



# Council of Chief State School Officers: Strengthening Partnerships for American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian Students Education Project

ISSUE PAPER

## High School Redesign and Native American Students

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### How can the nation's high schools respond to the needs of Native American students?

#### Introduction

Educators and community members generally agree that most students enrolled in our nation's public high schools are not performing at a level that would prepare them for the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is particularly the case for linguistically and culturally diverse students, such as Native Americans.<sup>1</sup>

According to Public Agenda's<sup>2</sup> 2002 survey on attitudes about teaching (p. 36), "[employers] and professors still say that too many of today's high school graduates lack basic skills." Between 73% and 75% of employers and professors respectively rank American public high school graduates as having fair or poor skills in writing, grammar and spelling. High school graduates' basic math skills are ranked as fair or poor by 63% of employers and 65% of professors. These statistics imply that high school graduates are largely unprepared for postsecondary education and work, and moreover, that a high school degree alone is not always sufficient achievement. These statistics raise concerns about both the students who do and do not attain high school diplomas, and suggest the need for high school redesign.

Although Native American students are one of the diverse groups facing especially low achievement levels in high schools, their needs have gone largely

unmentioned in the national discussion of high school redesign. While Native Americans constitute a small percentage of student enrollment nationally (1.3%), they represent a considerable proportion of student enrollment in almost a third of all 50 states. For example, 10.6% of student enrollment is Native American in South Dakota, 17.9% in Oklahoma, and 25.9% in Alaska.

A number of statistics indicate that Native American high school students are often less prepared for postsecondary opportunities and face lower expectations than their peers. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2005), the percentage of Native American high school graduates that completed the core academic track of courses increased from 3% in 1982 to 26% in 2000. However, they are still less likely to have completed the core coursework than their White counterparts (11 % in 1982 to 48% in 2000).<sup>3</sup>

The gap between Native American students and their peers emphasizes that the former are graduating inadequately prepared. Between 1999 Indian/Alaska Native students taking Advanced Placement (AP) exams increased 25%. However, the average increase for all students over the same period of time was 35% (NCES, 2005). The low participation rate can be partly attributed to enrollment in small rural schools where AP courses are often not offered. In 2005, 44% of Native Americans received a passing grade of 3, 4, or 5 on the AP exam. By comparison, 63% of their White counterparts received these grades. (The College Board, 2005).

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise specified, in this paper Native American denotes to American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian students.

<sup>2</sup> Public Agenda is a nonprofit organization that researches public opinion relevant to policy issues.

<sup>3</sup> NCES uses the National Commission on Excellence in Education's recommendations to define the core academic track for high school students as including at least four courses in English, three in social studies, three in science, three in mathematics, and two in a foreign language (2005, 64).

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The percentage of American Indian/Alaska Native Grade 10 students that expected to complete a bachelor's degree or higher also increased between 1980 and 2002, moving from 31% to 76%. However, the rate remained below the percent of White students (81%) that expected to achieve at this level (NCES, 2005). The above statistics clearly indicate that greater attention must be focused on the preparation of Native American high school students to better prepare them for the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce demands and post secondary education.

## Focusing the Discussion

To gain a better understanding of the factors that give rise to these outcomes and identify strategies for improvement, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) conducted a focus group on the implications of high school redesign for Native American students. The focus group was convened in October 2005 prior to the start of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Strengthening Partnerships for Native Student Education Conference held in Rapid City, South Dakota.

CCSSO recognized the importance of convening a focus group specifically around the needs of Native American high school students at a time when those involved in school reform are focused on secondary education, thereby generating new opportunities for change. The discussion provided those involved in Indian education with an opportunity to voice their concerns, raising awareness of Native American student needs. This issue paper summarizes the group's discussion and explores the implications for the high school redesign movement.

The focus group consisted of approximately 55 participants who represented members of various Indian communities, K-16 educators, district administrators, state Indian education coordinators, chief state school officers, and staff from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Indian Education. To guide the discussion, focus group facilitators outlined the key principles of high school redesign as identified by the National High

School Alliance;<sup>4</sup> they then elicited feedback on the distinctive challenges facing Native American high school students and practices emerging to address them. The National High School Alliance's key principles of high school reform are outlined below:

- Academic engagement of all students
- Engagement of community and youth (in the school and school reform process)
- Integrated system of high standards, curriculum, instruction, assessments, and supports
- Accountable leaders
- Empowered educators
- Personalized learning environments

## Recognizing the Challenges

Focus group participants were concerned with the level of Native American student success. Many began their remarks by sharing personal experiences that have shaped their views regarding the conditions in the high schools that Native American children attend. Recurring topics of discussion included concerns about the high dropout rates, low levels of achievement, poor communication within the school systems, and lack of culturally responsive instruction.

