



NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN MINNESOTA

A MINNCAN REPORT



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To order copies of this report please
contact MinnCAN:
info@minncan.org

**MinnCAN: The Minnesota
Campaign for Achievement Now**
287 East Sixth Street, Suite 513
St. Paul, Minnesota 55101
www.minncan.org

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Acknowledgments

Miigwech!

We are so grateful for the time and insights community members have shared with us in preparing this report, as well as the invitations to tour schools, talk with parents, and hang out with talented students. Our sincere thanks to all!

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Four-year cohort high school graduation rate for 2010–2011

The presentation of this data is based on methods used by the Coalition of Communities of Color in Portland, Ore. Special thanks to the Northwest Area Foundation for hosting the Coalition's August 2013 presentation in St. Paul, Minn.

National ■
 Minnesota ■

All students

Minnesota's failure to address academic opportunity gaps for students of color means that our statewide graduation rate is below the national average.

White or Caucasian

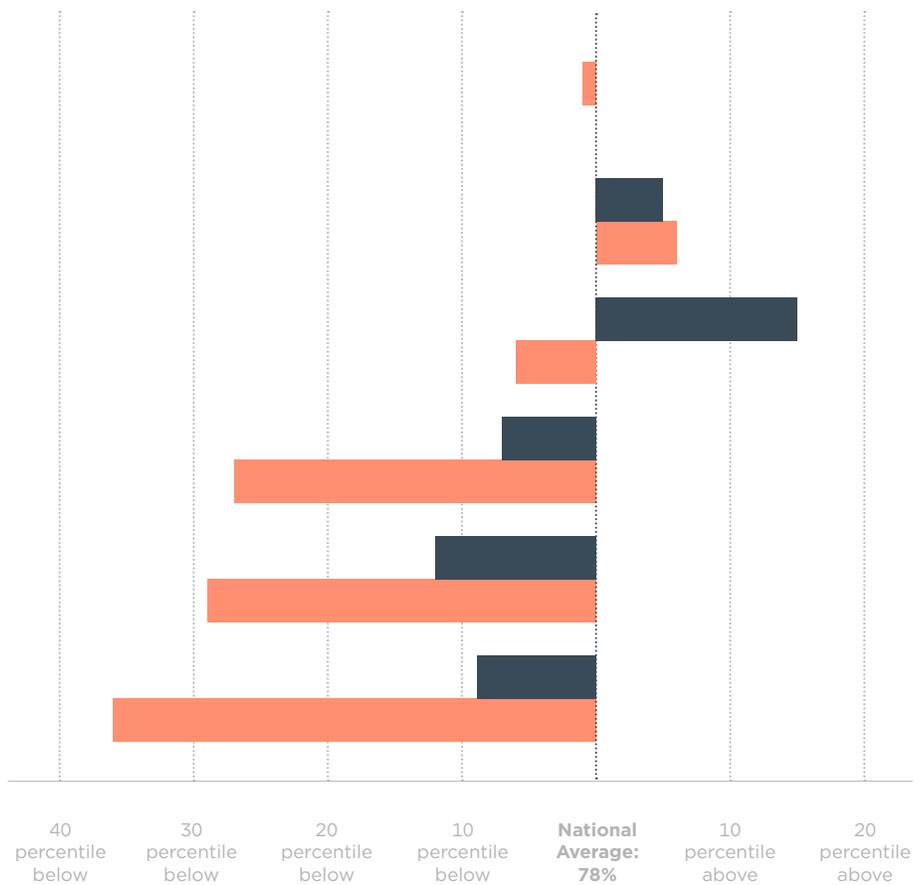
Asian/Pacific Islander

Hispanic/Latino

Black or African American

American Indian/Alaska Native

In 2011, Minnesota's graduation rate for American Indians was the worst of any state.



Introduction

Boozhoo—

The numbers aren't good at all. Even though in 2012 Minnesota's graduation rate for Native American students went up a few percentage points—to 45.5 percent—once comparison data is released, Minnesota will likely still have the worst record of any state.

Hearing that hard fact, it would be easy to succumb to despair. But we believe that's not an option Minnesota can afford.

And yet, what *can* Minnesota do to keep that graduation rate climbing?

Here at MinnCAN, we started out wanting to create some sort of resource that would be useful. That was our word—*useful*.

But last May in Minneapolis at the Sacred Voices Native youth gathering, sponsored by the Tiwahe Foundation and MIGIZI Communications, youth work consultant LeMoine LaPointe (Sicangu Lakota) challenged us, “Why not ask, ‘What would be transformational?’”

That's a bold word—*transformational*—but we realized immediately LaPointe was right: graduation rates for Minnesota Indian students won't improve unless Minnesotans act in bold new ways.

Meeting with Elaine Salinas (White Earth Ojibwe), president of MIGIZI Communications, the leading Minneapolis nonprofit in indigenous education efforts, gave us further food for thought. She grilled us: *Why had we come to meet with her?* It turned out Salinas was unaccustomed to mainstream educational organizations seeking out Native input.

Her assessment gave us pause.

We realized we needed to listen—*really listen*—to indigenous leaders, educators, parents and students. As LaPointe told us, “People have come in and proposed the answer, and never asked the questions. They've looked at our risk factors and never asked about our strengths. Yet our cultures were successful not because of our deficits, but because of our strengths.”

So we challenged ourselves to shift our thinking away from “What's wrong?” and toward “What's right?” As part of MinnCAN's 2013 Road to Success tour, we were able to visit schools for which hard data documents the academic success of their Indian students. What was going on there? What made the difference?

We didn't know what we'd find when we walked through the doors of those schools. We just knew that students in the High Five pre-K program in Minneapolis consistently made tremendous gains in kindergarten readiness, and that Churchill Elementary School in Cloquet

Deanna StandingCloud (Red Lake Ojibwe), Family Engagement Coordinator for Indian Education in the Minneapolis Public Schools, encouraged us, and others interacting with the Native American community, to “Learn the courtesy words.” She points out, “If you visit another country, you do that—learn some basic phrases. And here in America, native languages are the original language of this land.”

