



What do Parent Centers Need to Know: Historical Perspectives for Working with Native American Parents

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This document was produced by Robin Butterfield for the Native American Parent Technical Assistance Center.

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This document will describe some of the historical factors impacting the participation of Native parents in the schooling of their children. These factors do not just impact Special Educators, but all educators working with Native students whether they reside in reservation communities, or those living off reservations (over seventy-five percent) in public schools. Many times attitudes of parents are rooted in their own experiences with schools. If parents have had negative experiences themselves, they may consciously, or even unconsciously transmit their negative feelings to their children. Clearly American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) education abounds with justification for parental fear, caution, and open hostility towards schools and educators.

It has been well documented that the separation of Native children from their families, and sending them hundreds of miles from their homes to boarding schools, was the accepted strategy used to assimilate the Natives into society. When these children were removed from their families, whole generations lost access to Native parenting models, culture, language, and traditional values. Not only were the bonds between children and their fathers and mothers broken, but those with others who had parenting responsibilities as well. In many traditional Native communities, the extended family shared responsibilities for discipline, nurturing, guidance, and skill building.

“As early as 1744, an Indian elder described tribal members who returned to tribal life from schools of the white man, as being unfit for tribal life, not able to speak the tribal language well, unfit to be counselors, and hence unable to make worthwhile contributions to the tribe.” Following the 1871 conclusion of the treaty-signing period, boarding schools became the primary institution encouraging assimilation of AIAN youth and adhering to a regime that reflected the military fortifications in which schools were housed. Different conceptions of history were taught as part of a curriculum that was vastly different from their tribal realities.

Numerous investigations have documented the imposition of education upon Native people, one in 1928, commonly called the *Meriam Report*, and the other most notable in 1969, entitled *Indian Education: A National Tragedy, a National Challenge*.

The conclusions of these studies echoed that the federal government’s efforts to “educate” Native people had dramatically eroded the lifestyle and economic position of tribes and individuals. Historically, Native people have **learned** to fear schools and educators while at the same time understanding the necessity of their existence.

In the 1970s, Congress authorized funds for Indian education and cultural retention programs that **required** Native parental involvement. The Johnson O'Malley Programs began in 1934, but were reauthorized in 1958 and the Indian Education Act programs (1972) became part of the ESSA Act. These still offer support to tribes, Bureau of Indian Education (BIA) schools and public schools across the country.

While assimilationist practices are no longer the primary intent of educators, and public opinion has become more tolerant of cultural pluralism, Native education still carries the scars of this shameful legacy. These scars remain in the estrangement of Native parents from schools. They remain in the lack of accurate content about Native history, language, community values and practices available in the school curriculum. They remain in the lack of parental outreach on the part of school staff. They remain in the attitudes of both Native parents and many non-native educators in Native schools. These attitudes are not likely to change without intervention.

Implications for Parent Centers:

- Remember that Native parents **do** want to know what is going on, particularly when it affects their child, but they may not always know what to do in order to be supportive of what is being asked by the school. Non-judgmental, positive regard is required when working with Native parents. Native parents **are** concerned about their child's education. If there is a problem, cooperative plans of action must be negotiated detailing the shared responsibility of schools and parents. Center Staff can provide assistance with these cooperative plans and processes.
- The inclusion of Native parents is critical given the potential for success and the substantive impact Native parental participation could have on educational outcomes for students (attendance, achievement, attitudes toward school and self-esteem etc.). Parent Centers can play a leadership role in assisting Native parents to understand their role in the development of their student's positive outcomes. By providing **basic workshops** that support a parent's role in improving attendance, achievement, having a positive attitude about school, etc.. Starting with workshops on Special education laws and regulations will intimidate Native families and they will be reluctant to attend similar workshops in the future. For the protocol for training on reservation lands contact NAPTAC.
- Researching the historical background of the specific tribe(s) in the Parent Center service area would be invaluable in building rapport with Native parents in each area.
- The process of rebuilding communities, nurturing and educating or re-educating Native parents will require tremendous time, energy and commitment on the part of Parent Centers and tribal communities. Outreach to Native parents should become a priority and may need to include dedicating funds to cover the costs of outreach. As shared on the webinar "Outreach to Native American Families "(posted on NAPTAC website)

Parent Center staff may have to do a number of visits to Native communities before parent participation improves.

- The re-educative process must begin or be strengthened and must be supportive, accepting, and participatory, and must allow Native parents opportunities to learn and build skills necessary for themselves; skills which in turn, they can pass on to their children.
- Additional training for school and Parent Center staff may be necessary in changing perceptions and abilities to work effectively with Native parents. Native people repeatedly express concern about school staff attitudes, behaviors and lack of knowledge about the history, culture(s) and language(s) of tribes. High school staff turnover in some schools requires that this training be offered as a regular opportunity. Parent Centers may want to use the corresponding power point developed to accompany this document.

Resources:

Adapted from Improving Parental Participation in Elementary and Secondary Education for American Indian and Alaska Native Students by Robin Butterfield and Floy Pepper

(Christensen, Demmert, 1976, p.139)

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