



Focus On

American Indians/Alaska Natives

Learning the Culture of American Indian Students: Two States Step Forward

In 2006-07, two states funded or passed laws requiring educators to learn about the culture of American Indian students and integrate that knowledge into their lessons across the K-12 curriculum. Montana's law was passed more than 15 years ago, but the legislature failed, until recently, to appropriate funds to implement it. South Dakota's Indian population hopes that it will not take that long to fully fund the programs incorporated into the Indian education law passed in March 2007.

Both laws are too long in coming, yet reflect two states' efforts to improve the achievement of its Native students and enhance inter-group relations between their Indian and non-Indian populations. But the research base to support the law is familiar: students learn best when they see themselves—their culture, language, and experiences—reflected in the curriculum, the classroom, and the modes of instruction.

Montana Indian Education for All Act: A 34-Year Journey

In 1972, two high school girls from the Fort Peck Reservation testified before the Bill of Rights committee at the Montana constitutional convention and told their elders that students needed to learn about Indian people.¹ Their elders listened, but acted slowly. Not until 1999 did the Montana legislature pass the law now known as Indian Education for All (IEFA). Yet even more resolve was needed to move the state of Montana to realize its vision of recognizing the uniqueness of the state's Indian cultural heritage and to commit itself, through education, to its preservation. Only a series of state Supreme Court school funding and quality rulings would lead the legislature to fund the law to a level of \$11 million in 2006.

These two high school girls' grandchildren may finally reap the benefit of their outspokenness.

In the 34 years separating the constitutional amendment and the 2006 \$11 million appropriation, educators, policymakers, tribal leaders, and the Montana citizenry experienced several starts and stops. In 1999, the Indian Education for All (IEFA) act was passed, but not funded. The law's objectives included encouraging all Montanans to learn about the heritage of American Indians; requiring all school personnel to gain knowledge of Montana Indians to enhance their effectiveness with students and parents; and working closely with the Montana tribes to accomplish these goals. IEFA laid the groundwork for educators and tribal leaders to develop the materials and shape the curriculum that will be implemented now that funding is available.

The fiscal support for IEFA came by way of a successful 2003 inequitable funding lawsuit filed by the statewide Montana Quality Education Coalition. In addition to ruling the state's funding of schools unconstitutional, the Montana Supreme Court also required the legislature to define a "quality" education. In light of the state's constitution, the legislature concluded in 2005 that a quality Montana education required the creation and implementation of programs which "integrate the distinct and unique cultural heritage of American Indians into the curricula, with particular emphasis on Montana Indians."² Given this definition of quality, the legislature finally appropriated funds to support the state Office of Public Instruction and individual school districts to help Montana's schools meet this goal.

Today, the Montana Office of Public Instruction, in collaboration with the Advisory Council on Indian Education (designees from each tribal nation and from statewide education associations) are working together to implement the law. A centerpiece of the implementation is the *Essential Understandings Regarding Montana Indians*. These tenets form the foundation upon which new language arts, social studies, and science K-12 curriculum has been created to integrate the uniqueness and distinctness of American Indian culture and heritage.

The Essential Understandings (go to www.op.mt.gov/IndianEd for full text) emphasize the cultural, language, historical, and governmental diversity among the 12 tribal nations of Montana, as well as among individual American Indians. They point out how traditional beliefs and spirituality persist into the modern day life of Native people and underscore issues of sovereignty and the subjectivity of history.

The Montana story, while long, is far from complete. Educators must now alter their lesson planning to ensure that the content they teach, whether math, science, social studies, language arts and more, relates to the Indian people of Montana. State policymakers and education leaders must ensure that the funding that goes to school districts will be used for IEFA activities and not diverted to cover budget shortfalls. In addition, they must work hard to create new, culturally appropriate and historically accurate materials.³

While the law focuses on education, its intent is broader. Educating every Montanan about the state's Native population is a first step toward cultivating generations of state and tribal leaders who have a better understanding of each other



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and who can work together to advance the interests of the entire state. This outcome is an impetus for the efforts of another Western region state, South Dakota.

South Dakota Indian Education Act: An Essential First Step

The American Indian children of South Dakota represent the only growing segment of the state's population. At ten percent of the state's population, American Indian children's academic and economic success is vital to the future of this rural state. Yet these students, like American Indian students nationally (see Alliance for Excellent Education *Fact Sheet*), struggle to complete high school, attend, and graduate from college. The passage of the South Dakota Indian Education Act (SDIE), with its intention to better serve American Indian students, enhance American Indian student achievement, and improve inter-group perceptions and relations is thus likely to benefit all South Dakotans.

As noted, students learn best when the curriculum, classroom, and modes of instruction reflect their culture, language, and experiences. SDIE creates the opportunity for this to happen for the American Indian students of the nine South Dakota tribes by requiring all new teachers, out-of-state transfers, and practitioners with certificates 14 years or newer to take a three-hour course in South Dakota Indian studies.

