# Culture and Schools

# American Indian Stakeholder Perspectives on the American Indian Student Achievement Gap

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# Introduction

American Indian communities celebrate rich cultural heritages that are interwoven with education systems in Montana. This can be seen in indigenous language requirements for graduation or celebrations of student success, such as when graduates gain their first feather for scholastic accomplishments. For decades, despite the strength of community support, American Indian student achievement has not kept pace with other Montana students. This is observable via several metrics including the Smarter Balanced Assessment (SBAC), ACT assessment, and lower graduation rates for the American Indian student population in Montana.

This report highlights findings from focus groups conducted with on- and off-reservation education stakeholders regarding the achievement gap and provides a summary of the factors stakeholders felt were most important in understanding the school and community contexts influencing the achievement gap. The report provides a summary of the status of the gap, a description of the research design and methodology, findings related to specific topics, and general conclusions about the focus group responses.

## Current Achievement Gap Data

In 2019, student data in these categories confirms the achievement gap is still observable across several metrics. According to the achievement proficiency levels, student scores fall on a scale from Advanced, Proficient, Nearing Proficient, or Novice. For example, the testing gap on the SBAC Reading assessment shows 50.5% of American Indian students scored in the Novice category, meanwhile the rate for other students was 21.6%. A similar trend is seen with math where 55.2% of American Indian students scored in the novice range, whereas the percentage of other students scoring in the Novice range is 23.4%. Other standardized assessments show similar trends. In 2019, 56% of American Indian students scored in the Novice range on the ELA composite index of the ACT, whereas only 28.1% of other students scored in that range. On the ACT Math assessment, 61.9% of American Indian students scored in the Novice range compared to 32.3% of other students. Not surprisingly, the same data analysis reveals there is a similar gap with graduation. The cohort graduation rate for American Indian students is 78.6%, while the rate for other students is reported at 92.4%. OPI has been formally tracking these gaps and reporting to the Legislature since 2007 with the passage of MCA 20-9-330 (Indian Education for All).

On a biennial basis, the Montana Office of Public Instruction (OPI) prepares a report defining and discussing many of the metrics described above. This report has historically been limited to the description of basic quantitative data. Data of this type is valuable in describing 'what' is occurring, which is a critical piece of knowledge. What has been missing from the achievement gap report, however, is any qualitative metrics that might describe 'why' the gap exists year after year. The findings that follow in this report have been divided into five categories, which

supplement the report by including American Indian perspectives from both on- and off-reservation communities.

## Research Design

The design of this study was guided by two principal factors. First, the American Indian Student Achievement (AISA) team sought to provide a more complete analysis of the student achievement gap that included not just raw score data, but an examination of underlying factors influencing the achievement gap. Second, the team hoped to incorporate knowledge and first-person perspectives from the communities and individuals about whom the data is focused. In approaching the data gap via this lens, the intention is to provide findings that are actionable, are informed by the communities themselves, and are reflective of the priorities identified within each unique population. This is to ensure the voices of all stakeholders are represented in the solutions to closing the achievement gap.

To accomplish this, the AISA team enlisted support in research design and execution from the OPI's Statewide Longitudinal Data System (SLDS) team of researchers and analysts. Together, these teams designed the preliminary study and developed the focus group questionnaire. Focus groups were conducted by the AISA team via video-conferencing software Zoom. The moderators are highly trained, many of them are American Indian, have extensive experience with native communities, and had gained rapport with the groups through their work with American Indian students on and off-reservation. The SLDS team was charged with transcribing and analyzing the focus group data and producing this technical report.

*Sampling*

Sampling for focus groups was purposive. The AISA team sought to include participants from across the state, representing as many tribes and American Indian communities as possible. We included reservation schools that had been designated for comprehensive support from the OPI and off-reservation schools with high percentages of American Indian students or those that were located near a reservation boundary. Some communities showed strong interest in participation, while others chose not to participate due to limited capacity from COVID spread in their communities. Because participation was voluntary and because interest/ability to participate varied, the sample of participants for this phase of the study may appear to somewhat skew the results collected and analyzed. For example, there are more on-reservation respondents than off-reservation. The team also sought to include different types of voices from each community. Participant types included principals, other school leaders, superintendents, teachers, students, school board trustees, and community members/parents. Below is a brief discussion of the participants, their roles, locations, and other demographics.

The background of the focus group stakeholders varies on level of experience and role in the local education community. Table 1 provides a list of the roles and the counts of participants by group they represent.

**Table 1: Participant Count by Role**

| Role | Count | Percent |
|------|-------|---------|
| Community member/ Parent | 7 | 16.7 |
| Director | 1 | 2.4 |
| District Trustee | 5 | 11.9 |
| Instructional Coach | 2 | 4.8 |
| School Leader | 7 | 16.7 |
| Student | 8 | 19.0 |
| Superintendent | 7 | 16.7 |
| Teacher | 5 | 11.9 |
| Total | 42 | 100.0 |

There was a total of 42 participants split between ten demographically distinct focus groups. On- and off-reservation students accounted for the largest group, with superintendent, principal, and community member/parent groups each having seven participants.

The education systems represented vary. The number of participants at on-reservation and off-reservation focus groups was not equal, nor were the number of participants from each locale. Table 2 provides a list of the communities represented and the counts of individuals that come from each of these communities.

**Table 2: Communities and Participant Counts**

| | Count | Percent | | Count | Percent |
|---|-------|---------|---|-------|---------|
| Box Elder | 5 | 11.90 | Helena | 1 | 2.38 |
| Browning | 6 | 14.29 | Helena High | 1 | 2.38 |
| Cut Bank | 1 | 2.38 | Plenty Coups | 1 | 2.38 |
| Great Falls | 6 | 14.29 | Poplar | 5 | 11.90 |
| Harlem | 2 | 4.76 | Rocky Boy | 3 | 7.14 |
| Havre | 3 | 7.14 | Ronan HS | 3 | 7.14 |
| Hays Lodgepole | 1 | 2.38 | Wolf Point | 1 | 2.38 |
| Heart Butte | 3 | 7.14 | | | |
| | | | | | |
| | | | **TOTAL** | **42** | **100** |

Browning and Great Falls had the largest number of participants. Many of the on-reservation communities came from North Central Montana. Twenty-nine stakeholders came from reservations, while 13 stakeholders came from off-reservation. The off-reservation stakeholders were also more diverse than the on-reservation stakeholders. Overall, 32

participants self-identified as American Indian and ten self-reported as White. Gender was balanced with 20 females and 22 males participating in the focus groups. Acknowledging these differences is an important element of the analysis since it became apparent in the data that different communities and groups of people from within those communities told their stories in different ways. It is also important the focus group members felt they could safely talk about sensitive issues. As researchers we have tried to be responsive to this variation.

*Focus Group Structure and Questions*

Focus group moderators from OPI's AISA team were trained by the SLDS Program Manager on utilizing best practices in conducting focus groups interviews with the intent of mitigating variation from group-to-group and ensuring the experience was consistent across all groups and moderators. Travel restrictions during the summer of 2020 relating to the COVID-19 pandemic precluded in-person sessions, so focus groups were conducted virtually and recorded for later transcription. All participants received an overview of the session structure, along with confidentiality and analysis plans and provided informed consent for participation. Sessions were scheduled so participants from similar roles and positions (e.g. community members, teachers, etc.) were in group sessions with others who held similar experiences. Sessions were also structured so participants from communities on a reservation participated together while participants representing off-reservation communities also participated together. This structure was intentional and based upon the research team's perception that the responses from participants would reflect their different experience as individuals who held different roles and who came from different settings.

Focus group moderators asked participants five interrelated questions. The first question contains three parts: school level factors in the achievement gap, factors that may narrow the achievement gap, and reasons behind drop out and failure to graduate.

Question 1

- Part A - What influence do you believe instruction, classroom environment, or other factors has upon the difference in drop-out and graduation rates between native and non-native schools?
- Part B - If you could change anything about the educational experience in your school that you believe would impact the number of students who complete all four years of high school and graduate, what would it be?
- Part C - When students in your school drop-out or fail to graduate, what do you believe are the reasons? And why are those reasons a problem here?

The second question likewise has two parts: factors that influence math and ELA test scores and strategies to improve math or ELA test scores.

Question 2

- Part A - Which reasons do you think influence reading and math test scores at your school?
- Part B - What things do you believe the school can do to improve reading and test scores at your school?

The third question has a singular focus on what would impede students from success.

Question 3

- Part A - If we were to ask students in your school about the things that they believe prevent them from succeeding, what do you believe they would say?

The fourth question asks stakeholders to delve deeper into the differences between native and non-native schools and the impediments to success that a student may face at each location.

Question 4

- Part (A) - Do you believe that students who are at native schools face different challenges to success than students at non-native schools? What is the difference?

The final question solicits responses to a prompt that removes resources as a barrier.

Question 5

- Part (A) - The Oprah effect – If someone like Oprah Winfrey came to your community and wanted to give the school district millions of dollars in support of student achievement, what top three (3) things would you want your community to use the money for in improving your school(s)?

Focus groups took approximately one hour, although some continued longer or reconvened for an additional session to answer all questions. The moderators compiled and submitted ten (10) recordings of these sessions to the analysis team.

*Methodology*

Two OPI SLDS staff members were charged with transcribing each recording. Transcriptions were literal, seeking to maintain fidelity to the language and intent of the speaker. The transcriptions did not seek to summarize text responses and data. Rather, the transcriptions from each of the video recorded sessions presents the data in its authentic form as if the stakeholder had written it down. To ensure the responses were anonymous and confidential, all individual identifying information and references were removed during the transcription process. This allowed for a blind and confidential review of the data.

The SLDS team produced two complementary formats when transcribing the recorded sessions: (1) a narrative transcription in Word and (2) a collection of disaggregated comments illustrated in Excel. The SLDS team loaded the Excel file and content into a qualitative software tool housed in the Qualtrics suite of solutions for analysis. Within that tool, responses were analyzed to identify themes and their frequencies.

In Qualtrics, the research team coded comments under relevant topics and assigned sentiment scores. Comments served as the basic unit of analysis with 1799 in the dataset. Analysis was not informed by a theoretical framework, rather the research team coded via an exploratory analysis process. The team identified fifteen (15) themes in the dataset, comprising five (5) categories which are the five (5) findings sections of this report.

During the coding process, the SLDS team assigned each comment to a topic. In the case where there was more than one topic identified in relation to a specific comment, more than one code was assigned. Following the assignment of codes to comments, seventy-eight possible topics in the dataset were identified. The codes represent the frequency of the topic. Figure 1 illustrates a word cloud which shows both the topics and the frequency of the use of each of the topics. Frequency is depicted graphically by the size of the word in relation to others. The larger the word, the more frequent the topic is used in the dataset.

