



Using Culturally Based Education to Increase Academic Achievement and Graduation Rates

What is Culturally Based Education?

Culturally Based Education (CBE) grounds high quality instructional practices in culturally and linguistically relevant contexts. CBE is more than teaching language and culture as special projects, it is a systematic approach fully incorporating and integrating specific cultural ways of thinking, learning, and problem-solving into educational practice.

For Native students these approaches include recognizing and utilizing Native languages as a first or second language, pedagogy that incorporates traditional cultural characteristics and involves teaching strategies that are harmonious with the Native culture knowledge and contemporary ways of knowing and learning.¹

Research and Examples of High Quality CBE

- The Anchorage School District located in Anchorage, Alaska has developed a culturally responsive six year instructional plan to chart a course for closing the achievement gap while concurrently increasing achievement for all students through implementation of a culturally responsive continuum. The school district integrated recommendations from a coalition of Alaska Native educational organizations based upon research indicating that culturally related solutions (more Native culture, language and teachers) were the reasons most commonly attributed for improving schooling for Alaska Native students. Students in the Lower Kuskokwim School District in Alaska who are receiving instruction in their Native languages are achieving Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).²
- Hawaiian immersion programs, including Aha Punana Leo, have “yielded significant academic benefits. Immersion students have garnered prestigious scholarships, enrolled in college courses while still in high school, and passed the state university’s English composition assessments despite receiving the majority of their English, science, and mathematics instruction in Hawaiian. Student achievement on standardized tests has equaled, and in some cases, surpassed that of Native Hawaiian children enrolled in English-medium schools, even in English language arts. Beyond this, Hawaiian immersion has achieved program founders’ goals of strengthening Native Hawaiian maui, self-determination, and ethnic pride.”³
- The National Science Foundation funded Native Science Connections Research Project (NSCRP) in Flagstaff, Arizona, is a research model that successfully integrates native language, culture and traditions into the schools’ science elementary curriculum. On-going analysis of data is revealing increased student mastery of science and math concepts, deeper levels of student engagement in science and math, and increased student achievement in math and science.⁴
- One study of achievement trends for the Navajo immersion program at the Arizona Fort Defiance Elementary School (now the Tsé Ho Tso Primary-Intermediate School) found that, overall, Navajo immersion students performed as well, and in some areas, better than non-immersion peers. “By the fourth grade, not only did Navajo immersion students outperform comparable non-immersion students on assessments of Navajo (a finding we would expect), but non-immersion students performed lower on these assessments than they had in kindergarten. They had, in effect, experienced “subtractive” bilingualism, losing much or all of the heritage language abilities they possessed upon entering public school. Meanwhile, their immersion peers had the benefit of “additive,” or enrichment, bilingual education exceeding or performing on par with their non-immersion peers while acquiring a second (heritage) language as well.” (p.p. 21-22, from Romero, Mary & McCarty, T.L. (2006). Language Planning Challenges and Prospects in Native American Communities and Schools. Education Policy Studies Laboratory, Arizona State University. Tempe, AZ. Retrieved June 11, 2008 from <http://epsl.asu.edu/epru/documents/EPSSL-0602-105->

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- Other research has shown that the additive approach of second language acquisition is “the most powerful predictor of academic success,” even for “children dominant in English who are losing their heritage language.”⁵
- While data specific to Native American language immersions schools and the direct relationship between CBE and increased academic achievement is continuing to be compiled, national studies from both the public and private sectors emphasize the educational benefits of CBE. In addition to the educational benefits, CBE also improves student, family, and community engagement in schools, increases self-esteem and self-respect for Native students, and enhances the sustainability of the unique cultures, languages, and knowledge of Native communities.⁶

What are the concerns?