Boozhoo is an Ojibwe greeting; miigwech means thanks.

and Detroit Lakes Middle School had both made MinnCAN's respective Top 10 lists for Native American Achievement, based on their students' scores on reading and math proficiency tests. We also made sure to hear from some Native students who are on track for graduation.

We're eager to share with you what we discovered.

But first, before we got started, we realized we needed to review our knowledge of Native Americans in Minnesota. In case you'd like a refresher also, try out the matching numbers exercise on pages 27–29 and the map activity on the next page. Or consider trying these interactive lessons with a small group or at a professional development training.

Together, we can keep working toward the transformation that's needed for school success for American Indian students.

Miigwech,



Daniel Sellers
Executive Director, MinnCAN



Jacqueline White
Writer & Researcher

Getting to know Indian country: Minnesota's 11 tribal nations

AN ACTIVITY FOR CLASSROOMS OR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TRAININGS

The Minnesota Indian Affairs Council defines a reservation as “land that was retained by American Indian tribes after ceding large portions of the original homelands to the United States through treaty agreements. It is not land that was given to American Indians by the federal government.” In this activity, participants learn about Minnesota’s 11 tribal nations and their reservations or communities.

Activity Plan

- Provide each participant with eight star stickers of one color (for the seven Ojibwe reservations with an extra star for the legend), five star stickers of a different color (for the four Dakota communities with an extra star for the legend), a pen and a map of Minnesota that shows only lakes and rivers.
- Divide participants into 11 groups, giving members of each group information about one of the 11 tribal nations in Minnesota. Download the information from the website of the Minnesota Indian Affairs Council (mn.gov/indianaffairs) and from the website of each tribal nation.
- Give the small groups 10 minutes to read and discuss the information about the tribal nation to which they’ve been assigned, choosing a few interesting facts.
- Reconvene as a large group. Instruct participants how to create a legend for their map: Use one of the eight star stickers to indicate Ojibwe (also known as Chippewa and Anishinaabe) and one of the five star stickers for Dakota (also known as Sioux).
- Invite each group to report on what they learned about the tribal nation they were assigned. As they do so, have participants place and label the appropriately colored star on their map and record the interesting facts.

ABOUT THE ACTIVITIES

This map activity and the matching numbers game (page 27-29) are based on lessons created by Louise Matson (White Earth Ojibwe). She led small groups of teachers in doing the lessons at “Best Practices for Teaching Native Students,” a professional development training put on by the Indian Education Department of the Minneapolis Public Schools in August 2013, in partnership with Phillips Indian Educators, a group of Native educators in Minneapolis.

Providing teachers with background information on Minnesota’s indigenous people became, for Matson, an opportunity to showcase a project-based approach to learning. “We try not to lecture,” says Matson, who is director of Youth Leadership Development for the Division of Indian Work, Greater Minneapolis Council of Churches. “Experiential learning is more engaging.”

“Incorporating activities and working as a group for the common good are learning styles that work well for a lot of kids,” she observes, “but they’ve been shown to be particularly successful for Native kids. We want the teachers to experience what works for our kids.”

Boarding school legacy: Indian parents yesterday and today

Parents matter. And when they're involved in their child's schooling, the child will almost always learn and achieve more. But for many Indian families, boarding schools instilled the opposite message: that what parents have to teach—the language they speak and the culture they value—not only doesn't matter, but would be better eradicated. Even their very presence in their child's life was considered superfluous.

The traumatic legacy of the boarding schools continues to reverberate. “We have a history of education being used as a weapon against our people, so there's a lot of mistrust,” observes Deanna StandingCloud (Red Lake Ojibwe), family engagement coordinator for Indian Education in the Minneapolis Public Schools.

For an Indian parent to step foot inside the schoolhouse door can sometimes be fraught. But in her personal healing journey, StandingCloud found that facing the painful boarding school history was ultimately “liberating.” She gained insight into “why things are the way they are: why we don't speak the language or know our culture.” And she also came to see why people who've experienced such trauma, such as her grandmother, sometimes act “in a wounded kind of way.”

But even with those insights, StandingCloud felt her flight response kick in when she received a few of those calls last year from her son's teacher—you know, the kind every parent dreads about something not going well that day at school. She avoided taking the calls.

In retrospect, she knows what she wishes she had said: “I'm uncomfortable because you tell me negative things about my son.” Now she draws on that experience when she's advising other parents: “If we want to have a healthy family and a healthy community, we have to advocate for ourselves and have clear communication. It's an art to interact with your student's teacher, to say, ‘we're partnering.’”

And for the non-Native educator, StandingCloud advises, “At a minimum, be respectful. You can not know someone's culture but still be respectful.”

In an attempt to assimilate Native Americans, Indian boarding schools often forcibly separated indigenous children from their families, forbade them from speaking their native languages, and made them learn English as well as European ways. Two boarding schools operated in Minnesota: the Morris Industrial School for Indians (1887-1909) and the Pipestone Indian School (1892-1953).

To counter this legacy and put parents back in the education equation, Minnesota law requires that school districts with 10 or more American Indian students have American Indian parent committees. These committees can play a powerful role in promoting high academic standards and culturally inclusive curriculum.

Legislative briefing: Accomplishments in 2013

In 2013, new Minnesota legislation took three important steps to promote Native American student success:

1. Created a permanent statewide position of Indian Education Director;
2. Mandated ongoing consultation with the Tribal Nations Education Committee (which includes representatives from each tribal nation, as well as a member representing the Twin Cities metro); and
3. Called for an annual statewide listening session on Indian Education.

