

Schools as Tribes

The Power to Transform

You are truly home only when you find your tribe.

—Srividya Srinivasan

The tiny community of Ganado is in northeast Arizona's high desert. It is nestled in the midst of an expansive reservation twenty-seven miles from Window Rock—the largest town in Navajo lands. This is picturesque country, dry and beautiful, dotted with traditional hogans and small homes. To outsiders, the town of Ganado would be one of the last places expected to house an award-winning elementary school. The town has one of the highest unemployment rates in the country. Forty-six percent of the families do not have running water, and 35 percent across the district's one thousand square miles have no access to electricity. Despite the odds, Ganado Primary School is the town's pride and joy and has been continually recognized for its excellence.

Our early editions featured the special ethos of Ganado Primary based on our visits, examination of documents, and interviews with students, parents, faculty members, and Sigmund Boloz, the school's principal for almost twenty years. It continues to be an excellent portrait of a powerful school culture. Ganado Primary was identified as a School of Excellence in 1997, received the Arizona A+ award three times, and persists in serving its students and community with

a dedicated professional community and unique culture. The school continues Boloz's tradition of success secured by a strong positive culture.

Ganado Primary School: A Desert Jewel

The school's large, modern building is centrally located, visible from the main road and the small town. Its color blends with the high desert and fits well with the history and spirit of the community. The school's entry courtyard features a small-scale sculptural likeness of Spider Rock—a spiritually significant, eight-hundred-foot vertical sandstone pinnacle rising from Canyon de Chelly. The sculpture beckons students to enter a way of life that involves a deep sense of community history and traditions, an unwavering present-day focus on learning and literacy, and a lucid image of the future.

The school was not always a source of community pride. In 1980, Ganado Primary had one of the worst school buildings in Arizona. Designing and constructing the new school was the beginning of a new identity: a distinctive set of cultural ways and practices that are anchored in tradition but still embrace modern standards. The school's ethos engages teachers in ongoing learning about their craft, communicates high expectations for students through lively programs and celebrations, and involves parents as equal partners in the learning experience.

It also envelops students with symbols, support, and significant others as they go about their business of growing and learning. The combined symbols of student achievement and Navajo traditions make the environment caring and meaningful. The fusion of modern practices and ancient tribal ways connects the school historically and organically with the local community.

A walk through Ganado reveals a visual portrayal of the school's cultural values and traditions. A visitor entering the school experiences an inviting, open area dominated by the depiction of

Spider Rock. More than mere adornment, the replica represents a sacred place and time in Navajo history. According to local mythology, the actual column of sandstone in Canyon de Chelly is where Spider Woman gave the Navajo the knowledge of weaving. Today, this symbolic spire signifies that Ganado Primary is a historically anchored, sacred place that conveys knowledge and skills that are part and parcel of being a Navajo. It signals to the community that the school is part of its heritage, traditions, and future, a symbol of respect and appreciation for Navajo ways.

Inside the building, one immediately is struck by a massive red Ganado Navajo rug hanging in the front hallway. The rug—woven in the distinctive Ganado style—pulls one into the unique Navajo way of life. It is beautiful, complex, and emotionally warming. It draws you into an image of community and school working together in harmony. Nearby walls are adorned with awards for educational excellence won by staff members and students, as well as academic work demonstrating a wide array of student accomplishments. But, fitting local values, displays are a symbol of community pride—neither boastful nor excessive.

The school's architecture and design blend symbol and purpose. The school was designed collaboratively with architects to serve educational needs and to send an emblematic message. It is a fusion of modern educational equipment and methods with symbols of the traditional ways of the Navajo people. The school is configured in four units or quadrants. Each quadrant houses a team of teachers and a cohort of students—designs that reinforce the closeness of staff members and makes students feel part of a cohesive group.

Each quadrant denotes one of the tribe's four sacred directions and represents a core value. The east is associated with white, dawn, spring, critical thinking, and a clear mind. The south is associated with blue, daylight, and summer, one's purpose in life, the roles of staff members, and the importance of keeping oneself nourished. The west is identified with yellow, twilight, fall, the waning of light, supertime, and interpersonal relationships and connections.

The north is associated with black, night, winter, the importance of respect and reverence, personal values, and how life fits together in harmony (Witherspoon, 1995, p. 13; personal conversation with Sigmund Boloz, 2008). The deeper meanings of these four cardinal directions play out in the school and reinforce the learning and social mission of the school.

