

# STRATEGIES

TO IMPROVE OUTCOMES FOR  
AMERICAN INDIAN STUDENTS



THE CENTER ON  
STANDARDS &  
ASSESSMENT IMPLEMENTATION

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# INTRODUCTION

In 1991, the Indian Nations at Risk Task Force issued its final report, *Indian Nations at Risk: An Educational Strategy for Action*, recommending five major research-based strategies to address the urgent need to improve the quality of education for all American native students. Yet today, despite dozens of well-intentioned reform efforts, the condition of American Indian education is as pressing for native students as it was 25 years ago. In particular, American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) student achievement and graduation rates remain far below national averages, in addition to persistently high absenteeism and suspension/expulsion issues.<sup>1</sup>

AI/AN students often face well-known achievement barriers *beyond their control*, including low socioeconomic status, less access to highly qualified teachers, and reduced levels of family and community support. But they also often face other barriers, including poor physical school conditions, large geographic distances from schools, and higher rates of drug and alcohol use. These factors combine to

produce persistent gaps for AI/AN students on nearly all indicators of success.

The purpose of this CSAI publication is to help states, school districts, and schools develop strategies to overcome these barriers. Our recommendations are based on an extensive review of research of indigenous cultures in the United States, Canada, and Australia.

We encourage state and district leaders to incorporate AI/AN strategies into a written Master Plan, including needs assessment, goal setting, action steps, implementation, data collection, reporting, and evaluation. CSAI, through regional comprehensive centers, can provide technical assistance to help states and districts develop a successful AI/AN Master Plan.

In an era of higher standards and more challenging assessments, the need to improve outcomes for American Indian students has never been greater. We encourage you to join us in this vital endeavor.

<sup>1</sup> In this publication, AI/AN refers to all American Indian (AI) and Alaska Native (AN) students living on or off reservations and served by any type of school.



# DEVELOPING AN AI/AN MASTER PLAN

It is often said that goals without a plan will become unmet goals. Consequently, we encourage states, districts, and schools to work with their major constituencies (tribal leaders, district leaders, principals, teachers, staff, parents, and students) to develop a comprehensive AI/AN Master Plan that incorporates research-based strategies to reduce AI/AN achievement gaps and provide better outcomes for *all* students.

School and community subteams can be assigned to specific goals or needs, with a subteam leader reporting back to the overall team.

An effective AI/AN Master Plan should include:

- 1 Needs assessment** — identify specific problems and needs.
- 2 Goal setting and prioritization** — goals should be precise, time-bound, and measurable.
- 3 Action steps for each goal** — intermediate steps should have clearly defined objectives, individual and team responsibilities, funding needs, and timelines.
- 4 Implementation** — action steps should be monitored for progress and adjusted as necessary to meet goals.
- 5 Collection of performance data** — outcome information should be collected and reported frequently to all stakeholders.
- 6 Annual written report** — provided to full team, school/district leaders, and community.
- 7 Evaluation** — identify which goals have been met, what actions are most likely to help reach remaining goals, and next steps.



# RECOMMENDED ACTIONS TO REDUCE BARRIERS

In developing your AI/AN Master Plan, it is helpful to understand the factors that impact student achievement and to consider possible strategies to address each factor. This section includes lists of both common barriers and other additional barriers related to AI/AN outcomes, with recommended actions.

The first three barriers, socioeconomic status, access to highly qualified teachers, and levels of family and community support, are common to many disadvantaged students. Additional barriers, including AI/AN high-risk factors, geographic distances, physical school conditions, and distribution and population of schools, often place AI/AN students at higher risk than other groups, including blacks and Latinos.

## COMMON BARRIERS FOR DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS

### **Socioeconomic Status**

Although schools cannot change the socioeconomic status (SES) background of students, they can take active steps to diminish the many negative effects of low SES on learning (Jensen, 2009). Districts and schools serving AI/AN students should have:

1. **Strong Leadership.** An effective school principal often sets one or two very specific school-wide goals and then rallies teachers, staff, students, and the community to achieve those goals. Schools with high populations of AI/AN students need and deserve the very best leaders you can provide.
2. **Mentor Programs.** Ensure that all students, or at minimum the most challenged students, have an advocate to help them set and meet academic, career, and personal goals.
3. **High Quality Pre- and After School Programs.** Research increasingly shows that such programs produce positive effects for students with low SES backgrounds, including higher achievement, reduced grade retention, and other long term outcomes (Barnett, 2008; Pianta, Barnett, Burchinal, & Thornburg, et al., 2009; Little, Wimer, & Weiss, 2008).

### **Highly Qualified Teachers and Instruction**

The quality of teachers and instruction is usually considered to have the greatest “school” effect on learning outcomes for any student, AI/AN or otherwise (Demmert, 2001). Schools serving AI/AN students should ensure that teachers have:

1. **Strong content knowledge.**
2. **Effective teaching practices for different types of learners.**
3. **A cultural understanding of AI/AN students.**
4. **Exceptional interpersonal skills.**

Additional attributes of high quality teachers for AI/AN students include:

5. **High, yet flexible standards for all students.**
6. **Adjustable and motivational teaching methods.**
7. **Strong organizational skills.**

The AI/AN *cultural connection* for teachers and instruction appears repeatedly in the literature and should be emphasized in both preservice and professional development programs. Researcher Yatta Kanu (2005) recommends that schools hire more native teachers whenever possible, increase access to native resources in the classroom, and include native culture in all subject areas.