According to the Manhattan Institute (2003) approximately 54% of American Indian students graduated from high school. In 2002, approximately 17% of American Indian/Alaska Native students between the ages of 16-24 not attending school had not received a high school diploma or a GED (NCES, 2005).<sup>5</sup> This dropout rate is notably higher than the rate of 10.5% for all students, and 6.5% for White, non-Hispanic students (NCES, 2005). These

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<sup>4</sup>The National High School Alliance, founded in 2002, is a partnership of nearly 50 organizations working toward excellent and equitable high schools that identify principles reflecting the national discussion of high school redesign. Member organizations work in research, advocacy, and policy related to education at all levels.

<sup>5</sup> The status dropout rate includes all dropouts regardless of when they last attended school, as well as individuals who may have never attended school in the United States, such as immigrants who did not complete a high school diploma in their home country.

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rates and the discrepancies support focus group participants' concerns and suggest the value of integrating Native American students' needs in the conversations of high school redesign.

Several high school teachers present at the meeting noted students' poor skills in a variety of subject areas, from mathematics to language arts to science. This indicates the vast need for improvement, especially as students are preparing for college. Participants stated that even when some Native American students do continue on to college they do not achieve at the academic level of their peers.

Communication within school systems was viewed as vital to reducing dropout rates and ensuring college readiness. Participants were concerned about Native American students' readiness for both secondary and postsecondary education. They suggested that middle and high school teachers need to communicate with each other and align educational expectations to better prepare their students to succeed at each new school. Participants argued that the lack of communication between schools creates a chasm into which many Native American students fall.

Participants also expressed concern regarding lack of teacher knowledge regarding Native American history, language and culture. This is reflected in the school curricula, teacher pedagogy, and physical environment. Others noted that while some schools do mention Native American history and achievements, the issues are treated superficially or as part of a Pan-Indian curriculum. Moreover, others speak of the cultures specific to their students, but fail to connect the subject to the rest of the curriculum.

Participants found all of these approaches inadequate, linking them to low levels of student engagement, low levels of community involvement, disempowered educators, and impersonal learning environments. Many participants saw Native American students as disenfranchised, lacking a sense of connection to classroom learning, and recognized the detrimental impact of this trend on students' ability to achieve at the higher academic

levels required by today's post-secondary institutions and competitive labor market.

### **Promising Practices: Making a Difference**

Despite the numerous challenges, many participants also recounted positive experiences. Many agreed on the need for pushing students to achieve at higher academic levels by establishing new and challenging expectations and then providing the support for students to attain these objectives. Several mentioned the progress that specific programs have made in this direction.

In particular, the principal of a school in Manderson, South Dakota described a program that places Native American students on a college track beginning in Grade 8. He stated that approximately 90% of the students in the program continue on to college and earn their degrees, while the remaining continue on to technical schools and enter the military. In the coming year, the program aims to expand and include Grade 7 students through a Gear Up grant. While moving students toward college readiness, this program also addresses the need to improve communication between middle school and high school teachers to ease students' transition between schools.

Participants described positive experiences with the Early College High Schools for Native Youth program coordinated by Antioch University in Seattle, Washington, a national network of small schools that blend high school and 2 years of college in order for students to graduate with diplomas and associate degrees by Grade 13. A woman spoke about tribal leaders' success in requesting that this program interweave culturally relevant content and processes through the model program when implemented first in Washington State and then beyond. The Early College High Schools for Native Youth program is an example of educators raising expectations for students; the incorporation of culturally-relevant materials suggests the possibility for simultaneously addressing participants' concerns regarding academics and cultural responsiveness. It is yielding

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results in terms of higher test scores, higher graduation rates, and increased college enrollment.

Participants also discussed the importance of strong relationships between the community and the schools. Due to the historic relationships between Native American communities and schools, Native American students may not enter the classroom with a positive outlook (Reyhner, 1989). Therefore, it is crucial for educators and families to closely connect the community with the schools, by strengthening the channels of communication. By raising academic expectations for students, the community and teachers will engage with each other in new ways. However, increased expectations alone will not fully address the particular cultural needs of Native American students. The change in relationship needs to extend to students' families as well, to ensure that all the different people providing students with support can work collaboratively. They must demonstrate that the school and community are no longer separate entities, building trust and comfort in the classroom.

Several participants described cultural events that have opened the school doors to the community. These events have allowed teachers and parents to connect in a culturally-comfortable context. For instance, focus group participants shared that educators held community suppers at their local schools where the community introduced traditionally prepared food to the school staff. Other events provided students the opportunity to share their culture within the school day. For example, some teachers have incorporated culture into a range of courses including history and science; students have created cultural timelines and have learned why certain crops are grown together. One project, called the Light of My Life, asks each student to bring to the classroom someone who is the light of his/her life, enabling Native American students to build a sense of community by sharing their experiences. Other schools have incorporated musical, theatrical, and dance performances. In describing all of these projects, the participants provided anecdotal evidence of students' positive responses to the integration of culturally-based activities into their school experience.

