



## WYOMING LEGISLATIVE SERVICE

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### *Issue Brief*

**Date:** August 08, 2019

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**Re:** Addressing truancy in tribal communities

#### **PURPOSE**

Provide basic information to the Select Committee on Tribal Relations pertaining to truancy. To include effects of chronic absenteeism, contributing factors, and approaches to reduce truancy. This brief is not intended to supplant the detailed and thorough information experts may provide. Instead, this brief identifies potentially related issues that may arise during discussions.

#### **TRUANCY**

Historically as well as today truancy is a central issue in education. In the Native American population truancy is particularly serious. Despite decades of research, no one approach or theory has solved the problem. Educators and social scientists continue to explore possible answers with advancement in understanding the causal factors and models for addressing those issues. For Native Americans deep seated historical and present-day issues add to the problem's complexity.

#### **CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM/TRUANCY HAS LONG-TERM DETRIMENTAL EFFECTS**

According to the U.S. Department of Education, children in the early years of elementary school with high absenteeism are less likely to read at grade level. Those who can't read at grade level by the end of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade are four-times more likely than proficient readers to drop out of high school. A study of public-school students in Utah found that an incidence of chronic absenteeism in even a single year between 8<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade was associated with a 7-fold increase in the likelihood of dropping out.

Dropping out of high school, which chronically absent students are more likely to experience, has been linked to poor outcomes later in life. The consequences are many: from poverty and diminished health to involvement in the criminal justice system.<sup>1</sup> People who are better educated are more likely to live longer, healthier lives. On average, a college graduate is likely to live about nine years longer than someone who has not completed high school. More education is linked with good jobs, healthier working conditions, better health insurance, and higher wages. On the converse, those with less education are

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<sup>1</sup> *Chronic Absenteeism in the Nation's Schools; A hidden educational crisis*, Department of Education. (2016)

more likely to engage in unhealthy behaviors, such as smoking, substance abuse, higher rates of diabetes, obesity, and infant mortality.<sup>2</sup>

### **MANY FACTORS CONTRIBUTE TO CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM**

The educational environment is instrumental for not only keeping students in school but also for their success in learning. In 2014, “eighty-seven percent of the representation of Native Americans in the curriculum today in the United states are pre-1900.”<sup>3</sup> State standardized testing is geared towards upper- and middle-class society. Hostile learning environments have proven damaging to students (such as discrimination and bullying) by contributing to lower self-esteem to the point where children feel unsafe at school.

One study found that essentially no action is taken in those schools until students were deemed habitually truant. It would take months to identify and intervene with the truant youth. Additionally, there was little attempt to prevent absenteeism before it became chronic. Often this is due in part to the school administration having more pressing calamities requiring attention and leaving problems such as truancy unattended.<sup>4</sup>

Native American youth also struggle with social issues and these play a large part in their ability to be learning ready, stay in school, and succeed academically. Risky behaviors of teenage children negatively influence the behaviors of other children through their social networks.<sup>5</sup> Poverty, homelessness, historical trauma, teen pregnancy, drug and alcohol abuse, and neglect are a few examples of additional social issues. Another area is the connectivity and the infrastructure necessary to bridge the digital divide are constant challenges across tribal communities as almost a third of American Indian and Alaska Natives do not have basic telephone services, let alone access to internet outside of school.

Students are more likely to miss an individual class than a full day of school, frequently students systematically miss classes together. One study states students are 4.7 times more likely to skip class with a specific student with whom they have the strongest tie (in terms of joint absences) than with another of their peers. Additionally, students tend to miss class with other students who have GPAs and other behaviors that are similar to theirs.<sup>6</sup>

### **ADDRESSING TRUANCY INVOLVES A MULTIFACETED APPROACH**

Techniques to address truancy have varied over the decades, more recently theories and practices are focusing on holistic methods that are culturally-sensitive. There are many forms of this type of approach to educational services, yet the guiding premise is similar. As these approaches are more widely implemented: the theories and practices are further studied, providing verifiable concepts, models and practices.