This legislation makes sense to us at MinnCAN. We need infrastructure to support best practices for indigenous students.

And so we've been pleased to meet with Dennis W. Olson Jr. (Fond du Lac Ojibwe), the new director of American Indian Education for the Minnesota Department of Education, and to attend the September 2013 Minnesota American Indian Education Summit in Brainerd.

But we also know that whatever good work happens at the capitol to support Native American student achievement, the real work occurs in classrooms across the state. Read on as we share our profiles of schools with documented success with Native students.

School profiles: What's working?

ANISHINABE ACADEMY, MINNEAPOLIS INDIGENOUS BEST PRACTICES DELIVER RESULTS

In 2008, when the Minneapolis Public Schools posted a job opening for a new director of Indian Education, the requirements included a masters degree in education, as well as experience as a teacher and principal. Danielle Grant (Turtle Mountain Ojibwe) had none of those credentials, but that didn't dissuade her from applying.

What the daughter of the principal of the first Minneapolis American Indian magnet school did have was a passion for education, a master of public affairs from the Humphrey School at the University of Minnesota, a decade of experience building collaborative partnerships to support education, and a belief that delivering “the major systems change” that could help Native students realize their true academic potential might require some out-of-the-box thinking.

Grant got the job, and along with it, a lot of harsh reality. “Make no mistake about it,” Grant said, “these are kids with real challenges.” Among cities with a significant Indian population, Minneapolis has the highest poverty rate for Native Americans—45 percent, which is three times the city's rate for whites.

But Grant also inherited a district with a history of forward thinking. In the early 1970s, the Minneapolis Public Schools became the first non-reservation district to successfully apply for and receive federal Title VII funds for Indian education. And 2006 brought another national first, a Memorandum of Agreement, in which the Native American community and the Minneapolis Public Schools agreed to work together on behalf of Indian student achievement.

Institutionalizing accountability

That first MOA was a sign of goodwill, the equivalent of a handshake that begins a conversation. But the second MOA, which Grant shepherded through (in a year-long process that solicited input from more than 1,000 people) got down to brass tacks: identifying specific action plans and setting data targets. Approved by both parties in 2012, the MOA sets district-wide goals for all schools, as well as more ambitious goals for three Indigenous Best Practice Sites that have a more concentrated emphasis on Indian education. Those sites are Anishinabe Academy



Ojibwe words in a Minnesota classroom.

(pre-K–8), South High All Nations (9–12) and Na-way-ee Center School (a contract alternative school for 7–12).

The key to the extensive negotiation process, Grant said, was an understanding that “academic success is a shared responsibility” and that each side—the Native community and the schools—needed to be able to influence the other and, thus, the outcome. “Building relationships is vital,” Grant said, “but for a collaboration to last, it must be institutionalized.”

To teach at one of the Indigenous Best Practice Sites, teachers must agree to participate in indigenous language learning activities and to allow classroom observation and coaching on how to more fully integrate cultural relevance into their teaching. And because maintaining a stable and committed teaching force is typically both a challenge at high-poverty schools (nearly 100 percent of Anishinabe students qualify for free and reduced price lunch) and a key to their success, negotiations with the teacher’s union yielded protection for teachers from being bumped from the practice sites.

Language immersion creates academic rigor

In the High Five language-immersion classroom at Anishinabe, teacher Karen LaMere and language-specialist Laura Cloud, who also uses her Ojibwe name of biiwaabik, have been working as a team for five years, and it shows. When the 17 preschoolers sat on their assigned square on the classroom rug and biiwaabik pointed to the calendar and counted out the days in Ojibwe, LaMere counted along too. In High Five, blending academic rigor with culture means repeating in the afternoon in

Ojibwe the weather lesson and singing the song about harvesting wild rice that had been already covered in English in the morning.

The two High Five language-immersion classrooms (one Ojibwe and one Dakota, with a long enough waiting list, Grant said, “to easily fill a third classroom”) have out-performed even the goals set in the MOA. Tests show that the High Fivers are more ready to learn and less likely to have behavior problems than children not in the program—an advantage that carries over into kindergarten. LaMere attributes the positive data to the fact that the program is a full day, that learning a second language has been shown to increase brain activity in young children, and that over their years of teaching together, she and biiwaabik have grown more adept at creating a bilingual classroom. “A lot of the kids really need this program,” LaMere said. “They wouldn’t be ready for kindergarten without it.”

A college graduate originally hired for her Ojibwe fluency, biiwaabik subsequently received a master’s in education through a University of St. Thomas training program designed to address the lack of licensed teachers in Native-language immersion programs. biiwaabik is currently only licensed to teach K–6, but LaMere, who will be retiring in a few years, is urging her to do additional early childhood coursework to obtain her pre-K license so she’ll be ready to take over as lead teacher.

Because the Ojibwe language is in danger of dying out, the reality, biiwaabik said, is that the High Five classroom “may be the only place some of the children hear it, where it’s given credibility.” It’s a task she takes seriously. Although adopted, biiwaabik grew up knowing she was Ojibwe, but not until she connected with her birth family, who hail from the Leech Lake reservation, did she understand that the Ojibwe culture has its own language. The realization deeply embarrassed her—and gave her a mission.

“I’m giving them their language,” biiwaabik said. “This is a place where they can be themselves.” And it turns out that being themselves helps the Native American pre-K students achieve.

CHURCHILL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, CLOQUET DATA DRIVES COOPERATIVE SPIRIT

The folks at Churchill Elementary School are a modest bunch, which is not to say they weren’t excited that the Cloquet school had nabbed the #2 spot on MinnCAN’s list of top-performing elementary schools for Native Americans. In fact, two rows of second-graders were lined up in the hallway to greet and present pencils to the visitors bearing the honorary plaque.

