Keynote Address

"Preserving the Past to Secure the Future": The Center for Indian Education — The Next 50 Years

Monty Roessel

This article presents the keynote address given by Dr. Monty Roessel, Superintendent of the Rough Rock (Navajo) Community School, at the Center for Indian Education Re-launch Celebration held on the ASU Tempe campus May 6, 2011. Here, the author reflects on the legacy of the Center, co-founded by his father, Dr. Robert A. (Bob) Roessel, Jr., who also co-founded the demonstration school at Rough Rock in 1966. Both of these early efforts had a strong community focus and were designed to "amplify the voice of Native people" by (re)claiming Indian control over Indian education. Arguing that a viable future for Indian education requires a "both-and" approach, the author illustrates this approach with the current Navajo-language immersion program at Rough Rock Community School. Noting that the Center for Indian Education serves as a conduit for the future of Indian people, he concludes by urging Native nations to work together, along with the Center, and to take the "next leap of faith" in exercising tribal sovereign power over education.

I attended a *Kinaaldá* ceremony for my niece yesterday.[1] The beginning of the final night, around midnight, starts with hogan songs. Remembering the songs of last night and the blessing done today seems fitting as we meet here to rededicate the Center for Indian Education. The songs represent the building of a home. So it is with the Center. The prayers are sung that represent the East, South, West and North as well as the doorway. Once these are completed, the foundation is set for what will come next. This blessing is like that. The foundation is set for what will come in the next 50 years. The hogan songs were a favorite of my father. He would stay up for them and then go to bed. Last night, when the final hogan song was sung, I didn't go to bed — I headed here.

I am honored — and intimidated — to be invited to speak here today. Some of you, and I, share something in common. We would not be here today, speaking about the next 50 years of the Center for Indian Education, if it weren't for my father.

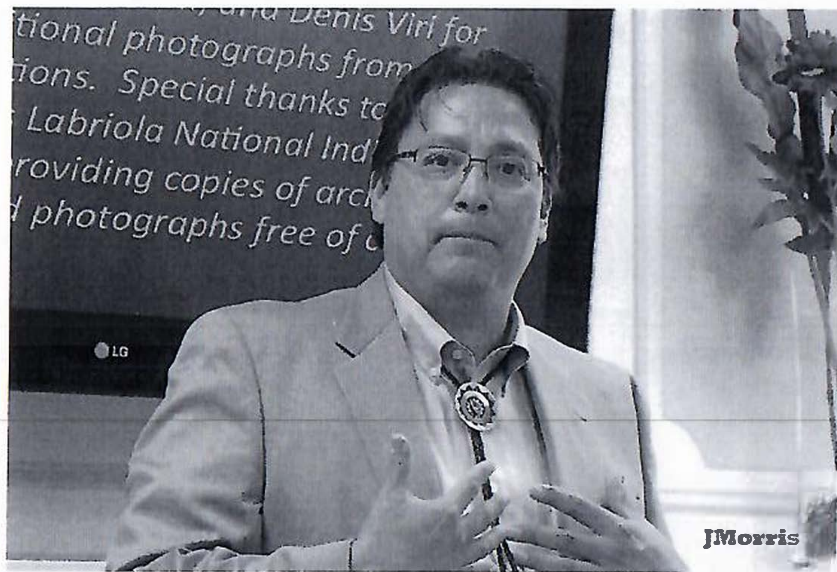

Figure 1. Dr. Monty Roessel delivering the keynote address at the CIE Re-launch Celebration; West Hall, ASU, May 6, 2011 (photograph by Jeston Morris)

To Drs. Bryan Brayboy and Teresa McCarty, thank you. I know through your leadership, the Center will grow again in prominence and be that place of reason and passion that helps our Indian people. Dr. McCarty is one of us. She, like my father, is as close as one can come to being Navajo without being born one.

My journey here is not as dramatic or poetic as my father's. I did not fall in love with my wife and pledge eternal love to her, or the Navajo people, because I saw her riding a horse across a mesa with her black hair flowing in the wind backlit by a setting sun. But because of this visual poem, I was raised on the Navajo Nation and choose to stay. My father and I shared some common passions — we both loved cameras and we both share a need to speak up and speak out. My father used to tell my kids that he was terribly shy. I know, for those of you who knew him — Bob Roessel, shy? It sounds far-fetched. But he would talk to them about the importance of being heard. I can still picture my father talking to my oldest daughter and telling her she had a strong voice and to be proud of it. "Don't ever let anyone tell you to be quiet and your perspective is not valid." My mom would laugh as she walked by and say, "Oh Bob, do you ever stop?" My daughter Jaclyn, all of three at the time, would just look at him and smile. I once asked him, "If you were so shy, how did you get to be so loud?" He responded, "You have to remember, in the 1950s, hardly anyone was speaking out, so even a whisper is loud when spoken in silence." That explains the 1950s.

