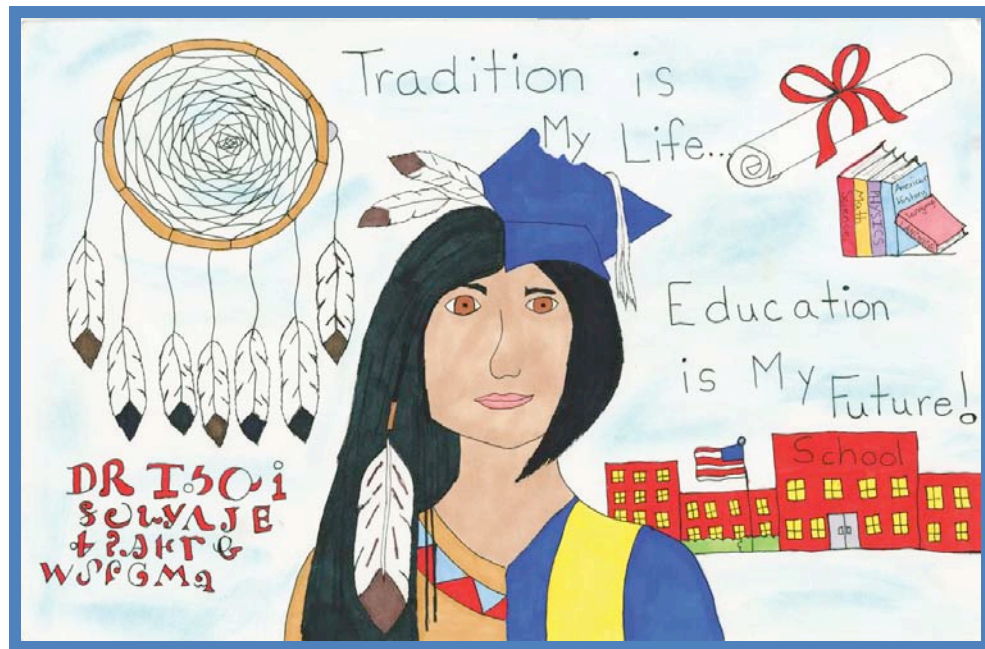


The Dropout/Graduation Crisis Among
American Indian and Alaska Native Students:

Failure to Respond Places the Future of
Native Peoples at Risk



by

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Catching My Dreams Through Education, by Paige Fourkiller (member of the Cherokee Nation), 8th grader, state of Oklahoma

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Abstract

This paper examines the graduation/dropout crisis among American Indian and Alaska Native students using data from the National Center for Education Statistics. Data from 2005 is drawn from the seven states with the highest percentage of American Indian and Alaska Native students as well as five states in the Pacific and Northwestern regions of the United States. Findings indicate that the number of American Indians and Alaska Natives who graduate continues to be a matter of urgent concern. On average, less than 50% of Native students in these twelve states graduate each year.

“Native students have the highest dropout rate in the nation. Without education they are disempowered and disenfranchised” (Indian Nations At Risk, 1991).

Although many American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN)¹ students do well in school - achieving academically, graduating and going on to college or other training programs - a large number of these students are unsuccessful in the educational system. Evidence of fundamental educational failure can be found in schools across the nation, most notably in the form of low graduation and high dropout rates (e.g., Freeman & Fox, 2005). The alarmingly high rates at which American Indian and Alaska Native students drop out or are pushed out of school is not a new phenomenon, but one that has persisted throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries (e.g., Senate Special Subcommittee on Indian Education, 1969²; Freeman & Fox, 2005).

Situating the Crisis

To fully understand and respond to this crisis, we must first acknowledge the multiple contexts in which education of Native students occurs (e.g., Freeman & Fox, 2005; KewalRamani, Gilbertson, & Fox, 2007). Nationally, there are approximately 644,000 American Indian and Alaska Native students in kindergarten through twelfth grade. Although the majority (approximately 92%) of Native students attend regular public schools, a significant number (approximately 8%) attend schools operated or funded by the federal Bureau of Indian Education (BIE)³ or by individual tribes⁴

¹ The term Native is used elsewhere in this paper to refer to American Indians and Alaska Natives.

² Commonly referred to as the *Kennedy Report*.

³ The Bureau of Indian Affairs' Office of Indian Education Programs was recently restructured and renamed the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE). For additional information regarding the BIE, see <http://enan.bia.edu/home.aspx>

⁴ A small number attend private schools.

(DeVoe & Darling-Churchill, 2008). Although American Indians and Alaska Natives are more likely (46%) to attend rural schools than are their non-Native peers, a majority of Native students live off reservations and an increasing number attend schools in urban areas. Approximately one-third attend schools in which 50% or more of the student population is American Indian/Alaska Native⁵ (DeVoe & Darling-Churchill, 2008).