The course will include elements reflecting:

- Lakota language, culture, and traditions
- History of South Dakota Indians
- Educational theory relevant to teaching American Indian students
- Background in traditional education techniques
- Strategies for implementing American Indian learning styles

Like the Montana IEFA, the South Dakota law calls for the integration of the state's American Indian cultures into the K-12 curriculum – not as an add-on, but rather as an essential part of the social studies, literature, and science programs, using culturally relevant materials. The intent is for students in all 168 school districts to deepen their understanding of the language, culture, traditions, and heritage of the nine tribes that reside within South Dakota's borders.

SDIE also makes permanent two entities created by the Governor – the Office of Indian Education (see <http://doe.sd.gov/secretary/indianed/index.asp>) and the Indian Education Advisory Council. The Council will consist of representatives (identified by their tribal councils) of the nine tribes along with Native American educators from across the state. The role of the Council will be to work in cooperation with the SD department of education to develop K-12 curriculum and the content for the educators' coursework in American Indian history and culture.

The Act also commits to helping to revitalize Native language. A first step took place in June 2007 when 14 teacher candidates with plans to work with American Indian students spent a week in a pilot Lakota language immersion program. A team of experienced Lakota-speakers led the program, which included exposure to the history, song, dance, and spirituality of the Lakota people. The next phase of this effort would involve the instruction of American Indian students in the Lakota language to ensure its preservation.

Not all is rosy for the future of the SDIE, however. Key elements have been funded; notably, the Department of Education Office of Indian Education, the Indian Education Advisory Council, and the American Indian standards, curriculum, and assessments. Yet, the language revitalization efforts are not fully funded and the three-hour course for educators needs support. It must be acknowledged, however, that South Dakota has taken an essential first step in providing initial funds and exhibiting a keen appreciation for the need for this work, not only for the Native students, but for all South Dakota children.

South Dakota and Montana are not alone in their efforts to provide curriculum or require educators to be prepared to effectively educate American Indian and Alaska Native students. Other states working in this arena include Alaska (Alaska Native Knowledge Network www.ankn.uaf.edu), Minnesota (http://children.state.mn.us/mde/Academic_Excellence/Indian_Education/K12_Curriculum/index.html), New Mexico (www.ped.state.nm.us/indian.ed/dl/2005.2006.Indian_Education.Status.Report.pdf), and Washington (www.k12.wa.us/CISL/FamilyCommunity/IndianEd.aspx).

¹ Denise Juneau and Mandy Smoker Broaddus. And still the waters flow: The legacy of Indian education in Montana. *Phi Delta Kappan*, November 2006, pp. 193 – 197. Vol.88, No. 3.

² Bobby Ann Starnes. Montana's Indian Education for All: Toward an education worthy of American ideals. *Phi Delta Kappan*, November 2006, pp.184-192. Vol.88, No. 3.

³ Starnes.

NEA Resource

A Report on the Status of American Indians and Alaska Natives in Education: Historical Legacy to Cultural Empowerment. (see www.achievementgaps.org)



American Indian and Alaska Native Students and U.S. High Schools

There are an estimated 4.4 million American Indian or Alaska Native¹ people living in the continental United States (the forty-eight contiguous states and Alaska), representing 1.5 percent of the total population. They are citizens of both the United States and the states in which they reside, but many are also citizens of the respective tribal nations to which they belong (U.S. Department of State 2005).

American Indians and Alaska Natives are two diverse groups united under one category in the U.S. Census. The 2005 Census report *We the People: American Indians and Alaska Natives in the United States* presented information on ten major tribal groupings of American Indians (Apache, Cherokee, Chippewa, Choctaw, Creek, Iroquois, Lumbee, Navajo, Pueblo, and Sioux) and four major Alaska Native groups (Alaska Athabaskan, Eskimo, Aleut, and Tlingit-Haida), though there are a variety of smaller groups. Legally and politically, 561 tribes are recognized as sovereign nations by the United States Government (U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs 2007). There are an estimated 209 indigenous languages spoken in North America today (Smithsonian Institute 2006); around twenty of those are spoken by Alaska Natives.

Unfortunately, many American Indian and Alaska Native students do not receive the support they deserve from their respective learning communities. The nation must remain concerned about the well-being of these students and the quality of the education they receive, particularly given the clear evidence of striking disparities in their educational achievement and attainment levels.

Background

- There are about 624,000 American Indian and Alaska Native students in the U.S. K–12 system (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2005b).
- About 90 percent of all American Indian and Alaska Native students attend regular public schools, and 7 percent attend schools administered by the U.S. government’s Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2005b).
- American Indian and Alaska Native teenagers suffer from poverty, suicide, teen birth, and substance abuse at rates higher than the national average (Henson and Taylor 2002).

¹ For the purposes of this fact sheet, the definition of “American Indian” and “Alaska Native” includes people with origins in the original people of North, South, and Central America. Native Hawaiians, Guamanians/Chamorros, Samoans, and other Pacific Islander groups are excluded from these statistics.

