

## Bridging Two Worlds for Native American Families

Topic

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There is a danger in attempting to describe effective strategies for any classification of families or schools, since no two are really alike. For American Indian families and schools, that is especially true. Native Americans are not only affiliated with more than 500 tribes and multiple tribal bands, each with its own cultures and customs, they also are found in every strata of American society, every residential situation, and every walk of life. As for schools, most Native American children attend regular district schools along with non-Native children, while some attend schools operated by their tribes or the Bureau of Indian Education. A few attend boarding schools.

For purposes of this discussion, we will focus on Native American children living on reservations or in areas where Native Americans constitute the majority of residents and maintain an identity with their tribes. This is often called “Indian country” and is typically characterized as remotely rural and too often associated with poverty.

Much of the earlier research on American Indian parent engagement tells the story of parents who are disengaged from the school system through which their children must navigate. Poor experiences with the federally mandated boarding schools scarred an entire generation of American Indian parents and left them mistrustful of the educational system (Chavers, 1998; Tippeconnic, 2000). However, more recent research paints a new picture of parents who are engaged in their children’s learning and have aspirations for them that include graduating from high school and attending college (State Advisory Council on Indian Education, 2004; Chavers, 2000; McInerney, McInerney, Ardington, & Rachewiltz, 1997; Chavers, 2000).

While a cookie-cutter approach is not applicable for any school, this becomes even more apparent for schools serving American Indian students. Indian students may attend public or parochial schools (approximately 93%), or Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) operated schools, or Tribally Controlled (contract) schools (remaining 7%). Of the BIE operated schools and Tribally Controlled schools, some are boarding schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). Each type of school represents

a different experience for both students and parents. These schools serve students from over 500 recognized tribes with different cultures and languages (Oakes & Maday, 2009; Kitchen, Velasquez, & Myers, 2000). However, when all these differences are stripped away, there is still a teacher, a student, and the student's family who all want the student to succeed.

While American Indian parents interviewed for the Indian Education Report (State Advisory Council on Indian Education, 2004) believed it was their responsibility to teach their children about their heritage and culture, they also felt that the schools needed to incorporate more of American Indian culture and history into the curriculum. At the minimum, teachers need to be educated in the prevailing culture so they can avoid applying stereotypes and misconceptions to their students (Coggins, Radin, & Williams, 1996; Gay, 2000; Huffman, Sill, & Brokenleg, 1986; Ward, 1994). Parents and community leaders can inform teachers about their histories and cultures (State Advisory Council on Indian Education, 2004; Oakes & Maday, 2009).

Educators also need to understand the role that economic depression plays on both the current conditions in which the student exists and in what hopes and aspirations the student may perceive for his or her future. Michelle Fine (1991) gives a picture of the role of poverty:

For these students, the opportunity to a public education is hollow. It asks them to abandon family and community responsibilities; to sacrifice language, identity, and pride; to ignore the pain and suffering they witness around them and the culture and pleasure they take comfort in; and to deny fundamentally all that sits between their dreams and their circumstances, between the ideologies

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they so want to believe and the contradictions they so need to confront. (p. 21)

School staff can learn how to communicate effectively with their students' families. The State Advisory Council on Indian Education (2004) gives these suggestions from their interviews with parents:

Lastly, our interviews indicated that families are learning about their children's academic performance primarily through written communications like notes, progress reports, and performance reports. When schools communicate with families in writing, they are inadvertently excluding a sector of their parent/family population. If schools can find a way to communicate more with families through personal phone calls, visits, or other non-written means—particularly among those families who appear to be entirely disengaged from education—they may be far more effective in increasing family participation in education. (p. 42)

Communication between the school and home should also be perceived to be two-way rather than just communication (often negative) being sent from the school to the parents (Cockrell, 1992; Chavers, 2000). Schools must make a concerted effort to communicate positive behaviors of the student, as well as encouraging parents to share their perceptions and knowledge of their child with the teacher. Schools must initiate the effort to make parents feel welcome and respected (Cockrell, 1992).

Persistence matters. Enlist the willing parents who attend school functions to get their feedback on what types of involvement they would like and to help communicate with other families. Talk to the tribal council and involve them in the school. Speak to the elders and include them when possible in teaching the students of their heritage and culture. Invite parents in to share special skills related to supporting at home their children's success at school. Keep track of those activities that garner the best response. Offer classes to the parents on how to help their students form solid habits of studying and reading and to maintain regular conversation with their children about school (Redding, 2000). Be willing to discuss learning standards and lessons without educational jargon. Listen when parents do not understand the relevance of a lesson or

grade. Listen. Train all school staff to treat all parents with courtesy and respect.

The burdens of poverty and cultural diffusion weigh heavily on many Indian children. Attending to their social and emotional learning is essential, and it also is necessary to their receptiveness for academic learning. Bridging the gap between the school and the families it serves is not easy work, but it is essential work that requires ingenuity, sensitivity, and persistence. Indian children must learn to successfully navigate two worlds, in many ways, and this creates both a challenge and an exciting opportunity for their schools.

### Action Principles

#### State Education Agency (or Bureau of Indian Education)

1. The State Education Agency includes a state-funded Indian education coordinator.
2. The state's academic and social-emotional standards address Native American culture and history.
3. The state provides targeted funding of Indian education programs, including programs for family engagement (Smiley & Sather, 2009).
4. The state's resources and programs for family engagement include practices and examples relevant to Indian families and schools.
5. The state ensures that remotely located schools possess adequate Internet access and equipment and families are given access to and training on the use of this equipment.