**Figure 1: Word Cloud: Frequency of Topic**



We tabulated 2,878 instances in which a topic was used in the dataset (code). In addition, the SLDS team further aggregated this schema identifying topics based on the apparent sentiment of the response given and themes which represent categories of topics. We incorporated a sentiment response scale ranging from Negative – Mixed – Neutral – Positive. This filtering of the responses allowed the SLDS team, for example, to appropriate a code for the topic "Family Environment" and assign it a certain sentiment from the aforementioned scale that provided an opportunity to say the stakeholders reported "positive" responses about family environment which corresponded to a measurable percentage of instances as reflected in the pool of responses. An example of a "positive" response about family environment is represented by the awareness of the strength present within intergenerational households.

The top ten most frequently assigned code/sentiment combinations are as follows:

**Table 3: Sentiment coding frequency**

| Codes | | Frequency |
|---|---|---|
| Family Environment: | Negative | 149 |
| Cultural Relevance: | Positive | 109 |
| Student Expectations: | Negative | 75 |
| Student Expectations: | Positive | 67 |
| Identity: Belonging: | Positive | 57 |
| Student Expectations: | Mixed | 56 |
| Identity Alienation: | Negative | 54 |
| Teacher Expectations: | Positive | 50 |
| Cultural Relevance: | Negative | 44 |
| Dropout: | Negative | 44 |

Interpreting topics and sentiment can also be done by identifying the context in which each of the comments are made. For example, for the code "Family Environment," sentiment was coded on the emotional scale as negative in 149 of the respondent comments. In this case, many of the comments referred to the social ills which were present in the family, inferences of families not holding high expectations for their child, or mental health/trauma originating from within the family- resulting in the assignment of a "negative" sentiment. Responses coded as "Student Expectations" similarly broadly address the classroom environment, attendance, and the anxiety connected to social promotion. Social promotion describes an activity where a student is promoted across grades levels without first mastering the content material but achieving grade level proficiency, nonetheless. The scale of sentiment including Negative – Positive – Mixed describe the context from which the comment is being made. Examples of positive comments (67) show praise for students and contained positive aspects and indicators of student performance and identity. Likewise, negative sentiment related to perceptions of lower expectations held by students or those expectations placed on students by teachers or parents. To place this in context, the scale used ranged from -10 to +10.

**Table 3: Sentiment Coding**

| Sentiment score | Sentiment code |
|---|---|
| -10 to -4 | Negative |
| -3 to -1 | Mixed |
| 0 | Neutral |
| 1 to 10 | Positive |

It is worth noting that in several instances "mixed" comments may have indicated a "negative" condition but may also mention something positive as well.

# Analysis

## Culture and Family

Within the preliminary findings of this data report, five sections have been identified that specifically address the comprehensive focus group data: (1) Culture and Family; (2) Pedagogy, Curriculum, and Instruction; (3) School Systems; (4) Student Learning; and (5) Trauma and Identity. Table 4 is a frequency table used to illustrate the number of codes attributed to each of the categories of themes for each section. The most frequently discussed category of the five by number of responses is Culture and the Family (780). Student learning is also frequently commented upon (709).

**Table 4: Categories of Themes**

|  | Frequency |
|---|---|
| 1. Culture and the Family | 780 |
| 2. Pedagogy, Curriculum, and Instruction | 539 |
| 3. School System | 441 |
| 4. Student Learning | 709 |
| 5. Trauma and Student Identity | 409 |
| **Total** | **2,878** |

Overall, nearly seventeen hundred comments (1,689) focused on perceptions associated with teaching and learning specifically (a combination of categories two, three, and four). Respondent comments coded to these themes and categories make up 58.69% of the total comments. When we look at these categories and their breakdown, this indicates school does remain important in understanding the achievement gap - representing nearly sixty (60%) percent of the data. The remaining comments on culture, family, trauma, and student identity made up over forty (40%) percent of the conversations in focus groups. It also indicates that out-of-school effects on the achievement gap are important as in-school effects when explaining why the gap is occurring and potential solutions. Stated another way, both in-school and out-of-school effects on the achievement gap and dropout in these schools explain the achievement gap.

Consistent across the data we observed testimonials to the strength and importance of the indigenous cultures in these communities. This was seen in two primary ways. First was the relevance of indigenous culture throughout the communities and schools and the impact of cultural heritage in talking about the historical memory of the community. Second was the family unit and the heritage of strong extended family units.

Nonetheless, most of the comments about the family were mixed, as we observed frequent comments about generational poverty and social ills that pervade the community. One example of this impact was parent involvement in schools. One parent participant indicated they wanted to see as many parents who push their kids in academics as they do with sports in American

Indian communities. Most stakeholders also called for increased parent involvement but did not provide concrete steps for how that might be achieved. The most concrete suggestion was activating the support system in and out of school by working with teachers, counselors, and social services.

*Culture*

Nearly all participants indicated they valued the cultural heritage and relevance of their indigenous cultures, although there were varied opinions on how culture was being integrated in the classroom. The category of cultural relevance had 208 comments. Fifty-two percent focused on the positive aspects of how culture is integrated in-schools or the community. Seventy-two responses expressed pride in their culture, whether regarding a program being successful or the school being successful at implementing cultural awareness programs. The remaining responses focus on negative aspects of how culture is reflected, either by improper/failed integration into schools or stigma some people experience on- and off-reservation. A comment from an American Indian community member participant addresses a negative sentiment that still expresses pride in one's culture: "I think too many times . . . we add culture; 'put a little culture on it' like it's an addition, a copying, a condiment if you will. But culture is more than that. It's the base, the understanding of lineage, the commitment, the family, the rich history."

Overall, the topic of cultural relevance highlighted how on-reservation schools integrate culture. Communities on- and off-reservation integrate culture in their schools in different ways. One Superintendent (on-reservation) took pride in their K-6 immersion program: "District-wide we have immersion K-6 now. We've—we have more immersion classes [. . .]. We are pushing the language and like I have said, the culture and history in every building and giving permission for our teachers to do that. Whereas I don't think in the past they've had the permission to do that and help our students have that identity." This integration is a community affair reflecting community outreach into schools. According to one educational leader (off-reservation), "The kids love the fact that they were getting to be around people that were teaching them about their culture and taking the time to be with them." This intersectionality between identity, culture, and American Indian youth represents an important means of integrating indigenous cultures for all student populations.

The second most frequently mentioned topic that focused on culture referenced cultural heritage. Fifty-five comments focused on cultural heritage where the majority (60%) were negative. Nearly all expressed a belief in American Indian cultures. However, this majority reflects frequent references on how Western culture is not relevant in American Indian communities- particularly in considering the legacy of boarding schools and the impact of the smallpox epidemic in creating historical distrust between communities. Calls to recognize this colonialism were strong. In the following we see how recent protests about racial justice have raised awareness of this aspect of cultural heritage: "I think that we, as a school when I reflect

on and especially what's going on and what just exploded in the country- Are we doing everything that we can to make sure that this is a culturally responsive environment?" (principal, off-reservation) Historical trauma is further seen as a barrier for all American Indian youth and their communities. Historical trauma is experienced by specific cultural, racial, or ethnic groups in a manner that is multigenerational and predicated on major events. Caught between two cultures, the historical trauma indicates the domination of one culture over the other and shows deep distrust in the communities as both cultures strives for racial justice: "There's small communities across Montana and they—a lot of those students do well and they don't have a lot of opportunities either. However, they are not in a [reservation] like [name redacted] said we have historical trauma that impedes some of that." (superintendent, on-reservation) Participants highlighted the need for honoring American Indian student cultural heritage within all school communities, as well as a mindfulness surrounding experiences of historical trauma both for American Indian students on-reservation and those attending school off-reservation.

Frequently stakeholders talked about differences on/off-reservation (60). Overall, 67% of responses were negative or mixed. The range of responses included bias and stereotyping either on- or off-reservation, the lack of opportunities on-reservation, or the lack of opportunities for American Indian youth off-reservation. A superintendent (on-reservation) mentioned the lack of opportunities as something that impacts American Indian youth everyday: "Students in urban cities, you have movie theaters, roller skating rink, ball park, parks, swimming pools, drive in, McDonalds, Wendy's, Burger King-- things to do whether mischievous or not. There are so many opportunities there. What do we have here in our community? Not much if you are out and about in the community, looking for something to do. Unfortunately, it's usually nothing positive." The remaining 33% of responses made positive comments about cultural outreach off-reservation and the ease to celebrate identity and culture on-reservation. "If you understand your kinship values, your ancestry, all of that has a big part of your identity." (Parent, on-reservation) The on-reservation learning and living for students presents as set apart in the process of knowing, growing, and the opportunity to act on their knowledge and growth. Such opportunity on-reservation for developing the American Indian identity participants note as unique, while opportunities off-reservation vary and are said to be less than sufficient to foster identity formation.

*Family and Community*

Stakeholders referred to the role of the community and family in understanding the achievement gap. Stakeholders referred to the community (41 comments) in a positive light 46% of the time. The positive remarks were often paired with cultural topics and underscored the strength of the community, despite adversity. Less often was this the case with families. Outside of areas of parent involvement and parent outreach, positive impressions of home and family only accounted for eight percent of responses (253 total responses). In response to

Question 1 Part 3, Superintendents referred to family and community in relation to questions about why students drop out.

**Figure 2: Superintendents Comments on Cause for Dropouts (Family/Community)**
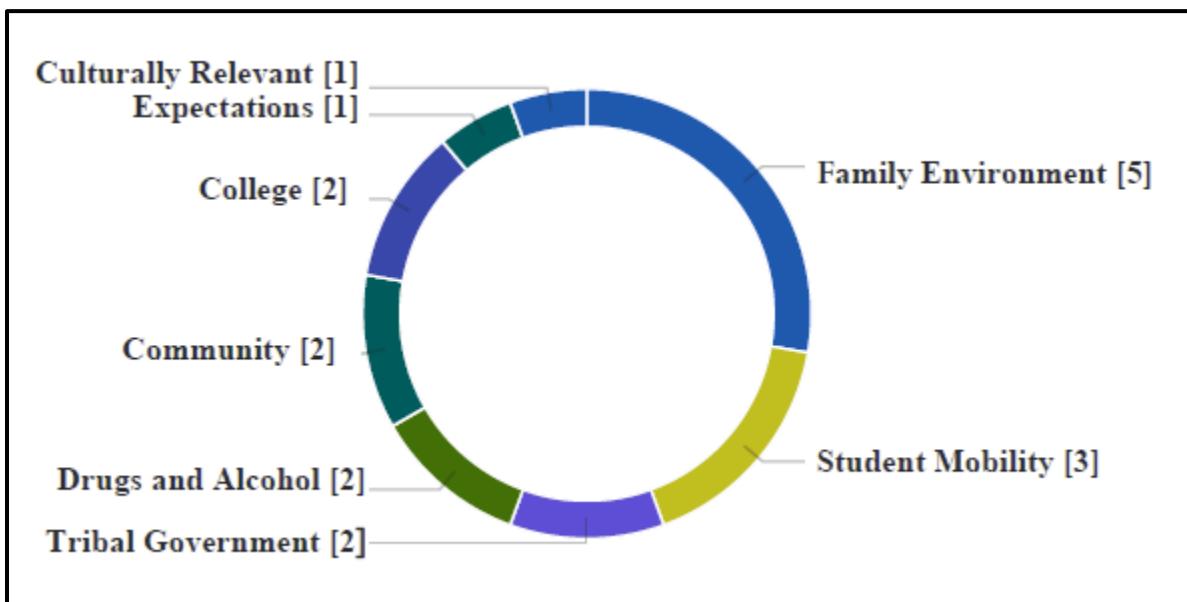


Seven comments from superintendents about family environment and community are paired with comments about student mobility between schools, comments about drugs and alcohol in the home, comments about tribal government and how it may be an enabling factor in families' poverty, goals for going to college, instances where someone dropped out of college, and comments on college life, expectations of students/children, and culture.

