



Examining American Indian perspectives in the Central Region on parent involvement in children's education



Institute of Education Sciences
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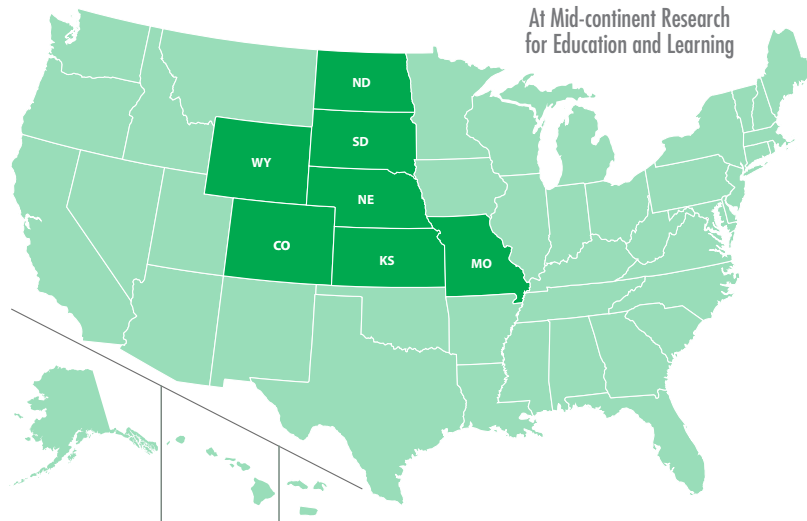
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Examining American Indian perspectives in the Central Region on parent involvement in children's education

This study examines American Indian parents' perceptions of parent involvement in their children's education and factors that may encourage or discourage involvement.

A better understanding of American Indian parent involvement was considered as a possible solution to narrow the achievement gap for American Indian students. Five focus groups, consisting of 47 self-selected parents, were conducted in one state in the Central Region. Factors perceived to encourage parent involvement included a caring, supportive, and communicative school staff and culturally respectful environment; access to American Indian programs, resource centers, after school activities, and clubs; and the presence of an advocate or liaison in each school. Factors perceived to discourage parent involvement included feeling unwelcome or intimidated at the school and perceptions of racism and discrimination; experiencing scheduling, transportation, childcare, and financial difficulties; and having prior negative experiences in their own or their children's education.

Parent involvement is recognized as an important factor in encouraging student achievement (No Child Left Behind Act 2002). However, a survey by the National Center for Education Statistics found that in public

schools with 25 percent or more American Indian students, teachers identified lack of parent involvement as one of their schools' three most serious problems (Freeman and Fox 2005). In the Central Regional Educational Laboratory seven-state service region (Colorado, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming), where American Indian students' performance on state and national assessments lags behind that of their White peers, policymakers and educators have acknowledged the need for research-based assistance in understanding how to effectively involve American Indian parents in improving education outcomes for their children. The Mid-continent Regional Advisory Committee (2005) identified parent involvement as a priority in areas where cultural issues impede student achievement. At an August 2007 meeting state-level policymakers identified as a high priority the need for research-based assistance on American Indian education and ways to close the achievement gaps among ethnic groups.

To begin to address the regional need to close the achievement gap for American Indian students and specifically to effectively engage American Indian parents in their children's education, parent perceptions about involvement are needed. This study starts with parent perceptions because of the history of

American Indian education, which alienated many parents from schools, and because of the lack of relevant current research in this area. The purposes of the study were to examine how Central Region American Indian parents perceived parent involvement and to understand what encourages or discourages their involvement.

Two Central Region communities were selected for data collection, based on the expressed interest of the state education administrator and the support of the state Office of Indian Affairs. Additional criteria for selection included high populations of American Indian students (American Indian student enrollment exceeding 2 percent of the student population) and permission from school district administrators. Recruitment letters were sent to 200 eligible American Indian parents from their school district's office of Indian education. Forty-seven self-selected American Indian parents, reflecting seven tribes from nine reservations, participated in five focus groups.

An interview protocol guided focus group discussions around four main research questions:

1. What do American Indian parents perceive as parent involvement in their children's education?
 2. Why do American Indian parents get involved?
 3. What do parents perceive as barriers to involvement?
 4. Which school strategies do parents perceive encourage involvement?
- Researchers audiotaped the focus group discussions, transcribed the tapes, and checked the transcripts against the tapes. They identified and organized key themes within and across focus groups and then developed the findings from those themes. The process was repeated several times to ensure that the findings accurately reflected the focus group discussions. Researchers used data from the demographics database, field notes, transcripts, coded themes, and sample quotations. Findings were organized into key themes around the research questions as follows:
1. What do American Indian parents perceive as parent involvement?
 - School-oriented involvement
 - Communicating about children.
 - Attending student-centered events.
 - Volunteering.
 - Advocating for their children.
 - Home-oriented involvement
 - Showing interest in children's education and life.
 - Helping with school work.
 - Encouraging and rewarding children to do their best.
 - Reading with children.
 - Meeting children's needs.
 - Involving the extended family and community.
 2. Why do American Indian parents get involved?
 - To help children succeed and build confidence.

- To stay connected with the school.
 - To monitor children's progress.
 - To address a problem.
 - To respond to schools' invitation or welcoming environment.
3. What do parents perceive as barriers to involvement?
- School-oriented barriers
 - Unwelcoming school environment (feeling unwelcome or intimidated at the school).
 - Previous negative experience with education (parents' own or their children's).
 - Perceptions of a school's lack of cultural sensitivity.
 - Different styles of interpersonal communication.
 - Home-oriented barriers
 - Experiencing scheduling, transportation, childcare, and financial difficulties.
4. Which school strategies do parents perceive encourage involvement?
- Printed and electronic correspondence.
 - Communications about children.
 - School staff respectful of parents' educational and cultural values.
 - Open-door policy.
 - Culturally respectful environment.
 - Cultural activities and resources, including American Indian programs, resource centers, after school activities, clubs for children and families, and an advocate or liaison at the school to welcome and assist American Indian parents and children.

Many aspects of American Indian parent involvement were largely consistent with the literature on parent involvement in the general population as well as in other minority cultures. This study found that parent involvement was additionally influenced by parent-school differences in values and communication styles, perceptions of cultural competency in the staff and curricula, and a history of American Indian education policy of coercive assimilation that continues to influence parents.

The challenges of increasing American Indian parent involvement are complex, residing in the overlay—and sometimes clash—of cultures in the public schools. This study provides an initial step toward understanding American Indian parent involvement. It is important to keep in mind that this study reflects the perspectives of American Indian parents; it does not include the perspectives of school personnel or their responses to these findings. This report is intended for researchers, educators, and parents of American Indian students, as a basis for further research and informed dialogue to increase American Indian parent involvement and student academic achievement.

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This study examines American Indian parents' perceptions of parent involvement in their children's education and factors that may encourage or discourage involvement.

WHY THIS STUDY?

This study describes American Indian parents' understanding of what it means to be involved in their children's education. The study was conducted in response to an identified need in the Central Region to improve American Indian student achievement and specifically to better understand American Indian parent involvement. The Central Regional Educational Laboratory conducted focus groups in which parents discussed their motivation and barriers to involvement, including home- and school-oriented factors.

The study found that parents' culturally related perceptions of public education and the tenor of the schools' efforts to engage them in supporting their children's achievement were at the heart of

their motivation—or resistance—to become involved in their children's education. The study provides a foundation to support further research and informed dialogue between schools and American Indian families about parent involvement.

History and conditions of American Indian education

Understanding the issues influencing American Indian parent involvement requires understanding the history of American Indian education. Some of the reasons for low parent involvement are thought to be rooted in parents' negative historical and personal experiences related to federal government policy on American Indian education (Butterfield and Pepper 1991; Cockrell 1992). Originally, the federal government used American Indian education policy to estrange children from their parents, people, culture, language, and values in an effort to force assimilation and conversion to Christianity (Adams 1995; Butterfield and Pepper 1991; Reyhner and Eder 2004). Congress passed laws permitting the Bureau of Indian Affairs to require boarding school attendance and to punish American Indian parents who did not send their children to boarding schools. The poor conditions and psychologically and culturally devastating experiences of American Indian children in government-sponsored boarding schools have been well documented (Adams 1995). Butterfield and Pepper (1991) explain that former policies and practices established for the education of American Indians have left a legacy of barriers between schools and parents. For example, American Indian parents were historically excluded from their children's education, but today parents are expected to be actively involved. In addition, schools historically did not (and, in some situations, still do not) share the same educational and cultural values as American Indian parents.

Several reports and legislative efforts prompted reform in American Indian education in the twentieth century. Both the Johnson-O'Malley Act of 1934 and the Indian Education Act of 1972, as amended, now require parental-committee or tribal sign-off authority for federal programs

servicing American Indian communities. Yet, despite these positive efforts the quality of American Indian education improved only moderately.

In 1991 the U.S. Department of Education's Indian Nations at Risk Task Force gathered data from extensive citizen and educator testimony, 33 school site visits, more than 200 documents, and 21 commissioned papers by experts. The task force reported that the erosion of native languages and cultures and the failure of schools to educate American Indian students were among the reasons American Indians were at risk (U.S. Department of Education 1991). The task force also noted disabling conditions, such as an unfriendly school climate that fails to support student development, a Eurocentric curriculum, low expectations,

relegation to low-ability tracks, poor academic achievement, lack of American Indian educators, lack of parent and community involvement, overt and subtle racism, and the highest dropout rate in the country. The task force identified strategies to

address these challenges, such as improving ways that parents can help their children; strengthening one-on-one relationships between American Indian parents, family members, students, and classroom teachers; and federal legislation to encourage parent involvement (Butterfield and Pepper 1991). The Indian Nations at Risk Task Force report is the most comprehensive compilation of American Indian perspectives on education; however, its suggested strategies have not been studied further.

Some successful programs and strategies have bridged the divide between schools and American Indian students, parents, and communities in ways that respect and incorporate native language, culture, values, and learning styles into curriculum and instruction and include native communities in the education process (Begay et al. 1995; Lipka, Mohatt, and The Ciulistet Group 1998; McCarty 2002; Reyhner and Eder 2004). One success story, the Rough Rock Community School in Rough Rock, Arizona, the first school controlled

by an American Indian community, exemplifies a successful partnership between a school and the local American Indian (Navajo) community (Begay et al. 1995; McCarty 2002).

A more recent legislative effort to improve American Indian education was initiated with passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The act requires states to close achievement gaps between student subgroups and encourages parent involvement (for example, by attending parent-teacher conferences, volunteering at school, encouraging other parents to become involved, learning about the challenges and resources of their child's school, and communicating with school board members, principals, and other state and local school leaders; No Child Left Behind Act 2002).

Despite the efforts to reform American Indian education, success stories remain more the exception than the norm. Although the numbers of American Indian students graduating from high school and attending college have increased over the last 20 years, nationwide gaps persist on key education indicators. American Indian students perform below White students, below the national average in grades 4 and 8 reading and math, and below college-bound seniors' reading and math Scholastic Aptitude Test scores. The American Indian dropout rate in 2003 was almost twice the national average and more than twice the average White dropout rate (Freeman and Fox 2005). In the Central Region states (Colorado, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming) American Indian students' performance on state and national assessments also lags behind that of their White peers (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2006).

Defining parent involvement

One of the challenges of examining parent involvement is identifying an operational definition and measurement. Some research studies use a definition that focuses exclusively on school-oriented activities (Shaver and Walls 1998), while others use a broader definition that includes a range of

Despite the efforts to reform American Indian education, success stories remain more the exception than the norm

home- and school-oriented activities (Gutman and Midgley 2000). Some studies leave it up to study participants to define parent participation, allowing the definition to emerge from the data (Delgado-Gaitan 1991). Because of the unclear definition of parent involvement, especially for

American Indian families, parent participants in this study were asked to provide their own understanding of what parent involvement means to them (see box 1 and appendix A on study methods and appendix B for a more thorough discussion of the definitions of parent involvement).

BOX 1

Study methods

Two Central Region states were targeted for data collection based on the interest, support, and encouragement of state departments of education and state offices of Indian affairs. Approval of the data collection process was obtained through the Office of Management and Budget (see box A1 in appendix A).

Four geographically separated communities were proposed as focus group sites based on their concentrated populations of American Indian students. Permission and cooperation were obtained from school district administrators and parents in two of the four sites (site A and site B). Each site had more than 10,500 students and a “mid-size city” locale classification. The five elementary schools in each district with the highest populations of American Indian students were selected for data collection. Elementary schools were chosen rather than middle or high schools because of cooperation from school staff.

American Indian parents with one or more students in any of the five targeted schools at each site were eligible to participate. Invitation letters were distributed to the 60 American Indian families in site A and 140 families in site B. From these efforts 17 parents

(28 percent response rate) responded by phone or Parent Response Form at site A and 56 (40 percent response rate) at site B. Of those who confirmed, 9 parents attended the group 1 focus group at site A and 38 at one of four focus groups at site B (11 at group 2, 16 at group 3, 4 at group 4, and 7 at group 5). Researchers audio-taped the focus group discussions, transcribed the tapes, and checked the transcripts against the tapes. Key themes were identified and organized within and across focus groups, and findings were drawn from those themes. The process was repeated several times to ensure that the findings accurately reflected the focus group discussions. Researchers used data from the demographics database, field notes, transcripts, coded themes, and sample quotations.

