

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and  
Social Sciences

Great Plains Studies, Center for

---

Fall 2013

# CONSIDERING NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENTS IN RURAL SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION

Andrea Miller

amiller@simmonsolsen.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch>



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), and the [Geography Commons](#)

---

Miller, Andrea, "CONSIDERING NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENTS IN RURAL SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION" (2013). *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*. 1272.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch/1272>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

## CONSIDERING NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENTS IN RURAL SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION

Andrea Miller

519 2nd Ave.  
Bayard, NE 69334  
amiller@simmonsolsen.com

**ABSTRACT**—When discussing school consolidation it is important to consider the educational effects on Native American students. Many Native American students live in homes of poverty, deal with difficult home lives, and struggle academically. While there are many areas of concern in discussing consolidation, loss of a low student–teacher ratio, loss of connection with the school community, and loss of autonomy or control of schools are of particular importance. Consolidation efforts may bring some positive education opportunity for Native students which may include offering a diversified and expanded curriculum, specialization for staffing, and specialized resources for students. Discussing the potential effects of school consolidation on Native students can help maintain a positive learning environment for increasing student learning and educational potential.

**Key Words:** Native American, Native student, school consolidation, community, at-risk student

### INTRODUCTION

As more rural schools are considering consolidation, discussions on maintaining small rural districts are important to preserving educational opportunities for Native American students. Rural academic school districts can provide a positive learning environment for Native American students. Rural educational settings can provide the framework for struggling Native American students to succeed in their education. Education is an important part in determining success and a creating a future for our youth. For many Native American students who live in poverty or have troubled home lives education is often the gateway out of poverty, hopelessness, and despair. As schools in rural areas are pushed to consider consolidation, it is important to consider the potential effects on Native American students in each community.

Considering background information can help determine why meeting the needs of all students, and in particular struggling Native students, in consolidation situations is important. The effects of school consolidation may be relevant to many students of differing ethnic backgrounds—but often Native American students experience challenging educational, home, and social issues at a high rate. Many Native American students face obstacles and challenges that affluent and non-Native students may not comprehend. Poverty and discrimination usually top the list of discussion items. Tom Rodgers writes, “Native Americans are among the poorest in the country and, according to the Economic Research Service at the U.S.

Department of Agriculture, nearly 60 percent of all Native Americans who live outside the metropolitan areas inhabit persistently poor counties” (n.d.). Native students living in rural settings are likely to live in poorer school districts considering consolidation.

Combine poverty with a challenging home environment, alcoholism, and lack of parental guidance, and many Native students face a unique set of challenges. These challenges have created hurdles and obstacles Native American students struggle with daily. Daily struggles contribute to performing below the national average in a number of academic areas, most notably graduation rates. In Nebraska, according to the *2011–2012 State of the Schools Report*, only 64.25% of Native students graduated from high school in 4 years (Nebraska Department of Public Education 2012a). The average for all students in Nebraska is 86.07% (Nebraska Department of Public Education 2012a). In 2011–12, Native American students collectively had the lowest student performance in reading and mathematics for Federal Accountability in elementary schools (Nebraska Department of Public Education 2012b). With graduation rates for Native Americans below the state average in Nebraska and Native elementary students performing below the academic setting, Native students are at a higher risk of not reaching their academic potential upon graduating—whether their goals be college, technical training, or entry into the workforce. Educators and school officials need to take special consideration in consolidation discussions to preserve a positive learning environment for the most at-risk students, which include struggling Native American students.

Small schools can provide struggling Native students with a positive learning environment. Lawrence and colleagues researched the importance of small schools and found small schools are safer, graduate higher percentages of students, have lower drop-out rates, send larger proportions of their graduates on to postsecondary education, have better attendance rates, provide students with a stronger sense of belonging, produce higher student grade point averages, and provide opportunities for participation in extracurricular activities (2002, 8–9). Small schools can give struggling Native students a unique opportunity to personalize their learning environment to obtain academic success.

