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COMPREHENSIVE REFORM AND AMERICAN INDIAN EDUCATION

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Introduction

Serious school reform in the United States has been underway for about 10 years now. It evolved out of a concern for equity in educational outcomes for America's growing diversity in student populations. It also grew out of a concern for the increasing demands for an educated and civil American citizenry that can maintain this nation's position of leadership in a 21st century globalized society.

American school reform is grounded on a move toward challenging content and performance standards that are aligned to curriculum and an accurate assessment system. Underlying these school improvement efforts is a radical shift in the thinking of parents, educators, policy makers, and other important stakeholders toward a belief that *all* children—not just some—can achieve academic excellence given adequate support and access to a high quality education.

The foundation of reform in the United States as it relates to the education of Native learners is associated with efforts to meet their unique educational and culturally related academic needs—the goal being that Native Americans can achieve in accordance with the same high standards as all other learners. Fundamental principles must be immediately applicable if Native learners are expected to achieve in accordance with

the same high standards that apply to other students. The following principles suggest the direction of these standards:

- Educators must assess their needs and respond to them authentically.
- Teachers must use appropriate teaching and learning strategies known to be effective with Native learners.
- The school's curriculum must reflect the linguistic, cultural, and social heritage of the learner's community and tribal society.
- The school must provide opportunities for Native learners to explore the possibilities of being human within the social and cultural themes that grow out of their *own* experience and heritage.

The current school reform debate focuses on a number of assumptions that may be conceptually inadequate to deal with the task of improving Indian education. These assumptions about educational practices based upon the nature of schools, the student population, and professional staffing hinder the Native student.

With a strong belief that all students can learn, the most basic underlying assumption of school reform is the view that schools as organizations can, in fact, be transformed and improved and that this improvement would result in increased levels of student achievement for all learners. This assumption is based on a certain level of stability and continuity with regard to student enrollment and professional staffing during the school year and succeeding school years. It would also require the existence and availability of a corpus of appropriate information and knowledge to guide professional development as well as curriculum development activities.

However, schools with predominantly Indian student populations experience, in fact, extremely high student and staff mobility. These schools also tend to serve student populations disproportionately affected by violence and substance abuse that negatively impact school readiness and individual capacity to learn. These problems are also compounded by the fact that schools serving Native students also lack the appropriate knowledge base for accomplishing the professional development and curricular development objectives necessary for sustained improvement while also meeting unique social linguistic and cultural needs.

Historically, schools for Native learners, including large numbers of isolated rural schools, have defined success by their ability to enable students to leave their communities either for employment or postsecondary educational opportunities far from home. For many Native learners, this particular purpose of education not only alienates the students from their homes and communities, but also causes the students to drop out of school—backstabbing the pursuit of education. Tribal governments and Indian communities have sought to reform schools to be culturally appropriate and consequently more effective. They have also attempted to recast the mission and purposes of schools to meet their unique and distinctive social, cultural, and economic needs.

Our national concentration on school improvement and the relationship of schooling to improve employment opportunities for all learners may be too narrow a policy focus for American Indian and Alaska Native education. School reform strategies must focus on objectives and approaches that recognize and address the linguistic and

sociocultural uniqueness of American Indian and Alaska Native learners. This would be in keeping with the original purpose of The American Indian Education Act.

School reform efforts have often focused on particular schools. However, no matter how well thought-out or supported, improvement strategies often fail due to many factors that lie beyond the capacity or authority of schools. Because of this, in 1997 The National Indian Education Association presented the White House with “A Proposed Comprehensive Federal Policy Statement." On August 6, 1998, in response to this policy statement and the glaring evidence that decisive action must be taken, President Clinton signed "The Executive Order on American Indian and Alaska Native Education." The activities of the Executive Order and its call for the development of a comprehensive federal Indian education policy attempt to broaden our policy vision of American Indian and Alaska Native education.

The Larger World of Educational Reform in the U.S.

In 1994, the Federal role in education was transformed by the passage of two major pieces of legislation aimed at reforming the U.S. educational system. These laws established the clear expectation that *ALL* children can and should reach high standards.

- The *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* formalized eight national education goals and established a system of grants to states and local communities to reform the nation's education system.
- The *Improving America's Schools Act* supported State and local reform efforts based on challenging academic standards and assessments linked to those standards.

