

Focus On



American Indians and Alaska Natives

CHARTING A NEW COURSE FOR NATIVE EDUCATION

In a searing testimony, in June 2010, to the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, 19-year-old Alaska Native student Mariah Bowers described how the No Child Left Behind Act had let her down and left far too many Indian students behind. A conscientious student who had perfect attendance and always did her homework, Mariah struggled in school. Because of the pressures of NCLB, “my teachers were more concerned with teaching to the tests and getting through all the curriculum than making sure we actually understood the material,” Mariah told the Committee. By her freshman year of high school, Mariah was skipping classes, getting into trouble with other truant students, and on the verge of dropping out of school. If she hadn’t transferred to a tribally operated public school that uses Native language and culture to teach all subjects, Mariah, now a college sophomore, might have been a statistic rather than a success story.

The evidence is clear: NCLB, unveiled to great fanfare almost a decade ago, has done more harm than good to American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) students—making it absolutely imperative, say Indian leaders, that next time around, we get the nation’s most important education law right. As Congress prepares to reauthorize NCLB, Indian leaders have presented comprehensive recommendations for the education of AI/AN students (see sidebar), whose performance has stagnated under NCLB due to narrowed curricula, the loss of Native language and cultural programs, and inappropriate use of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), particularly in Indian communities with high student mobility.

LOSING GROUND WITH NCLB

Recent reports show that American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) students have some of the highest dropout rates in the country and that Native children are the only students to show no significant progress in math and science scores since 2005 (AI/AN 8th graders had a slight increase in reading scores). In addition, American Indians and Alaska Natives are more likely than any other racial or ethnic group to be targeted for special education services, while suspension and expulsion rates for Native students are second only to those for African Americans.

Given the circumstances, the loss of native curricula is particularly damaging, say AI/AN educators, for students who are already isolated from their culture. The vast majority of Indian students attend public schools that are off-reservation, with highly diverse student bodies and a limited number of Native educators. As a result, they are unlikely to have exposure to Native cultural themes and activities as part of their academic experience. Yet studies show that Native students thrive when their cultural identities are factored into the equation—encouraging news for the future course of Native education. “Learning about my heritage gave me a reason to go to school,” Mariah Bowers told the Senate Committee. “I learned standards for life, not just math and science.”

CULTURAL CONNECTIONS POWER STUDENT GROWTH

Schools that incorporate “Native Ways of Knowing” (knowledge unique to Native cultures) into the curricula employ a range of innovative programs and practices, such as offering one or more Native languages as a foreign language requirement, using reservation ecosystems to teach science, developing book-of-the-month programs that make Native-themed literature an integral part of the curriculum for all subject areas, and utilizing tribal elders to help with behavior management. When Chief Leschi Schools in Puyallup, Washington, used a kiya (or “grandmother”) panel of tribal elders to meet with truant students, attendance improved by 80 percent. In Chugach, Alaska, which graduates 98 percent of its AI/AN students (compared to 60 percent statewide), a Voyage To Excellence program brings students from isolated villages to Anchorage for an intensive two-week course in exam prep, career possibilities, and life skills.

Despite incremental and, in some cases, impressive gains, many schools offering culturally rich programs still struggle to make AYP, a measurement that fails to capture the tremendous growth and triumph of individual students. Mounds Park All Nations Magnet School, for instance, didn’t make AYP last year, but the Minnesota public school won a coveted regional award. Of the 23 schools that competed in the Ojibwe-Dakota Knowledge Bowl, Mounds Park elementary students beat out high schoolers for third prize.



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ESEA: GETTING IT RIGHT

As schools across the country work to balance the requirements of NCLB with culturally rich curricula for Native students, a growing chorus is questioning the negative consequences of the nation's most important education law. The National Indian Education Association first expressed serious concerns about the impact of NCLB in "Indian Country" before a 2005 Senate Committee. Most recently, American Indian leaders at a July 2010 Native language summit told federal officials that the provisions of NCLB not only presented obstacles for Native language-immersion programs but were in direct conflict with rights spelled out in the Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act of 2006. In the same month, the NAACP and six other civil rights groups called the current federal education agenda particularly detrimental to low-income and minority children. "We may have actually lost ground with what is essentially one entire school generation of American Indian learners in the eight years since NCLB passed," Dr. David Beaulieu, Director of American Indian Education at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, recently told the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs.

As a result, Native organizations are determined to chart a new course for Native education with the upcoming reauthorization of the law. The reauthorization "represents a unique opportunity to ensure that the Act works for American Indian and Alaska Native communities," said Bureau of Indian Education Director Keith Moore, who, along with other Indian leaders at the June 17, 2010, Senate hearing, presented rec-

ommendations that fall under nine general categories [*see sidebar for specifics*]. NEA has also submitted recommendations for ESEA reauthorization that include language specific to Indian education around tribal involvement in the development of state education plans, appropriate assessments for AI/AN students, and the alignment of academic standards with tribal languages and traditions. In addition, NEA's general principles for reauthorization call for policy changes that would directly benefit American Indian and Alaska Native students. NEA believes that if we are serious about eliminating achievement gaps for AI/AN and all students, we must be serious about eliminating disparities in funding, resources, and opportunities.

