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## The Shifting Sands of American Indian Education in the Northwestern United States

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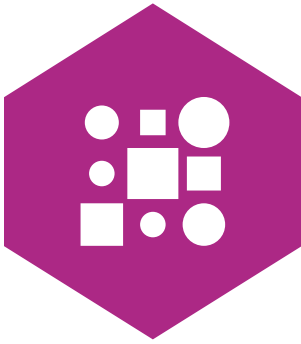
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# The Shifting Sands of American Indian Education in the Northwestern United States

Patricia F. Hornback,<sup>1</sup> George Fox University, USA

*Abstract: This article is intended to provide an overview of significant historical influences affecting American Indian education and to identify encouraging emerging trends in American Indian education in the Northwest. An overview of historically significant approaches to federal American Indian education is discussed. Specific examples of encouraging trends in increased tribal involvement observed in federal Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) and Northwest public school districts are provided. Examples include educational partnerships with the Navajo Nation as well as Northwest tribes such as the Lummi Nation, Spokane Indian Tribe, Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, and the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs.*

*Keywords: Native American, Indigenous, American Indian Education, Indigenous Education, Diversity in Education*

## Introduction

The philosophy and delivery of American Indian education has been a point of cultural and intellectual disagreement and contention between Native American communities and Euro-American politicians and educators for generations. The struggle to determine what “good” education for the Indigenous population is (Huffman 2008), who should control it (Reyhner and Eder 2017), and what pedagogical approaches should be used to deliver it (Meriam 1928) have contributed to American Indian student performance being among the lowest in the United States education system today. Conflicts of culture (Voller-Berdan 2003), worldview (Sanchez and Stuckey 1999), politics (McCoy 2000), and economic disadvantage (Meriam 1928) have added to an already difficult situation for educators attempting to develop and deliver more meaningful and effective education for Indigenous students. To further compound the situation, federal regulations and agencies overseeing American Indian education have been deeply influenced by the volatile nature of the shifting federal Indian policy and laws in the United States (Getches et al. 2011).

## Native American Indian Education: Law and Policies

The field of American Indian education has long been plagued by a history of distrust and mistreatment (McCoy 2000). This is largely due to the long-term practices of the United States federal government when developing and implementing Indian education programs (Reyhner and Eder 2017). Historically, federal government programs for American Indian education have been treated as a tool to force assimilation on Indigenous people (Huffman 2008; Watras 2004; Laukaitis 2006).

It is widely accepted that American Indian education policy developed as an integral part of the federal government’s general policy of “civilizing” the American Indian (Newton 2017). Consequently, 120 of the approximately 400 treaties negotiated between the United States and North American Indian Tribes describe American Indian education as a means for “civilizing” Indigenous people (Reyhner and Eder 2017, 59). American Indian education was completely controlled by the United States federal government until the 1920s. Within this complex legislative and political environment, American Indian education has been delivered by

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federally-funded mission schools, off-reservation industrial vocational boarding schools, on-reservation vocational boarding schools, and on-reservation day schools (Watras 2004).

Federal laws and policies from 1890 through 1928 established that American Indian education would occur under the primary control of the United States federal government (McCoy 2000). The US government believed that a controlled boarding school education delivered with rigid discipline could be an effective method for replacing Native American children's culture of origin with Euro-American culture and beliefs (Voller-Berdan 2003). In 1869, the United States government implemented a school system where Christian denominations were provided federal funding to establish and run mission schools for Native Americans (Voller-Berdan 2003). These institutions run by Christian missionaries consisted of faith-based day schools and boarding schools. The primary focus of these schools was to evangelize Indigenous students and assimilate them into Euro-American religious practices and culture (Voller-Berdan 2003). Native American students were forcibly removed from their communities and taken to these boarding schools, often against their will.

In 1879, Henry Pratt opened the first off-reservation government-run American Indian boarding school in Carlisle, Pennsylvania (Fear-Segal and Rose 2016). Carlisle Indian Industrial School offered half-day instruction in basic academic subjects. Students spent the other half of each weekday learning and performing various manual labor and industrial skills. The usefulness and applicability of the vocational skills learned and practiced by Native American students in these industrial schools varied (Reyhner and Eder 2017). Nonetheless, by 1905 there were twenty-four off-reservation government-run American Indian boarding schools functioning on various versions of the Pratt industrial school model of education across the United States (Fear-Segal and Rose 2016). Many Native American students attended these institutions because failure to do so resulted in the United States Indian Service withholding essential food rations or the removal of the Native American children from their families by force (Voller-Berdan 2003).

