

From Where the Sun Rises:

**Addressing the Educational Achievement of Native Americans
in Washington State**

Snapshot



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Addressing the Educational Achievement of Native Americans in
Washington State**

by

The People

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Introduction

Welcome to this report, which may someday be remembered as one of the last plans that was published before sweeping changes were fully integrated into our educational systems to support all children. The desire to instill a pivotal nature in this document reflects not on the authors who present this plan to the Legislature, but instead on all the people who have worked and will continue to work diligently to change the face of education in Washington as it is now currently known. From where the sun rises, we have seen promise return to our Native communities. We feel the urgency to prepare the people to live a meaningful life in a place where they discover their skills and abilities while experiencing how these contribute to the well-being of their community.

Purpose, Research Questions, & Action Plan

The purpose of this study was to conduct a detailed analysis of factors contributing to an educational “achievement gap” for Native American students. One of the primary foci was to analyze the progress in developing effective government-to-government relations between tribes and school districts and identification and adoption of curriculum regarding tribal history, culture, and government as provided under RCW 28A.345.070. Throughout were efforts to: (a) identify performance measures of achievement and success that are culturally and community appropriate to monitor adequate yearly progress, (b) determine what constitutes achievement and success for Native American students from the perspectives of Native stakeholders, and (c) conduct a detailed analysis of factors contributing to educational achievement and success of Native American students.

Empirical support was found for the achievement gap between Native American students and European American students in Washington. Specifically Native Americans scored significantly lower across all subjects (reading, writing, math and science) and across all grades when compared to their European American counterparts. A factor that contributes to lower scores is the percentage of Native American students enrolled within a school district, thus indicating that there may be unique challenges and stressors facing public schools with higher numbers of Native American students that affect their academic performance on standardized tests. Additionally, school personnel factors predicted higher scores on the WASL among Native American students in elementary, middle and high schools. However, when examining the databases provided for this report, there is a significant data gap for Native American students and how they are doing in Washington. Therefore, the trend of the “achievement gap” may be more of a reflection of a “data gap,” rendering Native American students “invisible” in terms of educational policies and procedures. More research needs to be conducted so that every Native child’s educational progress is monitored in a consistent, respectful and timely manner.

The outcome is a comprehensive plan for promoting educational success and closing the achievement gap. These foci were addressed with the recognition that there is an ongoing effort in the State of Washington to value place-based knowledge, revitalize First People’s languages,



and integrate culturally responsive pedagogy. The intent of this study, therefore, was to ensure that we close the achievement gap and maintain Native American cultural integrity while promoting indigenous knowledge, language, values, and practice. Our action plan was straight forward, and responsive to the legislative intent, and built around four overlapping and interconnected phases. To start, it was important to understand our current context and then evolve into a phase to analyze current types of data collected and data gaps. The third critical phase focused on listening to the people in order to formulate implications, conclusions, and recommendations while laying the foundation for the fourth and final phase of reporting.

Comprehensive Education Plan to Increase Native American Educational Achievement

In the introduction of this report, we started with a vision and stated that this report was being presented to the legislature with an understanding of our Native legacy and a responsibility to all learners; we asked that you, the reader, listen with a constructive mind and open heart. The goals and recommendations in this report are grounded in a foundation of work that is currently being done. This will not be a plan that sits on a shelf, because the people doing the work outlined in this study are creating change now and they will continue to do so. This plan was requested because education leaders are troubled by what they are seeing: an achievement gap between Native and non-Native students. We identified why this achievement gap is happening and describe how we can close that gap within five years and eliminate the gap by 2020. As listed on pages 104-106, we believe that our investigation confirms the need for achievement and success goals in at least four areas:

