

**Indian Education Primer
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Spirit Mountain Community Fund**

by Jackie Grant

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Introduction

Despite gains in the educational success of American Indian/Alaskan Native students over the past twenty-five years, statistics indicate this group continues to lag behind other minority students in academics. Research about American Indian/Alaskan Native educational achievement, high school completion, college attendance and college graduation rates demonstrate the situation is multi-faceted and complex. One known factor continues to be the lack of highly qualified Native teachers, coupled with the lack of training for current and new non-Native teachers.

There is growing awareness about how learning styles, cultural differences and impacts of assimilation affects the intellectual abilities of American Indian/Alaskan Native students. This has increased the amount of dialogue among educators on tactics to best deliver Indian education. The term “Indian Education” is not well understood by the majority of educators and there remains, within the mainstream educational system, ongoing bias and prejudice against American Indian/Alaskan Native students. The term “Indian Education” has different meanings for different people. In talking to several Indian Educators, it is clear there are some who are not in support of “Indian Education” as a separately defined field. They assert that it is a way for educators to narrow expectations of a segregated group of students thought to be less qualified to learn. If true, this attitude needs changing.

Bias and prejudices are a fixed part of our society. But when biases and prejudices impact the learning process it becomes a significant problem for education. This problem manifests itself in many ways. For example, a young man asked board members of the Oregon Department of Education to address the issue of Indian mascots in high school sports after he and his teammates almost came to blows with another team over this sensitive topic. This issue, among others, plays itself out within an ever-changing landscape of Indian Education. Legislation, funding and programs create a dynamic and often difficult environment for Native students, their parents, teachers and administrators.

Trends

The nine federally recognized Oregon tribes build local education programs through their tribal education and social service departments. Tribes have conducted localized assessments about the needs of their communities and students and developed programs to address those needs, though not all tribes can afford the same types of programs and levels of investment. Geographic location is another complicating factor for some tribes, influencing both local educational and funding opportunities.

Prior to 1975, federal funds were available to LEA’s (Local Educational Agencies), then known as the Title IV Act. Currently these funds are still provided to tribes through federal monies but

are now known as Title VII. In many cases, the funding is channeled directly to the schools. There are some cases where tribes administer Title VII funds themselves.

Another complicating factor is determining how best to increase parent involvement in Indian Education in the State of Oregon. Parents must be empowered to model tenacity and find ways to create and support successful programs for Native students in the state.

There are positive developments, however. Oregon tribes have been actively involved in public education for Indian students for some time. The Oregon Indian/Alaskan Native State Plan was adopted by Oregon Department of Education in March 1989. The Oregon Pre-White House Conference was held at Willamette University for the purpose of developing recommendations for the 1992 White House Conference on Indian Education. This work has enhanced working relationships between tribes.

There is a positive sense of community among Oregon Tribes surrounding issues of tribal education. Tribal education staff have benefited from information and resource sharing as a result. This had further led to some true successes, such as the formation of charter schools and teacher incentive programs like the one at Warm Springs School District, Madras 509-J. The government-to-government relationship it established has helped to create a forum for tribal staff to come together to discuss issues and problems, as well as offer moral, political and financial support to one another. Indian organizations and tribal coalitions have worked together to promote state and regional conferences addressing Indian Education.

Student demographics

The total number of students attending Oregon public schools in 2005–2006 is 559,215. Since 1980, the number of American Indian/Alaskan Native students attending public school in Oregon has increased by 54 percent to its current enrollment of 11,678 students. Based on projected growth rates, that number will increase to 12,400 by the year 2020. (*Oregon Report Card 2005-2006*, <http://www.ode.state.or.us>.)

American Indian/Alaskan Native K–12 students attend schools in the highest numbers in the following counties: Clackamas, Coos, Jefferson, Klamath, Lane, Marion, Multnomah, Umatilla and Washington. The majority of Oregon’s Indian population resides in urban areas, specifically Multnomah, Marion and Lane counties (⁴*2000 Census*.) Counties with high student enrollments are located in both rural and urban locations.

Of the 709 American Indian/Alaskan Native students who completed high school in 2004–2005, 122 students earned the regular diploma with a Certificate of Initial Mastery (CIM). Five

hundred eighty-eight students earned a regular diploma, thirty-one students earned a modified diploma, and ninety received a No Credential diploma.¹

During 2004–2005, Oregon experienced the lowest ever high school drop out rate of 4.2 percent. The drop out rate for American Indian/Alaskan Native students has declined over the past six years and currently is at 5.6 percent. For comparison, the dropout rate for African American students is 6 percent, and 8.1 percent for Hispanic students.

