

Report: Low grad rates for Native Americans

Experts: Lack of Native American teachers, resources could be cause

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Debbie Austin grew up in the Great Depression, a "time when it was not a good thing to be an Indian."

Talked down to by teachers, professors and medical professionals, berated by passersby, Austin thought, "If we were white, things would have been a lot easier for us."

But she doesn't want her more than 40 grandchildren and great-grandchildren to grow up the same way.

"I (don't) want my children to feel bad about themselves," Austin said.

Austin and her husband, Warner Austin, are elders in and founders of the Native American Cross Cultural Association, based in Salem, which celebrates various indigenous cultures across North America.

They advocate for more Native American studies and experiences to be shared in the classroom and encourage Native students to pursue their education.

But they are working against myriad obstacles.

Native American students in Oregon are graduating at lower rates, performing worse on state assessments, attending fewer days and receiving more suspensions and expulsions than their peers, according to a report released by the Oregon Department of Education.

For graduation rates alone, Oregon's Native American students are graduating at about 56 percent, compared to the state's overall four-year graduation rate of 74.8 percent.

"It's clear from the data that there are significant opportunity gaps for American Indian and Alaska Native students," said Colt Gill, acting deputy superintendent for the state.

"The data allow us to see the problem, but it is up to us to partner with our tribes, communities and districts to ... better support our American Indian and Alaska Native students in culturally responsive ways."

Experts believe a few key issues causing these negative outcomes include the lack of culturally-relative curriculum, a lack of Native American teachers and staff in schools, a gap in services available to the families along with additional obstacles many Native American students face outside of the classroom.

Culture not seen in classrooms

A doctor in Pennsylvania told Debbie Austin in the late 1970s when she was a young mother, "Don't ever bring your child here again — You people carry syphilis and tuberculosis."

Shortly after, a college professor in Oregon told her the same thing. So did her textbooks.

"Our children need to know that is not true," Austin said. "They need to know who they are and where they came from."

Austin argues there needs to be more curriculum about the Native American experience and more teachers and staff who identify as Native American in schools.

Shelby Maerz, who works for the Indian Education Department for Salem-Keizer Public Schools, agreed, saying students "need to be able to see themselves throughout the system."

And according to state workers, student outcomes improve when an effort is made to be more inclusive.

The Tribal Attendance Pilot Project, for example, has been working to lessen the rate of chronically absent Native students.

By partnering school districts with the nine federally-recognized tribes in the state, the program creates culturally-specific plans and materials designed to the needs of each community.

Though the chronic absenteeism rate for Native students is higher than that of their peers, according to the report, the rate held steady at 30 percent in the last year recorded.

The rate of chronically absent non-native students increased from 17 to 19 percent.

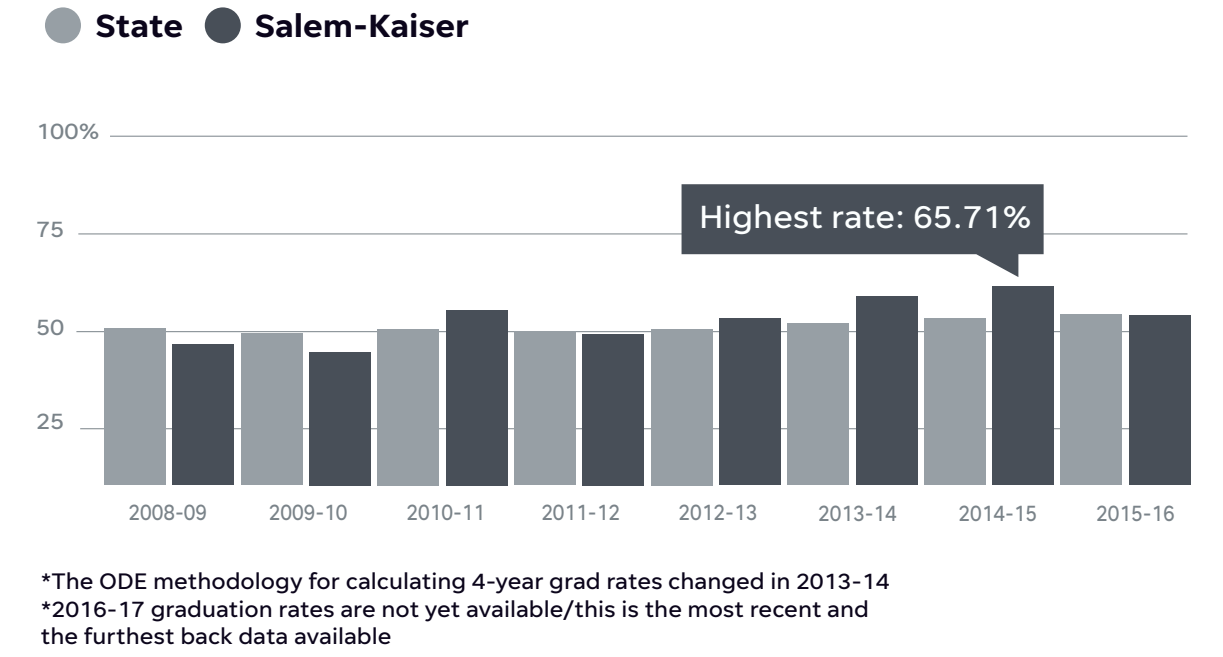
"Despite an unusually harsh winter, the majority of the schools with Tribal Attendance Pilot Project family advocates had improvements in their chronic absenteeism rates," said April Campbell, the Indian education adviser for the state.