Some participants were not biological parents, but all considered themselves parents by right of having an active role in the upbringing of children. Participants included married parents, single parents, cohabitating partners, foster parents, and three primary care grandmothers. Household sizes ranged from one to six children. Parents mentioned seven tribal affiliations and nine home reservations. Parents revealed diversity in their personal upbringing and education. Some were educated in tribal schools, and some in off-reservation boarding schools. Some

were raised in foster homes or with relatives who were not their parents, and others had grown up in urban communities after their families left the reservation.

Parents were not queried about their level of education, but during the course of discussion 6 parents mentioned having high school degrees, 1 had a General Educational Development certificate, and 15 had at least some college education, including 4 who had degrees. Parents' employment included college student, homemaker, blue collar worker, social service worker, preschool teacher, and small business owner.

A protocol guided focus group discussions around the four research questions (appendix C). Parents were asked to share their understanding of the term “parent involvement” and to describe school-oriented issues that encourage and discourage their involvement in their children's education.

Participants received a small financial reimbursement for travel and childcare expenses. Because of the nonrandom selection of sites and participants, the sample is not representative of any population of American Indian parents, and the findings are not generalizable. Appendix A provides a more detailed description of research methods.

Issues of parent involvement

An extensive body of research demonstrates the positive relation between parent involvement and student academic achievement (Grolnick et al. 1997; Gutman and Midgley 2000; Shaver and Walls 1998). A recent study from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2006) finds that in public schools with 25 percent or greater enrollment of American Indian students, teachers identified the lack of parent involvement as one of their schools' three most serious problems (Freeman and Fox 2005). Yet few studies exist on American Indian parent involvement in the education of their children. Two older studies identify school and home factors that influence parents' motivation to become involved and underscore challenges to encouraging parent involvement. In exploring school-related barriers to involvement, Cockrell (1992) observes that some parents of American Indian students find communication from schools to be inadequate or hostile, and most often geared toward health or disciplinary matters. Butterfield and Pepper (1991) identify such home-based barriers to parent involvement as poverty, health issues, and a perceived lack of ability to assist students with homework.

It has been more than 15 years since these two studies were conducted, and a literature search uncovered no further substantive literature on how American Indian parents' attitudes or perspectives about being involved in their children's education might have changed. Further, although proposed approaches for increasing parent involvement focus primarily on increasing cultural competency in the schools and on educating parents in tutoring their children (Butterfield and Pepper 1991), they do not consider whether cultural factors influence lack of involvement.

In the Central Region's seven-state service region, where American

Indian students' performance on state and national assessments lags behind that of their White peers, policymakers and educators acknowledge the need for research-based assistance in understanding how to effectively involve American Indian parents in improving education outcomes for their children. Parent involvement, where cultural issues impede student achievement, was first identified as a priority by the Mid-continent Regional Advisory Committee (2005). Then at an August 2007 meeting state-level policymakers identified the need for research-based assistance on American Indian education and ways to close the achievement gaps among ethnic groups as a high priority.

In response to the regional need to improve American Indian student achievement and the lack of research on how to effectively involve parents, this study was designed to contribute a preliminary, research-based understanding of American Indian parent involvement in their children's education. The study was exploratory, based on American Indian parents' perceptions of their involvement in their children's education and the underlying issues that affect their involvement. The report is intended for educators and parents of American Indian students, as a basis for advancing conversations for culturally enriching the schooling environment and supporting increased achievement among American Indian students. This descriptive material is also intended to set the stage for future research with a tighter focus on the issues uncovered by this study.

Research questions

The study sought to explore four research questions:

- What do American Indian parents perceive as parent involvement in their children's education?
- Why do American Indian parents get involved?
- What do parents perceive as barriers to involvement?

In response to the regional need to improve American Indian student achievement and the lack of research on how to effectively involve parents, this study was designed to contribute a preliminary, research-based understanding of American Indian parent involvement in their children's education

- Which school strategies do parents perceive encourage involvement?

WHAT WE LEARNED FROM PARENTS

The findings of this study are organized by the four research questions. Evidence was taken from transcripts of the focus groups, as described in box 1 and appendix A. Many of the findings are illustrated with quotations from parent participants. These quotations reflect the views of individuals rather than a viewpoint shared by the group.

What do American Indian parents perceive as parent involvement?

Responses to this question were coded by type of parent involvement: school-oriented and home-oriented. Parents described four kinds of school-oriented parent involvement and six kinds of home-oriented parent involvement (see below). They also explained how other family members participate in their children's education.

School-oriented involvement

School-oriented involvement is described as direct contact with the schools. The four kinds of school-oriented parent involvement, as identified by the parents, are communicating about children, attending student-centered events, volunteering, and advocating for their children's education process.

Communicating about children. Communication with the school was mentioned in all five focus groups. Parents described communication as talking with teachers and principals, visiting the school, emailing teachers, visiting the school web site, talking with school board members and the superintendent, attending parent-teacher conferences, and soliciting feedback from teachers. One parent stated:

One thing that I do in the beginning of the year is I tell the teacher right away that I really like to be involved, and I'm always

available if they ever want to discuss anything with me. And, I'd like to be able to discuss anything with them when I need to.

Attending student-centered events. Parents in all five focus groups spoke of attending school events and serving on boards or organizations as examples of parent involvement. Some of the events listed by parents included parent-student night, open house, grandparents day, graduation, holiday or awards ceremonies, sporting events, scout meetings, Head Start meetings, and school plays. Parents also described starting their own groups; for example, one parent formed a group at her child's school, and they "made American Indian regalia."

Volunteering. Parents in four of the five focus groups listed volunteering as one way they were involved in their children's education. Parents talked about volunteering in the classroom, as a presenter, and for school events and summer work with kids. One parent described a volunteer experience as follows: "At the school he goes to now they have cultural day and they had 40 different presenters there on that day, and I participated as a presenter one day for them. . . ." Parents also spoke of holding decisionmaking roles in the parent-teacher organization, serving on fundraising committees, the school board, and a board to represent American Indian students.

Advocating for their children's education process. In four of the five focus groups parents mentioned their children's Individualized Education Program (IEP) as a way they are involved with their children's education—either asking for a child to be put on a plan or advocating to get a child off one. Two parents describe different experiences with the process in the following two quotations. The first quotation depicts a parent who wanted to sign

Parents described four kinds of school-oriented parent involvement: communicating about children, attending student-centered events, volunteering, and advocating for their children's education process

her child up for an IEP so that she could receive additional support:

So now that's why I'm really backing my children. "Oh, I'm not good in reading. Oh, I'm not good in math," she says. I respond, "Well, let's get involved, and that's why I'm going to sign you up for this IEP, this extra help. It helps. I didn't have that when I was your age."

In this next quotation an aunt and uncle explain how they worked with the school to have their nephew removed from an IEP:

So, they put him on an IEP and said he had something wrong with his hand and he couldn't write, and they had all these issues. Well, that is funny because he could sit and play PlayStation for three hours, but he can't hold a pencil? I had him off his IEP in about a month. And he did fine. He just needed guidance. . . .

Home-oriented involvement

Parents described home-oriented involvement as educational activities occurring outside of school. The six kinds of home-oriented involvement reported by the parents are showing interest in

children's education and life, helping with school work, encouraging and rewarding children to do their best, reading with children, meeting children's needs, and involving extended family and community in American Indian students' home and school lives.

Showing interest in children's education. Respondents from all five focus groups spoke of parent involvement as taking an interest in children's education and life

in general. Parents described this as talking with children often about school and asking questions about what they did, how their day went, and whether they needed help with anything. Parents also spoke of general involvement with their

children, such as observing a child at home, giving advice, and making friends with their children's friends. One parent stated:

Well, for me, it means that parents are taking an interest in their kid's education, not just that but in their life and their skills as they grow up in the community and actually being involved with that.

Helping with school work. Parents in all five groups also described parent involvement as providing help with school work. Examples included checking with teachers or the school on children's progress, setting aside time for children to study or do homework, tutoring or getting tutors, and helping children with their work. One parent described this as follows:

I think parent involvement is more personal to me with my children; helping them with their homework, make sure they're studying their spelling words, reading before they go to bed . . . just keeping a good eye on their academic progress. And, if they start to slip, fix it before it gets too bad.

Encouraging and rewarding children to do their best.

In four of the five focus groups, parents explained parent involvement as encouraging and rewarding children to do their best. Parents described this as being enthusiastic about children's education, displaying children's work, taking pride in children's achievements, and encouraging them to go to school and do their best. One parent provided suggestions on how to demonstrate pride in children's work: "Look at all their papers and hang up what needs to be hung up, make bulletin boards and write down special events and hang up their good grades."

Reading with children. Parents in four of the five focus groups also discussed reading with their child as a form of parent involvement. They spoke of reading books to their children and having their children read to them. One parent explained: "My daughter's lacking a little bit in reading, so I make her read to me. . . . Just about every night too."

Parents described six kinds of home-oriented involvement: showing interest in children's education, helping with school work, encouraging and rewarding children, reading with children, meeting children's needs, and involving extended family and community

I've been buying her chapter books and she loves reading."

Meeting children's needs. In three of the focus groups parents spoke of facilitating their children's success in school by meeting their basic needs. Parents discussed buying books or resources for their children, as well as making sure children got to school, had enough sleep, ate healthful foods, and had clean clothes. One parent described this as walking her daughters to their classroom. She said, "I make a point to walk them to their classroom and watch them hang up their jacket and visit a little bit with the teacher about how they're doing."

Involving extended family and community. When parents were asked to speak about other family members' involvement in their children's education, they described family in a broad sense. Parents spoke of grandparents, the extended family, and the community. In fact, several grandparents attended the focus group meetings.

In three of the five focus groups parents discussed grandparents' involvement with the children. In one case a parent described how she collaborates with her mother to teach her child their native language and culture:

I help my grandma teaching my nine-year-old how to speak Sioux. And it's not part of their education as far as where she goes to school, but she really wants to learn how to speak our language from [tribe name] fluently.

Parents in three focus groups noted that siblings or aunts and uncles help younger family members with school work. One mother described how she helped her younger brother when he had posters to make for a presentation. An aunt described how she provides encouragement to her nieces and nephews:

When my nephews or my nieces come around, that's when I ask them how they've been doing, and I try to encourage them to do better in school. Because, in our family, there's a lot of kids, so they're not always devoted one-

on-one attention. So any time you give them a little bit of positive attention for them to go do something better, I think it helps a lot.

Parents in two of the focus groups described how the greater community acts as a family, supporting their children in school activities and homework. One mother, who was in a treatment facility, described how the other women ask to attend her children's sporting events:

There's probably 37 to 38 other women in there. Not all of them are involved, but a majority of them are involved with my children. Like, my son's going to be playing basketball. Everybody says, "Can we go to his games?" They're like aunties.

A majority of American Indian parents who participated in the focus group reported that the extended family was involved in their child's education, whether through teaching the native language, attending sporting events, or some other way.

Why do American Indian parents get involved?

When parents were asked their reasons for getting involved in their children's education their responses generally fell within five areas: encouraging success, staying connected with school, monitoring progress, addressing a problem, and responding to an invitation. Parents also described their children's perceptions of their involvement in the schools.

Encouraging success.

Parents in all five focus groups stated that parents get involved because it encourages their children's academic success. Parents described how their involvement helps children succeed and build their confidence. "I think if your kids see you involved," explained one

Parents' reasons for getting involved in their children's education generally fell within five areas: encouraging success, staying connected with school, monitoring progress, addressing a problem, and responding to an invitation

parent, “they realize how important school is and that makes them more apt to do better.”

Staying connected with school. Another reason that parents initially get involved is that they feel a need to communicate with the school, teacher, or principal. Parents in all five focus groups spoke of how building these connections helped children feel more comfortable in the school. One parent said:

I think it makes the connection stronger when your child sees you at the school . . . [and] it makes your child more comfortable to be there, and it's exciting for them. You know, for my kids, they say, “Mom, you know, thank you for being here. I just love you.”

Monitoring progress. By establishing connections between home and school, parents felt they had a better understanding of what was going on in the school and were better able to monitor their child's progress.

I have a relationship with my son's teacher in that if I'm not getting what I need out of him on how things are going from his point of view, I'll say, “Do I need to maybe give, you know, [teacher's name] a call and just kind of see what's going on?”

Another parent said, “I told the teacher, or assistant principal, last night: if [my child] hasn't handed in his assignment this week, please get a hold of me right after school and I'll come and get his homework.”

Addressing a problem. Parents in two of the focus groups stated that they get involved in their child's education to address discipline and attendance issues or to address issues with their child's instructional support.

If they're in trouble and if I'm called, I try to get right there if I can. And I really try to

work with the teachers and let the kids see that. . . . There's a few times where I have to go up against the teacher or the principal, and even if—just to show my child that even though they were in the wrong, I still gave them the benefit of the doubt.

Parents in three of the five focus groups also discussed getting involved because they needed to advocate for their children who were on IEPs. One parent described how she started getting involved when the teachers were not following the plan for her daughter's testing needs: “I would say it started in junior high when I noticed the teachers weren't doing what they were supposed to do. They weren't actually following the IEP plan.” Another parent described how she tried to attend every IEP meeting for her younger son to make a case for not placing him on medication for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

Responding to an invitation. Parents in four of the five focus groups described getting involved in response to invitations from their child or from the school. Invitations from children were discussed in two of the focus groups. One parent described it as follows:

My little girl is like, “How come you don't get involved, Mom? How come you don't go to the PTO [parent-teacher organization]? How come you don't come to suppers?” And it makes me think how come I don't? Now I wanna make it up. I want her to say, “Yeah. My mom's involved.”