As for college, during 2003–2004 a total of 84,215 students enrolled in Oregon’s community Colleges. American Indian/Alaskan Native students are entering community college at the lowest rate of 1.8 percent, behind African American students at 2.1 percent, Asian/Pacific Islanders at 4.5 percent and Hispanic students at 5.6 percent. At 1.3 percent, American Indian/Alaskan Native students represent the lowest total enrollment at Oregon University System (OUS) schools. American Indian/Alaskan Native students earned the lowest number of degrees awarded—173—by OUS in 2003–2004. There are currently eighteen American Indian/Alaskan Native teaching faculty at OUS’s eight schools (*OUS Diversity Report 2005* <http://www.ous.edu/dept/ir/diversity/2005%20OUS%20diversity%20report.pdf>)

Impacts, challenges and successes

Notwithstanding the growing awareness of American Indian/Alaskan Native education issues, gaps still exist in mainstream education and its acceptance of cross-cultural differences in learning styles. It is still unclear how best to implement effective strategies through the Oregon Department of Education Special Programs. This is further complicated by the fact that American Indian/Alaskan Native students post the lowest percent of students in TAG (talented and gifted) programs across the state, whereas more in-depth research may reveal that American Indian/Alaskan Native students are disproportionately placed in Special Education classes and/or on IEP (Individualized Education Plans). Testing and identification has improved with the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). However, more extensive research would be needed to determine if American Indian/Alaskan Native students are being appropriately identified and placed in programs that meet their individual needs.

One key area that will positively impact American Indian/Alaskan Native student success is a corresponding increase in highly qualified American Indian/Alaskan Native teachers and administrators in Oregon’s education system. The current Native student/teacher ratio is significant: 2.1 percent of all students are Native students, while only .3 percent of Oregon’s teachers are Native. The number of qualified Native teachers and administrators in Oregon

¹ A regular diploma is earned when a student fulfills all school district requirements and state requirements, totaling twenty-two credits, plus competencies. A regular diploma with CIM is earned when a student completes twenty-two credits as described above plus meets all the mastery standards in writing, math, reading, science and public speaking. A student earns a modified diploma when they successfully complete an individualized educational plan (IEP). A No Credential diploma is given to students who didn’t earn a diploma, but who attended high school for the full four years without dropping out. (*High School Completers*, <http://www.ode.state.or.us/search/results/?id=322>)

public schools needs to increase for two reasons: 1) Native students need more role models who are visible and impacting their daily lives and, 2) Native teachers working with non-Native teachers can help dispel myths and misinformation about Native learners.

Funding is an ongoing issue. It impacts every student. However the impact is greater on students who are already vulnerable to the education system due to certain risk factors (socio-economic, geographic, special needs, etc.). Federal funding allocated to states for education has increased slightly since 1999. However, federal funds for Indian Education have steadily decreased since 2004. Local and state funding to Oregon school districts for Indian education has also decreased when looked at across the state.

The challenges of securing federal and state funding are not isolated. They require that legislation, equity, access and race/discrimination issues be further analyzed and discussed at the state level. One outcome of any effort to systematically improve Indian education in Oregon might be to pull together researchers and data to better assess where we stand as a state on these matters.

There are a number of successful programs in Oregon of note. The earliest teacher preparation program for American Indian/Alaskan Native students was the *Warm Springs Teacher Intern Program*. This program was collaboration between the Confederated Tribes Warm Springs and Oregon State University. Over its three year operation, twenty-two American Indian/Alaskan Native students completed the program and nineteen qualified teachers graduated.

Another is the Portland Teachers Program, a partnership between Portland Public Schools, Portland State University and Portland Community College. This program is for students from all minority/subgroups. The number of Native students enrolled in this program is currently small but will hopefully increase over time.

Two new charter schools have opened on and/or near Indian Reservations: the Siletz Valley Community School located in Siletz, Oregon, and the Nixyaawai Community School located in Pendleton, Oregon. A charter school is community-based school with customized curriculum and focus. Districts must approve a charter school in their respective district(s). A percentage of the funds follow the student to the charter school. Additional funding is brought in from grants, private and/or tribal dollars. In addition to state curriculum, the Siletz Valley School and Nixyaawai Community School both focus on Native curriculum, culture and language preservation. Charter schools require high parent involvement and participation. In both cases, the immediate results appear very encouraging.

Successful programs are built on clear vision, where everyone works toward attainable goals and outcomes. Common themes that successful programs share are:

- Federal and state support
- Tribal leadership and support
- Parent and student buy-in
- School and community partnerships
- Program reporting and accountability

Program visibility

Next steps for Oregon

Increase training for current and new non-Native teachers
Build partnerships between tribes and Native communities with local school districts
Increase and stabilize funding
Increase two and four year college and tribal partnerships
Increase Native Teacher Training Programs
Involve business community
Seek grants to build and promote successful programs

Programs to consider in the future

Willamette University's Native Program, overseen by Oregon Native Advisory Council. This program is supported by the office of the President and students presently volunteer at Chemawa Indian School.

The Lewis and Clark Graduate Program for Indian educators:
<http://www.lclark.edu/org/orcenter/indianeducators.html>

NAYA Family Center's Charter School with Portland Public Schools:
www.nayapdx.org

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