On a similar note, the superintendent from the Red Cloud School District of Pine Ridge, South Dakota described the district's cultural responsiveness and increased expectations for students. The district set a goal of 100% enrollment by high school graduates in post-secondary opportunities including the military, technical schools, and colleges, while weaving culture across the curriculum. The superintendent was able to connect the district's cultural and academic approaches to the previous year's success of 41 out of 42 students' enrollment in post-secondary programs prior to graduation, with four seniors receiving Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation scholarships. The participating educators consistently asserted that when students see themselves, their lives, and their histories reflected in their academic surroundings, they are much more likely to engage in learning and achieve at higher levels.

## Recommendations for High School Redesign

The challenges and promising practices identified by the focus group participants resonate with several other organizations' assessments of high school reform, such as those of The Aspen Institute (2003) and the National High School Alliance (2004), while clarifying the unique needs of Native American high school students. The Aspen Institute's (2003) analysis of the significant and consistent progress made by California, Maine, Rhode Island, and Vermont secondary schools includes six lessons learned:

- Reformers need to build a strong case for change.
- Reformers must work from a clear and consistent vision.
- The state must support the reform through aligned policies.
- Reform requires technical support.
- Reform requires additional resources, often from a combination of sources.
- Reform requires consistent attention over a specific period of time.

After analyzing the national policies and programs that impact high schools and their students, as well as the national discussions of high school redesign,

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the National High School Alliance (2004, p.4) created a list of four “significant factors in transforming educational systems:”

- Aligned standards and assessments;
- Preparation and development of educators;
- Active, powerful, and knowledgeable communities; and
- Innovations for transforming high schools.

Focus group participants voiced similar recommendations, but again emphasized the importance of augmenting these actions with ones that specifically address the needs of Native American students.

### Emerging Themes: New Recommendations

“Although common sense and research findings document that parents and communities perform fundamental roles in sustaining effective schools, policy discussions concerning high-school reform in the United States remains largely an insider’s conversation” (National High School Alliance, 2004, p. 4).

The National High School Alliance’s insistence on the community’s value reflected above is similar to that of the focus group participants. Participants emphasized the importance of incorporating the community’s voice into the schools and the conversations of high school reform taking place at the state and national levels. Moreover, two major themes -- academic achievement and cultural responsiveness -- were viewed as priority areas. The following recommendations were the outcome of the focus group meeting and subsequent conversations with successful Native American educators. They urge policy makers, educators, and community members to work towards:

- Aligning standards, curriculum, and assessment across grade levels;
- Improving communication between educators at the primary, secondary, and postsecondary levels;
- Raising expectations for student work; and
- Assessing the best use of available resources.

Each of these recommendations will help both raise the expectations that educators and communities hold for students and improve the understanding of those expectations. While academic achievement is a concern for everyone involved in high school redesign, the implementation of these actions is particularly important in addressing the needs of Native American high school students. For example, focus group participants noted that previous failures to create a range of academic tracks with Native American students in mind (part of encouraging students to participate in challenging courses), caused one particular track to become the default track for all Native American students, thereby addressing only the needs of some students. Successful implementation of all these recommendations has the potential to improve the results described by both the educators at the focus group and the statistics on educational achievement of Native American students.

The discussion of culturally-responsive education generated another list of approaches to improving Native American high school students’ learning experiences. The focus group presses reformers to focus on:

- Incorporating the community into the design of educational programs;
- Addressing students’ cultures across the curriculum;
- Improving professional development; and
- Disseminating and researching promising practices.

While some of these recommendations may not initially seem to be culturally-specific, participants stated that they should all be implemented with an attention to culture and described potential approaches for doing so. For example, high schools can reach out to families through a feast or small powwow, rather than an open house night. Similarly, participants suggested that schools could create programs in which Native American students meet weekly with Native elders or role models to remind themselves of motivations for working hard in the classroom. Research on promising practices could provide the opportunity to recognize educational achievements in ways that are

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consistent with Native American values of honoring and celebrating the community. Further, promising practices could demonstrate how educators have introduced culture in the classroom and how policymakers and communities have supported them, while professional development could provide new instructors with the background and skills to do so. Each of these steps would then encourage students and teachers to recognize the value of Native American cultures and the relationship between culture and classroom instruction. While the cultural component of many of these suggestions has been absent from the broader discussion of high school redesign, when implemented properly, these steps could further improve many of the same conditions that new academic standards are trying to address.

## Conclusion

The statistical assessments in conjunction with the shared expertise of the CCSSO focus group demonstrate that while Native American high school students have similar challenges as non-Native American students, they also have unique needs. The Indian education community has a particular vision for its students that warrants a place in the discourse on high school redesign. Not only can this community articulate the unmet needs of Native American students, but it can also shape interventions in unique ways. Reform advocates must partner with state and district leadership in order to support existing approaches that hold promise and bring to scale those that show evidence of success. By respecting and honoring the commonalities and particularities of both Native American students and educators, reformers can build a clear and unified effort toward an education system responsive to all students.

The Council of Chief State School Officers will incorporate the recommendations cited above to its on-going programmatic initiative in the following areas: high school reform; school improvement initiative; and the partnership to promote increased educational outcomes for American Indian, Alaskan Native and Native Hawaiian students.

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### Contributors

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