<sup>2</sup> *The Relationship Between School Attendance and Health*, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. (2016)

<sup>3</sup> Comprehensive Truancy Prevention Project. ()

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> *Better Together? Social networks in Truancy and the targeting of treatment*. Bennett and Bergman. (2019)

<sup>6</sup> *Chronic Absenteeism in the Nation's Schools; A hidden educational crisis*, Department of Education. (2016)

In October and November of 2014, the *White House Initiative on American Indian and Alaska Native Education*<sup>7</sup> (WHIANE) and the U.S. Department of Education (ED) conducted a series of listening sessions directly with “Native youth, parents, school official, and tribal communities regarding school environments.”<sup>8</sup> This was the first of its kind nationwide effort. “Participants voiced their concerns regarding the conditions they experience in schools and institutions of higher education.”<sup>9</sup> This study is focused on truancy and sheds light on many of the possible causal factor of chronic absenteeism.

The 2015 final report of provides specific recommendations directed at the *federal government* as well as the *states* and their *local districts*. These recommendations are:

***Recommendations primarily pertaining to the federal government:***

- Identify and share positive community practices.
- Conduct outreach and engagement regarding the civil rights complaints process.
- Provide guidance regarding mascots and imagery.
- Better identify and report the race and ethnicity of students.

***Recommendations primarily pertaining to states and local districts include:***

- Support Native American languages.
- Promote positive school discipline.
- Address teacher and school staff attitudes and behavior.
- Address negative student attitudes and bullying.
- Promote cultural awareness. This directive is to promote the accurate instruction of Native American history and culture, to all school staffs and create initiatives for parents and tribal leaders to engage with students, analyze resources and strategies to ensure that tribal histories are included accurately.
- Address access and equity challenges. With regard to inadequate facilities and transportation, encourage the development of culturally responsive, flexible school policies and resources necessary to support students.
- Appropriately identify students with disabilities. Promote training for educators on effectively distinguishing AI/AN cultural and language difference from disabilities.

Culturally responsive teaching comes from “recognizing students’ cultures and backgrounds and presenting every subject, not just culture, through a lens they will understand.”<sup>10</sup>

Culturally – sensitive educational approaches engage Native American learners with cultural relevance. Examples include:

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<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Education, *White House Initiative on American Indian and Alaska Native Education: School Listening Sessions - Final Report*. (2015).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Intersections of Identity and cultural Competency: A white teacher in a Tribal School*. Wright. (2015)

- ❖ Literacy strategies include transitioning from a textbook-based curriculum to a child-centered approach through integration of dialogue groups; literature study; implementing instructional approaches such as hands-on activities;
- ❖ Mathematics interventions focused on having students engage in sense-making and constructing meaning together through indirect instructional methods such as games for homework, using student centered instructional approaches and holding students accountable for their own learning.

As part of the culturally-sensitive approach, other factors create environments fostering learning: school climate, quality of instruction, number of students per classroom, extracurricular activities, enculturation, family and community involvement.

Behavioral and Social Emotional Interventions incorporate non-academic student development and play a large part in reducing truancy. These include: social-emotional learning, leadership, self-esteem, and avoidance of engaging in risky behaviors, refusal skills for students, and cultural sensitivity for counselors. Another especially promising framework shows that students benefit “when teachers provided encouragement, support, and respect for their cultural identity; were flexible and adaptable in helping Native American students, and provided cultural opportunities outside the classroom.”<sup>11</sup>

Mentoring is another promising practice for students with chronic absenteeism. Intervention focuses on building positive student-adult relationships through data monitoring, daily check-ins, and group reinforcements.<sup>12</sup> “[F]indings suggest that mentorship programs are supporting at-risk youth generally, and particularly with increasing their self-worth as well as having educational benefits for the youth.”<sup>13</sup>

“Some research has shown that where the students and teachers share the same culture, learning is enhanced. This may be the result of American Indian and Alaskan Native teachers’ increased awareness of Native learning styles and their ability to fine-tune their teaching to their students’ learning needs.”<sup>14</sup>

