



Overview

As of 2003 there were almost 148,400 students enrolled in all Montana public schools (K-12), of which 16,324 (11%) were American Indian students. Although approximately 10% of Montana's high school enrollment is American Indian students, American Indians represent 24% of high school dropouts – over 400 students out of slightly over 1600 dropouts per year. Between 2001-2004, American Indian students in Montana completed high school at an average rate of 62.9%, while their white counterparts' average completion rate was 87.1%.¹

The Policy

In 1972, the Montana State Constitution was amended to recognize “the distinct and unique cultural heritage of American Indians, and [Montana] is committed in its educational goal to the preservation of their cultural integrity.”² In 1999, State Representative Carol Juneau, a member of the Blackfoot tribe, authored a bill that made four provisions to clarify the legislative intent behind this amendment:

- Reaffirm the 1972 Constitutional language.
- Mandate that every Montana public school student learns about the distinct and unique heritage of American Indians in a culturally responsive manner.
- Direct state and local schools to work with Montana tribes to develop appropriate curriculums regarding American Indian culture and heritage.
- Mandate that all public school personnel have knowledge of American Indian tribes and cultures in Montana, and are provided the means to acquire this education.³

This bill was passed into law by the legislature, and later became known as the *Indian Education for All* act. However, *Indian Education for All* received no funding until 2005.

Impact

Funding for *Indian Education for All* permits:

- Montana's seven tribal colleges to create written histories of their tribes.
- The Montana Office of Public Instruction to develop model *Indian Education for All* curricula for public schools.
- Grants to support Montana schools already fulfilling *Indian Education for All*.⁴

Indian Education for All is the first educational policy of its kind in the country. Although efforts to improve education for and about American Indian peoples are underway in other states, Montana is the first state that is engaged in a comprehensive curriculum revision for all public school students.

One projected outcome of *Indian Education for All* will be to help alleviate the disparate American Indian dropout rate in Montana. Janet Robideau, a member of Northern Cheyenne Nation and director of Indian People's Action (IPA) in Helena, describes, "Inadequate education, a comparative absence of Indian teachers, harassment and discrimination leave American Indian students poorly supported in our schools and more likely to drop out." A long-term hope for *Indian Education for All* is that as more American Indian students graduate, these students will return to the public school system as teachers.⁵

Winning the Policy

Legislative attempts at obtaining funding for *Indian Education for All* failed in 2001 and 2003. In 2003, many of Montana's public schools filed a lawsuit against the state that charged public schools were under-funded – the 1972 constitutional provision regarding Indian education was one of the items of specific complaint. The resulting 2005 Montana Supreme Court decision found that schools were indeed under-funded, and the intent of the 1972 Constitutional amendment had never been carried out.⁶

In the 2004 elections, Democrats took control of a greater part of the Montana state legislature, and the incumbent Republican governor was replaced with a Democrat. In early 2005, prior to the state Supreme Court decision, Rep. Juneau introduced a bill that requested \$23 million to fund *Indian Education for All*. Although this bill also did not pass the legislature, funding for *Indian Education for All* was included as a line item in the Governor's 2005-2006 budget, in part, because of the 2005 state Supreme Court decision. The Governor also requested additional funding in the 2005 legislative special session. In total, *Indian Education for All* received \$14.4 million for the 2005-2006 school year.⁷ Rep. Juneau describes change in the partisan control of the state legislature, the impact of the court decision and the Governor's budget requests as significant factors in obtaining funding for *Indian Education for All*.

Challenges

Approximately \$7 million for *Indian Education for All* arrived as one-time only grants. The legislature and school districts will have to fight for funding in the 2006-2007 school year that equals the \$14.4 million released for 2005-2006.⁸

¹ Montana Office of Public Instruction, American Indian Education Data Fact Sheet, 2005.

² Montana State Constitution, Article X, section 1(2), 1972.

³ House Bill 528, MCA 20-1-501, 1999.

⁴ Farrell, Allison, "State makes good on Indian Ed for All, 32 years later," *Indian Country Today*, 20 June 2005.

⁵ Op. cit. Interview with Rep. Carol Juneau.

⁶ Op. cit. Montana Office of Public Instruction, Montana's Indian Education for All Fact Sheet.

⁷ Montana Office of Public Instruction, Montana's Indian Education for All Fact Sheet, 2006.

⁸ Op. cit. Interview with Rep. Carol Juneau.