Successful AI/AN instructional strategies often include the following:<sup>3</sup>

1. **Language competence, especially reading at an early age.**
2. **Fostering the belief that motivation and effort are more important than innate ability.**
3. **Emphasis on short term goals.**
4. **Activity-based instruction.**
5. **Cooperative learning and peer tutoring.**
6. **Intergroup competition vs. individual competition.**
7. **Connecting subjects to local and traditional knowledge.**

A number of instructional programs have shown a positive impact on addressing specific AI/AN classroom or school learning needs. See, for example, information contained in the What Works Clearinghouse and the collection of AI/AN resources on the Center on Standards and Assessment Implementation (CSAI) website (CSAI, 2016). Some schools, such as the American Indian Model Schools, have demonstrated substantial achievement improvements using a strong academic focus.

Teacher certification via the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) is a worthwhile goal, and students of NBPTS-certified teachers (NBPTS, 2014) have shown substantially improved results.

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<sup>2</sup> Summarized from *Promising Practices in First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education* (Alberta Education, 2007).

# RECOMMENDED ACTIONS TO REDUCE BARRIERS



## Family and Community Involvement

Geographic, SES, and/or cultural factors may lead to reduced levels of parent and/or community involvement in AI/AN schools (Demmert, 2001). Consequently, addressing this issue is critical. Schools should:

1. **Encourage parent involvement in the design and implementation of school programs**, which has been associated with improved student achievement (Leveque, 1994).
2. **Take advantage of existing teacher and community partnerships and promote new ones** (Kleinfeld, McDiarmid, & Hagstrom, 1985).
3. **Foster local control of schools and community involvement in governance**, which has led to a number of positive AI/AN outcomes (Mason, 1998).

First Nation Schools in Canada (Alberta Education, 2008) have had positive results when:

1. Principals and teachers take primary roles in the development of enhanced relationships with native parents and the community.
2. Respected elders visit classrooms and give talks to students.

## ADDITIONAL BARRIERS FOR AI/AN STUDENTS



### AI/AN High-Risk Factors

In addition to higher instances of alcohol, tobacco, and drug use, AI/AN students often are at major risk for suicide, violence, and depression. These risk factors may contribute to what appears to be a lack of motivation and sense of purpose. To counteract these risks, schools should partner with parents and their communities to:

1. **Identify and target the most critical student social needs.** See, for example, pages 21–24 of *Community Schools: Working Toward Institutional Transformation* (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2008), or chapter 2 of *Resiliency: What We Have Learned* (Benard, 2004).
2. **Collect and report at-risk data.** See, for example, *District-wide Screening for At-risk Students: Strategies for Success* (Lewis & Mitchell, n.d.) and *Montana American Indian Student Achievement Data Report* (Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2014).
3. **Consider specific program interventions.** See the What Works Clearinghouse reviews on dropout prevention programs.

### Geographic Distance and/or Isolation



To counteract geographic distances and the remoteness that is often common to reservation schools, educators should (adapted from Education Northwest (Nelson, 2010)):

1. **Understand rural schools and their communities.**
2. **Identify and build on strengths**, such as smaller class sizes and personalized relationships.
3. **Build a strong technology infrastructure and support system.**
4. **Explore distance-learning opportunities.**
5. **Use data for continuous school improvement.**
6. **Leverage resources and partner with other schools**, such as by sharing professional development experts.



## Physical School Conditions

Although Bureau of Indian Education schools educate just 10% of all American Indian students, many of them are in deplorable condition. See, for example, *Separate and Unequal: Indian Schools, a Nation's Neglect* (Star Tribune, 2015). To address these problems, schools and districts should:

1. **Make sure that school needs are identified**, ranging from school buildings and maintenance to computer labs and recreational facilities.
2. **Prioritize needs into your Master Plan**, with costs and possible sources of revenue identified.
3. **Identify alternative funding sources or methods**, such as naming rights to buildings or facilities, and grants.
4. **Make needs well known through an effective public relations effort.**
5. **Communicate needs to policymakers at every level** through facilities visits or personal interaction; consider partnering with an advocacy group.

See also *Findings and Recommendations Prepared by the Bureau of Indian Education Study Group Submitted to the Secretaries of the Departments of the Interior and Education* (Bureau of Indian Education Study Group, 2014).



## Distribution and Population of Schools

While schools cannot likely change this factor, they can make a difference by focusing on what we know about effective schools, student motivation, and learning. The following recommendations are adapted from Jensen (2009), Usher and Kober (2012), and Brophy (1987).

1. **Review the organizational structure of existing schools, the school day, and the curriculum.** Consider different structures such as smaller schools, schools within schools, a longer school day, or self-paced learning.
2. **Ensure that all teachers and staff are familiar with the school and community culture**, recognizing that parent support may look different from that in other schools, and that American Indian students may have different motivations and interests in learning, socialization, and school in general.
3. **Identify school and staff strengths and weaknesses**, applying strengths to specific needs.
4. **Incorporate social skills learning with instruction.**
5. **Use technology and games to support learning whenever possible**, building on students' technology-based skills and interests.
6. **Adapt programs, curriculum, and teaching to students**, recognizing the uniqueness of each student's motivations, interests, and abilities.

For additional information about how CSAI can help your state, district, or school, please send an email to [csai@wested.org](mailto:csai@wested.org).

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## RELATED RESOURCES

American Indian Model Schools. <http://www.aimschools.org/>

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