

# **PROPOSED STUDY PLAN FOR HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 8: Addressing the High Dropout Rate for American Indian Students**

Prepared for the State-Tribal Relations Committee  
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## **BACKGROUND**

In October 2000, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that approximately 11% of young people between 16 and 24 years of age were not enrolled in high school and had not completed high school. Despite attempts over the last decade at both the federal and state level to improve the quality of public education in America, the dropout rate has remained fairly constant.

As the need for a higher-skilled labor force increases in order for America to compete in a global economy, those who drop out of high school before receiving a diploma will have fewer and fewer chances for success later in life. Employment opportunities will be more limited because today's economy requires workers who are literate, educated, have advanced technological skills, and are willing to continue learning. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, in July 2002, the average annual income for a high school dropout was \$18,900. At the same time, the average annual income for a high school graduate was \$25,900.

Dropouts are more likely to become dependent on public assistance, have health problems, and engage in criminal activity. They are also more likely to engage in high-risk behaviors such as premature sexual activity, alcohol and drug abuse, delinquency, violence, and crime. The costs to society include an underskilled labor force, lower productivity, lost taxes, and increased public assistance and crime.

What causes some students to drop out of high school? Are there predictors that parents and school officials can look at to determine if a student is at-risk of dropping out of high school? There are a number of at-risk factors that can contribute to a student's decision to drop out of school. Certainly poor academic performance is a major factor. Students who fall behind early on in reading, mathematics, and writing are at greater risk. Students who repeat one or more

grades are twice as likely to drop out as those who have never been held back. Children whose primary language is not English are also at substantial risk.

Poverty is one of the strongest predictors. The dropout rate for students from the lowest 20% of all family incomes is six times that of their peers from families in the highest 20% (NCES, November 2000).

Other identified at-risk factors include a stressful or unstable home life, parents or older siblings who dropped out, school truancy and excessive absenteeism, substance abuse, pregnancy, and legal problems.

What about Montana? What is the dropout picture in our state? The dropout rate in Montana for all students is about 4%. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2002, the median annual income as related to level of education in Montana was:

	<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>
less than high school	\$16,469	\$22,589
high school graduate	\$23,061	\$33,184

But it is the alarmingly high dropout rate for American Indian students that is of major concern to Montanans. The dropout rate for American Indian students in Montana is a little over 10% (Montana Statewide Dropout Report 2000-01, Office of Public Instruction) and shows no sign of decreasing. In addition, American Indian students drop out of high school at a rate three times greater than non-Indians. What is most alarming, however, is that American Indian students are beginning to drop out of school at a much younger age. American Indian students drop out of grades seven and eight at a rate 12 times greater than non-Indians (OPI Dropout Report). In addition, graduation data for the last 6 years shows that only 56% of American Indian students who enroll as freshmen graduate in 4 years, compared to 82% of their non-Indian peers (OPI Fall Reports).

These alarming statistics are the genesis of House Joint Resolution No. 8 (HJR 8). In November of 2002, the Montana-Wyoming Indian Education Association and the Montana Advisory Council on Indian Education held a public hearing in Helena on American Indian high school dropouts. Over 125 people from all walks of life and from Indian and non-Indian communities across Montana participated in the hearing. As a result of this hearing, Representative Carol Juneau introduced HJR 8 in the 2003 Legislature.

HJR 8 requests that an appropriate interim committee gather information relating to dropout

rates, graduation rates, and at-risk factors for American Indian students in Montana's public schools. The resolution goes on to request that a state strategic plan be developed to reduce the dropout rate among all students. As a result of the legislative poll conducted immediately following the adjournment of the 2003 session, the Legislative Council assigned HJR 8 to the State-Tribal Relations Committee.

## **STUDY TASKS**

1. Gather information relating to the dropout rates, graduation rates, and at-risk factors among American Indian students in Montana's public schools. (September 2003 - February 2004)
  - a. Review literature on issues generally, on issues pertaining to minority students, and on issues pertaining to American Indian students.
  - b. Review information and data for Montana.
    - i. Review information gathered by OPI, including fall reports, school district 5-year plans, and school profiles.
    - ii. Review report issued in 2002 by Montana-Wyoming Indian Education Association and Montana Advisory Council on Indian Education.
    - iii. Review reports, studies, etc., by tribal education departments.
    - iv. Review any studies done by individual districts.
  - c. Develop statewide profile of the American Indian dropout problem in Montana.
    - i. Develop a definition of "dropout" that will be used consistently throughout the study.
    - ii. Include special education students in the profile.
    - iii. Decide on longitudinal view or single-year "snapshot" view.
    - iv. Decide on grade levels to include in profile: grades 7-12 or 9-12?
  - d. Gather and analyze information on at-risk factors, including economic, behavioral, and health factors.
    - i. Look at general at-risk factors as well as factors that may be unique to American Indians.
  - e. Research alternative educational programs that have been successful in helping keep students in school.
    - i. Identify common elements of these successful programs.
    - ii. Research successful dropout prevention programs in states with significant Indian populations.

2. Hold public hearings throughout the state in school districts located on reservations and in urban areas to seek recommendations to address the dropout rate and at-risk factors.
  - a. Hearing at Fort Belknap Reservation (September 2003)
  - b. Hearing in Helena (December 2003)
  - c. Hearing on second reservation (May 2004)
3. Develop fiscal impact statement for those schools from which students drop out. (March 2004)
  - a. Will require assistance from Legislative Fiscal Division.
4. Collaborate with OPI's American Indian Education Office and Montana Advisory Council on Indian Education that are currently working through a U.S. Department of Education Dropout Prevention Program with six Montana public school districts located on Indian reservations and that will be coordinating a plan for dropout prevention. (September 2003 - July 2004)
5. Collaborate on this study with Montana's Interagency Coordinating Council, which has dropout prevention as one of its major goals. (September 2003 - July 2004)
6. Report on the progress of the study at the Montana-Wyoming Indian Education Association annual conference in Missoula. (April 1-4, 2004)
7. Produce a comprehensive, research-based, strategic plan to break the cycle of at-risk factors and significantly reduce the dropout rate, while increasing the graduation rate among Montana's American Indian students. Work with OPI to develop the plan. (March 2004 - July 2004)

## **STUDY PRODUCTS**

Staff will develop a statewide profile of the dropout problem in Montana, concentrating on American Indian students. Staff will also produce a report on the at-risk factors that can be used to predict which students are most likely to drop out of school before receiving a diploma and a report on educational programs that are successful in keeping students in school. Staff will work with OPI in developing a statewide strategic plan that will include suggestions for school districts on how to reduce the dropout rate and increase the graduation rate for American Indian students.

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