In contrast to public schools, *BIE schools are primarily federally funded; however, some of these schools are operated by tribes through contracts and grants with the BIE.* The BIE currently operates or funds 184 schools and dormitories on 63 reservations in 23 states including: Arizona, California, Florida, Idaho, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, Wisconsin, and Wyoming (Bureau of Indian Affairs, 2005). Schools operated or funded by the BIE are primarily located in rural areas and small towns and serve students living on or near reservations. Although similar to public schools in terms of staffing and access to Internet and other technologies, a report by the U.S. General Accounting Office (2001) cited a need for significant building and structural improvements to BIE school facilities. Further, children attending BIE schools tend to experience poorer educational outcomes than do their American Indian and Alaska Native peers who attend public schools. For example, during the 2003-2004 school year, the BIE reported approximately 60% of its high school students graduated

⁵ These schools are characterized by the National Center for Education Statistics and the Office of Indian Education as high-density schools.

(Bureau of Indian Affairs, n.d.), compared to a national average of 70% (*Education Week*, 2007).

National Dropout Crisis Illustrated through Use of Extant Data

In this paper, we examine the graduation/dropout crisis among American Indian and Alaska Native students using data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)⁶. We focus on 2005 data from the seven states with the highest percentage of American Indian and Alaska Native students as well as five states we categorize as representing the Pacific and Northwestern regions of the United States⁷. Additional demographic data is drawn from the 2000 Census, the NCES Common Core of Data (CCD), and the Research Center at *Education Week*. We conclude our analysis with recommendations for future research, as well as implications of these findings for policy and practice.

Limitations of this study

This study is limited by incomplete data collection and reporting for American Indian and Alaska Native students at the state and national levels. Questions regarding the quality of some data sets (e.g., National Congress of American Indians, 2008) have caused many researchers to avoid including Native students in their analyses. Lack of accurate data⁸ is due in part to a highly mobile population, undercounting of the population and distrust among this population regarding the use of data by the federal

⁶ The graduation rates presented here represent 2004-2005 data available from NCES. Rates are calculated using the Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI).

⁷ This paper was originally commissioned for a 2008 conference sponsored by the UCLA Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles and *Education Week*. The focus of this conference was on the dropout crisis in the Pacific Northwest, with a special emphasis on American Indian and Alaska Native students.

⁸ This phenomenon is particularly evident in the U.S. Census.

government (Lujan, 1990). Small numbers, coupled with a geographically dispersed student population, result in Native students being characterized as statistically insignificant (e.g., Butterfield, 2003) for purposes of data analysis and research. Such characterization is, in effect, an example of what has been described as “...*structural and institutional racism, placing [Native] students ... at a further disadvantage in opportunities and outcomes*” (Toney, 2007, p.8).

California provides a prime example of the difficulty researchers encounter in unpacking and making sense of the data currently available for American Indian/Alaska Native students. In California, as in many other states, this process is complicated by the use of self-report and/or teacher reported data which results in American Indians and Alaska Natives either not being included in data or represented and reported in ways that do not accurately represent the current educational status of this student population (e.g., Frith-Smith & Singleton, 2000). Although California has a large number of Native students, they make up less than one percent of the total number of students in the state. Teachers who are not familiar with their students’ backgrounds may, for example, erroneously report their race/ethnicity resulting in inaccurate reporting of student achievement and other educational outcomes by race and ethnicity.

The geographic dispersion of American Indian and Alaska Native students also makes it difficult to collect and report accurate data. Although the majority of Native students attend public schools, a small number attend schools operated or funded by the Bureau of Indian Education and tribes. Many of these schools are located in some of the Nation’s most geographically isolated communities making it even less likely

that schools will have the necessary financial and human resources needed to engage in timely and accurate data collection, analysis and reporting. Thus, it is not surprising that data from the BIE, and its predecessor, the Bureau of Indian Affairs' Office of Indian Education Programs, has historically been absent from both state and national level reporting, including calculations of graduation and dropout rates for American Indian and Alaska Native students.

In conducting this analysis, we acknowledge the ramifications of incomplete data and extend the call for improved data collection and reporting. In doing so, we concur with Jerald (2006) who argues that

...better access to data offers an unprecedented opportunity for educators to become problem solvers; using hard evidence to analyze student performance and craft data-driven school improvement plans. But information is just a tool, and like any tool, it is only as powerful as the use to which it is put... (p. 1).

The goal here is to put existing data to work to illustrate the growing educational crisis among Native students and to call policymakers and educators to action to resolve this crisis before it is too late.

Data Analysis and Findings

Table 1 below lists each of the twelve states included in this study ranked according to their American Indian/Alaska Native student population. Alaska ranked as the state with the largest percentage of American Indian and Alaska Native

students, while California ranked as the state with the smallest percentage of Native students.

Table 1.

