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Life lessons come to the classroom for Prairie Island students

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TODAY STAFF

RED WING, Minn. — A team of teachers, professionals and elders will enter a classroom in a public school to bring life lessons to students from the Prairie Island Sioux Community.

The life lessons pilot program, initiated by the Prairie Island Community Council, will enable students in grades kindergarten through 12 to prepare for adulthood.

The tribal council wanted to utilize some of the tribal resources to teach the youth during school when they are in a captive and learning situation in the classroom. The thought was that it was a good time to interact, said Dannie Harjo, project coordinator.

The program will provide students with educational opportunities that they don't normally receive in the classroom and may not receive at home.

"The program will also provide mentorship opportunities for the life-skills presenters and the Prairie Island Youth," the tribal council stated in a press release.

"It just came from a need to provide children with more skills and more tools and it grew from there," Harjo said.

Course topics will include finances and budgeting, healthy

eating, self-esteem, Dakota culture, career and college choices, the environment and the making of good choices.

Prairie Island employees, program and department directors (including the police chief), Family Services and Health Services personnel, and people from activities, land and environmental programs will be the presenters. Prairie Island has partnered with U.S. Bank to teach some financial and budgeting components.

Students who are tribal members will be taken from their regular studies to participate in the program on a rotating basis so that not more than one regular class will be missed in a month.

The program is also designed to introduce youth to the Prairie Island staff and to develop relationships with police and other programs.

"We presented programs to the community before and [they were] not well attended; sometimes [there was] no attendance. These are issues we feel are important, that youth should have a well-rounded education so we should reach them when they are young to prepare for the journey into adulthood," Harjo said.

The Red Wing school district is on the same page as the Prairie

Island Community, Harjo said. The relationship with the school board has been helpful in developing the program. The community made the presentation to the school board and the board gave their blessing.

Not all tribal members attend the Red Wing school district and it would be difficult to expand the program to all the schools where community members are located, Harjo said.

Modules may be developed for an online program of life skills that could reach all community members so that those who live outside the state and within other parts of Minnesota could participate should this program find success.

"We are expecting the community will see this as a positive move to help youth develop and get additional training," Harjo said.

Many students may not have time after school, with sports and other activities, to participate in a life lessons program, so the community will take the program to the classroom.

The program may expand to include other students in the Red Wing schools after a year of the pilot program and if the evaluations are favorable. Students will be asked to evaluate the program as well as teachers and presenters.

Parents will also be invited to attend any of the life skills courses that are available.

The Prairie Island Sioux Community is located on the Mississippi River south of the Twin Cities, and Red Wing is just downriver from the community. Prairie Island is involved in sharing its resources outside of its community. The Treasure Island Resort and Casino is owned by the Prairie Island Community.