



Red Lake High School Teachers' Assembly

Red Lake Reservation, Minnesota

by

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Good Morning. I am Dr. Chuck Grim, the director of the Indian Health Service. I hope this summer has provided you with some slight distance and relief from last March's tragedy at Red Lake High School. It remains a devastating time for all of us, but one that challenges each of us to redouble our efforts to help our Tribal students. In the wake of that terrible tragedy, I know it is a daunting task to begin this new school year and to forge on in the best way that we know how. We at the Indian Health Service and the U.S. Public Health Service are steadfast in our commitment to the Red Lake community, and especially its youth.

U.S. Surgeon General Richard Carmona asked me to convey how very sorry he is that the devastating impacts of Hurricane Katrina made it impossible for him to join you today as planned. The hurricane created huge and immediate public health threats that Dr. Carmona must oversee as the leader of the U.S. Public Health Service. I know that he was very much looking forward to meeting and speaking with you about the Public Health Service's commitment to help your community and school. Please know that the Red Lake community remains a focus in his thoughts and plans.

As an Assistant Surgeon General and leader of the Indian Health Service, I serve as a strong advocate for greater access and quality services for American Indians and

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Alaska Natives. Through my work as Vice Chairman of the Health and Human Services Department's Intradepartmental Council on Native American Affairs, I have direct access to HHS Secretary Mike Leavitt to discuss and advocate for the Council objectives. Frankly, these may seem like long bureaucratic titles, but behind them are Indian people, like myself, who are anxious to see that Indian Country is provided with the best possible health services and resources. There are many challenges ahead, but we will do our level best on your behalf.

As I am sure you do, I find it extremely troubling that many of our Indian young people today do not have a deep sense of pride in being Native American. Certainly racism and the challenges of reservation life can make it difficult for a young Indian person to establish his or her Native identity. For centuries, our various Tribal traditions and practices have been the bedrock of our existence. While the past century and beyond have often wreaked havoc on our Tribal societies, today I believe that are many encouraging indicators throughout Indian Country. Not the least of which is a strong American Indian cultural renaissance, which is reinforced by new Tribal cultural centers, museums, and language revitalization programs. In Washington, D.C., the new Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian is a source of pride and hope for many of our people as it emphasizes our past, present, and future.

Every young person needs positive role models and I believe there are many in your community whom Red Lake High School students can emulate. We at the Indian Health Service are tremendously proud of our own Dr. Kathy Annette, a Red Lake Tribal member, Red Lake High School graduate, and current director of the Indian Health Service's Bemidji Area Office. She has worked tirelessly to help her people and the many other Tribes who are served in the Bemidji region.

In this 50th anniversary year of the Indian Health Service, we are encouraged by the progress made on behalf of American Indians and Alaska Natives during this half century. Life expectancy has increased by approximately 10 years. Immunization rates have risen and infant mortality rates have fallen. Diabetes and its complications remain a tremendous challenge for the Indian Health Service health professionals. While the IHS is a world leader in treating diabetes, we see our present and future challenge in promoting healthy eating and exercise habits of American Indian and Alaska Native people.

I know that Dr. Carmona would emphasize to you that 2005 is "The Year of the Healthy Child," which is the most comprehensive agenda ever set forward by a U.S. Surgeon General for a single year. This initiative includes all aspects of a child's life — body, mind, and spirit — starting with prenatal care and going through the developmental stages of childhood and adolescence. As teachers, you are a very integral part of a child's progress and your help is essential to achieve these objectives. A healthy child begins before birth, and this initiative highlights steps that women should take to keep themselves healthy, especially when they are considering becoming pregnant. This includes a healthful diet, exercise, and eliminating tobacco use and alcohol consumption.

"The Year of the Healthy Child" also highlights the contributions and the role of fathers. Every person has to come to the table to ensure the health and well-being of

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every child. Certainly there is a special focus and emphasis on the child's growing mind. Through the Surgeon General's "50 Schools in 50 States" Initiative, the U.S. Public Health Service is working with school districts and other partners to encourage students to stay in school. In addition, more students, especially minorities, are being encouraged to focus on excelling in math and in the hard sciences, areas in which the United States is falling behind. Finally, we will focus on spirit. The enthusiasm of children and teens is often overlooked in their communities. We must work to harness their energy and partner them with local and national organizations to promote volunteerism, civic and Tribal responsibility, and patriotism.

Still we remain mindful that the overall state of American Indian and Alaska Native behavioral health is one of great need and guarded hope. The external demands upon individuals, families, and communities are a tremendous and ongoing challenge. As you prepare for the new school year, I want you to know that the Indian Health Service greatly values what you do each day preparing students for what we all hope will be productive and happy lives and careers.

I applaud you for the record number of Red Lake High School graduates who earned their diplomas at the end of 2005 school year. You as teachers can be among the most influential forces in a child's life. Lessons imparted strongly and wisely in high school can serve a person well throughout their lives. Your resilience and patience during each teaching day can be a lasting impression for students who are seeking encouragement and guidance.

You also serve as a role model for Indian youth, demonstrating the importance of education and personal responsibility, as you work diligently to help your students become strong, moral, and competent adults.

I would like to save time this morning to answer question and to discuss other topics that can be helpful to you. I thank you for your kind attention and warm welcome here.