Many of these comments referred to the families of students that underperform, are socially promoted, and eventually drop out. An example of a negative comment about family is from a principal (off-reservation): "Sometimes I think what needs to be the first issue we address is the generational poverty in some of our families." Respondents provide detailed descriptions of this poverty as seen in the following: "Some of them—they [students] may not have the services. They may not have running water. They do not have electricity. They cannot get ready for school. They do not have clothes. That is part of some of our students. Maybe their parents partied all night, or they did, or this- the drugs and alcohol is a tremendous factor in our communities." (superintendent, on-reservation) Accompanying these descriptions are calls for social services to be involved. At the same time, some respondents expressed the view that social services can be enabling. For example, suggesting that while the tribal government provides for some basic needs, this service may inhibit motivation to better ones' circumstances or succeed in-school. The challenges these students navigate surrounding the homelife certainly are communicated as the dominant catalyst for dropout. And yet, homelife and family simultaneously is also portrayed as a dynamic experience that can also strengthen

and encourage the students' road to graduation and instill a sense of pride about scholastic achievements.

Twenty-nine percent of comments (total 75) that discussed parent involvement were positive. An example of a positive comment from a parent on-reservation is as follows: "We have to have the family dynamics be involved. The school can only do so much. The individual can only give so much. There has got to be a balance . . . education, in the essence, is what our ancestors died for [. . .] Whether it is parents, grandparents, siblings, whoever is raising the student, needs to be involved somehow [. . .] to encourage and acknowledge and honor the students, whether it's the educators or the family, it needs to happen all the way around to help them push forward." Parent involvement is seen as focal to graduation and continued success. One parent (on-reservation) said, "I know our educators are really important to our kids, but we also need to have parent involvement for our kids to push them to graduation success and continue on for schooling."

School leaders echo the importance of this connection as well. A superintendent (off-reservation) summarized the importance of this link in comparing their off-reservation school experience to those on-reservations: "I do recognize from our families who may have spent time in other districts that they felt that the tie between the building itself and the community was a little bit stronger in those reservation or native schools than they experienced in our district. And I think that is something we continue to work on—is to incorporate ways to get families into our buildings." Across focus groups, there was consensus that no single factor alone could move the needle for students. Instead, as the participant statements above indicate, the connection students have between school, family, and community is vital. The connection with the community is especially important since successful integration of tribal practices into the school is dependent on belonging and successes in similar communities throughout Indian country.

## School System

There were relatively few comments about the school system (district and schools) aside from the teaching and learning that occurs within these institutions. For the purposes of this study, school system is understood broadly as all references to a school or school district that did not address the classroom and in-classroom experiences. The references consist of three parts: school system (234 comments), staffing (49 comments), and references to support system for students and families (158 total comments). Major topics of the theme school system include building (33), education alternatives (23), leadership (23), and school system (75 comments). Hiring and retention of teachers is the dominant concern of staffing (39 comments). Thirteen of those comments directly address the recruitment, hiring, and retention of American Indian educators. Support system describes those comments that reference supports for students in schools: social services (21 comments), the work of school counselors and mental health counselors (25 comments), and school outreach to parents (27 comments).

*School System*

Fifty-one percent of comments about schools or school districts were mixed or negative. An example of a negative comment was that a participant felt leadership was unresponsive or school facilities were inadequate. Thirty-six percent of responses were positive, often indicating pride in one's school or comments about specific programs. Stakeholders thought broadly about the potentials and challenges for their schools, as seen in the following from a parent (on-reservation): "If we take away COVID and all that, I think the big thing is structure. I think both paradigms of succeeding and not succeeding depend on how we structure our students to then be successful. If we are just continuing the same structure traditionally, in the Western society concept, we are going to continue to get what we always got. So if we want to build new leadership, and build structural students who then have the capacity to go into a work force, know what they are doing, to run a grant, to run a tribe, to be successful . . . I think the big thing is structure." This and similar comments indicated a general dissatisfaction with how some schools are currently being run.

Moreover, it is a call for reimaging education on the reservation as a response to this general dissatisfaction. There was also a call for an education system that is more relevant for indigenous youth. Other criticisms concerned the mechanics of these schools, which often rely on grant funding. "I think the clock and the dollar controls so much of the education and somehow, we have got to find a way to balance it, or at least get the students' education a little higher than the time clock or the dollar or the grant that needs to be spent." (parent, on-reservation)

Many of the positive comments focus on education alternatives, things like an alternative school or HiSET prep programs in the school. One superintendent (on-reservation) comments that education alternatives serve students that are traditionally on the margins: "I think that if there was another option that was almost like a branch of our public schools, but it was just a different type of setting, you could probably reach a few more kids that way. And then we're all working on a solution right now to get those kids through the four-year system, but if we had money and the people to do it- I think that an alternative option could benefit some kids." Participants thought broadly about the concept of schooling and saw how some alternatives would meet the needs of their communities and families (principal, on-reservation): "It would be nice to have [a student group home], you know we have so many kids in our community that, their living situations are so sad, it is really sad what they have to see and what they have to deal with." This was an interesting finding, given the historical context of boarding schools. However, participants felt that given the current living situations of some students, alternative options had some appeal. What proponents sought to claim was that holistic tribally driven residential schools could have an impact in improving students' out-of-school environment.

Further exploration of ideas for improvement was inspired in the focus groups, not just for the school system but across the board of student experience, through the opportunity to discuss

what changes they would institute if money was not an issue. In the following figure, we present how six off-reservation comments targeted what they viewed as important in education reform.

**Figure 3: Off-Reservation Stakeholder Responses to Question 5- Student Focused**
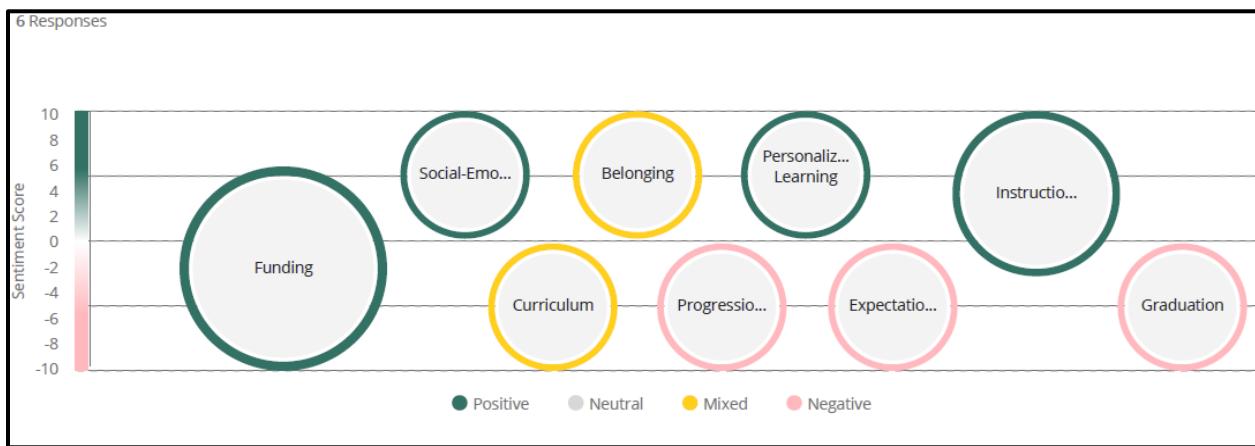


Each comment was assigned more than one topic. In this graphic, the size of the circle indicates how many comments address the topic. In the scale to the left, the sentiment score rates each topic on a scale from -10 to +10. Funding for specific school programs made up the bulk of the six comments. This was accompanied by concerns about graduation, student expectations, and social promotion. Learning strategies proved to be important areas of improvement, with a focus on curriculum, instruction, and personalized learning. Identity themes were also apparent with a mixed comment about belonging in an off-reservation environment.

*Staffing*

In general, the presence and influence of school staff was reflected in a positive light as part of the school system. 62% of stakeholders made comments with positive sentiment about teacher recruitment, especially regarding recruitment of American Indian educators. Comments on staffing, retention, and recruitment were often interwoven with other teacher characteristics, as seen in Figure 4.

**Figure 4: Teacher Staffing Characteristics – Views of Principals (Question 1A)**
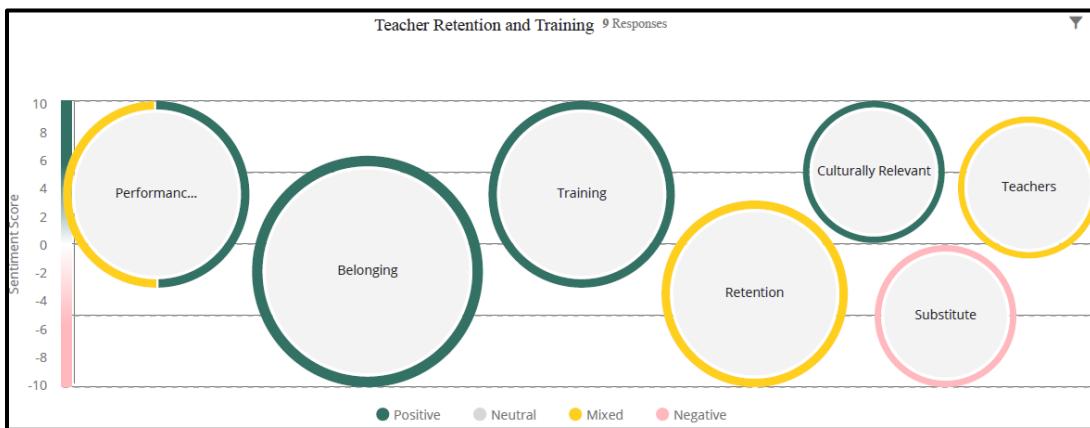


Belonging was important with principals witnessing pride among teachers in their school communities. This intersects with pride in one's ethnicity or the ethnic makeup of the community. Mixed reactions occurred with some comments about retention and teacher performance. Positive comments occurred about professional development and cultural relevance of teaching practice.