At Ganado, dawn is celebrated through the start of the day and the opening of school. Daylight and summer represent growth and sunlight; one's learning roles during the day. Twilight reminds one of relationships in the school and within family. Night reinforces the importance of reflection and contemplation, an important element to planning and thoughtfulness. The four quadrants are represented throughout the school in the colors of the blinds in each classroom and in stories told and retold in group settings. All these elements—*architecture, mission, tradition, colors, stories, and relationships*—combine to form the Ganado culture.

Other unique architectural features also reinforce cultural and instructional values of Ganado. For example, the library is located in the center of the building, a point signaling the centrality of literacy. It displays thousands of books in open view as students travel from one part of the school to another. Writing displays reinforce literacy. Small reading corners invite students to curl up with a book. Hallways are airy and light. A room used for meetings, reflection, and community gatherings is shaped in the form of a Hogan—an ancient Navajo home design with deep symbolic significance, still common in rural areas.

In the meeting room, traditional wooden posts holding up the ceiling seem perfectly in harmony with modern paraphernalia: books, tablets, camcorders, and computers. It reinforces the harmony of school and community.

Hallways are adorned with numerous expertly hung Navajo rugs woven in the red geometric design favored by local weavers. The rug represents “quality, attention to detail, care, skills, learning, creativity, and tradition” (personal conversation with Sigmund Boloz, 2008), all values of the school. The floor in the lunchroom mirrors

the patterns in the Ganado rug on display in the foyer—again reinforcing cultural traditions and tying the school together with common themes.

Architecture and artifacts vividly represent the school's core values and basic beliefs as embodied in the school's mission statement during Boloz's years:

The Ganado Primary School's mission is to provide opportunities for children to make sense of their world, to respect themselves and others, to respect their environment, and to appreciate and understand their cultural and linguistic heritage. Children, teachers, and administrators all bring varying points of view, resources, expectations of and assumptions about the world, and ways of dealing with their daily circumstances. Our mission is to help everyone negotiate their experiences with the content of the classroom, instructional style, and the social, emotional, physical, and professional interactions of school life. We believe that a relaxed atmosphere where surprise, challenge, hard work, celebration, humor, satisfaction, and collegiality is the natural order of the day for all.

Care must be taken to ensure that sound philosophical, developmental, and cultural understandings of children are at the heart of decision making in the classroom and the school. The question, "What is it like to be a child?" underlies staff development, matters of curriculum, parent involvement, and instructional approaches. "What is it like to be a teacher?" is an equally valid question. What is true about our mission to children is true for teachers and staff as well.

The school's mission is reflected in a piece written in 1997 by then-principal Sigmund Boloz. It sketches a portrait of his core obligations.

The C Diet

My job is

to keep the compass

to massage change

to build credibility: a positive image for the school in the eyes of the community

to cultivate my staff

to ask the compelling questions

to be an advocate for children

I build the culture of the school

curriculum consensus constituents community

I see my job as building my staff. I strive to build:

confidence in themselves, in their decisions, and in their teaching

courage to take risks and to break new ground

compassion for children and others

character to always do their personal best

competence that they know the current trends

capacity to learn new things

commitment to our mission

clarity a good focus on the whats and the hows

consciousness to bring thinking to a higher level

communication open lines of dialog

collaboration share expertise

connectedness bonding to each other and our mission

collegiality professional interactions

challenge to keep staff on their cutting edge

critical thinking thoughtfulness

creativity to implement innovations
curiosity actively seek better ways
contentment feel accepted

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Other key values are played out in the culture of Ganado. Central among Navajo educators is the importance of honoring relationships and harboring a deep feeling of moral responsibility to oneself and to others. In addition, in Navajo culture all tribal members are to work toward “living well” in harmony and balance. As Eder (2007) notes, living well means “. . . wholeness; continuity of generations; one’s relationship to the beginning, to the past and to the universe; responsibility to future generations; life force; and completeness” (p. 279). As we have seen, these are core values of Ganado educators and are reinforced in efforts and actions to jointly ensure that all children learn.

Ganado’s Mission and Rituals

The school’s mission and purpose cast a shadow far beyond architectural form, artifacts, and the written word. The school year is packed with rituals and ceremonies for everyone—students, staff members, parents, and elders. These engaging rites reinforce core values and beliefs.

Four times a year, Boloz held a “Once Upon a Time Breakfast” meeting. He invited students, teachers, and parents to bring their favorite books and celebrate literacy while they enjoyed food, drink, and read together. This activity bolstered the professional community and emphasized literacy as a vital part of life.

