

**Claire Darmstadter**

Hey everybody, I am so lucky to be joined today by David O'Connor, Education Consultant at the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction who works closely with American Indian students in education. Thanks so much for taking a couple of minutes to chat with me today!

**David O'Connor**

Pleasure to be here, Claire. Thank you for the opportunity.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Could you start by just giving us a really general overview of your educational and linguistic background and how you came to work in your current position?

**David O'Connor**

Certainly. So first and foremost, my name is Bwaakoningwiid or also David J. O'Connor. David O'Connor is what you find on my taxes or forms or different things. But Bwaakoningwiid is the name that I've been taking ownership of more lately, in terms of it's my Ojibwe name. And when I translate it into English, it means *broken wing*. And when I translate into what it means, it means *he overcomes*. And so when you think about, going back to your question that you're asking, in terms of how I've stepped into this role here at DPI, I've been here close to about 10 years now. This coming January will be my 10th year here at DPI. In terms of my background, I'm originally from and a member of the Bad River Band of the Lake Superior Chippewa. I was born and raised on the reservation. I feel very fortunate to have many different folks who have shaped me in understanding what it means to be Anishinaabe or Ojibwe in this world, in terms of my growing up experience. But when I had the opportunity to go to college, I had the opportunity to delve into some American Indian Studies or First Nation Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison more in depth. So I got a strong academic background in terms of understanding who our First Nations are in our state, as well as elsewhere across the US as well, which allowed me opportunity at the same time to make that journey when I was an undergrad as well to take four years of Ojibwe, which is offered at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and I feel very fortunate to have that experience and opportunity. So here I am learning my own language on a campus at a higher education institution. And so taking four years of that really helped me have a better understanding about not only different aspects about learning the language, but also helped me grow in terms of identity. Thinking about my late teens, early 20s. Learning my language, I think it's a big part of who you are. And as someone who's still learning to speak Ojibwe or Anishinaabemowin, I always tell people by not speaking that language or not having an opportunity to learn it, I think there's a big part of you missing. And so I feel very fortunate to have that. And so I continue that journey on today. So *ban gieta*, which means little by little, I still push myself to learn my language, and take every opportunity to help myself to understand or look at things differently either by being at ceremonies or educational places, but also when I had the opportunity to pass it on to my children and make sure that future generations have an opportunity to learn their language, because it's a big part of who they are. In terms of my position here at DPI, I'm the American Indian Studies Consultant here. And as I mentioned, I've been here about 10 years now. So a lot of my work across the state is working with school districts, pre-service education programs, other entities to provide instruction on Wisconsin American history, culture, and tribal

sovereignty, which is often referenced as Act 31 in the state, as well as the education of Native students. And so that includes not only just learning about histories and cultures, but it's also an opportunity to know about our languages as well.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, and so Act 31, of course we're talking about education here, and so it's a very big part of it. And you just mentioned it as well. Can you talk specifically about the background, why it was created, how teachers can implement it, and what are some resources if they want to learn more about how they can further their inclusion of that topic in their classroom?

**David O'Connor**

Sure. So Act 31 came into existence on August 3, 1989. So it's a little over 30 years now. It came at a time when there was a large controversy over spearfishing, specifically Ojibwe spearfishing, in northern Wisconsin. And so legislators and other stakeholders came together and wanted to have an opportunity to create something for future generations to learn about what does it mean to have treaty rights? What does it mean to have tribal sovereignty? What does it mean to have Native histories and cultures? And so together they created this law in 1989 for future generations to learn about — to avoid some of those circumstances from maybe happening again, meaning some of the controversy, the backlash that Indigenous Peoples, specifically Ojibwe, as an example, and others nations across Wisconsin, faced during that time. And so it was an opportunity to learn about tribal people or Native people in our state. Why it's important is, like any work, it's ongoing. And we think about the work that's ongoing, you think about those opportunities that, you know, every single day as I engage in work or dialogue, one of the things I try to stress more importantly is that we as individuals, as human beings, we have stereotypes about other people, we have biases that other people. But once we have an opportunity to learn about other people, and have firsthand stories or accounts, sometimes those barriers or those things that we used to have misconceptions of go away, in a natural way, in a good way. And so for me, one of the things that, you know, I talk to educators about quite frequently is that it's one thing to have resources, materials, but it's also one thing to understand the content. And so one of the three things I talk about quite often is that it's not only just in trying to include this information into your teaching, learning, but it's also how you integrate this as well as how you infuse it. So a lot of times I call them the three I's. So include, integrate, and infuse. And so include is where you just take a resource or two and you add it to your teaching and learning, but it kind of supplants your instruction in a sense. Integrating is where you build up your content, but you feel like you struggle with that. But at the same time, you are taking resources and implementing them in a good way at different points in time. When you infuse, that is where it just comes second nature, you're just doing it, you know how to take resources, your content is strong, but you always recognize that you need to build up stronger content for your own understanding. But you just know you're doing everything in a natural way to seem seamless. And so, you know, resources I encourage folks to check out quite often is definitely check out the Wisconsin First Nations website, which is a partnership between PBS Wisconsin, UW-Madison School of Education, and the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. A lot of resources that are curated there, collected into one spot for educators to use across the state, not only in just our K-12 schools, but in early childhood, as well as in higher education as well. And so I think it's a good opportunity to think about how this information can be integrated or