In three of the five focus groups parents described school invitations as similar to invitations from children to become involved. Parents discussed schools inviting them to participate in events; they also discussed schools having a welcoming environment, which encouraged them to participate. One parent described a school invitation as follows: “When [principal's name] was the principal last year, he was starting Native American Indian clubs . . . [and] he was inviting American Indian parents and trying to have meetings.”

When discussing how children feel about parents' involvement, parents in all five focus groups talked about differences between the feelings of younger children and those of older children

Children's perceptions of parent involvement. When discussing how children feel about parents' involvement, parents in all five focus groups talked about differences between the feelings of younger children and those of older children. One parent said about her older child, "He loved it up to a certain grade and then it was one of those, 'Oh man, here comes my mom.'" A parent in a different focus group described how she remains involved with her son's school, despite his embarrassment when he sees her at school: "Just like you said, they get embarrassed at the school. So, kind of lay low a little bit."

Parents in two of the focus groups described how parent involvement motivates their children and builds their confidence. One parent said, "They're so excited to know that . . . you're interested in what they're doing, so they're gonna show off a little bit."

What do parents perceive as barriers to involvement?

When parents were asked what difficulties or obstacles they have encountered in becoming involved in their children's education, parents in all five groups provided examples. However, some parents stated that they did not experience any barriers specific to them as American Indian parents. Parents' comments about barriers to involvement were categorized as school-oriented and home-oriented.

School-oriented barriers

School-oriented barriers were categorized into four areas: unwelcoming school environment, previous negative experiences with education, perceptions of a school's lack of cultural sensitivity, and different styles of interpersonal communication.

Unwelcoming school environment. Most of the parents' comments about barriers to involvement were related to their relationship with their children's schools and teaching staff. Parents in all five focus groups indicated that they felt intimidated or unwelcome at their children's school. One parent talked about having had a learning disability when she was in school and therefore experiencing a lack of confidence in her ability to assist her child or

volunteer in class. Others described being fearful of making a mistake when talking with school staff or other parents about their children.

Parents in two groups told of getting involved at school and then being discouraged by the outcome. One mother described attending a parent night at her older child's junior high school and feeling unwelcome, sensing hostile stares from non-American Indian parents, perceiving a lack of effort by others to be cordial or to offer her a chair to join an ongoing discussion, and being interrupted by another non-American Indian parent when she attempted to speak. In another group parents also talked about the difficulty of breaking into established relationships and ways of working in the school. In a discussion on invitations and barriers to joining a school's parent-teacher organization, one parent explained:

[I]t's just this clique of people and you're kinda on the outside, and you're not let in. Even my girlfriend, she speaks out a lot more and a lot better than I do. Even she doesn't go anymore because [of] this clique of people.

Previous negative experiences with education.

Parents in four focus groups described how previous negative experiences with education created a barrier to getting involved in their children's education. One couple described their experiences of being raised in a boarding school and in foster care, where they were not exposed to good models of parent involvement in education. The father explained that he therefore did not know how to assist his own children, when to attend teacher conferences, or how he was expected to act at public school functions. Another parent commented that having grown up in a boarding school, he, and a lot of people he knew, had never been exposed to school involvement and parent-teacher

School-oriented barriers to parent involvement were categorized into four areas: unwelcoming school environment, previous negative experiences with education, perceptions of lack of cultural sensitivity, and different styles of interpersonal communication

conferences. In his case these tasks had been taken care of by nuns and priests:

We're maybe first generation parents that are doing it, you know, for me, anyways. A lot of people that I know went to boarding school. . . . [T]hey [his parents] weren't ever at school that I remember, so . . . with my three older ones now, I never went to their school. I took them and I dropped them off, but I never went to a conference, nothing. See, and my mom and dad, they were never there for conferences. . . . Or any kind of interaction there. So, how are we supposed to act when we go there to the functions?

Perceptions of a school's lack of cultural sensitivity.

Across all five focus groups parents talked about their views on how schools handle issues of racism, discrimination, and the cultural heritage of American Indians.

Parents in all five focus groups recounted incidents of perceived racism and discrimination faced by their children when asked what creates barriers to their involvement at school. In one focus group parents discussed a legacy of racial harassment in the local schools. In another group a parent described removing her child from a middle school because of what she perceived as high racial tension. A different group of parents discussed how schools will identify an American Indian child's exhibition of anger as a behavior problem

that needs treatment, rather than recognizing it as a reaction to racial slurs from classmates.

Discrimination was also identified across all five focus groups in the common perception that non-American Indian students receive favored treatment in the local schools. From two of the parents' experiences, American Indian

students are teased to the point of fighting, with the American Indian students bearing more of the blame. One parent told how her daughter had, on

more than one occasion, been treated disrespectfully by a non-American Indian boy in her class:

I would tell her to go to the teacher and tell somebody. She always says, "They aren't going to do anything," and she gets mad and she wants to beat him up herself. I always tell her, "No, you can't do that." I don't know what else to tell her. She won't go to the staff or anybody. She thinks they're not going to do anything about it.

Parents discussed the fact that this situation had occurred for each generation of American Indian students in the public school system, highlighting the problem's long history.

A former janitor in the schools commented on the lack of American Indian artwork and historical references in the local school classrooms. In another group a father shared his wariness about his children's school because it was named after a leading figure in what he termed the "genocide" wars against their people. He was disturbed by how the staff idolized this namesake, without regard for the cultural perspective of American Indian students in the school. Parents in three of the focus groups also mentioned the lack of American Indian school staff as a barrier to feeling culturally at ease.

Different styles of interpersonal communication.

Comments in this area relate to cultural and personal differences in interpersonal style, including how American Indian parents interact with members of the school community. Several of the parents' anecdotes exemplified a cultural tendency to withdraw in the face of potential conflicts with the schools. Across the focus groups there were parents who said that they encouraged their children to solve their own problems at school, effectively sidestepping involvement. When the focus group facilitator asked if a parent was willing to talk to the school about a racial problem, the parent replied, "I didn't know if I should. Why is it our problem? . . . I just told my daughter to stay away."

Parents also mentioned challenges unassociated with the schools that created barriers to involvement with their children's education, with employment as a major inhibitor

American Indian parents admitted that they sometimes cooperated with a school's recommendations for their students' education plans regardless of whether they fully agreed and simply disengaged when they felt uncomfortable or unwelcome. Two parents mentioned feeling nervous about their ability to interact successfully with the school. Both parents reported that reactions to potentially challenging situations also created barriers to involvement.

Home-oriented barriers

In all five groups parents also mentioned challenges unassociated with the schools that created barriers to involvement with their children's education. Parents talked about employment as a major inhibitor to working with their children or the schools. Conflicting schedules and a division of labor with other family members were also mentioned as home-oriented barriers. In two groups single parents talked about their inability to meet all the education needs of each child, particularly with five or six children to raise. Parents with large families also talked about how their younger children benefited from their involvement more than their older children did, because they had more free time and had learned the consequences of noninvolvement with their older children.

Financial constraints, lack of childcare, lack of computer access, and lack of transportation to the school were also identified as barriers to involvement. Although school web sites were available for tracking student progress, at least 30 of the 47 parent participants (64 percent) across the five groups said that they did not use a computer to stay updated on their child's progress or to contact teachers, primarily because of a lack of convenient access. One mother explained why technology was not working well as a way to involve parents:

At the beginning of the year the teachers passed out their e-mail address to everybody, and said if there is a problem or there's something they want me to know, they'll e-mail me. But I don't have Internet in the house.

Two mothers in one group were currently under court-ordered confinement in rehabilitation centers, which limited their physical access to their children's school functions.

Which school strategies do parents perceive encourage involvement?

A series of focus group questions asked parents to discuss school strategies that encourage their involvement. First, parents noted that schools use written correspondence to invite parents to events. Next, parents discussed aspects of that correspondence that motivated their involvement and suggested ways to improve that correspondence. This section is organized by key themes that emerged from the discussions—general communication and school culture and environment—rather than by focus group questions.

General communication

General communication included correspondence, such as newsletters, flyers, and emails, disseminated to groups of parents and individual communications, such as email, notes, and phone calls, from school staff delivered to specific parents about their children. Parents indicated that communications that were more personal and positive motivated greater involvement.

Parents indicated that communications that were more personal and positive motivated greater involvement

Printed and electronic correspondence. When asked which strategies schools use to involve parents, focus group members mentioned printed and electronic means such as flyers, general emails, newsletters, and the school web site. These were used to disseminate information, such as announcements and school directories; describe upcoming meetings, events, holiday parties, and activities; solicit volunteers for organizations and events; and explain how parents can get involved. Generic invitations were typically delivered to groups of parents and seemed to be used most frequently in the preschool and early elementary grades. Only a few parents were prompted to

participate after receiving this type of invitation. Commented one parent, "they more or less just send a flyer home and expect you to be there." Parents in one focus group expressed a desire for more personal invitations.

Few parents in any of the focus groups had Internet access (some did not have telephones). One parent with access to the Internet described how it allows her to connect weekly with her son's teacher: "I email with my son's teacher a lot . . . even though . . . I don't go in the building all the time, I'm in touch with her a lot. I hear from her every week." For the few parents with Internet access email from teachers, access to the school web site, and the ability to electronically check on students' work and attendance were useful. Parents without Internet access preferred to have an interpersonal relationship and face-to-face communication with their child's teachers. When parents ask how their children are doing, they do not want a teacher to suggest that they check the Internet. One parent expressed frustration with her child's teacher because she preferred to use email, despite the parent's attempts to meet in person:

I think that there are ways that are more personal as far as your relationship with the teacher. That's the way I like to deal with it. But, this year, it just seems like, "Well, you know, we don't have time for that anymore." So, I'm just wondering how I'm going to deal with this problem. It is a problem . . . because when you sit down and visit, you not only discuss grades, but you get to know . . . each other and, you know, you can develop that kind of relationship that would help your child.

Concern was expressed that school communications to parents about their children were more often made for negative reasons, such as for behavior and disciplinary concerns

Communications about children. Parents in all five focus groups expressed the need to improve the quality and timeliness of school communications. Concern was expressed that school communications to parents about their children were

more often made for negative reasons, such as for behavior and disciplinary concerns. Suggested one parent:

I think to make Native American parents feel more involved is to give them a positive outlook on their kids instead of calling them with the negative outlook. Because when you do that then you make the parents feel like they're your enemies. So, if they come to us with more positive things . . . then I'd feel more apt to be involved and more willing and wanting to be knowing what's going on in school. The teachers were as much of my enemy as they were his, you know? It seemed like every time they called me they were nagging about my kid. Don't nag to me about my kid. Tell me something good that my kid is doing.

Two parents commented that school communications about children's progress needs to happen earlier, before a child who is a little behind falls way behind. Earlier and more effective communication with parents could avoid this. A parent whose child had just started a new school explained:

I went to a parent-teacher conference last week, and I thought my child was doing great. Well, she's been doing good all these years, but they were trying to imply that she was slow. And I said she is not. She is learning a whole new culture to you people. She's learning English. She's learning writing. She came from a Hidatsa family . . . they were trying to imply that she was slow and I said, 'No, she isn't. You guys just aren't speaking the same language she is.' That's all it is, and they didn't know that. I said, 'Well, I wish somebody would have called me or asked me.' They never sent me letters or anything, except to come in to a conference, and I was wondering why. So I think that they should have had me come in or sent home a paper.

One parent in a court-ordered residential treatment facility complained that she wanted

communication from the school about her child's progress:

I'd like the school to call the [treatment facility] and let me know things that's going on with my daughter at school. . . . Cause I'd like to be involved . . . they don't think I'm worthy of it . . . but I think I am.

Several parents noted that they appreciated phone calls and notes from the school and teachers about their children as long as the messages were presented positively, with genuine concern for the child's well-being rather than to blame parents. Commented another parent, "If my daughter doesn't show up for school or she's late, her teacher calls. She's on the phone trying to get a hold of me to find out why she's not there and make sure everything is okay." When the moderator asked if the parent appreciated this kind of communication, the parent replied, "I think they're helping me by being really understanding of what's going on. They just want to know everything is okay at home."

School culture and environment

The remaining discussions focused on issues that relate to the school culture and environment. Examples outlined in all five focus groups included staff behaviors, attitudes, and invitations; open-door policies that encourage parents to visit, observe, and participate; a fun-, family-, and community-oriented atmosphere; cultural sensitivity; and the kinds of activities and resources available to families. This section is organized into the following topics: staff attitude and behavior, school environment, and general and cultural activities and resources.

Staff attitude and behavior. Staff behavior, attitude, and invitations affect a school's overall culture. Parents highly valued interpersonal communication and relationship-building with school staff. Several parents mentioned having good relations with their children's teachers. Parents in one focus group described how they received weekly

communication from their child's teachers and received personal invitations from teachers to attend activities. Some parents in a different focus group were permitted to call their child's teacher at home.