It's just that when the pivotal staff gathered in the conference room to explain their achievement, they did all they could to deflect attention away from themselves and onto the 11×14 sheet of paper that they claimed unlocked their students' potential. The Intervention Block Schedule looks like, well, a schedule, with the time periods of the school day down the left side, and across the top, the names of three Title I staff (for schools with a high percentage of low-income students), three special education staff, three Indian Education staff, and two student teaching interns from the College of St. Scholastica—all available for intensive work with small groups of struggling students.

The Intervention Block Schedule is the hard evidence that the entire staff is literally on the same page. The school year begins with extensive testing and then a full-day data retreat, in which the staff hunkers down to pore over data points for each student which, in conjunction with their personal knowledge of the children, helps the educators determine which of their 530 students need what level of intervention. “Data,” declared Principal David Wangen, “drives what we do.”

The groupings are multi-cultural: Native students may end up working with any of the intervention staff, and non-Native students can receive extra help through Indian Ed. And rather than being pulled out of class piecemeal (risking the stigma that can go with the need for extra help), the Block Schedule facilitates the students leaving together (sometimes as many as half the class) for a 50-minute reading or 25-minute math session. Not only does this prevent disruptions for the classroom teacher, it provides enrichment time for the remaining students.

Homegrown teacher builds relationships

Phil Beadle (Fond du Lac Ojibwe), coordinator of Churchill's American Indian Education Program, might be close to a celebrity on the playground, according to Wangen, who described students as bereft when Beadle isn't outside to organize games (and build relationships) with them, but he's reluctant to take much personal credit for how well the Native students, who make up one-fifth of the school's population, are doing.

In keeping with Churchill's premium on modesty, Beadle was even a little embarrassed to report that one of the prizes children can spin for on a prize wheel in the Indian Ed room, if they're “caught” doing something exemplary, like speaking Ojibwe in the hallway, is the chance to sit with him (or the Indian Ed tutor or the home liaison) at lunch. Instead, Beadle was quick to credit teamwork—“the whole building is working



Principal David Wangen and Churchill Elementary students applauding student achievement success.

hard”—as well as the mentoring he’s received from more established Churchill teachers.

Now in his fifth year at Churchill, Beadle is a graduate of the College of St. Scholastica’s teacher training program for Native Americans in nearby Duluth. According to Tara Graves (Fond du Lac Ojibwe), director of Indian Education for the Cloquet district, “It’s unusual to have a licensed Indian Education teacher in Indian Education.” And yet, because of the St. Scholastica program, Cloquet boasts five such teachers, as well as three Native student teacher interns.

Being a homegrown teacher gives Beadle, who grew up on the Fond du Lac reservation where many of his students either live or trace their heritage, a head start on building trust with families. While he knows that grandparents of some students were forced to attend boarding schools, he also knows the Seven Grandfather Teachings (Honesty, Wisdom, Bravery, Humility, Respect, Truth and Love) which are posted prominently on the Indian Education classroom wall and form the foundation for the conversation, held at the start of each school year, for how students should aspire to treat each other.

“I’ve tried to make coming to the Indian Ed room cool,” said Beadle—“not somewhere children feel they *have* to go.” Beadle does offer enrichment activities as well. And of course the iPads available in the room, especially at a school in which nearly half the students are eligible for free or reduced lunch, are also a definite draw for those students without tech access at home.

Parents request academic rigor

Still, the focus in Indian Ed is squarely on academics, which Beadle said represents a departure from the past: “We went from a cultural

program with academic components to an academic program with cultural components.”

That shift in emphasis came at the behest of parents, according to Gerard Sorderlet, Sr., chair of the Cloquet Local Indian Education Committee and an enrolled member of the Fond du Lac tribe. Upset by the poor academic standing of their children, the committee approached the school board. “On the reservation, we have a lot of addiction and a lot of poverty, and the only thing I know that can change that cycle,” Sorderlet said, “is education.” The parent concerns coincided with the opportunity to pilot the Response to Intervention process in 2005, which was what led Churchill to develop the Intervention Block Schedule.

“Cloquet gets it,” said Mike Rabideaux (Fond du Lac Ojibwe), superintendent of the Fond du Lac Ojibwe School, one of four Minnesota schools run by tribes and funded by the federal Bureau of Indian Education. “They know they have an obligation to serve Indian people, and they’ve involved Indian people. The Local Indian Education Committee has an active voice. That’s not the norm.”

That Rabideaux made his comments sitting at a table in a coffee shop with the Cloquet mayor, the Cloquet superintendent, the director of Indian Education for Cloquet, the executive directors of the local United Way and Chamber of Commerce, the president of the local community college, and the director of the St. Scholastica Native teacher training program gave his words credence. Natives and non-Natives do seem to be collaborating in Cloquet to a degree that isn’t seen everywhere.

But it wasn’t always that way. “When I was growing up, the race relations were absolutely horrendous,” said Mayor Bruce Ahlgren. “There’s been a tremendous change.”

Written commitments to collaborate

A potent symbol of that change is the Memorandum of Agreement, first developed between the Fond du Lac Band and the Cloquet School District in 1997 and just renewed this past August, which spells out joint goals around attendance, school readiness, achievement, and parental involvement for American Indian students in both the Cloquet schools and the Fond du Lac Ojibwe School, both of whose Indian students made Adequate Yearly Progress goals in 2012. That the Cloquet administrators aren’t just giving lip-service to Indian Country is made clear by the fact that Superintendent Ken Scarbrough attends the parents’ Local Indian Education Committee meetings—a fact that, in a small city like Cloquet, gets noticed.

And the collaborative efforts are continuing at the college level: the Fond du Lac Band and the Minnesota State Colleges and University System recently completed an MOA regarding Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College in Cloquet. According to college president Larry Anderson (Fond du Lac Ojibwe), the college consistently graduates more Natives than any other college in the MSCU system.