Figure 2. CIE co-founder Dr. Robert A. Roessel, Jr. speaking to BIA officials outside Rough Rock Demonstration School, 1967 (photograph courtesy of Monty Roessel)

Part of my father's vision for the Center and the *Journal of American Indian Education* was to amplify the voice of Native people. The Center needed to be a literal and virtual meeting place, whereas the *Journal* was an avenue to extend out and communicate to a wide audience. Both were needed to provide a forum to gather thoughts and perspectives, a repository for research and history. It was a place that allowed Indian nations to help prepare in taking that leap of faith to improve the education of their people.

When I think of the Center for Indian Education and its beginning, I think of airplane rides and Havasupai [in northwestern Arizona]. In my father's job at the Center, I remember flying to meetings he would have with tribes in different parts of the state. Maybe it was a bet lost to my mom or he just liked the company, but he would take us kids to some of these meetings. On weekends, we got to fly in a plane and we would be back for supper.

Years later, when I was working as a photographer for the Native American Rights Fund (NARF), I was assigned to photograph Havasupai. I believe NARF was representing the tribe in a water and mining issue. So I spent time down there and my dad asked me to stop by an old friend that he had not seen in 30 years. He told me to say, "Yellow Buckskin said hi." So I found her and her family. And I told her, "Bob Roessel says hi." I wasn't about to say "Yellow Buckskin." She looked quizzically at me. Finally, I broke down and said "Yellow Buckskin" and

Figure 3. Dr. Robert A. Roessel, Jr. (second from left, back row), with wife Ruth Roessel (center), family members, and former CIE director George Gill (far left), upon Dr. Roessel's receipt of ASU's Outstanding Alumni Award; Farmer Education Building, ASU, ca. 1999 (photograph from CIE archives)

her eyes widened and then filled with tears. She invited me in for dinner and shared stories from long ago. She spoke of their tribe's need for a "good" school and not just a school. She spoke of sending her kids away to get an education and missing them dearly. She spoke of trying to make ends meet. She spoke of her dreams for her grandkids and wondered if they were the same dreams that her grandmother had for her. She told me stories of my dad taking long evening rides on horseback and people getting worried about him as darkness fell.

That day, I learned as much about my father as I did about Havasupai. I also learned about the Center. It went to the people to hear their voices so it could understand their dreams and concerns and challenges — even eight miles down in a canyon. I also knew that my dad would go to great lengths for an excuse to go horseback riding.

The Center's mission was to combine research with community outreach. Education was a part of its name, but "community" was the real focus. In Indian Country, everything is connected and so it was for the Center — economic development was about health care and leadership was about curriculum. This holistic approach was as novel then as it is a necessity today. We cannot solve one problem without understanding its impact on another problem. A sense of community was about understanding a sense of the people.

The Center also serves to amplify the voices of the tribes. Take Rough Rock Demonstration School for example. The idea of an Indian community controlling education seems natural now, but in 1966, the concept was innovative. The Center took the information gathered from in the canyons and in the far reaches of reservations and the result is a school that was built around a community and a community that is built around a school. It is a true symbiotic relationship, from childcare to adult education, Navajo immersion when everyone else is English-only, to housing to healthcare and security. Rough Rock Demonstration School, now Rough Rock Community School, stands as an educational and cultural foundation for our children. This could not have occurred if not for the Center's vision of reaching out for input and then garnering resources and support both at the local and federal level.

In order to make the whispers heard, the *Journal of American Indian Education* was created. Native languages generally rely on the spoken word. The rich history and culture largely remain unchanged through storytelling and ritual. The *Journal* brought forth the possibility of making those stories real to people who may not have the resources to go eight miles down into the canyon. At the same time, it provided a forum to discuss the real needs and perspective of people who are for the most part underrepresented. This scholarly journal gave voice to a people, to dreams, to issues and to solutions. It validated the work that was being done but also pointed out how much more needed to get done.