- **Teachers, Administrators, School Boards, and Tribes.** We offer four goals that speak to the critical need to develop relationships between school districts and tribes. A sustainable relationship will depend on a shared understanding of the cultural protocols and policies of each domain. This shared understanding will serve as the foundation for formal relationships to emerge and flourish. An ultimate indicator for the Native community to know whether or not a relationship evolves is the incorporation of Native language, culture, and history in the public school curriculum.
- **Health and Well-Being.** We advance six specific goals to ensure that our Native children are given an opportunity to be their best in school and life. This means establishing measurements to monitor the health and well-being of Native American children, youth, adults and families that are reliable, valid and standardized based on a sample of Native Americans in Washington State. We also need culture-based prevention and intervention programs to provide important transition services and reduce risk factors. Ultimately, in place will be standard assessment instruments in public and tribal schools that assess students' overall well-being and social and emotional functioning.
- **Academic Achievement and Educational Attainment.** We have seven goals to advocate that Native children are proficient or advanced in reading, writing, and math at various grade levels and upon high school graduation. To do so will mean increasing the number of students passing all their classes in junior and senior high school and reducing truancy and dropout rates. This needs to be complemented by increasing Native student exposure



to college preparation opportunities. We will be able to ascertain progress by monitoring increases in high school graduation and college going rates.

- **Assessment of Learning.** Here we list two goals that support Native students by offering assessments that will provide more intervention and direction to students and families to improve student learning. Several other primary outcomes will be an assessment that includes indicators endorsed by Native communities and a determination of whether all students can demonstrate mastery pertaining to the ancestral and contemporary history of tribes and urban Indian communities in Washington. The evidence of true progress will be whether or not public school districts and OSPI embrace indicators of achievement and success that are relevant to Native students and are equally applicable to non-Native students.

We feel that these goals are listed in order of priority; although each area has its own justification for being the focus of financial and policy support. Of course there are other equally important areas. The justification focusing on building relationships among teachers, administrators, school boards, and tribes brings attention to all the stakeholders that can provide leadership and service. Education professionals, parents, business, and the public at large possess the spirit of support for those ultimately held responsible for the education of our children. We heard this in the many listening sessions held throughout the state. Increasingly vocal was the call for Native people to be active in the mission, scope, and influence of educating their community. To do so, we highlight five recommendations:

1. **Shift the Paradigm through Relationship Building (fuller description, pp. 107-131).** From the onset, we believed that there is the possibility to develop a comprehensive plan already in action. It is a plan that represents the concerted efforts of community and political leaders over the last couple of decades and that will serve us well into the future. It is made possible when important stakeholders representing the public's interests feel that Native children are important. Although obvious, it is not always a position that is borne out in today's reality. What is emerging is a movement of stakeholders who recognize that tribal sovereignty strengthens community ethos rather than weakens political agendas. Much of it simply starts with acknowledging that Native people have a language, culture, and history. That such acknowledgement raises an obvious bewilderment of, "Why haven't we done this before?" We believe that funding should support efforts to develop relationships between public school districts and tribes as well as help urban Indian education programs to integrate Native teaching and learning that benefits Native and non-Native children. We highly recommend that this funding support the integration of curriculum by well-trained stakeholders agreeable to the spirit of this report.
2. **Provide resources for pre- and in-service educators and stakeholders (fuller description, pp. 132-141).** We need to graduate non-Native and Native teachers/administrators/school psychologists and related service providers whose knowledge, skills, and cultural understanding will bring about the changes needed to improve the education of Native children and youth. This approach would help assure effective and efficient use of resources, time, and talents required to implement such programs and would assure sustainability of the programs. Equitable education for Native



students with or without disabilities is essential to the future of all Native peoples; as such, it is a matter of social justice. It is time for all universities/colleges in the state of Washington responsible for administrator/teacher/related service provider professional training to systemically address Indian education. We also need to consider the increasing degrees of sophistication operative in tribal schools and lessons to be learned in the areas of programming, instruction, curriculum, parental involvement, and relationship building. Tribal schools in Washington include Chief Leschi, Lummi Tribal and High School, Muckleshoot Tribal School, Paschal Sherman Indian School, Quileute Tribal School, Wa He Lut Indian School and Yakama Tribal School. We are convinced that our public school colleagues can learn from the experiences of their tribal school colleagues.