Stakeholders commented that new teachers were appreciated on the reservation because they knew the challenges and opportunities of the communities, they approached teaching with new ideas and a fresh face, and they attracted students who knew they could relate to them: "And then, we have teachers who, when they are new, they see us and they see a need and they want to fill it, so they will do anything they can to fill that need." (student, on-reservation) And yet, while the efforts of educators were recognized, participants also expressed the challenge of finding quality educators to invest the effort. Numerous stakeholders discussed how difficult it is to attract high quality, new educators. According to one superintendent (off-reservation): "And then paying teachers higher wages and raising the bar for their competency and their expertise that's contemporary with doctors and lawyers. Pay somebody $100,000 a year—a mentor, or a first-class teacher who has these skill sets. What kind of people would we be attracting if there were those kinds of salaries out there?" This feeling of difficulty in attracting educators given resource limitations extended to the rest of the school staff and substitutes. One on-reservation superintendent claimed that "I don't get quality subs out here. It's usually trying to find someone at the spur of the moment – an adult that is just a babysitter."

Many stakeholders commented on the role of American Indian educators as mentors and role models for American Indian youth. Beyond having someone in the classroom that "looks like them," American Indian educators also represent success stories based on what students can identify. Yet stakeholders also acknowledged it was difficult attracting American Indian educators because the pool is so small. A superintendent (off-reservation) talked about this challenge: "I would like to see more American Indian teachers— teachers that could relate not only with American Indian students, but with all students. I think that would be a great place to

start. Unfortunately, we do not have very many applicants for open positions who are American Indian, or who had even attended American Indian colleges." One superintendent (on-reservation) commented how these staff members are valued members of the school community: "You know, we hired a couple of American Indian teachers that are going to be able to identify with kids. And then getting training for our educators that are coming in from a non-native community and getting them to have understanding of- of the issues that our kids are dealing with. And then how they can help them be successful and assist them." This comment on teacher training and the willingness of educators to be receptive to that training is also focal to staffing decisions.

*Support System*

The term 'Support System' is a phrase often used in the dataset and was incorporated as a topic. Stakeholders mentioned the importance of support systems in both schools and the community. According to one superintendent (off-reservation): "Somebody knows them, and they make a relationship with them, they are much more likely to stay in-school, or come back into school if they've been absent for a while. If there is a significant person there who understands and knows this kid. That's a causal factor to dropout." That significant person is often a teacher, administrator, or the school counselor (or other mental health/addiction counselors that may work in the school). Direct connections between student and teacher are vital.

Support systems in these schools often had a negative connotation in the data, mainly in relation to feelings that support was missing or more was needed. Fifty percent of responses (80) expressed either negative or mixed feelings in relation to support systems. Examples of negative contexts of these codes include the absence of social service resources, school counselors that have too many responsibilities, and leadership that is not supportive of school programs focused on the well-being of students. Forty-four percent of respondents responded positively regarding school counselors. School counselors are seen as individuals who can help provide connection for students amidst the current weaknesses of the school support system. Positive comments include those that represent a helpful school counselor or the hope a counselor may be able to remedy situations. One student (on-reservation) made the distinction between the services a school counselor typically does and the work of contractors who provide mental health or addiction services: "I think they should have two different counselors because I know counselors now they have to do scheduling and all that. They have little time to be actual counselors- a mental health counselor." One of the principals who participated was particularly thankful for the services of the mental health contractors in their school: "I'm thankful for the Alta-Care program because these boys, we got these set of boys into Alta-Care wrap around supports at younger grades, so they're able to talk about their experiences without being ashamed of it or having emotion attached to it." The role of the counselor was expressed as focal to establishing the school support system for students. For students who

could benefit from mental health counseling services, the role of the counselor is central not only to the student's academic success, but well-being also.

Situations of mental health and trauma are particularly acute. One principal (on-reservation) agrees: "I would agree with [redacted]. I think the top thing that we would choose is the mental health and ensuring that we have enough hired for not just the students, but also for the parents. We need a lot of parent counseling out there." Parent outreach is seen as a crucial link to addressing dropout issues, struggling achievement, and for the general well-being of the child. Parent outreach was referred to in a positive context 52% of the time. Examples of positive comments included praise for parental outreach, calls to expand this outreach, and celebration of the impact of parental engagement.

## Pedagogy, Curriculum, and Instruction

The core of teaching can be defined as pedagogy, curriculum, and instruction. Pedagogy is the theory and practices behind teaching. When we think of multiple pedagogies, we address different philosophies of teaching and learning. For purposes of this study, we included the expectations that teachers have, or that others hold about teachers, to factor into pedagogy because often they represent pedagogy in practice. There were many references to curricula, often framed as math or reading curricula, curricula mandated by a grant, or culturally sensitive curricula that are being implemented in the school. Instruction refers to the practice of teaching. Comments regarding math and reading instruction received both positive and negative sentiment scores. We also included specific kinds of instruction in this theme, including socio-emotional learning, differentiated instruction, and personalized learning. Because so much of professional development addresses different kinds of instruction, we included references to professional development as an aspect of instruction.

There are 205 comments that focus on pedagogy which include references to theory and practice, teachers' roles, teachers as role models, and examples of exemplary teachers. One hundred ten of these comments were positive. Examples of negative comments include reference to quality teachers working in difficult circumstance. Thus, a negative comment may also include positive aspects. There are 90 comments that focus on curriculum. These comments include 44 comments about specific curricula, grant-required curricula, and the Indian Education for All program. There are 244 comments that focus on instruction, including classroom instruction in ELA or math, instruction that is discussed as fundamental to learning processes, early intervention, personalized learning, socio-emotional learning, and professional development. Of these, sentiment is positive in 160 responses. Examples of negative comments include those comments directed at the ELA and math content areas. Frequently, stakeholders identify that too much time is given to these content areas, many teachers and administrators engage in social promotion of students when they haven't demonstrated grade level proficiency, and the ways of teaching ELA and math focus too much on assessment and neglect indigenous ways of knowing.

*Pedagogy*

Considering the theory and practice of teaching, including the expectations teachers hold reflecting their theory and practice, the general response from stakeholders was positive. There are 84 comments that focus on teacher expectations, 60% of which have a positive context. One example from a student in an off-reservation school illustrates the expectation placed on teachers: "Just taking a serious interest in your kids. Not just teaching them to get the information out but teaching them to be an educator. Not teaching them to remember stuff but teaching them to learn." While this comment is not overtly positive, it refers to the positive impact a teacher can have when they engage in the practices the student describes. Moreover, comments that exhibited a teacher expectation coincided with a variety of other codes as seen in Figure 5.

**Figure 5: Superintendents comments on interventions with teachers—on-reservation (Question 1B)**
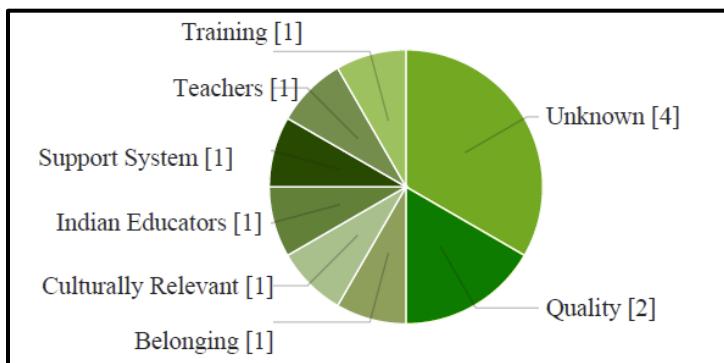


Coincidental with teacher expectations as seen by superintendents was the need for quality educators, the need to foster a sense of belonging among teachers, the need to reinforce cultural practices, the importance of Indian educators, and the need for professional development.

There were negative sentiments for this topic as well. In this next quote, the principal notes the family environment is difficult to change, but that teacher-level effects are more under the control of the administrator: "[Students] have so many obstacles at home and we can't fix the home life. I think we can start to try to teach our teachers how to build resiliency." A frequently held belief among stakeholders is that teachers are active role models, especially American Indian educators. Fifty-six percent of these comments about role models for indigenous students are positive. The mixed or negative comments focus on the difficult context that teachers work within. Active in this context means the educator actively builds relationships with their students, as seen in a comment from an educator (on-reservation): "I believe relationships are at the key of this— as with all students— and establishing trust with the American Indian students, knowing that they can trust their instructors." The key is to build

relationships, make connections, and deter potential struggles or negative outcomes such as dropout.

Thirty-two comments focused on the teacher's role and provided indications of quality performance by selected educators. Fifty-three percent of these comments were positive. One on-reservation superintendent said, "I think our students need to feel that they have the highest quality educators, they need to be motivated to want to learn, and come to school." Another positive example on the teacher's role is provided by an American Indian parent (on-reservation) who noted that any effort to change outcomes that repeat themselves year after year, such as the achievement gap, need to consider what is means to teach and learn in these schools: "If there is one thing, I could change . . . [I would] change the structure of Westernized teaching: of your bells ringing, and classrooms, and sitting in desks . . . [instead make it about] the innate connection of incorporating individual students, one-on-one sessions, smaller classroom sizes, and more resources." The practice and theory of teaching presents as an opportunity for schools to engage a meaningful and personalized learning experience for unique learners, especially noting the characteristics of the American Indian student.

*Curriculum*

Considering the means in which educators design scaffolded opportunities for students to demonstrate the knowledge and skills expected of them to learn, stakeholder responses in the study largely focused on how curriculum impacts the learning experience of the student and prepares them for anticipated academic encounters. In total, 76 comments focused on curricula. The remainder focused on curricula that is grant-required or a part of the Indian Education for All program. Of the 76 comments, many focused on content area, academic language, the importance of math and ELA instruction, calls for experiential education, meeting student where they are academically, interdisciplinary teaching, and culturally responsive curricula. In the dataset there are a variety of comments about math and reading instruction and how it is essential to promote the academic language among students. One IEFA representative commented that: "I never thought that reading and math would be so connected, but I've noticed the students that have difficulty reading [. . .] have huge difficulties in math because they do not understand what they're reading. And that's not just lengthy word problems, it is equations [. . .]. A lot of our American Indian students are considered English Language Learners: not that they can't speak English, but they don't understand English, and the academic aspects of English are not being spoken at their homes." This stakeholder puts hope in the education system to remedy the situation; however, this is dependent on the curricula and teacher buy-in to implement this remedy.

Another educator (on-reservation) focused on how math and ELA can be a stabilizing element to the education of American Indian children: "And if we do this across curriculum in every period for seven periods a day, then I think kids will start getting a real clear understanding that reading and math are important. No matter what class I'm taking it is important no matter what

I do. Staff members play a very critical key in developing those." And every staff member can be seen as a math or ELA instructor by integrating key concepts across disciplines: "I think the other thing too that where schools fall short on, schools in general, is everybody being a reading teacher. You know, everybody. It's not an ELA issue—some of my best reading instructors are social studies teachers because you have to be able to understand the content through reading for the most part on if you're looking at source documents and things like that. But I think everybody being a reading teacher, so they get that consistency and redundancy of the message on how to do things, how to decode, how to do all those things that, like you said, the academic language." (principal, off-reservation) Consistency across curriculum design and implementation is expressed as a hopeful remedy to closing some of the gap for American Indian students in way of access through language."