Parents in three focus groups mentioned the role of the principal in encouraging their involvement. One parent mentioned that she got involved in her child's school because the principal asked her to volunteer. Another focus group participant caring for her grandchild explained that communication between her grandchild and the principal (at the grandmother's request) was helpful when her grandchild did not want to come to school. Other examples of principal involvement and communication included one principal who gave her cell phone number to a parent to call at any time. One parent commented of her school's principal, "[I]f the parent comes to the school to pick up the kids or drop them off, he'll meet you at the door and tell you . . . what's going on, what's happening in school."

Parents in all five focus groups found their school to be more welcoming when staff projected an attitude of genuine caring, concern, and respect and were willing to work in partnership with parents to resolve children's needs. Parents appreciated schools where teachers complimented students and showed concern about their well-being. They also placed a high value on the need for school staff to recognize and greet parents and children by name. One parent said, "A lot of the teachers of my kids were really nice and the principals were really nice. They'd always . . . try to talk to me and they know me by . . . face, not by [child's name's] mom. They know me by name."

One parent noted that it wasn't enough for staff to appear to respect parents and children. Their

Parents in all five focus groups found their school to be more welcoming when staff projected an attitude of genuine caring, concern, and respect and were willing to work in partnership with parents to resolve children's needs

efforts must be perceived as genuine. There had to be congruence between staff's body language and their words, "Sometimes you can see right through people when they're in your face, 'Well, I really want to help you,' but that's not what their body language or that's not the vibe you're getting from them."

Another factor that encouraged parent involvement was staff who appeared dedicated to family involvement as demonstrated by their willingness to take extra steps to help children and families. Examples included staff who would walk children to their taxis, act as advocates for children, and accommodate working parents' schedules. Several parents with no transportation appreciated efforts by the schools to help transport children to school, parents to meetings, and families to school events. One parent explained, "I lived all the way in [city name] so I was like three miles away, and so the teachers would even pick him up to take him to school."

School environment. Parents noted aspects of the school environment that encouraged their involvement, including having open-door policies that encouraged parents to visit, observe, and participate; caring and respectful staff; a friendly, fun, comfortable, and family- and community-oriented atmosphere; and cultural sensitivity character-

ized by an intolerance of prejudice and discrimination, diverse and culturally competent staff, and the use of cultural activities, images, and artifacts in the school halls and classrooms (such as medicine wheels, star quilts, and pictures).

Cultural sensitivity seemed to influence how safe, welcome, and valued parents and children felt in their school

Cultural sensitivity emerged as an important issue in all five focus groups and seemed to influence how safe, welcome, and valued parents and children felt in their school. Three focus groups suggested the need for more American Indian teachers, staff, and volunteers in the schools so that children would feel safer:

I think that they need more Indian teachers. That way when . . . [children] go to class they

say, oh, well, there's an Indian or a Native American. Alright, we're safe. But then if they see a white teacher, they're not. I felt safer with an Indian teacher or more comfortable being around, because you don't know how . . . [White teachers] were raised.

Another parent suggested that, in the absence of American Indian teachers, American Indian children should have access to someone they can feel close to, such as a Big Brothers or Big Sisters type of relationship. Two parents suggested an American Indian grandparent program, with someone who could visit classrooms, tell stories, and connect with American Indian children. Two other parents mentioned that their involvement was encouraged by the presence of either a family or Title VII (Indian education) liaison at their school who works with American Indian families.

Conversations about cultural sensitivity in all five focus groups addressed the need for more cultural competence among teachers and staff and more American Indian culture in the school curriculum. One parent said, "I think that the teacher system, the overall system with the teachers should also include . . . being sensitized towards the Native American families, because there are a few times I felt really uncomfortable going over there." Examples of cultural sensitivity also included removing stereotypes from the school curriculum, reducing blatant and "closet" racism among staff and other students, including American Indian parents in curriculum development, bringing in traditional dancers to talk about cultural awareness, and not just talking about American Indians at Thanksgiving. Another example was the need to increase teachers' awareness that some American Indian parents are not familiar with school systems in general and are still learning how to be parents, especially those who grew up in boarding schools.

General and cultural activities and resources.

Discussions of strategies that encourage parent involvement also addressed the role of organizations, clubs, activities, after school programs,

cultural events, and general school events. Parents seemed to be more comfortable and likely to participate in schools that offered a variety of fun, informal social opportunities for parents and families to get to know school staff and each other. Formal and policymaking opportunities (such as school boards, parent-teacher organizations, and Johnson-O'Malley committees¹) had the least participation among American Indian parents. One parent was a member of a board. She said:

We serve all of the Native American students in the [school district]. . . . And we organize different activities for the students. We're going to . . . combine information for the parents so that they know all of the programs that we offer under Indian education, Johnson-O'Malley, and Sheltered Journey. We've found that it's been a really positive thing and . . . we're really getting good turnouts.

Parents in two focus groups mentioned their school parent-teacher organizations as a form of parent involvement. One parent mentioned that she was hoping to join the parent-teacher organization: "I really don't do that either because I'm a bashful and shy person. It's hard for me sometimes to say anything." One parent noted that her school and parent-teacher organization involve parents by asking them for feedback, such as with surveys. Another parent reported that her parent-teacher organization provides incentives (such as door prizes) and accommodations (such as childcare) to encourage parents to attend events. A few parents had tried to join their school parent-teacher organization but felt unwelcome there and did not see other American Indian parents attending meetings.

Several discussions addressed informal school activities, organizations, and clubs as good ways to involve parents. Parents in three focus groups added that having after school programs and activities encouraged children's attendance and interest in school. Those that allowed children to stay until 5:00 pm or 6:00 pm were especially valuable to working parents. Parents liked general activities

that were open to everyone, but especially appreciated cultural events targeted to American Indian families. Examples of general activities listed in the five focus groups included special events (grandparents day, carnivals, dances, family nights, bake sales, book fairs, and rummage sales). One school was reported to offer a community supper one night each week for families. Another school offered a resource night for families to inform and connect them to community services. Incentives and personal staff invitations were also useful in encouraging parent participation.

Cultural centers, activities, and events were also topics of several discussions. Parents commented that such resources were especially useful in helping American Indian children and their families feel

welcome at their school and connected to it and to other American Indian families. Some parents, however, did not have such resources at their schools, even in schools with high populations of American Indian students. Parents in one focus group mentioned a cultural group at a high school and another at a middle school that seemed to be successful; however, they were unaware of any cultural programs or groups in their schools that were open to elementary school children and their families. In four focus groups parents whose schools did not have cultural resources suggested the need for after school programs, centers, or clubs that provide homework help, access to resources, and cultural education (such as stories, crafts, language, dance instruction, and traditions) for American Indian children. They also suggested that schools give parents access to walk-in resource and information referral centers and support groups for American Indian families. One parent described the value of these clubs in schools with low cultural sensitivity and low American Indian student populations:

In four focus groups parents whose schools did not have cultural resources suggested the need for after school programs, centers, or clubs that provide homework help, access to resources, and cultural education for American Indian children

It's like a cultural shock to the children. And I think . . . if they had like Indian clubs and stuff like that . . . they can be made at a young age to have pride in who they are, instead of even being made aware of that difference with no explanation.

Focus group discussions addressed the need to have cultural centers with American Indian staff who would know how to relate to the children and their families. One parent remarked from her own experience in a school with a resource center:

[W]e had a Native American center and that was in the high school that we could go to. And I know a lot of times that was wonderful. . . . [I]f I was having trouble, there was, you know, people in there that knew how to relate, you know, they were Native American. . . .

Three focus groups also discussed the importance of having access to American Indian liaisons and advocates. Some parents suggested that every American Indian parent and child in the school should have access to an advocate or liaison who could connect them to resources, help them negotiate “the system,” and act on their behalf when necessary. Although it appeared that each school district represented by focus group participants

had a liaison, parents complained that having only one liaison serving an entire school district was insufficient and felt that each school needed its own liaison. One parent suggested that it would be helpful if the liaisons would visit each school to introduce themselves to parents, explaining their role and what they can do to help parents.

Like many other parents, American Indian parents want to feel comfortable, accepted, and appreciated for how they can work with the schools to improve their children's education experience

common to those of parents in the general population or in other ethnic minority groups, although some may be unique to American Indian families. For example, like many other parents, these American Indian parents want to feel comfortable, accepted, and appreciated for how they can work with the schools to improve their children's education experience. And, like other parents, these American Indian parents struggle to balance time for work, for relaxation, and for assistance with school projects.

What is unique, emerging from nearly all of the focus group discussions, is the historical and cultural perspective that American Indian parents bring to their children's education and to the public education system. This factor appears central to their decision to become involved in their children's school. These parents would also like the opportunity to provide more input in how their children are educated and in the content of the curriculum. They would like schools to be sensitive to their cultural and ethnic heritage and free of the effects of racism and discrimination and in which they feel comfortable and welcome. Finally, the parents stressed the key role that grandparents, extended family, and community members play in American Indian students' home and school lives.

The data also suggest that, although schools are inviting parents to participate, the ways the invitations are presented fall short, from the parents' perspectives. American Indian parents would like educators to be more aware of and able to interact in ways that promote the development of closer interpersonal relationships with parents, working collaboratively to support the academic achievement of their students.

At the top of their list of ways schools can foster their participation, parents mentioned providing adequate and timely communications about their children's progress, offering sensitive guidance and cooperative planning with parents, and demonstrating positive, caring support and celebration of their children's academic achievements.

CONCLUSION

The findings reveal that some of the issues and challenges identified by focus group parents are

Parents reported that having a school staff that is more educated about and sensitive to the unique cultural perspectives of American Indian parents might increase parent involvement.

Limitations of the study

This was a small exploratory study involving five groups of self-selected American Indian parents in one state in the Central Region. The intent was to explore American Indian parents' perceptions of parent involvement in their children's education, what they understand it to be, and what barriers tend to interfere. This study may provide a basis for furthering conversations between American Indian parents and school staff.

Several limitations affect the findings. The perceptions of these parents may not be shared by other American Indian parents. And because the data were collected in focus groups, participant responses may be influenced by conflict avoidance, social acceptability, interactions with the moderator, conformance to the opinions of the group or to more assertive participants, and participants' self-confidence. Limitations are discussed in greater detail in appendix A.

Future research

This study provides a foundation for an initial understanding of basic issues, subtle themes, and considerations that influence American Indian parent involvement; however, more research is needed as the findings do not permit drawing inferences to a larger population. While parent involvement studies conducted in the general population and among other ethnic minorities are useful, American Indians have histories, cultures, belief systems, and a sense of community that

are unique to each tribe. Thus, further research is needed to compare parent involvement among American Indian and other parents to determine the effects of these unique characteristics.

Findings also suggest that parent involvement may be influenced by parents' experiences in different school settings (tribal, Bureau of Indian Affairs, private, charter, boarding, and public schools). The current study did not compare these settings. The importance of parent involvement in improving student academic achievement together with the substantial achievement gap between American Indian and White students highlights the need for schools and American Indian parents to work together to improve parent involvement. Studies that illuminate strategies for facilitating open, constructive, authentic communication between schools and American Indian parents and that reveal opportunities to work together might substantially improve the outcome of American Indian education.

As the current study was exploratory and conducted at only two sites, a more expansive study is needed to determine whether the factors identified are relevant to other American Indian families. In addition, while this study was focused in part on ways schools can and do encourage parent involvement, research is needed to find out how parents can take the initiative to increase their involvement. Research that includes the perspective of school staff on parent involvement is also needed to confirm or counter these findings.

While parent involvement studies conducted in the general population and among other ethnic minorities are useful, American Indians have histories, cultures, belief systems, and a sense of community that are unique to each tribe

APPENDIX A RESEARCH METHODS

Four research questions were proposed to investigate the topic of parent involvement as it relates to American Indian education:

- What do American Indian parents perceive as parent involvement in their children's education?
- Why do American Indian parents get involved?
- What do parents perceive as barriers to involvement?
- Which school strategies do parents perceive encourage involvement?

Research design

The study was a qualitative inquiry-based design using focus group interview data obtained from parents of American Indian students attending public elementary schools in the Central Region (see box A1 for the Office of Management and Budget burden statement and approval information). A total of five focus groups were held at two sites, with 47 participating parents. One focus group (group 1) was held at site A and the other four focus groups (groups 2–5) were held at site B.

One limitation of focus groups is that participant responses are not independent. Focus group

responses may be influenced by conflict avoidance, social acceptability, interactions with the moderator, conformance to the opinions of the group or to more assertive participants, and participants' self-confidence. Despite these potential limitations the focus group interview method was selected over data collection methods such as surveys, interviews, and observations because the insight, multiple perspectives, shared understandings, and degree of consensus sought from participants were more likely to be elicited within a group context. The focus groups permitted more participants to be interviewed and more data to be gathered in less time than was possible with individual interviews or observations. The focus groups also helped engage participants and stimulate exploration, discussion, and understanding of the issues of parent involvement in greater depth and context than could be achieved through observations, surveys, or individual interviews.