"It's a good indicator that implementing culturally relevant programs provides benefits to all students, not



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 MOLLY J. SMITH/STATESMAN JOURNAL

These are the 4-year graduation rates (in percentages) of Native American (American Indian/Alaskan Native) students over the past 8 years in Oregon and Salem-Keizer, comparatively.



just those from specific student groups,” she said.

There has also been action at the state level to improve representation in course materials.

Senate Bill 13, passed earlier this year, requires the Oregon Department of Education to develop curriculum exploring the Native American experience and provide professional development to teachers and administrators relating to the curriculum.

Services for some, not all

Native American students in Oregon check the box "American Indian/Alaska Native" for race/ethnicity when enrolling in school.

But in order to receive services from the school districts, they have to do the additional paperwork required by the federal government and prove they have a parent or grandparent who is a member of a tribe in the United States.

In Salem-Keizer Public Schools, the approximately 700 students who take the additional steps receive various services, including weekly study groups, additional math tutoring, summer school classes, cultural events, parent classes and a culturally-appropriate graduation ceremony.

This past year, 56 of the 70 seniors in the program graduated — an 80 percent graduation rate.

Yet when averaged with dozens of other American Indian/Alaska Native students who do not receive services from the Indian Education Department, the four-year graduation rate is only 56 percent.

Lillian Govus, a spokeswoman for the district, said the individual attention is part of what makes the students served by the department as successful as they are.

"The students see Shelby (Maerz), how much she cares, and they have a sense of value in the schools," Govus said. "That's unique."

Austin spoke to the effectiveness of the district's efforts through her great-grandchildren's experiences.

"They love school," she said. "They don't feel bad about themselves. They wear their hair long and are proud of who they are."

But there remains a gap in which families who do not

fill out additional paperwork do not receive the support they may need.

"There need to be more services for all our native students," Maerz said.

More poverty and special needs

While Native American students make up less than two percent of all Oregon students, many of these students are dealing with additional obstacles.

The percentage of Native American students considered to be economically disadvantaged increased from 69 percent to 75 percent in the last year, according to the state's recent report.

That means more than 6,000 Native American students statewide qualify for free and reduced lunch due to family income.

Additionally, 19 percent of Native American students receive disability services, compared to 13 percent of non-Native students, according to the report.

These additional obstacles make it harder for Native students to thrive in school, and even show up.

Leslie Riggs, the education department manager for the Confederated Tribes of Grande Ronde, sees these issues playing out in the "simple things."

"Say a child has no breakfast," he said. "Their ability to learn won't be as good as a child who did."

Riggs said these factors bring students an inability to pay attention and retain important information. "Anyone can go to school, but getting someone engaged is another story," he said.

The Confederated Tribes have made a consorted effort to have parents and other tribal members in the classroom as both academic tutors and daily mentors. This is especially important in districts like Willamina School District where Native students make up close to 30 percent of the student populations.

"As dismal as they may seem," Riggs said referring to the report's data, "it is good for us as communities to (see) how we need to move forward."

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Tips

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sons by fermented grape juice.

You can fairly reliably count on Detroit Lake filling for Memorial Day weekend, unless there is a drought, and conversely depend on the water level dropping after Labor Day weekend. The timing of both being keyed to the recreation season rather than any meteorological phenomenon.

Another angling rule of thumb is that winter-run steelhead fishing on the Oregon Coast begins “around” Thanksgiving.

“Around” in this case is not a weasel word, given the volatility of the weather and resulting volume, temperature and clarity of river flows.

Not to mention the sluggish nature of the potential fishing participants who are in various stages of torpor from massive food and gravy overdoses during the extended holiday weekend.

One rule of thumb that has been fairly reliable, and which has been mentioned in a previous column, is both arboreal and piscatorial. That is to say relating to trees

and fish.

It is a fairly reliable rule of thumb that when consistent warm weather — generally around mid-May (and there's that not-a-weasel “a” word again) — gets the cottonwoods blooming, it's time to start checking the shad counts at the fish ladder at Bonneville Dam on the Columbia River.

I'd like to take the credit for this rule-of-thumb tip, but I actually learned it from John, a dedicated shad angler in Redding, California, who called me on a sultry early summer afternoon to entice me to go with him on a pre-dusk shad outing on the Sacramento River near Red Bluff.

The air was hot and heavy, and laden with little puffs of white drifting from the cottonwood trees. The Sacramento was equally loaded with fish.

As were the riverside bushes ... with mosquitoes.

Good times.

There is one rule of thumb about fishing that you can pretty well bank on, though.

Don't ever thumb your nose about making a call or two, and checking the weather and river-level web sites, before you head out.

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