



# Leading the Way

Native American-Led School Transformation

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**W**hitehorse High School is quiet but welcoming. Even when students are in the halls, the building is never loud. In any given classroom, you'll observe students attentive to their teacher and engaged in their learning. Nestled in Southern Utah on the Navajo Nation, Whitehorse and its students are making steady gains in academic proficiency and growth.

Unfortunately, such gains are not the norm for schools that serve Native American students. National statistics tell the story of a different silence in schools that serve primarily Native American student populations—one stemming from a lack of engaging, authentic instruction. Native students are slipping away because they are not getting the kind of education they need or deserve.

According to 2015 Department of Education data, "The current dropout rate for Native students is twice the national average, they are more likely than any other racial group to be placed in special-education classes, and their discipline rates are second only to black students."<sup>i</sup> The long-term implications of this reality are deeply concerning, especially because students who are disciplined often or frequently suspended or expelled not only experience gaps in their learning, but are more likely to leave school altogether. Native American tribal leaders and education experts alike attribute these disconcerting trends to Native students feeling alienated in an education system that does not embrace Native American history and culture.<sup>ii</sup>

Compounding these problems is the fact that funding for the education of Native American students is woefully insufficient. The Johnson O'Malley program, an important source of federal support for Native students since the 1930s, is a prime example. Twenty years ago, the program allocated \$125 for each Native student; today, that amount has been cut in half, to about \$64. And recent federal budget proposals threatened to bring this number down to just \$45 per student. This trend of diminishing funding runs counter to the steady annual growth rate (around 4 percent) of the overall population of Native students.<sup>iii</sup>

Unfortunately, student outcome measures reflect this lack of educational equity. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), Native students are among the lowest-performing in the United States. Fourth- and eighth-grade reading and math performance levels among Native students rank second-to-last among racial and ethnic groups.<sup>iv</sup> And according to the White House's Native Youth Report, Native students' graduation rate is only 67 percent—lower than any other racial or ethnic group.<sup>v</sup>

Clearly, much of what we are doing is simply not working for Native students.

## The Importance of Native American Leadership

Fortunately, we do know what *is* working and how to scale that success.

It all begins with Native American leadership. Time and time again, Native tribes have successfully leveraged internal leadership to redesign complex social and public systems, including courts, healthcare systems, and workforce structures.<sup>vi</sup> The Salish and Kootenai Tribes of Montana, for example, created a workforce development project focused on cultivating citizens' ability to pursue careers and improve their future. Washington State's Tulalip tribe has redesigned their court system to ensure citizens receive the proper legal help they need. And the Navajo Nation has worked with national health and human service officials to create the Navajo Nation Wellness Policy, which provides incentives to Navajo community members as a means to improve their physical health.<sup>vii</sup>

Emphasizing Native leadership also works well in education. In Utah's Nebo School District, Eileen Quintana—a district program manager—has dedicated significant effort to indigenizing curriculum, resulting in an increase in Native students' graduation rate from 37% to 100%.<sup>viii</sup> Whitehorse High School (highlighted at the beginning of this white paper) began holding parent climate conferences twice a year and, more recently, monthly "Coffee with the Principal" sessions to ensure Native parents and families are included in the decision-making process for their students. Intentionally nurturing this connection to the community has been extremely valuable because Native students are more likely to thrive when their culture is integrated into their education.<sup>ix</sup>

School and district leaders like these are improving outcomes for Native students, despite the discouraging national trends in academic achievement and funding. Our team has observed a direct relationship between the engagement of Native leaders with Native students' schools and improved student outcomes. As Ahniwake Rose, executive director of the Native Indian Education Association, has noted, "Education in Indian Country is not in need of a solution imposed by others who know little about our communities. Solutions already lie within."<sup>x</sup>

When it comes to school improvement, Native communities and leaders should not only have a voice—they should be leading the dialogue and action around school priorities and practices.

**WHITEHORSE HIGH SCHOOL: A CASE STUDY**

Whitehorse High School is an excellent example of Native American-led school improvement. Whitehorse partnered with our team two years ago to help support their transformation process after being identified as a school with turnaround status. Since then, we have had the privilege of collaborating with school leaders to establish a School Transformation Team (STT) that emphasizes Native American-led school improvement. Whitehorse’s STT includes three Navajo teacher-leaders and regularly solicits feedback from students and other Native staff members to ensure Whitehorse continues to prioritize integrating the community’s cultural richness with the school’s transformation approach.

The STT’s leadership has been integral to Whitehorse’s progress over the last two years, particularly with regard to improving the quality of classroom instruction, faculty collaboration, and teacher-leader development.

**Classroom Instruction**

After an initial appraisal of the school’s current state suggested Whitehorse was experiencing a high level of passive engagement in classrooms, the STT and our team worked together to implement evidence-based instructional strategies and consistent schoolwide instructional expectations. As a result, students have demonstrated a steady increase in active engagement by making their thinking and learning visible and significantly decreasing off-task activity (see Figure 1). This increased engagement has also been driven by the STT’s consistent focus on helping teachers provide learning opportunities that are culturally responsive to students’ backgrounds and interests.

The STT has also used student engagement data to redesign the school’s lesson planning process. Appraisal findings indicated students were more engaged in their learning if the teacher had a clear and rigorous lesson plan in place because the students knew exactly what was expected of them. This connection between student engagement and lesson planning prompted the STT to lead the implementation of weekly lesson plans and six-week instructional maps.