Students were acknowledged on a regular basis for their growth and learning. During the “Celebrating Quality Learning Award Ceremony,” a significant number of students received awards for

writing, quality work, citizenship, dance, drama, or for progress in mastering the Navajo language. Each student was recognized and parents or caregivers joined them at the front for applause, the award, and a photograph. Parents and teachers joined with children and celebrated together what they had collectively accomplished to make the school special. After the awards, reporters from the school newspaper conducted interviews and took additional photos for the articles that appeared in the coming issue. Frequently the award that students received was a Ganado T-shirt proudly worn at school. These celebrations reinforced cultural values by anointing champions who exemplified the purpose and successes of the school.

Learning to read prompts a major celebration throughout the school year, thus signifying its centrality in the school's mission. A T-shirt was designed that said, "I can read guaranteed," reinforcing widespread attention on the recognition and deciphering of written words. Reaching 3.0 on Accelerated Reader was the measure of success celebrated with the ringing of a bell and the presentation of the T-shirt in the lunchroom, where the whole school would applaud the accomplishment. A photograph of the student and teacher memorialized the event and was placed on the wall for public attention.

Parents also learned at Ganado—through workshops on important topics and a series of year-long classes leading to a general education degree (GED)—and were feted in frequent events as their learning progressed. Parents are valued and woven snugly into the texture of Ganado. They are respected, supported, and made to feel welcome at any time.

A Culture of Learning

At Ganado everyone is a learner: students, teachers, parents, and administrators. The value of learning and improving is part of what keeps the school moving forward. Boloz met often with

teachers from one of the four units for a “curriculum conversation.” Together, they explored new ideas by discussing articles or books, viewing DVDs of new approaches, or observing individual teaching episodes. The dialogue offered fresh perspectives on curriculum, instruction, and learning.

Teachers were esteemed as professionals, always seeking innovative ways to serve their students. As Boloz noted, “You need to be thinking, learning, be a model in your class.” Staff members deepened this commitment to self-improvement by reading, attending workshops, and staying abreast of new developments in their fields.

Over time routine meetings have become ritual gatherings. These gatherings are organized to share ideas on literacy (“Reading Achievement Meetings”) or examine progress on the school improvement plan (“The Instructional Improvement Committee”). Small meetings are held to discuss an individual student who is struggling.

These ritualistic occasions are focused on improving instruction and serving children, but they also reinforce trust, collaborative decision making, and a shared sense of purpose. Staff members have become more of a team, more skilled at diagnosing and solving learning problems, and more committed to the school and its community. There is a sense that if any child fails, the school and staff members have botched the job.

Child-focused curriculum and instruction are prized and reinforced through voluntary focus groups that pursue relevant topics in depth. Sometimes topics originate from teachers’ direct observations of classroom needs, but they are also prompted from close examination of performance data. Creative collaborative discussions seek better ways to serve students. For example, ten teachers might examine new techniques for teaching poetry; another group might discuss alternative ways of teaching writing to first-graders.

The meetings are lively, focused, and collegial. They simultaneously build skills and a sense of community—all core values and expectations of the culture.

Everyone at Ganado is dedicated to learning. An “Early Childhood Academy” for classroom aides provides new ideas and conveys a sense of importance among the school’s paraprofessionals. Classroom aides are immersed for a full week in early childhood concepts and classroom techniques. All who participate receive book bags with the academy name and year prominently displayed, symbolizing their responsibility to carry newfound knowledge back to the school.

Another staff ritual is “Teachers as Readers.” The school provides time for teachers to eat together and talk about what they are reading. Individuals bring a new book or article that they want to share and discuss with colleagues. Leadership for the sessions is distributed, thereby reinforcing the sense of professional responsibility.

As former principal Sig Boloz noted, “We marinated students in literacy and activities in the classroom. And we marinated our staff in new ideas, new dialogues, and new approaches.” His successor continues the legacy of finding ways to reinforce learning and nurture a sense of professional community.

Students as Leaders

Students are also active shapers of cultural ways. The “Tour-guide Program,” for example, is an ongoing tradition. First- and second-grade students guide visitors around the school, highlighting student work, explaining the presence of community weavers, and showcasing school awards. The petite guides are articulate and well prepared to enlighten visitors about the special features of the school and the unique values they share. Youthful guides become purveyors and consumers of their own culture and history.

