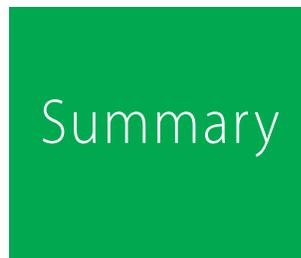




Examining American Indian perspectives in the Central Region on parent involvement in children's education



Institute of Education Sciences
U.S. Department of Education



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Summary

August 2008

Prepared by

Dawn M. Mackety

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning

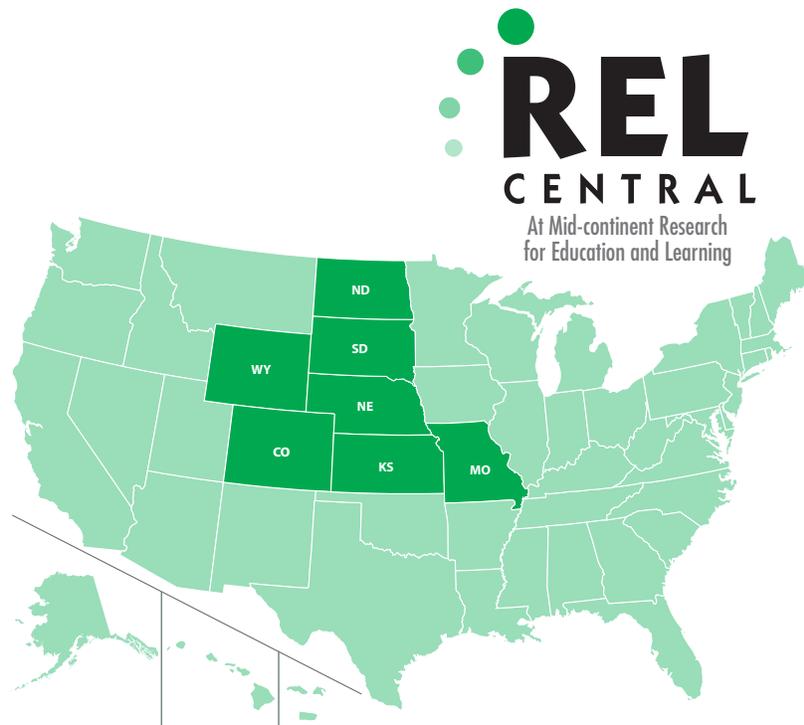
Jennifer A. Linder-VanBerscho

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning



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Examining American Indian perspectives in the Central Region on parent involvement in children's education

This study examines American Indian parents' perceptions of parent involvement in their children's education and factors that may encourage or discourage involvement.

A better understanding of American Indian parent involvement was considered as a possible solution to narrow the achievement gap for American Indian students. Five focus groups, consisting of 47 self-selected parents, were conducted in one state in the Central Region. Factors perceived to encourage parent involvement included a caring, supportive, and communicative school staff and culturally respectful environment; access to American Indian programs, resource centers, after school activities, and clubs; and the presence of an advocate or liaison in each school. Factors perceived to discourage parent involvement included feeling unwelcome or intimidated at the school and perceptions of racism and discrimination; experiencing scheduling, transportation, childcare, and financial difficulties; and having prior negative experiences in their own or their children's education.

Parent involvement is recognized as an important factor in encouraging student achievement (No Child Left Behind Act 2002). However, a survey by the National Center for Education Statistics found that in public

schools with 25 percent or more American Indian students, teachers identified lack of parent involvement as one of their schools' three most serious problems (Freeman and Fox 2005). In the Central Regional Educational Laboratory seven-state service region (Colorado, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming), where American Indian students' performance on state and national assessments lags behind that of their White peers, policymakers and educators have acknowledged the need for research-based assistance in understanding how to effectively involve American Indian parents in improving education outcomes for their children. The Mid-continent Regional Advisory Committee (2005) identified parent involvement as a priority in areas where cultural issues impede student achievement. At an August 2007 meeting state-level policymakers identified as a high priority the need for research-based assistance on American Indian education and ways to close the achievement gaps among ethnic groups.