Considering the risks associated with school consolidation can prevent hardships on Native American students within the districts. Rural school consolidation can have negative effects on at-risk students, including Native American students. Although there are many areas of concern, loss of a low student–teacher ratio, loss of connection with the school community, and loss of autonomy or control of schools are of particular importance.

When schools consider consolidation efforts, policy-makers need to be mindful that the increase in student–teacher ratio that may result in a consolidated school can have an impact on Native students within the school. The smaller number of students in an unconsolidated school can provide unique opportunities for Native students to excel in academics, leadership and extracurricular activities, thus giving them a boost in confidence and experiences while in school. Native students are often characteristically shy and quiet students. Small class sizes with familiar peers can provide Native students with an environment in which they feel comfortable participating in the educational instruction and discussion, thus increasing educational understanding. This may very well be the extra push that Native students need to move toward academic success.

Discussions on school consolidation also tend to center around the loss of community for one locality or another. Constituents are fearful that a consolidation will have a major impact on each individual community. Oftentimes the small rural school is the lifeline of the community; without the school in the town there is a void. Like many community members, Native students in particular look to their school as a place of safety, security, and structure. Some Native students whose home lives are in a state of disarray oftentimes find themselves connecting with the school as the only normal or consistent area of their lives. These Native students look to the school for a safe environment and take solace in the fact that the school is secure. These Native students may look to the schools to provide some type of daily structure that is often lacking at home. Consolidation discussions pull at the very heartstrings of the connections Native students have with a school. Native students and families who are connected to a small rural school may have a hard time reconciling the loss of community identity that occurs

in school consolidations. In consolidation situations issues such as transportation can become a barrier to daily school attendance, participation in extracurricular activities, representation on boards, or decision making for the school—many Native students live in households at or below the poverty level. It is important to consider that the consequences of consolidation can have secondary effects beyond the regular academic program that affect the connection between students and the school community. For children who look to the school for stability, structure, or safety, school consolidation can have a dramatic effect on their daily lives and their education. It is important that policy makers and educators who are navigating school consolidations recognize this situation, discuss the loss of community for all students within the school, and take proper steps to minimize its effects.

Finally, there is a sense of a loss of autonomy or power within the school system in consolidation discussions. Consolidation discussions can include questions of control between communities when making decisions for the school. Native families in small rural schools are often underrepresented in communities. When schools consolidate the percentage of Native constituents may be reduced and result in decreased representation within the new district. This situation could be troubling given the historic disenfranchisement and loss of autonomy experienced by Native Americans. In a smaller school setting, Native people may also feel their ideas and concerns are heard and respected, and they will be encouraged to participate—be it at the school board level, the parent group level or just in parent-teacher conferences. Making sure all members of the community have an opportunity to be heard and participate in decision making is critical to maintaining connections and preventing additional loss of autonomy for Native constituents during consolidations.

Although there are challenges that can have a damaging effect on Native students when consolidating schools, some actions can be taken to help minimize consolidation. Consolidation of school districts may be inevitable given the financial constraints of each district. Areas of educational opportunity for Native students in consolidation may include offering a diversified and expanded curriculum, specialization for staffing, and specialized resources for students.

When school districts are consolidated, diversifying and expanding curricular offerings can enrich Native student learning. School districts may be able to offer a wide array of different classes that many small rural schools cannot offer given their limitations on staff and resources. The expanded curriculum may allow for an incorporation of Native American–focused classes such as Native history, Native American languages, and Native American art. Classes like these can help Native students stay connected with Native culture and community through their education. In a recent study Native American students preparing for postsecondary education were ques-

tioned to determine indicators of postsecondary success (NCELA 2011). One factor indicated by Native students was connecting educational programs with their culture and community. Offering a large—and perhaps more specialized—selection of classes may present Native students the opportunity to connect educationally with their culture and community thus increasing the chances of postsecondary education and career readiness.

