

2004 – 2005

Focus On

American Indians/Alaska Natives

We must do more to close the achievement gap. We must ensure that every child is learning and succeeding in school, regardless of race, gender, and sexual orientation—Reg Weaver, President, National Education Association

The National Education Association's commitment to creating great public schools for every child requires working to ensure that all students are learning and succeeding in schools. This task is challenging. From its beginnings, our nation's school system has treated students differently, depending on their race, social class, and gender, and even today, a significant gap in academic achievement persists among groups.

The 2004–2005 Focus On series examines and enriches our understanding of this achievement gap for six groups: American Indian and Alaska Native students; Asian and Pacific Islander students; Black students; Hispanic students; women and girls; and gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered students. Each publication highlights some of the barriers to learning and success faced by one of these groups of students, concrete strategies to address these barriers, and additional resources for school personnel.

American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) students too often are left out of the conversation on the achievement gap—or of student success. Most reports on student achievement, attainment, and access list “N/A” (not available) for American Indian students when citing data in these areas. Yet, what we do know about AI/AN students is that they have enjoyed a notable increase in educational attainment over the past 20 years. The number of AI/AN associate, bachelors, and first professional degree holders more than doubled between 1984 and 2000.¹ Undergraduates majored mostly in the liberal arts, business, and social sciences. Law and health care were the most popular professional degrees. These facts set the tone for a review of what needs to be done to continue and improve on this progress as we move into the 21st century.

Looking Back

Any view of AI/AN student achievement is incomplete without acknowledging that the passing down of knowledge and skills between generations of native peoples predates the arrival of Europeans and the imposition of governmental control of Indians' education.² The current relationship between American Indians and public education is strained due to a history of federal control. After centuries of forced assimilation, the U.S. government, 70 years ago, shifted policy to

allow Indian education to preserve and retain native language and culture while building academic achievement.³

The strength of earlier policy and the weak enforcement of the latter approach have done its damage. The formal transferance of AI/AN language and culture has suffered. For example, in one school district's effort to preserve the Diné language among Navajo children, it was found that in a 10-year period (1989-1999), the number of native language-speaking children declined from 97 percent to 3 percent.⁴ The current challenge becomes one of preparing AI/AN youth for full participation in the modern economy and effective contribution to their communities while also ensuring they are able to carry forth the culture, language, and traditions of their tribes into future generations.

AI/AN student achievement must also be viewed with an appreciation for the wide diversity found among American Indian people. The 500,000 school-aged AI/AN students who attend public schools may belong to one or more of the 560 federally recognized tribes and may be found in rural, suburban, urban, and reservation classrooms.⁵ At least 8 percent of these students are in Bureau of Indian Affairs schools. Thus, any public school teacher may have an AI/AN student in his or her classroom and can benefit from learning about strategies that support Native students' high achievement. Other factors that make the education of Indian students unique include:

- The impact of AI/AN elders' perceptions of American schooling as a result of their own Indian boarding schools experience (AI/AN youth were once forced to attend by the U.S. Government); and
- The negative experiences many AI/AN parents have had as students either from being labeled as needing special education or from dropping out of school altogether.⁶

These two factors may inhibit the forging of much-needed partnerships among schools, families, and communities aimed at closing the student achievement gap.

continued





Indian Student Achievement Today

While we celebrate the achievement of the thousands of AI/AN students who have received college degrees, we must not lose sight of the achievement gap that contributes to the extremely poor job most schools do in retaining AI/AN students to high school graduation.⁷

A recent longitudinal study of early childhood found that AI/AN students “enter kindergarten with significantly lower reading, mathematics, and general knowledge achievement scores than other students.”⁸ Yet, by grades 4 and 8, AI/AN students exceed African American and Hispanic students and narrow the gap with white and Asian/Pacific Island students on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in reading and mathematics.

The tragedy of the AI/AN achievement gap is in the subsequent drop off of these students as they progress through high school. Recent computations reported in a Harvard Civil Rights project study found that only 51.1 percent of AI/AN 9th graders complete 12th grade with a regular diploma (compared to 75 percent of whites, 53.2 percent Hispanics, and 50.2 percent Blacks).⁹ Unlike other groups, the gender gap in high school completion is under 10 percentage points with only 51 percent of AI/AN girls graduating compared to 48 percent of boys.

Many factors, including poverty, rural location, health deficits, and more, contribute to the low high school completion rates of Native students. We also have accumulated knowledge about what it takes to produce high achievement in AI/AN students.

Looking Forward

We have known for a long time what is necessary to increase achievement among the native student population. Beginning in the 1930s, at the end of the “allotment and assimilation” era of federal government dealings with the Native American population, we find John Collier, the new commissioner of Indian Affairs stating that “assimilation, not into our culture but into modern life, and preservation and intensification of heritage...are interdependent through and through.”¹⁰

Since that time, a wealth of programs and research projects in education, cultural anthropology, sociology, psychology, and other areas have supported this view by finding that AI/AN students are likely to learn best when:

- Instruction is connected with students’ own language, culture, and history;
- Students whose home language is not standard English receive extra help in developing English language and literacy skills as well as instruction in

their native language whenever possible;

- Teaching practices align with students’ learning styles and the home culture of adult-child interactions;
- Curriculum and classroom management reflect the traditional culture of the community; and
- Parents and other community members are actively engaged in educating children and in making critical planning and operating decisions with school staff.¹¹

The data show clearly that public education has not done its best in implementing these practices. What follows is an overview of four areas—Instruction, Curriculum, Policy, and Community—that impact the successful school achievement of AI/AN students, with a closer look at strategies that move AI/AN students toward success.