Meanwhile, back at Churchill Elementary School, Wangen had the challenge of explaining to a class of third-graders that while bragging is *usually* not a good thing to do, in this case, given the award the school was receiving, the students could go ahead and give themselves a round of applause.

So the third graders clapped. “And now,” Wangen said, without hardly missing a beat, “it’s time to get back to work.” Because isn’t school, after all, first and foremost about learning?

DETROIT LAKES MIDDLE SCHOOL, DETROIT LAKES “GETTING A ZERO IS NOT AN OPTION”

Coreen Roy (White Earth Ojibwe), a 2010 graduate of Detroit Lakes High School with a stylish asymmetrical haircut, drove a pick-up truck with White Earth tribal license plates down Highway 59 on a recent morning to get the story: Her old middle school was ranked #1 in the state for Native American Student Achievement. How did the students account for that?

Roy’s report, which aired on the White Earth tribal radio station, Nijjii radio (89.9 FM), quoted eighth grader Ana Olson (White Earth Ojibwe) as saying, “We get a lot of help from teachers. They explain anything we don’t understand.”

Olson’s observation goes to the heart of a culture change at the school, which is in one of the poorest counties in the state and where Native students, who make up 12 percent of the school’s population, were not making Adequate Yearly Progress, as measured by No Child Left Behind, just a few years ago.

“We made getting a zero not an option,” said Assistant Principal Justin Hegg. “We circle back and almost require a retest.” In order to take a retest, though, students need to complete more practice problems or stop by the Indian Ed office for tutoring. “We’re not leaving that kid behind,” Hegg said, “saying ‘too bad,’ we’re moving on.”

Teachers team up

Pose the same question—Why the #1 ranking in Native American Student Achievement?—to a huddle of sixth-grade teachers at the



Detroit Lakes High School graduate and White Earth enrollee Coreen Roy and her mother, Tara Mason.

school, and the answer comes quickly and definitively: “Our expectations are high, and they’re high for everyone.”

Maintaining those high expectations is the primary work of the “professional learning communities” that meet daily to compare notes, share lesson plans via Google Docs, and pore over data from assessments, some of which the teachers create themselves, to determine how much students are comprehending about particular topics, say, how to determine the volume of a cube.

To identify struggling students early sometimes even involves monitoring data in real time. In Ben Pederson’s seventh-grade math class, students use the Schoology app to do math problems on school-issued iPads, giving Pederson immediate feedback on who might need him to stop by for a more in-depth explanation.

Focusing in on data is key, said Principal Mike Sukert, who explains that while it’s easy enough for a school to *claim* it’s instituted PLCs to facilitate collaboration between teachers, delving into assessment results is at the crux of what happens when Detroit Lakes teachers gather. “When we know the bulls-eye,” he said, “it’s a lot easier to hit it.”

A former college athlete, Sukert also knows that achieving true teamwork is hard work. “Teachers don’t always get along just because they’re ‘collaborating,’” he noted wryly, while also acknowledging that the profession has changed “from the days when teachers were basically independent contractors. Now you’re part of a highly collaborative and reflective team.”

That approach is “perfect,” said Hegg, for a new teacher coming in. “For teacher development, we’re as good as it gets. You get mentorship. We’re never: ‘Here’s your stuff. Go teach.’”

Instead, teacher evaluation, which has a strong coaching component, is ongoing, involving teachers creating portfolios, being evaluated by Sukert and Hegg, as well as observed by peers.

A bridge between home and school

Another factor in the success of Detroit Lakes schools (both the elementary school and the high school also made MinnCAN's respective Top 10 lists for Native American Student Achievement) is the district's commitment to connecting with Native parents, said Joe Carrier (Turtle Mountain Ojibwe), who has been Indian Education coordinator for the district for 15 years. Carrier, whose father attended an Indian boarding school, sees a big part of his role as "working to take the bad reputation off of education itself. I've been a bridge, connecting families to the school."

The parents also mentor each other. Coreen Roy's mom, Tara Mason (White Earth Ojibwe), coaches other parents on how to create regalia for their children to wear for the Native drum and dance team. For many parents, making the regalia and understanding its meaning can become a chance for them to re-engage with a culture from which they've become disconnected. "If we're hands-on making the outfit," Mason said, "we've got the parent engaged with the culture, engaged with the kid, and engaged with the school."

Earning an eagle feather

Even for a student like Roy, who had involved parents and was president of the Native American Student Council, getting across the high school finish line to receive a diploma was touch-and-go. Participating in Quiz Bowl—tournaments in which Native students team up to research questions about Indian history, culture, and language, and then compete against other schools—was one thing that helped. "It's just a better feeling when you know who you are," Roy said.

The distasteful prospect of having to stay an extra semester to make up credits was one motivator for Roy. And then there was the eagle feather that would be waiting for her—a gift to every Native American graduate of Detroit Lakes High School from the Indian parent committee.

"It's a huge honor," said Roy. "I'd only gotten a feather once before when I got my name."

Roy's mother agreed, explaining that "receiving an eagle feather is one of the highest honors you can receive. The stem in the middle of the feather is your life, and each of the branches represents the different paths you can take. How you treat that feather," she said, "is how you treat your life."

Youth voices

While too many Native American students aren't graduating from high school, many still do. We wanted to hear from successful Indian students, so we spent a few afternoons hanging out with a talented group who had landed summer jobs with MIGIZI Communications through the Step-Up AchieveMpls summer job program.

We asked these Native students to write down for us, **what helps you be successful at school?** Here's what Indian students who are on track to graduate as part of Minneapolis South High School's Class of 2014 in Minneapolis shared:

ATTENTION TO PERSONAL LEARNING STYLES. "I learn differently from other kids. *I'm hands on.* So the teacher has to learn the way that I'm capable of learning and try to teach me that way. One thing that works for me is when I have time to do work with friends—not just by myself."

