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## At Bemidji charter, American Indian students excel

*Alejandra Matos*

Students at TrekNorth Junior and Senior High, a charter school in Bemidji, have to meet an unusual graduation requirement: prove they've been admitted to at least one institution of higher education.

Administrators believe that's one of the reasons why American Indian students here — nearly half of the school's 250 students — outperform their peers statewide. The school has won attention from the state for its excellence and significant progress toward closing the achievement gap between white and Indian students.

“There are very clear expectations that if you come here, what we are working toward is going to college,” Principal Dan McKeon said. “Kids know what we are about, and we've earned their trust, and it makes a lot of things possible.”

So as the state more than quadruples its investment in Indian education funding — to nearly \$18 million total over two years — Minnesota Education Commissioner Brenda Cassellius is

highlighting the school as a model for other schools with Indian students to emulate. State officials hope the financial infusion will push districts toward innovative programs like those at TrekNorth.

“I’m challenging you to think outside the box,” Cassellius said during a Thursday visit to the Bemidji public schools. “With this new funding and flexibility, you can do whatever it takes to get those kids achieving.”

American Indian students have some of lowest graduation and achievement rates in the state. In 2015, 37 percent of Indian students mastered the state’s math standards, compared to 68 percent for white students. Just half of all Indian seniors graduated in 2014, the lowest rate in the state.

The state increased its Indian education funding this school year after a series from the Star Tribune editorial board revealed unsafe, failing and neglected schools run by the federal Bureau of Indian Education.

When Cassellius visited TrekNorth and Bemidji Middle School last week, her goal was to find out what works and can be replicated in other large districts serving Indian students.

“What is that special something?” she said, quizzing teachers and staff at TrekNorth. “I know it’s not the water.”

## 'Students of celebration'

TrekNorth is housed in a commercial building near a mall and across from a Subway. It used to be a mattress and appliance store, but now there are 14 classrooms and a large common area. No class had more than 23 students.

When Greg Moen was in front of his 11 students during a life sciences class, he had the attention of every one of them. The instruction was not a lecture. Instead, students spouted questions and answers as they thought of them. They called Moen by his first name, a small detail that students say is "really cool."

The school also takes every student on experiential learning trips. They visit Grand Marais to go canoeing and hiking and go to Chicago to serve at homeless shelters and soup kitchens. It teaches students resilience and courage in a way that can't be taught in a classroom, McKeon said.

Teachers at TrekNorth keep track of how well students are doing and discuss their progress in meetings where they review data from assessments, behavior and attendance. The teachers categorize the kids as "students of concern" and "students of celebration."

They then work to make sure every student gets off the concerned list. The longer they stay on the list, the more teachers make home visits and meet with parents, McKeon said.

The students say its those relationships with their teachers that keep them accountable and coming to school.

Cyan Koos, a ninth-grader, said she was bullied at another school in town and decided to attend TrekNorth. “This place is more like a family or a community than a school.” Koos said.

Still, the principal says one of the school’s challenges is to be seen as a top choice in the community. Unlike in the Twin Cities, families here often do not see charters as better options than public schools. Families often choose TrekNorth as a last resort.

“They are usually running away from something, and we happen to be an option,” McKeon said. “I think we are good at fixing what hasn’t worked.”

That includes the education of some of its American Indian students coming from other schools. The school will be using its \$50,000 in state Indian education funding to pay for college visits and expand its tutoring program. TrekNorth will also purchase more American Indian novels and host talks with Indian authors.

### Hesitant to innovate

While this is the first year TrekNorth receives the state funding, other schools are seeing large increases.

Minneapolis Public Schools, with 1,400 Indian students, will receive

nearly \$500,000 more than in past years. They will be hiring a social worker, a middle school counselor and a family engagement coordinator to work with Indian families.

Bemidji Public Schools went from receiving \$60,000 to fund Indian education to over \$400,000. Officials in the district told Cassellius they will use the money to supplement transportation and staffing needs for programs already in place, such as hiring another Ojibwe language instructor and academic advisers.

Cassellius challenged the school district to be more creative with the money. They should consider an Ojibwe Immersion school, she said, and suggested they partner with Red Lake or Leech Lake communities to increase access to early childhood education.

Bemidji Superintendent James Hess said they will look into expanding their programs, but still feels they are limited by a lack of resources. He and other district leaders said they were hesitant to try something new and bold because they were unsure the state funding would continue.

Cassellius reassured them the financial commitment is ongoing and will not go away in two years.

“We have the opportunity to do something big,” Cassellius said.

“You should combine efforts and say we are not going to let kids fall through the cracks.”