

REDUCING NATIVE HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUT RATES BY COMBATTING CULTURAL
ISOLATION

College Board ID: 125147197

2022

Word Count : 2199

In 1878, the U.S government under the direction of American military captain Richard Pratt established the Carlisle Indian School in middle-Pennsylvania, a school constructed to “Kill the Indian in him, and save the man” (Dawson, 2012).¹ The infamous boarding school brought students from tribal reservations around the country and attempted to “erase their backwardness by making them more like their white teachers ... [their] hair was forcibly shorn, clothing changed, and indigenous languages and religions forbidden,” all in an effort to repress Native American culture (Dawson, 2012). Captain Pratt’s model of Native assimilation, a word defined by Merriam-Webster dictionary as the process of “one group mixing itself into another,” at Carlisle Indian school later extended well beyond Pennsylvania, expanding across Canada and the United States well into the late-20th century (Merriam-Webster; Dawson, 2012). Though Carlisle and the assimilationist model of boarding schools is no longer operational, Native Americans continue to “recognize how these problems [in education] are attended by cultural losses” (Child, 2018).² Today, while Native communities in the United States exist prominently on rural reservations, 70% of Natives live in urban areas (Indian Health Service, 2018).³ These Natives often report feeling more disconnected from their Native religious, environmental, and linguistic traditions than their rural counterparts, particularly within the educational system where they are a minority (McCarthy, 2015).⁴ In urban schools, Native students face high levels of social “tightness” from teachers and students. Social tightness is defined as a group

¹ Alexander Dawson is a history professor at the University at Albany who formerly worked at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia specializing in Latin American history.

² Brenda J. Child is the Ojibwe Chair of the American Studies Department at University of Minnesota.

³ The Indian Health Service helps allocate medical aid to Native American tribes across the country, operating as part of the U.S Department of Health and Human Services.

⁴ Glenda McCarthy was a teacher for 29 years in both Australia and Montana and now works with Montana high schools to improve education for Native Americans. The report was published in the peer-reviewed Journal of American Indian Education.

environment with “strict rules and punishments for deviance” (Gelfand et al., 2020).⁵ In this case, the mere physical presence of Native students is enough to violate these repressive norms, which manifests through racist bullying from their peers (Campbell and Smalling, 2013).⁶ Non-Native teachers may also often react negatively to Native students, particularly those who are perceived to be disinterested in their curriculum for cultural reasons unknown to the teachers (McCarthy, 2015). This cultural antagonism towards Native students is just one factor contributing to America's highest high school dropout rates of any race (Child, 2018).⁷ Given this data, the question then becomes, how should school districts around the country help Native students graduate high school? To answer this, I will begin by exploring the causes of the problem and explaining why school administrators should hire more Native teachers in urban high schools, as well as in middle schools to prevent the conditions for dropping out from arising in high school. However, I will also conclude that while this solution is admirable, we need to do more, and ultimately propose a mentorship program between Native students and teachers. This program will allow Native students to find cultural empowerment even in predominantly non-Native environments.

Native Challenges in Education Today

In order to understand how to effectively combat high dropout rates for Native students, we must further contextualize the challenges they face today. Native students are suffering from the highest dropout rates by race in the country. Only 74% of Native American public high

⁵ Michele J. Gelfand, Nava Caluori, Joshua Conrad Jackson, and Morgan K. Taylor are all Psychology professors at Stanford University, University of Virginia, University of North Carolina, and Duke University, respectively.

⁶ Paper is published by the Journal of Indigenous Social Development, a peer-reviewed scientific journal which seeks to highlight the experiences and challenges of Indigenous peoples.

⁷ Brenda J. Child, a member of the Red Lake Ojibwe, chairs and lectures at the University of Minnesota's Department of American Studies and has dedicated a substantial focus to the history of Native American education.

school students graduated in the 2018-2019 school year, compared to the national average across all races of 86% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021).⁸ Regardless of identity, students who drop out of high school may confront “negative effects on employment, lifetime earnings, and physical health” (Lee-St. John et al., 2018).⁹ Despite these negative effects, skepticism from Native communities about the value of the educational system still produces high dropout rates. This skepticism runs deep as “many adults can still remember boarding school experiences and ... [are] passing on a disdain for education as a tool of assimilation” to their children or grandchildren (Cornelius, 2002).¹⁰ However, a study of middle school age adolescents found this age group generally resisted negative influences from their parents, suggesting there are more factors to consider as these students mature into high school (Do et al., 2020).¹¹

Currently, Native students face assimilationist pressures from two primary sources at school: Non-Native students and teachers. Native students are often faced with conflict from their non-Native peers who, given the rampant racial segregation of urban schools, are likely predominantly one race or ethnicity (Fiel, 2013).¹² Predominantly homogenous schools create “tight” and ethnocentric group norms that contain “more monitoring, [and] order... which is critical for coordinating in the face of threat” (Gelfand et al., 2020). Non-Native students often determine their Native peers to be such a “threat”, resulting in Native students facing among the

⁸ The National Center for Education Statistics is an element of the United States Department of Education.