HONEST FEEDBACK. "What works for me in school is that the teacher and I have to communicate about how I'm doing. *When I do a good job, I would like to be recognized for it.* I hate when teachers lie to me when I think it's bad, and they like it. Just tell the truth."



AARON THOMSON, WHITE EARTH OJIBWE

Aaron plans to go out for wrestling at Minneapolis South High School. He has an above 3.0 GPA.

CURRICULUM THAT INCLUDES NATIVE PERSPECTIVES. "For a unit on an historical event that involved Native Americans, I was impressed by how the teacher used text and other resources that contained information provided by Native scholars, instead of using information from some government-issued textbooks. The teacher even had a couple of Native guests speak to the whole class. I felt as if *the teacher wasn't just giving information about my people but was building an understanding of who we are.* I believe the only way to understand a culture is to learn from their point of view."



HUNTER MOUNTAIN, STANDING ROCK LAKOTA

Hunter likes to write short stories, poems and his views on certain topics. He also plays the guitar. After high school, he hopes to travel to different places in the world.

TEACHERS WHO FOCUS ON THE POSITIVE. “I see myself as someone who has a lot of attendance problems and struggles with getting to school and wanting to be in school. When a teacher approaches me after I’ve been gone for however long I’ve been gone and says, ‘Where were you? You have all these assignments,’ I don’t feel like responding. I don’t feel like being there. But when a teacher says, ‘You’re here today! Here’s this assignment,’ I feel like I can get the work done in the amount of time allotted. *I definitely feel more willing to come to school the next day after I was met with more of a positive response.*”

CULTIVATE PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS. “I think the best teachers are the ones who you can connect with on a personal level. I had one teacher who I felt I got to know as a person. When grades were coming around, *it was more like a mom pushing me to do well and pass.* And even though I didn’t care about the actual grade, I cared about her response to it.”

DANIEL BARNEY, FOND DU LAC OJIBWE

Daniel has studied drawing at Minneapolis Community and Technical College through Post-Secondary Enrollment Option. He likes to skateboard and to think about the world “and what I am to the world.”

TIE LEARNING TO PERSONAL INTERESTS. “A memorable and even inspiring quarter in the school year would have to be the final quarter of 11th grade. We were assigned a researched argument. I was in class ready for another humdrum topic when the teacher gave us a sheet that we wrote our interests on. The first thing that came to mind was video games. *This would be a chance to explore something I actually wanted to learn about.*

I started doing my research on motion control in video games. I was actually excited to work more on this project at home and in my spare time. My topic was relevant to my desired future. It was an even bigger inspiration when the teacher asked almost every day what I learned on this video game subject. The teacher then talked about my future as a game designer as if it were already a reality. This pushed me to work harder and even motivated me: *Because if someone actually believed I could do it, why couldn’t I?*”

MIGUEL MAYEN-EAGLE, MILLE LACS OJIBWE

A wrestler at Minneapolis South High School, Miguel likes to play the keyboard, draw, and write. He enjoys a good video game session whenever possible and plans to become a game designer.



A RITE OF PASSAGE CEREMONY. “When I went through puberty around the age of 12, my grandmother had an ‘isnati’ ceremony for me: a ceremony where we go into ‘inipi’ (sweat lodge) and sing, and the elder Dakota women pray for me and my future. *Then they told me I was special and precious and I should keep myself that way.* That day affected me in the most beautiful, positive way. This ‘rite of passage’ has always been in my mind and is something I think all Dakota girls should have.”

SEAN BUEHLMANN, YANKTON SIOUX

Sean is captain of the Minneapolis South High School dance team. She dreams of having her own home and a potato garden where she can host a dinner party.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the factors the students identify as crucial to their success reflect the “Best Practices of Indigenous Pedagogy” identified by Phillips Indian Educators on their website, www.pieducators.com. Examples include: Relationships, relevance, asset-based, and cultural competency.



Self portraits by Daniel Barney and Miguel Mayen-Eagle. Additional student portraits by Daniel Barney.

Special thanks to John Gwinn and Arlana Omaha of MIGIZI Communications for introductions to the students, and Kelly Drummer of Tiwahe Foundation for the invitation to attend the Sacred Voices Gathering with Native youth.

Conclusions

So, what have we learned?

As we've visited schools, talked with educators, parents, students and community members, a lot of what we heard simply makes common sense:

- Set high expectations for students and focus on their assets;
- Build relationships with students and their families;
- Integrate indigenous history, culture and languages; and
- Put a premium on mentoring and supporting teachers.

We also saw impressive results when schools:

- Use assessment data pro-actively to intervene when students are struggling;
- Respond to needs articulated by parent education committees;
- Create permanent collaborative agreements between schools and the Native community;
- Have access to programs that support the education of Native teachers; and
- Have flexibility to hire whomever they consider the best person for the job.

And where do we go from here?

MinnCAN will keep listening. And we'll start exploring how we might bring what we're hearing in communities across the state to our work at the capitol.

We've seen that when Natives and non-Natives work together on behalf of American Indian students, good stuff—sometimes even great stuff—happens.

But we're also aware that coming to a shared understanding can be a challenge.

We're both white people, Daniel and Jacqueline, the two signatories on this report, and we've been thinking carefully about how MinnCAN, as a mainstream non-Native organization, can advance this work.

While being smart about money will be part of the answer, money is never the whole answer. And especially not when generations of mistreatment and broken promises are involved. It seems our starting point should be to at least acknowledge that grievous history. We must do better. The U. S. and Minnesota governments have made agreements with Native nations that need to be upheld.

We were especially troubled, then, by one finding in the June 2013 report, ‘American Indian Education in Minnesota: Analytic Review of Key State and National Documents,’ which was commissioned by the Minnesota Department of Education’s Office of Indian Education. In seeking to distill the best and latest thinking from tribal nations, the state and the federal government, the Analytic Review found consensus on every priority except one: *Honor treaty and other legal obligations, and fulfill trust responsibilities for American Indian education.* While Native sources advanced that priority, non-Native sources did not. The Analytic Review identifies “a need to build a common understanding of the importance of this theme among all American Indian education stake holders.”