Federal resources have been focused on helping States to develop and implement challenging State standards for all children and to use those standards to improve learning through a coherent and aligned system of curricula, assessments, and professional development. The 1994 laws complemented and accelerated reform efforts already underway in many States and school districts and acted as a catalyst for change in States that had not yet begun setting high academic standards.

The 1994 legislation renews federal commitment to high standards for all children and promotes the next stage of standards-based reform by helping states, districts, schools, and teachers use challenging state standards to guide classroom instruction and student assessment. Significant components of this current reform effort include the following:

- Provisions to improve accountability by holding school districts accountable for continuous and substantial gains in overall student performance and in the performance of the lowest-performing students; and
- Support for a national effort to improve and strengthen the quality of teaching and school leadership.

Early results of the 1994 legislation suggest that standards-based reform is a powerful tool for raising student achievement and for closing the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students in high poverty schools and their more affluent counterparts.

How are American Indian Children Doing?

American Indian students have made some progress in recent decades but continue to be disproportionately affected by poverty, low educational attainment, and access to fewer educational opportunities than other students. Current conditions seem to have changed little from similar conditions noted 30 years ago:

- Indian students often start school unprepared to learn, especially children who are bilingual or developmentally delayed.
- The achievement rate of Indian students is often lower. American Indian students, on average, score lower on the NAEP test than other students.
- The dropout rate for Indian students is high. Currently, the high school completion rate for American Indians, ages 20-24, is 70%, which is significantly lower than the national average.
- Schools with high enrollments of Indian students are often geographically isolated in small communities and rural areas. Transportation of students to school is often difficult and time consuming, with many students, daily, travelling long distances over unpaved roads.
- There is often a high rate of unemployment and poverty in Indian communities and on Indian reservations. In 1990, 36.2% of American Indian children ages 5-17 were living below the federal poverty level ($16,400 for a family of four), compared with 17% of all other children. Significant numbers of Indian children live in families with incomes below 50% of the federal poverty level.

- Few Indian students enter and finish college. In 1990, 9.3% of American Indian persons 25 years old and over had attained a bachelor's degree or higher, as compared to 20.3% of the total population.

Education Reform in American Indian Education

In 1969, the Senate Subcommittee on Indian Education issued its final report on the educational situation and status of American Indian people in the United States. The report titled *Indian Education: A National Tragedy, A National Challenge,* documented the significant failure of American public education to address Native learners' needs. The report identified as the fundamental cause of this failure to the federal government's policy of coercive assimilation of American Indian and Alaska Native people. Those who endeavored to eliminate Native languages and culture as strategies for educating American Indian and Alaska Native children did not anticipate the long-term viability and tenacity of Native societies and communities.

Responding to the Senate Subcommittee's report on American Indian education, the U.S. government finally recognized the need for comprehensive Indian education legislation to meet the unique educational needs of Indians, both in federally and locally operated public schools.

In the mid-1970s, the U.S. Congress established legislation that provided resources to Tribal governments to not only operate elementary and secondary schools but also colleges. In the mid-1980s some State governments with large American Indian populations also began to redefine their education policies toward American Indians. Some have provided unique programs and resources to meet the needs of American

Indian learners, as well as providing greater access to State-funded educational opportunities.

In 1991, the federally initiated Indian Nation's At-RiskTask Force evaluated progress made in American Indian education since the passage of the Indian Education Act of 1972. Many excellent and creative programs were designed to meet the unique needs of Native learners in public schools. However, a key finding of the Task Force report was that these programs had little influence overall on the effectiveness of curriculum and instruction in schools responsible for educating the *majority* of American Indian children. The Task Force noted that American Indian/Alaska Native children continued to have high dropout rates and poor overall achievement. Schools serving elementary and secondary Native students continued to evidence inferior results. At the same time, despite this failure, the overall educational level of American Indian people had improved; this was due to the participation of adults in adult education programs, including post-secondary education programs.

In 1994, the Indian Education Act of 1972 was reauthorized to require schools to develop comprehensive programs, using all of a school's resources to meet the needs of Native learners. These provisions are particularly important for schools in which Native learners are a minority learner population. The focus of educational reform for American Indian children is shifting toward identification and adaptation of successful programmatic approaches and strategies developed through actual practice in schools serving American Indian children.