INSTRUCTIONAL ISSUES

There seems to be a consensus building for a set of pedagogical principles developed from research conducted by the Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE) to guide the education of culturally and linguistically diverse students, including AI/AN students.¹² These principles or standards for effective pedagogy are:

1. Teachers and students working together;
2. Developing language and literacy skills across the curriculum;
3. Connecting lessons to students’ lives;
4. Engaging students with challenging lessons; and
5. Emphasizing dialogue over lecture.

Instructional practice that adheres to these standards is likely to go a long way toward helping AI/AN students to learn through observing and modeling; privately practicing new skills before publicly displaying them; and working cooperatively rather than competitively.

The primary challenge in meeting these standards is in the preparation/professional development of public school educators. This is an issue regardless of whether the educators are native or non-native if they have not been trained to structure a learning environment to support these standards and AI/AN students’ learning styles.

We know that the staff turnover rates in schools attended by AI/AN students is at least 35 percent and staff rarely know the culture and traditions of their Indian students. In addition, the need for AI/AN students to have instruction in their own language to help them make the connection between modern and traditional knowledge puts many educators at risk of failing their Native American students. Effective instruction requires effective educators and appropriate practice.

The Oksale Native Teacher Preparation Program is a partnership of three institutions: Northwest Indian College (NWIC), which serves the Lummi tribe; Washington State University (WSU); and Western Washington University (WWU). Working with funds from a private foundation and the U.S. Department of Education, the program articulates American Indian students through the two-year NWIC, to the bachelor's degree granting WSU and the master's degree granting WWU.¹³ To help contribute to the wealth of resources needed to prepare educators to teach AI/AN students, WSU runs a Clearinghouse on Native Teaching and Learning whose mission is to identify effective curriculum resources, create high-quality professional development materials, and disseminate useful information and products to improve preK-12 teaching and learning for American Indians and Alaska Natives.¹⁴

CURRICULUM STRATEGIES

William Demmert, a renowned American Indian scholar and policy advisor, recommends that one priority for improving AI/AN academic performance is to “build a comprehensive school curriculum that is culturally-based, that promotes language development in both the Native language and English early, and that provides the literacy base so critical to improved academic performance.”¹⁵ On the surface, this priority for enhanced student performance flies in the face of the current trend toward a narrow, basics-focused curriculum that prepares students to do well on standardized tests. Yet in those places where a culturally rich approach is being tried, students are engaged, persistent, and raising achievement.

The Lower Kuskokwim School District (LKSD) in Alaska—a geographically large, small population, high poverty district of 3,700-plus students and 500 educational staff—is meeting this challenge. The primarily Native Alaskan (mostly Yup'ik) residents are working to ensure that “every child is visible.”¹⁶

Cultural and linguistic needs are at the center of this district's effort to set and meet high standards. To help preserve the native language and build literacy in both English and Yup'ik, the LKSD has developed, with the tribal community, a wealth of curricular materials in both languages. The materials are designed to support the district's academic goals of:

- Developing Yup'ik language proficiency for cultural, family and academic purposes;
- Developing English language proficiency for social and academic purposes;
- Developing literacy proficiency (K-12);
- Restoring the heritage language of Yup'ik of LKSD's students; and
- Creating opportunities for bicultural activities where Yup'ik culture is celebrated with non-Native cultural traditions.¹⁷

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The 2001 Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA/NCLB) created both opportunities and challenges for Native American education. On one hand, the push for high standards for all students can have the effect of raising the bar for school communities to lift expectations for AI/AN student achievement. In addition, the disaggregation of achievement data to show the progress of all groups of students has the potential to ensure that persistent data gaps for AI/AN students are filled.¹⁸

On the other hand, the push for proficiency on standardized assessments tends to narrow the curriculum away from cultural diversity and preservation of native languages. Criterion-referenced and performance-based assessments give Native students the opportunity to show what they know, and they can be compatible with Native cultures. The focus on norm-referenced tests limits students' ability to demonstrate the skills and knowledge they carry from home and apply to academic work.

In the realm of teacher quality, if this concept includes an educator's capacity to elicit the best performance from students by recognizing the talents they exhibit in their home communities, then this aspect of the ESEA/NCLB can benefit AI/AN students. This benefit can only come, however, if the professional development needs of Native and non-Native educators are met. The challenges of doing so—overcoming geographical isolation, scheduling, and limited resources—are many and require a strong commitment from the districts, states, and federal government.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

The historical isolation of AI/AN families and communities from the education of their children is a shadow that lingers over the current call for parent involvement in education. Even as volumes of research point out the salutary effects on student outcomes of family engagement at schools and as first educators in the home, barriers remain between the home and school.

Some schools are showing great creativity in reconnecting with Native families and communities. For example, in Utah, tribal elders are brought into schools serving Native students to tell traditional stories. These stories are then transcribed and used as texts for beginning readers. In an effort to support quality instruction, the Warm Springs Indian Reservation in central Oregon works closely with their elementary school to create such opportunities as a Summer Academy that links academic work with real-life experiences and strong partnerships among the school site council, tribal groups, and a local college.





Parent involvement and family engagement are difficult for most communities—especially those distracted by the demands of poverty, rural or urban isolation, and health and safety needs. Yet, the desire of Native peoples to preserve their language and culture and to support their children in being successful in the wider society demands a strong link between school and home that must be forged with persistence and creativity.

CONCLUSION

The success of those persistent American Indian/Alaska Native students who received college degrees in the last twenty years of the 20th century must serve as a beacon of hope and a challenge for the educators of the 21st century. Research, practice, and policy have given us the tools to increase these numbers significantly, if we have the will.

Notes and Resources

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Great Public Schools for Every Child