⁹ Study conducted by professors with the Lynch School of Education and Human Development at Boston College, which has focused on psychology, education, and human development since 1952.

¹⁰ The author, Mary Cornelius, is affiliated with the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, and published her report in the educational journal *Nebraska Anthropologist* which distributes peer-reviewed anthropological research.

¹¹ Kathy Do, Ethan McCormick, and Eva Telzer are all affiliated with University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill’s Department of Psychology and Neuroscience.

¹² Jeremy Fiel is currently a Sociologist at Rice University and formerly worked at the University of Wisconsin-Madison when composing this paper.

highest rates of physical violence and threats of any race, particularly during early adolescence (Campbell and Smalling, 2013). If Native students are perceived as outsiders due to these norms, some might argue this could actually prevent Native students from assimilation because they would be rejected from mainstream culture by default (arguably a positive development in preserving Native culture). However, they would likely drop out in the process, as adolescents resist social pressure from their peers in 65% of cases (Do et al., 2020). Thus, if Native students are pressured to either assimilate and suppress their identity or resist conformity entirely by dropping out of a middle or high school that continuously rejects them, they will likely choose the latter.

While students have some effect on dropout rates, it is teachers who wield more influence; research has shown that the social support of teachers in middle and high schools is more valuable in fostering “emotional and cognitive engagement” of students than that of peers (Wang and Eccles, 2012).¹³ Native students must handle daily interactions with non-Native teachers who comprise over 99% of urban teachers, who may not understand Native skepticism of the educational system or communication barriers students face; Native students are often perceived by teachers as disinterested in learning, when in fact their “lower volume of voice, longer pauses between speakers, and less focused gaze” is actually a common mode of polite social communication among Native peoples (Spiegelman, 2020; McCarthy, 2015).¹⁴ This may disincentivize Native students from contacting their teachers, an issue as students who interact less with their teachers perform worse in school and consequently graduate less (Beck et al.,

¹³ Study conducted by Ming-Te Wang, a Psychology and Education professor at the University of Pittsburgh and Jacquelynne S. Eccles, a professor of Education and Psychology at the University of Michigan.

¹⁴ Maura Spiegelman authored this report for the National Center for Education Statistics, an affiliate of the United States Department of Education.

2014).¹⁵ Thus, an ideal solution would be for public school districts to hire more Native teachers to increase Native student graduation rates.

The Benefits of Hiring Native Teachers

As the percentage of Native teachers is lower than Native students, one proposed solution is to increase the number of Native teachers in urban schools, which is proven to increase graduation rates among Native students (Spiegelman, 2020). Only 29% of majority-Native reservation schools contain over 50% Native teachers, with urban Native students interacting with even fewer Native teachers than their rural counterparts (Spiegelman, 2020). This can be an issue for Native students as one study from across racial backgrounds has shown that students tend to perform better in school, both academically and socially, when their teacher is the same race as the student (Kearney and Levine, 2020).¹⁶ Currently, there is a lack of research on the direct impacts of increasing Native teacher representation in urban schools for Native students, though there is relevant data to demonstrate the merits of this solution. Although this paper focuses on Native students in urban middle and high schools, not on majority-Native reservations, data from the Menominee Indian school district, a reservation school district with majority white teachers but a Native student body, still proves increasing Native teacher representation improves graduation rates. The district found that increasing the number of Native teachers by 15% increased graduation rates from 60% to 95% (Mader, 2015).¹⁷ Although this paper focuses on Native students in urban middle and high schools, not on majority-Native reservations, this data still proves increasing Native teacher representation improves graduation

¹⁵ Study published in a peer reviewed academic journal, the American Journal of American Indian Education.

¹⁶ Melissa S. Kearney is an Economics professor at the University of Maryland, and contributes to the National Bureau of Economic Research as well as the Brookings Institution. Phillip B. Levine is also an Economics professor at Wellesley College.

¹⁷ Jackie Mader of Education Week reported on this story. Education Week is an independent nonprofit journalistic organization dedicated to following the American educational system.

rates. This is unsurprising given that Native teacher interactions with students who share their cultural upbringing allows students to fight the “repression and loss of autonomy” that results from hostility towards their Native identity, thus encouraging Native students to stay in school (Gelfand et al., 2020). Given this context, Native teachers may be better able to guide their Native students through an educational system that has largely erased Native history and depicted Natives as “uncivilized and savage” in classroom materials (Hani, 2009).¹⁸ As such, hiring more Native teachers in urban middle and high schools (given many of these factors contributing to dropouts surface before high school) will reduce Native student dropout rates (Campbell and Smalling, 2013).