Students help others become more proficient readers and are the editors, photographers, and writers for the school newspaper. They are engaged and energized by the school and the learning activities.

Although learning is important, it is also important that students have fun. Activities that promote learning must also be engaging and fun, making the classroom culture a joyous one.

Another important tradition that supported kids and built ties with the community was the “Caring Adults” program (now transformed into a “Foster Grandparents” program). Everyone was encouraged to volunteer and identify a student who seemed lost or in need of some attention. The adult took the time to talk with the student, ask about his or her interests and work, listen to the student read, or just check in. Almost everyone had someone; the principal had several, the head custodian had five on his list, and the secretary, clerks, and food service workers all pitched in. Students with emotional needs or who were going through tough times had access to an adult who acknowledged that they existed, took an interest in them, and made sure they connected daily.

This invisible platoon of adults was there to help kids. The program not only supported the individual student but also built a deep sense of purpose and commitment to children as a whole.

Ganado Lore

History and stories are significant cornerstones of the school culture, just as stories are a key part of Navajo culture. Almost everyone in the Ganado community is a storyteller. They tell stories of change and renewal, celebrating the transformation of the school from one of the worst to one of the best in Arizona. They share tales of the conferences and training programs that have kept their school fueled with new ideas and innovative instructional approaches. They spin yarns of parents once excluded who now work in the school, get their GEDs, and come to early-childhood conferences. The narratives tell of reaching goals, overcoming obstacles, and working together as a community. The school’s treasure trove of stories becomes glue for the staff, sets expectations for new hires, and provides the stuff of celebrations for parents and community.

Ganado's Cultural Network

There is a strong informal network at Ganado Primary. The social system is filled with role models and individuals who keep stories and information flowing. One of the first school superintendents was appreciated as a special person at Ganado. A Navajo, he had been there for thirty years and was credited with a good heart; some say perhaps he cared too much. When he visited the school, children flocked to see him and wrote to him through the school post office—and he responded. In the early years, Grandma Taliman was another character in the cultural network, and she was a foster grandparent for many children. She visited with staff members and children and brought the attention, caring, and sense of legend that only the elderly can offer. She made people feel good just by being a quiet, understanding anchor to the past and a reminder of how community values came to be.

Ganado is full of heroes and heroines. Some are parents who learned to read themselves and then helped their children. Some are staff members dedicated to becoming great teachers. Many others are students whose deeds exemplify the school's values and purpose. As Boloz remarked, "A good administrator has to have heroes—people who embody important values" (personal conversation, 2008). Principal Boloz is now retired from the school but remains an icon and is fondly remembered. His words, deeds, and commitment are constant reminders of the school as a beloved institution.

Ganado also has its subcultures. The four units are tight-knit family subcultures and mini-professional communities. Staff members often have breakfast and lunch together and talk about curriculum and other educational matters. Teachers in the units take special pride in "their kids." Each cluster is its own small neighborhood. Students feel connected, cared for, and part of the school as a whole. School is another family for many.

Other core norms are deeply embedded in the culture. Staff members are always asking, “What does the child need?” They assume that everyone is working together; clearly problem solving is a joint venture at Ganado. Kids are always at the center of decisions in the school. Knowledge is valued and the expertise and intelligence of teachers is respected and upheld. Learning by everyone is a virtue, not a requirement. Creativity and new ideas are revered resources to be nurtured. Finally, the school is considered another family for children, not as a replacement for the core family but as a place to provide continuity to caring relationships in the community.

Ganado did not instantaneously change from worst to first. It took twenty years of hard work, leadership, and a communal desire for something better. The school’s successes continue based on the same commitment. Staff members and students continue to be zealous learners, active problem solvers, and creative architects of a culture in which history is a foundation for the future, current accomplishments are recognized, and children are the center of the universe and tomorrow’s promise.

Ganado Primary is an example of a school possessing the necessary elements—the blueprint and building blocks—every school assembles to build a cohesive culture that gives purpose, vitality, and direction to an educational enterprise. School cultures—no matter whom they serve—offer, similar to tribes and clans, deep ties among people and the values and traditions that give meaning to everyday life. In the next chapters, we explore the elements of culture in more detail and see how culture shapes behavior, focus, and success. It makes no difference whether the school is large and urban, well-funded and suburban, or poor and rural, the challenges are very similar. Unless America changes its course and focuses on meaning more than metrics, our schools will never realize their full potential. The new course will be charted by the teachers and administrators whose hands are on the tillers of every public school in the country.