

Interview with Robert DePoe, Education Director  
Southern Paiute Indian Tribe of Utah  
March 5, 2008

Forrest Cuch

Robert, tell us about what you do as the education director for the Paiute Tribe of Utah.

Robert Depoe

The Paiute Tribe, we handle our higher Ed program, our JOA program and then we also partner with local school districts in providing a title 7 program which is Indian Education. Which comes to the school districts in a federal level. An honor scholarship program where students that are in higher ed are we monitor a scholarship program to ensure students have the necessary means to go to school and to achieve success at the higher education level. We also have a department which I mentioned, the JOM program which helps with students who are preschool - 12th grade. This program helps them buy supplies and pay for programs at that level. We also with our partnership with the local school districts, with title 7 we're able to monitor how professionals which are in the school and help them in tutoring students, helping them become successful. Our education department also houses a general aid in adult Ed programs, which allow students to be successful in receiving their GED and also adult high diplomas.

Forrest Cuch

Where do Paiute kids attend school? Do they attend public, private or home schooling?

Robert Depoe

About 95 - 98% of our students attend public schools within the 4 county areas. Our students attend school in Miller, Sevier, Washington and Iron County.

Forrest Cuch

What is the ratio of the Paiute students to other students?

Robert Depoe

Most of our students are in a school setting where they are about 1% of the total population.

Forrest Cuch

What do you believe are some of the educational barriers for young tribal members and why? What do you believe are some of the solutions?

Robert Depoe

Well that's an interesting question when you talk about barriers or obstacles for students. In our education department we take a systematic approach to education. We understand that there are multiple barriers that students may have or variables that they have for them to be successful. We believe there are 3 key players in helping students be successful in school. We believe that if parents are involved, if students are involved and if teachers are involved if they are part of a team that works together, this gives an opportunity for students to be successful. If one of those players is missing or is not doing their part we believe that's one of the biggest barriers to students not being successful in school.

Forrest Cuch

Do you believe Utah's public schools, talking about the curriculum and instruction; do you believe they teach American Indian and Paiute history accurately and adequately?

Robert Depoe

That's a good question. You go to a history manual or history projects within the school systems and you may not even hear the word Paiute within their curriculum. You may have more of a national, and you hear some of the bigger tribes, but being a small tribe here in Utah, you may not even be mentioned as a tribe. And I don't know if there, if the curriculum even addresses the local needs of Indian tribes.

Forrest Cuch

Tell us about the Paiute language. How do Paiute youth learn all their cultural traditions?

Robert Depoe

Um, most of the programs we rely on the family's to pass on culture and pass on those traditions. And we believe, within the education department that is best taught in the home. Within the framework of their parents, and grandparents and aunts and uncles. To pass down those traditions. We don't believe it's the appropriate place to have the education system teach our culture. We believe that it needs to be part of the schools and the schools need to celebrate the culture of the student but to have them actually teach the culture, we believe that should be within the home, within the family. To do and then have the schools be a participant of that and to celebrate the culture to celebrate the traditions of the tribe and use those as strengths within the class room so that teachers can understand the culture. And then use that culture and strength that the students have to allow them to become successful in school and to teach them to teach other students in the classroom about the culture. But we believe that it's up to the tribe and the parents to be the teachers and pass on the traditions of their culture.

Forrest Cuch

All of the Utah Tribes languages are in decline right now and so, knowing that, is leaving the responsibility of the parents in the home enough, is that going to be enough to prevent the loss of the Paiute language?

Robert Depoe

You know I don't believe so. When passing down language, there needs to be a value placed on the language to be able to have that we need to have a systematic approach into how we are going to address the language problem. There is a problem within the Paiute tribe and its concern of our chairperson of to what's going to happen to the language in the next 5 years. Her concern is that it may be gone. It may be lost and so with support from other agencies with support from other people and funding that will be made available so that this, the language can be written in a manner which is sustainable and has curriculum so that multiple people can teach the language I think is important. Currently, when you have elders that know the language, um it's easy to know the language and speak the language, but it's a different story when you are asked to teach the language. And it could be a problem within the classroom and handling classrooms so. It is an issue and a concern that I think everybody needs to be aware of, so that everybody can be apart of preserving something that is so valuable. Language is an interesting, has interesting dynamics. There is more than just learning how to say words, but learning their meaning and where their roots come from. And it gives you different perspective of where you're looking at when you hear that word. And it gives you a different way of thinking about how the earth works and how you are involved within the earth.

