

KNOWLEDGE PAPER

Maximum Representation in the State of Washington

INTRODUCTION

The misclassification and under-identification of Native, multiracial, and multiethnic students in public K-12 schools (and other spaces) are long-standing issues in the State of Washington and across the United States (U.S.). When a student identifies on school forms as both American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) and of an additional race(s)/ethnicity(ies), data about the student's tribal affiliation is frequently obscured through reporting processes. As a result, tribal nations have a difficult time tracking and understanding Native American students' educational achievement and participation, impeding tribal sovereignties and tribal consultation within schools and violating government-to-government rights.

In response, **Maximum Representation, or the processes of including every student's tribal affiliation(s), race(s), and/or ethnicity(ies) throughout data collection, analysis, and reporting, ensures that every dimension of a student's identity is honored.** While tribal nations have been calling for and working on ways to increase data representation for years, the adoption of these practices by non-tribal partners has been gradual. This knowledge report is the first of two reports on Maximum Representation. This report focuses on the issues and histories that Maximum Representation addresses, while a second report will go into the application of Maximum Representation at the school district level. This report emerged from conversations between the Office of Native Education (ONE) and Washington STEM staff members, particularly Dr. Jenée Myers Twitchell, Tana Peterman, Angie Mason-Smith, and Susan Hou. This report is a collaborative effort between Dr. Mona Halcomb, Dr. Kenneth Olden, Jenny Serpa MPA, ONE, and Washington STEM. While data discrepancies are a nationwide issue, this report focuses on the State of Washington and Washington STEM's partnerships with Native scholars/experts/community members who work with and serve Native students in Washington.

CATEGORIES FOR AI/AN DATA COLLECTION PRE-K-12 STUDENTS IN WASHINGTON

Native American - Ethnic/Racial Category	Number of Students (state reporting)	Number of Students (federal reporting)
AI/AN - Non-Hispanic	19,063	13,547
AI/AN - Hispanic	30,014	0
AI/AN - Two or more races	19,120	0
TOTAL	68,197	13,547

Figure 1. AI/AN pre-K-12 student numbers reported in the State of Washington. There are large discrepancies between state and federal reports when it comes to AI/AN students with additional racial and ethnic identities. This table was shared by Dr. Kenneth Olden and Elese Washines ABD, and the data was accessed from the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) Comprehensive Education Data and Research System (CEDARS) on April 20, 2023.

This knowledge report is written in the format of a series of conversations between the collaborators of this report. We do so to exemplify the relationships between the collaborators, and at times we mention collaborators by their first names to signal how we refer to one another. However, we do so not to erase the immense expertise and training that each collaborator embodies. We also include the collaborators' tribal affiliations and settler relations to name the communities that we are accountable to and that have shaped our perspectives. The conversations took place between Susan Hou, a Washington STEM Community Partner Fellow, and our partners. Susan is a Han Taiwanese settler and a Ph.C. at the University of Washington, College of Education. This report describes how Susan and the staff of Washington STEM are still learning alongside Native experts and communities. As an organization, Washington STEM owns up to the limits of our knowledge while we continue to gather resources to further the Maximum Representation conversation.

OUR BEGINNINGS: THE HISTORY OF COLONIALISM IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

The lands, waters, and air we have come to recognize as the state of Washington are the traditional homelands of 29 federally recognized Tribal Nations, each operating with their own government as politically-independent sovereignties that have government-to-government relationships with local, state, and federal governments. The impacts of colonialism disrupted tribal nations' self-governance historically, including how tribal nations access Native student data.

Jenny Serpa MPA is a college faculty member of Peruvian Quechua and Scottish heritage living in the traditional territory of the Nisqually. She currently teaches various topics, including history, federal Indian law, and research. With her expertise, Jenny shared how more than **90%¹ of Native students receive public education because of the long-term impacts of colonization**, contrary to stereotypes that most Native kids go to tribal schools. These impacts include historical events and colonial violences, such as boarding schools, the U.S. government's efforts to relocate Native Americans to cities in the 1950s,² and social workers' abduction of Native children prior to the Indian Child Welfare Act in 1978. Specifically, in 1952, the U.S. federal government created the Urban Relocation Program, incentivizing Native Americans to leave reservations for cities. This was then followed by the Termination and Relocation Act of 1953, which terminated federal recognition of reservations at that time. These federal and state relocation efforts aimed to assimilate Native Americans into White societies. The U.S. government's efforts to assimilate and erase Native communities and tribal nations then resulted in high rates of Native peoples moving across the U.S., and now their children are in public education systems in every state.

