



# THE HARVARD PROJECT ON AMERICAN INDIAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

HARVARD KENNEDY SCHOOL • HARVARD UNIVERSITY  
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## AGUA CALIENTE PEOPLE CURRICULUM

### Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians

*Misconceptions about Native nations and their sovereignty create obstacles for tribal governments and can lead to discrimination against tribal members. But things are changing in Palm Springs, California. In a groundbreaking partnership, the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, the Palm Springs Unified School District, and the school district's foundation created a robust public school curriculum that educates students on Cahuilla history, culture, traditions, and government.*

## ENDURING STEREOTYPES

The Cahuilla people originate from what is now California's Coachella Valley and surrounding mountains. Today, they identify as nine distinct federally recognized tribes. The modern-day reservation of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians shares boundaries with the famed resort town of Palm Springs and the adjacent Riverside County municipalities of Cathedral City and Rancho Mirage.

Throughout the last 140 years, the Palm Springs area has seen an influx of residents and visitors, many drawn to the Tribe's Agua Caliente Hot Mineral Spring, desert climate, and fashionable scene.

The Agua Caliente Tribe has spent generations refining its governing tools, strengthening its sovereignty, and establishing tribal nation-owned enterprises, including a spa resort, several casinos, a fuel station, and golf courses. Today, the Tribe is one of the Coachella Valley's largest employers and a driving force in the regional economy. Thousands of area residents work for the Tribe and frequent its businesses. Nevertheless, a vast majority of local residents and visitors lack an informed understanding of Cahuilla history and tribal sovereignty.

The Palm Springs Unified School District (PSUSD) serves more than 22,000 K-12 students-residing within Palm Springs and neighboring towns, including approximately 100 Agua Caliente tribal members, making them an obvious place to learn such information. Yet despite the Tribe's importance to the region, the schools long lacked a district-wide curriculum that addressed Cahuilla history and contemporary concerns. Occasionally individual teachers introduced local history and produced lessons on their own, but because they taught from generic, national

textbooks and without input from the Tribe, lessons tended to reinforce misinformation. Children mistakenly believed that Indigenous peoples lived elsewhere in the US and existed only in the past. When interviewed, second-grade students who were learning in this setting expressed wildly inaccurate views. Some thought that “Agua Caliente” was the name of a music band; others said that tribal members lived at the casino or in tipis.

How could the Tribe and the school district address racial stereotypes, ignorance about tribal jurisdiction, and negative sentiments about its economic success?

### **AUTHENTIC TRIBAL VOICES**

The Agua Caliente Band’s answer has been to develop accurate educational materials and to implement a comprehensive communications and outreach plan. In the early 1990s, it founded the Agua Caliente Cultural Museum to exhibit artifacts and tell the story of the Cahuilla People. The Tribe began to compile teachings from Agua Caliente tribal members for tribal ranger programs at the Tribe’s Indian Canyons, an initiative that had the added benefit of recording Cahuilla relationships with plants and animals for posterity. In 2014, the Tribe began publishing *Me Yah Whae*, a magazine that shares information about tribal history, culture, business, and government. Around the same time, it also developed content for a multimedia lifelong-learning program at the Osher Institute for Lifelong Learning at California State University San Bernardino Palm Desert campus.

This rich reservoir of tribally generated materials allowed Agua Caliente to respond quickly when, in 2017, the PSUSD and the PSUSD Foundation inquired about partnering with the Tribe to create a new curriculum for the local public schools. The three parties institutionalized their partnership through a Memorandum of Understanding, which among other recitals states that the Tribe has “full and final authority to review and approve all curriculum content.”

Each partner contributes to the project, and a core team develops and implements the curriculum. The Agua Caliente Band suggests topic areas, provides content, and designs presentation materials. Experienced curriculum specialists from the school district help turn the Tribe’s content into engaging lesson plans that meet, and often exceed, the state of California’s education standards. The Agua Caliente Tribal Council vets the resulting curriculum units through a cultural committee composed of tribal members, and once approved, the final product is ready for classrooms. The foundation manages administrative tasks and provides logistical support to facilitate seamless project coordination.

