

## **Decolonizing Data: Moving Toward an Inclusive Count of American Indian/Alaska Native Students in a Pacific Northwest School District**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The prevalence of data use in education requires researchers to critically examine data-collection practices that could inform, obscure, or omit accurate representations of students. Thus, an innovative approach to accurate demographic collection and reporting can enable school districts to more accurately count and represent American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) students. This approach, developed in partnership with Pacific Northwest Indigenous communities, centers the perspectives of Native peoples. Utilizing critical Native theories, research for uninterrogated biases advises on pathways for improved representation practices that maximize accurate identification of a diverse Native presence. Data accuracy in educational decision-making supports resource allocation and efficacy in academic practices and policies. Therefore, this best practice article emphasizes representation practices for a change-interpretation of AI/AN student enrollment and graduation rates through student district responses that best suit Native communities, student academic needs, and student developmental expectations.

**Keywords:** American Indian/Alaska Native, decolonizing data, inclusive count, maximizing, identification, aligning with Native practices

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**O**ur school district, located in the Pacific Northwest, focuses on improving the educational experience for our American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) students. By many standards, our work might be considered exemplary. We have a vibrant Native student support program that includes a partnership with the local sovereign Tribal Nation, providing high school dual-credited coursework for Native perspectives, Tribal language instruction, and revitalization. We have several AI/AN student clubs and teach the Washington State-required John McCoy (luliláš) Since Time Immemorial curriculum, which is implemented in collaboration with our local sovereign Tribal partners. Our school board and the local Tribal council hold biennial formal government-to-government meetings. In 2019, our school board unanimously adopted an official land acknowledgment that is read whenever the pledge of allegiance is recited and during public events. We fly the Tribal flag at every school, along with the U.S. and Washington State flags. Annual professional development for administrators and teachers focuses on treaty histories such as the historic Boldt decision regarding Tribal fishing rights and Indigenous language.

However, despite our best intentions, we have recently become aware of a glaring problem. Through our growing Tribal collaboration and partnerships, we have realized that our data systems are flawed in measuring accurate demographic information. Specifically, traditional data collection methods were unintentionally inaccurate and failed to count all AI/AN students. More importantly, we have learned about settler-biased data systems and their negative impacts on outcomes for Native Peoples. Consequently, our discovery helped us to realize that these inaccuracies misalign existing data with our values and commitments. This realization led us to explore ways to decolonize our data systems (Magee et al., 2023) to intentionally identify all AI/AN students and to understand our students' experiences, thereby improving student outcomes. We hope that sharing our approach to redressing this wrong might provide other districts with a roadmap.

## **Federal and State Requirements: The Official Count**

Research examining AI/AN students' challenges uncomfortably revealed that federally mandated race data, also referred to as the official count, erased some of our students as a result of a system designed to intentionally underreport the number of AI/AN individuals (Prewitt, 2013). Thus, legislative requirements in State Education Agencies (SEAs) now scrutinize data collection for demographic reporting according to state and federal rules. Consequently, federal regulations from the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the Statistical Policy Directive No. 15 (OMB, 1977) govern the disaggregation of Indigenous Populations. OMB initially issued requirements in 1977 and then revised them in 1997 to disaggregate Pacific Islanders and Hawaiians from the Asian category. The update also added a two-part question on ethnicity and race. The first question asks if the student is Hispanic or Latino. The second question asks about race, with choices of Asian, American Indian or Alaska Native, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and White (AIR, 2023). Since race and ethnicity are cultural rather than biological, self-identification is emphasized in this system. Students who identify as more than one race are grouped into a sixth racial category called two or more races.

In 2024, an additional category was added to support individuals with Middle Eastern or North African heritage. Furthermore, the current two-part question that separates ethnicity and race will be replaced by a single question, "What is your race or ethnicity?", by 2029. In addition, there will be minor changes to the definition of AI/AN, shifting from "A person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America), and who maintains Tribal affiliation or community attachment" to "Individuals with origins in any of the original peoples of North, Central, and South America, including, for example, Navajo Nation, Blackfoot Tribe of the Blackfoot Indian Reservation of Montana, Native Village of Barrow Inupiat Traditional Government, Nome Eskimo Community, Aztec, and Maya" (Revisions to OMB's Statistical Policy Directive No. 15: Standards for Maintaining, Collecting, and Presenting Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity, 2024).