The United States Secretary of the Interior Hubert Work commissioned the *Meriam Report* in 1927. This report was produced by the Institute for Government Research under direction of Lewis Meriam over a seven-month period in 1927 (Reyhner and Eder 2017). The report compared the activities of the United States Indian Service to similar programs provided by other US agencies (Watras 2004). It included findings derived from visitation and observations of Indian reservations, schools, and agencies across the United States. The findings submitted to Congress in 1928 concluded that Native Americans were subject to unreasonably harsh conditions under the administration and practices of the U.S. Indian Service and recommended significant changes in the administration and delivery of federal programs for American Indians (Watras 2004).

The deplorable conditions and oppression experienced by Native American students and communities is apparent in the findings of the *Meriam Report*. The general findings of the report concluded that Native Americans, confined to reservations during this era, were very poor, lacked the economic opportunity to be economically self-sufficient, and were not provided with adequate education to improve their situation (Meriam 1928). Recommendations for the improvement of American Indian education included replacing the common curriculum with curriculum and instruction tailored to the needs, interests, and culture of the Native American reservation communities where students resided; discontinuing the reliance on Native American child labor to maintain the boarding schools; reducing the number of American Indian boarding schools while increasing the number of day schools on the reservations; and sending American Indian students to state public schools when locally available (Meriam 1928).

The *Meriam Report* was the catalyst for replacing many federal boarding schools with day schools where education could occur within "local Indian life" and for reducing the uniformity and regimentation within the remaining federal Indian boarding schools (McCoy 2005, 8). In addition, the *Meriam Report* findings contributed to the passing of the *Indian Reorganization Act* and *The Johnson O'Malley Act* in 1934 (McCoy 2005). These congressional acts provided the

context and funding that reduced the federal government's control of American Indian education while transferring much of the responsibility for delivering American Indian education to state, and potentially, tribal governments (Watras 2004).

From 1933 to 1950, Commissioner of Indian Affairs William Collier implemented initiatives to replace Indian boarding schools with day schools and local public schools, develop and use curriculum that encouraged and supported Native American culture, and provide vocational training that was focused on meeting the needs of the tribal communities that students were from (Laukaitis 2006). The Indian day schools of this era were central to the Native American communities they served. The curriculum and activities intentionally revolved around the interests, values, and priorities of the Indigenous students and their communities (Watras 2004). This shift in focus resulted in greater academic success and cultural sensitivity in the curriculum. Students and teachers were encouraged to allow use of both Indigenous and English languages in the schools, Native culture and art were valued and promoted, and education was focused on equipping Native students to solve the problems in their communities instead of preparing them for vocations that require they leave the reservation (Watras 2004).

In the 1950s the US federal Indian policy of Indian "termination" was introduced. This national policy was based upon the goal of forcing Native Americans to assimilate into the dominant American culture (Watras 2004). Between 1953 and 1958, many federal Indian schools were closed in areas where local public schools were available. Many Native American students began attending state public schools (McCoy 2005). However, Bureau of Indian Education day schools and residential schools in more remote locations continued to operate (McCoy 2005).

Between the 1920s and 1970s, control of American Indian Education was referred to state governments in many instances. Forced assimilation was carried out as a pervasive theme in American Indian boarding schools until as recently as the 1970s (Reyhner and Eder 2017). While managed by either the federal or state governments, American Indian Education programs, facilities, and curriculum were deficient in many ways. Student achievement results among Indigenous students in these programs and schools were significantly lower than the performance of students in other American school systems.

