

For most folks the goal of creating heaven on earth might seem daunting, but not for Dr. Mark Sorensen

Tucked into a corner of the Navajo Nation near Leupp, Dr. Mark Sorensen has been growing many things. It all began when this school teacher decided to do something about his frustration with schools without a vision. He had spent much of his teaching career in schools in Native American areas and realized that there was no reason why these schools couldn't meld respect for the culture of the students and a curriculum that included the best of western skills.

He and Kate Hawke started planning such a school in 2000 and in 2001 they opened the STAR School. STAR is an acronym for the major concept of the school...Service To All Relations. The school focuses on teaching the relationship between people, place and all living things...the Navajo concept known as K'e, (roughly what others would call kinship). The three Rs of this school are Respect, Responsibility, and Reasoning.

It all began with a \$40,000 Farm to School grant from USDA.

With that first boost, STAR School began addressing nutritional issues. At first they provided vegetables and whole grains, but the students rejected them. Fresh foods are scarce in the area and the students, like most kids, wanted the foods they were used to. But then the school began a culinary program where the students would grow, harvest and prepare the food. This hands on approach led not only to a deeper understanding of nutrition, but also to a new appetite for many of the traditional foods of their people which they were now growing...an important step for a population where diabetes is rampant.

Today the Star School has 140 pre-K to 8th grade students...and a waiting list! Over the past five years the school has received \$161,258 in our Search Program loan funds and another 1,042,337 in grant funds to bring water to the school and the surrounding community.

Dr. Sorensen's strategy to develop social capital is working. When asked what the ultimate goal for the school would be, he didn't skip a beat..."to make heaven on earth by doing well by doing good!