



Improving Achievement

The challenges facing American Indian students in Montana must be addressed. The purpose of this Indian education summit brief is to highlight issues and research surrounding the achievement levels of American Indian students.

How do we define student achievement and success? For some Indian students success may mean exiting a system that does not meet their needs. Systems must change in order for American Indian students to find success.

This Summit is convening educators and leaders from across the state to develop an action plan on how to close the achievement gap for American Indian students and ensure that schools can successfully implement Indian Education for All. It will be the collective wisdom of all the participants that will ultimately lead to change.

Related Issues

To help focus and frame discussions during the summit, the Indian Education Summit Planning Committee recognized the following issues as related to drop out and retention issues. They are inter-related and not meant to be all inclusive.

✓ School Readiness

What can be done to assist parents and primary caretakers to help them to best prepare their children for school? A 1998 report from the U.S. Department of Education stated that students from low income families begin school with a 3000 word vocabulary as opposed to students from high income homes who begin with a 20,000 word vocabulary. What happens when Indian parents don't have access to books and appropriate early age reading material in the homes? It is important to keep in mind the impacts of poverty and look at what schools and communities have done to move beyond a mindset of low expectations for low income youth. It is also important to remember that many American Indian students come into our schools with Limited English Proficiency because they may speak some or all of their Native language. The key to making gains in achievement lies in early reading intervention in the primary grades.

✓ Parents

"Parents are their child's first teachers." American Indians have embraced this concept for centuries which needs to be considered and applied to our children's education. Traditionally, lessons were taught to young people on what their role was in the tribe. Knowledge was passed down from generation to generation. How adequate is our educational system at helping parents to be their children's first teachers? Many American Indian parents, especially younger parents, may not have access to information that may help them increase their children's vocabulary and foster their curiosity for learning. How can schools do a better job of reaching out to parents? What can American Indian parents do to foster welcoming environments for non-Indian teachers working on the reservations? VOICE (Voices of Indian Communities for Education) was created in response to American Indian parents seeking greater input in the education system. What can be done to assist and foster grassroots organizations, like VOICE, to be actively involved in the education system? Meaningful and sustained involvement from American Indian parents that helps them return to their roots and truly become their "children's first teachers" is essential.

✓ Culturally Relevant Curriculum/Climate

Schools should be reflective of the cultures they serve. Many wonderful efforts have been made at the state and local level to put together tribally developed curriculum that offers accurate, tribal specific, contemporary and historical portrayals of American Indians. Culturally relevant curriculum must promote new learning and complement existing curriculum. It cannot replace information that American Indian students need to be successful in college or the workforce. Showing DVD's and videos in the classroom will not suffice. Educators comfort level for teaching culturally relevant material will vary. We must make sure that educators are aware of current resources and receive professional development to help them implement essential lessons/concepts.

In thinking about educational systems, it is good to be reminded of the words of Dr. Raymond Reye, professor Gonzaga University, as he describes the 3 R's of Indian education: Respect, Relevancy and Relationships.



✓ **Student Social and Emotional Needs**

Indian communities are often compared to Third-World countries with regard to their social and economic conditions. Changing these living conditions will take time. Public schools on reservations and off cannot ignore the issues related to poverty and families in crisis. Schools need to meet the students where they are in their lives and make a concerted effort to meet the social and emotional needs of their students. Some schools have young parent programs; other schools have in-house community-based social programs for students and families. Learning cannot take place if a student is dealing with challenges affecting themselves and their families. In the same light, expectations of students must not be lowered. The challenges are real, but they do not validate excuses made by schools and communities for why American Indian students underachieve.

✓ **Involvement in curricular and extra-curricular activities**

A recent drop out study conducted by Stan Juneau, retired School Administrator from Browning, cited participation in sports as one of the main reasons American Indian students stayed in school. Dr. Wayne Trottier, the only American Indian Superintendent in the state of Idaho, was quoted as saying, “our job is to leave no basketball player behind.” It has been suggested that by some American Indian educators, to shift priorities in Indian country. Basketball brings out the best in our schools. It instills pride in our schools and communities. It gives student-athletes a goal and purpose, to stay in school and do well. However, basketball season doesn’t last forever. Therefore, it is absolutely essential to instill the same sense of purpose and pride in all of students, not just the basketball players. Not all students are destined to become star basketball players. Schools must offer a variety of options that meet the needs of all American Indian students. After-school programs are examples of options that can be made available to students who do choose not to participate in organized athletics.

✓ **Seamless Transition to College**

What are schools serving American Indian communities doing to better prepare students for options beyond high school? As a result of the growth of tribal colleges in the

last thirty years, college has become a viable option for many Indian students. The options that are available now extend beyond the traditional four-year state institutions. Colleges of Technology offer training that allow students to move into careers that pay well, without having to spend four years in a degree program. Schools need to prepare students well, to allow them to choose a pathway to post-secondary training that will meet their own individual needs.

✓ **Community Partners**

If change is going to happen in Indian Education, it will not happen without community involvement. No longer can schools operate in a vacuum and expect to make changes for the better. Involvement needs to happen at every level. Montanans, including Tribal governments, have an obligation to protect their greatest resource; the youth of their communities. Water, oil, timber and range land are important to many Indian tribes. However, the future of our communities lies not in material wealth, but in our young people. Indian people survived for generations upon generations, because the education of the young was a task taken upon by the entire community. Indian communities can no longer be passive observers to the education of their own children.

✓ **Support Systems**

There are no quick fixes in Indian Education. No “guru” is going to come down from the mountain and lead us to the “promised land.” More money and programs alone will not create change ---change must come from within. Schools must be able to develop support systems that will allow them to make smarter decisions with regard to fiscal responsibility and program implementation. Data must not only be collected at the school level, it must also be analyzed. School boards must take the lead in ensuring that administrators and teachers are given the support they need to do their jobs to the best of their abilities. Community members need to support the efforts of their schools, especially when those efforts are made to bring about change. For real change to occur, schools and communities must be able to weather the storms of change and allow their administrators to do their job, and make the decisions that will make a difference in their students and schools.