States ranked according to American Indian/Alaska Native student population⁹

State	Percent American Indian/Alaska Native Student Population
Alaska	26.3
Oklahoma	18.0
Montana	11.3
New Mexico	11.1
South Dakota	11.0
North Dakota	8.3
Arizona	6.2
Wyoming	3.4
Washington	2.7
Oregon	2.3
Idaho	1.6
California	0.8

⁹ Source: KewalRamani, Gilbertson, & Fox (2007).

Graduation rates reported in Table 2 below were derived from the NCES CCD. These figures were calculated using the Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI) developed by Christopher Swanson and the Urban Institute (e.g., Swanson, 2003). The formula for calculating CPI is demonstrated in Figure 1 below:

$$\text{CPI} = \frac{\text{10th graders, fall 2003}}{\text{9th graders, fall 2002}} \times \frac{\text{11th graders, fall 2003}}{\text{10th graders, fall 2002}} \times \frac{\text{12th graders, fall 2003}}{\text{11th graders, fall 2002}} \times \frac{\text{Diploma recipients, spring 2003}}{\text{12th graders, fall 2002}}$$

Figure 1. Formula for Calculating Cumulative Promotion Index

The CPI is used to generate the best possible estimates of graduation rates using grade-by-grade enrollment data. It is important to note that the CPI is one of a number of formulas utilized to calculate graduation rates. The CPI is unique in that it employs the collection and analysis of longitudinal data allowing researchers to track student progress toward graduation as they move from grade to grade. Although the CPI is a more reliable means of data collection and reporting than has typically been used by schools, districts, and states, the use of different methods of collecting and reporting data means that the graduation rates reported here may differ from the rates reported elsewhere by individual states.

As demonstrated in Table 2 below, overall graduation rates ranged from 54.1% to 79.2%. Graduation rates for American Indian/Alaska Native students ranged from 30.4% to 63.8%. North Dakota had the highest overall graduation rate at 79.2% compared to a graduation rate of 37.9% for American Indian/Alaska Native students (demonstrating a high degree of disparity between American Indian/Alaska Natives

and the overall student population). Oklahoma¹⁰ had the highest graduation rate for American Indian/Alaska Native students (63.8%) compared to 70.8% for all students (demonstrating a moderate degree of parity between American Indian/Alaska Natives and the overall student population). South Dakota had the lowest graduation rate for American Indian/Alaska Native students (30.4%) compared to 75.6% of non-American Indian/Alaska Native students (again demonstrating a high degree of disparity between the two student groups). The lowest overall graduation rate was found in New Mexico where 54.1% of all students graduated compared to 45.3% of American Indian/Alaska Native students.

The graduation rates for American Indians and Alaska Natives in all twelve states were lower than the overall state rates (see Table 2); only three states had rates of 50% or more for American Indian/Alaska Native students. With the exception of Oklahoma and New Mexico, the gap in graduation rates between the overall state rates and the American Indian/Alaska Native rates, was 17 percentage points or more. Oklahoma came closest to matching the state rate with a difference of 7 percentage points; New Mexico was second with a difference of 8.8 percentage points. The widest graduation rate gap was found in South Dakota at 45.2 percentage points followed by North Dakota at 41.3 percentage points.

Table 2.

Overall graduation rates (%)

State	Overall	AI/AN	Graduation Gap
Alaska	67.6	46.8	-20.8
Arizona	73.4	52.4	-21
California	70.1	52.4	-17.7
Idaho	76.6	48.4	-28.2
Montana	75.7	50	-25.7
New Mexico	54.1	45.3	-8.8
North Dakota	79.2	37.9	-41.3
Oklahoma	70.8	63.8	-7.0
Oregon	70.4	42.7	-27.7
South Dakota	75.6	30.4	-45.2
Washington	68.8	42.7	-26.1
Wyoming	74.2	**	**

Note 1: ** indicates insufficient data available.

As demonstrated in Table 3 below, on average, graduation rates for American Indians and Alaska Natives (46.6%) were lower than the graduation rates for all other racial/ethnic groups including whites (69.8%), Blacks (54.7%), Asians (77.9%) and Hispanics (50.8%). Graduation rates for American Indian/Alaska Native students

ranged from 63.8% in Oklahoma to 30.4% in South Dakota. Graduation rates for white students ranged from 81.8% in North Dakota to 64.2% in New Mexico; the graduation rate for Blacks ranged from 71.6% in Arizona to 39.4% in South Dakota; Asians ranged from 88.9% in Arizona to 67.8% in Alaska; and Hispanics ranged from 65% in Arizona to 20.4% in South Dakota.

Table 3.

