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INDIAN EDUCATION IN NEW MEXICO, 2025

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Conducted by
Eight Northern Indian Pueblos Council, Inc.,
Indigenous Education Study Group

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EXECUTIVE BRIEF

This study indicates that best practices in Indian education entail providing a culturally responsive education for Native students. Culturally responsive education requires systemic reform and transformation in educational ideologies. Such a task is not easily accomplished in a rigid public school structure that is bound by state and federal laws.

The drive for high-stakes school accountability creates obstacles in implementing the NM Indian Education Act (IEA) and even violates its tenets for placing Native students' home cultures, experiences, and knowledge within the public education system. This conflict foregrounds the importance of developing formal agreements between tribal communities and public schools to ensure that accountability includes Indigenous knowledge, and culturally responsive curriculum, and pedagogy.

Thus, there may be some confusion of what it means to be a culturally responsive educator—does it mean teaching culture or does it mean understanding, respecting, and drawing on the backgrounds and lived experiences of students and their communities? The NM IEA may need to include its own definition to be clear about its intentions.

The issue at hand is enabling schools, communities, and students the ability to define and create culturally responsive schools. The study is revealing that cultural responsiveness is more than being sensitive and aware of a students' cultural background. It is also recognizing how cultures are contextually based, and it necessitates educators become culturally competent in order to meaningfully and appropriately incorporate students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds into their teaching.

The task for many schools is instilling the belief in culturally responsive schooling as a more effective educational approach than cultural assimilation strategies. While laws like the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) may not facilitate such change toward culturally responsive education, likewise, laws such as the NM IEA cannot completely facilitate and enforce schools to become culturally responsive. A belief in cultural responsiveness must be facilitated from within the local context, especially through community engagement.

The importance of understanding the factors and conditions associated with educational achievement among Native American students is imperative. According to population estimates, by 2025 it is projected that 84,710 American Indians will be 18 years & younger. For 2025, it is projected that the share of the 0-18 age group among AIAN's will be 30.2%. This is a decline of 9.5 percent from year 2000. It is unclear if this is the beginning of a downward trend in the participation of American Indian students in the public school system. What is evident is that this enrollment decline cannot be attributed to a decline in births.

American Indian students and schools where American Indian students predominate have had the lowest proportion at or above proficiency. The expectation that all schools and, by implication, all sub-groups "must" reach 100% proficiency by SY 2013-2014 foretells definite failure among American Indian students and schools where American Indian students predominate. It is imperative that educators, administrators, researchers, policy makers, and other stakeholders develop a good understanding of the conditions and factors under which American Indian children could succeed.

This study sheds some insight into where cultural responsiveness exists, how it has been fostered, how it is practiced, and how to inform those schools who aspire to become more culturally responsive for the benefit of their students and the tribal communities.

POLICY FINDINGS

BEST PRACTICES

Schools that foster the **Educated Native Person** are those that,

- ◆ strengthen cultural identity by promoting and supporting strong Native American values, traditions, culture, and language at the local level;
- ◆ have native American adults from local communities who serve as role models and mentors to students;
- ◆ provide a foundation for life-long learning;
- ◆ create bridges to successful postsecondary opportunities by using college bridge programs and conducting summer visits on college and tribal community college campuses; and
- ◆ work with the tribal government to connect careers with community development.

Schools that succeed in **Language** are those who,

- ◆ promote and maintain an overall school climate that values and respects Native language and culture;
- ◆ review and renew commitments to Native American language and cultural programs at the district and the tribal community levels;
- ◆ develop local tribal protocols for tribal language instruction by specifying goals and a MOA review process;
- ◆ support or provide an uninterrupted language curriculum, K-12, for all Native students;
- ◆ determine clear goals and basic standards for the hiring of certified and accredited language instructors; and
- ◆ develop MOAs for Native languages such as Cherokee, Comanche, and Lakota that are now widely represented in New Mexico.

Schools that successfully advance **Curriculum** are those that,

- ◆ make curriculum relevant to Native students' lives, in multiple ways, by incorporating experiential learning techniques that bring meaning to local places, events and situations;
- ◆ integrate Native history, science and philosophy in all courses, for the benefit of all students;
- ◆ use information technologies, such as the internet, to direct self-learning and self-awareness;
- ◆ integrate textbooks and resources written by Native Americans that are more contemporary and provide for in-depth, critical reading and exchanges among students; and
- ◆ diversify learning activities in the arts, sports, and technical vocations.

Schools where **Pedagogy** succeeds are those where,

- ◆ teachers use different teaching methods and strategies that encourage innovation and hands-on problem solving rather than memorization;
- ◆ students gain self-esteem and motivation by providing a classroom environment that is equally shared by a teacher and the students;
- ◆ community members and leaders are regularly invited to share their knowledge and motivate students to excel;
- ◆ the classroom entails multiple learning activities in every content area as based on team building, group work, and class and/or public presentations; and
- ◆ the Native content, perspectives, and experiences are presented in positive ways to emphasize their contributions to the world.

Schools where **Accountability** becomes a positive factor are those that,

- ◇ develop teacher/staff action teams to deal with students that exhibit chronic absenteeism, fail coursework, exhibit alcohol and/or drug abuse and are from home environments that are unhealthy, i.e. domestic violence;
- ◇ offer professional development opportunities to improve knowledge and appreciation of the local community's historical, cultural, and social context;
- ◇ provide opportunities for teachers and school related staff members and students to share best-practice examples;
- ◇ continually assess that the district's mission and actual school practice are meeting the standards of the NM Indian Education Act;
- ◇ create incentives among good teachers;
- ◇ develop recruitment and support incentives for Native teachers by offering scholarships and participating in loan-forgiveness programs;
- ◇ address administrative staff turnover rates by developing active and supportive school boards and parent committees; and
- ◇ augment NCLB and state testing by providing a variety of multiple alternative assessments (i.e., portfolio, performance, presentations, exhibits, observations, student self-assessments...) that track the same students across grade levels.

The **School Climate** is best served when the schools,

- ◇ create an inviting and welcoming environment for Native students and their families;
- ◇ actively mediate race relations among diverse groups and populations;
- ◇ coordinate on and off-campus activities with Native parents and the larger tribal community;
- ◇ develop clear and concise protocols and expectations for student participation in tribal activities and events;
- ◇ provide for the support of student participation in extra-curricular events that occur before and after school;
- ◇ develop strategies and fund parent workshops for involvement in their children's education; and
- ◇ involve the tribal community to participate and be proactive in the long-range design and development of facilities to serve their students and the community.

Successful Relationships by schools are achieved when,

- ◇ opportunities for interactions between students, teachers, staff, and the tribal community are provided that develop healthy, professional, and caring relationships;
- ◇ classroom learning is built on the values on mutual respect and reciprocity; and
- ◇ teachers make an effort to learn about the community and the social conditions that affect their student's lives.

Vision can extend far beyond a school's immediate agenda. It entails,

- ◇ promoting and nurturing a students' demonstration of their knowledge, ultimately towards their future as a gainful professional;
- ◇ inspiring a student's intrinsic motivation to learn in a manner that values individual intellect as well as maintaining their cultural identity;
- ◇ anticipating and incorporating the newest technologies;
- ◇ continuing to build and maintain quality learning physical environments for active learning and engagement; and
- ◇ developing proactive and reciprocal relationships between administrators and tribal leadership in a manner that advances the future goals and needs of the community.