Forrest Cuch

The Paiute kids I understand are no exception to the achievement gap that exists between Indian kids and non-Indian kids. And this has been going on for quite some time now and there have been different explanations for why and none of them have really been validated. What would be your explanation for this achievement gap?

Robert Depoe

You know when you are talking, when you are comparing two different races or multiple races there's a lot of variables involved in why one particular group is being successful and another one is not. The gap that I'm concerned with is the gap in Indian education. Why are some students successful why are some students within Indian within American Indian education not successful? If we look at that. If we look at two people that come from the same household, the same background or the same family, and compare why one student is successful and the other is not, then we are able to narrow down the variables and be able to understand or address each students needs. When we look at achievement gaps and I've seen the gaps and they are usually about 25% in proficiency in language arts and math, and in some areas even more and some areas even less but you know, if we look at those 25% is a lot and if you do one thing different, you are going to see an increase. If you do one thing that is positive you are going to see an increase and so I like to look at the different variables, within my students. With the Paiute tribe. Why do I have one student that is successful, why do I have one that is not. And then I am able to narrow down even more. Because I can take out the variable of race, I can take out the variable of learning strategies. I can take out the variable of economic disadvantage. And then I can start to understand what those students are going through. And what's going in within that, for that student so that one student can be successful. So that's what we are looking at in the educational part for the tribe is, you know, I have one student in the same math class that's doing very well and another student that may not be doing as well. Why is that? If I have

the answers to that I think I'd be able to handle a lot of problems. Throughout the nation you see that same achievement gap. Not only in the state of Utah but also throughout the whole nation.

Forrest Cuch

Great approach. You've answered this already to some extent but I need to ask you "what unique programs aim towards self efficacy and identity issues among the Paiute youth?"

Robert Depoe

You know its one thing to be able to understand who you are as a person, but then to also understand how you can be successful in the school. We want our students to, when they walk into the doors of a school; we want them to be, to know that they have an opportunity of being successful in that classroom. To do that you must ensure that they have the tools necessary, the supplies necessary to be successful. The tribe is very concerned with the supplies that students have. And so we have programs so that they can buy the materials that they need to be successful in the school. We are also concerned that, what classes they are able to take. You know, when you get into the high school level, a lot of the extra curricular classes have fees attached. We want our students to be well-rounded students we want them to be able to stay, and take the classes that they are interested in and so we are looking for programs and have programs that help students in those areas. We want students to believe that when they go to school that they are to take any class that they want to, without regard to their economics and what classes they are able to afford.

Forrest Cuch

Good.

Robert Depoe

It just got really dark in here... or are my eyes?

Sally Shaum

I want to stress that if you, for example, I want you to say for example, I know a kid, and you can use their name. Can you make it more personal? Make it a little more, make it a story of this boy who...those are great things to add to this. Okay?

Robert Depoe

All right.

Forrest Cuch

Ready? What unique programs aim toward self-efficacy and identity issues among the Paiute youth?

Robert Depoe

As a tribe we want to assure that students are able to, when they are born, that there are classes that they are able to take and there are classes that they desire and that they want to take. We want our students to be well-rounded students. Sometimes in our public school system, some of the classes have fees attached to them. As a tribe we want to assure that students can take those classes, even if they are expensive so that they can be that well-rounded student so that they can go after what they feel they enjoy. You know identity is something that is always an issue. We want our students to know that they are American Indians. And we want them to know what that means to be an American Indian. If you were to ask some of our students today "what does it mean to be an American Indian male? What does it mean to be an American Indian female?" we want our students to be able to answer that correctly. We want them to know what that means. It's a big issue. It goes right along again with the language. Once you understand your language and once you understand the definition of what it means to be Paiute, I think if any student could understand what their purpose in life is and what their purpose on this planet is for, and be able to be successful and I don't believe our students have a very strong identity in who they are. I believe that comes from learning the culture, from learning the language. And as they do that they will be more successful.