Graduation rates by race/ethnicity (%)

State	AI/AN	White	Black	Asian	Hispanic
Alaska	46.8	74.4	59.0	67.8	24.4
Arizona	52.4	78.7	71.6	88.9	65.0
California	52.4	78.2	57.0	84.0	59.5
Idaho	48.4	79.2	**	**	56.2
Montana	50.0	79.3	59.2	**	57.7
New Mexico	45.3	64.2	52.1	72.6	49.4
North Dakota	37.9	81.8	**	**	**
Oklahoma	63.8	72.3	58.5	**	54.0
Oregon	42.7	74.0	44.0	78.3	60.7
South Dakota	30.4	81.7	39.4	**	20.4
Washington	42.7	72.3	51.8	75.5	56.9
Wyoming	**	75.6	**	**	54.6
Average	46.6	69.8	54.7	77.9	50.8

Note 1: ** indicates insufficient data available.

Note 2: States with insufficient data were excluded from calculation of overall averages by race/ethnicity.

As demonstrated in Table 4 below, overall graduation rates for male students ranged from 76.3% to 49.1%, with an average of 68%. Graduation rates among

American Indian/Alaska Native males ranged from 61% to 28.2%. The highest overall graduation rate for males was found in North Dakota where 76.3% of all males graduated compared to 36.8% of American Indian/Alaska Native male students (demonstrating a high degree of disparity between the two student groups). The lowest overall graduation rate for males was found in New Mexico where 49.1% of all male students graduated compared to 39.2% of American Indian/Alaska Native male students (demonstrating a moderate degree of disparity between the two groups). The highest graduation rate for American Indian/Alaska Native males was found in Oklahoma where 61% of American Indian/Alaska Native males graduated compared to 70% of all males (demonstrating a moderate degree of disparity between the two groups). The lowest graduation rate for American Indian/Alaska Native males was found in South Dakota where 28.2% of American Indian/Alaska Native males graduated compared to 71.4% of all male students (demonstrating a high degree of disparity between the two student groups).

Table 4.

Graduation rates among males (%)

State	Overall Male	AI/AN Male	Graduation Gap
Alaska	61.8	42.0	-19.8
Arizona	69.8	47.2	-22.6
California	65.7	45.0	-20.7
Idaho	74.4	44.9	-29.5
Montana	73.2	46.0	-27.2
New Mexico	49.1	39.2	-9.9
North Dakota	76.3	36.8	-39.5
Oklahoma	70.0	61.0	-11.0
Oregon	69.8	34.2	-35.6
South Dakota	71.4	28.2	-43.2
Washington	64.8	35.7	-29.1
Wyoming	69.4	**	**

Note: ** indicates insufficient data available.

As demonstrated in Table 5 below, overall graduation rates for female students ranged from 80.2% to 59.8%. Graduation rates for American Indian/Alaska Native female students ranged from 61.3% to 31%. The highest overall graduation rate was found in North Dakota where 80.2% of female students graduated. Insufficient data

was provided by the state of North Dakota to allow comparison of graduation rates between female American Indian/Alaska Native and non-American Indian/Alaska Native students. The lowest overall graduation rate was found in New Mexico where 59.8% of all female students graduated compared to 50.1% of American Indian/Alaska Native female students (demonstrating a moderate degree of disparity between the two student groups). The highest percentage of American Indian/Alaska Native female students graduated in Oklahoma where 61.3% of American Indian/Alaska Native female students graduated compared to 73.3% of all female students (demonstrating a high degree of parity between the two student populations). The lowest number of American Indian/Alaska Native female students graduated in South Dakota where 31% of American Indian/Alaska Native students graduated compared to 77.2% of all female students (demonstrating a high degree of disparity between the two student populations).

Table 5.

Graduation rates among females (%)

State	Overall Female	AI/AN Female	Graduation Gap
Alaska	71.7	50.5	-21.2
Oklahoma	73.3	61.3	-12.0
Montana	78.2	44.9	-33.3
New Mexico	59.8	50.1	-9.7
South Dakota	77.2	31.0	-46.2
North Dakota	80.2	**	**
Arizona	77.5	57.7	-19.8
Wyoming	75.3	46.4	-28.9
Washington	74.6	**	**
Oregon	76.8	45.6	-31.2
Idaho	78.1	58.1	-20.0
California	74.1	55.9	-18.2

Note: ** indicates insufficient data available.

Summary.

The graduation gap between Native and non-Native students within the twelve states analyzed in this study ranged from a high of 45.2 percentage points in the state

of South Dakota to a low of 7 percentage points in the state of Oklahoma (see Table 2). These data represent “...*the tragic failure of public schools and local communities to provide many American Indian [and Alaska Native] students with a quality education that creates the greatest potential for economic security, healthy families and viable communities*” (Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2002, p. 3).

Newest Data Shows No Progress.

The most recent state and national dropout statistics, released by *Education Week* in June 2009, show that the graduation and dropout crisis continue to intensify. As demonstrated in Table 6 below, the graduation rate for American Indians and Alaska Natives in the class of 2006¹¹ was 44.1%, far below the national average of 69% for all students. Though the national graduation rate for all students remained relatively stable, most of the states studied in this report actually experienced declines. For example, in 2006, Oklahoma and Idaho were the only states with American Indian and Alaska Native graduation rates above the 50% mark. North and South Dakota remained below 40%. They were joined by Oregon and Washington State, which dropped below 40% (*Education Week, 2009*). Although insufficient data were available to compare the 2006 graduation rate in Wyoming with that of 2005, it is important to note that the 2006 rate fell below the 40% mark.