Native American students in consolidated schools may see a better specialization of staffing within consolidated schools. In consolidated schools with more employees there may be an opportunity for staff members to concentrate on particular areas of education. One example of the benefits of specialized staffing can be seen in New Mexico's Central Consolidated Schools (Central Consolidated School District n.d.). Central Consolidated Schools is a district that has a predominately Navajo Native American population. The district has a number of schools within it, including four high schools. The school district was able to specialize their staff to focus on incorporating Native culture in the curriculum. The district also was able to focus on attendance issues and getting kids to school. Many small schools would not have the staff or resources to dedicate this type of energy to the issue of low attendance. The incorporation of the Native curriculum and a strong attendance policy are two areas credited with increasing the school's graduation rate above the state average for New Mexico students (Central Consolidated School District n.d.). Although this school district focused on attendance and curriculum, other schools may find different areas in which specialization of staff can lead to academic success.

Finally, schools in consolidated districts may be able to offer specialized resources for students with special needs. Larger school districts may be able to employ staff members to help students with strategic counseling needs. For example, larger schools may be able to offer staff with a more focused concentration, such as a counselor who deals primarily with Native American students. Many Native students are in need of counseling services to deal with the internal struggles life creates. The suicide rate among American Indian and Alaskan Natives is far higher than that of any other ethnic group in the United States—and 70% higher than the rate among the general population of the United States (Dorgan 2010). In some communities on the Great Plains, the youth suicide has reached epidemic proportions (Dorgan 2010). Since Native American teen suicide rates are at such an alarming level, employing staff members who can concentrate on providing students guidance and services to learn coping mechanisms as well as overcoming the feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and a hesitancy to dream for the future can be critical to that Native child's academic success.

Practitioners and policy makers need to be proactive in thinking about the needs of Native American students

and other at-risk students when making the serious decisions pertaining to school consolidation. Small schools offer unique settings in which many Native American students can thrive and excel academically. Since many Native students struggle academically, preventing educational barriers is a must to maintain academic success. Smaller schools can provide positive learning environments with more individualized attention to learning, thus increasing student learning and educational potential. When schools are consolidated the interests of many Native students could be dramatically affected and thus deserve consideration.

In closing, there is a Lakota phrase, *mitakuye oyasin*, which means “we are all connected” or “we are all related.” Our collective and individual action or inaction can have a significant impact on those around us and can help or hurt the entire community. Given the importance of meeting the needs of all students, it is imperative that tax payers, policy makers, and educators realize that in times of transition, such as school consolidation, high levels of support are needed for all students, especially at-risk students such as struggling young Native Americans.

## REFERENCES

- Central Consolidated School District. n.d. [www.ccsdnm.org](http://www.ccsdnm.org) (accessed July 15, 2013).
- Dorgan, Byron L. 2010. The tragedy of Native American youth suicide. *Psychological Services* 7:213–18, <http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/features/ser-7-3-213.pdf> (accessed May 18, 2013).
- Lawrence, B.K., S. Binger, B.M. Diamond, et al. 2002. Dollars and Sense: The Cost Effectiveness of Small Schools. KnowledgeWorks Foundation, Cincinnati, OH.
- National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Educational Programs (NCELA). 2011. Postsecondary success for Native American students: A brief summary of research, programs, and practices. [http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/files/uploads/7/Post\\_Secondary\\_Success\\_NAM.pdf](http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/files/uploads/7/Post_Secondary_Success_NAM.pdf) (accessed April 1, 2013).
- Nebraska Department of Public Education. 2012a. 2011–2012 State of the schools report: A report on Nebraska public schools, [http://reportcard.education.ne.gov/pg\\_FederalAccount\\_Cohort.aspx](http://reportcard.education.ne.gov/pg_FederalAccount_Cohort.aspx) (accessed July 15, 2013).
- Nebraska Department of Public Education. 2012b. Federal Accountability: Adequate Yearly Progress: Students in Elementary School, 2011–2012, [http://reportcard.education.ne.gov/pg\\_FederalAccount\\_AYP.aspx](http://reportcard.education.ne.gov/pg_FederalAccount_AYP.aspx) (accessed July 15, 2013).
- Rodgers, Tom. n.d. Native American poverty. Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity, <http://www.spotlightonpoverty.org/ExclusiveCommentary.aspx?id=0fe5c04e-fdbf-4718-980c-0373ba823da7> (accessed July 15, 2013).