

Dear Friends of ILI-

It is with a combination of great pride in the work we have done over the past 12 years, and great sadness, that we are announcing the ending of Intercultural Leadership Initiative (ILI) sessions at the end of this school year. A combination of events mostly beyond our control has led us to make this difficult decision.

In the winter of 1998, we started ILI in response to a critical need in our community to proactively help Indian and non-Indian youth learn more positive ways to interact. While problems existed between Indian and non-Indian neighbors for many years, ILI was born as a result of the very difficult period of our local history surrounding the reaffirmation of treaty rights for Ojibwe people. The Ojibwe were finally able to exercise their off-reservation treaty rights in 1983, when a federal court--the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit in Chicago--asserted that Wisconsin had no rights to regulate fishing on Ojibwe reservations and, more importantly, that the 1837 and 1842 treaties guaranteed Ojibwe rights to hunt and fish off their reservations without being bound by state regulations. This decision, commonly called the Voigt Decision, was upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court that same year.

Many of you remember the unrest, turmoil and violence at our local boat landings as people protested the Voigt Decision. It is an ugly period of our local history. Our children were caught up as the bad feelings between adults translated into fights between youth, especially in our high school where all of our children came together for the first time as 9th graders. The fact that our K-8 elementary school system is segregated not only geographically but also by ethnic culture did not help matters. In fact, that segregation exacerbated the issue as our children were kept separate except for competing against each other occasionally through sports. In those days, school administrators were reacting to problems of violence in schools with few proactive measures to prevent such behaviors. We started ILI to build a proactive violence prevention system for our youth. After serving thousands of youth over these past 12 years, we can say, with extreme confidence, that we made an important difference. Our community is much better today because of ILI. But who really made this happen?

Our children did. Every year when we hosted our first 4th grade ILI session we would ask the children "why are you here?" It was always amazing that even at 9 and 10 years old, our children knew exactly why they were in ILI: "so we don't have fights when we get to LUHS;" "so LUHS is a safer school;" "so we can become friends now so going to high school won't be so scary....." and on and on. We would praise them for having the courage, and taking the risk, to come together to become friends. It made them proud to know they had this responsibility-and they always rose to the occasion. Our amazing ILI staff artfully guided them through the process, always in a nurturing way and in a way that allowed them to have FUN while doing it! Imagine that-changing community norms can be FUN! We believe this simple step of empowering children to make a positive difference in their community is one of the biggest accomplishments of ILI. This was the realm of the children.

Our efforts were rewarded with incredible support from all of you, our wonderful community, and many others from around the state and nation. We received numerous local,

state and national honors for our program that we always accepted with pride on behalf of all of you and especially the children who made ILI such a great program. We were able to do all these things because we stayed true to our mission. The goals and objectives we developed over the years for ILI were very centered on ILI staff providing the leadership and direction, as community people, for the youth we were dedicated to serving.

Many people looked to ILI to solve the academic achievement gap issue for students in our community. We always looked at that as a by-product of our efforts. Our job was to help children discover each other as people-no matter the color of their skin-so friendships could evolve. A safer school learning environment should help our students learn and close this gap right? I think we all felt that was a possibility. When we had a full compliment of ILI programming (4 elementary school sessions/year for 4th-8th grade, 2 hours per week during the school day for LUHS ILI students, LUHS after school tutoring, overnights, 8th grade transition day), 100% of ILI students participating in all of our programs graduated from LUHS.

This year this contact has been reduced to two sessions/year for elementary students, 18 minutes every other week for LUHS ILI students, and no work with 8th grade students at all during this critical transition year for them. This decrease in dosage of ILI for area youth has come about over recent years primarily as a result of No Child Left Behind which mandated schools increase "academic" minutes for students and focuses on yearly tests as the benchmark for "academic improvement". This focus on academics has decreased the availability of students to be outside of their classrooms. It is not just ILI that has been cut back-so have the arts, music, recess and other critically important pieces to whole child development. This all comes together as a perfect storm: terrible economic recession; poor job growth and good paying jobs to keep families in our area; decreasing enrollment in area schools; decreasing amount of dollars per child in our schools; fewer guidance people in our schools; unfunded federal mandates for school improvement; federal threats to schools (less dollars) if they don't improve test scores; intense focus on academics. Fortunately, children are not just brains-they have hearts and bodies as well. In ILI we always felt that the fastest way to a child's brain was through their heart.