¹¹ This figure represents the graduation rate for the twelve states included in this study. Overall, in 2006, the national graduation rate for American Indian and Alaska Native students was 50%.

Table 6.

American Indian/Alaska Native graduation rates by State, 2005-2006 (%)¹²

State	2006	2005	Change
Alaska	45.2	46.8	-1.6
Arizona	45.6	52.4	-6.8
California	49.6	52.4	-2.8
Idaho	50.9	48.4	+2.5
Montana	48.3	50.0	-1.7
New Mexico	49.5	45.3	+4.2
North Dakota	39.9	37.9	+2.0
Oklahoma	64.1	63.8	+0.3
Oregon	39.1	42.7	-3.6
South Dakota	33.5	30.4	+3.1
Washington	37.9	42.7	-4.8
Wyoming	25.8	**	**

Note: ** indicates insufficient data available.

¹² Source: *Education Week* (2009).

Why This Crisis Must be Addressed

According to the 2000 Census, there are approximately 4.2 million American Indians and Alaska Natives in the United States when counted alone or in combination with other races (Ogunwole, 2002). By 2007, the Census Bureau estimated that this number had increased to 4.5 million (U.S. Census Bureau News, 2007). Much of this growth is due to an increasing number of children and youth. One third of all American Indians and Alaska Natives are under the age of eighteen, compared to 26% of the total U.S. population, with a median age of twenty-nine compared to thirty-five for the total population.

The relatively young age of this population increases the importance of securing more positive educational outcomes. Children and youth hold the key to the social, economic, and cultural survival of the American Indian and Alaska Native population in the United States. Failure to ensure that Native youth graduate from high school places the entire population at risk.

For American Indian and Alaska Native adults, the effects of low graduation and high dropout rates are readily evident. For example, American Indian and Alaska Native people are less likely to join the workforce (i.e. employed or actively looking for work) than the national average. Only 67% of American Indian and Alaska Native males age sixteen and over are part of the labor force compared to 71% of all males (Ogunwole, 2006). Further, American Indians and Alaska Natives tend to be employed in more service-oriented jobs than professional/managerial level jobs. These are jobs much more likely to lack benefits and to pay less than enough to support a

family. This results in large gaps in income and homeownership¹³, which are strongly related to educational attainment levels. For example, the median income for American Indians and Alaska Natives is well below the national average. In 2000, the median income for Native men was \$28,900 compared to \$37,100 for all men. The median income for Native women was even lower at \$22,800 compared to \$27,200 for all women. Inability to earn competitive wages results in American Indians and Alaska Natives living in poverty at more than twice the rate of their non-Native peers – 26% of American Indians and Alaska Natives compared to 12% of non-Natives.

Without a high school degree, the economic outlook for young Native peoples is at best, bleak. Today, jobseekers enter a market where the average wage for individuals without a high school degree is far lower than it was forty years ago. High paying industrial unionized jobs with limited formal educational qualifications are gone, and the risk of joblessness, family instability and involvement with the criminal justice system are much higher for those who drop out of school. What is particularly ironic about this is that American Indians and Alaska Natives are the only racial/ethnic group indigenous to the United States; yet, they have continually faced serious political, economic and social issues including racial prejudice and discrimination, paternalism, loss of treaty rights, isolation on economically depressed lands, health disparities, lack of political power, and loss of Native languages since the colonial period.

In spite of the federal government's trust responsibility for federally recognized tribes, few policies have been enacted to specifically address the low

¹³ Fifty six percent of American Indians and Alaska Natives own their own homes, compared to 66% of non-Natives (Ogunwole, 2006).

educational attainment levels of Native peoples. This is due in large part to the geographical and epistemological distance between much of Indian country and the nation's capital, where most policies are made with limited input from tribes.

Table 7 below lists the twelve states included in this study, according to their population of American Indians and Alaska Natives. Overall, 48% of the American Indian and Alaska Native population resides in the West (Freeman & Fox, 2005), 7% in the Northeast, 16% in the Midwest, and 29% in the South. The largest population of American Indians and Alaska Natives (approximately 333,000) is located in California, while the highest percentage of American Indians and Alaska Natives is located in Alaska (Trujillo & Alston, 2005). Approximately one-third of Native peoples live on reservations, federal trust lands, Alaska Native villages, and other lands designated by the federal government as American Indian/Alaska Native statistical areas. Many of these communities are far from major population centers making it difficult to access resources typically found in more populated urban and suburban areas.

Table 7.