NIEA is witnessing a broad-based reduction and diminishment of culturally based education in schools which provide an effective and meaningful education for Native students. During hearings conducted by NIEA on NCLB and the education of Native students, concerns that Native languages and cultures are being used less and less in teaching Native students math, science, or reading because of a focus on meeting AYP on standardized tests were repeatedly voiced. However, research and experience in Native serving schools indicates that Native language and culture and high quality instruction in content areas are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they are complementary and equally important elements for enhancing the knowledge and academic achievement of Native children.

NIEA and CBE

NIEA believes that the integration of culture and language are critical to meeting high expectations and accountability in the

education of Native students, something that is only possible when communities serving Native students have the tools and resources needed to play a meaningful role in school reform. Promoting policies and practices that support CBE is critical to fulfilling the Federal Government's responsibility in meeting the unique educational and culturally related academic needs of Native students.

Recommendations

- The reauthorization of Title VII of NCLB will continue to recognize and affirm the need for culturally based education (CBE) and the expectation that state and local educational agencies will be held accountable for meeting these needs.
- Cultural and language programs funded under Title VII should act as catalysts in the development of curriculum and instruction that results in Native student achievement and success.
- Funding and support for high quality research, data collection, and technical assistance directly relating to best practices in culturally relevant education is important. Multiple qualitative studies affirm and support the educational benefits of culturally based education (CBE) and ongoing research is examining the direct links between CBE and student achievement. Federal policy making this research a priority, making the data from it easily accessible, and promoting the development of technical assistance for incorporating the most effective practices helps State Education Agencies (SEAs) and Local Education Associations (LEAs) to improve education for Native American and other students.
- Policies under Title II need to prioritize CBE as part of developing a high quality teaching force. Training and preparing teachers who are able

to recognize and incorporate the cultural and linguistic intellectual strengths of Native students into high quality teaching practices is a priority.

References

1 From the Testimony of Dr. Willard Sakiestewa Gilbert, President-Elect, National Indian Education Association Before the U. S. House of Representatives Education and Labor Committee On the Reauthorization of No Child Left Behind in Indian Country April 28, 2007.

2 See National Foundation for Improvement of Education, at <http://www.sharingsuccess.org/code/pd/table9.html> and Finding out what works for Native students: Researchers in Alaska are putting Native and practitioners' wisdom to the test to see if culturally based education boosts learning (2002). Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, available at <http://www.nwrel.org/nwedu/09-04/finding.php>

3 See p. 18, from Romero, Mary & McCarty, T.L. (2006). Language Planning Challenges and Prospects in Native American Communities and Schools. Education Policy Studies Laboratory, Arizona State University. Tempe, AZ. Retrieved June 11, 2008 from <http://eps.l.asu.edu/epru/documents/EPsl-0602-105-LPRU.pdf>

4 From the Testimony of Dr. Willard Sakiestewa Gilbert, April 28, 2007.

5 See Thomas, W.P., & Collier, V. (1997). School effectiveness for language minority students. Washington, DC: National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education, as cited in Romero, Mary & McCarty, T.L. (2006).

6 See 1. Sugarmen, Julie and Howard, Liz (2001). "Two Way Immersion Shows Promising Results: Findings of a New Study." Center for Applied Linguistics, ERIC/CLL Language Link. ERIC Clearinghouse on Language and Linguistics: Washington, DC; 2. Demmert, W. & Townsend, J. (2003). A review of the research literature on the influences of culturally based education on the academic performance of Native American students. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory; and 3. Demmert, W. (2004). Improving Academic Performance Among Native American Children. Bellingham, Washington: Western Washington University, 2004.



ABOUT NATIONAL INDIAN EDUCATION ASSOCIATION:
The premiere organization advocating for educational excellence, opportunity, and equity for American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian students, the mission of the National Indian Education Association (NIEA) is to support traditional Native cultures and values; to enable Native learners to become contributing members of their communities; to promote Native control of educational institutions; and to improve educational opportunities and resources for American Indians, Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiians throughout the United States. Learn more at www.NIEA.org.