As a result, teachers have produced more thoughtful and thorough lesson plans that include clear learning objectives, modeling of student success criteria, opportunities for collaborative student work, intentional checks for understanding followed by immediate re-teaching, and opportunities for enrichment for students who have demonstrated proficiency. The emphasis on intentional planning has also prompted teachers to make more intentional connections between students’ native language and academic language in the classroom.

**Faculty Collaboration**

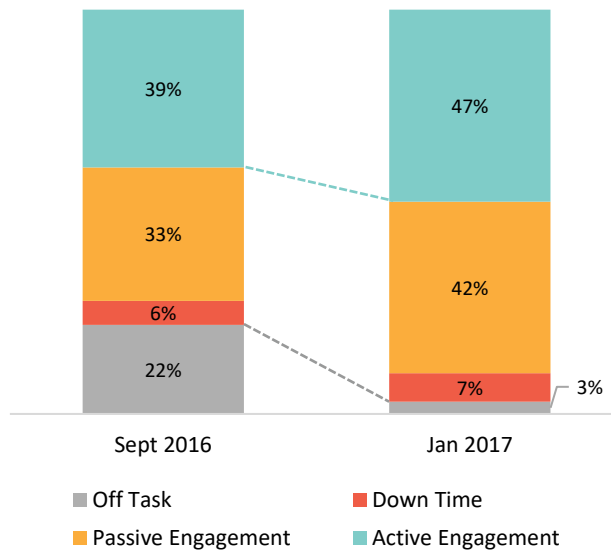
Early on in the transformation process, Whitehorse was experiencing several barriers to staff collaboration, including a history of teachers feeling isolated. To overcome these barriers, the STT worked with our team to implement a creative structure for faculty collaboration. Teachers now

analyze student performance data and collectively create solutions to address student learning needs. They also receive coaching on using data to determine interventions for specific students and groups of students. Increased collaboration has helped the school focus on improving instruction through a culture of dialogue and teamwork. Students also benefit from the resulting instructional consistency across teachers and classrooms.

**Teacher-Leader Development**

In addition to improving classroom instruction and faculty collaboration, Whitehorse has worked to cultivate leadership capacity across the school. Establishing the STT gave teacher-leaders a larger role in the transformation process, and the STT soon became a driving force behind increasing the quality and

Figure 1: Student Engagement



quantity of culturally responsive teaching and using student data to help guide instructional improvements. Because the STT is designed to be a sustainable catalyst for school improvement, Whitehorse is well equipped to continue leading its transformation process after its formal partnership with Ed Direction concludes.

The linchpin of these improvements in classroom instruction, faculty collaboration, and teacher-leader development has been Whitehorse's emphasis on Native American-led school transformation. Rather than relying on Ed Direction, an external partner, to lead this process, the School Transformation Team has taken ownership of transformation from within, placing Native leadership from teachers and the Whitehorse community at the forefront of the change process.

## The Importance of School Transformation

Given the troubling national trends around the quality of Native students' education, it's clear a fundamental shift is needed in the way schools, districts, and states approach this important but often overlooked issue. Examples of success like Whitehorse High School demonstrate the enormous potential of Native American-led school transformation. Regardless of whether schools partner with outside organizations to support improvement efforts, Native school leaders and community members should be the ones guiding the transformation process. The results produced by this internal, culture-based leadership approach are exactly what Native American students need.

## About the Authors

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**Kimberly Dee** is a science teacher at Whitehorse High School and a proud member of the Navajo community. She currently serves on Whitehorse's School Transformation Team and has extensive experience delivering culturally responsive instruction to students. You can read more about Kimberly's background and experience in [this partner spotlight](#).

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<sup>i</sup> Wong, Alia. (September 1, 2015). The Subtle Evolution of Native American Education. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/09/native-american-education/402787>.

<sup>ii</sup> Clarren, Rebecca. (July 24, 2017). How America Is Failing Native American Students. *The Nation*. Retrieved from <https://www.thenation.com/article/left-behind>.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> The Nation's Report Card. (2015). Mathematics & Reading Assessments. Retrieved from [https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading\\_math\\_2015/#mathematics?grade=8](https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading_math_2015/#mathematics?grade=8).

<sup>v</sup> 2014 Native Youth Report. Executive Office of the President. Retrieved from <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/>

[sites/default/files/docs/20141129nativeyouthreport\\_final.pdf](https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2017/02/08/why-arent-we-talking-about-native-american.html).

<sup>vi</sup> Rose, Ahniwake. (February 7, 2017). Why Aren't We Talking About Native American Students? *Education Week*. Retrieved from <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2017/02/08/why-arent-we-talking-about-native-american.html>.

<sup>vii</sup> Native News Online. (July 22, 2017). Navajo Nation Leadership Present Navajo Health Concerns to Federal Health & Human Services Officials. Retrieved from <https://nativenewsonline.net/currents/navajo-nation-leadership-present-navajo-health-concerns-federal-health-human-services-officials>.

<sup>viii</sup> Dodson, Braley. (May 24, 2016). Nebo School District Graduates 100 Percent of American Indian Seniors. *The Daily Herald*. Retrieved from <http://www.heraldextra.com/news/>

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<sup>ix</sup> National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition. Retrieved from [http://www.ncela.us/files/uploads/7/Post\\_Secondary\\_Success\\_NAm.pdf](http://www.ncela.us/files/uploads/7/Post_Secondary_Success_NAm.pdf).

<sup>x</sup> Rose, Ahniwake. (February 7, 2017). Why Aren't We Talking About Native American Students? *Education Week*. Retrieved from <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2017/02/08/why-arent-we-talking-about-native-american.html>.