

# MIGIZI Communications

## Native Academy Connections: Partnerships Between Schools and Nonprofits

### *Considerations for implementing new programs in schools*

#### Introduction

At the end of MIGIZI's four-year Native Academy Connections program, we revisited the "implementation evaluations" we did for every year of the program to create a summary of learnings for MIGIZI as well as a list of items to consider for those entering into a school-nonprofit relationship. We hope that this report is useful for MIGIZI as well as useful for nonprofit and school staff when planning or delivering new programming in schools. The items to consider are:

- **Facilitate more co-planning and co-coordinating.** MIGIZI and its school partners expressed surprise at how much time was necessary to implement the Native Academy Connections program in a meaningful way. Future initiatives should allot ample time for planning and coordination time between school and nonprofit representatives.
- **Find alignment between program learning goals and classroom learning goals.** A consistent challenge (and an eventual success) for MIGIZI and school partners was identifying, communicating, and highlighting alignment between the program's learning goals and classroom learning goals. It is important for nonprofit and school staff to take time to identify this alignment in the planning stages of a partnership, and then find ways to communicate and make clear the alignment to everyone involved – teachers, nonprofit staff, school staff, and students.
- **Take steps to gain support from administration.** MIGIZI had two school partners – the administration of one of them was immediately supportive of Native Academy Connections; the administration of the other was more hesitant. This provided a unique case study into the impacts of administrative buy-in. Our evaluation found that the relationship with the school with immediate administrative buy-in was consistently stronger and more positive.
- **Consider how to promote the longevity and sustainability of the program in multiple ways.** Not every aspect of the Native Academy Connections programs was institutionalized by MIGIZI's school partners at the end of the initial four-year program period (though some aspects were institutionalized). That being said, school partners spoke about the positive impact of working closely with MIGIZI regardless of whether the entire program was institutionalized. In particular, school partners said that their skill levels with various teaching approaches increased and that they had more connections to their students' community. In other words, the program's long-term impact is still apparent in teacher's increased capacities and connections, even though not every aspect of the program will be carried on by MIGIZI's school partners.

# About the Native Academy Connections program and evaluation

In 2013, MIGIZI Communications, Inc. (MIGIZI) received a four-year demonstration grant from the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Indian Education to support its Native Academy Connections (NAC) program. The purpose of the NAC grant is to increase the on-time high school graduation rate among American Indian students and increase the number of the post-secondary education credits with which American Indian high school students graduate. Through the NAC grant, MIGIZI provided culturally responsive, experiential learning opportunities to American Indian high school students at two schools in the Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS) school district: Nawayee Center School (Center School) and South High School’s All Nations program (All Nations). Center School is an alternative high school that provides education grounded in indigenous lifeways. All Nations is an academic program at South High School with culturally responsive instruction.

MIGIZI contracted with Wilder Research to evaluate its NAC program. Over the four-year grant period, our evaluation focused on the implementation of the NAC program as well as the outcomes of the program. This report outlines the major implementation findings from this four-year evaluation.

We used a variety of methods to measure the implementation of the NAC program (Figure 1). Our methods varied in response to the program; we sometimes used a particular method in response to questions that arose from the previous year’s evaluation, and at other times we used a specific method because of budget limitations. Decisions to change or alter our methods were always made in partnership with MIGIZI staff. This mixed methods four-year evaluation has resulted in a variety of data about the NAC program’s implementation; this report presents key learnings from these evaluation activities for MIGIZI and its current and future partners.

## 1. Methods used to evaluate NAC’s implementation

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
Student focus group	X	X		
Center School teacher focus group	X	X	X	
All Nations teacher interviews/focus group		X	X	
MIGIZI staff focus groups		X	X	
Student survey			X	
Teacher (partner) survey				X
MIGIZI staff survey				X

# Considerations for “new programming” partnerships between schools and nonprofits

Based on findings from the focus groups and surveys we used to gather information about the implementation of the NAC program, we present a number of considerations for organizations and schools considering entering into a nonprofit-school partnership to implement new programming.

## Facilitate more co-planning and co-ordination

Throughout the NAC program’s four-year grant period, our evaluation activities repeatedly highlighted the importance of co-planning and co-ordination between MIGIZI staff and its school partners. In earlier years of the evaluation, findings about co-planning and co-ordination took the form of 1) teachers requesting greater flexibility from MIGIZI staff in terms of when program components took place and 2) questioning among all stakeholders if the NAC program components occurred at the “right” times of the day or on the “right” days of the week for students and teachers. These findings represented the clear need for a deep level of co-planning and co-ordination between MIGIZI and its school partners.

A primary component of the NAC program was “Content Connections,” which was originally envisioned as a full day of experiential and culturally responsive learning activities led by MIGIZI staff with support from Center School and All Nations teachers. At Center School, these Content Connections days were implemented as originally envisioned, and grew more effective because Center School and MIGIZI began meeting on a weekly basis to plan Content Connections days.