Forrest Cuch

What types of cultural training do public school teachers receive in schools that serve the Paiute bands?

Robert Depoe

That's one of the things that we have focused on in the education department. We want the teachers that teach our students to know what their culture is. We want them to know what they believe we want them to know how they think and how they learn more successful. Or to be more successful. Some of the things we are doing is we take our students into the schools and have them perform and to share the talents that they have to celebrate their culture and to celebrate some of the traditions that they have. You know its one of the beliefs that we have is the belief that our students are given come from a creator. And when a student get up in a pageant and when a student is performing or dancing they are actually giving tribute to their creator for the gifts and talents that they have been given. That goes along educationally. Some of our students are great writers, some are good at math. Some are great thinkers, great artists and as they perform and as they excel in these areas they are giving credit to their creator in producing these great projects that they are able to complete within the school. So its important for students to have an identity its important for them to be able to use their culture to be successful in school.

Forrest Cuch

I hear you say you want the teachers to understand and be knowledgeable of Paiute culture, but I don't know if anything is being done to do that to give them that information or to require them to appreciate and respect Paiute culture.

Robert Depoe

We open our doors for teachers to learn about the Paiute culture. We don't have very many requests for that, we don't have very many requests for in-services from our department to go into a staff or a faculty

setting to teach the culture. I wish that more people were involved in that. But as of right now we don't have a lot of that.

Forrest Cuch

Let go back to the first one. Tell us about what you do as education director for the Paiute tribe of Utah.

Robert Depoe

As the education director we have, I have three people within my department. I have my assistant who handles the Johnstone??? program, which is funding for American Indian students from preschool to twelve grades. This funding is used to help in um, it helps students buy supplies and it pays for classes that may have fees. The other person I have in my department, he is in charge of adult education to help students achieve and get their GED and be successful in adult high settings, or vocational settings. Other programs we have in the department are we have a scholarship program and we help students who are increasing their education through higher Ed, whether it be in a university setting or a vocational program. A student can apply to our program and then and may be able to access funding to help them be successful in school.

Forrest Cuch

What does the name of this project "we shall remain" mean to you?

Robert Depoe

That's an interesting question. In we shall remain, when I look at that you know we talked a lot about the history of the tribe and what the tribe has been able to accomplish but I think the tribe is more than that, more than just our past, we are also our future. We will remain we will remain through economic development, we will remain through education. I just taught a, I teach a parenting class and I have been teaching it in Washington County for parents of American Indians. I'm certified in positive American Indian parenting and we had a discussion last week of what's going to happen in 10 years, one mother brought up, "what's going to happen to my grandchildren in 10 years and they don't even have enough blood to be enrolled what will happen. And so we talked about that. What does that mean? What will define who they be, what will be their identity at that time, she was really concerned about that you now, what will happen to those children? So we talked about, what does it mean to be American Indian? Does it mean that you dress traditional? Does it mean that you, how long your hair is, what does it mean to be American Indian? One of the other mothers that were there, we were talking about that and we came to the conclusion that it doesn't matter how dark you are. It doesn't matter how if you are enrolled, what matters about being an American Indian is the values that you have, the culture that you have been passed down. We look at the value system of American Indians we have a great value system and if we can pass that on, down to our children if we can pass those values that we have been raised with, our children will be successful and then they will know what it means to be an American Indian and we will remain with those values. It's not the material culture that's as important as the non-material culture. Your core beliefs your values, those are the things that I think allow us to be successful and stand out as American Indians. What we believe and what we value as a people.

Forrest Cuch

20:12

Last question and I'm going to ask this in Barbra Walters's fashion. "What is the future of the Paiute children?"

Robert Depoe

The future of the Paiute children you know we, I look at the funding that we have. And then I look at the generation of children that are coming up. You know, I look at my elementary students, I look at my middle school students and I see great success. We've seen some strides in education for our students. I see brilliant students and it makes me worried because I don't have enough funding for each of them to go to college. And so as an education director and as a department that's our goal. We want every student who desires to go to college and desires to receive more training; we want them to be able to say I can do it. We don't want financing to be a factor in that and so our children are great. They are very creative and we believe that each and every one of them has the opportunity to be successful.