Federal funds to schools now support a comprehensive approach to educational reform to help ensure that Native children benefit from national education reform efforts

and that Native children receive every opportunity to achieve to high standards. At the local level, eligibility for special federal funding requires a comprehensive plan from schools serving populations of Native students. These plans must—

- be consistent with their State and local standards-based improvement plans;
- be developed with a local committee comprised primarily of parents of Native children;
- include student performance goals;
- include descriptions of professional development activities that will be carried out;
- explain how student progress will be measured; and
- explain how the results of student assessments will be provided to parents and other Native community members.

The Executive Order

In an historic 1994 meeting, President Clinton met with Tribal leaders. Indian educators requested special consideration on the part of the President for Indian education. In response, American Indian organizations and Tribal governments provided the President with a proposed federal American Indian education policy statement.

As a result, an Executive Order on American Indian and Alaska Native education was written and signed in 1998 by President Clinton. The Executive Order reaffirms the federal government's special and historic responsibility for the education of American Indian and Alaska Native students.

The Executive Order requires federal agencies to develop a long-term, comprehensive Federal American Indian education policy that will address--

- the fragmentation of government services available to American Indian and Alaska Native students;
- the complexity of intergovernmental relationships affecting the education of Native students;
- the improvement of academic performance by Native students; and
- the accomplishment of reducing the dropout rate of Native students.

A Continuing Need for a Comprehensive Approach for Native Education Reform: Where Do We Go From here?

There is need for a policy vision for American Indian education that is comprehensive. Even though the policy encompasses school reform, it should expand our vision beyond the school to strengthen (a) the capacity of school reform initiatives to be more effective; (b) the educational potential of schools in Tribal communities; and (c) the broad-based capacity of tribes and Indian communities for meaningful social, cultural and economic development. The following are important factors to consider and address in the development of a comprehensive approach to educational reform for American Indians.

Factors that Mitigate the Potential for School Reform

Professional Staff Turnover

Most school reform strategies rely on a *continuous* improvement model that has high standards; that the high standards are aligned with curriculum and assessment

systems; and that professional development is focused on improvement of teaching and learning. Schools with predominantly Indian student populations have very high turnover rates of professional staff, including teachers and administrators. The high turnover of professional staff combined with vacancy rates seriously impede the potential of school reform efforts.

High Student Mobility

High student mobility has an obvious negative impact on student achievement and teacher morale. In addition, high student mobility mitigates the effectiveness of school reform strategies by denying the school system short- and long-term knowledge about the effects of improvement efforts. Assessment data and other forms of academic achievement and progress information used to measure school improvements have serious validity and reliability problems created by high student turnover. Schools with very high mobility rates have no reliable way to truly judge the effects of their efforts on either individual students, a specific student population, the school, or the district.

High Dropout Rates

A principle objective of school reform to improve student achievement is thwarted by high dropout rates of American Indian students. A very significant percentage of Indian high school students reject schooling altogether. Consequently, the singular focus on improvement in student achievement would have limited impact on the overall improvement of education within an Indian community.

Limited Knowledge

With regard to teaching and learning, school reform is dependent upon decision-making based on authentic knowledge in the hands of those where it is most needed--teachers and instructional leaders. However, most schools educating American Indians have limited knowledge about the special educational and culturally related needs of Indian students and the school reform strategies deemed most effective for meeting these needs.

Similarly limited is knowledge about effective processes for school improvement in schools with predominant American Indian student populations. Given the parameters of current systems of school governance, administration, and finance, two questions need to be asked: What are the effective models for school reform in schools governed by American Indian tribes? and, What are the effective models for school reform in schools that serve tribal communities? The success of school reform efforts appears to be overly dependent upon the character of individual leadership and not genuine institutional change. Some small rural Native communities have developed parental governance and training initiatives to mitigate the effects of school leadership change.

Factors that Relate to the Educational Potential of Schools Within Indian Communities.

Many of the educational objectives of tribal societies and American Indian and Alaska Native communities such as language and cultural retention and development as well as dealing with significant issues of violence and substance abuse cannot be fully addressed by schools. Tribal societies, communities, and families must be recognized,

strengthened, and supported directly as primary social and educational vehicles fundamentally important to the future of Tribal communities.

The Needs of Indian Children and Youth

The experiences of Indian children before they enter school, and that of Indian youth while enrolled in schools, are extraordinarily affected by violence, substance abuse, and other factors associated with poverty and isolation. Consequently, young Indian children are affected in their ability to learn by two major obstacles: their experiences and their linguistic and cultural knowledge base. Currently, for significant numbers of young Indian children, these experiences are not only incongruent with the expectations of schools, but also for those seeking the maintenance of tribal specific linguistic and cultural distinctiveness.