- Often, the civil rights and cultural identities of American Indian and Alaska Native students are not supported in the classroom (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 2003).
- Studies indicate that American Indian and Alaska Native students often experience difficulty establishing relationships with their teachers and other students; additionally, they are often subject to racist threats and frequent suspension (Clarke 2002, U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 2003).

Graduation, Dropouts, and Preparedness

- The national graduation rate for American Indian high school students was 49.3 percent in the 2003–04 school year, compared to 76.2 percent for white students (EPE Research Center 2007).
- Only 44.6 percent of American Indian males and 50 percent of American Indian females graduated with a regular diploma in the 2003–04 school year (EPE Research Center 2007).
- American Indian and Alaska Native high school students who graduated in 2000 were less likely to have completed the core academic track than their peers from other racial/ethnic groups (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2005b).
- Studies suggest that the cultural discontinuity between the average public school and the American Indian communities they serve is partially to blame for the gap between American Indian and white students’ academic achievement (Reyhner 2001).
- The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reports that 83 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native eighth graders read below grade level, compared to 61 percent of white eighth graders (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2007).
- NAEP reports that 74 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native twelfth graders read below grade level, compared to 57 percent of white twelfth graders (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2007).

Schools, Segregation, and Teacher Quality

- Fifty-two percent of Native American students attended schools in the 2003–04 school year where half or fewer of the students were white (Orfield and Lee 2005).²
- Fifty-four percent of American Indian and Alaska Native eighth graders attend schools where more than half of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2006).

² Some sources use the term “Native American” to indicate American Indian and Alaska Native populations.

- In the 2002–03 school year, the average Native American student attended a school where 39 percent of the students were poor, while the average white student attended a school where only 23 percent were poor (Orfield and Lee 2005).
- Although blacks and Latinos have a higher level of exposure to poor students in schools than Native Americans, Native Americans experienced the biggest increase in exposure to poor students, up from 31 percent in 1996–97 to 39 percent in 2002–03 (Orfield and Lee 2005).
- A full 70 percent of BIA-administered schools failed to satisfy No Child Left Behind Adequate Yearly Progress requirements in 2005 (U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs 2006).
- In 2004, 22 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native high school students reported being threatened or injured with a weapon on school grounds in the previous twelve months, compared to 11 percent of black, 9 percent of Hispanic, and 8 percent of white students (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2005b).
- In public schools with high Native American enrollment, only 16 percent of teachers are Native American (Manuelito 2003).³
- Though 23 percent of Alaska public school students are Alaska Natives, just 5 percent of the teachers are (Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development 2003, McDowell Group 2001).
- Because BIA schools tend to be in isolated communities with limited amenities, it is often hard for them to recruit teachers (U.S. Government Accounting Office 2001).
- Schools in the Alaska bush, the especially isolated regions that make up the bulk of the state, are so understaffed that teachers often practice a wide range of tasks, from coaching sports and mentoring after school to managing grants and running the community library (Alaska Department of Education and Early Development 2006).

Special, Gifted, and College Preparatory Education

- Although American Indians and Alaska Natives scored higher, on average, than black and Hispanic high school students on both the verbal and mathematics sections of the SAT college entrance exam in 2004, they still scored below the national average (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2005).
- The gap between the average verbal scores of American Indian and Alaska Native students and those of the total student population tested on the SAT widened from twenty-two points in 1996 to twenty-five points in 2004 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2005b).

³ This source does not explain its definition of “Native American” and therefore may include Native Hawaiians, Guamanians/Chamorros, Samoans, and other Pacific Islanders.

- American Indians and Alaska Natives constituted just over 1 percent of the student population in 2006 but only 0.6 percent of the population taking the Advanced Placement exam (College Board 2007).
- American Indian and Alaska Native students were more likely than students of other racial and ethnic groups to receive services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Specifically, about 12 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native students received IDEA services in 2003, compared to 8 percent of white, 11 percent of black, 8 percent of Hispanic, and 4 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander students (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2005b).
- In 1998, American Indian and Alaska Native students made up 1.1 percent of the student population but just 0.87 percent of the student population in gifted education (U.S. Department of Education 2000).
- About 20 percent of students at BIA schools receive special education services (U.S. General Accounting Office 2001).
- American Indian and Alaska Native students are 1.53 times more likely to receive special education services for specific learning disabilities and 2.89 times more likely to receive such services for developmental delays than the combined average of all other racial groups (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs 2004).
- Fifteen percent of American Indian and Alaska Native eighth graders were categorized as students with disabilities in 2005, meaning they had or were in the process of receiving Individualized Education Plans, compared to 9 percent of all non-American Indian and Alaska Native eighth graders (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2006).
- In a study involving thirty special education teachers on a Navajo reservation, no more than 10 percent of the teachers surveyed said they had been provided with sufficient information regarding their students' cultures (Watt et al. 2000).

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