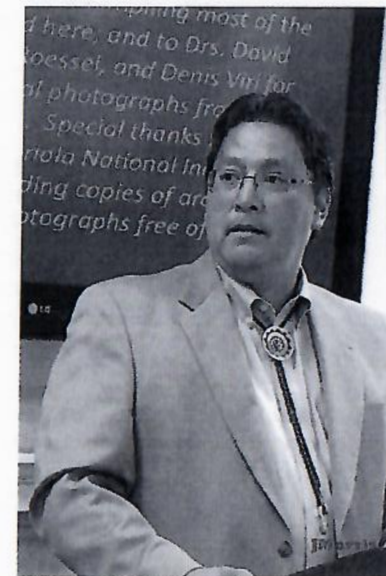

Figure 4. Dr. Monty Roessel speaking at the CIE Re-launch Celebration; West Hall, ASU, May 6, 2011 (photograph by Jeston Morris)

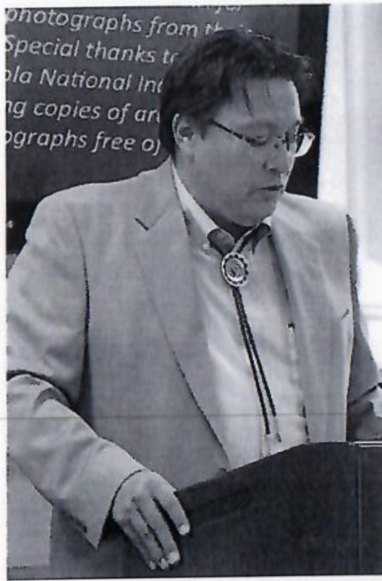

Figure 5. Dr. Monty Roessel at the CIE Re-launch Celebration (photograph by Jeston Morris)

As I stand here today, 52 years after the creation of the Center for Indian Education, I am reminded of our strong voice as Native people. Yet, sometimes I still feel we are whispering or shouting in a canyon and being hushed. Today, I want to talk about some of those whispers. Education is supposed to be personal. So I make no apologies for this speech. It is based on the battles fought and my observations.

The Next 50 Years

In preparing for this event, I looked back. It's easy to look back. You pick those areas you want to focus on, those areas that help make your point, and ignore the rest. I love history. It always seems that the leaders of yesterday were bigger, smarter and better than those today. It should come as no surprise that I revere my father. His vocabulary resonates with me. The words battle, guts, speak up, stand up, pride and passion, are words that bring me to my feet. But, as I look to the future, I don't see new leaders of Indian education stepping forward. Presently, on the Navajo Nation, of the 16 public school districts, only two superintendents are Indian — one Navajo and one Hualapai. Where have all our leaders gone? With nearly 80 percent of the Navajo student population attending public schools, this will have a profound impact on the future direction of Navajo education. But without the needed leadership, we will be reacting to and not directing our future. My dad wrote, "The choice must be made by school administrators as to whether they wish to risk disapproval in trying to assist a

community [to] refine and reach for the stars, or whether a school administrator is intent only to insure proper teaching and proper books and materials…are available….Navajo education needs those who are willing to dare greatly and attempt new solutions to old problems while never losing one's faith or one's commitment!"

With this in mind, what do the next 50 years look like? I see battles being fought in the courtroom and not just the classroom — that is, if Indian education leaders believe education is part of an Indian nation's sovereign power. It also depends on whether or not tribes are willing to fight. We have forgotten how to make a leap of faith. We have become complacent. As Pogo said, "We have met the enemy and he is us."

When I think about the beginnings of Rough Rock, I think of the story told in *A Place to Be Navajo,* by Dr. McCarty (2002). She recounts the story of how the Office of Economic Opportunity, after a failed attempt at local control in Lukachukai, Arizona, would give the tribe one more chance to prove that Indian community control of education was possible. Today, I wonder if we would take that challenge. Or would we shy away from the possibility of failure? Would we put our beliefs to the side and look for an easy way out?

Take the Navajo Nation, for instance. When No Child Left Behind was adopted they had the option to create their own definition of adequate yearly progress (AYP). They chose not to. When they finally started developing their own accountability plan, they started with the premise that AIMS [Arizona's mandated testing instrument] would be the assessment. Why not develop the Navajo Nation's own assessment, and why would the Navajo Nation look to Arizona to solve a Navajo education problem? Here was an example in which the statute was ahead of tribes. It allowed for us to create our own definitions. The Center for Indian Education could have really stepped up and helped all Indian tribes. We all are the weaker for all of us not taking this leap of faith. Like Rough Rock, I believe the Center for Indian Education to be more than a name and a place — it is an idea. There was never a battle fought or even a whisper of protest.