WHAT EDUCATORS CAN DO

While organizations work to improve the education of AI/AN students on the national stage, concerned educators can take best practice steps at the school and district levels:

- ❶ **Model respect for AI/AN cultures and languages.** Incorporate Native culture and contributions into classroom projects, the school curriculum, and after-school activities. When talking about the various ethnic and racial groups that compose the U.S. population, always include American Indians and Alaska Natives, who are all too often left out of "national" statistics.
- ❷ **Hire AI/AN staff.** Many Native students feel isolated and invisible. They would benefit from the presence of Native educators who can serve as advocates and role models for

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NATIVE EDUCATION 101

American Indians and Alaska Natives maintain a unique legal status as sovereign nations due to treaties signed with the U.S. government in exchange for vast tracts of aboriginal land. The education of Native children, who comprise over one percent of the U.S. student population, is a federal obligation and reflects this complex and multilayered relationship:

Public Schools. Ninety-three percent of AI/AN students attend mostly rural and urban public schools that are off-reservation, although a small number of public schools are on tribal lands. Over 50 percent of these students attend schools where less than 25 percent of the student body is AI/AN. Public schools on and off tribal lands are funded by individual states and are subject to state standards and assessments. Some states with sizeable AI/AN populations hire Indian education staff to serve as liaisons between the Native community and the superintendent's office.

BIE Schools. Almost seven percent of AI/AN students

attend schools funded by the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), at the U.S. Department of the Interior. BIE is responsible for 184 elementary and secondary schools and dormitories located on reservation land in 23 states. Fifty-nine of these schools are BIE-operated as well as funded.

Tribal Schools. The remaining 125 BIE-funded schools are operated by tribes who have complete administrative control, including curricula, assessment, and hiring of school staff.

Private and Charter Schools. A fraction of AI/AN students attend private—often mission-operated—schools on Indian lands or charter schools on and off-reservation.

To help address the unique needs of Native students, Congress passed the 1972 Indian Education Act, which established the Office of Indian Education within the U.S. Department of Education (DOE). Incorporated into ESEA as Title VII, "Indian, Native Hawaiian, and Alaska Native Education" is the only comprehensive federal legislation that addresses Native education from pre-school to the graduate level.

students and as liaisons for Native families who feel uncomfortable navigating the school system.

3 Engage AI/AN parents and community members. Schools that infuse Native culture into the school climate via the curricula, staff expertise, and school activities see a corresponding increase in the participation and interest level of Native families. Some schools have found that outreach efforts to Native parents and elders on the importance of student attendance result in improved attendance rates for AI/AN students.

4 Clarify academic expectations and be accessible to students. Student Mariah Bowers testified at the Senate hearing that the educators at her tribal school distributed a book to each student clearly describing academic standards and what kind of student products were required to achieve a proficient, emerging, or advanced grade.

5 Establish a holistic community school. Tend to the physical and mental health issues, as well as academic needs, of students and their families. Provide access for afterschool and weekend activities, such as parenting and computer classes.

FULFILLING A TRUST

Doing right by American Indian and Alaska Native students goes beyond providing for the needs of a minority population, say Native leaders. When these students' ancestors ceded the lands that now constitute the United States, the government assumed a "trust" responsibility for the safety and well-being of all Indian peoples. As Congress prepares to reauthorize NCLB, the government has a unique responsibility to ensure that the offspring of the first people of America aren't last in line.

REAUTHORIZING ESEA: RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE AMERICAN INDIAN AND ALASKA NATIVE COMMUNITY

NEA has merged the proposals from six leading AI/AN authorities into this unique summary of recommendations from the Native community.* Each of these tribally driven and Indian educator-developed recommendations can be folded into the DOE's five overarching goals for reauthorizing ESEA: preparing college- and career-ready students through well-rounded education; growing great teachers and leaders; providing equity and opportunity for all; raising the bar and rewarding excellence; and promoting innovation, continuous improvement, and comprehensive services.

INDIAN EDUCATION WITHIN ESEA

- Improve and expand ESEA to fully fund and meet the original goal of The Indian Education Act of 1972, now Title VII of ESEA, which is to address the "unique educational and culturally related academic needs" of AI/AN students.
- Align Indian education plans required in Title VII with state, local, and BIE plans required in Title I (Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged); improve oversight of the uses of Title VII funds.
- Restore the DOE position of Director of Indian Education to Assistant Secretary for Indian Education, with authority to engage in various titles of the ESEA that impact Indian education.
- Restore DOE funding for culturally based education technical assistance and resource centers to provide support for Title VII programs and all schools serving Native students in the development of best practices, student assessment, data collection, professional development, and the promotion of language and cultural curricula.
- Include statutory language to make most DOE funding available to tribes and BIE schools. Currently, the BIE

school system is ineligible to receive much-needed federal funds, such as "Race to the Top" grants.