Focus groups involve a dynamic group interaction process of questioning, listening, reinforcement, and discussion that permits in-depth exploration of participants' attitudes and beliefs on a particular topic when they are exposed to the experiences of others. Focus groups take advantage of the pleasure that many people derive from meeting and chatting with peers about shared interests and experiences and of the way that people naturally influence each other. As Rubin and Rubin (1995, p. 140) aptly state, "In focus groups, the goal is to let people spark off of one another, suggesting dimensions and nuances of the original problem

BOX A1

Office of Management and Budget burden statement for the focus group data collection

According to the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995, no persons are required to respond to a collection of information unless such collection displays a valid Office of Management and Budget (OMB) control

number. The valid OMB control number for this information collection is 1800-011-v.76. The time required to provide the requested information is estimated to average a maximum of 1.5 hours including the time to get instructions, sign consent forms, and respond to the group facilitator's questions. **If you have any comments concerning the accuracy of the time estimate(s)**

or suggestions for improving this form, please write to: U.S. Department of Education, Washington, D.C. 20202-4700. **If you have comments or concerns regarding this group session, write directly to:** Sandra Garcia, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, 555 New Jersey Avenue, N.W., Room 506C, Washington, D.C. 20208-4651.

that any one individual may not have thought of. Sometimes a totally different understanding of a problem emerges from the group discussion.”

Sampling

Two states in the Central Region were targeted for data collection based on the expressed interest of state education administrators at the Central Regional Educational Laboratory Policy Forums in August 2006 and 2007. State departments of education and state offices of Indian affairs also expressed encouragement and support for the study. Four geographically separated communities were proposed as focus group sites based on their concentrated populations of American Indian students. Permission and cooperation were obtained from school district administrators and parents in two of the four elementary school districts, referred to as site A and site B. Both sites are located in one Central Region state. Each site had more than 20 schools and 10,500 students, and each had a locale classification of “mid-size city” (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2008).

The five elementary schools in each district with the highest enrollments of American Indian students were selected for data collection. Elementary schools were chosen rather than middle schools or high schools for convenience and because of cooperation from school staff. Each school at site A had a 2006 enrollment of 250–500 students and an American Indian student population of 15–20 children (4–7 percent). Each school at site B had a 2006 enrollment of 125–500 students and an American Indian student population of 27–60 children (5–40 percent). The site A school district did not meet adequate yearly progress during the 2006/07 school year; but the site B school district did.

American Indian families with a child in any of the targeted schools were eligible to participate and targeted for recruiting. Invitation letters were sent to the Office of Indian Education at site A to distribute to the 60 families with American Indian

students registered in those schools. A reminder postcard was sent two weeks later. Seventeen parents responded by phone or letter of interest (28 percent response rate). Of those who confirmed, nine attended the group 1 focus group scheduled at site A. At site B invitation letters were sent to the 140 families with American Indian students registered in the targeted schools. A reminder postcard was sent two weeks later. Fifty-six responses were received (40 percent response rate), and 38 adults attended one of four scheduled focus groups (groups 2–5).

The focus groups were held at centrally located hotel conference rooms at the two sites rather than at schools or American Indian community centers, to maintain a politically neutral environment. Focus group attendance ranged from 4 to 16 parents (see table A1 for details). Participants were reimbursed \$25 for travel and childcare expenses. No other incentives were provided. Because of the nonrandom selection of sites and participants, the sample is not representative of any population of American Indian parents, and the findings are not generalizable.

Not all focus group participants were biological parents. Participants recognized themselves as parents by virtue of having an active role in the upbringing of the children. In this study participants included married parents, single parents, cohabitating partners, foster parents, and three

TABLE A1
Parents in attendance at focus groups, 2007

Site and group	Attendance
Site A	
Group 1	9
Site B	
Group 2	11
Group 3	16
Group 4	4
Group 5	7
Total	47

Source: Authors' compilation.

primary care grandmothers. Several primary care parents also held roles as uncles, aunts, and grandmothers for the children of other extended family members. Household sizes ranged from one to six children. While all parents lived in or near the site communities, seven tribal affiliations and nine home reservations were mentioned. In addition, parents revealed the diversity in their own upbringing. Some were educated in tribal schools, some in off-reservation boarding schools, and some in foster homes or with relatives who were not their parents. Others had grown up in urban communities when their families left the reservation.

Parents were not specifically queried about their own level of education, but during discussions 6 parents mentioned having a high school degree, 1 a General Educational Development certificate, and 15 having at least some college education, including 4 who had completed degrees. Several parents also mentioned their employment status, which included a range of situations: college student, homemaker, blue collar worker, social service worker, preschool teacher, and small business owner. While a complete demographic mapping of participants was not a component of this study, the comments made by participants during discussions demonstrated that the groups were reflective of a diverse population of American Indian parents in marital status, family size, education, employment, and relation to the children they parent.

Data collection

The researcher-facilitator began the 90-minute discussion by reviewing the parent participation consent form, including its confidentiality provisions, which had been mailed to all but walk-in participants. Each parent was asked to sign the form and received a copy.

A focus group interview protocol was used in each session to ensure consistent group facilitation, to increase the depth of discussions, and to ensure that ethical considerations were fully explained

(see appendix C).² The protocol was read aloud by the focus group facilitator at each focus group meeting. Moderators for all focus groups were of American Indian heritage but were not affiliated with the tribal groups represented in the focus groups.

One researcher led one focus group and another led the other four. The note taker was the same researcher in all five groups, helping to ensure the consistency of data collection. Field notes were used to record research ideas and observations, as well as general thoughts from the researchers during the focus group session. At the beginning of the protocol the researchers introduced themselves and the purpose of the study. Parents were read a list of session expectations, introduced to the focus group agenda, and given an opportunity to ask questions before the formal discussion began. The protocol contained 10 lead questions related to the four principal research questions, plus related probes. Each probe was intended to stimulate discussion around a lead question, without creating research bias in parent responses.

Qualitative approaches were used in all stages of the study. The principal research questions were exploratory, intending to elicit parents' perspectives on their involvement with their children's education. Data analysis of the focus group interview transcripts included encoding and comparing topics and themes across groups, followed by detailed summarizing of findings for each principal research question. The coded manuscripts and group summaries formed the basis of a narrative description of findings.

The five focus group discussions were audiotaped, and all digital files were password-protected and accessible only to the researchers working on the study. The audiotapes were transcribed verbatim and verified by the principal interviewer and a research associate. The transcripts identified participants only by gender to protect confidentiality. Other possible identifiers, such as the names of individuals, schools, districts, communities, businesses, and social services were eliminated during

analysis. Once the transcripts had been verified, the audio recordings were erased.

Data were also gathered from parent response forms and used to create a recruitment tracking spreadsheet that included parent contact information, documentation of interactions, and participation status. The sheet was later used to record the final count of each focus group and familial relationships. Information on the spreadsheet was regularly updated and verified as the research study progressed. These data informed the eventual consolidation of parent demographic information and the individual focus group summaries (see appendix D), which were also used to compare and contrast groups. Each summary was reviewed and edited by two researchers, using the original transcripts to ensure the accuracy of the narratives.

Data analysis

Electronic audio files of the focus group discussions were transcribed for analysis. The authors verified the accuracy of the written transcripts by listening to the audio recordings while reading the transcriptions. An iterative process of data analysis suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994) followed: data reduction, data display, conclusions, and verification.

The lead researcher, an American Indian, facilitated four of the focus groups and had a primary role in analyzing the data. She read the focus group transcripts and field notes and assigned alphanumeric codes to key themes and subtopics, patterns, commonly used words, and concept clusters and then categorized the codes by research question. She also identified variations in the themes and interesting quotations. The codes were then examined, challenged, amended, and recoded as necessary by the authors until key themes emerged. This step was repeated several times. Next, the coding schema was applied by the site B facilitator/researcher across all focus group transcripts. The coded transcripts were then verified by the second author, who was not

of American Indian heritage. The analysis of field notes, transcripts, coded themes, and subtopics then facilitated the writing of descriptive narratives that summarized the data for each focus group around the research questions.

For the data display step a matrix was created to organize the data along research questions, fine-tune themes and subtopics, and identify relationships and themes as they emerged across focus groups. A fourth researcher was added to the team to assist in developing the matrix and to provide an outsider's perspective (this researcher had not been involved during earlier data collection and analysis). During the conclusion drawing and verification step, discussions focused on what the data meant. This step involved drawing conclusions and determining whether the conclusions were defensible by verifying them against data from transcripts and field notes.

The methods of qualitative data analysis used in this study are based on Miles and Huberman's (1994) three-step process and are common in qualitative research and have been noted in other studies reporting findings from qualitative designs (see Pashagumskum 2005; Petrie and Holloway 2006; Sheehy 2006).

Limitations of the study

Because of this study's exploratory nature, its generalizability is limited, both to other populations and other settings (ecological generalizability). Sites and parent participants in this study were nonrandomly selected and the sample size was small, so neither is representative of other sites or of American Indian families. Sites were selected based on interest among state education administrators and the encouragement and support of state departments of education and state offices of Indian affairs. Sites were selected from larger districts in order to have a larger pool of eligible parents from which to recruit participants and from elementary schools for convenience and staff cooperation. Although many participants had children in multiple grades, the parents' perspectives on

their involvement at other levels of schooling were generally not discussed.

Only one of the two school sites had met adequate yearly progress. Understanding the impact of this difference was beyond the scope of this study, but it might have influenced parents' experiences of involvement at their school. Most study participants came from site B, and some families within a specific focus group were represented by

more than one individual. These factors have the potential to skew results toward the experiences of families in site B or toward the experiences of particular families.

The perspectives of school personnel were not included. As a result, little time was spent discussing how parents could increase their involvement in their children's education beyond the school context.

APPENDIX B

THE LITERATURE ON AMERICAN INDIAN PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Although there is an extensive body of literature demonstrating the positive relationship between parent involvement and student academic achievement (see Cotton and Wiklund 2001 and Epstein 2001 for literature reviews and Lareau 2000, 2003 for long-term empirical studies), the topic remains understudied among American Indian families. One study of predictors of parent involvement is that by Grolnick et al. (1997). They included nonrandomly selected mothers ($n = 209$, 45 percent response rate), their children in grades 3–5 ($n = 209$), and their teachers ($n = 28$). The study used parent interviews, student questionnaires, and teacher ratings of parent involvement among the families in their classrooms.

A thorough search of databases (such as ECO, ERIC, PSYCHLIT, PsycARTICLES, Psych Info, JSTOR, ProQuest, and Wilson Select Plus) using relevant keywords and descriptors (such as American Indian, Native American, Alaska Native, parent, involvement, participation, student, achievement, education, elementary, indicators, academic, persistence, dropout rate, government role, policy, reservation, culture, cultural influences, acculturation, minority, student needs), produced research that was dated, descriptive or qualitative, and nongeneralizable. The quality of most of the studies was limited by small sample sizes, nonrandom sampling, nonrepresentative samples, ambiguous operational definitions and measurements of the “parent involvement” construct, weak internal validity, incomplete and nonsystematic data collection methods, reliance on correlational data, lack of triangulation, nonexhaustive analyses, lack of population and ecological generalizability, and failure to validate results, or many provided incomplete or no detail about sample size, sampling methods, participant demographics, definitions, data collection, coding, analysis, and validation. In the absence of rigorous studies, studies that reflect primary data collection methods and first-hand accounts were selected initially, supplemented by

articles and books that summarize research findings and reflect the thinking of respected researchers in this area.

History and conditions of American Indian education

An understanding of the issues influencing American Indian parent involvement requires an understanding of the history of American Indian education. Some reasons for low parent involvement are thought to be rooted in parents’ negative historical and personal experiences related to American Indian education policies. Butterfield and Pepper (1991), in a study commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education Indian Nations at Risk Task Force, review education conditions among American Indian students and summarize the historical barriers among American Indian parents as well as key issues, successful models, and recommended strategies for improving American Indian education (U.S. Department of Education 1991). Information on task force meetings, public call for papers, sessions at the National Indian Education Association Conference, regional hearings, site visits, and commissioned papers was briefly summarized in another commissioned paper (Charleston and King 1991). Cockrell (1992), using qualitative analysis, examined American Indian parents’ perspectives on parent-school communication in one rural consolidated school district using multiple data sources.

At one time education policy was used by the federal government to estrange American Indian children from their parents, people, culture, language, and values in an effort to force assimilation and conversion to Christianity (Adams 1995; Butterfield and Pepper 1991; Reyhner and Eder 2004). Adams (1995) and Reyhner and Eder (2004) provide a historical overview of American Indian education policy and practice, documenting boarding school histories and experiences. Congress passed several laws permitting the Bureau of Indian Affairs to require boarding school attendance and to punish American Indian parents who did not send their children to boarding schools. The poor conditions in such schools and the psychologically

and culturally devastating experiences of American Indian children sent there have been well documented (Adams 1995). Horne and McBeth (1998) is Horne's first-person account of life in American Indian boarding schools as a student and teacher, covering daily life, the challenges and rewards of teaching, and issues of cultural identity. Child (1998), Coleman (1993), Ellis (1994), and Lomawaima (1994) also provide accounts of American Indian boarding school life, based on case histories, personal narratives, and document analysis.

Several reports and legislative efforts prompted reform in American Indian education in the twentieth century. For example, the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 conferred U.S. citizenship on American Indians. In 1928 the Meriam report documented shocking boarding school conditions and recommended that elementary school-age children not be sent to boarding schools (Meriam 1928). The Johnson-O'Malley Act of 1934 allowed the federal government to pay states to educate American Indian students in public schools. The amended act provides financial assistance for programs to meet American Indian students' unique education needs.