Limitations and Implications

However, simply hiring more Native teachers may be insufficient in decreasing high school dropout rates. If Native students are never assigned to a Native teacher during this period, Native students may never find a mentor who understands their social and academic struggles, leading them to drop out of school even if Native teachers are present. This is likely given that less than 1% of public school teachers are Native (Spiegelman, 2020). This critical shortage of Native teachers, brought on partially by the low graduation rates, potentially undermines the ability of public schools to find Native teachers to hire. However, if districts make efforts to hire qualified Native teachers when possible and these teachers interact with Native students, this could incentivize these students to stay in school, graduate and become teachers themselves (USC Rossier School of Education, 2022). Nevertheless, Native teachers may still feel confined by the cultural isolation they face due to their minority status. In a study of 10 Native professors at universities, “several Native women faculty ... express[ed] feelings of isolation” and racial

¹⁸ Hani Morgan is an Education professor at the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg.

bias “as the only person of color in their department” which could decrease their will to teach (Tippeconnic Fox, 2009).¹⁹ While this study focused on Native college professors, Native individuals in academia are underrepresented across the board, suggesting similar feelings of isolation (Tippeconnic Fox, 2009; Spiegelman, 2020). To fully address the limitation of teacher isolation and help students stay motivated in school, I propose that in addition to hiring more Native teachers in urban middle and high schools, public school district administrators should facilitate the creation of mentorship programs for Native students.

Native teachers as Socio-Academic Mentors

Because Native students continue to drop out of high school, school administrators in urban areas should set mentorship programs for urban Native students to help relieve cultural isolation. Administrators could follow the model of an urban high school in Montana, whose highly successful (and budget friendly) program involved a presentation to school staff explaining the historical context of Native student challenges (McCarthy, 2015). Volunteer mentors were then assigned to one or two Native students, who could choose if they wished to participate in the program. While the report detailing the program does not conclude whether students were eager to participate, it does assert that the program increased Native student empowerment (McCarthy, 2015). During their independently scheduled meetings, teachers reviewed their student’s academic performance and discussed “setting goals, developing communication and self-advocacy skills” (McCarthy, 2015). Ultimately, the program was highly successful in helping Native students gain a sense of belonging at school while improving academic performance (McCarthy, 2015). The previously stated findings that Native teachers specifically can act as role models to Native students suggests this mentorship program could be

¹⁹ Mary Jo Tippeconnic Fox is a member of Oklahoma’s Comanche Nation and a Research Professor of American Indian Studies at the University of Arizona.

improved if school administrators hired more Native teachers whenever possible (Kearney and Levine, 2020). In other words, Native students would feel comfortable discussing their social and academic concerns with teachers who would understand the history of Native cultural oppression and could therefore better advise Native students on their schoolwork and social development (Davis et al., 2016).²⁰ Native teachers are likely eager to join the program as increasing Native student-teacher interaction could reduce the cultural isolation for both groups (Tippeconnic Fox, 2009). However, given it may take years for school administrators to hire more Native teachers as acknowledged above, and given most teachers would remain white after more Native teachers are hired (Spiegelman, 2020), the Montana model's education of non-Native teachers would likely remain. Despite this, Native teachers should be given priority for participation in the program, particularly given that they would likely be more engaged in the program than non-Native teachers. The Montana example could also be improved if it were to be implemented in middle as well as high schools, as early adolescence (from ages 12 to 14) is a time when Native students would have the most "susceptibility to both antisocial and prosocial influence" from not only their peers in the classroom, but prominent adults in their life as well (Do et al., 2020).

Despite the clear efficacy of the proposed mentorship program, we must acknowledge that the roots of the high Native student dropout rates are so deep and widespread that no single solution can fully remove them. Native communities can clearly link the trauma of assimilationist boarding schools — whose goal was to pave the way for white settlement across the Western U.S — to the broken education system that isolates and shuns their cultural expression today (Dawson, 2012). The mistrust so many Native people feel towards America's

²⁰ The report by Davis et al. was published in the *Sociological Forum*, a peer reviewed academic journal with a focus on Sociology.

public educational system, although a potential gateway to better job opportunities and empowerment, is very much justified by the horrors experienced by family members and cultural exclusion Native students face today. Therefore, Native Americans deserve an educational system that respects their identities and experiences, which is why hiring more Native teachers and creating mentorship programs is so critical.