Schools are limited in their capacity to provide for the wide range of needs of Indian students that are supportive of achievement and academic progress while mitigating the social, economic, and health related issues that negatively affect student learning. There are limited opportunities in Indian communities for young people to engage in activities within the community that are educational, social, cultural or recreational in character.

The Linguistic and Cultural Needs of Indian Tribes and Communities

Tribal societies and Indian communities are facing significant challenges concerning the long-term viability of their distinctive linguistic and cultural traditions. The pace of social and cultural change generally within society and its attendant consequences with respect to small isolated communities makes most ideas about the role of culture in

education less prescriptive and more dynamic and evolving. The long-term effects of public schooling and the influence of the English language and American commercial culture has created a growing discontinuity of experience between Indian young people and the generation of American Indians that have maintained a distinctive language and cultural tradition.

Approximately 155 or 89% of the 175 native languages that are still spoken in the United States are declining. The Census Bureau conservatively estimated in 1993 that more than one third of American Indian and Alaska Native tongues had fewer than 100 home speakers in 1990. A rapid shift to English is evident even among speakers of languages such as Navajo, long considered the healthiest of indigenous languages. Native American languages are in serious danger of becoming extinct.

The Pace of Change

The pace and nature of change within the daily experiences of youth will continue to mitigate the authority of schooling and education as an influence, either for or against the effects of these trends, without the determined involvement of the community as a whole. Schools, what they teach and how they teach, will continue to be reactive to what is occurring in the larger society unless communities and schools cooperatively develop determined goals and standards for experiences of Indian young people.

Visioning for the Improvement of Indian Education: Governance, Control and Standards and the Community Context for Education

Formal schools are a relatively new way to educate people in Indian communities. Historically, schools have not served but have worked against the interests of tribal

communities. It was only a generation ago that the avowed purpose of schooling was to eliminate the distinctive cultural and linguistic traditions of American Indian people. Schools have traditionally served the needs of the larger society and have not focused on the needs of small isolated and primarily rural Indian communities that have their own specific ideas about the goals of development and the role of education in meeting community needs. Tribal colleges and tribally controlled schools have begun to refocus the community social cultural and economic context for the purposes and goals of Indian education.

The desire to stay in school and graduate is related to a student's motivation to learn and his perception of the relationship of education to his personal future. What is taught in school is connected to the standards adopted for the education program. Indian communities and tribes seek the development of educational institutions that are congruent with their vision for the development of Indian community and tribe. Schools must excite and engage learners, provide opportunities for involvement and learning in real-life communities, promote the development of a strong and confident sense of self-rootedness in their unique identity, and enable young people to become productive, contributing citizens of their communities as well as the nation as a whole.

Historically, schools for Native learners, and indeed, large numbers of isolated rural schools in the U.S., have defined success by their ability to enable and equip students through the educational process to leave their communities. For many Native learners, this particular mission and purpose of education ultimately disengages students and negatively affect their retention in school.

Tribal governments and Indian communities have not only sought to reform schools to be culturally appropriate and consequently more effective, but have also attempted to recast the mission and purposes of schools to meet the social, cultural, and economic needs and requirements of redeveloping Native communities.

In order to meet the challenges of American Indian and Alaska Native education there must be strategies developed that are comprehensive and holistic. These strategies must address all the human and social needs of Indian students before they enter school and even while they are not in school. They must strengthen the capacity of schools that serve predominantly Indian student populations so that school reform efforts can be effectively implemented and managed. Efforts at reducing federal interagency fragmentation and developing intergovernmental cooperation and partnerships between tribal state and federal governments—as mandated by President Clinton's Executive Order—would greatly assist this process.

Lastly, Indian parents, communities, and tribes must define their purposes and goals to guide education with clear directions and to synchronize education with community development efforts. They must also assert the criteria for evaluating success from a tribal and community perspective. Education must be a community-wide concern and not something that is relegated only to what schools are considered to do. Communities must examine themselves and pursue changes that will truly support and encourage Indian young people in the most positive way. Though central to the educational experience of American Indians, the school itself is *only part* of a larger picture of what is needed to improve opportunities for young American Indian and Alaska Native people

today. The Native communities and tribes must partner with schools, creating a holistic and community-owned approach to educating their young people.

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