Although forced assimilation policies were eventually moderated, deplorable education conditions and outcomes persisted for decades according to a 1969 congressional report (known as the "Kennedy Report") that declared the education of American Indian children a "national tragedy" (U.S. Senate 1969). The Kennedy Report included a comprehensive literature review, on-site evaluations of federal boarding schools, field investigations, surveys, and hearings in the field and Washington, D.C., and prompted passage of the Indian Education Act, Title IV, of 1972, which legally recognized that parent-school partnerships were critical to improving American Indian student academic achievement. This act provides grants to schools for programs to meet American Indian students' educational and cultural academic needs. Both the Indian Education Act and the Johnson-O'Malley Acts, as amended, require

parental-committee or tribal sign-off authority for federal programs serving American Indian communities.

Positive legislation followed in the late twentieth century. In 1975 the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act recognized the federal government's obligation to permit American Indian participation, decisionmaking, and administration of education and service programs in support of American Indian self-determination. The Tribally Controlled Community Colleges Act of 1978 and Tribally Controlled Schools Grants Act of 1988 provided financial assistance for tribally controlled community colleges and schools. In 1990 the Native American Languages Act provided for protection of American Indian languages and cultures, reversing the policy of suppressing the use of American Indian languages in federally funded schools.

Despite these positive efforts, the quality of American Indian education improved only moderately. In 1991 the U.S. Department of Education's Indian Nations at Risk Task Force reported conditions such as an unfriendly school climate that fails to support student development, a Eurocentric curriculum, low expectations, relegation of American Indian students to low-ability tracks, poor academic achievement, lack of American Indian educators, lack of parent and community involvement, overt and subtle racism, and the highest subgroup dropout rate in the country (U.S. Department of Education 1991). The report also noted several programs and strategies to improve American Indian education that have bridged the divide between schools and American Indian students, parents, and communities in ways that respect and incorporate native language, culture, values, and learning styles into curriculum and instruction and that include native communities in the education process.

Lipka, Mohatt, and The Ciulistet Group (1998) document the experiences of Eskimo teachers in creating culturally responsive education and teacher-community-school relationships. McCarty

(2002) reports the results of a 20-year ethnography of Navajo self-determination at the Rough Rock Demonstration School, the first school to be controlled by an American Indian community, the first to teach in the native language, and the first to produce a body of children's literature by and about Navajo people. Begay et al. (1995) and McCarty (2002) document the transformation and alignment of school's curriculum and pedagogy to local cultural and linguistic knowledge, learning, and norms in a tribally governed community. Pashagumskum (2005) reports findings from a qualitative study (participatory research with a grounded theory approach) of American Indian parent involvement and school-community connectiveness based on interviews and focus groups with 13 participants.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 requires states to close achievement gaps between student subgroups, including American Indian students, and encourages parent involvement in a variety of ways (attending parent-teacher conferences, volunteering at school, encouraging other parents to become involved, learning about a school's challenges and resources, and communicating with school board members, principals, and other state and local school leaders; No Child Left Behind Act 2002).

Despite the progress and reform of American Indian education success stories remain more often the exception than the norm. Although the numbers of American Indian students graduating from high school and attending college have increased over the last 20 years, nationwide gaps between them and White peers persist on key education indicators. Statistics indicate that American Indian students perform below White students and below the national average in grades 4 and 8 reading and math and in college-bound seniors' reading and math scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test. The dropout rate in 2003 of American Indian students was almost twice the national average and more than twice the average of White students, as reported by Freeman and Fox (2005), using data obtained from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Schools

and Staffing Survey, Public School Survey, Public Charter School Survey, and Indian School Survey, 1999/2000, and U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau's Current Population Survey, 1990 to 2003. Survey respondents were a nationally representative sample reflecting 4,700 school districts, 12,000 schools, 12,300 principals, 52,400 teachers, and 9,900 school library media centers. In the Central Region states (Colorado, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming), American Indian students' performance on state and national assessments also lags behind that of their White peers (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2006).

Parent involvement defined

One of the challenges of examining parent involvement is identifying an operational definition and measurement for the construct in the literature. While some studies provide a clear operational definition and measures (Grolnick et al. 1997; Gutman and Midgley 2000; and Shaver and Walls 1998), others do not. Leveque (1994) uses a case study design to examine K-12 student performance, parent involvement, and assimilation patterns of American Indian families in a California school district; however, she does not report the sampling methods, sample size, number of observations and interviews, participant demographics, procedures and methods, operational definitions and measures, coding, data analysis, and limitations. Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (1992), in a descriptive study of American Indian parent and community involvement and support in Northwest Region schools, also reports minimally on methods, sample selection, participant demographics, operational definitions, measures, data analysis, and limitations.

Some researchers leave it to study participants to define participation, allowing the definition to emerge from the data (Delgado-Gaitan 1991; Pashagumskum 2005). And some use a narrow definition of parent involvement that includes attendance at specific school-based meetings (Shaver and Walls 1998 define high parent involvement

as parents who attended 50 percent or more of school-based Title I parent group meetings in a school year) or general school-based activities (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory 1992), while others use a broad definition that includes a range of home- and school-based activities (Delgado-Gaitan 1991; Grolnick et al. 1997; Gutman and Midgley 2000). Gutman and Midgley (2000, p. 234) define parent involvement as “the extent to which parents and other family members are involved in their children’s education both within the home and at school during the school year.” Butterfield and Pepper (1991), in a paper commissioned for the Indian Nations at Risk Task Force (U.S. Department of Education 1991), distinguish parental support (such as sending children to school, attending parent-teacher conferences, ensuring homework completion, and reading to children) from parental involvement (such as serving on education or tribal culture committees in the school, participating in parent-teacher organizations, and serving on boards). They note that parental support reflects the roles of parents as learners, teachers, counselors, and resources for their children, whereas parental involvement reflects parents as decisionmakers and agents of change in their children’s schools.

Agreement is growing that parent involvement needs to be viewed from a more, multidimensional perspective (Grolnick et al. 1997). Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005), in an empirical, longitudinal study conducted for the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, summarize findings from four related studies conducted over three years to develop reliable and valid measures that address model constructs and to test hypotheses about causes and consequences of parent involvement in children’s education. A total of 2,151 parents of children in grades K–6 and 779 students in grades 4–6 participated across the four studies. Grolnick et al. (1997) suggest a multidimensional definition that incorporates school involvement (such as attending parent-teacher conferences and school events, talking to teachers, and volunteering in the classroom), cognitive involvement (such as going to the library and talking about

current events), and personal involvement (such as knowledge of children’s activities in school and classmates’ names). Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005) suggest a definition that incorporates parents’ motivational beliefs (beliefs about what they should do about their children’s education and what they can do to produce positive results), perceptions of invitations (a welcoming school climate and invitations from children and school staff), and perceived life context (parents’ perceived skills, knowledge, time, and energy for involvement).

Parent involvement can also be viewed in the broader context of the extended family and community. Several studies (see, for example, Kelly 2004; Romero 2004; Volk and de Acosta 2004, as featured in Gregory, Long, and Volk’s 2004 compilation of cross-cultural ethnographic studies on language and literacy) refer to the importance of extended families in building literacy. Romero (2004) examines how cultural forces permit the social and natural development of young Pueblo children. Data were obtained from home and community observations, interviews, and field notes. Romero, a member of the Pueblo community being studied, describes the role of godparents as “guardian parents” (p. 213) in American Indian pueblos and explains that socializing and learning among Pueblo children are the responsibility of a child’s primary caregivers (parents, grandparents, and siblings), secondary caregivers (aunts, uncles, cousins, and godparents), and communal caregivers (community elders). Kelly (2004) recounts how one young child acquired the knowledge, expectations, and assumptions about print and literacy learning from his home environment. Observing the increasing importance of grandparents in education, Kelly suggests that this change is due to higher divorce rates and the rise of single-parent families.

Parent involvement is not only multidimensional but also substantially influenced by school climate. Recognizing the school’s role and responsibility in parent involvement, Epstein (2001) suggests that parent involvement must be viewed in the context of school-family-community partnerships. She identifies six types of involvement: parenting,

communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decisionmaking, and collaborating with the community.

Parent involvement to improve student achievement

There is an extensive body of research demonstrating the positive relationship between parent involvement and student academic achievement (Grolnick et al. 1997; Gutman and Midgley 2000; Shaver and Walls 1998; Cotton and Wiklund 2001; Epstein 2001; Lareau 2000, 2003). A few qualitative studies have examined the influence of race, family life, and socioeconomic status on this relationship (Gutman and Midgley 2000; Shaver and Walls 1998). Gutman and Midgley (2000) suggest that improved student achievement among poor minorities may rely on the combined influence of parent involvement and school factors. Their descriptive study of 62 poor Black families uses parent interviews and student surveys to examine the effects of psychological, family, and school factors on students' grade point averages as they transitioned from elementary into middle school. Results revealed that parent involvement alone did not predict student achievement but that the combination of parent involvement, students' perceived teacher support, and parent involvement and students' feelings of belonging at the school each predicted higher grade point averages. Findings suggest that improving both parent involvement and the school environment may be effective in improving the academic achievement of poor Black students transitioning into middle school.

Shaver and Walls (1998, p. 90) suggest that parent involvement, regardless of socioeconomic background or a child's gender, is "a dynamic force influencing students' academic success." This descriptive study uses data from school records and student test scores to examine the impact of parent-school involvement on 335 Title I 2nd through 8th graders' reading and mathematics achievement. Results reveal that students with involved parents (parents who regularly attended Title I training and workshops) are more likely to have higher achievement gains than students

with uninvolved parents. Although poverty is negatively related to education growth, parent involvement has a positive influence, and parents' socioeconomic status did not influence the level of parent-school involvement. Parents of younger children are more likely to be involved in their children's education than parents of older children.

Only one study was found that examined cultural and parental influences on American Indian academic achievement. Leveque (1994) observes that parent involvement and family acculturation patterns provided the strongest link to the academic achievement of Navajo and Pueblo students in a California school district.

Factors that encourage or discourage parent involvement

Factors that influence involvement among American Indian parents remain understudied. In 1990 and 1991 the Indian Nations at Risk Task Force collected information and public opinion on American Indian education conditions across the country (Butterfield and Pepper 1991; Charleston and King 1991). Findings revealed that home and family circumstances were important influences on American Indian student attitudes and achievement (Butterfield and Pepper 1991). Butterfield and Pepper (1991) observe that school and districtwide commitment to being advocates for all students is important and that American Indian parental support and involvement should be a high priority. Possible strategies include expanding American Indian parents' access to classrooms and establishing committees and school boards to advise and assist in policy setting at the school and district levels. Butterfield and Pepper proposed that school policies and procedures reflect why and how parents will be included, recognizing and appreciating their traditional cultural orientation. Regular school staff training in American Indian culture and strategies for working effectively with parents could address the perceived lack of cultural competence. Finally, Butterfield and Pepper suggest that to overcome some barriers that limit American Indian parents' involvement in their children's schools, opportunities be provided for

educating parents in child development, substance abuse prevention, literacy, parent-child support activities, and cultural reinforcement—including learning American Indian languages.

Although progress is being made in improving the conditions of American Indian education, the history of coercive assimilation and some parents' more recent negative experiences prevent the removal of barriers between schools and American Indian parents (Butterfield and Pepper 1991). Literature on barriers to American Indian parent involvement reveal the complexity of the issue. One of the central findings in the literature is a lack of agreement on the root of the problem; schools tend to blame parents, and parents to blame schools. According to Butterfield and Pepper (1991), key issues for American Indian parents include the attitudes of teachers and other staff, school building conditions and learning environment, alienation of students and parents from school, school misunderstanding of extended family dynamics, and the scarcity and cultural isolation of urban American Indians. Barriers to parent involvement also appear to be rooted in parents' negative historical and personal experiences with the schools (Butterfield and Pepper 1991; Cockrell 1992).

Delgado-Gaitan's (1991) ethnographic study of parent involvement among 20 Spanish-speaking families observes that schools usually ignore the needs of underrepresented groups that are unfamiliar with the school's expectations, including the need to have school materials printed in Spanish.³ Parents preferred to be involved through non-conventional activities that validated their social and cultural experience, served Spanish-speaking students, and allowed parents to feel a part of and be active in their children's education. The study also reported that, despite the appearance that minority parents do not care about their children's education, their low participation is more likely due to their lack of comfort with or inability to understand, engage, or negotiate traditional participation avenues: "To actively participate in the school, parents must be informed about the school system and how it functions" (p. 25).

Communication patterns between schools and parents are another area where barriers have been recognized. Schools tend to blame parents when American Indian students have problems and tend to communicate with parents only when there is a problem (Butterfield and Pepper 1991). American Indian parents, however, view educators as the professionals, so they expect schools to be responsible for correcting problems on their own. Additional barriers to American Indian parent involvement include social issues such as drug and alcohol abuse, dysfunctional families, poverty, and illiteracy (Butterfield and Pepper 1991).

* * *

In summary, American Indian students' academic performance lags behind that of Whites across the country and within the region (Freeman and Fox 2005; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2006). Parent involvement is an important factor in encouraging student academic achievement (Grolnick et al. 1997; Gutman and Midgley 2000; No Child Left Behind Act 2002; Shaver and Walls 1998), yet teachers report that lack of parent involvement is a serious problem (Freeman and Fox 2005). The regional need to effectively involve parents and improve American Indian student achievement has been demonstrated (Mid-continent Regional Advisory Committee 2005),⁴ but research on which factors might provide effective assistance is limited, dated, and insufficient. Factors such as the quality of school-parent relationships; cultural sensitivity in the school, staff, learning environment, and curriculum; home, family, community, and cultural issues; and negative historical and personal experiences may be influential (Butterfield and Pepper 1991; Cockrell 1992), but that has not been confirmed or recently studied. This study was designed to contribute a basic understanding of American Indian parent involvement in their children's education as a basis for subsequent research that would meet the region's need to effectively involve parents and improve American Indian student achievement.

