



## Drop Out and Retention Issues

The challenges facing American Indian students in Montana must be addressed. The purpose of this Indian education summit brief is to highlight issues and research around American Indian drop out and retention issues. There is a significant gap in the numbers of Indian and non-Indian students who graduate from high school. It will take everyone that serves American Indian students, whether they are on or off the reservation, K-12 or post-secondary, to improve education for our Indian students and change this dismal picture in Montana.

This Summit is convening educators and leaders from across the state to develop an action plan on how to close the achievement gap for American Indian students and ensure that schools can successfully implement Indian Education for All. It will be the collective wisdom of all the participants that will ultimately lead to reducing the drop out rates for our American Indian students.

*“Reducing the alarmingly high drop out rate of American Indian students from our public schools is a significant challenge facing Montana’s public school systems. American Indian students are leaving school at a much higher rate than their non-Indian peers, therefore educational strategies must be developed to help keep students in school and services put into place to help them find success.”*  
(Stan Juneau, Retired School Administrator, 2004)

### Related Issues

To help focus and frame discussions during the summit, the Indian Education Summit Planning Committee recognized the following issues as related to drop out and retention issues. They are inter-related and not meant to be all inclusive.

✓ **Relevancy and Learning** strategies serve to motivate students to learn and excel; provide opportunities to build relationships with others including peers, instructors, and other adults; encourage a sense of pride in academic and personal achievement; and build a desire to be continuous learners.

✓ **Resiliency** research conducted by Iris Heavy Runner and other Native scholars regarding American Indian drop outs identified resiliency as a key factor in students staying in school or college. Three major factors that influence resiliency are:

1. One caring adult/person
2. High expectations
3. Opportunities to participate

It is important to have high expectations for all of our students, regardless of ethnic/racial or socioeconomic background. Can high expectations be taught or measured? Is there a culture of low expectations for American Indian youth? If so, how can it be broken?

*“Today, a common misconception about young people is that their race, ethnicity, family structure, or economic status are the major factors affecting their success or failure in school and, ultimately, in life. This misconception can lead some educators and others to view Native youth as coming from such deficient circumstances that they cannot be expected to succeed.”* Strand and Peacock (2002)

✓ **Instructional and Coaching** strategies recognize unique characteristics of the learners, accommodate a range of learning styles, meet individual student needs and focus on preparing the student to be successful in an adult learning environment. The foundation for these strategies includes a research-based pedagogy, which is consistently applied; a team of educators and student support staff, who share a common mission; and professional development that supports the growth and development of the staff and program.

*“The common pattern that emerges from both existing research and the voices of teachers is that there is no single American Indian learning style, nor any combination of learning style preferences that fit all American Indian groups or individuals.”* (Collected Wisdom, 1998)

✓ **Social and emotional needs** of students can not be overlooked. A caring school environment is key in making students feel welcome. Extracurricular opportunities provide a purpose for many students to be connected to school. The complex challenges associated with drugs and alcohol, teen pregnancy, etc, necessitate a holistic support system that supports the family and extends beyond the school community.

✓ **School Structures** that contain flexible, student-focused features accommodate a variety of students needs, strengthen the learning experience, and promote student retention and success. Such features relate to the organization of instruction, size of learning community, and student services. How can we change our structures to meet the unique needs of our American Indian students? Here is an approach:

*“We call our method of advising – making relatives – our staff members whether they be Indian or not make relatives of the students we serve – similar to the way many plains tribes make relatives/or adopt outsiders/extended family members. I think that when an academic advisor adopts the student as a relative it really changes it to a more intimate and familiar relationship where one works hard for the other and vice versa. (Reno Charette, Director MSU-Billings Big Horn Teacher Projects)*

✓ **Parents and School Readiness** was recognized by the 1991 Indian Nations at Risk Task Force as one of the four national priorities: Develop parent-based, early childhood education programs that are culturally, linguistically, and developmentally appropriate. It is important to remember that many American Indian students come into our schools with Limited English Proficiency because they may speak some or all of their Native language. The key to making gains in achievement lies in early reading intervention in the primary grades.

✓ **Extra-curricular and community involvement** are important for students to feel connected to school. A recent dropout study by Stan Juneau, retired School Administrator from Browning, cited participation in sports as one of the main reasons American Indian students stayed in school. Sports give student-athletes a goal and purpose, to stay in school and do well, and are valued by the community. However, a sport season doesn't last forever. It is absolutely essential to instill the same sense of purpose and pride in all students.

*“Every Indian student must be provided with equitable opportunities for a quality education to empower them in their personal journeys, to provide them with an opportunity for choice, and to have an educational system that respects who they are as Indian people.” (Carol Juneau, Chair, Montana Indian Education Association)*

The **National Dropout Prevention Center/Network** (NDPC/N) [www.dropoutprevention.org](http://www.dropoutprevention.org) identified 15 strategies that can have a positive impact on the dropout rate:

1. Systemic renewal that focuses on school policies, practices, and organizational structures;
2. School-community collaboration that sustains a caring supportive atmosphere for students;
3. Safe learning environments that make schools a positive experience for students;
4. Family engagement that gives children the support they need outside of school;
5. Early childhood education that provides children with a solid beginning to their school experience;
6. Early literacy development that gives children the necessary foundation for effective learning in all other subjects;
7. Mentoring/tutoring that addresses specific academic needs;
8. Service-learning that connects school with the outside world;
9. Alternative schooling that provides at-risk students with a variety of options that can lead to graduation;
10. After-school opportunities that enhance learning and eliminate information loss;
11. Professional development that assists teachers who work with at-risk students;
12. Active learning that involve students in the learning process;
13. Educational technology that delivers instruction in creative and innovative ways;
14. Individualized instruction that allows teachers to consider individual differences in deciding teaching methods and motivational strategies;
15. Career and technical education that prepares student's for the workplace.

Do any of these strategies make sense for Montana? Some are happening and showing success. What could be done to implement them in more schools and communities? What can we do to promote collaboration so that more Montana schools can learn best practices from one another?