Though somewhat contradictory, participants also expressed feelings that the current curriculum is not working. Fifty-three percent of the comments about curriculum were negative comments about the current education practice. "We are really not a one-size-fits-all type of people; we just are not. So, I think that is part of it, is looking at that, at the instruction. If there are ways, we can bring experiential into that a lot more, I think we could find some success." (parent, on-reservation) This emphasis on experiential learning focused on diagnosing where a child is coming from, their previous performance, and how they would like to see their education look. It offers a dynamic was to promote self-actualization and promote positive identity development. A similar suggestion was made by a school leader (off-reservation): "Meeting the student where they're at educationally, and then developing those skills. So, for instance, a lot of my high schoolers, they are at a fifth-grade reading level. Instead of reading "Taming of the Shrew" this year we read *Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian*." A superintendent (off-reservation) echoes these sentiments by focusing on finding real world relevance in what is being taught: "We struggle more with math than we do with reading. I just think it is—I think it starts early and then it just gets worse from there in the early grades. And I would say it's mostly a connection—a lack of connection with everyday life as far as math goes." In this way, not only does access through language provide connection to achievement for American Indian students, but the affiliation with providing curriculum that is culturally relevant to their experiences and ways of knowing.

Calls for culturally responsive curriculum permeate the dataset. Many of the comments have a negative tone, as many respondents did not view current programs as particularly culturally responsive. One principal (off-reservation) said: "I'm not sure everybody is always as well educated on how to integrate culturally responsive . . . curriculum . . .. [I]t's got to be a day-to-day-to-day [investment from the educator], where [students] can see themselves in the curriculum, and it's meaningful to them." This definition is useful because it shows the power of promoting curricula and fostering student identity. Yet as the principal suggests, it is a work in progress dependent on the investment of the educator.

Many positive comments emerged during discussion of language curricula; specifically those promoting indigenous languages in ways that involve the community (education leader, on-reservation): "Definitely involve language curriculum- try to create a class that is more of life lessons, and then a career-focused, strength-focused classroom or place based learning, or something with the elders involved also." One parent on-reservation described the curricula's central role as preserving cultural heritage and suggested interdisciplinary implementation: "Right now, our Cree language teachers in the school, they get half an hour to forty-five minutes a week with each class, which is definitely not enough. I would try to balance that out with the amount of time they spend on reading and math. There are other important things that students could be learning . . .. And I think there is a way we can probably get [language] integrated into each class we have . . . if you're doing shop, there are so many different things you could do with geometry and math, then how to use these tools and sharpen a knife. Maybe even correlate that with how to skin a deer properly, and then go from there on how to make moccasins from top to bottom . . . what I would like [changed is address] how all these things tie in together." Opportunities for students to engage with their native language offer a connection to their learning environment distinct to the cultural responsiveness needs of education for American Indian youth.

*Instruction*

Considering the practice of teaching, stakeholders focused again on prioritizing the experience of the unique student. Sixty-eight percent of the comments that focused on the fundamentals of instruction responded positively. These comments often occur in the context of differentiation, social emotional learning, and personalized learning. Many respondents agreed their schools are successful overall, at least in the delivery of instruction in the classroom. Negative comments tend to focus on how reading and math is taught in a decontextualized fashion or frequently paired with comments on student performance, especially social promotion.

In approaching the means in which instruction can enhance students' capacity for growth toward achievement, individualized learning was central. Thirty-three comments focused on personalized learning and its potential to provide one-on-one instruction that is tailored to the learning needs of each student. Fifty-eight percent of responses about personalized learning were positive. Negative comments about personalized learning were mainly about the absence of personalized learning options. One superintendent (off-reservation) proposed more personalized learning: "I think more flexibility, and more personalized learning for students-- understanding what their individual needs are better. And having skillful staff, faculty, administrators, and counselors, and community partners that can help guide a student towards whatever it is that they needed. And then being flexible enough in our systems to give them a pathway towards career or college that's maybe more personalized." Similar suggestions for more personalized learning were efforts to differentiate instruction. Differentiation relies on meeting students where they are at, diagnosing specific challenges the student may have, and

making instruction meaningful and personal to each student learning styles. Seventy-one percent of comments that mentioned differentiation were positive.

Social-emotional learning is an important component of trauma-based approaches and soft skills including collaboration and communication. According to one on-reservation principal, "One thing we do is we push instruction, we really push instruction. Ensuring that we are meeting all the grant, things that we need to meet, but we do not really push that teaching kids that social-emotional piece. Really, how to have a growth mindset. And so, I think those are key factors that once we take a step back, we have to ensure that the kids know how to communicate, they know how to deal with their feelings, they need to know that it's okay to disagree with a teacher or what they're teaching, you know. But it ties back to relationships and really getting to know our kids." It is expressed that access to social-emotional learning begin early in the students' academic career.

Many comments (23) focused on early childhood interventions, especially those programs fostering social-emotional learning. This practice was a way to target the child's education and augment what may or may not be occurring in the home. According to one principal, "I think that if we can get a hold of our kids, like [redacted] was saying, at a younger age on how to deal with their issues or seek help and let them know that it's okay to get help."

Trauma informed education practices are also an increasingly important strategy for challenged school communities. Respondents viewed this as fundamental, above any other learning that may occur. One on-reservation principal summarizes this as follows: "All of our professional development is focused on trauma enforced practices and restorative justice."

Professional development indicates the direction of instruction and was an area of interest for participants. It was also the place many stakeholders indicated the school system could be improved. Professional development occurs in a variety of formats and fashions. Finding the right fit for a school is often determined by outside priorities such as efforts to meet grant requirements, and the timing, availability, and cost. One principal notes many factors involved in training: "Professional development is key, but it's got to be the right professional development. You have to have buy in from your staff. There is no doubt about it. They have to see it as important and vital. So professional learning community time where they can get with their colleagues, and they can—I guess chew up the concepts, and digest them a little bit, and work back and forth with 'What is best practices?'"

A common focus for professional development is culturally responsive practices. One principal (off-reservation) mentioned how beneficial their school's professional development was for promoting cultural awareness: "I would also say that our district, in conjunction with our department priorities, training for diversity for teachers to broaden their understanding and teaching strategies to work with students from all different places and backgrounds and cultures." One parent participant summed this up succinctly: "If it's supposed to be Indian Education for All, then it should be for all, including teachers, counselors, [and] administrators. I

think they should all have to take some kind of college level course on that." Conversations around instruction, as well as notes on professional development for what and how to teach, stayed central to providing instructional methods to students that is personalized and responsive of their experiences.

## Student Learning

Twenty-five percent of focus group comments focused on student learning. This section contains four parts: achievement, attendance, social promotion and graduation, and skills and career. In the context of an achievement gap study, relatively few comments focused on achievement and testing (87 comments). Of those, 26% were positive. Examples of positive comments included improving test scores after the introduction of a new curriculum, the value of the SBAC Interim tests in providing actionable results tailored to each student, student success in reading and math in culturally relevant environments, and particular references to school-level assessment improvements. Attendance was viewed as a key factor impacting the achievement gap (50 comments). Sixty-four percent of comments relating to attendance were negative. These included references to students or groups of students, or criticisms of current school attendance policies. There were 232 comments about social promotion and graduation. Nineteen percent of comments (41) focused on positive aspects of proficiency and graduation. Many of the comments that were negative focused on dropout trends (78 comments). The skills and career focus has 76 comments, 50% of which were positive. Many of the positive comments focused on CTE opportunities in a culturally relevant background. There were also comments about college. Many stakeholders expressed negative experiences from their personal experience in college. There were a few comments that mentioned a school focus on college readiness. Others talked about taking students to visit colleges as a hands-on opportunity to explore career potentials.

*Achievement*

Student achievement served as a focus area for stakeholders in conversing about student learning, naturally, as much insight of their learning comes from scores representing their academic success. Few comments referenced the achievement gap. Of the 87 comments that mention achievement testing, there are 54 achievement topic codes and 33 that address testing. Most of the achievement topics address student performance. There are often references that directly mention the term achievement. Positive comments focus on increasing student performance school wide, increasing individual student performance, or the benefits of certain programs or pedagogies in increasing academic achievement. Fifty-nine point twenty-six percent of comments about achievement were in a mixed or negative context. Comments occur about grade level and school level measures of proficiency in low performing schools, how achievement is not relevant to students that are being socially promoted, and data that is showing the achievement gap statewide.

Stakeholders agree the achievement gap is complex and casual factors to that gap are often external to testing and the test. One in-school solution is early intervention with students long before they are testing and in subsequent elementary grades. According to one superintendent (off-reservation): "Recognizing gaps that exist with our Native American populations, and addressing those gaps early and often is another big piece to improving student achievement, and students doing well and staying on track to graduate. Too often these goals fall on the secondary environment to try to catch up, and they end up getting the blame for our dropout rate, but I think those skills and those gaps need to be identified early." Another in-school solution is to create a culture of growth and achievement in the school. Something as simple as celebrating success whether it be at the completion of a unit or as measured by a standardized test of student achievement, can enable future growth and achievement among all students. One principal (on-reservation) describes the challenge: "I do think with our reading and test scores at our school we do put a lot of emphasis on it, but we always don't do the positive praise and the growth." Articulation that in-school measures and methods assist in addressing the achievement gap for American Indian students is made clear. These approaches help prepare the student for setting long-term perspectives of graduating and celebrating the small successes along the way.

Testing on the other hand refers to the process of preparing for or taking a test. Often these comments are critical of testing programs as it can take time away from other disciplines or lead to teaching to the test. Not all comments are critical of the testing programs. A superintendent (on-reservation) describes: "Another thing that we were doing— will continue to do was practice that test. A part of it is— if the report card is that the state is publishing is showing our test scores then we should be preparing our students for that test." Others criticize the testing programs as they are not relevant to a student's ultimate success (graduation). According to one superintendent (on-reservation) tests lose their relevance as a student gets older: "Honestly, I think when it comes to testing and scoring for native students is the redundancy of the test. By the time, a kid is an 8th grader they are done taking the test. There's no value to them to show anybody that this test is good for anything because they know it doesn't affect any part of their [life] whether they go on to high school, or graduate, or anything of that nature. So, it just becomes another hoop to jump through." Relevance here contains two components: relevance to academic success and relevance to cultural variables. This echoes across the eight other comments that address relevance. For example, relevance is seen as students interest and cultural heritage, which enables achievement in novel ways: "And then I agree with [Redacted]—the math situation for struggling learners—if there isn't relevance built into the math instruction all the way through elementary school and high school—there's a lot of students [. . .] And I think that maybe because I've interacted with a lot of American Indian students they thrive in an environment where they can see relevance and application to the mathematics -- even in beading and so forth." (superintendent, off-reservation)

There are two challenges frequently noted about test taking. Eight comments focus on how students often struggle with the academic language of the test and the test may not be culturally relevant; as seen in the following comment from a principal (on-reservation): "I think a big part of the reading and math test scores is really the lack of their understanding of the academic language. A lot of our kids, they're taking a reading test, but really don't understand what [does] 'compare and contrast' mean what does 'cause and effect' mean. Then when they are taking a math test, a lot of the math tests are so much reading . . . just understanding that academic language." Other stakeholders mention that this causes test anxiety which becomes the main experience when testing. One superintendent (on-reservation) mentions this in context: "I think test anxiety—maybe test— the test itself has a big play in it but it's also the experiences that our students have. Their vocabulary—they're not EL students per say because of their language, their EL because of the limited experiences and limited vocabulary that they hear on a daily basis at home." Both the process of test preparation and taking the test for students presents significant challenges in the way students achieve success on the assessment and in how teachers adapt their curriculum and instruction to respond to these challenges. Stakeholders note how providing the balance between rigorous test prep and access through academic language while also providing culturally relevant lessons and critical thinking skills is a unique challenge in teaching native students, recognizing influence exterior to the classroom impacting such balance.