Sally Shaum

Okay. In those four counties teaching high school they may not even hear the word Paiute... I mean isn't there a part of you that says that's completely unacceptable? Because the people that are living here, the people that are living in Washington county. Do they know anything about the land they are living on? Dorina Martindale was telling me that these children are playing over the boulders of ancient Anasazi art. It really surprises me that there can be curriculum on the history of this area and they don't know anything about the Paiute history. That would concern me.

Robert Depoe

Do you want to sit here and do that?

Sally Shaum

No because my immediate reaction is emotional. That upsets me, it seems so wrong. I'm just wondering why that is. Do teachers get to select what they bring their students? And do some teachers say I will bring in a Paiute historian and others will never give those children that information? Is that something that they get to choose to do?

Robert Depoe

From my understanding I believe that in our history classes there is core curriculum that's been established and teachers they usually stick to this core curriculum and then they use manuals and history books that have been written nationally. And some of these history books may not even have Paiute part of that program. There are some teachers within our school system that go out of their way to learn about the Paiute culture. There are some that study the history of the land but then there are others that don't. They don't know where the Paiute tribal headquarters are. They may not even know where the traditional lands

are. They may not even know a lot about the culture. I think as we, as a tribe work with school districts and as we become partners in education, we can alleviate some of these problems. Here in Iron County the tribe and the education department or the education department and the school district have a great relationship. We have been able to see positive things that have occurred because of this relationship. We have been able to have our students open school board meetings with traditional songs. We have been able to have them bring in the flags at these school board meetings. And bring in the culture. Our desire is to have, as many of our history teachers understand the culture as much as possible. And so to blame the school district for not, or blame teachers for not knowing Paiute history I can't do that. I can't say they don't have a desire to know they may just not know where to go. And we need to get the word out, we need to let them know that hey " the Paiute tribe is here and we want to help in educating not only our students but other students about the tribe. In looking at success of students and looking at the dynamics of a classroom, we want our students to feel that they are wanted in schools. We want them to feel that they are needed. We look at our school system and if we look at two populations when they come together in education or any time they mingle, one tries to make the other population more like them. We don't need that. We need cooperation and understanding from teachers that our students are needed in the school. We believe in our ed. department that our students are needed in the classroom. When one of our students drops out of the school, it hurts the school. Not only does it hurt our students, but also it hurts the school. And once the school understands that they need our students because of their diversity and the way they think, they need their creativity, they need the gifts the creator has given them, once they understand that they need our students, a relationship changes there. A relationship between the school and the students. And it turns from less of a savior role where the school feels that they need to save our students and it acts more of a role for teachers in how can I use this students knowledge. How can I use this student's gifts and talents? How can I use their perspective and perception to make my classroom more successful? And if teachers look at our students in that way, and look at how they can use our culture to be success -make the whole classroom successful then the student feels needed then start to see how that relationship changes. We don't need to be saved as a people. We don't need to be saved as American Indians. Our culture and our traditions are very valuable. And they allow us to be good people and so what we need is that cooperation and understanding that both cultures and all cultures within a classroom are valuable. And once we understand that then we can overcome some of the other barriers in education.

Sally Shaum

That's great! I want to know one more thing and look at Forrest. What are those values?

Forrest Cuch

What are those American Indian values?

Robert Depoe

Well we could get in a deep discussion over values. What do we as American Indians value? We I can't speak for every American Indian because values come from your home a value how do values get passed down. Where are the roots of our values? Values get passed down from where you are at geographically. If you are in the northwest you may have different values than the southwest because of where you live. In the southwest water is a very valuable instrument because there is not a lot of it. So if you look at where a