APPENDIX C FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Welcome to participants

Participants will be welcomed by the facilitator and the note-taker in a culturally appropriate manner.

Opening comments and introductions

Introduction of facilitator and note-taker

The facilitator and note-taker will introduce themselves by providing their names and affiliation with the study. The facilitator will provide further information on her tribe/nation and other culturally appropriate information.

Purpose of gathering

The purpose of our conversation today is to gather information about how Native American parents and families get involved in their children's education.⁵ This conversation is one of four being conducted by Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) to determine how Native American parents and family members become involved in the education process. We are particularly interested in identifying barriers to your involvement, as well as strategies that encourage you to participate more fully in your children's education.

Importance of their participation

Some teachers and school personnel who are not of Native American descent know little about the way Native American families prefer to participate in their children's education. In order to give Native American children the best possible chance of achieving to their full potential, we have invited you to participate in these conversations and share your ideas about how you encourage your children to succeed in school and how you interact with the schools they attend. Once we gather information from this and the other

conversations, we will provide the information to schools and districts so they can develop better ways to welcome you into the schools. We also hope that the information gathered from these conversations will help increase the participation of all Native American parents and families in their children's education.

Session expectations

It is important that you know that there are no right or wrong answers to the questions we will be asking; all of your responses, comments, and questions are good and important. Feel free to ask for clarification about anything you don't understand. You will not only help yourself but all of the others who are engaged in this discussion. We would like for all of you to participate. Your opinion is very important to us, but you should not feel pressured to share any information that you don't want to share. It is okay to disagree with the opinions of each other and to share what is on your minds. We're interested in the variety of opinions this group represents. In order for us to have a friendly and productive conversation, we would like to establish some rules on how we want to communicate with each other during this session.

- Try to speak up so we all can hear each other.
- To be able to hear each other, try to speak one person at a time (a talking feather or a talking stick will be used for this purpose).
- Be respectful of each other's ideas and opinions.
- What is said in the group stays in the group; keep all comments confidential.

Are there any questions?

Agenda for the focus group session

As we explained earlier, we hope to hear your perspectives on being involved in your children's education. Our purpose is to learn how teachers

and other educators can work together with parents and families of their Native American students. To begin, I'll ask you to introduce yourself. Following introductions, I'll ask some questions about parent and family involvement in their children's education. Before we finish the session, I'll ask you if we have left anything out of the discussion that is particularly important to you that we understand. At that time, you will be able to share anything else that is on your mind about the manner in which you and your child's teachers interact.

Introduction of participants. We would like you to introduce yourself by sharing with all of us the following information:

- Your name.
- Your tribe/nation affiliation.
- How many children you have and their ages.
- The schools and grades your children attend.

[Note: Each person will introduce himself/herself to the group.]

Thank you. You bring important perspectives to this discussion. We will now start with the questions for our more formal conversation.

Topic one: what is parent involvement?

In the field of education we talk a lot about the importance of parents participating in the education of their children. This first set of questions deals with parent involvement and your perceptions about what it means to be involved in your children's education.

Lead 1: Have you heard the term "parent involvement"? What comes to mind when you hear people talk about parent involvement?

Lead 2: How do you think schools want parents to be involved in their children's education?

Probe 1: Has anyone in your school—a teacher, the principal, or another person—explained to you how to participate or helped you to be involved in your children's education? Could you give us a few examples?

Lead 3: Why do you think schools want parents to get involved in their children's education?

Probe 1: Are there any benefits to being involved? What are they?

Probe 2: Are there any disadvantages to such involvement? Give us a few examples.

Topic two: how do Native American parents and other family members become involved in their children's education?

As we explained earlier, we are very interested in finding out how Native American parents and other family members get involved in the education of their children. The following questions refer to how you and other family members participate in the education of your children.

Lead 4: There are many ways in which parents and families participate and become involved in their children's education. Which of your family members is involved in your children's education?

Probe 1: How do you, as a parent, prefer to be involved in your children's education?

Probe 2: What about other family members? How do they prefer to get involved?

Lead 5: What things do you do to support your children's education?

Probe 1: Do you encourage your children to go to school? If yes, how do you do that? If no, why not?

Probe 2: Do you encourage your children to work/study hard? If yes, how do you do that? If not, why not?

Lead 6: How do your children feel about your involvement in their education?

Probe 1: Do they like that you are involved in their education? Why?

Lead 7: Do you think that your involvement/participation in your children's education helps them do better in school? If so, why?

Topic three: barriers to parent involvement

The following questions deal with things that discourage or prevent you from participating in your children's education.

Lead 8: Have you ever encountered any difficulties or obstacles to getting involved in your children's education?

Probe 1: Have you ever wanted to get involved in your children's education but found that your school discouraged it? Can you provide some examples?

Probe 2: Have you ever participated in your children's education but found that the way in which you were involved was not considered useful by the school? Describe the situation(s) or provide some examples.

Topic four: facilitating parent involvement

The last few questions are about what you have experienced in the schools that has helped you be more involved in your children's education.

Lead 9: Schools sometimes try to get parents to participate in their children's education. What strategies have schools used that have helped you, as Native American parents, get involved in your children's education?

Probe 1: What things do schools do that you like or that encourage Native American families to participate in their children's education?

Lead 10: Do you have any suggestions for schools or districts that would help you get more involved in your children's education?

Probe 1: What would you like schools to do to make you feel that you are better supporting your children's education?

[Additional comments.]

That's all of the questions that we have.

Are there any other questions that you think we should have asked, but didn't? Is there anything else that you'd like to share with us?

Thank you very much for all of the comments and experiences you have shared with us. Your participation in this study will help us understand what works for the Native American community in terms of your participation in your children's education. This study is very important because we are certain that if parents, families, and schools work together, children will benefit.

APPENDIX D

FOCUS GROUP SUMMARIES

This section briefly describes the participants in the five focus groups and then explores their motivations for becoming involved in their children's school, the barriers to that involvement, their perception of strategies schools used to encourage involvement, and other key factors to involvement standing between parents and their children's school.

Group 1 summary

Descriptives. In focus group 1, nine participants (seven women and two men) were affiliated with two different reservations. One parent was not American Indian but was the partner of an American Indian woman with four children. There were 29 children among eight families. In each family the number of children ranged from one to six. Twelve of the children were in elementary school. Six of the families had students at the five target elementary schools; two had students at nearby schools. One parent had received a letter through the Office of Indian Education, and one accompanied another participant, as they were related and shared childcare. One parent was caring for a foster child. Seven of nine parents (six of eight families) had one or more children on an Individualized Education Program (IEP). Six of nine parents (five of eight families) had used medication prescribed to their children. There was little discussion of education levels or employment of parents, although four parents mentioned their college experience.

Perceptions and motivations for involvement.

When parents in group 1 were asked for examples of parent involvement, they listed school-oriented and home-oriented ways in which they were involved, including the parent-teacher organization and other school events and cub scouts and girl scouts. They also discussed getting involved in their child's IEP—observing the child in the classroom, meeting with teachers and administrators about IEP expectations, or calling teachers for

clarity on homework. At home parents read books and did homework with their children and encouraged them to do better in school. When asked why they got involved, parents reported that they wanted to encourage and support their children.

Barriers to involvement. When asked about the barriers to participation, several parents in group 1 mentioned limited transportation, single parenthood, financial difficulties, work schedules, discrimination, and intimidation. One parent reported how her financial challenges affected her participation:

I couldn't make it to even bring him to school sometimes. He wanted to join sports and stuff like that. I couldn't do it financially as a single parent and so therefore he acted out, and I just felt pretty hopeless. I thought I'm not going to encourage him to do anything, so I didn't do it. I was, I guess, failing on my part as a parent until recently. I recently got on my feet and got everything going.

Other parents remembered the problems they faced in boarding schools and were discouraged with public schools in general.

Strategies for involvement. When parents were asked which strategies the schools used that worked well and which they would recommend that schools use, parents in group 1 reported that some schools tried to accommodate parents. For example, one parent without a car described how the teacher was willing to hold a parent-teacher conference in the evening so that someone could drive the parent to the meeting: "As long as they know that the parents are involved they'll work around the schedules for me to get there for conferences, even if it was seven o'clock at night." In addition, one parent shared how welcoming her son's school was—at a school meeting the teacher put her arm around the parent and walked with her to the group. From that point on the parent was involved in the school. Several parents appreciated when teachers called them about concerns or their child's achievements. Six of the eight

families reported using the Internet—another medium schools could use to contact parents—to check on students’ grades, homework assignments, school activities, and so on.

Key factors. Two topics emerged from the discussion in group 1: these were IEPs and cultural differences. Most parents had at least one child on an IEP and on medication. Parents felt that schools were pushing children to be on medication. Adding to this problem was the limited pool of doctors that parents could work with. One parent reported not giving her child the medication because he was unable to sleep and did not seem to be doing better in school.

Also unique to this group was the discussion of American Indian traditions and how parents maintain and share those traditions with people outside their culture. A mix of parents encouraged traditional practices, such as burning sage and sweet grass, participating in pow-wows, and teaching the native language to their children. One parent described how she participated in a culture day by dressing in traditional clothing and providing pictures of dances, including one that showed her son dressed in native attire. His classmates did not recognize him and could not believe it was the same person. This parent felt that this level of participation helped the children to better understand her son and his American Indian background. Other parents did not follow traditional ways. In fact, one parent said she used to let people think she was Mexican because she preferred being referred to as a member of another race than being “pushed aside” for being American Indian.

Group 2 summary

Descriptives. Focus group 2 comprised 11 participants, 9 women and 2 men, reflecting 10 families and five Indian reservations in the central states. There were a total of 24 children among the participants, 4 of whom were being raised by their grandmother. Thirteen of the children were in elementary grades. Seven of the 10 families had at least one student in the target schools. Two parents

heard about the focus group from an Office of Indian Education newsletter sent to all parents of American Indian students in the district, and one accompanied another participant. These parents had students in other elementary schools in the same district that had smaller populations of American Indian students than the five targeted schools. Five parents reported graduating from high school, one parent had a General Educational Development (GED) certificate, and one attended Job Corps. All five who graduated from high school had some college education, and two parents mentioned having college degrees.

Perceptions and motivations for involvement.

When parents in group 2 were asked to provide examples of parent involvement, they focused more on home-oriented than school-oriented involvement. Although they listed the typical ways of being involved in schools (participating in the parent-teacher organization, volunteering), they provided a longer list of ways they supported their children in school—helping with homework, asking their child how the day went, reading and discussing papers that their child brought home, and providing a healthy home environment so that their child could succeed at school. When asked why they got involved, parents shared that they wanted to encourage children to get better grades. One parent reported that all her older children dropped out of high school because of drugs and alcohol. Because she did not want the same for her younger daughter, she is now more involved in her child’s education.

Barriers to involvement. Barriers to parent involvement varied for parents. Two parents were court-ordered to a year-long treatment program, which limited their access to their children’s schools. Although they were allowed to visit the schools, they needed prior approval. These parents complained that schools often did not notify them early enough to receive such approval. Other parents were unsure about their parental rights. For example, one mother did not know if she should talk to the school about issues she felt were important but that the school might perceive as

unimportant (she was referring to her children's feelings of discrimination).

Strategies for involvement. Parents were also asked which strategies the schools used that worked well and which strategies they recommend that schools use. Parents reported that schools encouraged parent involvement by circulating flyers and emails to announce upcoming events. Some teachers provided parents with their home phone number so that they could be contacted at any time. Parents discussed how welcoming some schools could be and how much they appreciated that. For example, one parent explained that teachers went out of their way to encourage parental support, such as welcoming parents when they enter the school and personally inviting them to school events. A principal at one of the schools stands outside and talks to parents and children before and after school. One parent said about the principal, "You can tell he really likes kids, and he talks to the parents and the child . . . by name. He knows all of them." Parents reported being more encouraged to get involved when they feel that the school cares about their children's well-being.

Key factors. The three topics that emerged from the discussion in group 2 were challenges in cultural differences, the teenager treatment programs, and community support. Parents felt that schools did not embrace the cultural differences introduced by American Indian children. One parent explained that because her child's first language was the family's American Indian language, when the child entered school, she was told that her child needed an IEP. She said about the teachers, "They were trying to imply that she was slow. And I said she is not. She is learning a whole new culture. . . . Then it dawned on them, they said, 'Well, then she is smart.'" The parent reported that she met with the teachers because she knew that her daughter was smart but faced a language barrier. Parents also felt there was discrimination in the schools and that teachers needed better training in cultural competency. One parent described how she teaches her children to respond: "I don't raise my kids to discriminate—I teach them respect.

No matter what color they are, you open that door, you give those people some respect."

The two women who were at a treatment facility described the challenges they faced in putting their life back together, while still trying to support their children. One woman felt frustrated that there were so many barriers preventing her from getting involved in her children's education.

The final topic that emerged from the focus group discussion was community support. Some grandparents taught their grandchildren the native language of the family. One woman described a friend, who her children called "grandma," who attends parent-teacher conferences and school games. And the women who lived in the treatment program described how the other 40 women were like "aunties" to their children.