The intersection of topics can be seen in principal responses to Question 2 Part B. Principals focus on achievement and testing, but also look to other in-school variables.

**Figure 6: Principal Responses to Achievement Gap Question**
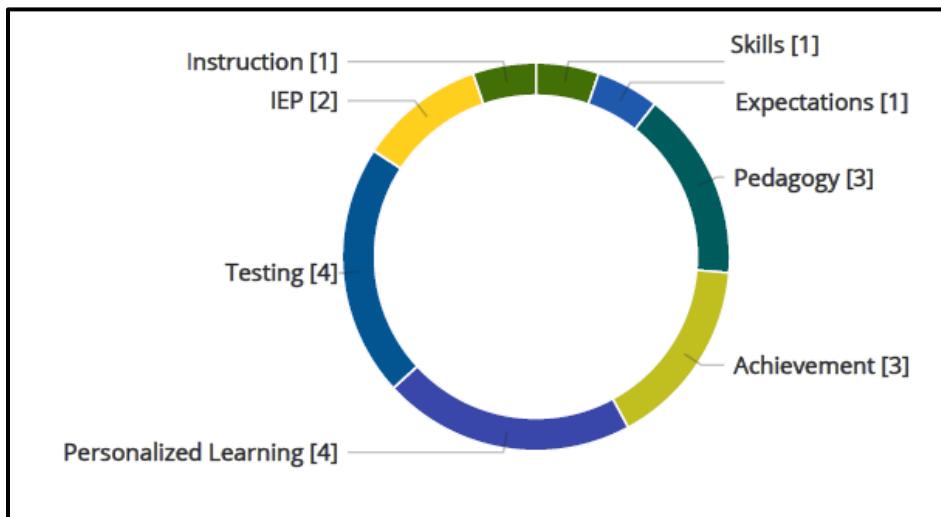


Among the other in-school variables the principals mention is the importance of pedagogy in determining the achievement gap, the need for personalized learning to ameliorate the achievement gap, a focus on providing IEPs for students in order for them to take alternate

assessments, an emphasis of life skills, and the need for higher expectations to be placed on students.

*Attendance*

Stakeholders expressed a belief that higher expectations on students' attendance would have an impact on achievement. There were only three positive comments about attendance in the schools represented in this report. These comments focused on the belief that increasing attendance would increase student academic achievement. One principal (on-reservation) put attendance issues in context: "[A]ttendance . . . has a kind of a ripple effect at our high school, we're 70% attendance. I mean, if you're 90% attendance, kids are missing 18 days. So, our kids are missing 60 days of school instruction a year on average. Now, not only are they missing that instruction, but how much are our teachers slowing down to then meet up with them not being there? So, our teachers are going at way slower rate as well because you can't move forward when you don't have everybody there every day." One superintendent drew a direct line between achievement and attendance: "So, one of the biggest things that influence reading and math test scores is attendance. We go back to what's going on with our-- there's that accountability piece that really hurts that attendance." Students' presence in-school to participate in learning and practice was highlighted as one of the more significant factors to increasing student achievement. There is little room for impact through a teacher's pedagogy, curriculum, and instruction if the student is not there to receive it.

Attendance was seen by participants as critical not only to student achievement, but also of the ability of the teacher to teach all their students. Answers revolve around enforcing existing attendance policies, such as a tribal government's mandate that students stay in school until they are 18 and being flexible for some students who may have missed school but want to continue. One superintendent (off-reservation) said, "I believe it would be attendance policies. I think our students that don't make it would point the finger at attendance policies whether it be from—you take in consideration a senior is considering dropping out, or he might look back and say 'I lost credit when I was a sophomore because of attendance policies' or the inflexible attendance policy didn't account for a scenario that [redacted] pointed out—a death in the family where an extended absence was necessary, and maybe some inflexible practices forced the attendance policy." Many of the policy-related decisions about attendance are out of the control of administrators, however. State policy around homeschooling allows for students who have attendance issues to transfer to homeschooling: "I think the home school factor – that's a whole state problem where there's no teeth in our governmental—if they go to homeschool there's no requirement that they have to be in a licensed facility, that they have to do testing still—you know. So that and our communities are starting to see well jeez if they clamp down on attendance well then, I'll just homeschool my kid. And that—we've seen a rise with that." (superintendent, on-reservation)

*Learning*

There are three main codes which comprise student learning: student expectations (216), accountability (18), and safety (36). Student expectations include both expectations that are held of students and the expectations that students hold of themselves. This topic addresses a range of issues in the classroom such as student success, behavior, and achievement. Often these comments were coupled with conversations about coursework or social promotion. The topic of accountability most frequently related to students being held accountable for their behavior or achievement. Often this occurred in requirements from sports programs to maintain high grades. Safety is seen in specific comments about students' safety in school and in the home.

First examining student expectations, many of the comments about student expectations reference honoring students, broadly speaking. One on-reservation trustee took pride in her students and said, "But yet, we have to, because kids will rise to the occasion no matter what their background, no matter what kind of hell they are coming from." Honoring involves respect by all stakeholders in student success: "Encourage and acknowledge and honor the students, whether it's the educators or the family, it needs to happen all the way around too to help them push forward." (parent, on-reservation) This process involves enabling students to be successful and at all stages of the educational career making them feel ready to learn: "If you want them to learn, they have to feel ready to learn, and I think we are missing that in the native schools big time." (parent, on-reservation) Support for American Indian subgroups in off-reservation schools is often seen as lacking. Off-reservation stakeholders cited a variety of student factors when describing the American Indian graduation gap that warrant targeted support.

**Figure 7: Snapshot of Off-Reservation Comments that Focus on Student Learning (Question 1 Part A)**
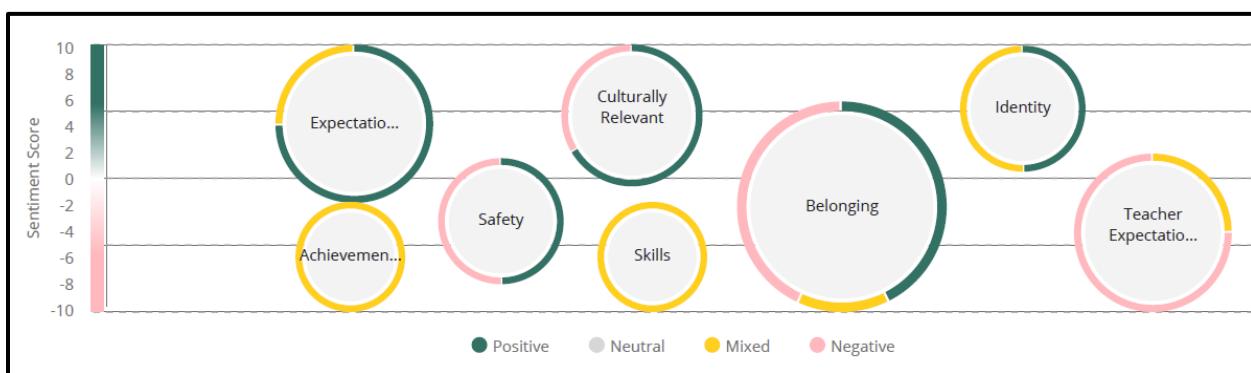


Comments were broadly mixed about the expectations for off-reservation students, the need for belonging and culturally relevant programs, achievement concerns, safety, life skills, and identity. Potential solutions identified with teacher expectations were negative.

Frequently our code on student expectations occurred alongside cultural relevance. This was seen in comments both on- and off- reservation. According to one superintendent (off-reservation) diversity enables the success of all students. "So, I think that the focus on literacy, and the interaction between students from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, and that interplay between the kids when it comes to reading and language helps all students." Diversity also supports identity issues, a code that is frequently paired with student expectations. Identification with one's culture and the ability to see that culture is thriving is essential to the identity of American Indian youth according to our stakeholders.

Descriptions of students were often accompanied by calls to hold all students accountable for their own educational outcomes. Fifty-six percent of these responses had a mixed or negative tone. Negative comments often referred to things like efforts to hold students accountable for poor attendance. The following is a neutral comment emphasizing the importance of accountability (trustee, on-reservation): "And I also agree with the accountability. It does seem as though, at some point some kids are just getting through and not really understanding how their actions are going to impact their futures." Another trustee (on-reservation) felt that the middle school grades are precisely the time when accountability should be emphasized: "I think a lot of our issues stem from the fact that we don't hold kids accountable in the middle school; everybody passes." This important element of social promotion is seen frequently in the dataset.

*Social Promotion and Graduation*

There are 54 comments in the dataset that focus on social promotion. Positive comments in the data were limited but mentioned students hitting multiple benchmarks on the same material and advancing a grade level in their studies. Thirty-seven of those are mixed or negative. Negative comments focused on passing a student along grade by grade before the student attains academic proficiency in that grade. Participants felt that social promotion contributes to dropouts. Participants believe social promotion is hurting the student that is involved. One stakeholder described it as taking the current problems with a student and sweeping them under the rug until the student gets to the next grade level. Students face a stigma when they are socially promoted but still have courses that must be repeated: "I also think there's a stigma for any student who may struggle in an English course to continue to take the same English course over, and over again when they're outside of their peer group—where you have a junior and a freshman inside the same English course, or worse case scenario you have seniors who are taking multiple English classes just to get their graduation requirements." (superintendent, off-reservation)

Some participants also discussed the rationale for social promotion and the issues that creates. They indicated the practice can be a way educator[s] try to rid themselves of problems, with the expectation the student will drop out. One consequence is that peers of socially promoted students are left behind and in turn become drop out risks: "I'm also a firm believer that often we chase kids out of our schools. In terms of we either bore them to death because we are

trying to remediate the lower nonproficient students and we just bore them, and we don't challenge them enough." (superintendent, on-reservation) Participants also discussed the impact from circumstances in students' home life and the expectations the family has for the student: "[I]f they come from a very unhealthy home that is riddled and plagued with a lot of different social ills and dynamics, it plays a part in . . . commitment to school . . . it goes back to that hopeless feeling. If they have that hopeless feeling in the educational system . . . they are looking at the other alternative and that is quitting school." (parent, on-reservation) Stakeholders express how social promotion presents significant difficulty for students and that further consideration for handling such scenarios should be examined

One potential remedy participants discussed regarding social promotion and dropout is early intervention that targets students well before they enter high school: "And I think that early intervention is key [to] graduating from high school . . .. I think sometimes it's very easy to become invisible, or to feel invisible." One on-reservation elementary principal advocated for intervention starting in the early grades: "I would like to see more tiered support staff at [the elementary] level. Because early intervention, if we can fill our children's toolbox at this level, then as they move up the ladder, they will have something in their toolbox to help them with their struggles. Because right now, what I see . . . is we try to band-aid the problem when they are older, and we are not getting to the root of the problem." In this way, early intervention prevents the complications social promotion can cause for the student later in their academic career and as they approach graduation.

