Kim Anderson and student Jaiden Lightfeather, center, drummed in the outdoor classroom.

### **Culture at the core**

The Bug school attracts students today for the same reasons it did when it first opened in 1975 in another location. After decades of federal policy that nearly eradicated Indian culture, students, parents and teachers in Minnesota and elsewhere left public schools that ignored their culture and started new schools that incorporated it.

Today, public schools near reservations typically offer language or culture classes. But, “basically it’s just the western system with a little bit of Ojibwe injected into it,” said Mike Schmid, a social-studies teacher at the Bug school who was part of the founding effort. Schmid also still teaches part time at nearby Cass Lake-Bena public schools.

Language and culture are at the core of a BIE school day instead of at the periphery, offering an alternative educational approach for American Indian students, whose graduation rates have been the lowest among any ethnic group. In addition to ongoing “seasonal” classes like Armstrong’s, there are Ojibwe language courses and analysis of traditional Indian stories. Saging ceremonies, a spiritual cleansing ritual, often kick off the day or week. Many schools have flag-draped spirit poles where students can seek out peace during a hectic school day.

Elders from the community also come to share their skills and forge relationships with younger generations. Several of the elders who teach at the Bug school are among the last “first language speakers” of Ojibwe in the state. Leona Wakonabo and Gerri Howard work in the elementary’s Niigaane Ojibwe immersion program, and Marlene Stately teaches at the high school. They dispense hugs along with the correct pronunciation of a language said to be one of the hardest to learn.

“There’s nobody left like them,” said Ben Bonga, who speaks Ojibwe as a second language and teaches in the immersion program. By starting kids early, it’s hoped that they will achieve the fluency that their parents did not.

To Bonga and many others in the community, the risk of not having schools like Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig, or losing students because the facilities are inadequate, is that the Ojibwe language and traditions will die out. “We are at a turning point. It’s crucial that we get the right help, the right money, to prevent that,” Bonga said.

Because BIE students’ math and reading scores nationally lag those of Indians and non-Indians in public schools, there are questions in policy circles about the schools’ educational niche. But there are also a growing number of studies underscoring the potential of a

culture-based education to improve outcomes. The success of tribal colleges in dramatically increasing the number of Indians with postsecondary degrees is also potent evidence of the value of culture-based education.

As for those who advocate simply putting students into public schools, Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig Superintendent Crystal Redgrave noted that scores for Indian students in public schools remain dismal. She said culture-based curricula need to be strengthened and given more time to deliver.

She and educators at the school are working on a math textbook that would use traditional seasonal activities to teach key concepts. Bravery and resilience would also be a theme in stories and activities used in grades three to five. On reservations, “that’s when many children lose a grandparent or parent or other family members,” she said.

Western education “has had 150 years to prove itself” for Indian students, Redgrave said. “It doesn’t work. It is time to change Indian education to Native education.”

### **Providing strength**

At the Bug school, traditional activities and dedicated teachers keep students coming to class as they deal with troubles at home or in communities plagued by crime, alcohol and drug abuse.

The Leech Lake Indian Reservation has a child poverty rate (those under 18) that’s nearly three times higher than the state average of 12.8 percent. Nationally, Minnesota has the third-highest percentage of Indian families living below the poverty level, at between 30 and 33 percent, according to a 2013 Bureau of Indian Affairs report. The diabetes clinic, one of the first sights that visitors to the reservation encounter, also attests to the widespread health problems and lower life expectancy on the reservation.

Chaz Roper, 17, a senior, lost his dad this fall and has lived with his older sister, Rochelle Roper, and her family for about the past three years. His mom, who has serious health problems, has struggled to be a part of his life.

An amateur boxing champion, Roper never felt at home in public schools. He transferred to the Bug school and found solace in its small size and traditional activities. “He’s always been very interested in his native culture,” said Rochelle Roper, who graduated from the Bug school herself. “It seems like since he started the Bug school, he’s been on the right path. He comes home on time. He listens to me. He has respect for me. If I need something, he does it. He’s a really good kid.”

Senior Seneca Keezer, 18, also attended public schools and felt adrift before transferring. She lost her mother to kidney failure and pneumonia when she was 10. For the last eight years, she’s been a second mom to her two younger sisters, coming home each night to cook dinner for them, watch over their homework and put them to bed.

Her father is seriously ill, with diabetes-related amputations leaving him in a wheelchair and requiring nursing care. Keezer shares these duties with her aunt, somehow finding time to do her own homework and to have led the school’s Native Knowledge Bowl team to a second-place finish in a recent tournament.

The cultural touchstones emphasized at the Bug school, and its caring teachers, have helped Keezer during her grief and adjustment to new family roles. “I’ve gone to sweat lodges, ceremonies with big drums, powwows, things like that,” Keezer said. “When I’m doing them ... I let go of all the negative stuff that has happened.”

### **Find a state solution**

The Bug school’s construction woes are not of Minnesota’s making, but state-based solutions should be explored to prevent Seneca’s little sister, a fourth-grader who attends the Ojibwe immersion program, from going to high school in the same decrepit building.

Unlike Minnesota’s public school system, BIE schools rely primarily on federal dollars — a legacy of land treaties specifying future education obligations. That means faraway bureaucrats ultimately decide whether new schools are built.

Federal officials may be fine with Bug school conditions for now, but Minnesotans shouldn’t be. Children in a state that has long relied on an educated workforce as its leading economic asset should not be getting their education in a school that is an unsafe impediment to learning.

There’s precedent for Minnesota to provide state aid: The state already supplements BIE schools to address disparities between rich and poor districts. The biennial appropriation for the program is \$2.2 million.

That’s not even close to the sum needed to make the new Bug school a reality. But a state-led focus on the school could attract philanthropic assistance. Officials for the Minnesota Department of Education and northern Minnesota’s respected Blandin Foundation, which

has long worked with the Bug school, told an editorial writer that they were interested in evaluating new strategies to provide help.

While the price tag for a new school may seem daunting, “with enough partners you can get that done,” said Kathleen Annette, Blandin’s president and CEO.

Minnesota is also home to the profitable metro-area Mystic Lake Casino run by the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community. While casinos don’t negate the federal government’s obligation to BIE schools — and there aren’t enough highly profitable gambling operations to support all of the federal system’s needs — with \$28 million in 2013 donations this south-metro tribe is known regionally for its generosity. Helping the Bug school would fit the tribe’s philanthropic mission.

A state-led initiative would essentially let the federal government off the hook when it comes to its educational trust obligations to the Leech Lake Reservation. But the conditions at the Bug school are at the point where action is needed now. Gov. Mark Dayton should appoint a task force to kick-start the effort.

“Physical space matters,” said Anton Treuer, executive director of the American Indian Resource Center at Minnesota’s Bemidji State University. “You become who you hang out with, and you become what you hang out in.”



Niigaane teacher Ben Bonga waved goodbye to students LaKaylee Kingbird, a fourth-grader, and Waasebiik Belgarde, a kindergartner, at the end of the school day.