These injustices became the backdrop to Native American activism and resistance in the 1960s and the 1970s, eventually prompting legislation aimed at supporting tribal sovereignties and self-determination. Current federal funding for Native education programs is one legacy of Native resistance and self-advocacy. **Federal funding for Native education should be perceived as additive to Native students' education, respecting tribal sovereignties and honoring government-to-government relations.** To apply this to practice, Jenny asks teachers to think,

¹ According to the National Indian Education Association (NIEA), more than 93% of American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) and 92% of Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander (NHOPI) students attend public schools. <https://www.niea.org/native-education-research>

² Several news articles have covered this history, including this story from APM Reports: <https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2019/11/01/uprooted-the-1950s-plan-to-erase-indian-country>

“If a Native student is failing a class, we need to ask 'what if they were non-tribal? What would you do?' Because that's what you need to do. It's your responsibility to provide the education and the supports needed to that child because that child is a U.S. citizen, that is a child that you are responsible for. (...) The Title VI Indian Education money, or the Title III money, those have very specific supportive aims. It's additive. It's in addition to, and not a replacement.”

In addition, because of the colonization, **Native families, caregivers, and students may distrust the government and their handling of Native student data.** Families, parents, and caregivers have shared with Jenny that they do not always want to share their own Native identities on school forms. Jenny shared that,

“Some tribal families have shared that when their student(s) identify as tribal they are pulled from classes, asked to do even more forms, or received a lot more communications. While these are likely intended to engage students and families, some parents have reported they just become overwhelming. In addition, identifying as tribal also leads to students experiencing microaggressions or being asked to represent the tribal voice in the school. These poor experiences have led to parents opting to withhold their students' identity so they aren't treated in a bad way.”

The legacies of colonization are important to recognize when thinking about Maximum Representation and the data collection processes related to Native students.

MAXIMUM REPRESENTATION: DEFINITIONS, PROBLEM SPACE, ONGOING EFFORTS

This section focuses on the conversations with Dr. Mona Halcomb and Dr. Kenneth Olden. Dr. Mona Halcomb previously worked as the Director of Education with the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation and as an Indian Education Specialist with the Oregon Department of Education. Mona is a citizen of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation and she currently works as the Native Student Success Program Supervisor at ONE. Dr. Kenneth Olden is the Director of Assessment and Data at Wapato School District. He is also a descendant of the Yakama Nation as well as a data analyst who has been working on creating best practices for applying the conceptual framework of Maximum Representation to student data in Washington's school districts.

How is Student Demographics Data Collected and Reported?

In Washington State, as a student enters a K-12 school, they are asked to fill out a student form to report their race, ethnicity, and tribal nation affiliation—and they are encouraged to check all boxes that apply to their identity. Then, school districts typically have detailed disaggregated data about each student's tribal affiliations, race, and ethnic identities, which is collected in the districts' Student Information System (SIS). This data is reported to OSPI's Comprehensive Education Data and Research System (CEDARS), where the data is aggregated up into a single racial or ethnic demographic and later reported in this aggregated form. Figure 2, shared by Kenneth, outlines the current process for how student data is handled by state systems. For example, in the second row of Figure 2, a student who self-reports as AI/AN, Asian, and Hispanic/Latino is later reported as only Hispanic/Latino.