Especially in regard to education, doesn’t honoring treaty obligations come down to the basic human values we all want to teach our children, like keeping our word and treating one another as equals? Those are values MinnCAN can get behind.

Looking to the future, MinnCAN intends to build on the impressive work so many who are committed to Native American student success are already doing. And so here we summarize—and endorse—the key themes that emerged in the 2013 Analytic Review. These themes reflect much of what we observed for ourselves in our field visits and conversations:

Honor agreements—Native Americans belong to sovereign tribal nations. These nations negotiated treaties in which they exchanged land for future promises, some of which concern education. Minnesotans need to honor these treaty and trust obligations.

Stay committed—We need to believe we can close the achievement/opportunity gap. Doing so will require increasing the attention and financial resources we devote to Native American education.

Expect cultural competence—All students (not just Native Americans)—as well as all organizations and educators who interact with Native American students and their families—need to learn about Native histories, languages, cultures, and governments.

Build capacity—Supporting efforts to develop best practices, provide technical assistance, and cultivate high-quality educators who are themselves Native American is critical.

WHAT ABOUT CASINOS?

One solution we’ve heard often from non-Natives is the notion that casino money could solve the financial challenges in Indian Country. What we understand, though, is that while some casinos near urban areas are extraordinarily lucrative, that doesn’t hold true in Greater Minnesota.

So what about wealthy tribes subsidizing struggling ones? MinnPost’s in-depth 2012 series on Indian gaming quoted Karen Diver, chairwoman of the Fond du Lac band, offering a response. Diver identified a double standard arising about the idea of communal wealth: what she described as an “egalitarian myth that people tend to want to impose on Indian nations.”

She observed, “If Wisconsin is having a budget deficit, they don’t necessarily ask Minnesota to chip in.” In other words, tribal nations are sovereign: their primary obligation is to their own people.

Cooperate—Governments, communities, and schools need to work together with tribal nations and organizations as equal partners with non-Native groups.

On that last point, we're thrilled that the Minnesota Department of Education and Minnesota tribal nations intend to develop a Memorandum of Understanding. Working toward a shared statewide vision feels critical.

We've already taken some important steps in Minnesota towards increasing academic opportunities for Native American students. Of course, we have a long ways to go. For our part, MinnCAN is committed to partnering with Native Americans and Minnesotans from all backgrounds to ensure all students in the state can attend a great school. After all, great schools change everything.

Miigwech!

Test Your Knowledge: Do You Know These Numbers?

Do you know the answers to these questions about Indian education in Minnesota? Find answers on page 29. Or cut up the question cards and the number cards for a small group to discuss and match.



A. The federal legislation that funds supplemental programs (including culturally relevant and bilingual materials) for public schools with 10 or more Indian students is known as Title ____?

F. Number of community-based “survival schools” that operated in Minnesota?

B. Percentage of Minnesota public school students who are Native American?

G. Number of Minnesota charter schools that currently incorporate a focus on Ojibwe language and culture?

C. Percentage of Native American students in Minnesota who live in the seven-county Twin Cities metro area?

H. Number of Minnesota schools currently run by tribes and funded by the federal Bureau of Indian Education?

D. Number of traditional district schools in Minnesota that serve a Native American population of more than 25%?

I. Year that the National Indian Education Association was incorporated in Minneapolis?

E. Number of Native American teachers teaching in public schools in Minnesota?

J. Total number of eligible Native American students on the waiting list for the Minnesota Indian Scholarship Program?

Matching Numbers Game: Answer Cards

Can you match these numbers with the questions on the previous page?