incorporated into your teaching and learning in a natural way. And that's when so a lot of times what I try to emphasize firsthand is learn about our neighbors first. So we are home to 12 Nations in Wisconsin. Each of them has their own government representation, histories, cultures, sovereignty, etc. and going on a list of many other things. And I think it's important that for me, I stress that it's important that they tell their stories their way. And so with that being said, that's why I always try to find resources that have or materials that share those stories, from those firsthand accounts from those communities or peoples across our state. The other resource I definitely encourage to check out is the DPI American Indian Studies Program website, which is a website I oversee directly here at the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. And so on our website, I always add tons of resources on here quite a bit. Especially a lot of times when when I get contacted about different things, about different areas that maybe they're not on the website, I try to find those and update those as much as possible because I want to make sure that when people come into that space, they see it as a resource that they can utilize for many different areas.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

Yes, I will link all those resources down in the transcript because there are so many great ones on that website and Wisconsin First Nations, a lot of incredible resources. Can you talk a little bit more about your work as it relates to schools and your interactions with those? So we have a bunch of different types of schools in Wisconsin. There might be charter schools, there might be public schools, there might be reservation schools. Can you talk a little bit about your different work in different areas, specifically relating to American Indian Studies? Are there certain schools that might have a different relationship to the state than a typical K-12 school?

### **David O'Connor**

No, for me, you know, so when I work with educators, I work with public mainly obviously. I work with private, charter, and many times in different capacities. And so a lot of times, you know, when an educator comes to me, if they're asking for resources, materials, or they want some help and growth and content or some training opportunities, I mean, I'm all about that opportunity to, you know, not only expand my programming, but also making sure that information is being shared with stakeholders across the state. And so, I know you asked a question about reservation schools, so actually 95% of our Native students attend public schools in the state of Wisconsin. We do have three of what we call tribal schools. And those are actually part of the Bureau of Indian Education, which are federally funded schools. And then a very small portion attend our private schools as an example. But the vast majority of our Native students attend public schools in Wisconsin, concentrated — and if you think about it, there are about 400 plus school districts in the state — in about 42-43 school districts, and those 42-43 school districts make up 70-75% of all Native students in the state of Wisconsin. So like the school district I went to school as example, it was about 20-25% American Indian or Native American, but at the end of the day that you know, information about learning about First Nations peoples, that extends to all school districts in the state, not just school districts that have high percentages or numbers of American Indian students, it includes all school districts in the state of Wisconsin, not just our school districts that have Native students.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, that's a very important point to make, right? That the majority are in our public schools, or in schools that might be with other students who don't have that background, so it's really important for teachers and their students to be aware of the past and the present relations and statuses of all these individuals. So we tell little kids all the time that it's a superpower to speak more than one language. So can you give me one reason, you can answer in whatever language or mix languages you want, why it is a superpower to speak or understand or interact with more than one language?

**David O'Connor**

It goes back to that comment I made earlier. I think language is a big part of who you are. As an Ojibwe man, as an Anishinabe man, if I'm not speaking my language, I think there's a big part of me missing. And so I think, you know, it's important that you know, and I talk about culture, I don't know how you can have language without culture, or vice versa. And so I always feel fortunate that at different points in time in my life, that I've had the opportunities to engage and understand and learn my language so that I have the opportunity to better understand, you know, not only things that are shared with me in our language, but understand about the relationship I have with the world around me. And so when I think about, you know, it's one thing to say, you know, the name of this plant in English, but it feels different when you say it in your own language. And so when I say that I feel like it's a big part of me, it makes me think I'm looking through the eyes of maybe like one of my ancestors did when they talked about that medicine or whatever context you're in as an example. I think to me, it really makes me feel — if you say, superpower, I hear what you're saying. But I think it's more than that even.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, for sure. Well, thank you so much. I know you're very, very busy right now. So I really appreciate your time and being willing to speak with us because there are so many great resources, so much great work you're doing. And so I know people will have a lot that they can learn from you. So thank you so much.

**David O'Connor**

Well, I appreciate this opportunity. And I know one of the things that just want to end with is that, you know, a lot of work that I feel very fortunate to get engaged in across Wisconsin, you know, a lot of times I just want to make sure that folks understand that there's a great opportunity for us to learn from each other. And I think, you know, as Native peoples we've shaped Wisconsin historically, we shape Wisconsin today, and in the future will shape Wisconsin as well. And so, I always tell people as one individual, I try to do my part as well and have an opportunity to do my work in education, but even my work just in the community as well. So I appreciate this opportunity.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yes. Thank you!