American Indian/Alaska Native population by state¹⁴

State	Population	Percentage of State Population ¹⁵
California	333,346	1.0
Oklahoma	273,230	7.9
Arizona	255,879	5.0
New Mexico	173,483	9.5
Alaska	98,043	15.6
Washington	93,301	1.6
South Dakota	62,283	8.3
Montana	56,068	6.2
Oregon	45,211	1.3
North Dakota	31,329	4.9
Idaho	17,645	1.4
Wyoming	11,133	2.3

Unfortunately, access to educational and other services is not necessarily better for American Indians and Alaska Natives who live in more urbanized areas. As

¹⁴ Source: American Indian Policy Center (n.d.).

¹⁵ Source: Ogunwole (2002).

demonstrated in Table 8 below, the large off-reservation Native population is often too small a proportion of the cities where they reside to garner the attention students and their families need. For example, in 2000, the two largest concentrations of American Indians and Alaska Natives in the states we studied were located in the metropolitan Los Angeles and Phoenix areas. The 57,000 American Indian and Alaska Native residents of Los Angeles equal the population of a small city, yet they make up less than two percent of the population of Los Angeles and they do not live in concentrated areas. This lack of a critical mass often results in urbanized Native peoples being treated as the “invisible minority” (Carr, 1996).

Table 8.¹⁶

American Indian/Alaska Native population by county (2000 Census)

County	Population
Los Angeles County, CA ¹⁷	56,703
Maricopa County, AZ	56,429
McKinley, NM	48,861
Oklahoma County, OK	25,298
King County, WA	20,191
Anchorage Borough, AK	18,238
Shannon County, SD	11,797
Rolette County, ND	10,066
Multnomah County, OR	7,581
Glacier County, MT	7,561
Fremont County, WY	7,008
Bingham County, ID	2,872

Why Students Drop Out: What Research Shows.

The research on American Indians and Alaska Natives who drop out of school is limited in scope and somewhat dated, with the majority of these studies conducted

¹⁶ Source: Population Estimates Program, Population Division (1999).

¹⁷ Home to the largest urban Indian population in the United States.

in the 1980s and early 1990s. In 1991, Reyhner published a review of dropout studies involving Native students. In these studies, the dropout rates for Native students ranged from 29% to 36%. He concluded that Native students

...have a dropout rate twice the national average; the highest dropout rate of any United States ethnic or racial group. About three out of every ten Native students drop out of school before graduating from high school both on reservations and in cities (p. 1).

In response, Reyhner called for an increased understanding of why students drop out. He also argued for a shift away from deficit models that tend to place the blame for dropping out of schools on students and their families. Rather, he called for studies that assess the role of schools and teachers in working to push students out of school. As Reyhner and others (e.g., Rumberger, 2004; Brandt, 1992) have argued, the process of dropping out or being pushed out of school is a cumulative process often precipitated by academic and personal difficulties causing students to detach from school (e.g., Rumberger, 2004; Brandt, 1992).

A 2009 study by Mac Iver and Mac Inver attributed the dropout crisis to a lack of student engagement, with student engagement being driven by both institutional (e.g., school) and student level factors. These findings mirror those presented in the more dated research focused primarily on American Indian and Alaska Native students. In these studies, *school-level factors associated with dropping out* include large schools, a perceived lack of empathy among teachers, passive teaching methods, irrelevant

curriculum, inappropriate testing, tracking, and lack of parent involvement (Reyhner, 1991).

Student level factors, specific to American Indian and Alaska Native students include: feeling unwanted or “pushed out” of school (Wax, 1967, cited in Swisher & Hoisch, 1992; Deyhle, 1989); poor quality of student-teacher relationships (Brandt, 1992; Colodarci, 1983, cited in Swisher & Hoisch, 1992); lack of parental support, peer pressure (Colodarci, 1983, cited in Swisher & Hoisch, 1992); boredom, problems with other students, discipline problems (Platero, et al, 1986, cited in Swisher & Hoisch, 1992; Milone, 1983, cited in Ledlow, 1992; Brandt, 1992); difficulty with classes and with reading, responsibilities at home or on the job, distance from school, pregnancy (Deyhle, 1989; Brandt, 1992); poor attendance (Platero, et al, 1986, cited in Swisher & Hoisch, 1992; Milone, 1983, cited in Ledlow, 1992; Brandt, 1992; Bowker, 1992); lack of future plans or goals (Chan & Osthimer, 1983; Bowker, 1992); retention in grade (Eberhard, 1989; Bowker, 1992; Brandt, 1992); student mobility/transiency¹⁹ (Swisher & Hoisch, 1992; Eberhard, 1989); legal problems, substance and alcohol abuse, frustrations related to student being older than other students, lack of adequate transportation, medical reasons (Brandt, 1992); and language barriers (Bowker, 1992; Brandt, 1992). Other factors include: high rates of suspension and expulsion (Swisher, Hoisch & Pavel, 1991; Freeman & Fox, 2005); lack of interest in school; transferring from one school to another; pregnancy; inability to adjust to school environment; failure to reenroll; failure to complete