Group 3 summary

Descriptives. For focus group 3 there were five tribal affiliations among the 16 participants (12 women and 4 men), and 35 children among 10 families. In one case a grandmother, mother, and adult daughter attended together, as they all participated in raising the children. In another a mother and adult daughter attended together. Two participants were taking care of their grandchildren, and one looked after her nephew for eight years. Eight of the ten families had at least one child in one of the five targeted elementary schools. Two other parents had children in nearby elementary schools and had heard about the focus group from flyers posted around town by a proactive parent. There was not much discussion of education levels or employment of parents, though some parents mentioned attending two colleges in the area.

Perceptions and motivations for involvement. When parents in group 3 were asked to provide examples of parent involvement, they recalled many examples of school-oriented parent involvement, including fundraising for school events, participating in holiday parties, and attending

parent-teacher conferences. They had just as many examples of home-oriented participation, such as asking how kids are doing in school and paying attention to their children's progress and education. When the parents were asked why they got involved, a couple parents said that they felt that it influenced their children to do better in school since they see how important school is, and everyone agreed. And as one parent said, "I think it makes the connection stronger when your child sees you at the school." Parents also said that they get involved because their children pestered them to attend school events. Parents in group 3 listed various ways in which the school contacted them for participation, including letters home and a school web site. Parents were most appreciative of schools with open door policies—in which teachers noticed them when they walked in the door and welcomed them to participate in the classroom. One school had a community room where parents could chat with other parents, read the newspaper, or get on the Internet. Two parents mentioned that they go there to complete their own school work.

Barriers to involvement. When asked about barriers to involvement, parents in group 3 reported feeling isolated because they were one of the only American Indian parents at the school. Some parents reported that they felt uncomfortable approaching the teachers. Other barriers included parents having to work late and the school's lack of cultural awareness of American Indians. For example, one parent reported that American Indian children have different learning styles, but the schools were not willing to adapt the curriculum to fit the needs of a diverse classroom.

Strategies for involvement. When parents were asked which strategies of the schools worked well and which they would recommend schools use, group 3 parents mentioned several strategies to encourage parent involvement. Most often discussed was an American Indian cultural center where students could go after school and do projects, have a dance group, and be with other American Indian children. Some schools have this

program, and the parents were very positive about its effect on their children's pride.

Key factors. IEPs and the difference between elementary and secondary school students emerged from the discussion in group 3. Parents felt that their options were limited once their students were put on IEPs. For example, one mother was told that she had to leave her daughter at a school because of her daughter's IEP, even though the mother felt that the school was not serving the needs of her child. Similarly, another couple felt that their child was not being held accountable for making academic gains on his IEP. They reported that they arranged with the school to have their child taken off the IEP and worked with the child to catch up on his work at home. They also noted that the child is now getting all A's.

The other topic that was discussed is how parent involvement changes as children get older. One parent said she only gets involved with older children if there is a problem at school. Three parents said they felt that high school students are more embarrassed when parents participate. Nevertheless, one couple described how they try to balance their level of involvement between their elementary and secondary school children. The mother noted, "They're that comfortable with us being there. That we were there so much and so involved that it's not an issue with them. It's just that we belong there. It's normal for us to be there."

Group 4 summary

Descriptives. Focus group 4 comprised four participants, all women, among four families and three American Indian reservations in the central states. There were a total of 29 children among the four families, 7 of whom were in elementary school. All four families had at least one child enrolled at one of the five targeted public elementary schools. One parent was raising a grandchild, having home-schooled the child from grade 7 through grade 12. Three of the parents were homemakers, and one was an independent living counselor. One parent had earned her GED certificate 17 years after

dropping out of high school, while none reported attending college. Every parent had at least one child on an IEP, and two had children that used to be on medication.

Perceptions and motivation for involvement.

When parents in group 4 were asked to provide examples of parent involvement, they listed an equal number of examples under school-oriented and home-oriented involvement. For example, parents participated in parent-teacher organization meetings and helped display art at the school. Parents also attended scout meetings and sport events, helped with homework, and attended their children's IEP meetings. One parent volunteered as a "surrogate parent" for children on IEPs who had severe disabilities and whose parents were not able to support them. Asked why they got involved, parents typically said that it was to make sure children were successful in school and to get to know their child's teacher. One parent said she got involved when she felt that she needed to defend her child when teachers were talking about him. Children often encouraged their parents to get involved. For example, one parent said:

My little girl is like, "How come you don't get involved, Mom? How come you don't go to the PTO [parent-teacher organization]? How come you don't come to suppers?" And it makes me think how come I don't. . . . They want you to come more and more, and now I am and see what it's all about. And I feel so bad and ashamed and guilty that I never got involved in these past few years, and I've been here 23 years.

Because one of the parent-teacher organization representatives was at the meeting, there was greater discussion on how to get parents involved in the parent-teacher organization than in the schools. The suggestions included having door prizes and childcare.

Barriers to involvement. Parents were also asked about the barriers that prevented them from getting involved in their child's education. Several

parents mentioned feeling uncomfortable participating in the schools. One parent said, "I was nervous as heck to volunteer because, like a lot of Native Americans are shy or hold back. I just sit back . . . and watch things more than speak out." A different parent was uncomfortable because of the leadership: "There's not a Native American person in a leadership position, not someone to bridge the gap between cultures so people can relate and participate." Other parents worked full-time and were unavailable. One parent had a disability in her legs and back so she was not as easily mobile; another parent had a learning disability and felt embarrassed. Transportation, childcare, and financial difficulties also prevented parents from getting involved.

Strategies for involvement. Parents were also asked which strategies of the schools worked well and which they would recommend that schools use. Parents reported that the schools tried to minimize some of the previously mentioned barriers by being open to parents and encouraging them to get involved. One parent described the support she received from a parent-teacher organization member: "She said if I come across a problem, call me, and I'll walk you through it." One of the schools had an American Indian principal who tried to create a club for American Indian parents and students. Parents also felt encouraged when they saw American Indian artifacts on the wall, such as a medicine wheel and star quilts made by students. However, parents would like to see more American Indian teachers and principals. They wanted their students to have role models in the schools. One school had a grandparent program where American Indian grandparents came to the school and taught the children about their culture. There were also suggestions to support single mothers, but the group did not indicate how.

Key factors. The two topics that emerged from the discussion were maintaining American Indian culture and the importance of community among American Indians. Several parents shared stories about how they taught their children about their culture. One parent said:

We take care of each other. You've got to teach them their culture. If we're going to go on and on, we don't want to lose them to the diseases that are out there now. We need to teach them. We need to increase our population as we teach them who we were to know who they are.

Parents educate their children about their culture so that they can be proud of it. Parents also talked about the importance of community. One parent said, "For Indian people, family is the first thing. The family is the most important thing, and an extended family is real important. And they want to be involved."

Group 5 summary

Descriptives. Focus group 5 comprised seven participants, four women and three men, reflecting four families and four Indian reservations in the central states. There were 17 children among the families. Eleven children were in elementary school. Three of the families had at least one child in one of the five targeted elementary schools. The fourth had children at a nearby elementary school and had accompanied another family. One family had a child with a physical disability. A show of hands revealed that six of the parents had graduated from high school, five of those had some college, and two had college degrees. Every parent reported having at least one child on an IEP.

Perceptions and motivations for involvement. When parents in group 5 were asked what they considered to be parent involvement, they focused more on home-oriented than on school-oriented support. Although parents mentioned that they kept in touch with teachers and attended parent-teacher organization meetings, many responses involved interaction with children, such as reading with children, helping them with spelling and math, listening to their problems, encouraging them to succeed and attend college, making sure they get plenty of sleep and a healthful breakfast, buying them school supplies, and so on. When asked why they got involved, parents responded that they wanted to encourage their children and

monitor their progress. One mother noted that she became involved after going to school and learning about her role as a parent.

Barriers to involvement. Parents were asked about the barriers that discouraged them from participating in schools. Parents in group 5 listed several, including financial difficulties, work, and lack of Internet access. The primary barrier for group 5 was that most of the parents attended boarding school and did not know how to interact with schools. One parent said:

[F]or me, it's all new, because I was raised in a boarding school, so that was all taken care of for me. . . . It's like new to me. . . . They're not in boarding school, and that stuff's not provided for them for me, like it was . . . supper, everything, clothes, church. Whatever you need, they're the ones that sent us. Our parents didn't do it.

Strategies for involvement. Parents were also asked which strategies of the schools worked and which they would recommend the school use. Parents discussed the positive and negative communication they had with the schools. For instance, they received flyers from schools to inform them of activities, and the Title VII Native American Representative (their term) helped children and connected parents and teachers. Parents appreciated teachers sending out their email address so that parents could communicate with them, but as some parents did not have Internet access, they needed a phone number. One parent expressed frustration at not finding out about a parent-teacher conference until the day of the conference. Parents had suggestions for schools to encourage parent involvement. Because most parents in the group did not have Internet or email access in the home, they wanted more accessible alternatives to communicate with teachers. Parents wanted to see more American Indian teachers, principals, and staff members at the schools. One parent said:

I felt safer with an Indian teacher or more comfortable being around; because you know

how they were raised . . . three or four families living together all the time. White people they're not. They're one, and they're distant, and they don't like moms and dads around them. We do. We live together, and we know how to be a group.

One parent suggested that teacher education programs should include cultural sensitization so that American Indian families and students feel welcome, higher standards and expectations for students, and more culture in the school curriculum. They also would like to see more American Indian clubs “where they can be made at a young age to have pride in who they are, instead of even being made aware of that difference with no explanation.”

Key factors. The two areas of focus that emerged from the discussion in group 5 were cultural competence and perceived prejudice in the schools.

One parent felt frustrated that that the child's school is named after a president that supported the “genocide that was being committed against the Native Americans back then.” This father did not understand how his child could look up to such a person. When the students at that school had the opportunity to write a biographical report on someone, his son asked to write on Little Big Horn. The teacher “told him, no, it wasn't acceptable because it wasn't real history.” Another parent found the lack of American Indian art in the schools frustrating. He said, “I was the janitor and like went to all of [the classrooms]. I did work in every one of them, and I went to every class, and I didn't see anything about Native Americans.” From this discussion, parents started talking about the racism embedded in the school system. Although much of the abuse and hangings occurred decades ago, parents felt that they were still a barrier for American Indian parents to trust public schools.

NOTES

Several people contributed to the development of this report. Dolores Riley, director of Indian Education and Grants, Rapid City Area Schools, Rapid City, South Dakota, assisted with site selection and participant recruitment. Trudy Clemons, senior researcher at Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL), assisted with data reduction. Sha Balizet, senior researcher at McREL, assisted with transcript verification. Lynn Waldorf assisted with initial project development, and Barbara Aiduk assisted with formatting and report transmission. Lou Cicchinelli, executive vice president of McREL and director of Regional Education Laboratory Central; Zoe Barley, senior research fellow at McREL; and Kirsten Miller, senior consultant for REL Publications at McREL, assisted with review and editing. Finally, the authors acknowledge and thank the Office of Indian Education staff and school personnel who assisted with site and participant recruitment, school superintendents and principals who permitted the authors to interview their American Indian parents, and the many parents who graciously shared their experiences.

1. According to federal legislation resulting from the Johnson-O'Malley Act of 1934 (as amended) the purpose of the act is to provide financial assistance to schools through the Bureau of Indian Affairs to meet the unique and specialized education needs of American Indian students. Schools receiving funds are required to have an elected governing body (such as a parent board or committee), that is empowered to identify students' needs, giving parents a say in their children's education. For additional information on Johnson-O'Malley parent committees visit <http://johnsonomalley.com/>.
2. The protocol was approved by the Office of Management and Budget. The protocol was piloted with a group of seven American Indian parents located through acquaintances of one of the researchers, who was of American Indian descent. The pilot group met for 90 minutes to participate in a trial discussion. Field notes taken by both researchers were used to reconsider minor points in the data collection process. For example, several of the probing questions were determined to be redundant or failed to adequately elicit the desired information and were dropped or revised. Additionally, the field notes were used to clarify the transcripts, when needed.
3. This four-year study used an ethnographic methodology to examine parent-involvement activities as they encouraged Spanish-speaking parents to increase their participation in their children's education. Data collections included observations of 157 home-school interaction activities (parent-teacher conferences, school-site councils, and bilingual preschool-parent programs) and interviews with parents in 20 families and with elementary school teachers and administrators. Responses were coded for themes, and findings were presented to parent participants for validation. The total number of interviews conducted, number of teachers and administrators interviews, participant demographics, coding, data analysis methods, and limitations were not reported. Findings from this study are not generalizable due to limited sample size, nonrandom sampling, nonsystematic data collection, lack of triangulation, and the lack of validation of results.
4. The report of the Mid-Continent Regional Advisory Committee for Educational Needs Assessment, commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education under contract number ED04CO0043/0001, documents the Central Region's education challenges and technical needs regarding student achievement and implementation of the provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act. Data were obtained from e-mail messages, meeting discussions and presentations, and focus groups. Methods, procedures, sampling, participant

demographics, data, analysis, and limitations were not reported.

5. Although this protocol is scripted, the facilitator will read the scripts carefully observing and taking cues from participants, adapting the scripted statements and phrasing to

accommodate the communication needs and styles of the participants. To gain the trust of participants, the facilitator will explain the information in a way that makes sense to participants. Flexibility in the facilitator's role is critical to obtain the type of information sought in the study.

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