

Academic Readiness Effort Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians

Grounded in the concept of “amuyich,” or generosity, the Santa Ynez Academic Readiness Effort tackles the Native nation’s once-major educational achievement gap head-on by providing comprehensive support for Santa Ynez Chumash students at every step of their educational journeys – from birth through adulthood. Last year, an incredible 97% of Chumash students graduated high school – and the tribe is poised to reach 100%. Graduates and students alike are role models for the next generation and are equipped to serve as leaders and key decision makers for the nation. By providing students with mentorship, tutoring, and assistance, Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians is creating a brighter tribal future.

A Pressing Need for Education

The Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians is a small tribe located in California’s Santa Ynez valley. Approximately 1,800 people are affiliated with the Band; 129 are enrolled citizens, the rest are lineal descendants. Less than one-fifth of the population lives on tribal land. Young tribal citizens are educated in off-reservation schools where they grapple with racism, low expectations, and misunderstandings of tribal sovereignty.

Education has long been problematic for Californians of American Indian heritage. Federal policies forced the parents and grandparents of today’s students to attend boarding schools or to enroll in training programs for jobs as maids or laborers. Today, Native students attend schools in the state system. Nearly 19% of tribally affiliated students in California leave high school without graduating, compared to only 13% of the general population. Even among high school graduates, only 25% of Native students meet the state university system’s entrance requirements, as compared to 38% of all California high school graduates. Without culturally appropriate intervention, Santa Ynez Chumash students are at risk of not fulfilling their academic potential.

At the same time, the last few decades have seen the creation of exciting career opportunities for Santa Ynez citizens and their descendants. The tribe operates a health clinic, two hotels in the neighboring town of Solvang, a gas station, and a vineyard. In 2006, the tribe opened the Chumash Casino Resort, which now has more than 1,600 employees. Chumash students need to be well educated in order to fill these jobs in their community.

Addressing Academic Barriers

For the past 10 years, the Academic Readiness Effort has systematically removed barriers to academic participation and success for Chumash students. To meet the program’s goal of a 100% high school graduation and a 100% post-secondary enrollment rate, the tribe has designed a range

of specialized services including support for learning disabilities, one-on-one academic tutoring, cultural activities, and financial aid. The tribe's Education Director, who works closely with local school officials, manages the program, and a seven-member committee of elected officials oversees it. Santa Ynez finances the Academic Readiness Effort through an Education Fund endowment and with federal funding sources such as Title VII grants (from the U. Department of Education under PL 107-110) and Community Development Block grants (from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development).

The Academic Readiness Effort is guided by a belief that support at all stages of life is important for long-term academic achievement. This life-cycle engagement, which is individually tailored for each Chumash student, begins with outreach to Chumash toddlers, who are screened for early intervention before their formal schooling begins. As needed throughout the children's primary and secondary school careers, program staff work with each student's school to advocate for special services, including learning accommodations and support for gifted and talented students. The Academic Readiness Effort also helps high school students draft applications, arrange college visits, and evaluate career options. Chumash adults are encouraged to go to back to school, obtain vocational certification, or pursue professional development opportunities regardless of their age or previous academic attainment.

Academic services are provided in a supportive environment and through programming that engages participation from families and the wider community. The tribe's 5000 square foot learning center, which opened in 2012, is the focal space for the Academic Readiness Effort. Any Santa Ynez community member from preschool through college is eligible for one-on-one tutoring by credentialed teachers. Tutors set and regularly update clear goals for each student and share these with the student's family. An honor wall within the learning center celebrates student achievements such as acquiring a new concept or doing well on a test. Students can participate in skill-building workshops, twice weekly Chumash language courses, talking circles run by the tribal health clinic, and various cultural outings.

To reduce the economic barriers to education, the Academic Readiness Effort coordinates financial aid for Chumash families. More than 130 Santa Ynez Chumash students have received preschool tuition assistance in the past five years. High school graduates and mature students receive financial aid to attend college and continuing education programs. Critically, this support is not a "blank check:" We the Education Director meets with every college-bound student to make a plan that includes academic goals, grade expectations, and a timeline for finishing the degree. To reinforce the importance of education, the Academic Readiness Effort also coordinates incentives for school and degree completion. There is financial accountability for dropping out and monetary awards for reaching milestones. Students receive \$100 for completing 8th grade, and doctoral candidates receive \$3000 for finishing their studies.

Santa Ynez's strategic investment in educational support has had dramatic results. Fewer Santa Ynez Chumash students are being held back a grade in their early primary years. Ninety-seven percent now graduate high school in four years, surpassing the state's 81% graduation rate. One-fifth of Santa Ynez adults who had not previously earned a degree or certification are currently enrolled in post-secondary education. Twenty seven Santa Ynez adults have earned a master's or doctorate degree. Most importantly, many graduates are working for the nation, and students understand that staying in school prepares them for meaningful career opportunities at home.

Education as a Nation-Building Tool

Santa Ynez is prioritizing educational achievement as a way to strengthen tribal sovereignty. By making an investment in human capital at all ages, the tribe is ensuring that community members are able to obtain the training they need to make valuable contributions to their nation. Once Santa Ynez Chumash students graduate, they are qualified to fill key leadership and other positions within the nation and its enterprises. This helps ensure that decisions are made using contemporary best practices while respecting Chumash cultural values. Today, Santa Ynez college and vocational graduates work for the tribe in diverse capacities—as environmental technicians, behavioral health professionals, and restaurant managers, among other roles. In the words of one program administrator, “Santa Ynez is building a nation led by community members who introduce new knowledge and experiences, challenge assumptions, and propose positive change.”

Beyond creating an educated workforce, the tribe's investment in academics is bringing about a renewed sense of cultural identity. The Academic Readiness Effort emphasizes *amuyich*, the Chumash concept of generosity by encouraging all students to give back to each other, the tribe, and local communities. The well-attended intergenerational activities at the learning center have made it a gathering place for the community and a resource for sharing traditional teachings. The close involvement of tutors, families, and the wider community in education helps Chumash students withstand the ignorance and racism that they experience in mainstream institutions. By mentoring students within a strong cultural context, the Academic Readiness Effort reinforces pride in being Chumash and helps them honor their cultural heritage within non-tribal educational systems.

The Academic Readiness Effort is fundamentally changing Santa Ynez community members' academic opportunities. It has established crucial connections among tribal staff and local school officials, which in turn lead to cooperation on behalf of Chumash student success. It has shifted family-school communication away from a sole focus on academic or behavioral "problems" toward discussions about the development of student potential. The Education Director has even been appointed by the Governor to serve a second term on the State Board of Education, giving the tribe a voice in the state's education policy-making. These changed relationships encourage tribal citizens and descendants to work through problems caused by complicated requirements or a lack of sensitivity to cultural practices rather than being discouraged by them. Ultimately, the Academic Readiness Effort is helping the Santa Ynez Chumash move beyond the frustration and shame of past school experiences and reclaim education as a tool that furthers tribal goals.

Conclusion

When tribal community members drop out of school, human capital that their nations may need to govern, manage programs, and grow their economies remains undeveloped. To overcome the barriers that have prevented community members from taking advantage of educational opportunities and to encourage academic achievement, the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians takes a comprehensive approach to academic readiness. From one-on-one tutoring support to family engagement, from cultural activities to working with local school boards, and from testing preschoolers for learning disabilities to financial support for adults who decide to go back to school, the Academic Readiness Program helps Chumash students succeed.