tribe is located they are located around water. Something valuable. If you are in the northwest, value may be fish. But a lot of tribes here in the southwest may not eat the seafood and fish and things like that. So values come from where you are geographically. Values also are passed down from your family. What do you value as a family, what is valued in your home? These values can be from as how you value the world that you live in, how you value nature. Our students I believe have a strong value and system around what nature has brought to them. One of the things that I like to talk about and to help youth understand is that, even though they are in the school system they can still learn from nature. A lot of the most valuable lessons that they can learn are from the environment that they are in. and they can gain value from that. Other things that our student's value is their elders. I continue to see respect for elders within our youth. They value the knowledge that they have. They value the people that they are with. One of the most memorable experiences for me in working for the tribe is when I have a youth found out that my family was in town and found out my father was in town and it was during the hunting season and I found one of the youth in our education system bring some his deer that he had got that fall, had brought it to my father, or my dad because he recognized him as an elder and was appreciative of what he has done in allowing me to be here. And that was one of the most powerful experiences I've had. As the education director. In having that presented to my dad from one of the youth in our program. One of the youth in our education system. I thought that was, that showed great respect for him and great respect for how the youth still respects a lot of his culture and his tradition. And understanding that you give things away, when you take things from the earth you give it away. You don't keep it; you don't hoard it to yourself. They don't value greed, they don't value being prideful. They value the other which is being a community being collective and understanding that you are part of a community. There are not individuals within tribes. Within a tribe you are not just one person, you are part of a greater plan and you are part of a greater community that's around. I think our students are very value that in so much that they, when they go to schools that they have a hard time being competitive, they have a hard time being - end of tape

Robert DePoe

Its sometimes it may be hard for students and they may becoming more (I need to look at Forrest - laughter). Out students, you know, traditionally they are not competitive and they are more of a communal, they are more of a community and they understand that they are one part of a whole planet that is around the community. I believe that a lot of our students may even struggle with that in the school system. When they are asked to stand out and to participate in the school system and to compete against others in the classroom, they may not feel comfortable with that. Because they are becoming more assimilated, some students may not have issues with that. And maybe that is the variable I'm looking at, between students within the culture. With the students who are successful in school and the students who are not. Those are some of the things that we have to look at. When we are looking at achievement gap I'm not looking at, what are other cultures doing compared to my culture? If I have students that are 50% proficient in language arts, that means that I have 1 out of 2 students who is proficient. So I have one student who is proficient and one student who is not. What is the difference between those two students? And if I can understand the difference between those two students then I can understand, I can narrow the variables down. There are too many variables when you are looking at different races in the achievement gap. I'm interested in the gap between my students. If I have 80% proficiency in language arts and 20% that are deficient that means that 8 out of ten are doing well and 2 out of 10 who aren't. Whets the variable between the 2 and the 8. And once I understand that then I'm able to design programs and then to address the

variables within those two groups. When you look at being competitive, when you look at the values and being more interested in what's going on within the culture, that's where I'm at.

Forrest Cuch

My experience has been it's just, in the past it's been a reverse of that. Where 2 out of 10 were doing fairly well. But 8 out of 10 were struggling. And that of the 8 it varies from just struggling to complete failure and drop out.

Robert DePoe

Yeah. You know that's, I'm glad we don't have those statistics where we have two out of eight. You know I'm seeing a reverse of that where more of our students are successful than not. So we are getting to the point where we have 60% in some areas that are proficient. So you have 6 that are proficient and 4 that are not.

So there is some improvement its not completely where it should be but there is some improvement is that what you are saying?

Robert DePoe

There is some improvement. I'm not totally satisfied with the improvement that has taken place but I think even here in Iron County with our partnership that we have had we have seen a great increase in our proficiency levels. We have seen a 10% jump in the last 2 years in some areas. So we are doing some thing's right but still it's not to the satisfactory level that I'd like to see, there are still some things that need to happen. And that could be in services with teachers or it could be with teaching them more of the culture and helping that culture be used in the classroom. It could be building more curriculums for teachers to use, and things and that all requires staff and that all requires money. Which as a tribe we are very limited on that. And so if we can gain partners with other organizations, if we can gain partners with school districts in providing and creating curriculum I think we will be successful.

Forrest Cuch

This project "We shall Remain" our intent is to provide each school with a disk. As we cover the Paiute tribe. We are also going to provide teacher guides which will assist teachers in presenting information associated with the the documentary. Do you think that is going to be helpful? Do you think that is going to help in this regard? As far as the helping teachers create a better understanding?

Robert DePoe

Anytime you can help teachers understand our where we are at and our concerns and any time you teach them some of the values of the tribe, I think it can be beneficial. One thing that has been you hear a lot of complaints about "no child left behind" but one of the positive things we see is parents or teachers are now acknowledging they need our students to be successful. If our students are failing, they are failing. And so teachers are now looking at how can they help our students be successful. Because if our students are successful, they are successful.