¹⁹ In a study of Navajo students, Brandt (1992) found, “that over 50% of the students ... identified as ‘dropouts’ had in fact either transferred to another school[s] or had graduated” (p. 52). Brandt (1992)¹⁹ coined the term “floating” to refer to students who transfer from one school to another until they find a school where they feel more “comfortable, tolerable and challeng[ed]...”

assignments; parental request; child care; suspension; employment; running away; marriage; illness (Swisher, Hoisch, & Pavel, 1991); *low expectations; an older sibling who dropped out of school; spending more than three hours alone at home per day* (Bowker, 1992); and *poverty* (Reyhner, 2006).

***Strategies to Decrease Dropout Rates and Improve
Graduation Rates among American Indian and Alaska Native Students***

Brandt (1992) identified a number of factors associated with increased likelihood of persisting in school. These factors include early acquisition of the English language; parental encouragement; proficiency in students' Native language as well as in English; incorporating and honoring traditional values and beliefs; completion of vocational courses in grades eight or nine; and enrollment in small schools.

Based on a review of literature, coupled with our own personal and professional experiences in working with Native students and schools, we also urge educators and policymakers to:

1. Review and revise school policies and avoid implementation of policies that exclude, repress, demean, embarrass, harass or alienate Native students (Brandt, 1992).
2. Make schools physically, mentally and emotionally safe by working to end racism, sexual harassment and other forms of physical and emotional assault (Brandt, 1992; National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, n.d.²⁰).

²⁰ For additional information, see "Effective strategies for dropout prevention". Available on-line at: <http://www.dropoutprevention.org/effstrat/default.htm>

3. Demonstrate an ethic of care and concern for students (Brandt, 1992; Reyhner, 1992).
4. Hold high expectations for students and challenge them to succeed (Brandt, 1992; Reyhner, 1992; National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, n.d.).
5. Avoid use of negative stereotypes (Brandt, 1992).
6. Recognize that not all students perform or achieve the same (Brandt, 1992).
7. Avoid blaming students or their parents and families for their academic failure or the low performance of the school (Brandt, 1992).
8. Actively involve parents and families in schools and communities (Brandt, 1992; Reyhner, 1992; National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, n.d.; Trujillo & Alston, 2005).
9. Individualize instruction and work to actively engage students in the learning process (Brandt, 1992; National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, n.d.; Reyhner, 1992).
10. Provide opportunities for students to be immersed in their Native language and culture and develop and implement culturally appropriate and relevant curricula (Reyhner, 1992; Trujillo & Alston, 2005).
11. Prepare educators to work with American Indian and Alaska Native students (National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, n.d.; Trujillo & Alston, 2005).

This includes pre-service as well as in-service professional development opportunities.

12. Use tests and assessments as a means of supporting and assisting students rather than a means of promoting failure (Reyhner, 1992).²¹

These strategies are important first steps, but it is equally important to acknowledge the wide range of cultural and linguistic diversity represented among the American Indian and Alaska Native student population, as well as diversity in the size, location, and type of schools they attend. Such diversity lessens the effectiveness of a “one size fits all approach”. Rather, a variety of comprehensive, yet flexible approaches are needed to decrease the dropout rate and in turn increase the number and percent of Native students who go on to graduate from high school. When developing and implementing these strategies, schools must work in consultation and collaboration with Native families, communities and organizations. Unfortunately, the education of Native students has historically been conducted without their input, thus nurturing a sense of distrust and detachment from the educational system for many Native families and communities.

Addressing the Crisis through Improved Research

If we are to begin to reverse these alarming trends in graduation and dropout rates among American Indians and Alaska Natives, we must make a concerted effort to ensure that the extent and magnitude of this crisis is made known to educators, policymakers and community members across the nation. No longer can we accept the argument that American Indian and Alaska Native students are a statistically insignificant proportion of the student population. Although we know that American Indians and Alaska Natives are graduating at rates far below that of their non-Native

²¹ Reyhner (1992) referred to this as advocacy testing.

peers, the lack of accurate reporting of national graduation and dropout rates for Native students continues to be an issue of concern. Historically, such calculations have been left to the discretion of individual states. The adoption and implementation of a uniform means of calculating and reporting graduation and dropout rates is an important step in illustrating the extent and magnitude of this crisis. As traditionally reported, much of this data has been suspect, if not missing. Swanson's (e.g., 2003) cumulative promotion index provides an innovative, reliable method of calculating graduation rates; however, schools must first be trained and financial and human resources must be made available to sustain such efforts at improved data collection and reporting.