These recent changes illustrate that the OMB, and the census before it, collects race information with dominant culture policy objectives rather than a rational or coherent approach (Prewitt, 2013). This system of categorizing race and ethnicity has served the purposes of the dominant culture because most non-Indigenous Americans identify as only one race. In 2020, the U.S. Census reported that AI/AN populations were in the two or more races category. However, 87% of white Americans, 88% of Black Americans, and 83% of Asian Americans are classified as one race alone. In contrast, just 39% of AI/ANs are classified as one race alone, which "is a legacy of the complex effects that hundreds of years of colonization have had on the identities of Native Americans" (Maxim et al., 2023, p. 5).

Further complexity arises in the Hispanic and Latino category, which is considered an ethnicity rather than a race. In federal education data, any student identified as Hispanic/Latino is not reported in a racial category and instead is included only as Hispanic/Latino. Nationally, AI/ANs identifying as one race identify as Hispanic or Latino more than any single race (Maxim et al., 2023). Thus, when racial and ethnic categories are connected, the majority of our AI/AN students are assigned labels that obscure their Indigenous identities. This official count contrasts with an inclusive count that identifies all students who are AI/AN, regardless of their Hispanic/Latino or multi-racial identities (AIR, 2023).

## **We Can Do Better: Why Districts Should Shift to an Inclusive Count Approach**

Educators emphasize identifying inequities in our public schools. Examining achievement and opportunity gaps and differences in outcomes across various student groups reveals a disproportionate prevalence of incorrect data collection and erroneous conclusions. Currently, educators are challenged by the lack of visibility into AI/AN students in systems that fail to record their existence. These systems continue to engage in the practices of erasure and white/settler supremacy that harm our AI/AN students. The nation's historical and ongoing systemic inequities, including anti-Indigeneity, extend into public education data systems, including their management and collection (Magee et al., 2023). School administrators and educators are unknowingly complicit in perpetuating harmful practices and accepting misleading data. Therefore, critical knowledge required to achieve maximum levels of representation highlights Tribal Sovereignty in data education practices to reduce misinformation in educational policies and practices that disrupt AI/AN students' outcomes.

## **Washington State Context**

In 2016, the Washington State Legislature recognized that relying on the federally mandated ethnicity and race categories was insufficient and mandated their expansion. In response, the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) created the Race and Ethnicity Student Data Task Force (2017) to fulfill the legislative mandate. The legislature directed the task force to expand the disaggregation of Black, white, and multiracial students. While AI/AN students were

not included in the legislative directive, the task force chose to include expanded categories for them as well. The recommendation, implemented by OSPI, acknowledges 29 federally recognized tribes, 7 non-federally recognized tribes, and 2 write-in options, expanding the options from 1 to 38, as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 2**

***Student Survey Displaying Expanded AI/AN Categories***

- American Indian/Alaska Native (may check categories and use write-in)**
  - Washington State Federally Recognized Tribes**
- |   |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Confederated Tribes of the Chehalis Reservation</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Cowlitz Indian Tribe</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Hoh Indian Tribe</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Jamestown S’Klallam Tribe</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Kalispel Indian Community of the Kalispel Reservation</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Lower Elwha Tribal Community</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Lummi Tribe of the Lummi Reservation</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Makah Indian Tribe of the Makah Indian Reservation</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Muckleshoot Indian Tribe</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Nisqually Indian Tribe</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Nooksack Indian Tribe of Washington</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Port Gamble S’Klallam Tribe</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Puyallup Tribe of the Puyallup Reservation</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Quileute Tribe of the Quileute Reservation</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Quinault Indian Nation</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Samish Indian Nation</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Sauk-Suiattle Indian Tribe of Washington</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Shoalwater Bay Indian Tribe of the Shoalwater Bay Indian Reservation</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Skokomish Indian Tribe</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Snoqualmie Indian Tribe</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Spokane Tribe of the Spokane Reservation</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Squaxin Island Tribe of the Squaxin Island Reservation</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Stillaguamish Tribe of Indians of Washington</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Suquamish Indian Tribe of Port Madison Reservation</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Swinomish Indian Tribal Community</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Tulalip Tribes of Washington</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Upper Skagit Indian Tribe of Washington</li> </ul> |
|---|--|---|
- Washington State Non-Federally Recognized Tribes**
- |   |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Chinook Tribe</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Duwamish Tribe</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Kikiallus Indian Nation</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Marietta Band of Nooksack Tribe</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Snohomish Tribe</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Snoqualmoo Tribe</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Steilacoom Tribe</li> </ul> |
|---|

*Note.* Adapted from Race & Ethnicity Student Data: Guidance for Washington’s Public Education System, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2017.