Meanwhile, the tribe passed a landmark law, the 2005 Navajo Sovereignty in Education Act. With it a Department of Diné Education was created and the Navajo Nation declared its authority over all education on the reservation — sort of. I believe this law is the beginning of the beginning of Navajo education. The questions it raises are about a tribe's role and place. The answers, which are yet to be determined, are the key to the future of the Navajo Nation. It is a law that will define Indian sovereignty in practice and theory.

This is the kind of battle in which the Center for Indian Education should be engaged. We have spent much of our time debating what is the best reading program to use for Indian children, the best math program for Indian children. What are the reasons for the high dropout rate of Indian children? What are the characteristics of a good school leader of Indian children? All of these are valid. All of these are important. All of these questions must be answered. Yet, what

does control mean if left for a discussion among War on Poverty "has-beens." I remember my father sharing a story from the last National Indian Education Association conference he attended in Albuquerque. He ran into Vine Deloria. They had not seen each other in nearly 30 years. At the end of a session they sat in an empty room and talked for more than an hour — reliving the '60s and wishing they were young again. They talked about the battles they would fight now, knowing what they know. We do know what they know and yet we are afraid to fight. In the *Journal of American Indian Education,* my father wrote about Rough Rock in an article entitled, "The Right To Be Wrong" (Roessel, 1968). We have come full circle and we now have the right to be right. We need not make apologies. President George W. Bush did not make any apologies for No Child Left Behind. Maybe Indian sovereignty means never having to say you're sorry.

I believe that Indian education — true Indian education — is about creating the menu and not just selecting items from it. This can only happen if tribes exercise their sovereignty as they "control" education. What does this look like? It means controlling the money. The federal government has a responsibility to fund Indian students, the state has a responsibility to fund Indian students in its state, and Indian nations have a responsibility to begin to fund the education of their Indian people. We cannot hide behind the treaties and enabling acts; we need to use these to find new and creative ways to fund the future of our Indian children. We need to negotiate and, if necessary, go to court. Sovereignty does not mean acting alone, it means acting.

One reason that is often heard on the Navajo Nation is that we are not ready. If we used this logic in the 1960s we would still be in BIA boarding schools and there would be no tribal colleges. We have met the enemy….

A task force was recently developed to streamline the reauthorization process for Navajo Bureau of Indian Education-funded schools. Rather than state the obvious and do away with the authorization process, the task force recommended doing away with the Navajo Nation Board of Education. Modeled after a state's board of education, it was less than five years old. When a baby stumbles we don't confine him or her to a wheelchair. We'll have to wait for the new board to determine the board's fate. We have met the enemy….

I understand that I am in a unique situation as superintendent of Rough Rock Community School. It is a school that is a pioneer in bilingual and bicultural education. If American Indian history, language and culture has a home in any school, it is at Rough Rock. Five years ago, we decided to rededicate ourselves to our roots and mission. While all schools were focused on AYP, we decided to create a Navajo language immersion program. While schools were aligning their curriculum to state standards, we began aligning our Navajo curriculum to our traditional ways of thought. Six stages have been identified to provide strength as we do identify our lands with what we call *Dziil,* literally meaning strength but also translated as sacred mountains. With this, as students develop through these six stages, it is believed that they would have a strong foundation of

knowledge to plan and live their lives. We went deeper than our roots; we went to the beginnings of what it means to be Navajo. Suffice to say, we have not made AYP. I would rather not make AYP and stand for something than make it and stand for nothing. We are creating students who know their place in the world — as a Navajo and as an American.

Fifty-two years ago, the Center helped prove that Indian history and language had a right to be in all classrooms. But today, the issue seems to be, why? Why is it relevant for our young to know our histories and stories? Getting back to our immersion program, we knew that we could not fail so we decided to make it voluntary. We had our parents commit to not just one year of immersion but to a philosophy of education. Parents are afraid that by learning in Navajo their children won't learn anything else, and critics complain that we will never make AYP with our Navajo immersion students pulling our scores down. But I am equally fearful for our English immersion students.

Our program started slowly — we have added a grade a year, with our immersion teachers teaching two grade levels. We built our new school with the plan to have a K-8 Navajo language immersion program. We have three grades to go. Knowing the importance of our culture is as essential as knowing math facts and phonics. This week is our Traditional Week — a week of celebrating and honoring being Navajo. And while measures of success and accountability have vacillated throughout the years, at least as far back as I can remember — the ITBS, IOWA, Stanford 9, AIMS/DPA and Stanford 10, to name just a few — one thing I can say with certainty is that traditional Navajo beliefs, culture and history have not waivered. It is a constant and one that we cannot afford to lose. I speak of Navajo, because that is my history and who I am. The Center for Indian Education represents all tribal communities and children should have the same opportunity afforded to our children at Rough Rock. Without fear of missing out, our culture needs a place in our schools.

