

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

There are an estimated 4.4 million American Indian and Alaska Native* 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 the United States, and many are also citizens of the respective tribal nations to which they belong.¹

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.² Legally and politically, 562 tribes are recognized as sovereign nations by the United States government.³ There are an estimated 209 indigenous languages spoken in North America today; around twenty of those are spoken by Alaska Natives.⁴

Unfortunately, many American Indian and Alaska Native students do not receive the support they deserve from their respective learning communities. The nation must commit to ensuring 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 644,000 American Indian and Alaska Native students in the U.S. K–12 system.⁵
- 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)^{†6}
- American Indian and Alaska Native teenagers suffer from poverty, suicide, teen birth, and substance abuse at rates higher than the national average.⁷

* 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.

† As of 2006, Bureau of Indian Affairs schools are called Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) schools.

- Often, the civil rights and cultural identities of American Indian and Alaska Native students are not supported in the classroom.⁸
- 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.⁹

Graduation, Dropouts, and Preparedness

- The national graduation rate for American Indian high school students was 50.6 percent in the 2004–05 school year, compared to 77.6 percent for white students.¹⁰
- Only 45.8 percent of American Indian males and 52.5 percent of American Indian females graduated with a regular diploma in the 2004–05 school year.¹¹
- American Indian and Alaska Native high school students who graduated in 2005 were less likely to have completed a core academic track than their peers from other racial/ethnic groups.¹²
- Studies suggest that the cultural discontinuity between the average public school and the American Indian communities it serves is partially to blame for the gap between American Indian and white students’ academic achievement.¹³
- The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reports that 81 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native eighth graders read below grade level, compared to 62 percent of white eighth graders.¹⁴
- 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.¹⁵

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.^{*16}
- Sixty-one 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.¹⁷
- 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.¹⁸

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



- 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 2002–03.¹⁹
- Seventy percent of BIA-administered schools failed to satisfy No Child Left Behind Adequate Yearly Progress requirements in 2005.²⁰
- In 2005, 22 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native high school students reported engaging in a physical fight on school grounds in the previous twelve months, compared to about 17 percent of black, 18 percent of Hispanic, and 12 percent of white students.²¹
- In public schools with high Native American enrollment, only 16 percent of teachers are Native American.^{*22}
- Though 23 percent of Alaska public school students are Alaska Natives, just 5 percent of the teachers are.²³
- Because BIA schools tend to be in isolated communities with limited amenities, it is often hard for them to recruit teachers.²⁴
- 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.²⁵

Special, Gifted, and College Preparatory Education

- Although American Indians and Alaska Natives scored higher, on average, than black and Hispanic high school students on the critical reading, writing, and mathematics sections of the SAT college entrance exam in 2007, they still scored below the national average.²⁶
- In 2007, the gap between the average critical reading SAT scores of American Indian and Alaska Native students and those of the general student population was fifteen points.²⁷
- American Indians and Alaska Natives constituted just over 1 percent of the student population in 2007 but only 0.6 percent of the population taking the Advanced Placement exam.²⁸
- American Indian and Alaska Native students are more likely than students of other racial and ethnic groups to receive services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Specifically, about 14 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native students received IDEA services in 2006, compared to 8 percent of white, 11 percent of black, 8 percent of Hispanic, and 5 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander students.²⁹

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



- 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.³⁰
- About 20 percent of students at BIA schools receive special education services.³¹
- American Indian and Alaska Native students are 1.53 times more likely to receive special education services for specific learning disabilities and are 2.89 times more likely to receive such services for developmental delays than the combined average of all other racial groups.³²
- 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.³³
- 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.³⁴



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