

Third grade teacher Heather Hemeyer, class of 2008, isn't just teaching math, reading and spelling at St. Joseph's Indian School in Chamberlain, S.D. She's teaching children the skills they need to build a better tomorrow.



Teaching FOR Change

According to an analysis by the National Center for Children in Poverty, nearly one in six children in South Dakota – a staggering 34,000 kids across the state – are impacted by poverty. The poverty label, by definition, is attached to households reporting an annual income at or below \$22,050 for a family of four.

Of those, a large number are Native Americans who live in areas categorized as among the poorest in the U.S. – counties like Shannon and Ziebach in rural South Dakota.

For these children, the financial strains their families face all-too-often leave their mark – from malnourishment to cognitive delays, behavioral disorders, abuse and neglect.

By the time they enter school, many have already endured a lifetime's worth of heartache and strug-

and beyond from American Indian reservations (high school students attend Chamberlain High School).

The school's mission is to help Native American children in need regain pride in the Lakota (Sioux) culture by learning the Lakota language, studying Native American culture and, often times, healing the broken family circle from which they came.

For 25-year-old Hemeyer, teaching young children from impoverished homes in a residential setting has been a learning experience.

"We deal with a variety of challenges. Many times, the kids experience homesickness that sometimes carries over into the classroom. We deal with ADHD, psychological conditions and issues that stem from past abuse and neglect."

To counter the challenges, Hemeyer

is designed for those who hold a bachelor's degree in education and are eligible for certification.

"A colleague of mine mentioned that she was pursuing her master's and was planning to implement a number of different techniques in her classroom. After talking with her, I really started to feel a hunger to learn more about my trade."

"I started researching graduate programs. But I live in Chamberlain. The location is tough. Then I heard about Augie's program. If it wasn't for the program being online, there would be no way I could do it."

"For today's teachers, the decision to obtain a master's degree is an important investment in their future. In addition to enhancing their abilities to create positive learning environments for students, in most

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– Heather Hemeyer, Class of 2008

gle. Many find the structure and expectations of classroom work difficult.

Teaching children in need can be challenging, too.

But for Heather Hemeyer, class of 2008 and a third grade teacher at St. Joseph's Indian School in Chamberlain, S.D., the challenges are worth it.

"These kids have had such unstable lives ... you do what you can to give them stability. Sometimes they're defiant; sometimes they struggle. I do everything I can to prepare these students for the next grade. I hope they fly. I have students from old classes who come up to me and give me a hug or color me a picture. That's what really makes it special for me."

Teaching at St. Joe's

Established in 1927, St. Joseph's is a non-profit residential school that serves 200 Native American students from first grade through eighth grade

and her colleagues offer stability, structure and an open heart.

"There are a lot of late nights ... if a child is having problems, you stay late to try to provide comfort. It's important to build those relationships."

Experience, she says, has also made her a better teacher, and a better counselor.

"Plain old experience has been a huge benefit for me. I learn something new about these kids and the culture they come from every day. I'm able to have really good conversations with students; I'm able to listen to them objectively with an open mind."

Looking Ahead

In June, Hemeyer, a native of Gregory, S.D., was among the first group of students to enroll in Augustana's first-ever Master of Arts in Education Online Degree Program.

The 19-month, non-thesis program

cases a master's degree correlates to increased compensation," said Dr.

Sheryl Feinstein, professor of Education at Augustana. "By offering our program online, we're able to accommodate the busy lives of adult learners while making the dream of a master's degree a reality for teachers in rural areas."

Augustana is currently accepting applications for its second Master of Arts in Education Online Degree Program, for which classes will begin in June 2012. Applications are due by Wednesday, Feb. 15, 2012. To learn more, visit www.augie.edu/graduate.

For Hemeyer, she's looking forward to implementing what she's learning through the program in her classroom.

"This program has given me the chance to further my education and not have to worry about traveling somewhere else to do it. I couldn't ask for more."