*“We continued this year with the Wednesday morning meetings, and while it’s been difficult to do an early morning thing, I think that having a set time when we’re supposed to plan is really good. That has been done well. This year I feel like we started with an idea instead of a nebulous thing.” – Partner school teacher, from a Year 3 focus group*

*“It’s gotten a lot better with collaborative work... it really meshes together now. It’s going really well. Everyone has the process down, it’s not viewed as an interruption with how the school is run, it’s part of the school.” – MIGIZI staff, from a Year 3 focus group*

At All Nations, however, Content Connections was not implemented for the first two years of the program because the schedule established by South High School’s administrators prohibited MIGIZI from implementing a full day of programming. In Year 3, MIGIZI and All Nations staff reached the level of co-planning and co-ordination necessary to devise a solution: a “seminar” style class that took place during first period each school day. While different from MIGIZI’s original vision, this solution satisfactorily fulfilled the goals that MIGIZI had for Content Connections. This seminar style class is a clear success of the NAC program; however, if MIGIZI

and All Nations had established a strong co-planning and co-coordinating partnership from the outset of the program, it may have been possible to reach this solution sooner.

*From the Year 2 implementation report:* MIGIZI and All Nations staff agreed that implementing Content Connections at All Nations was difficult during Years 1-2, with a MIGIZI staff person saying that, “[It] didn’t go well at all.” Despite continuous challenges throughout Years 1-2, All Nations and MIGIZI staff expressed optimism regarding the future of Content Connections programming. In fact, they revealed plans for a Content Connections class to take place every day for All Nations students.

MIGIZI and its school partners indicated many times throughout our evaluation that implementing the NAC program required more co-planning and co-coordination than either MIGIZI or its school partners expected. Moreover, implementing the NAC program was sometimes seen as “extra” work for teachers because they were helping MIGIZI to implement the program in addition to their regular teaching duties – and they were unsure of whether or not they were supposed to be getting paid for this additional time and effort. In Year 2 of the program, MIGIZI began the practice of financially compensating Center School and All Nations teachers for the additional time and effort they contributed to implementing the program. The decision to pay school partner teachers for their work with the NAC program resulted in a deeper level of co-planning and co-coordination between MIGIZI and its school partners; it also helped to clarify to school partners the level of co-planning and co-coordination necessary for successful implementation of the program.

## Find the alignment between program learning goals and classroom learning goals

In the early years of the evaluation, a challenge we heard from teachers was that the NAC program did not align with what they were teaching in their classrooms. It should be noted that MIGIZI crafted its program components to align with state and district teaching standards, but this perception was present nonetheless. In addition, All Nations teachers expressed confusion about who was “taking the lead” on developing curriculum for Content Connections – which likely contributed to why Content Connections was not implemented at All Nations in Years 1 & 2. All Nations teachers reached a solid level of clarity about roles and responsibilities in Years 3 & 4 as they began to co-plan and co-coordinate with MIGIZI staff at a deeper level. It should also be noted that MIGIZI staff and Center School teachers credited their weekly planning meetings with helping to clarify and workshop how the NAC program’s learning goals aligned with classroom learning goals.

Students, too, found it difficult at times to see much connection between NAC program components and their classroom learning. In Year 3, at least 50 percent of students said that they were unsure of or did not see the connection between Content Connections and what they are learning in math

class (75% were unsure of or did not see connection), science class (50% were unsure of or did not see connection), art class (50% were unsure of or did not see connection), or English class (50% were unsure of or did not see connection). That being said, 64 percent of students did see a connection between Content Connections and social studies class. These findings suggest that more clarity about learning goal alignment would have been beneficial for the NAC program – and that teachers at Center School and All Nations could have benefitted from more explicit communication from MIGIZI about how to bridge NAC programming with their classroom curriculum.

*“We thought the experiential stuff would bring kids in, and it has, but we’re still having trouble with kids seeing this as a class or that it matters.”*  
– School partner teacher, from a Year 3 focus group

Another aspect of the NAC program was “Core Connections,” which involved MIGIZI staff being present in school partner classrooms to offer classroom support and one-on-one help to students who may be struggling with an activity in class. Feelings about Core Connections were mixed. In some classrooms, teachers felt that MIGIZI staff proactively contributed in meaningful ways; in other classrooms, teachers felt that MIGIZI staff could have been more involved. Other teachers did not receive any classroom support from MIGIZI staff. While teachers expressed a range of opinions and experiences regarding Core Connections classroom support, it is clear that this part of the NAC program could have been more optimally utilized to make sure that teachers and students saw a connection between NAC learning goals and classroom learning goals.

