

Bridge the Divide and Wisconsin Indian Education Association Celebrate Cedarburg School District's Adoption of American Indian History Curriculum

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CEDARBURG – Earlier this year, the Cedarburg School District adopted a new plan to teach students in grades 4, 8 and 9 about Wisconsin's American Indian communities. Cedarburg adopted the plan after an investigation by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) found that the district was not in compliance with Act 31, a Wisconsin law passed in 1989 that requires school districts to provide instruction at the elementary, middle, and high school level on the history, culture and tribal sovereignty of Wisconsin's eleven federally recognized American Indian nations and tribal communities. According to DPI's website, Act 31 was passed to provide Wisconsin's students with accurate, academically appropriate information about American Indian communities in Wisconsin "that could also serve as a positive force to combat misunderstanding and social unrest."

Since 2019, students and families in Cedarburg—spearheaded by the community organization Bridge the Divide—have been asking the district to evaluate its curriculum for diversity and cultural representation. In late 2021, seeking a more orderly and transparent process, Bridge the Divide filed a complaint asking DPI to investigate Cedarburg's compliance with Act 31 and with a state statute that requires Wisconsin school boards to provide students with books and instructional materials that "reflect the cultural diversity and pluralistic nature of American society." In addition to its finding regarding Cedarburg's American Indian curriculum, DPI also offered recommendations and resources so that the District could strengthen how its instructional offerings reflect American diversity.

"For years, Cedarburg residents have been seeking transparency and honesty about how our schools' curriculum addresses race," said Erica Turner, a Cedarburg resident and Executive Director of Bridge the Divide. "We are proud that our efforts yielded such clear information about how the district can improve and grow—and we are so excited for the 4th, 8th, and 9th graders who will experience the district's new Native Peoples of Wisconsin units next fall. All students deserve an education that prepares them to be informed, empathetic participants in our diverse society."

"On behalf of the Wisconsin Indian Education Association (WIEA), I want to express my sincere gratitude to the Cedarburg School District for their recent decision to implement

Act 31,” said James A. Pete., DBA, WIEA Board President. “The Act was originally passed to help bring an understanding of the many different and unique levels of the Tribal Nations within Wisconsin. In some of our beliefs, the four sacred colors of red, white, yellow and black represent the four seasons, the four directions, the four stages of life, and the four races of humankind. When those four races of humankind work together, and not against each other, we all reap the benefits of the strength that is present. Anytime you need some assistance, WIEA and the many Tribal resources are available to help in creating an understanding of our different and unique levels of the Tribal Nations within Wisconsin.”

“Bridge the Divide’s extraordinary tenacity has paid off,” said Elisabeth Lambert, a Wisconsin education lawyer who advised the organization regarding the DPI complaint process. “They went absolutely by the book, following the state’s long-established statutory process to help Cedarburg take these steps towards developing students’ historical and cultural awareness. They are a model for how communities in Wisconsin can pursue productive conversation about race and diversity in curriculum.”

A copy of DPI’s final decision and order is available [here](#).

A copy of Cedarburg’s new Native Peoples of Wisconsin curriculum is available [here](#).