My niece made her cake last night. My sister flew in from Washington, D.C., my brother drove up from Phoenix, and my family drove over from Kayenta, Arizona. We are there because of my mother. My mom taught us that this is important — no matter what you are doing. In education leadership, we discuss the non-negotiables. It is time we begin to define what the non-negotiables are when it comes to our Indian way of life. What are we not willing to lose? Because of my mom, my nephews and nieces are pulled from school during finals week and assist at a Kinaaldá ceremony for their sister.

The Kinaaldá ceremony is a time for reflection and learning. In my mind, this ceremony is the equivalent of a master's degree in leadership. It is about humility, service, endurance, strength, kindness, planning, communicating, and the future. When a young girl makes her cake, she works hard at grinding the corn, mixing the batter. The cake is about three to four feet in diameter and six inches thick. But despite all this work, she doesn't get to taste it. She gives it all away. It is about teaching and learning. When my eldest daughter made her cake, we took everyone out of school and headed to Round Rock [Navajo Nation,

Arizona]. She was the first grandchild of Bob and Ruth. I was a photographer during this period of my life. I had photographed many Kinaaldá ceremonies and written articles and a children's book about the ceremony (Roessel, 1993).

But, this time I would be able to be closer. I could sit wherever I wanted for the best angle. I could even light the hogan with flash. I sat in my perfect spot and waited with cameras in my lap. My mom walked in, looked at me, and said, "What are you doing sitting there? Get over here and comb her hair." I share this story because it is a reminder that we are not just observers; we are participants. We have a vested interest in the outcome. These are our kids. I believe that others are waiting for us to step up and speak out. After tying my daughter's hair, we went back to Kayenta. In the Kinaaldá ceremony the girl runs before sunrise and at noon. Family and friends follow her. I thought that my daughter would be embarrassed. So I made arrangements to check her out of school and drive her out of Kayenta so she could run during noon. We lived across from the middle school at this time and as I opened the door to go out, I saw the most beautiful sight. There was my daughter running, with her whole class following her yelling "*ooooyieeee*." She wasn't whispering her pride, she was yelling it... along with her classmates. I took this as a challenge and entered education.

I am a product of the Center for Indian Education — not because my parents are Bob and Ruth Roessel, but because what the Center stood for, and what it fought for, impacted my life as a Navajo student, Navajo parent, Navajo professional, and as a Navajo. As a photographer, it touched my life and taught me more about my father as I discovered the beauty of details. As a journalist and researcher, it informed me and gave me answers. As a community service coordinator it guided me as I steered my community. And, as an educator, it inspired me.

Figure 6. CIE Co-director Dr. Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy (R) thanking Dr. Monty Roessel at the CIE Re-launch Celebration, May 6, 2011 (photograph by Jeston Morris)

Preserving the past to secure the future — that is why we are here today. Much like the founders of the Center for Indian Education, we come as a community to find solutions, gather input, observe and reach out. What we have that the founders didn't have is the past 50 years to learn from — as the War on Poverty "has-beens" said, "If we only knew then what we know now." We do know and so we gather today to celebrate the past 50 years as a foundation and a springboard to the future of Indian education. We must continue to validate and strengthen our culture through teaching and learning our language and stories. We must continue to promote opportunities for Indians to prosper by drawing connections to the Western world and framing it through our traditional lenses. We must look within to build capacity through education and leadership by seeking ways to move beyond a whisper and share our successes. The Center for Indian Education serves as a conduit for the future of Indian people. As my father lived and we all believe — Indian education doesn't have to be a one-way choice. It is not an either-or proposition — done correctly, it is a BOTH-AND.

In conclusion, I am reminded of a Salish quote, "If each of us knew everything, then we wouldn't need each other." Luckily, we don't know everything and therefore, we do need each other. But this quote means more in this modern era. I think of sovereignty and how its double edge has made us think we can just pound our chest and do everything single-handedly. We have lost our need for interdependence as we expand our grasp on self-sufficiency. We cannot solve our problems by ourselves. We must work together. The Center for Indian Education is uniquely qualified to be that place which allows for a shared sovereignty as tribes begin to truly control their education. It is a place where the whispers of Indian nations can become the impetus for our next leaps of faith.

Note

[1]*Kinaaldá* is the Navajo girls' puberty ceremony (see Begay & Clinton-Tullie, 1983; Roessel, 1993). — *Eds.*

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