The Robinson-Zanartu and Majel-Dixon (1996) study concluded that Native American parents living on the reservations were dissatisfied with Bureau of Indian Education schools and much preferred tribally controlled educational options for their children. An increase in tribal influence over American Indian education began to emerge in 1972. It is a fairly recent development that tribal organizations have been allowed to participate in the governance, curriculum, and decision making for institutions of American Indian education. This change was made possible by the enactment of the *Indian Education Act* of 1972 and the *Indian Self-determination and Education Act* of 1975 (Public Law 93-638), the *Impact Aid Amendment* of 1978; and the *Tribally Controlled College Assistance Act* (1978). Special programs for American Indian students began to be funded through the American Indian Education Act. During this era, tribes became eligible to contract for Johnson-O'Malley (JOM) funds. This legislative shift marked the beginning of tremendous changes in federal American Indian educational policy. The *Tribally Controlled School Grants Act* was passed in 1988 and the *Native American Language Act* became law in 1990 (Reyhner and Eder 2017). These acts have proven foundational in providing the authority for tribal governments to administer American Indian Schools, previously managed by the Bureaus of Indian Affairs (Reyhner and Eder 2017). However, there have also been significant issues in the calculation of appropriate funding for the JOM programs.

While the number of eligible Native American students increased significantly between 1995 and 2018, the annual allocated budget amount for JOM services remained static for the same time period (NJOMA 2009; Pruitt 2019). The JOM Supplemental Education Modernization Act passed on December 31, 2018. The act requires that updated population data and new JOM rules and regulations for increased tribal involvement in JOM administrative decisions be provided to Congress by January 2020 (Pruitt 2019). The updated population data estimate used for 2019

allocations increased the JOM funding provided across the nation significantly for the first time since 1995.

The United States federal government's acknowledgement of tribal rights to be involved in educating their people has changed the landscape of American Indian education significantly. The more recent legislative acts have granted tribes increased influence and control over the methods and delivery of education in both federal and state schools (McCoy 2000; Reyhner and Eder 2017; Pruitt 2019). Indian education today has improved a great deal when compared to the early efforts of assimilation and federal or state dominance over American Indian people. Today's American Indian Educational environment provides opportunities for Tribes to exercise greater control and involvement in formal educational partnerships with federal and state governments (McCoy 2000). However, there is still room for improvement.

Native American student enrollment in post-secondary education is lower than that of any other racial or ethnic group in the United States (U.S. Department of Education 2017). There are many factors that contribute to the lower enrollment of American Indians in US educational institutions. Among them are the effects of poverty, cultural dissonance, and the residual effects of a poor Indian education system for generations (AIHEC 2017). It is worth noting that according to the 2016 U.S. Census, Native Americans experience poverty at almost twice the rate of all other Americans. In 2016, 27 percent of Native American experienced poverty compared to the national poverty rate of 14 percent.

Once enrolled in educational institutions, Native American students experience many barriers to successfully completing formal education. Native Americans have much lower high school and college completion rates than white students or other students of color (Reyhner and Eder 2017). Seventeen percent of Native Americans did not finish high school (US Census Bureau 2016). Many American Indian students experience "an unfriendly school climate" (United States Department of Education 1991). In addition, Native American students are only half as likely to graduate from college as their peers. The United States national average for earning a college degree is twenty-eight percent. While the national average for Native Americans students earning a college degree remains consistently lower at only fourteen percent (Native American College Fund 2018).

Furthermore, the effects of disjointed and culturally hostile American Indian educational systems had an adverse effect on Native American views of the value of formal Euro-American forms of education (Deloria 1991; Littlebear 1992). The Red Horse study (1980) found that Native Americans who practice traditional Indigenous life ways tend to view formal Euro-American education as detrimental to their culture and identity. Huffman, Sill, and Brokenleg (1986) found that for Native American students who do choose to attend college, traditional Native American worldview and practices appeared to have a strong correlation to academic success. Huffman (2008) identified a four-step process experienced by many Native American students attending public and private colleges off the reservation that frequently results in their withdrawing from higher education. The study further identified that the Native American student participants tended to experience the college environment as alien and difficult to relate to, which manifests as an initial feeling of alienation. Shortly thereafter, students further developed the perception that college was an agent of assimilation, resulting in a sense of disillusionment. As these students rejected the assimilation they perceived to be occurring, they experienced emotional rejection. If the progression continued, these Native American students eventually transitioned into a state of disengagement and physically withdrew from college. However, in the Huffman (2001) study, 75 percent of the students experienced transculturation and were able to persist in completing college, while 25 percent did not, resulting in their eventual withdrawal from higher education.