*From the Year 4 implementation report: When asked about the benefits of Core Connections activities, staff said that they appreciated the knowledge and skills that MIGIZI staff brought to their classrooms (many of the teachers at Center School and South High School are newer teachers). It should be noted that two teachers had never received this kind of support during this school year, and one teacher did not know that MIGIZI offered this kind of support.*

## Take steps to gain support from administration

Overall, administration at Center School was supportive of the NAC program from the outset while administration at All Nations was more hesitant, especially in terms of changing their daily or weekly schedule to support the goals of the NAC program. For example, Center School readily agreed to full day sessions for the Content Connections component of the NAC program whereas All Nations initially refused to change their weekly schedule to accommodate MIGIZI’s vision. It should be noted that All Nations, as a program of a large high school, has in general a more rigid schedule than Center School, which most likely accounted for some of these early challenges. In Year 3, South High School and All Nations experienced some administrative turn-over, and MIGIZI made sure to build relationships with the new administrative staff and communicate with them about the purpose of the NAC program. Based on focus groups and surveys with MIGIZI and All Nations staff, these administrative changes – and the relationship-building between MIGIZI

staff and the new administrative staff – contributed to a more positive working relationship in Years 3 & 4 of the program.

*From the Year 2 implementation report:* During Year 2, a new administrator started at South High School who was more supportive of NAC programming, and also the All Nations coordinator left the program. All Nations and MIGIZI staff were optimistic about these staffing changes and their effect on NAC programming. After the departure of the coordinator, remaining All Nations staff felt their relationship with MIGIZI staff greatly improved.

The impact of administrator “buy-in” for the NAC program can be clearly seen: Center School experienced four years of progressive partnership-building with MIGIZI whereas All Nations experienced two years of partnership gridlock followed by two years of partnership-building. In any case, for MIGIZI’s ongoing partnerships with Center School and All Nations – and for future partnerships it might start – we would suggest, based on these findings, for MIGIZI to continue focusing on gaining administrative support for their efforts and goals.

## Consider how to promote the longevity and sustainability of the program in multiple ways

From the NAC program’s outset, MIGIZI had the intention of institutionalizing program components at Center School and All Nations after the four-year federal grant period ends. The NAC program has been most successful, in terms of institutionalization, with the Content Connections program component. This is likely in large part due to the level of co-planning and co-coordination required to deliver the Content Connections component; in other words, school partners over multiple years have shown that they are invested in delivering Content Connections – and so they and MIGIZI expressed high levels of confidence that this part of the NAC program will continue. The other aspects of the NAC program required less buy-in and investment from school partners; MIGIZI and its school partners were less confident that these other program components will continue after the grant period ends. These findings suggest that the Content Connections component will be institutionalized because it required a deeper, more tangible commitment from school partners.

That being said, while not every aspect of the program will continue after the grant period ends, our evaluation shows that the NAC program has had a long-lasting impact – in particular on the teachers at MIGIZI’s partner schools. Teachers at Center School and All Nations noted the impact of the NAC program on them as professionals, mentioning that they know more about Native American culture, are more connected to the Native American community in Minneapolis, and are more comfortable with experiential teaching pedagogies and curriculum that is grounded in Native American culture.

*“I don’t think I can say all the ways that I benefitted from MIGIZI: emotional support, classroom support, financial support, connections to other community partners, curriculum sharing, shoulders to cry on, fresh perspectives on how to accomplish goals, a wealth of knowledge on numerous topics, direct connections to people in the American Indian community to work with, a willingness to help in any way possible, positivity, motivation to be a better educator...” – School partner teacher*

*“MIGIZI has excellent cultural connections in the community that allow us to educate students and staff on cultural things. For instance, we were able to go on an ‘Our People, Our Story’ tour of sacred sights because of a connection MIGIZI had. It was a super powerful field trip that I hope we can do again another time.” – School partner teacher*

## Summary and moving forward

Throughout the four-year NAC program, MIGIZI exhibited deep commitment to its intended outcomes. This commitment can be seen in MIGIZI’s steadfast focus on building strong working relationships with its school partners based on their unique needs. Moving forward, we suggest MIGIZI consider the following recommendations for future partnerships with schools:

- Early in program development, communicate to partners about the goals of the program and how the program delivery approach and schedule helps to meet those goals; explicitly address whether and how the program’s goals align with partners’ goals and likewise ask directly about whether and how the program’s delivery approach and schedule align with partners’ approach and schedule
- Set a schedule with partners during early stages of program development to co-plan and co-coordinate program delivery, and adjust this schedule as necessary once you start delivering the program; it will likely be beneficial to meet at least weekly during early stages of program implementation
- Host quarterly partner check-ins throughout the partnership period (make sure these check-ins are distinct from program co-planning or co-coordination meetings) to assess program implementation and adjust aspects of the partnership as necessary
- Involve administrators early in partnership process, ideally while the program is still in development; be as clear as possible in communicating the goals of the program and how these goals may affect the partners’ current schedules or programs

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451 Lexington Parkway North  
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55104  
651-280-2700  
[www.wilderresearch.org](http://www.wilderresearch.org)



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