After two years of development, the Agua Caliente People Curriculum rolled out to third grade classrooms—which means that it now is taught to approximately 1,800 students in over 80 classrooms each year. Ten units cover topics such as rock art, bird singing, water stewardship, and creation stories. Students examine artifacts, discuss stereotypes, and learn Cahuilla vocabulary. Tribal rangers lead students on a field trip through ancestral canyons.

Throughout the school district, people are proud of this curriculum effort. Teachers consistently support the units. They praise the quality of the materials, hands-on lessons, and the opportunity to visit tribal lands. Students gain and retain a broad understanding of the Cahuilla people's history, traditions, language, and cultural landmarks. Homework assignments bring in family members and caretakers and create opportunities to celebrate other cultures and histories found throughout the district.

Success in the classroom has largely been attributed to teacher training. Teachers participate in a three-hour session that includes sensitivity training and an overview of the materials. The training, delivered by both Agua Caliente and school district curriculum specialists, ensures the teachers have some base knowledge about Indian Country and an understanding of how best to share the information. Representatives from the Tribe quickly respond to emails or texts if any questions arise during the school year. This comprehensive support has made teachers comfortable exploring the Cahuilla curriculum with their students.

## **PARTNERS IN PUBLIC EDUCATION**

Agua Caliente's partnership with the school district and the district's foundation allows the Tribe to share stories and achievements far beyond what would be possible on its own. The Band's previous outreach efforts mainly appealed to adults; this collaboration brings information about the Cahuilla people and Agua Caliente Band to the region's youth. More recently, the enthusiasm and trust built up among the partners have led to an expanded curriculum development effort. While the original agreement covered elementary and middle school instruction, and units for fourth through seventh grade already are planned, the partners agreed that a high school component would give students more insight into the Tribe's unique role in the area. The forthcoming eleventh-grade curriculum will address more complex issues such as tribal sovereignty, contemporary challenges to Indigenous cultures, and decolonization.

Over the years, the Agua Caliente People Curriculum project has transformed from a school initiative into a broader community collaboration. The respectful cooperation to improve public school education has fostered positive and profound long-term relationships between the tribe and the key local institutions. The region's residents not only have increased awareness of the Agua Caliente Band's history, contributions, and role but also a deeper appreciation of all the different cultures within the Coachella Valley today. As one tribal spokesperson notes, young people are learning "to appreciate the similarities and differences of culture as strengths that build a better understanding of each other." With this knowledge, children educated by PSUSD will be well prepared to interact with the Band and to be better citizens wherever they ultimately live.

Rather than having Cahuilla history and knowledge filtered by outsiders, students benefit from stories and first-hand accounts shared by Agua Caliente Band members. As one district foundation official notes, students are taught "a story told by those who own it, live it, and have rightfully inherited it." Agua Caliente tribal leaders and culture bearers participate in the curriculum project at every step, creating content, training teachers, hosting field trips, and hand-making artifacts to share with the youth.

Importantly, the Agua Caliente Tribe was ready for this partnership. Having already decided that external communications and outreach would improve relations with its neighbors, the Band was well-positioned to begin work with the school district as soon as the opportunity arose. Such preparation also made it possible for the partnership to surpass the State of California's mandate that all schools teach about the "American Indians who lived in the region."

The Cahuilla people are an integral part of the past, present, and future of the Palm Springs region. Working together, the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, the Palm Springs Unified School District, and the school district's foundation created an accurate and authentic set of teaching materials—the Agua Caliente People Curriculum—to reflect that reality. The active involvement of Agua Caliente citizens in creating and sharing these materials gives students an unparalleled opportunity to learn about the Cahuilla culture and the area's overall diversity.

## **LESSONS**

1. Partnerships between Native nations and local public school districts can improve the accuracy and authenticity of teaching about local Native Peoples and create outcomes that benefit the entire community.

2. Student learning experiences improve when tribes have the opportunity to assist in training public school teachers responsible for teaching about local Native Peoples and their histories.
3. Tribes' efforts to share their histories and information about their current work can help correct misinformation and stereotypes and result in greater cross-community understanding.