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Varied Strategies Sought for Native American Students

Some focus on culture while others emphasize strict academic approach in raising achievement.

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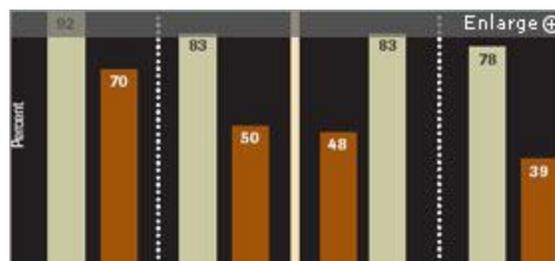
Rapid City, S.D.

Educators working to improve the performance of Native American students are struggling to find the right balance between core academics and attention to native culture as a way to help engage and motivate children, according to those at a multistate gathering on the topic here last week.

But the educators and scholars from a number of Western and Midwestern states agreed on at least one thing: If they want to improve achievement for all students, they're going to have to improve it for their American Indian students, who represent a large, and in many cases increasing, portion of their enrollments.

Native American Schooling

Percent of students scoring as proficient or advanced on the Dakota State Test of Educational Progress 2007



South Dakota's challenges are typical of those faced by states with large American Indian enrollments.

Ethnicity or Race	Enrollment, Fall 2006
Asian	1,158
African-American	2,099
Hispanic	2,501
Native American	12,710
White/Caucasian	101,810

SOURCE: South Dakota Department of Education

“This conference wouldn’t be happening if it weren’t for the No Child Left Behind Act,” said Rick Melmer, South Dakota’s secretary of education, whose department was host to the 2007 Indian Education Summit. The Sept. 19-21 event drew attendees from as far away as California and Alaska.

Thanks to the 5½-year-old federal law’s requirement that schools track test scores and adequate yearly progress for Native Americans and other subgroups, Mr. Melmer said, people in his state became acutely aware that large numbers of Indian students weren’t doing well and that something needed to be done about it.

In South Dakota, Native Americans make up 11 percent of the state’s 102,300 students in public schools, the largest single minority group. An additional 8,500 such students attend Bureau of Indian Education schools in South Dakota.

This school year, the only two public school districts in South Dakota that require state intervention because they have consistently missed AYP goals under the federal law are on the Rosebud and Pine Ridge Indian reservations.

Weighing Academics, Culture

While educators in Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming, and other states with large Native American populations have recognized the need to raise such students’ achievement, schools have taken different approaches to that task.

Subscribing to the philosophy that Indian students are best served by a focus on core academics was Ben Chavis, a former principal of the American Indian Public Charter School in Oakland, Calif., who gave a keynote address on the first day of the conference.

Mr. Chavis told how over five years at the school he helped change the academic performance of students by paring down the curriculum to focus on language arts and mathematics. The school went from having one of the worst academic records in Oakland to having one of the best, he said. It also grew far more diverse, from having 27 students, most of whom were Native American, to 230 students, 12 percent of whom are Native American.

Mr. Chavis said that when he started as the principal in 2000, students were spending an hour each morning in a practice derived from Native American culture called a "talking circle," in which they were "sitting around in the circle passing the feather."

Though he grew up attending segregated schools for Native Americans in North Carolina, he saw that practice as a waste of time and eliminated it. He also moved cultural electives such as music to after-school programs, so the school day could be spent on core academics.

But in a breakout session that followed Mr. Chavis' address, Sandra J. Fox, a member of the Oglala Lakota Nation, and a consultant on Indian education, said she encourages schools to take a very different tack—in one school, she quipped, "we instituted a talking circle."

In general, Ms. Fox stressed the importance of incorporating Native American culture and history into lessons and teaching in ways that are compatible with that culture. She said, for example, that many Indian parents teach their children by doing or showing, rather than telling, and that such a method works well also in school with such children.

"Indian children watch and watch and watch, and don't want to try it until they think they can do it," she said.

Ms. Fox also recommended that teachers use "instructional conversation," in which they sit in a circle with students, informally introduce a subject they are about to teach, and ask for student input. She said that Native American children also respond well to hearing lessons in a storytelling form.

M. Jay Cook, the chairman of the school board of the 1,100-student Cheyenne-Eagle Butte School and a conference attendee, also is an advocate of infusing more Native American culture into the curriculum in his school system, which is located on the Cheyenne River Reservation, in South Dakota.

Under the NCLB law, he said, "a lot of money is going to technology and staff development, but [federal officials are] forgetting the language and culture." He said the achievement of children on his reservation also is hampered by teachers from off the reservation who aren't sensitive to the children's culture.

Meeting AYP

Still, some administrators in South Dakota districts with large numbers of Native American students that have made adequate yearly progress under the federal law say they stressed academic rather than cultural approaches.

Amy Loeb, the principal of the one-school, K-12 McIntosh school district on the Standing Rock Reservation in South Dakota, said in an interview that her district was able to make AYP with the help of after-school programs emphasizing homework and tutoring, and summer programs focused on reading, math, and enrichment classes.

Likewise the 940-student Chamberlain district near the Crow Creek Reservation implemented programs focused on core academics when the district missed making AYP for several years because Native American, special education, and economically disadvantaged students did poorly.

Tim M. Mitchell, the superintendent of the Chamberlain district, said it recently moved out of the category of a school needing improvement under the federal law after it hired math and reading specialists for every grade, extended the school day, and provided transportation for children to stay after school for tutoring, among other measures.

Keith Moore, the director of the Indian education office for South Dakota, said his office is just starting to get a handle on which schools with many Native American students are doing well under NCLB.

“We didn’t have an Indian education department for close to 15 years,” he said, noting that the office was reopened in July 2005, when he was hired to direct it. He and a half-time administrative assistant make up the office.

Recently, he said, the state has acquired new tools to improve Indian education. In the last legislative session, state lawmakers passed the Indian Education Act, which made the Indian education office, which is part of the state education department, a permanent fixture. The law also required for the first time that all teachers take a three-semester-hour course in American Indian history and culture to become certified to teach in the state.

Mr. Moore said the conference was an attempt to “bring states together that have a significant population of Native Americans and share stories.”