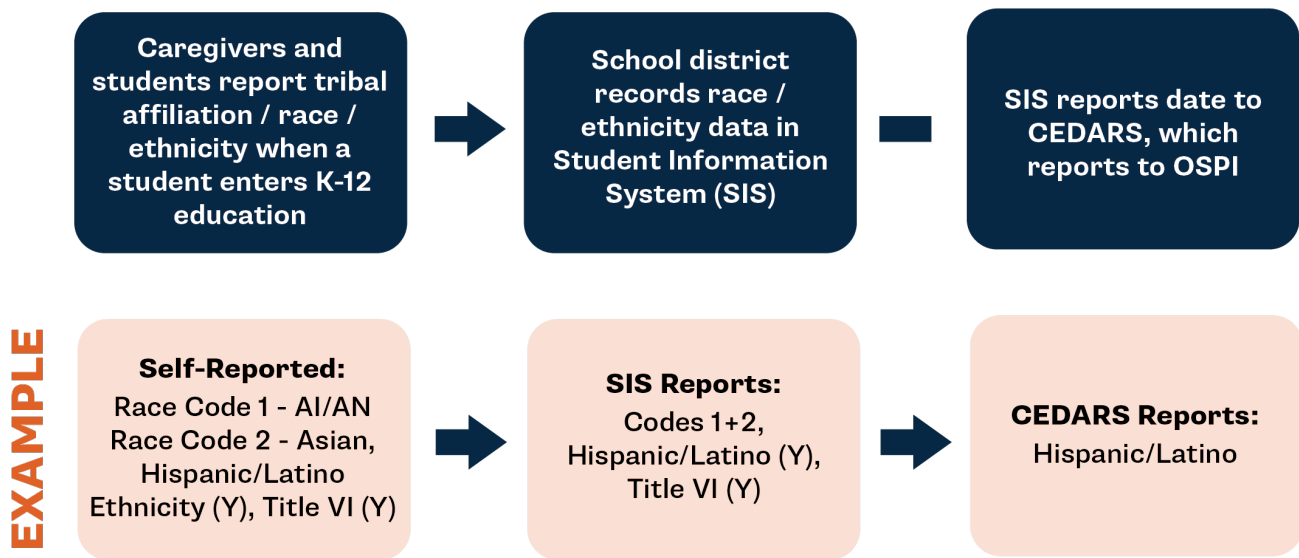


Figure 2. The process of how student data is collected, stored, and reported in the State of Washington. The row above abstracts this process while the row below gives an example of how student identities might be erased in this process. Dr. Kenneth Olden shared a previous version of this graph, which was then included in this report.

Kenneth was clear that **ultimately, the goal of Maximum Representation is not just about getting the student count right, but about supporting student needs and academic goals by having quality data.** Inaccurate student demographics data could lead to a poor understanding of student needs. For example, this could impact a school district’s understanding of who is represented in their student body, and, relatedly, what kinds of culturally-sustaining education programs and support to provide. **An undercount of Native students could also lead to the suppression of Native student data in educational research, impacting our understanding of Native students’ academic performances.** In more severe cases, an undercount of Native students could impact tribal consultations and violate government-to-government policies.

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On a school district level, since student data is self-reported and caregivers might not be aware of the impact, **schools must put in the effort to reach out to families and caregivers to educate them about the impact of the student forms.** As mentioned above, there might be hesitation from Native families, caregivers, and students to provide their identifications. Having this awareness could help school administrators ensure that Native students are supported. Aside from the race and ethnicity student form usually provided when students enter school, there is an ED 506 form (i.e., the Indian Student Eligibility Certification Form for Title VI Indian Education Formula Grant Program). This form is directly tied to Title VI federal funding distributed to each school district. However, the ED 506 is not typically part of the standard enrollment packet. Sometimes, ED 506 forms are provided after students self-report as Native. Sometimes, school districts rely on CEDARS data reporting, which undercounts AI/AN students by excluding those who also identify with an additional race(s) or ethnicity(ies). This contributes to an undercounting of students qualified for Title VI and a loss of federal funding for school districts. So, **for school districts, it is important to include ED 506 forms in enrollment packets and have an understanding of the Native student population in each school district.**

In addition, through Kenneth’s work with school districts, he found that sometimes data is not centralized or digitized, which leads to gaps in the CEDARS data. By inquiring into gaps in Native student data, Kenneth worked with school districts to locate and digitize data from students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds as well. He said,

“That question comes up every once in a while, ‘Well, if you focus on this group, what happens to the rest of the groups?’ The answer is **usually if you focus on the most marginalized students, everybody is going to have a better experience.** So if you focus on the areas where the system doesn’t do a good job, you’re probably going to benefit the entire system.”

Given that Native students face numerous systemic inequities, serving Native students could improve many system-wide issues (e.g., systemic racism, being unhoused, and disproportionate disciplinary actions). While Native students hold unique lived and historical experiences, the system-wide issues they face are also felt by other student demographics.