In Oregon, nine federally recognized tribes participated in the Tribal Attendance Pilot Project (TAPP) to increase school attendance for grades K-8. “Participating schools and districts received fiscal support in the form of grants to each hire a family advocate with deep local connections to create school-wide initiatives to reduce chronic absenteeism.”<sup>15</sup> Each school or school district developed their own project objectives and action plan tailored to their specific circumstances. To illustrate a project objective, one school developed the following objectives:

<sup>11</sup> *Where the Sun Rises: Addressing the Education Achievement of Native Americans in Washington State*. Promising Education Interventions to Improve the Achievement of Native American Students, (2008)

<sup>12</sup> *Effectiveness of an Adapted Behavioral Education Program Targeting Attendance Improvement*. Stripling (2017)

<sup>13</sup> *Educationally-Based, Culturally-Sensitive, Theory-Driven mentorship Intervention with At-risk Native American Youth in South Dakota: A narrative Review*, Journal of Child and Family Studies. (2017)

<sup>14</sup> *Chronic Absenteeism in the Nation’s Schools: A hidden educational crisis*, Department of Education. (2016)

<sup>15</sup> Tribal Attendance Pilot Project. Oregon Department of Education. (2017)

1. To work with American Indian/Alaska Native students and families to create a support system and intervention plan for chronically absent students (students missing more than 10% of school days)
2. Establish and rebuild bridges with community partners to provide “wrap-around” support for our students and families.

Another school listed as their objectives:

1. Identify barriers to school attendance and provide supports for families to address these barriers
2. Analyze school systems and policies that support and/or hinder school attendance
3. Create a school culture that celebrates and encourages regular school attendance

An example of one school’s action plan for the project:

- Identify “chronically absent” students.
- Reach out to families regarding attendance awareness and the importance of education, and set regular attendance goals.
- Address barriers hindering regular attendance (such as lack of transportation, safe bus routes, safe walking routes, frequent custody changes, etc.)
- After Identifying barriers and setting realistic goals, cultivate and maintain communication between Family Advocates, parents, and students
- Strengthening this communication was essential to maintaining attendance goals and improving where necessary
- Create a culture and awareness of regular attendance in the school
- Regularly praise and encourage students about regular attendance and the impact it has on their future
- Create an incentive plan to maintain momentum of the positive atmosphere of attendance
- Establish solid and positive relationships with the students on a daily basis
- Partner with the Confederated tribes of warm Springs Reservation of Oregon (CTWR) to create “wrap-around” support for students
- Maintain the tribal partnerships through regular communication and keeping the common goal of supporting students throughout the community
- Be available and present whenever possible for students, families, staff, and tribal partners
- Meet where people are: school, homes, and in the community

Other related efforts described include professional development for all staff in cultural responsiveness, Restorative Justice, Trauma Informed Schools, writers’ workshops. Others are directed toward the families and the community: provide family events with attendance incentives included, instill an understanding of the positive impact and importance of school attendance, and attend all family-oriented events including family conferences and community activities provided by TAPP.

The fundamental themes of TAPP seem to be to provide school, family, and community support and services for each child. Create an education-positive relationship. Assure the school staff have the training needed to understand the cultural and trauma-related needs and issues these children face in their day-to-day life. Create a sense of community and inclusiveness encouraging attendance through “attendance awareness campaigns”. Use incentives, activities, and rewards to get children excited about “positive attendance” which will help create a positive attendance culture. One of the most impactful aspects is the personal contact with the families. “Change takes a team and all working towards the same goal.”<sup>16</sup> Much of this approach mirrors that of other studies and efforts. No one program appears to be the solution, each tribal community is unique and the approach needs to be customized to address those circumstances. As illustrated in the TAPP study, there were nine separate plans, one for each participating tribe.

While this brief does not address the programs and efforts in Wyoming to reduce truancy either through a culturally-sensitive approach, or by other models: it is worth noting the Wyoming Department of Education provides (on its website) public information and resources on Native American Education focusing on the history and culture of native peoples including the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> <https://edu.wyoming.gov/in-the-classroom/native-american/>