**LITERATURE REVIEW: TRIBAL CRITICAL RACE THEORY**

Emphasizing tenets of Tribal Critical Race Theory (TriCRT), Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy (2005), a scholarly and Tribal member of the Lumbee Nation Tribe of North Carolina, created a theoretical framework to examine AI/AN experiences of colonization and racism. Brayboy’s second tenet, “U.S. policies are rooted in imperialism, White supremacy, and a desire for material gain” (2005, p. 429), is illustrated by the fact that initially, AI/AN were not counted in the census because they were not citizens, taxpayers, or property owners (Schor, 2020). However, in 1870, the census finally included a formal count using “I” for Indian in response to the question of color. In the same decade, U.S. Census reports foreshadowed the expected disappearance of Indians altogether; many mixed-race white and Indians were classified as Indians “as if at this time, when white domination over Indians was firmly established, Indians offered no threat to the purity of the white race” (Schor, 2020, p. 119).

Brayboy's fourth tenet, "Indigenous peoples have a desire to obtain and forge Tribal sovereignty, Tribal autonomy, self-determination, and self-identification" (p. 429), defines the liminal space occupied by Tribal members of legal and political groups and their racial identities. Through an inclusive examination of Indigenous Sovereignty, the determination of what it means to be Indian is standardized by Indian standards. Thus, connecting TriCrit tenets to district data projects, Tribal ability to distinguish among the diverse tribes for sovereign nations elevates sovereignty beyond the obscure AI/AN label. These terms include indigenous data sovereignty and the determination of what it means to be Indian by Indians. This tenet is connected to our data project because it is necessary to distinguish among the diverse tribes and sovereign nations currently included in the AI/AN label. Native Americans occupy a "liminal space" (Brayboy, 2005, p. 427) as both members of legal and political groups and as racial identities.

### **METHODOLOGY: INCLUSIVE COUNT EFFORTS FOR MAXIMUM REPRESENTATION**

Our two research questions were, "Does applying an inclusive method of counting students who identify as AI/AN result in a different number of students than the official, federally mandated count?" and "Does using the inclusive method of counting result in different outcomes for AI/AN students on key educational metrics?" Applying Gene Kim and Arlyn Arquiza's (2010) inclusive method of counting students from the University of Washington Office of Minority Affairs and Diversity, this process conceptualizes individuals who identify with more than one ethnic or racial identity for maximum representation. In Fall 2023, our educational research study did not require Institutional Review Board approval because it excluded identifiable private information.

Data were reported for 191 of the 15,725 total students in the federally mandated AI/AN category. However, when we explored data for our district, we found a few patterns. A total of 830 students self-identified as AI/AN on our local race/ethnicity form. The discrepancy between the district and federal data occurred because 288 students were also identified as Hispanic/Latino, and 351 were also identified as another race in addition to AI/AN. In both cases, the AI/AN category was superseded due to federal counting guidelines. Therefore, our publicly available, federally mandated count made 77% of our AI/AN population, or 639 students, invisible. Our district data are similar to the Washington state undercount rate, estimated at 75% (AIR, 2023; Olden, 2023; Washington STEM, 2024), or approximately 49,134 indigenous students whose identities are not accurately classified (Indigenous Student Identification Project, 2023). Nationally, the rate is an estimated 70%, or more than 870,000 students (AIR, 2023).

This is significant at both the district and school level. We are calling our inclusive method of counting students "maximum representation," a term coined by Gene Kim and Arlyn Arquiza at the University of Washington Office of Minority Affairs and Diversity (2010). This concept reflects the reality that individuals can identify with more than one ethnic or racial identity, especially for our AI/AN students.

#### **Aligning with Native Practices**

Historically, research and data practices involving Native Peoples are fraught with colonialism, surveillance, extraction, and minimization; therefore, we aligned the values of the intended goals of our maximum representation with Native research practices and methodologies. More accurate data would better represent Native Peoples, students, families, and lands, and could impact sovereignty. Rigney (1999) and Martin and Booran Mirraboopa (2009) highlight alignment with Indigenous researchers for principles that recognize Native work as the "privileging of Indigenous voice and experience as situated in Indigenous lives and lands" (Kovach, 2022, p. 185). We commit to ensuring that our work remains Native-informed, reviewed, and in contribution to Native goals, outcomes, and futures. Thus we ground our approach in the key methodological principles set forth by Adam Gaudry's (2011) framework for respecting and validating Indigenous people, providing research for use by Indigenous people and communities, and ensuring that research is "action oriented and works as a motivating factor for practical and direct action among Indigenous peoples and Indigenous communities" (Gaudry, 2011, p. 117) for decolonized logic that elevates Native culture.