- 3. Improve data collection and reporting (fuller description, pp. 141-147).** Clearly, we have a chance to develop a database that reports on indicators of interest to society at large and Native populations. We can do so while protecting confidentiality and informing policy and practice. Collectively and finally, data pertaining to Native students can be used by program personnel close at hand to guide daily decisions and develop long-term strategies; and remember that we can seek higher levels of data aggregation until statistical confidence is satisfied (i.e., county or ESD level if data are limited at the school or district levels). Indicators should include noncognitive factors that influence academic achievement. Many people recognize the need for improved data collection and reporting, and we recommend following up on the opportunity to partner with ETS which has the technical capability and substantive understanding of how to do so.
- 4. Develop a partnership with the National Education Association (fuller description, pp. 147-149).** NEA developed a research-based guide entitled, *C.A.R.E.: Strategies for Closing the Achievement Gap*. *C.A.R.E.* stands for Culture, Abilities, Resiliency, and Effort and partnering with NEA offers the opportunity to take advantage of established resources that target the very issues we are addressing in this report. Such a partnership is exciting because NEA is willing to revise any materials and resources to develop culturally competent school systems that meet the needs of Native students and communities. We anticipate that following through on a recommendation to partner with NEA will result in opportunities to share our learning and successes with national audiences through NEA conferences, the NEA website, and the trainings that NEA produces for its 3.2 million members.
- 5. Increase state support and collaboration (fuller description, pp. 149-151).** We need funded mandates to expand service delivery and maintenance of existing state programs that can address issues of concern identified in this report. This means expanding OSPI's Indian Education Office while maintaining services offered in the Center for the Improvement of Student Learning (CISL), Title I-Part A, Office of the Education Ombudsman (OEO), Family Policy Council (FPC), and Governor's Office of Indian Affairs (GOIA). Calls for increased levels or maintenance of funding may be tenuous given the current economic crisis. However, this is the most important time to invest in the most renewable and sustainable resource we have, our children. To help states and tribes wrestle with funding priorities, we are setting the stage for a meeting of foundations (tribal and non-tribal) to dialogue about the report's goals and recommendations with the specific



purpose of funding action strategies to close the achievement gap between Native and Non-Native students.

Conclusion and Summary

There is a persistent recurring theme in the literature that Native language, culture, and history are important to Native people and critical to the educational attainment and achievement of their children. We found that the health and well-being of youth and their families are primary concerns due the historical circumstances that conspired against Native American educational achievement. It is clear that to do well in school and life, there must be the physical, emotional, and spiritual balances in place to really cultivate intellectual skills and abilities. We found that quantitative indicators do suggest an achievement gap. However, it was equally important to find that standardized indicators are not good predictors of educational achievement among Native American students and that improvement in data collection and reporting are necessary to guide policy and practice.

This is an ever present call for Washington State leaders to advocate for an education system that honors our students' languages and cultural heritages. This was reaffirmed by Native people throughout many listening sessions we held to document the people's voice. We would do ourselves a favor to honor our first teachers, the plants and the animals, and to do so in a way that respects the environment. Because it is so important, a plan emerged to establish goals around pre-service training and professional development for critical stakeholders, the health and well-being of youth and their families, academic achievement and attainment, and assessment of student learning. To realize these goals, it was recommended that we: (a) shift the paradigm through relationship building between schools, tribes, and Indian education programs leading to integration of Native language, culture and history into the public school system; (b) provide resources for pre- and in-service educators and stakeholders; (c) improve data collection and reporting to better inform policy and practice to promote student learning; (d) develop a partnership with the National Education Association to better align with teacher resources; and (e) increase state support and collaboration to increase Native American educational achievement because the most renewable and sustainable resource we have is our children.