Forty-three comments discussed graduation, of which 42% were positive. One positive anecdote from a stakeholder highlighted the ceremonies that are held for graduates once students have completed their study. Negative comments about graduation discussed the challenges in increasing graduation rates. One superintendent discussed degree requirements and how many American Indian schools have requirements that are more stringent than those on the Montana standard transcript: "If there was a way that we could strategically and methodologically implant—actually move our four-year curriculum to proficiency-based graduation rate, I have some kids that could probably graduate high school in two years. Those that are very interested in academics and wanting to make something—they seem to do very well. And often times- I often consider are we holding them back by making them take these-- meet these 22 standards that [School name redacted] has for graduation instead of the 20 the state requires? And I have been trying to figure out how to develop that, and how can we work that, and how we can implement that into our school." (on-reservation) Proficiency-based benchmarks can also help alleviate the social promotion phenomena. Benchmarks provide the standards for advancing a student up a grade or making progress within a grade. Clear benchmarks can be used for graduation with the opportunity that the student works at their own pace and can accelerate learning.

Seventy-six comments focus on dropout trends. Eighty percent of these have a mixed or negative tone. An example of a negative comment is how individual students have abandoned

their goal of graduating, casual factors to drop out such as social promotion, a poor family life, or the lack of alternative programs. Twenty-seven comments focus on data about the dropout issues in these schools or address data-driven decision making by education leaders about the dropout crisis. On-reservation superintendents mentioned seven areas that would lead to dropout prevention. Personalized learning ranked high with the expectations that the more tailored the curriculum is to the student, the greater likelihood the student will persist in schools. Skills figured prominently, especially CTE skills that bring relevance to the child's education.

**Figure 8: Superintendent Responses to Q2 B: Factors to Change to Prevent Dropout**
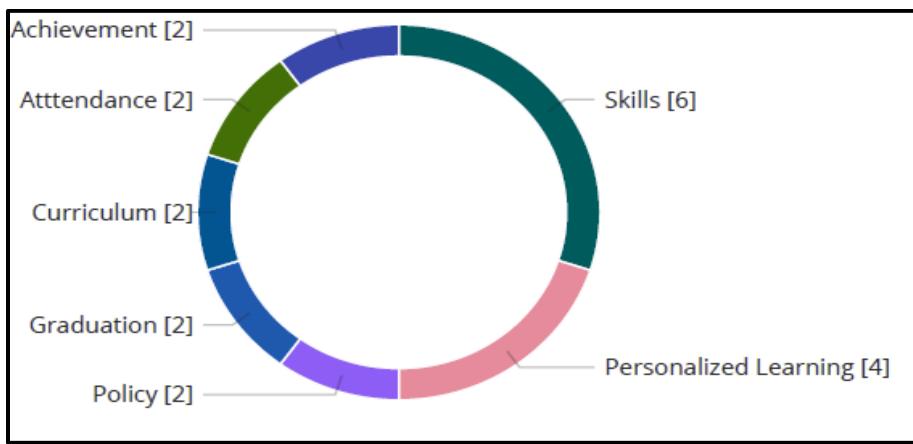


Policy mentioned either graduation requirements or attendance policies that stakeholders believed could be reformed. There was a continued emphasis on achievement and graduation as providing precipitating factors to drop out.

*Skills and Career*

Thoughts of the future are often what schools can inspire for students. College going is seen in a mixed light by the focus group stakeholders. Of 28 comments about college, 18 are mixed or negative. Negative anecdotes are highlighted by comments that address bias. One student (on-reservation) describes: "I think a part of it has to do with the stigmatism around Native Americans. A lot of people growing up have this understanding that Native Americans will not make it outside of high school." Participants indicated that a lot of the college-going aspirations are influenced by family expectations: "I think the aspect of non-native families and/or native families that live off the reservation, college is expected. They are planning for you to go already. Where [in comparison], on the reservation, they are just hoping you graduate high school. You're just not required as much on the reservation." (community member, off-reservation) Some stakeholders praise their schools for the work they do to enable success. One parent (on-reservation) describes how their school provides "an exposure to the colleges like [redacted] was saying. Get out and expose them to what is out there so they understand, so they are not just sitting inside this little box, oh we can't leave this reservation boundary. There's more out there." This push for more encouragement toward post-secondary study was

echoed by an on-reservation superintendent: **"**We've had some opportunities and doors open to moving on to the post-secondary level and hopefully those experiences play a big part in what our current students see." The opportunity to continue the academic career as a student after high school graduation seems influenced both externally and internally.

Another area of focus relating to next steps after K-12 we observed in the dataset was on career and trades. There were 48 comments about 'career and technical education' and 'life skills', about half of which were positive. Positive comments in this category included things like how all teachers can teach reading and math, including the career and technical instructors. Other comments call for an expansion of career and technical opportunities at the schools. Comments often indicated that native youth value hands-on, relevant instruction. One on-reservation trustee even called for systemic change moving toward more career-based learning: "But I think our environment needs to change that, maybe more career-oriented type of (education) so these kids can learn what they need to do to get to the end means." An on-reservation superintendent described what this change might look like in detail: "I do believe that career—career track those different opportunities such as having them get certifications such as welding certification, CDLs—maybe we help them get all of those things while they're in high school. We are doing the dual credits. Maybe we do journeymen things where they can work with a plumber, they can work with electricians and do more of that- those opportunities as well with our kids. I think that could enhance their learning. Get them motivated to be here." In the same way that providing opportunities to explore post-secondary school is encouraged by stakeholders, providing knowledge and practice with career and trade practice is also emphasized in a positive light.

## Trauma and Student Identity

In this study, comments relating to trauma and mental health have been combined. We chose to pair these two topics because they occur in the same context, with the same challenges, and with similar proposed solutions throughout the dataset. There were 99 comments in the dataset that focused on trauma and mental health. Most of which are negative descriptors of the current situations in the lives of many students. There are four main topics: trauma (51 comments), mental health (31 comments), homelessness (8 comments), and resilience (8 comments). Trauma also occurred frequently in conversations about cultural heritage and trauma in the home. Mental health conversations in the dataset mentioned both people with disabilities and social services that are/should be provided to students. Our category on homelessness includes discussion on the types of housing insecurity faced by some students, and in the case of a few comments, proposed solutions to homelessness. Resilience includes discussion about how people cope with trauma or mental health crises. For example, one resilience comment focused on teachers and how schools cannot change the home life, but stakeholders can build resilience among teachers and other staff.

In the data, we also saw discussion about the negative impacts of trauma on student identity. Many of the comments about trauma addressed the historical atrocities committed against

native peoples such as the smallpox epidemic and the boarding school experience of previous generations. There were 310 comments that focused on student identity. Common topics include belonging (98 comments), alienation (64 comments), motivation (55 comments), bias (34 comments), identity (25 topics), and hopelessness (28 comments). Belonging reinforces student identity, whether it be belonging to a cultural group or community. Alienation is often paired with bias, as students can feel ostracized from the culture, either off-reservation or on-reservation. Hopelessness describes how someone is feeling or a certain perspective about present circumstances or the future. Motivation addresses the drive to learn, which students learn as they make progress towards academic goals.

*Trauma and Mental Health*

"I think trauma is at the center of everything." (superintendent, off-reservation) This sentiment summarizes an important aspect of the achievement and graduation gap which addresses trauma in the home, a history at times defined by trauma, and proposed solutions that many schools are addressing in order to better serve students that are facing and processing trauma. In the data, trauma and mental health often appeared in the same conversations, especially when the sources of that trauma were in the home: "I think a lot of our issues we have is mental health . . .. We have a high number of kids that are designated as homeless . . . they couch surf from house to house. Parents are either on drugs, alcohol or are deceased, and the kids don't know how to handle the issues, and then the people that they are around drink alcohol, do drugs, to take care of their own problems. We just continue in this deadly cycle." (principal, on-reservation)

Care of students navigating the complicated emotions and experiences of mental health further presents at the forefront for providing supports through the school. Twenty-nine of the comments about mental health were negative and included lack of counselors in schools to address mental health issues, lack of funding for private agencies to address the demand for mental health services, and references to specific students in crisis. Positive comments about mental health included things like the effectiveness of social service agencies to treat individuals with disabilities, despite lack of funding. Some participants expressed the belief that mental health challenges are acute, especially when combined with other social issues: "Working with reservation schools there's more of a sense of hopelessness it seems with the students on the reservations. It's like they have this feeling of, 'What's the point? I'm graduating high school, what's the point?'" . . . I would say reservation students have more of the emotional and mental health challenges than our students here . . .. But, I think the barriers are pretty much the same [for native students both on- and off-reservation]: addiction, socio-economics, incarceration." (school leader, off-reservation) Overall, respondents put faith in the ability of the school system to resolve some issues. Stakeholders called for an increased role for the school counselor, more mental health and addiction counselors, and social-emotional supports in the classroom.

Trauma in the dataset was also discussed through the lens of the imposition of a dominant culture on the peoples of native communities. Frequently mentioned was the smallpox epidemic and the boarding school experiences of Elders. According to one superintendent (on-reservation), historical trauma impacts today's students as a function of their identity and ability to see that their culture is thriving: "You know there's—there's a big push right now about trauma-informed education. So, you know—specifically historical trauma as it relates to reservations and native people. You know districts are starting to understand that and then teachers are starting to understand. So I think we're progressing as far as being aware of some of the issues that kids are facing in the home and bringing to the school and then that—you know—negative impacts or negative things that they have had happen is historically— how that is still effecting the generation that's coming through school right now." Another superintendent (on-reservation) contextualizes this historical trauma considering the boarding school experience that impacted all native communities. This is confounded in the home since parents and elders often have mixed experiences with their own education: "And then some of the things that I think is that—is a key factor for our high dropout rate is the negative experience that previous generations had with school. You know, you start with boarding schools. The trauma that was inflicted upon children there and separation of children from their families. And then the abuses that happened in those boarding schools. And then once public schools started to gain a bigger influence in our Native communities you still had a lot of physical abuse—punishments and—that were traumatizing for kids and they didn't want to come to school. You know the language was deemed unworthy. And psychological impact of that is still felt." While it is challenging to measure the impact of this generational trauma, this dataset certainly saw the concept of trauma woven throughout the conversations.