From the beginning, our work included the collaboration and guidance of our district's Native student specialist. This practice restored space for Native educational expertise, accountability, and oversight. The presence of that cultural and professional lens informed us about the complex "social, historical, and political contexts that shape Indigenous experience" (Kovach, 2022, p. 185) and the myriad ways that settler data systems and practices obscure and omit Native presence. The partnership has also meant that the systems we create could serve and anticipate the needs and goals of Native educators and Tribal leaders. The specialist's experience with Native students and communities also meant he could identify, through relational and professional experience, students who weren't properly identified as Native in federal race and ethnicity paperwork. For example, he helped us identify students in the Title VI program who had documented Tribal affiliation but

were not listed as Native. Additionally, as we strive for maximum representation, we increase Native student and family inclusivity, which helps more students identify as Native. In other words, good practice creates a system in which data continues to improve through positive community representation.

The partnership informed which data visualizations could be created to support school and Tribal leaders. For example, we can disaggregate our data to identify the distribution of Tribal affiliation in our district. These data can help Tribal Nations with student counts for their education programs, inform funding priorities and grants, and even honor graduates. Further, it can guide customized instruction when implementing the state Tribal history and sovereignty curriculum. To expand our accountability and oversight, our district presents our data work to Tribal leadership during our biannual work sessions. These opportunities also allow us to address data issues that are relevant and impactful for them.

### EXPLORING THE DATA

In addition to noting that significantly more students identify as AI/AN than previously recognized, new findings emerged surrounding outcomes of interest for public K-12 schools. One of the most important outcomes of a public K-12 school district is ensuring that students graduate. When we examine our most recent AI/AN data using the official count, we find that 64% (7) of our AI/AN students graduated in 4 years, compared to 85% (898) in the all-students group (Table 1). However, using the maximum representation method, we see that 78% (42) of students graduated. This is important for two reasons. First, using the maximum representation method shows that the gap between AI/AN students and all students is reduced by two-thirds. In other words, our AI/AN students are graduating at much higher rates than previously recognized. Second, we can identify eight AI/AN students who are continuing into a fifth year of high school and who may need additional culturally relevant support to graduate.

Table 1

#### Graduation Rates for the Class of 2024

	# of students in the cohort	# of students dropping out	# of students continuing into 5th year	# of students graduating
Official AI/AN Count	11	1 (9%)	3 (27%)	7 (64%)
Maximum Identification	54	4 (7%)	8 (15%)	42 (78%)
All Students	1,055	82 (8%)	75 (7%)	898 (85%)

Another key metric is attendance, as shown in Table 2. In our district, we examine the number of classes missed due to excused or unexcused absences. We define *regular attenders* as students who miss fewer than 5% of class periods, *at-risk attenders* as those who miss 5% to 10% of class periods, and *chronically absent* as those who miss 10% or more of class periods (North Thurston Public Schools, 2021). When examining our second-semester data from 2023-2024, using the official count, we see that 60.7% (94) of our AI/AN students were chronically absent. However, using the maximum identification count, the rate drops to 48.9% (361). With more accurate counting, although our AI/AN students are still more often absent than the *All Students* group, the gap is much smaller.

Table 2

#### Attendance Rates in Semester 2, 2023-2024 School Year

	# of regular attenders	# of at-risk attenders	# of chronically absent attenders	Total
Official AI/AN Count	27 (17.4%)	34 (21.9%)	94 (60.7%)	155 (100%)
Maximum Identification	170 (22.9%)	211 (28.4%)	361 (48.9%)	742 (100%)
All Students	4,443 (33.1%)	4,088 (30.4%)	4,907 (36.5%)	13,438 (100%)

### CONCLUSION

The influence of data in education requires practitioners to critically examine how data collection and practices inform, obscure, or omit student representation. Utilizing critical Native theories and research can illuminate uninterrogated biases and inform pathways to improved practices. Maximum representation practices can more accurately identify the diversity

of Native presence and provide more accurate data to inform educational decision-making, resource allocation, and evidence of the efficacy of educational practices and policies. Maximum representation likewise supports data sovereignty in the necessary equal collaboration and accountability with and to Native Peoples and the affirmation that Native identity is a racial and political reality. The work creates new opportunities and spaces to develop and grow mutually beneficial and reciprocal relationships with sovereign Tribal partners. The practices and criticality of our work continue to inform the creation of data systems that accurately represent and provide our district with the most accurate information possible to make decisions that can benefit all students.

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*Manuscript submitted: **September 16, 2024***

*Manuscript revised: **July 17, 2025***

*Accepted for publication: **August 2, 2025***