The recent growth of the tribal college system and the expansion of programs available in the Tribal college environment is a promising trend in American Indian Education. This growing involvement of tribal governments in tribal colleges programs contributes to an increasing the

number of Indigenous students who are attending college and improving college completion rates among Native American students (Native American College Fund 2018). The involvement of the tribal communities is also contributing to the increased development and delivery of culturally appropriate methods for providing education to Native American students (Native American College Fund 2018).

## Encouraging Trends in American Indian Education in the Northwest

Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) schools are located in twenty-three states on sixty-three separate American Indian reservations (BIE 2019). Currently, 130 of the 183 elementary and secondary schools funded by the United States Federal Bureau of Indian Education are tribally controlled. In addition, the BIE operates fifty-three primary and secondary schools and two colleges (Bureau of Indian Affairs 2017). Each of these schools must comply with the United States Bureau of Indian Education Blue Print for Reform (2014), which focuses on improving Native American education by encouraging federally recognized Indian Tribes to assume control for BIE schools (BIE 2014; Jung 2016). The challenges facing many BIE schools include inadequate facilities and conditions for students, the need for students to travel long distance to attend school, the effects of high poverty rates among students and communities served by these schools, high school discipline rates, and graduation rates of 53 percent compared to the national average of 81 percent (National Indian Education Association n.d.).

A specific example of how tribal involvement and control over BIE schools is improving Native American school experience can be seen at Crystal Boarding School on the Navajo Nation. At Crystal Boarding School, control of the school has been turned over to the Navajo Nation. An immersive Native American education curriculum is taught, which includes traditional Navajo language, song, dance, and culture in a boarding school setting. In addition to significantly increased tribal involvement and curricular changes, necessary infrastructure and facilities upgrades to ensure student safety and well-being have been promised by the BIE (Jung 2016). Crystal Boarding School student growth in mathematics and reading was among the highest of the national BIE schools. The number of students at the fiftieth percentile in mathematics increased from 3 percent in 2010 to 45 percent in 2013 (Northwest Evaluation Association 2014). In addition, the annual growth rate in mathematics for Crystal Boarding school students increased from 42 percent in 2010 to 75 percent by 2013 (Northwest Evaluation Association 2014). Student performance at or above the 50th percentile in reading increased from 11 percent in 2010 to 18 percent by 2013 (Northwest Evaluation Association 2014). The annual growth rate in reading for Crystal Boarding School students also increased from 32 percent in 2010 to 67 percent in 2013 (Northwest Evaluation Association 2014). The *Bureau of Indian Education Report on Student Achievement and Growth* did not observe substantive improvements in math or reading for the larger group of BIE schools during the same period (Northwest Evaluation Association 2014).

Educational systems in Montana rank among the most effective in Native American education today (John 2016). In 1972, Montana became the first state to include a statement pledging to use educational resources to preserve Native American culture and heritage. In 2002, Montana implemented the *Indian Education for All Act* (IEFA). In 2005, the Montana state legislature funded and initiated the implementation of the provisions in the IEFA (Klein 2017). Teachers in Montana state public schools consistently report that the implementation of this IEFA is having noticeable positive effects on students regardless of their heritage. The Montana Department of Education provides materials and training to support public school teachers in learning about and teaching Native American studies in an integrated manner. Indigenous approaches to math, science, history, as well as social studies are used in the classroom in many Montana schools (Klein 2017).



Beyond primary and secondary education, the Montana State University system is also known as a leader in Native American Indian education (MSU 2018). Programs and access for Native American students are promoted as well as areas of study in Indigenous Studies at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Montana State University offers integrated experiences in Native American culture for students from all backgrounds that includes a higher ratio of Native American faculty than many state university systems, university sponsored Pow-Wows, Indigenous activities, and other Native American cultural events.

Examples of state public school reform and improvements in Native American curriculum and student success are also occurring in Washington State. Washington State public schools are required by law to incorporate Native culture, history, and governance into their curriculum. Currently, there are fourteen elected Native American school board members in Washington State, more than ever before. Wellpinit School District has achieved greater success in American Indian education by partnering with local American Indian Tribes to improve Indian Education. In Wellpinit, 87 percent of students are Indigenous, but only a small portion of the school's teaching faculty are of Native American descent. In this context, Wellpinit School district implemented a new Native American curriculum "Since Time Immemorial." This curriculum was developed and delivered in partnership with the Spokane Indian Tribe. In addition, grant funds were secured to further partner with the University of Washington Native Education Certification program, Spokane Community College, and Washington State University to prepare teachers to deliver the "Since Time Immemorial" curriculum and support them in addressing the specific educational needs of Native American students (Walker 2017).