This past year the schools, whom have been amongst our strongest supporters and partners over the years and for who we have great respect, proposed a new dramatic shift in the paradigm of how we will be bringing children together. They have proposed ILI curriculum be integrated into the existing school curriculum and that next year 4th and 5th grade will come together for two transition days. ALL 4th and 5th graders will attend each day-meaning 150-200 students per session. Sessions will be facilitated by teachers, many of whom have not had any specific professional development with respect to cultural teaching. ILI staff has been asked to help but will not play a leading role in the design, development, implementation or facilitation of the effort. This is a fundamental shift- in the past ILI was our program: we spent hundred of hours designing our curriculum; we adapted our curriculum to include the latest evidence-based research (small group sizes, hands-on experiences, address the whole range of student learning and leadership styles, restorative consequences for behavior issues); we researched the most effective delivery methods; we facilitated all of our sessions with culturally trained and knowledgeable facilitators so it was genuine for

the children we served; we rigorously evaluated every session and each year with student, teacher and parent surveys and provided this annual report to anyone who wanted it; and to support this entire effort and a full-time staff of 5 people, we wrote literally hundreds of grants and spoke to hundreds of people, service clubs, churches etc. asking for financial support.

We respectfully disagree with the schools on this new model. We understand their need to bring all things curriculum-related under the guidance of administrative staff and that's okay. It's just not how we do ILI and we don't think it will be as effective in building friendships between children as what we have built over the past 12 years. We respectfully disagree with the new model proposed by the schools for the following reasons:

1. It is not a good model for serving kids-too many kids per session, too difficult to build real relationships-the kind that withstand and transcend local prejudice and ignorance. In fact-this is the model that existed prior to when we started ILI in 1998 (transition days for the whole grade at one session).
2. Culturally untrained teachers teaching "culture" does not work because it is not genuine or authentic. The real risk is that this could potentially provide a mechanism to perpetuate stereotypes.
3. ILI staff is hamstrung as far as raising money-how do we write grants/fundraise for a program that we don't control, develop nor lead? We are extremely grateful for every dollar donated to ILI-it needs to be spent on ILI programming.
4. We could better leverage our existing ILI resources and standing in the community and state to engage in other community and statewide discussions/projects that have the kind of impact that still connects us with our mission: helping community youth and families live healthier productive lives.

We may disagree and we will voice our opinions-that's the basis for a strong democracy. Out of disagreement comes consensus. We are also not going anywhere, we live and work here and will always be a part of the decision making process for youth and families in our community. Ending ILI programming in the local schools is the right thing to do because we can't run it in a way that is most effective for the children we serve, that stays true to our mission and makes the best use of the community donated funds. We are keeping our 501c3 non-profit organization status in case future opportunities present themselves.

This is a long letter-there is not enough room to thank our schools and the hundreds of Tribal and non-Tribal individuals, teachers, parents, businesses, organizations, churches, schools, foundations, colleges and universities and incredible volunteers that have supported ILI these past 12 years-you know who you are and the children know who you are. Very special thanks to all the ILI students over the years-some of whom have gone on to lead lives devoted to solving social justice issues around the globe. We are proud of every last one of you. Thanks to an amazing ILI staff who all came to ILI out of a true passion in their hearts to serve children and to be a part of doing the hard work of building solutions for our community.

One day we will realize that we need to be patient with some of our efforts to solve social issues and results may not be realized in a year or two, and may in fact take generations. Is it worth the wait? We are confident that the ILI experience taught children values about the brother and sisterhood of humankind that will be passed along to their children. That's when real change occurs and where cycles of oppression are finally broken. Thank you, tchii miigwetch, to our community for having helped us as we helped the children make our community a better place for all.

Bob Kovar
Intercultural Leadership Initiative