Regarding both trauma and mental health, stakeholders put faith in the positive efforts by schools to address these issues. One superintendent (off-reservation) describes professional development in his district: "All of our professional development is focused on trauma—trauma informed practices, and restorative justice. We believe that kids do not care what the teachers know until they know that the teachers care." Participants also saw treatment and mental health interventions as a way for helping individuals with disabilities and those impacted by trauma lead a better life: "I think qualified, licensed counselors who can work with children and families around the issues of trauma, and completely understand what all those dynamics are, and help the educators truly deal with that, and have effective strategies. So, putting money into those kinds of programs—more money into people who are really good at that." (superintendent, on-reservation) In Figure 9, we depict the responses to Question 5 (how stakeholders would improve the education system if funding were not an issue. Stakeholders would increase the role of school counselors and social services in providing mental health and addiction counseling.

**Figure 9: Response to Question 5 focusing on Mental Health and Trauma**
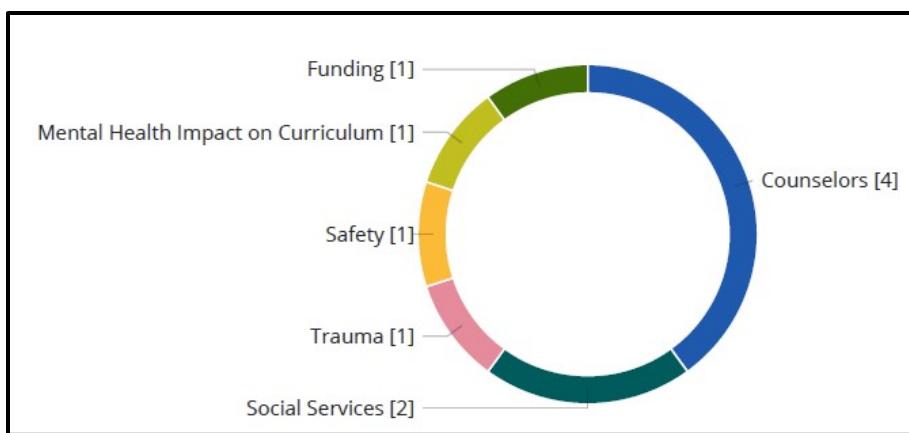


They also noted the context that this support is needed where mental health issues does impact teaching and learning and the safety of all those involved. This places a renewed importance on funding.

*Student Identity*

Student identity is frequently impacted by trauma originating from home, school, or community. Often, it is a function of overcoming these barriers and finding something bigger than oneself with which to identify, like when stakeholders mention belonging and culture in the same comment. Fifty-two percent of the comments that focused on identity were positive, with the remainder being negative or mixed. An example of a comment with negative tone came from an on-reservation student struggling with identity issues and was often called 'White' by his classmates.

Fifty-eight percent of the comments about belonging to the native culture, the community, or school occurred were positive. For example, a principal (on-reservation) said: "I think that sense of belonging . . .. Our Indian people we sit back, we're very humble people. And it's . . . about those relationships and you have to feel a part of that group or a group." A student (on-reservation) commented negatively that some native youth are trapped between cultures. Participants believed that culture in the home provided the greatest sense of belonging: "I could only talk about my own experience. Going from Rocky Boy to a school in Great Falls elementary, and just feeling really disconnected there. You know, not having that culture, language, and just familiar faces around, it was different. I was definitely treated like an outsider. I lasted two weeks, and I begged my mom to let my grandparents raise me, and luckily, she let me. I got to move home and go back to school and go back to Cree class with friends and relatives." The importance of culture, and embracing the positive aspects of one's own culture, builds social connections and self-esteem for students off-reservation, disconnected from those things, this piece of identity can take renewed importance.

 The disconnect of identity in social and familial context beds its roots in experiences of alienation. Sixty-four comments focused on the alienation of some indigenous youth. That

alienation occurs in contexts both on- and off-reservation. Without recognizing the impact of culture on identity and diversity, one principal believes students get lost in the shuffle of schooling: "I think if you don't do some things that are culturally responsive for all people, then those students can at times feel like they become invisible." Invisible in this sense means not a valued member of community or a person that does not have the identity reinforced by the school community. Frequently participants felt that alienation was a result of implicit or explicit bias. As one student remarked about his teachers: "I don't feel like white teachers push native students as hard as they do the white students . . . I think it is something that is called implicit bias." Explicit bias came up in conversation in relation to placing a stigma on certain behavior, people, or communities: "I think a part of it has to do with the stigmatism around Native Americans. A lot of people growing up have this understanding that Native Americans won't make it outside of high school." (student, off-reservation) Faced with bias in many different forms, many native youths find themselves in a situation of hopelessness. There were 18 comments that used the term 'hopelessness' directly. Frequently, this was paired with two topics: cultural relevance and trauma.

Schools play a large function in eliminating bias, providing hope, and promoting a sense of belonging. According to a principal (on-reservation), schools provide positive role models, especially among native educators: "My heart, I'm just thankful that now we're having more of us native role models in the system. Because growing up, a lot of us did not have that, just a handful. So, seeing others be successful, saying, 'hey, you can do it. I can do it, you can do it,' You know? And so, just changing that belief system for them." Often, this belief in the power of the education system to help students identify with their culture is a deeply personal journey: "[I]t's just trying to find that place and that identity piece for these kids. Because of my experience being native, that is something I had to fight through during my educational years. And so, I always tried to be that voice for those kids that did not have a voice because I lived it. I guess that's why I speak from the heart about it is something that I still struggle with for these kids." The voices of this study aggregate to help provide a needed first glimpse into the conversations framing the achievement gap and drop-out trends of native students in Montana. The findings revealed in this study elicit consideration for further exploration among communities and stakeholders both on- and off-reservations.

# Conclusion

In this series of focus groups with on- and off-reservation stakeholders, participants offered a variety of insights about the factors in-school and out-of-school effects they believe play a role in the American Indian student achievement gap in on-reservation schools and among American Indian students off-reservation. Many centered not on the achievement gap itself, but on the gap in opportunities driving the gap. To summarize:

- Relatively few comments focused on dropout or achievement. Many comments focused on teaching and learning but did not tie directly to dropout or achievement.

- Cultural relevance that is closest to the student has the greatest impact on- and off-reservation. When the student can see their culture is thriving, less negative identity issues arise. Estrangement from culture is seen as one cause of dropout. Few cultural ties to testing also leads to a situation where students are estranged from the language of the assessment.
- School districts and schools as institutions were infrequently mentioned. Some characteristics, such as staffing and support system, can be identified. The importance of Indian educators cannot be downplayed. More than mentors and role models, they can provide increased relevance for what students are learning. Stakeholders also call for a stronger role of the school counselor and ways to promote social emotional learning.
- Teachers were viewed positively in this dataset. There is a strong emphasis in the data on teacher training that can focus on drop out and achievement. Many different instructional practices were mentioned. Personalized learning received extensive discussion to make learning relevant and self-paced.
- Achievement and attendance were two factors leading to dropout. One administrator mentions the achievement test loses relevance as students advance grades indicating that some stakeholders believe that too much testing is occurring. Stakeholders also mentioned numerous alternatives to schooling whether it be an increased focus on CTE, alternative education programs, or alternative graduation requirements.
- Trauma is interwoven throughout the dataset—both trauma originating inside the home and trauma that native peoples still live from the past. Programs targeting trauma are mentioned. Student identity that is built of a sense of belonging to community and culture is seen as valuable. Numerous instances where students are described as 'alienated' or hopeless suggests that many factors discourage positive identity formation.

The main analysis that can provided about the focus group data, is that out-of-school effects seemed to be more explanatory of the dropout crisis than in-school effects. Impressions that the family members and family circumstances were often contributing toward dropout risk were the most frequently cited topic. Students also appeared to be held accountable for their own achievement gap and dropout crisis. Many comments about student accountability were paired with descriptors of home life, strengthening the connection between out-of-school effects to school behavior. Relatively few connections, discussions, or recommendations about in-school effects can be seen in the data besides attendance policies, testing regimens, lack of cross-curricular support for reading and math, and teachers who do not act like a role model or identify with their students. And those were not specific to dropout risk, but rather the achievement gap in general.

Participants did not offer many proposed solutions for the challenges faced outside the school. Some did mention the role of social services, but also mentioned how these services are strained. Hope was placed on parent outreach, but concrete steps to get more parents in the door was not discussed. Some in-school solutions were offered. Staffing topics when paired with training themes talked about the importance of increasing cultural relevance and trauma

informed practices of these trainings. The unique role of native educators was mentioned by both on-reservation and off-reservation stakeholders. They believed efforts should be made to increase the pool of native teacher candidates. Stakeholders also mentioned the role of new teachers and retention efforts.

Most comments focused on teaching and learning occurring in the classroom rather than school level policies or practices. Participants mentioned different pedagogies that would differentiate instruction, make it more personalized, and focus on social-emotional approaches. The need for alternative programs was addressed, including HiSET preparation classes. Other alternatives included alternative schools and CTE programs. At the student level, attendance policies were frequently addressed. Some participants believed the inflexible attendance policies were a direct contributing factor in student persistence and dropout challenges.

Teaching to the test is an option that few stakeholders would advocate. One option that was mentioned was the SBAC Interim test that provides benchmarks and goals for instruction targeted to each student. These goals can be accomplished without directly teaching to the test. Graduation policies were also targeted. The Board of Public Education recommends each student have at least 20 credits to be able to graduate. Many native schools require more credits. This policy was frequently cited as a reason for dropout.

Trauma and Student Identity were two themes paired in the dataset. Mental Health, seen as a component of Trauma, impacts many students according to our stakeholders. The efforts to promote social-emotional learning is a way these issues may be addressed in school. Student identity is often paired with cultural relations. The health of that identity was often seen as a function of the health of the culture and the sense of belonging to it. American Indian youth face many different obstacles that cause alienation, at times propelled by bias. Solutions target valuing native culture in all contexts, especially in off-reservation schools where school leaders should address cultural relevance in more than a one-off fashion.

Students face many opportunities and challenges in their choices to either not work toward proficiency or to dropout. Sometimes their only opportunity is the opportunity to learn. An on-reservation Superintendent describes this, "I think the one that stands out to me right now is opportunities. When you are in a rural area—such as I am with reservations— there is not other—there are not many opportunities out here. The kids dropout, or graduate in the city [. . .] In my school district if they drop out there is nothing to look forward to, there is no employment opportunities to move forward, so they kinda hit a brick wall." Failure to take advantage of the opportunity to learn is a societal issue. These in-school solutions only impact students within their walls. One challenge for communities will be to reimagine schooling, involve a variety of stakeholders, and define what exact inclusive environment they would like to see realized in their communities.