Academic achievement results for Native American students in the Wellpinit School District have been mixed. The percentage of students meeting language arts proficiency has improved, ranging from 20 percent in 2014 to 24 percent in 2017. However, the most recent language arts proficiency results from 2018 show a slight decline to 21 percent (Washington State Department of Education 2018b). Similarly, math proficiency for Native American students in the Wellpinit School district has varied but shows an upward trend. Native American student achievement in mathematics in Wellpinit School district was 14 percent in 2015, declined significantly to 7 percent in 2016, improved to 12 percent in 2017, and fell to 11 percent in 2018 (Washington State Department of Education 2018b). The graduation rate for Native American students in the Wellpinit School district varied widely between 2014 and 2018. The average graduation rate for these years was 78 percent, ranging from a high of 90 percent in 2015 to a low of 62 percent in 2017. In 2018, 76 percent of Native American Wellpinit students graduated (Washington State Department of Education 2018b).

Ferndale School District, in Ferndale, Washington, is also experiencing success in improving Native American Indian education. By partnering with Lummi Indian Tribe, Ferndale School has introduced a Native American Education program to provide an active parent network, social media presence, and a new Native American curriculum: The new curriculum is providing a more integrated experience of Native American culture through Lummi Language, culture, song and dance in classroom sessions as well as at the Ferndale Festival of Arts, Culture and Family Cultural Fair.

Academic achievement results for Native American students in the Ferndale School District have improved consistently since 2014. The percent of students meeting language arts proficiency has steadily increased from 14 percent in 2014 to 21 percent in 2018 (Washington State Department of Education 2018a). Proficiency results in mathematics for Native American students in the Ferndale School District have also steadily improved from 9 percent meeting state proficiency in 2014 to 16 percent meeting state proficiency in 2018 (Washington State Department of Education 2018a). High school graduation rates for Ferndale Native American students have increased from 25 percent in 2014 to 55 percent in 2018 as well (Washington State Department of Education 2018a).

Improvements in American Indian Education have also been occurring in Oregon State public schools. Since the enactment of the *Oregon Educational Act for the 21st Century*, Oregon public school districts have been required by state law to provide culturally sensitive Native American curriculum for all students and supplemental services for Native American students. The Oregon Department of Education formed the Oregon Indian Education Council and ensures the inclusion of American Indian/Alaska Native communities in the development and delivery of curriculum.

The Oregon Department of Education also created the *Indian Student Bill of Rights*. Specific schools within Oregon that have implemented enhanced Native American curriculum and are experiencing greater student success include Warms Springs K–8 Academy and the Willamina School District (Hefling 2017). Warm Springs K–8 Academy is a public elementary school in the Jefferson School District and located in the town of Warm Springs, Oregon, on the Warm Springs Indian reservation. Students who graduate from Warms Springs K–8 academy attend Jefferson High School. Warm Springs K–8 Academy partnered with the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs to build and operate a new school for Warm Spring students. The new school provides greater cultural immersion and involvement in the local community while allowing students to attend school nearer their home through eighth grade. Active tribal involvement continues to enhance and form the students' cultural and educational experience at Warms Spring K–8 (Leeds 2014).

Warm Springs student growth rates in language arts for Native American students in grades kindergarten through eighth grade increased from 34 percent in 2016 to 43 percent in 2018 (Oregon Department of Education 2018c). Annual growth rates for Warm Springs K–8 Native American students in mathematics improved from 32 percent in 2016 to 50 percent in 2018 (Oregon Department of Education 2018c). Regular school attendance rates at Warm Springs K–8 Academy ranged from 71e to 74 percent for the same period of time. High School graduation rates for Native American students at Jefferson High School held steady at 100 percent from 2016 through 2018 (Oregon Department of Education 2018b).

Willamina School District has also experienced success in partnering with a local tribal community to enhance Native American curriculum and educational experiences. The Willamina School District has benefitted from the involvement of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde in providing additional culturally appropriate curriculum, programs, and services for their students. Their partnership with the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde has provided greater opportunity for students from all backgrounds to experience Native American culture while also resulting in improvements in Native American student attendance and success that exceed those achieved by public schools of similar size elsewhere in their region (Hefling 2017).

