

MONTANA AMERICAN INDIAN DROPOUT PREVENTION PROGRAM

The U.S. Department of Education recently awarded the Montana Office of Public Instruction a grant for nearly \$1 million to fund the Montana American Indian Dropout Prevention Project. The project proposes to assist American Indian students in graduating from high school by implementing a research-based design at the state level and in six demonstration schools. At the state level, the Office of Public Instruction, the Interagency Coordinating Council for Prevention Programs, and the Montana Wyoming Indian Education Association will collaborate to produce a comprehensive strategic plan for dropout prevention and host a statewide conference on research and effective strategies. The project will also work with high schools and middle schools located primarily on reservations to provide leadership and assistance in creating school, family, tribal, and community collaborations.

The six demonstration schools and their American Indian four-year dropout rates (high school) are:

- Box Elder School District – 10.4%
- Browning School District – 11.1%
- Heart Butte School District – 11.4%
- Lame Deer School District – 17.5%
- Poplar School District – 21.2%
- Rocky Boy School District – 18.4%

The grant is \$328,461 the first year with the expectation of funding for three years. The total amount of the three-year grant is expected to be \$981,872.

Each site, except Poplar School District, will receive a \$40,000 grant each year to address the dropout issues. As Poplar has received an additional grant, the Montana American Indian Dropout Prevention Project amount will be \$10,000.

For the first year the grants will be distributed in two \$20,000 increments. The immediate funding of \$20,000 is for district activities related to the development and support of School Based Working Groups and Local Stakeholder Advisory Councils, including:

- a. professional development for teachers and administration in dropout research, collection, and use of data to design and monitor prevention efforts, use of five-year Comprehensive Education Plan for dropout prevention, classroom strategies, and other identified training needs;
- b. release time for teachers to participate in dropout prevention activities;
- c. attending the state and national dropout prevention conferences;
- d. school based prevention library for teachers and staff;
- e. planning time for federal and state funded programs (e.g., Title I, Title VII, GEAR UP, Character Education, 21st Century, Montana Behavior Initiative, Comprehensive School Reform) to develop coordinated dropout strategies;
- f. development, support, and training of Local Stakeholder Advisory Councils; and
- g. hiring of a VISTA coordinator or other staff to provide organizational support to Project.

The remaining \$20,000 provides funding for dropout prevention activities that are scientifically based, sustainable, and that have been proven effective elsewhere, identified by the School-Based Working Group and the Local Stakeholder Advisory Councils, including:

- a. efforts to improve student academic achievement at the middle school and high school level, especially reading and mathematics;
- b. counseling and mentoring programs for at-risk students;
- c. reentry efforts for students who have dropped out; and
- d. other proven dropout strategies.¹

An advisory council for the Montana American Indian Dropout Prevention Program has been established. The members are:

- Peggy Azure – Character Education Specialist, Office of Public Instruction
- Susan Bailey-Anderson – Montana Behavior Initiative Coordinator; Office of Public Instruction;
- Norma Bixby – Board Member, Montana Wyoming Indian Education Association; Montana Legislator;
- Julie Cajune – Director of Indian Education, Ronan Public Schools; Montana Wyoming Indian Education Association;
- Lori Falcon – Indian Education Specialist, Office of Public Instruction;
- Overall Fox – GEAR UP Specialist; Office of Public Instruction;
- B.J. Granbery – Administrator, Division of Educational Opportunity and Equity, Title 1 Director, Office of Public Instruction;
- Lynn Hinch – Bilingual Education Specialist, Office of Public Instruction
- Carol Juneau – Chair, Montana Wyoming Indian Education Association; Montana Legislator;
- Cathy Kendall – Coordinated School Health Programs Director, Office of Public Instruction;
- Jan Lombardi – Special Projects Director, Office of Public Instruction;
- Gary Pfister – 21st Century Community Learning Centers Specialist, Office of Public Instruction; and
- Joyce Silverthorne – Tribal Education Director, Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes; Montana Board of Public Education.

Excerpts from Dropout Prevent Grant Application

“Indian children in Montana public schools are in a crisis situation, as evidenced by disparities in education, including dropout rates that are double those of non-Indian students, low achievement levels and test scores, and few high school graduates with little advancement to higher education.” “Equal Educational Opportunity for Native American Students in Montana Public Schools” Montana Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (2001)

Abstract

Montana American Indian students drop out of public schools at an average rate of 10.4 percent, more than twice the dropout rate of 4.2 percent of all Montana students. The school completion rates for American Indian students is only 56.1 percent, far below the 81.8 percent for all Montana students.

These statistics only illustrate the tragic failure of public schools and local communities to provide many American Indian students with a quality education that creates the greatest potential for economic security, healthy families and viable communities.

The goal of the Montana American Indian Dropout Prevention Project is to graduate American Indian students at the same rate (81.8%) as their non-Indian peers and to reduce the dropout rate to parity with all other Montana students (4.2%). The Project will demonstrate research based strategies that will produce movement toward achieving dropout parity as measured by reduced dropout statistics at grade level and by reduced absenteeism in six demonstration school systems.

To achieve this goal the Project will design and implement strategies at both the state level and in six demonstration schools. At the state level, the Office of Public Instruction, the Interagency Coordinating Council for Prevention Programs, and the Montana Wyoming Indian Education Association, will collaborate to produce a comprehensive research based, strategic state plan for dropout prevention, and host a statewide conference on research and effective strategies for reducing the American Indian dropout rate.