NATIVE CONTROL

- Increase the role of AI/AN communities and tribal governments in all schools serving Native students.
- Strengthen tribal control of education by authorizing and funding Tribal Education Agencies (TEAs) to perform State Education Agency (SEA) functions, and require states to enter collaborative agreements/compacts with tribes as a condition to receiving Title I funds. Over 200 tribes have TEAs.
- Facilitate cooperation between tribes and states, which can have competing interests. Tribes often lack the capacity to compete with states for competitive educational grants.

AGENCY COLLABORATION

- Improve consultation, collaboration, and cooperation among tribes, states, and the federal government, all of whom have essential roles and responsibilities in Native education, yet few venues exist for inter-agency collaboration.
- Promote coordination between the Department of the Interior and the Department of Education that includes training and technical assistance for BIE staff, use of alternative assessments for tribal schools, and assistance with curriculum selection and instructional practices.
- Include specific language in ESEA requiring DOE to consult with tribal education agencies whenever they consult with state and local education agencies.
- Establish a tribal education advisory committee to advise the Secretary of the Interior on policy issues and budget development for the BIE school system. A formal mechanism has never existed for tribally operated schools to raise issues and provide advice on an ongoing basis.

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- Increase resources from the Bureau of Indian Education to the schools. BIE schools are the sole responsibility of the federal government, but they struggle to provide quality education with insufficient funding.

NATIVE CULTURES AND LANGUAGES

- Invest in AI/AN cultural and language revitalization. Use culturally based education as a promising practice in public schools.

- Incorporate “Native Ways of Knowing” (knowledge unique to Native tribes and cultures) as a critical cornerstone of relevant, rigorous, and high-quality instruction for Native students.

- Fund pilot projects across the country implementing tribal cultural and language curricula, and corollary teacher certification initiatives.

- Incorporate the current federal Native language policy into ESEA, which is in conflict with the Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act of 2006, which allows and encourages Native languages as a medium of instruction to increase overall Native student achievement.

- Expand support for Native language use in the classroom from Title VII programs to include Titles I and III (Language Instruction for Limited English Proficient and Immigrant Students); and expand Title VII support of language immersion schools, including early childhood education centers.

- Give funding preference to tribal colleges and universities in developing Native language resources.

TEACHER QUALITY

- Authorize and fund a “grow your own” Native teacher preparation initiative by using scholarship programs, pay incentives, and the particular expertise of tribal colleges and universities to create a pipeline of skilled and qualified AI/AN educators, through Titles II (Preparing, Training and Recruiting High Quality Teachers and Principals) and VII.

- Provide flexibility in meeting requirements while Native language teachers work to achieve “highly qualified teacher” status, and authorize tribes to certify Native language teachers.

- Incentivize teaching in schools serving AI/AN students. Due to rural isolation, local poverty, and social issues, recruitment and retention of highly qualified teachers is difficult.

ASSESSMENTS

- Allow for alternate, culturally appropriate standards, assessments, and AYP requirements relative to the teaching of Native American students based on unique linguistic, cul-

tural, and sovereign status considerations. Include tribes and AI/AN educators in the development of state and national standards.

- Develop a single set of culturally appropriate standards and assessments that would apply to all BIE schools. Unlike states, which use a single assessment system, BIE uses 23 different state assessments.

- Give students a clear understanding of academic standards. Mariah Bowers testified that her problems in school stemmed directly from a lack of understanding about what she was expected to know. At her new school, academic standards were clear and given to each student.

DATA COLLECTION AND RESEARCH

- Invest in the collection of comprehensive data and research about the education of AI/AN children, and share information with tribes. Due to tribal diversity, remote locations, language barriers, migratory families, and four distinct school systems enrolling Indian students, data is often fragmented and incomplete. Accurate data is needed to assist with proper enrollment and placement of Indian students.

- Authorize TEAs to collect, report, and analyze data on all students enrolled in a school (public, federal, tribal, or private) within the tribe’s jurisdiction.

STUDENT WELL-BEING

- Consider the whole range of needs of Indian children and youth that impacts on their well being beyond the content and context of schools. Multiple issues, including high levels of substance abuse, suicide rates, poor housing, and growing health needs, impact the capacity of Native students to attend school and achieve. Coordinated education and human service delivery systems are required.

PARENT AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

- Cultivate parental, family, tribal, and community involvement, and maximize their participation in the education of AI/AN children. Include resources and funding for evening activities, transportation, and support groups for parents of children with disabilities.

**Recommendations were compiled from the following organizations and individuals: Bureau of Indian Education; Cherokee Nation; National Congress of American Indians; National Indian Education Association; Tribal Education Departments National Assembly; Yurok Indian student, Mariah Bowers; and Dr. David Beaulieu, Electa Quinney Institute for American Indian Education, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.*

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