#### Local Education Agency (or Education Line Office)

1. Curriculum includes native culture and languages as part of the education program (Smiley & Sather, 2009).
2. Curriculum guides assist teachers in integrating culture and language into their standards-aligned instruction (Smiley & Sather, 2009).
3. All teachers are educated in the history and culture of the communities they serve.
4. All schools are expected to include parents in shared leadership opportunities.

5. School budgets include line items for family engagement, and the district provides guidance for effective family engagement practices.

### School

1. The school uses multiple means of communicating with parents (websites, notes to home, bulletin boards, face-to-face meetings, home visits) that are two-way, allowing for parental input and feedback.
2. The school offers workshops for parents to learn about and discuss their role in their child's education, including studying at home, reading at home, parent-child interaction, school-home compact, and learning standards.
3. The school maintains a School Community Council consisting of the principal, teachers, and parents who have currently enrolled students, to discuss and develop meaningful activities and ways for families and schools to interact.
4. The school selects and evaluates all staff based on their ability to work effectively with families and to attend to the social and emotional development of their students.
5. The school trains all staff on Native American culture, effective relationships with families, and the importance of children's social and emotional development, and expects the training to be demonstrated in daily work.

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## Resources

- Brown, J., Muirhead, M., Redding, S., & Witherspoon, B. (2011). *Changing the conversation with families in persistently low-achieving high schools: Guidance for*

# Marie

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Marie is six years old. She lives in a two-bedroom trailer that sits on a wind-swept plain. The land is beautiful. Bluffs frame the horizon and change colors with the rising and setting sun. Eagles sweep the sky. Sunrise lights the ground with fire. Marie's family has lived on this land for several generations. She lives with her mother, grandmother, two siblings, and two uncles. Every morning she gets up just as the sun peaks over the edge of the world, brushes her teeth and her hair, and sits down with her mother and siblings for breakfast. At 7:00 a.m., the bus arrives to take her to school. It will take an hour and a half for the bus to make its rounds and deliver her to the school door.

Marie loves school. She loves her schoolmates, her teacher, and even the new principal. She loves the smell of the chalk on the chalkboard, and especially the smell of the new crayons that fill the container on the shelf marked "Supplies." She works hard at her studies and enjoys learning new things. Sometimes she has trouble understanding the teacher – in her home, her grandmother speaks only in their native language, and other adults bounce between that language and English in the same sentence. Marie mostly thinks and speaks in English, but wishes she were more fluent in both languages. Her teacher works with her individually when she doesn't understand.

Mrs. Johnson recently accepted the position as principal at Marie's school. She is excited about her new job and about the students and staff with whom she is working. Most of the teachers seem engaged and eager to try her ideas for school improvement. The students, for the most part, are hard-working and well behaved. She has not had much time to learn about her new community since she just moved to the reservation a few weeks before the school year began. As part of her plan for school improvement, Mrs. Johnson has proposed an Open House for the families, with interactive activities for parents and children. It will give her a chance to meet some of the parents of the students as well as become more familiar with the people in the community. Some of her staff responded less than enthusiastically to her ideas for the Open House, which confuses her, but does not deter her from her plans. Mrs. Johnson forges ahead with energy and enthusiasm and chalks up the resistance to nervousness about a new venture.

The Open House is planned for 6:00 p.m. on a Tuesday evening. Mrs. Johnson prints up colorful flyers with all the information and makes sure all the teachers send them home with their students. She posts the information on the school website.

On Tuesday evening, Mrs. Johnson eagerly waits to welcome the parents of her 175 students. She has brought cookies for refreshments and rehearses in her mind the speech she wants to deliver to the parents to tell them how excited she is to be serving in their school. At 6:10, a small smattering of parents arrives. At 6:30, a few more dribble in. By 6:40, Mrs. Johnson expectantly observes the teachers who have mingled with the students and parents, who now total 35 – students included. Mrs. Johnson steps to the front of the room and delivers her speech with a little less enthusiasm than she intended when the evening began. After the group dispersed, Mrs. Johnson cleaned up the leftover cookies and wondered what had gone wrong.

Marie received the flyer for the Open House from her teacher one week before the event. She loved the bright colors and pretty pictures even if she didn't understand all the words. She put the flyer in her backpack and was the first to run off the bus at 5:00 p.m. (when the bus normally dropped her off) to give it to her mom when she got home. Grandmother was there to greet her, and her mother got home from work at 6:00. Her mother put the flyer on the refrigerator and told Marie she would try.

On the day of the Open House, Marie's mother was not home from work yet when Marie got off the bus. Grandmother was in the kitchen cooking supper. Marie asked about the Open House. Grandmother said Marie would have to ask her mother when she got home. Marie's mother got home shortly after Marie. When Marie asked about the Open House, her mother explained that they would not be able to attend. Marie's family only owned one car. The car was needed by one of Marie's uncles to drive to work that evening. Marie's mother assured her that she would speak with her teacher just as soon as she was able to let her know why they did not attend. Marie's grandmother and mother both knew that Marie was disappointed so they spent the evening looking over all her schoolwork and drawing new pictures she could give to her teacher the next day.

Family engagement is not always easy to understand. On the surface, Mrs. Johnson could assume that the majority of her students' parents did not attend the Open House because they were not committed to their children's education. She might believe that the parents of her students did not want to be "engaged." However, she would be wrong.