The Project will also work with six school districts, comprised of a high school and middle school, primarily on Montana reservations, with the highest dropout rates in the state. The Project will provide leadership and assistance in creating school/family/tribal community collaborations that will develop dropout prevention plans that demonstrate research based strategies and activities to be implemented in the school and community. The Project will provide \$40,000 a year per site for activities in approved plans of action. Funding can be used to better coordinate existing school and community resources, to provide supplemental activities, or to explore research based strategies that have proven effective elsewhere. The focus on developing local and state leadership and ownership of the American Indian Dropout Prevention Project, creates sustainability, visibility and the potential to have a measurable impact on the lives of our American Indian students.

Montana American Indian Dropout Prevention Project (MAIDPP) Goals and Strategies

It is the stated goal of the Office of Public Instruction, the Montana Wyoming Indian Education Association and the Interagency Coordinating Council for Prevention Programs to graduate American Indian students at the same rate (82%) as their non-Indian peers and to reduce the American Indian dropout rate to parity with all other Montana students.

The goal of the Montana American Indian Dropout Prevention Project is to demonstrate research based models that reduce the American Indian dropout rate to parity with the present state average (4.2%) as measured by reduced dropout statistics at grade level and by reduced absenteeism in six demonstration school systems.

To achieve this goal the Montana American Indian Dropout Prevention Project will engage in the following strategies:

- 1) Develop a comprehensive, research based, strategic state plan for American Indian dropout prevention developed through collaboration and consensus;
- 2) Create and provide opportunities for state and local educational leaders to develop a deep understanding of the research and proven strategies addressing American Indian dropout prevention;
- 3) Provide a process and structure for sustainable long term organizational collaboration to implement a comprehensive state and local dropout prevention strategic plan;
- 4) Develop leadership at state and local levels for American Indian dropout prevention;
- 5) Develop research based strategic plans for reducing American Indian dropout rates in six schools using local leadership from the school and community; and
- 6) Demonstrate research based strategies and activities for dropout prevention in six school districts with among the highest American Indian dropout rates.

Who is a Montana Dropout?

A dropout is an individual who:

- Was enrolled in school on the date of the previous year October enrollment count or at sometime during the previous school year and was not enrolled on the date of the current school year October count; or
- Was not enrolled at the beginning of the previous school year but was expected to enroll and did not re-enroll during the year (“no show”) and was not enrolled on the date of the current school year October count; and
- Has not graduated from high school or completed a state- or district-approved high school educational program; and
- Has not transferred to another school, been temporarily absent due to a school-recognized illness or suspension, or died. (OPI, 2001)

The Impact of Dropping Out of School

The high incidence of school dropout in Montana is a very serious concern to parents, educators, employers, government, and the general public. An education prepares students to participate in all aspects of a democratic society, including self-governance, community and family well being, and the economy. The 21st century workplace requires that the educational system prepare a knowledgeable and skilled work force for the economic needs of the United State and the world. Education prepares future participants for the economy and represents a long-term investment in the welfare of communities and the country. The

consequences of dropping out are life-long and life altering for the individual, and threaten the vitality of the economy and the stability of society.

Students who drop out of school face a bleak economic world to a much greater degree than youth in general. According to the digest of Education Statistics, as of October 2000, 28 percent of the 1999-00 dropouts were unemployed. Montana counties that are also Indian reservations have the highest unemployment rates in Montana. Three of the four counties [Big Horn, Glacier, Roosevelt] with the highest unemployment rates, double and triple the national average, are located on Indian reservations.

But education should not be seen solely in relation to the economy. The capability of education to advance the social well being of communities and the country and to promote democratic values is essential. The general well being of communities is predicated on the possibility that all citizens, regardless of their economic and social status, can improve their lives. The dropout problem also threatens the future of American political institutions, including sovereign tribal governments. The demands of democratic governance require an educated and well-informed citizenry to make knowledgeable decisions about the increasingly complex social and political problems faced by contemporary society; problems, which are even more complex on American Indian reservations.

Methods of Evaluation

Evaluation of the project will include both qualitative and quantitative performance measures. Quantitative performance measures for the six demonstration sites will include three primary measures, measured on an annual basis:

- 1) reduction in absenteeism;
- 2) reduction in dropout rates; and
- 3) increase in high school completion rates.

At the six demonstration sites, evaluation will also consist of the following:

- 1) an assessment of the quality of the local action plan for dropout prevention implementing research based strategies;
- 2) the successful development of community leadership;
- 3) progress toward collaboration between federally funded programs around dropout prevention strategies; and
- 4) an analysis of progress toward the objective and activities in the local plan of action.

Evaluation of the state level project will consist of the following:

- 1) an assessment of the quality of the Office of Public Instruction's state action plan for American Indian dropout prevention implementing research based strategies;
- 2) the successful development of collaborative planning and activities between the Office of Public Instruction, the Montana Wyoming Indian Education Association, and the Interagency Coordinating Council;
- 3) an analysis of progress toward the objectives of the dropout prevention activities created by the state action plan;

- 4) an assessment of the degree of increased coordination of federal programs within the Office of Public Instruction related to dropout prevention; and
- 5) an assessment of the quality of technical assistance, professional development activities, and support provided to the six local demonstration sites.

“Let us put our heads together and see what life we will make for our children.”
Tatanka Iotanka (Sitting Bull, Lakota)

¹Office of Public Instruction letter to the United States Department of Education