



American Indian Parent Involvement in the Central Region: Parent Perspectives

RESEARCH IN BRIEF

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

Parent involvement is recognized as an important factor in encouraging student achievement (No Child Left Behind Act, 2002). There is an extensive body of research demonstrating the positive relationship between parent involvement and student academic achievement (Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski, & Apostoleris, 1997; Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Shaver & Walls, 1998). However, a survey by the National Center for Education Statistics found that in public schools with 25 percent or more American Indian students, teachers identified lack of parent involvement as one of their schools' three most serious problems (Freeman & Fox, 2005).

In the Central Regional Educational Laboratory's (REL Central) seven-state service region (Colorado, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming), where American Indian students' performance on state and national assessments lags behind that of their White peers, policymakers and educators have acknowledged the need for research-based assistance in understanding how to effectively involve American Indian parents in improving education outcomes for their children.

In response to this need, REL Central conducted a study to examine American Indian parents' perceptions of parent involvement in their children's education and factors that may encourage or discourage involvement.

This brief is intended to guide researchers, educators, and parents of American Indian students as they design future research and engage in dialogues about how to increase American Indian parent involvement and student academic achievement.

AMERICAN INDIAN PARENT INVOLVEMENT: THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Some of the reasons for low American Indian parent involvement are thought to be rooted in parents' negative historical and personal experiences related to federal government policy on American Indian education (Butterfield & Pepper, 1991; Cockrell, 1992). For example, American Indian parents were historically excluded from their children's education, but today parents are expected to be actively involved. In addition, schools historically did not (and, in some situations, still do not) share the same educational and cultural values as American Indian parents (Butterfield and Pepper, 1991).

Some successful programs and strategies have bridged the divide between schools and American Indian students, parents, and communities in ways that respect and incorporate native language, culture, values, and learning styles into curriculum and instruction and include native communities in the education process (Begay et al., 1995; Lipka, Mohatt, & The Ciulistet Group, 1998; McCarty, 2002; Reyhner & Eder, 2004). In addition, the No Child Left Behind Act requires states to close achievement gaps between student subgroups and encourages parent involvement.

Despite the efforts to reform American Indian education, nationwide gaps persist on key education indicators. American Indian students perform below White students, below the national average in grades 4 and 8 reading and math, and below college-bound seniors' reading and math Scholastic Aptitude Test scores. The American Indian dropout rate in 2003 was almost twice the national average and more than

twice the average White dropout rate (Freeman & Fox, 2005).

STUDY METHODOLOGY

REL Central developed four research questions to investigate the topic of parent involvement as it relates to American Indian education:

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

Recruitment letters were sent to 200 eligible American Indian parents from their school district's Office of Indian Education in two Central Region communities. Forty-seven American Indian parents choose to participate in five focus groups. Some participants were not biological parents, but all considered themselves parents by right of having an active role in the upbringing of children. Parents cited seven tribal affiliations and nine home reservations.

FINDINGS

Findings were organized into key themes around the research questions as follows:

1. What do American Indian parents perceive as parent involvement?

School-oriented involvement

- Communicating about children
- Attending student-centered events
- Volunteering
- Advocating for their children

Home-oriented involvement

- Showing interest in children's education and life
- Helping with school work
- Encouraging and rewarding children to do their best
- Reading with children
- Meeting children's needs

2. Why do American Indian parents get involved?

- To help children succeed and build confidence

- To build relationships with school staff
- To monitor children's progress
- To address a problem
- To respond to schools' invitation or welcoming environment

3. What do parents perceive as barriers to involvement?

School-oriented barriers

- Unwelcoming school environment (feeling unwelcome or intimidated at the school)
- Previous negative experience with education (parents' own or their children's)
- Perceptions of a school's lack of cultural sensitivity
- Differences in interpersonal communications style

Home-oriented barriers

- Experiencing scheduling, transportation, childcare, and financial difficulties

4. Which school strategies do parents perceive encourage involvement?

- Printed and electronic correspondence
- Communications about children
- School staff respectful of parents' educational and cultural values
- Open-door policy
- Culturally respectful environment
- Cultural activities and resources, including American Indian programs, resource centers, afterschool activities, clubs for children and families, and an advocate or liaison at the school to welcome and assist American Indian parents and children

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Several limitations affect the study findings. Since the participants were not randomly selected, the perceptions of these parents may not be shared by other American Indian parents. Because the data were collected in focus groups, participant responses may be influenced by conflict avoidance, social acceptability, interactions with the moderator, conformance to the opinions of the group or to more assertive participants, and participants' self-confidence, all typical drawbacks of this methodology.

FUTURE RESEARCH

This study provides a foundation for an initial understanding of basic issues, subtle themes, and perceptions that influence American Indian parent involvement; however, more research is needed as the findings do not permit drawing inferences to a larger population.

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

CONCLUSION

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

This study serves as an initial step toward understanding American Indian parent involvement. It is important to keep in mind, however, that this study reflects the perspectives of American Indian parents; it does not include the perspectives of school personnel or their responses to these findings. Follow-up studies might examine these issues from an additional perspective.

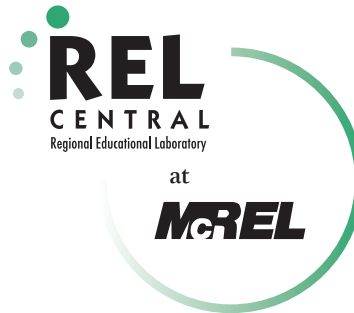
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