It is also important to acknowledge that the lack of accurate data for this population is not limited to graduation and dropout rates. Historically, the absence of American Indian and Alaska Native students in large-scale data sets and other data collection efforts have made it virtually impossible to adequately describe the growing educational crisis facing Native students. Recent attempts to improve overall data collection and analysis in public schools has been driven by the Office of Indian Education, U.S. Department of Education, as demonstrated by the publication of two national studies of Indian education (Moran, Rampey, Dion, & Donahue, 2008; Rampey, Lutkus, & Weiner, 2006). Although these studies are important, they focus primarily on student academic achievement in fourth and eighth grades, with little discussion of the factors that account for high dropout and low graduation rates or the measures tribes, schools and states are taking to address these concerns. The collection

and analysis of such data is critical to ensuring accountability for American Indian and Alaska Native students' academic success.

Questions Left Unanswered. To better understand and respond to the drop-out and graduation crisis, we recommend that future research consider the following questions:

- (1) Why is the graduation rate for American Indian and Alaska Native students consistently lower in North and South Dakota than in other states with high concentrations of American Indian and Alaska Native students?
- (2) Why is the graduation gap between American Indian/Alaska Native students and their peers narrower in Oklahoma than in North and South Dakota?
- (3) Why are American Indian/Alaska Native females graduating at rates higher than their male counterparts²²?
- (4) To what extent do existing formulas for calculating graduation and dropout rates take into account the effects of student transfer and mobility rates?
- (5) To what extent does an emphasis on tribal languages and cultures have on the dropout and graduation rates for American Indian and Alaska Native students?

In considering these questions, we also urge researchers to identify schools and programs that have proven effective in reducing the number of American Indian and Alaska Native students who drop out and increasing the number who go on to graduate. One way to do this is by conducting comprehensive case studies in states

²² In this study, 50.2% of American Indian/Alaska Native females graduated compared to 41.8% of American Indian/Alaska Native males. This is consistent with recent studies (e.g., Swanson, 2004), which report disparities between the graduation rates of male and female students. The effects of such differences in graduation rates are particularly evident in the college-going rates of all students, with more females currently attending college than males (e.g., Snyder, Dillow, & Hoffman, 2009).

such as Oklahoma where American Indian and Alaska Native students appear to be graduating in higher numbers and achieving at higher levels academically than their American Indian and Alaska Native peers elsewhere in the nation (Moran, Rampey, Dion, & Donahue, 2008; Rampey, Lutkus, & Weiner, 2006).

***Research Alone is Not Enough -
Policymakers and Practitioners Must Act Now***

As researchers, we acknowledge the need to collect and analyze data as outlined above; however, the magnitude of the graduation/dropout crisis among American Indian and Alaska Native students demands immediate action at the federal, state, district, local and tribal levels; this means not waiting to act until the results of future research studies have been presented or published.

Where do we go from here?

“The most important responsibility of any society is to ensure the health, protection and education of its young children” (Indian Nations at Risk Task Force, 1991, p. 33).

Demand for increased accountability, most recently demonstrated in the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), raised hopes that the educational status of all students, including American Indians and Alaska Natives, would become a priority as requirements for the collection and disaggregation of data called attention to the ongoing inequities in Native student achievement (e.g., NIEA, 2005). Ironically, these hopes have been dashed for many Native schools and communities as demonstrated in the excerpt below:

Upon the enactment of the Federal No Child Left Behind Act, parents and tribal leaders breathed a sigh of relief that finally someone [would] notice what is happening to our children. We applauded the attempt at system accountability. All of a sudden, school administrators, teachers and state education agencies were recognizing the serious state of neglect in the education of our Indian children. On the surface, the goal of the No Child Left Behind seemed a worthy one. Unfortunately, the approach dictated by the law has created serious negative consequences. Instead, it has become our children who are being held accountable for something that is out of their control. Schools are sending the message, that if our children would just work harder, they would succeed without recognizing their own system failures. [As a result,] Indian children are internalizing the system failures as their personal failure... (NIEA, 2005, p. 8).

Failure to respond to this crisis is a violation of the federal trust responsibility for American Indian and Alaska Native peoples, which dictates that the federal government, in consultation and collaboration with tribes and schools, provide adequate education for Native students in public, tribal, and BIE funded and operated schools. Although more research is needed, we believe that we have a good sense of why students are dropping out and not graduating, as well as what needs to be done to reverse these trends. The next step is to implement these strategies, commit resources to their continued implementation, and monitor them over time to determine and document their long-term effects. In order to achieve these aims, the federal

government must commit adequate levels of human and fiscal resources to improving the educational, social and economic status of Native peoples. Policy makers, budget appropriators, school boards, superintendents, principals, teachers, counselors, tribal leaders, and other stakeholders must take action and demand that this crisis be halted. No longer can we sit back and wait for change to happen. Failure to respond to this crisis will have disastrous consequences for Native peoples across the nation, including a widening social and economic gap between American Indians, Alaska Natives and the larger population, and a real and immediate threat to the self-sufficiency of tribal peoples and their nations. This is a national crisis. One that must be addressed now.

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