33

7

1970

237

3

3

219

23

2

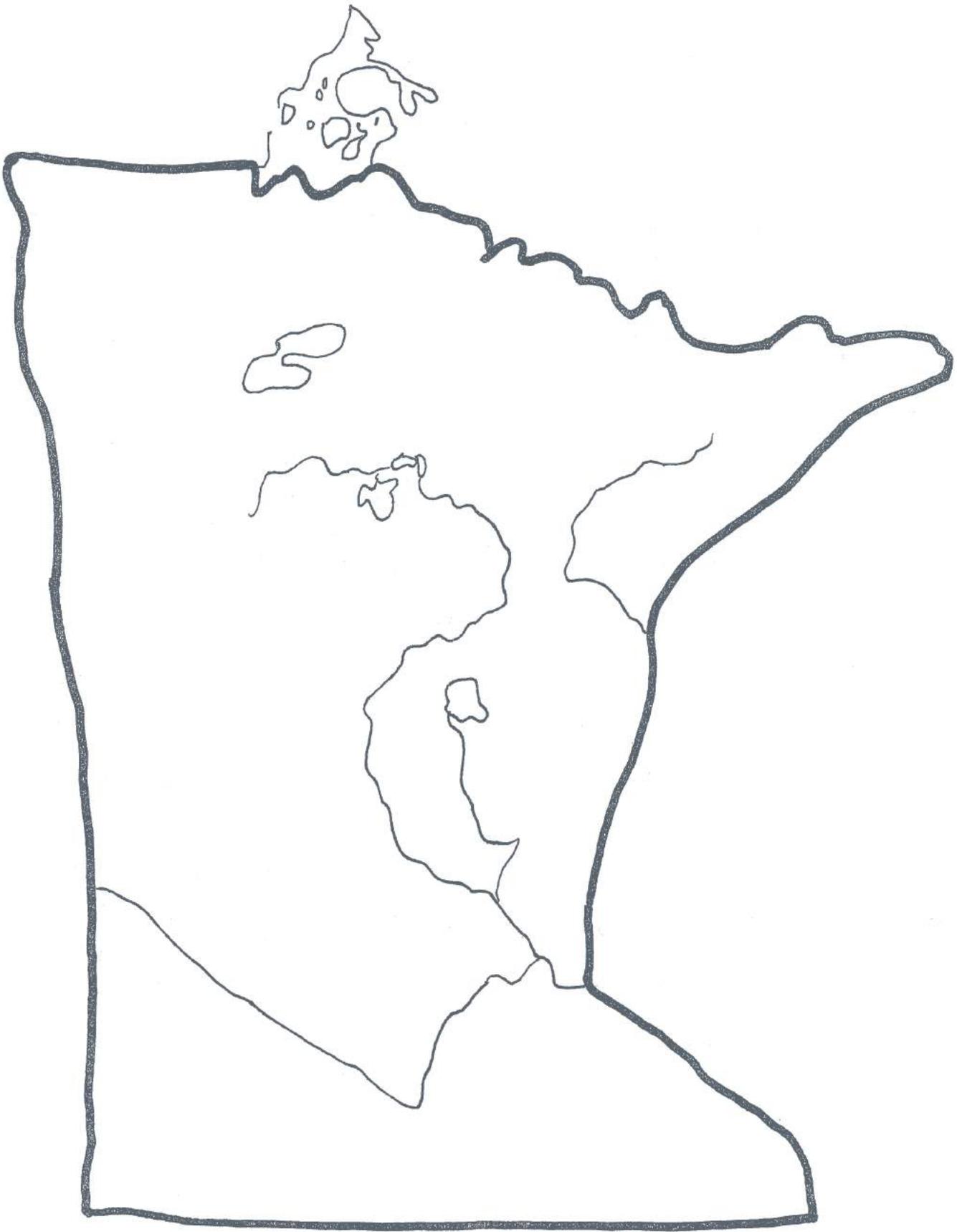
4

Matching Numbers Game: Answers

This game is based on an exercise developed by Louise Matson (White Earth Ojibwe), director of Youth Leadership Development for the Division of Indian Work, Greater Minneapolis Council of Churches.

Data sources include education.state.mn.us/MDE/Data, aimovement.org, pieducators.com, bie.edu and niea.org and Minnesota Indian Scholarship Program and Minnesota Association of Charter Schools.

- A. 7** The landmark 1972 Indian Education Act, which reaffirms the Federal government's special responsibility related to the education of American Indians, was reauthorized in 2001 as Title VII Part A of the No Child Left Behind Act. To receive funds, each district must document the number of Native American students who are enrolled tribal members or who have a parent or grandparent who was enrolled.
- B. 2** 19,352 public school students in Minnesota from preK-12 self-identify as Native American.
- C. 33** As a way to address poverty on reservations, federal policies from the 1950s to 1970s pressured Indians to move to cities, prompting a mass migration. However, federal resources did not consistently follow.
- D. 23** The schools are in 10 districts: Bemidji (3), Cass Lake-Bena (4), Deer River (2), Mahnomon (2), Minneapolis (1), Onamia (2), Red Lake (4), Redwood (1), St. Paul (1), and Waubun-Ogema-White Earth (3).
- E. 219** Out of 53,422 Minnesota public school teachers, 219 are Native American; out of 2,784 administrators, 22 are Native American.
- F. 3** Heart of the Earth Survival School in Minneapolis served as a model "of community-based, student-centered education with culturally correct curriculum operating under parental control," according to the American Indian Movement website. The second survival school, the Red School House, opened in 1972. The Circle of Life Survival School, which opened on the White Earth reservation in 1975, received funding from the U.S. Department of Education.
- G. 3** Minnesota charter schools with a focus on Ojibwe language and culture: Oshki Ogimaag Community School, Grand Portage; Naytahwaush Community Charter School, Naytahwaush; and Minsinaakwaang Leadership Academy, McGregor. According to Phillips Indian Educators, charter schools can continue the survival school tradition: "Creating our own schools and taking control over education offer[s] us a rare chance to develop education systems that honor Native history, culture, and teaching practices and provide a shelter from the systemic de-culturalization of our children."
- H. 4** Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig School, Bena (Leech Lake); Circle of Life Academy, White Earth (White Earth); Fond du Lac Ojibwe School, Cloquet (Fond du Lac); Nay-Ah-Shing School, Onamia (Mille Lacs). Because BIE schools rely on federal funding, sequestration cuts will hit them particularly hard.
- I. 1970** The largest and oldest Indian education organization, NIEA focuses on advocacy, research, and capacity building. It hosts an annual national convention as well as a policy summit in Washington, DC.
- J. 237** For the 2013-2014 school year, due to a larger appropriation by the legislature, the Minnesota Indian Scholarship Program, administered by the Minnesota Office of Higher Education, was able to award 868 scholarships, a significant increase over the previous year when 537 scholarships were awarded and 609 students were on the waiting list.



About MinnCAN

Launched in 2011, MinnCAN: The Minnesota Campaign for Achievement Now is an education reform advocacy nonprofit. MinnCAN is a movement of nearly 9,000 Minnesotans—and growing—dedicated to creating the political will to enact smart public policies to ensure that every Minnesota child has access to a great public school.

How we've approached this report:

We challenged ourselves to shift our thinking away from “What’s wrong?” and toward “What’s right?” We visited schools that are leading the state in American Indian student achievement, ate lunch with dynamic parents, drank coffee with engaged community leaders, and hung out with talented Native youth who are on track to graduate.

For MinnCAN, a mainstream school reform organization, the listening itself has been transformational. We saw first-hand the powerful results that can occur, especially when Native and non-Native people work together to help Indian students succeed.

Together, we can amplify the assets that lead to school success for American Indian students.

www.minncan.org

Resources for this research report are provided by our generous local and national funders.

To learn more about our supporters and to make a tax-deductible donation, visit <http://minncan.org/our-funders>.