Tribal Consultations and School Districts

In terms of tribal consultations, Dr. Mona Halcomb shared that the new requirements of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (i.e., the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) under section 8538 of the ESEA, as amended by the ESSA and HB 5252) mandates that school districts have to consult with tribal nations. From Mona’s experiences working at ONE, she noted that different **tribal nations are at different stages in their consultation processes, ranging from minimal interactions to years of continued relationships.**

On more than one occasion, Kenneth met with some tribal nations who were trying to start a formal consultation process with neighboring districts, but unsure of what data tribal nations could (or should) be requesting. His collaborations indicated a gap where data sovereignty is not being recognized or respected. **There is a need for Native data expertise at state and regional levels to improve consultations and communications between school districts and tribal nations.**

Mona also highlighted the role of tribal nations’ self-determination concerning data. In her previous position as the Indian Education Specialist with the Oregon Department of Education, she invited the nine federally recognized tribal nations in Oregon to be a part of a data report. Only seven out of the nine tribal nations chose to be a part of this report, while two chose not to have data-sharing agreements. This speaks to tribal data sovereignty and how **tribal nations always have the agency to opt out of data projects, even state- or federally-mandated projects.**

The Indigenous Education State Leaders Network (IESLN)

To highlight some ongoing efforts around Maximum Representation, the Indigenous Education State Leaders Network (IESLN) is a community of practice that includes state education agency staff and contractors who are working to support Indigenous students in 23 member states, including Washington.³ IESLN member states have been meeting regularly since 2016, and have been working on several different projects. Mona is currently on one of these projects, the Indigenous Student Identification (ISI) Project, which “works directly with state and local education agencies, tribes, federal agencies, and national Indigenous education professionals and organizations to improve equity through better Indigenous student identification policies and practices.”

³ The language here in the report is paraphrased from IESLN’s website, <https://www.iesln.org/>.

The ISI Project has created many important reports and maps that critically inform the public about AI/AN undercounting across the U.S., at state and district levels. An interactive map allows users to immediately access the official count, inclusive count, and undercount of AI/AN students in every state and district. Currently, the map shows that there may be as many as 35,909 (75.1%) of AI/AN students being undercounted—a staggering number to be potentially excluded from the official count. The map can be accessed [here](#) and a detailed report can be accessed [here](#).