Works Cited

- Beck, K. A., Joshi, P., Nsiah, C., & Ryerson, A. (2014). The Impact of Sociability on College Academic Performance and Retention of Native Americans. *Journal of American Indian Education, 53*(1), 23–41. www.jstor.org/stable/43608712
- Campbell, E. M., & Smalling, S. E. (2013). American indians and bullying in schools. *Journal of Indigenous Social Development, 2*(1), 1–15. scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/bitstream/handle/10125/29815/v2i1_03campbell.pdf?sequence=1
- Child, B. J. (2018). The Boarding School as Metaphor. *Journal of American Indian Education, 57*(1), 37–57. doi.org/10.5749/jamerindieduc.57.1.0037
- Cornelius, M. (2002). *An exploration of possible causes of high dropout rates in Native American reservation schools*. University of Nebraska - Lincoln. digitalcommons.unl.edu/nebanthro/71/?utm_source=digitalcommons.unl.edu%2Fnebanthro%2F71&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages
- Davis, J. J., Roscigno, V. J., & Wilson, G. (2016). American Indian Poverty in the Contemporary United States. *Sociological Forum, 31*(1), 5–28. www.jstor.org/stable/24878757
- Dawson, A. S. (2012). Histories and Memories of the Indian Boarding Schools in Mexico, Canada, and the United States. *Latin American Perspectives, 39*(5), 80–99. www.jstor.org/stable/41702285
- Do, K. T., McCormick, E. M., & Telzer, E. H. (2020). Neural sensitivity to conflicting attitudes supports greater conformity toward positive over negative influence in early adolescence. *Developmental Cognitive Neuroscience, 45*, 100837. doi.org/10.1016/j.dcn.2020.100837

- Fiel, J. E. (2013). Decomposing School Resegregation: Social Closure, Racial Imbalance, and Racial Isolation. *American Sociological Review*, 78(5), 828–848. www.jstor.org/stable/43187507
- Gelfand, M. J., Caluori, N., Jackson, J. C., & Taylor, M. K. (2020). The cultural evolutionary trade-off of ritualistic synchrony. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 375(1805), 20190432. doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2019.0432
- Hani, M. (2009). What every teacher needs to know to teach native american students. *Multicultural Education*, 16(4), 10–12. eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ858583
- Indian Health Service. (2018, October). *Urban Indian Health Program*. www.ihs.gov/newsroom/factsheets/uihp/
- Kearney, M. S., & Levine, P. B. (2020). Role Models, Mentors, and Media Influences. *The Future of Children*, 30(1), 83–106. www.jstor.org/stable/27074976
- Lee-St. John, T. J., Walsh, M. E., Raczek, A. E., Vuilleumier, C. E., Foley, C., Heberle, A., Sibley, E., & Dearing, E. (2018). The Long-Term Impact of Systemic Student Support in Elementary School: Reducing High School Dropout. *AERA Open*, 4(4), 233285841879908. doi.org/10.1177/2332858418799085
- Mader, J. (2015, May 28). *In One Tribal District, Native Teachers May Be Key to Improvement*. Education Week. www.edweek.org/leadership/in-one-tribal-district-native-teachers-may-be-key-to-improvement/2015/05
- McCarthy, G. (2015). Mentoring American Indian Students in an Urban High School. *Journal of American Indian Education*, 54(3), 98–112. www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/jamerindieduc.54.3.0098
- Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). *assimilation*. www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/assimilation

National Center for Education Statistics. (2021). Public High School Graduation Rates.

Condition of Education. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences.

nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/coi.

Spiegelman, M. (2020, September). *Race and Ethnicity of Public School Teachers and Their*

Students. National Center for Education Statistics. nces.ed.gov/pubs2020/2020103

[/index.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2020/2020103/index.asp)

Tippeconnic Fox, M. J. (2009). American Indian Women in Academia: The Joys and Challenges.

NASPA Journal About Women in Higher Education, 1(1). doi.org/10.2202/1940-7890

.1011

USC Rossier School of Education. (2022, March 16). *Seven Steps to Become a Teacher in*

California. University of Southern California. [rossieronline.usc.edu/7-steps-to-](https://rossieronline.usc.edu/7-steps-to-become-a-teacher-in-california/#:~:text=Pass%20the%20California%20Basic%20Educational,on%20the%20SAT%20or%20ACT)

[become-a-teacher-in-california/#:~:text=Pass%20the%20California%20Basic%20Educational,on%20the%20SAT%20or%20ACT](https://rossieronline.usc.edu/7-steps-to-become-a-teacher-in-california/#:~:text=Pass%20the%20California%20Basic%20Educational,on%20the%20SAT%20or%20ACT).

Wang, M.T., & Eccles, J. S. (2012). Social Support Matters: Longitudinal Effects of Social

Support on Three Dimensions of School Engagement From Middle to High School. *Child*

Development, 83(3), 877–895. www.jstor.org/stable/23255730