Willamina student growth rates in language arts increased from 53 percent in 2016 to 58 percent in 2018 for grades kindergarten through fifth grade (Oregon Department of Education 2018a); language arts student growth rates for Native American students in sixth through eighth grades increased from 42 percent in 2016 to 51 percent by 2018 (Oregon Department of Education 2018a). Annual growth rates for Willamina Native American students in mathematics were also high. Kindergarten through fifth grade math growth rates improved from 36 percent in 2016 to 57 percent in 2018. Sixth-through-eighth-grade math growth rates for Native American students improved from 24 percent in 2016 to 42 percent in 2018 (Oregon Department of Education 2018a). In addition, regular school attendance rates also improved for Native American students in all age groups at Willamina Elementary School, Middle School, and High School for the same period of time. Regular attendance increased from 56 percent in 2016 to 71 percent in 2018 for Willamina kindergarten through fifth grade students. Attendance for Native American Willamina students in sixth through eighth grade increased from 61 to 67 percent for the same period of time, and Native American student attendance at Willamina High school improved from 50 percent in 2016 to 75 percent in 2018 (Oregon Department of Education 2018a). While academic growth patterns are very positive for recent kindergarten through eighth

grade students in the Willamina School District, high school graduation rates for Native American students in the Willamina School District have declined from 100 percent in 2016 to 71 percent in 2018 (Oregon Department of Education 2018a). However, the reported “On Track to Graduate” results for Native American ninth grade students at Willamina High School increased significantly from 52 percent in 2016 to 81 percent in 2018 (Oregon Department of Education 2018a).

## Conclusion

The history of American Indian education in the United States and in the Northwest is a tumultuous and tragic story in many ways. The historical, political, and cultural conflicts between the United States and American Indian tribes continue to be the source of many obstacles for Native American students. The inequitable treatment of Indigenous people as perpetuated through generations of American Federal Indian Law and policy has created disparate conditions for Native Americans. These conditions have impacted student access and performance in academics. It has also resulted in inadequate Native American studies curriculum in public schools in the Northwest.

However, recent trends in federal American Indian Education policy and state laws have begun giving greater authority to tribal governments for the education of their children. In addition, partnerships with tribal governments and Indigenous communities are providing culturally authentic and supportive Native American curriculum in an increasing number of public school systems today. Partnerships with American Indian Tribes such as the Lummi Nation, Spokane Indian Tribe, Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, and the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs have the potential to increase the academic success of Native American students.

Academic achievement results for Native American students at each of the schools discussed are promising. Native American student proficiency in language arts and mathematics has increased consistently and graduation rates have improved by 30 percent in the Ferndale School District. The Warm Springs K–8 Academy is showing significant improvements in student academic growth rate in both language arts and mathematics, and Jefferson High School Native American student graduation rates have held steady at 100 percent for the past three years. Annual academic growth rates in language arts and mathematics were positive for Willamina School District, and Native American student performance in “On Target to Graduate” indicators at Willamina High School have increased by 29 percent since 2016. Wellpinit School District also shows gradual upward trends in language arts and mathematics that may be early indicators of increased success among Native American students.

While Native American student assessment results continue to be lower than the national average, indicators of student growth in language arts and mathematics show improvement for each of the schools reviewed in this study. Significant improvements in student results at Crystal Boarding School, Warm Springs K–8 Academy, and Willamina School District are promising. Slower but consistent improvements in Native American student performance at Ferndale School District are also encouraging. Potentially positive early indicators of improvement in Native American student performance are occurring in Wellpinit School District as well. The opportunity for further analysis will improve as additional years of student performance data becomes available. In addition, the opportunity to conduct observations and interviews with stakeholders involved in these partnerships could provide useful insight. The generally positive trend in academic performance of Native American students in each of these schools warrants further study. Inquiry into the pedagogical approaches, supplemental services, and programs used in these partnerships between tribal communities and public school systems may prove helpful in determining factors that will enhance Native American academic performance and improve Native American student experiences in school.

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*The International Journal of Diversity in Education* is one of four thematically focused journals in the family of journals that support the Diversity Research Network—its journals, book imprint, conference, and online community. It is a section of *The International Journal of Diversity in Organizations, Communities and Nations*.

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