

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

There are an estimated 4.4 million American Indian and Alaska Native¹ 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 (U.S. Department of State 2005).

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. Legally and politically, 561 tribes are recognized as sovereign nations by the United States government (U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs 2007). There are an estimated 209 indigenous languages spoken in North America today (Smithsonian Institute 2006); around twenty of those are spoken by Alaska Natives.

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 624,000 American Indian and Alaska Native students in the U.S. K–12 system (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2005b).
- 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) (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2005b).
- American Indian and Alaska Native teenagers suffer from poverty, suicide, teen birth, and substance abuse at rates higher than the national average (Henson and Taylor 2002).

¹ 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.

- Often, the civil rights and cultural identities of American Indian and Alaska Native students are not supported in the classroom (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 2003).
- 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 (Clarke 2002; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 2003).

Graduation, Dropouts, and Preparedness

- The national graduation rate for American Indian high school students was 49.3 percent in the 2003–04 school year, compared to 76.2 percent for white students (EPE Research Center 2007).
- Only 44.6 percent of American Indian males and 50 percent of American Indian females graduated with a regular diploma in the 2003–04 school year (EPE Research Center 2007).
- American Indian and Alaska Native high school students who graduated in 2000 were less likely to have completed a core academic track than their peers from other racial/ethnic groups (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2005b).
- 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 (Reyhner 2001).
- The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reports that 83 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native eighth graders read below grade level, compared to 61 percent of white eighth graders (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2005a).
- 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 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2007).

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 (Orfield and Lee 2005).²
- Fifty-four 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 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2006).

² Some sources use the term “Native American” to indicate American Indian and Alaska Native populations.



- 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 (Orfield and Lee 2005).
- 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 (Orfield and Lee 2005).
- Seventy percent of BIA-administered schools failed to satisfy No Child Left Behind Adequate Yearly Progress requirements in 2005 (U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs 2006).
- In 2004, 22 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native high school students reported being threatened or injured with a weapon on school grounds in the previous twelve months, compared to 11 percent of black, 9 percent of Hispanic, and 8 percent of white students (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2005b).
- In public schools with high Native American enrollment, only 16 percent of teachers are Native American (Manuelito 2003).³
- Though 23 percent of Alaska public school students are Alaska Natives, just 5 percent of the teachers are (Alaska State Board of Education and Early Development 2003; McDowell Group 2001).
- Because BIA schools tend to be in isolated communities with limited amenities, it is often hard for them to recruit teachers (U.S. Government Accounting Office 2001).
- 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 (Alaska Department of Education and Early Development 2006).

Special, Gifted, and College Preparatory Education

- Although American Indians and Alaska Natives scored higher, on average, than black and Hispanic high school students on both the verbal and mathematics sections of the SAT college entrance exam in 2004, they still scored below the national average (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2005).
- The gap between the average verbal scores of American Indian and Alaska Native students and those of the total student population tested on the SAT widened from twenty-two points in 1996 to twenty-five points in 2004 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2005b).

³ This source does not explain its definition of “Native American” and therefore may include Native Hawaiians, Guamanians/Chamorros, Samoans, and other Pacific Islanders.



- American Indians and Alaska Natives constituted just over 1 percent of the student population in 2006 but only 0.6 percent of the population taking the Advanced Placement exam (College Board 2007).
- American Indian and Alaska Native students were more likely than students of other racial and ethnic groups to receive services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Specifically, about 12 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native students received IDEA services in 2003, compared to 8 percent of white, 11 percent of black, 8 percent of Hispanic, and 4 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander students (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2005b).
- 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 (U.S. Department of Education 2000).
- About 20 percent of students at BIA schools receive special education services (U.S. General Accounting Office 2001).
- 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 (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs 2004).
- 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 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2006).
- 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 (Watt et al. 2000).



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