Sally Shaum

One more question. Robert when you see a child that who has signs of drug and alcohol issues, how does, what is your role as education director to intervene there or to help?

Robert DePoe

You know as the education director. Our role is never the to take the role of the parent. For generations the government has taught our parents that they are not the number one educator for a student. When tribes, when children were put on reservations, when reservations were established, that government said initially said to the parents "you're not the educator of this child you do not know how to educate your children any more. So what happened then is that the children were either put in placement programs or they were sent off to boarding schools where the government educated the children. And to the parents were taken out of a role that they were familiar with. Generations before that, they were the number one educators they understood as a community that if you didn't educate your children you didn't survive as a community. So our role as the education department is to actually flip that and go to the other end of the continuum. Our goal is to teach parents that they are the number one educator in a student's life. As they teach students and as they are teaching in there home, then the school district becomes supplemental. Or the school that they child goes to, East Elementary, when the child goes to school, it supplements what a parent teaches at home. and that puts the parent in the drivers seat. That puts the parents as the number one educator in a Childs life. If we can help parents gain that responsibility and understand that philosophy once again, then that can take an active role in that. When I have a student who has issues with drug and alcohol or other issues of substance abuse, or behavioral problems, its important for me to ensure that the parent is taking an active role in that. And that they are receiving the professional counseling or the professionals that they need in their life. That is not my role, I'm the education director, I don't have a role in that but to ensure that they are directed in the areas that they need to and that they are given the contact information for the people that can help them overcome those issues. So they can be successful. I want to see all students be successful in school. We don't need any more barriers that, to stand in the way of that. Our students have enough barriers. But when you add on those situations it just compounds some of the barriers that they have. I'll go back to my parenting class again; they were asking, I asked them I said " you know one of the pet peeves I have is when I hear from a parent or someone in the community that our students are going to experiment, that experimentation is alright. And one of the things that I brought up is that I know gravity is there. I know gravity is all around us. I don't need to experiment with it. I don't need to experiment that everyday. Our students don't need to experiment with drugs and alcohol. They don't need to experiment with these things. They have had people that they can learn from already. They should be able to understand that when an individual experiments with drugs and alcohol when an individual uses these that equal bad things. That it equals barriers that they are going to have to overcome. Our students shouldn't be thought that they are going to experiment with these substances they don't need to. They don't need to know whets going to happen. They can see it all around them. They can see what's going to happen. And that's a philosophy that I want to make sure that our students don't have in their lives. Our parents, you know we shouldn't think that all our students are going to experiment in those things. We should have the value and we should have the perspective that our students aren't going to do these things. And if we have that value in our home, then that value is passed down and that value is then given to the youth that this isn't something that we are even going to talk about doing or even going to allow in our homes". And she said well, and she brought up well everybody has drank and then I asked her again. And I remember, I just said that I have never had anything cross my lips in that case. I've never had alcohol; I've never had tobacco cross my lips. Any of those substances any illegal substance either. And she was

surprised about that. She was surprised that I was an individual that had that happen and, growing up American Indian, growing up on a reservation, I moved to a reservation when I was in 7th grade. And I had, I made a pact with a young lady at the time who was a good friend of mine, great friend, I considered this young lady my best friend. She came to school when I was in 7th grade and her mother wasn't there the night before, she came to school on her own cause her mother had been drinking and didn't come home. At that moment in my life and with that young lady I made a pact and said that I would never drink and I would never have that substance be apart of my life and from that point on I have had that and I have been able to remember that situation. Our students need to be committed and they need to be committed to education, they need to be committed to success. They need to understand that if these things happen, if these things are part of their life it adds to another barrier in their life to help them to they are not successful. We have got a lot of things that we need to work on. I taught a program to a group of youth and the youth were late and I used this statement from Howard Rainer that we don't have time to be late. As American Indians we are leading the nation in things we shouldn't be leading in. things that are negative. And we are behind in things that are positive. We have a lot of things that we need to make up and we have a lot of ground to cover and we don't' have a lot of time to do it. And we need to make sure that we don't have a lot of time to be successful and we need to make sure we are doing everything we can to be successful.