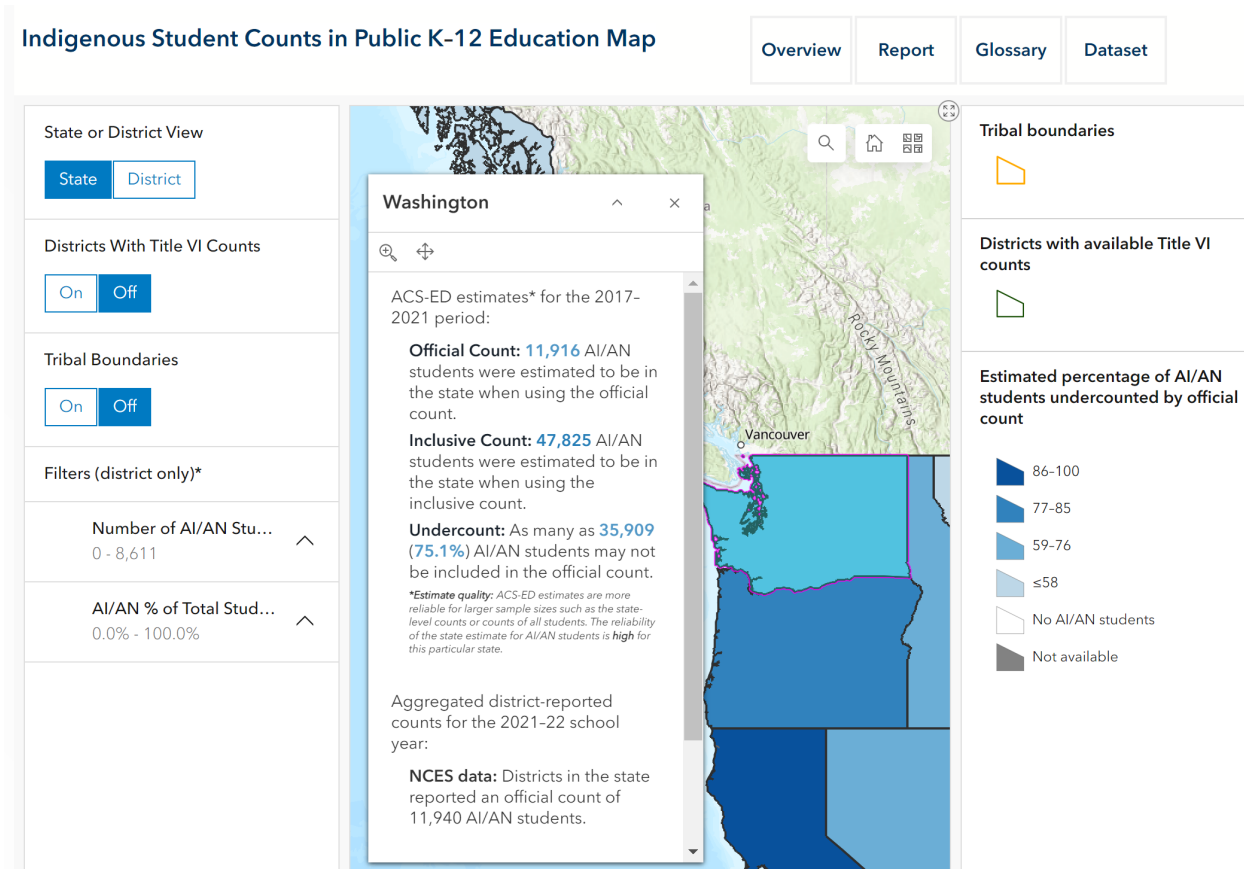


Figure 3. A snapshot of IESLN’s website, the ISI project, that shows the official, inclusive, and undercount of AI/AN students in the state of Washington. This map can be further disaggregated to the counts of AI/AN students in each school district across the U.S. and U.S. Territories. This snapshot was accessed on March 14, 2024.

OUR LEGACIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS: WHAT STILL NEEDS TO BE DONE

To conclude, Maximum Representation addresses an array of issues around student demographics data and could provide many improvements. This includes improving educational opportunities for Native, multiracial, and multiethnic children in our school systems. This could improve educational research, avoid the suppression of AI/AN student data, and contribute to the accuracy of data to advance racial equity and decolonization (e.g., understanding the postsecondary trajectories of AI/AN students). This could also increase collaborations between tribal governments and school districts, solidifying ongoing government-to-government relations between tribal nations and the federal government.

To this end, the collaborators on this report have summarized several recommendations on different levels:

On the school district level

- Educate school administrators on the implications of Native student enrollment and ensure that administrators are prepared to communicate with Native families and caregivers about these implications.
- Disaggregate student demographics data for a more accurate understanding of student performance and needs. While federal reporting requires aggregate categories, school districts can disaggregate data to create inclusive counts of Native students and even counts of students affiliated with each specific tribal nation.
- Enhance communication and relationships with tribal nations and tribal communities represented in each school district to co-create strategies that align with Native student needs and assets.
- Increase data analysis and research capabilities at both K-12 districts and tribal organizations to enact Maximum Representation at the school district level.
- Create policies/procedures for effective data sharing, data sovereignty, and tribal consultation.

On the state agency level

- Report accurate AI/AN data by disaggregating data and having inclusive counts whenever possible. This may be tricky when considering the confidentiality of student information and the related [data suppression methods](#), but if disaggregated data reports are inappropriate at certain school districts, these reports could be shared at the statewide level or in districts with a greater proportion of AI/AN students.
- Collect and accurately report tribal affiliations of students whenever possible. Similar to the last point, there are contexts where reporting tribal affiliations may or may not be appropriate. Reporting the specific tribal nation is critical to ensure students are supported and to honor government-to-government relations.
- Increase accountability around accurate student demographics data. This could include:
 - Increasing Native data expertise in state agencies.
 - Conducting regular meetings between state agencies on data quality and data sovereignty that involve tribal partners and Native data experts.
 - Creating a statewide coalition for state agencies and Native data experts to meet and push forward legislated policies.
- Create statewide policies that reinforce Maximum Representation at school district and state levels.

Finally, while much of this report's data focused on AI/AN students, we also want to advocate for more research, policy, and practices around additional Native student identities (e.g., Pacific Islanders).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Government-to-Government Trainings at OSPI](#), which are ongoing and happen annually
- [Native Youth Count](#), a flyer with information on education programs and funding concerning Native students
- [Strategies for Improving the Accuracy of Native Student Identification \(REL Northwest\)](#), a video from the Institute of Education Sciences to provide information for school staff and teachers
- [Best Practices for American Indian and Alaska Native Data Collection](#), by the Urban Indian Health Institute
- [Indigenous Education State Leaders Network](#) and the [Indigenous Student Identification \(ISI\) project](#)