To begin to address the regional need to close the achievement gap for American Indian students and specifically to effectively engage American Indian parents in their children's education, parent perceptions about involvement are needed. This study starts with parent perceptions because of the history of

American Indian education, which alienated many parents from schools, and because of the lack of relevant current research in this area. The purposes of the study were to examine how Central Region American Indian parents perceived parent involvement and to understand what encourages or discourages their involvement.

Two Central Region communities were selected for data collection, based on the expressed interest of the state education administrator and the support of the state Office of Indian Affairs. Additional criteria for selection included high populations of American Indian students (American Indian student enrollment exceeding 2 percent of the student population) and permission from school district administrators. Recruitment letters were sent to 200 eligible American Indian parents from their school district's office of Indian education. Forty-seven self-selected American Indian parents, reflecting seven tribes from nine reservations, participated in five focus groups.

An interview protocol guided focus group discussions around four main research questions:

1. What do American Indian parents perceive as parent involvement in their children's education?
 2. Why do American Indian parents get involved?
 3. What do parents perceive as barriers to involvement?
 4. Which school strategies do parents perceive encourage involvement?
- Researchers audiotaped the focus group discussions, transcribed the tapes, and checked the transcripts against the tapes. They identified and organized key themes within and across focus groups and then developed the findings from those themes. The process was repeated several times to ensure that the findings accurately reflected the focus group discussions. Researchers used data from the demographics database, field notes, transcripts, coded themes, and sample quotations. Findings were organized into key themes around the research questions as follows:
1. What do American Indian parents perceive as parent involvement?
 - School-oriented involvement
 - Communicating about children.
 - Attending student-centered events.
 - Volunteering.
 - Advocating for their children.
 - Home-oriented involvement
 - Showing interest in children's education and life.
 - Helping with school work.
 - Encouraging and rewarding children to do their best.
 - Reading with children.
 - Meeting children's needs.
 - Involving the extended family and community.
 2. Why do American Indian parents get involved?
 - To help children succeed and build confidence.

- To stay connected with the school.
 - To monitor children's progress.
 - To address a problem.
 - To respond to schools' invitation or welcoming environment.
3. What do parents perceive as barriers to involvement?
- School-oriented barriers
 - Unwelcoming school environment (feeling unwelcome or intimidated at the school).
 - Previous negative experience with education (parents' own or their children's).
 - Perceptions of a school's lack of cultural sensitivity.
 - Different styles of interpersonal communication.
 - Home-oriented barriers
 - Experiencing scheduling, transportation, childcare, and financial difficulties.
4. Which school strategies do parents perceive encourage involvement?
- Printed and electronic correspondence.
 - Communications about children.
 - School staff respectful of parents' educational and cultural values.
 - Open-door policy.
 - Culturally respectful environment.
 - Cultural activities and resources, including American Indian programs, resource centers, after school activities, clubs for children and families, and an advocate or liaison at the school to welcome and assist American Indian parents and children.

Many aspects of American Indian parent involvement were largely consistent with the literature on parent involvement in the general population as well as in other minority cultures. This study found that parent involvement was additionally influenced by parent-school differences in values and communication styles, perceptions of cultural competency in the staff and curricula, and a history of American Indian education policy of coercive assimilation that continues to influence parents.

The challenges of increasing American Indian parent involvement are complex, residing in the overlay—and sometimes clash—of cultures in the public schools. This study provides an initial step toward understanding American Indian parent involvement. It is important to keep in mind that this study reflects the perspectives of American Indian parents; it does not include the perspectives of school personnel or their responses to these findings. This report is intended for researchers, educators, and parents of American Indian students, as a basis for further research and informed dialogue to increase American Indian parent involvement and student academic achievement.