

William Buffalo Hide Academy

Exciting things are happening in alternative education at BuffaloHide Academy! A larger audience has taken notice of the alternative approach to education the team at BuffaloHide is taking which has led to a relationship with the English Education Dept. at MSU spearheaded by Dr. Robert Petrone. Following is a letter Dr. Petrone addressed to the school after he was there for a brief visit last year with two of his English education students from the university.

The relationship between BuffaloHide and MSU is ongoing, and there are plans to send more students down to MSU this spring to be ‘expert high schoolers’ and present to future English educators about what it takes to be a good teacher. Switching the roles of our youth and putting them in front of college audiences as experts on what students here need from teachers has shown to be a transformative experience for our students. The main takeaway, and the foundation of BuffaloHide Academy is that building positive relationships between students and staff is a foundation of education.

BuffaloHide is also proud to showcase the results of some of their project based instruction including the hand drums made by students pictured [below]. In addition to traditional arts and crafts, students at BuffaloHide maintain a successful vegetable garden on school grounds, take an active role in tribal politics by attending important council meetings, design, construct, and race their own remote-control cars, craft and use their own materials in traditional games, and produce, direct, and act in their own films, just to name a few things.



Dear Matthew and Nick,

I'm writing to thank you so much for opening up your school to me (and my students) over the past several months to spend time and observe and build relationships with faculty, staff, and students. I've been in public education for over 20 years (first as a teacher in inner city high school Denver teaching reading to students labeled "at risk"), and truthfully, I've not seen a learning environment in all that time like the one you are all creating at Buffalo Hide Academy. As far as I can tell, it's one of the few places in public education where everyone involved is "walking the walk," so to speak. I so love it and hope to be able to continue building relationships with you and the students and community there. Below are thank you notes from the two students who joined me on my recent visit to your school. Both of these students are on track to become future high school English teachers, and as their notes attest, their experiences at your school have profoundly shaped their developing ideas for teaching. I hope you enjoy what they have to share with you about their experiences.

Sincerely,

Robert Petrone, Ph.D.

Associate Professor & Director, English Education Program

Nick and Matthew,

I want to extend my sincere gratitude for allowing my colleague, Matt, and I to visit your school and interact with your students. I had never been to Browning and had no idea what to expect. What I found there was something I have never found in a public school setting: a safe and welcoming community for learners and educators. I particularly enjoyed the seminar put on about restorative justice and how to incorporate that into everyday teaching practices. As a student, I did not encounter this idea, but I would love to use it in my own classroom to create a space similar to Nick's classroom, where students have a voice that matters and they know someone is listening to that voice. On another note, I would like to comment on your students. I was extremely nervous to teach my first lesson for high schoolers. I found them to be some of the most respectful and open group of young people I have met in a very long time. The students were open to trying something they had not done: a writing workshop and they rocked it! They bought into what Matt and I were trying to do and every single student contributed something. I would love to visit your school again and interact with your fantastic staff and students. What you have going on up there is unique and so special. Thank you so much again for the opportunity to come up there and learn about what you do and how you do it, in the hopes that I can gain some of these practices to incorporate into my own teaching.

Best,

Megan Williams

Nick and Matthew,

I am writing to thank you the both of you for allowing me to come up and observe at your school with Dr. Petrone twice this month. Both of my visits to your school have opened my eyes to a way of teaching that is in line with the values I feel most educators have when making the choice to work with students. Your patience and dedication towards the students have shown me how creating a safe and welcoming environment is paramount in helping students engage with the material. I would especially like to thank Nick who was generous enough with his classroom to allow for me to participate in lessons with the students, for allowing me to teach a lesson plan with a fellow MSU student, Megan, during his English class, and most especially for allowing us to participate in your circle at the start of every class. The Blackfeet language class was one of the most interesting lessons I've sat through at the high school level and I was extremely impressed with the ease that your students could recall and piece together elements of the language without going through a direct translation process. During our lesson, many of your students took the idea of a character sketch for a hero and stretched the boundaries of what a hero could be.

Cordell wrote about his skateboard as a hero, Jathaniel wrote about Allen Iverson and his arch nemesis the Black Mamba, and Michael analyzed my character sketch by saying “I think that your character is a hero because of the way she is able to create something out of nothing” which I hadn’t even considered during my writing process. I was blown away at the amount of writing that was produced in just a twenty-minute workshop, most students wrote up to a page for each session and engaged actively in crafting unique characters.

Your circles at the beginning of every class really reignited my love of working with high school aged students. Much of what was talked about and the safety of the circle reminded me so much of why it is that I wanted to teach in the first place. The respect for the circle as a safe space has been cultivated expertly, it is a special process and I thank you again for allowing me to participate. Thank you again for allowing us to come and see what your school is all about, I loved having this opportunity and I believe that I will be a better teacher for it.

Sincerely,

Matthew Lawrence