

*Educational Experiences  
and Aspirations of  
American Indian  
High-School Students  
in the Spokane Area*

By

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## 1. Executive Summary

**This monograph presents findings** from a study designed to explore the most important influences determining American Indian/Alaska Native students' decisions to attend college. Researchers from the Institute of Public Policy and Economic Analysis at Eastern Washington University collected data from American Indian K-12 students and their parents in the Spokane School District and surrounding districts of the state of Washington to study this phenomenon. The issue is important since American Indians have the highest dropout rates among all racial/ethnic groups attending Spokane Public Schools and have lowest college attendance rates in the region.

**To this end, researchers developed** a questionnaire designed to examine the educational experiences and aspirations of American Indian middle and high school students attending schools within the Spokane School

District and the surrounding area in the state of Washington. The questionnaire was administered to American Indian students and parents at the annual Native American Christmas dinner held at the Northern Quest Casino in Airways Height, Washington in December 2006.

**Key findings from the survey** show that parents and students both have high expectations of educational attainment. Overall, parents have high expectations of the level of education they would like their children to attain: 30 percent of the parents say they would like to see their children earn a Bachelor's degree and 50 percent of them would like their children obtain graduate or advanced professional degrees. Students' expectations of their own educational achievement seemed to correspond very well to their perceived parental expectations, with 95 percent of the students expressing a desire to get

at least an undergraduate degree. Findings also reveal almost half of the students plan to attend to a university in the state of Washington (while only 17 percent named an out of state college), with Eastern Washington University and Gonzaga University as the most frequently cited universities.

**In addition, the survey revealed** an ability by students to preserve a strong sense of American Indian identity, although most of them live in the predominately white environment of Spokane and many come from biracial/multiracial families. Students in the study who reported a strong American Indian identity often participated in cultural activities such as Pow Wows. Parents in the study indicated, however, they would also like for schools to adequately represent American Indian/Alaska Native history and cultures in the curriculum as another means for students to learn of their American Indian culture.

**Yet, the opportunity for a college education** may not seem as promising, in light of the high dropout rates, low WASL scores, and low college attendance rates among the local American Indian population. Despite parents' and students' overall positive attitudes toward education expressed in the survey, it appears that our educational system at both the secondary and postsecondary level struggles to help American Indian students realize their dream of attending college.

**Given these findings,** school officials, parents and leaders in the American Indian communities need to work together through community forums where ideas and concerns are shared. Widening the channels of communication and developing ameliorative strategies is critical to the academic success of American Indian children attending Spokane area public schools as well as expanding the educational opportunities for attending college.