

Essential Understandings Regarding Montana Indians



Indian Education for All
Montana Office of Public Instruction

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Developed and Published by
Montana Office of Public Instruction
Indian Education for All Unit

The foundation for guiding Indian Education for All began in 1999 when American Indian educators from the Montana tribes met in Helena to discuss the most important issues regarding Montana tribes that all Montanans need to understand. The product of those discussions is the publication, “Essential Understandings Regarding Montana Indians.”

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Introduction

These seven elements are the guiding principles behind Indian Education for All. Tribal histories and contemporary tribal members, governments, and nations have shaped and are shaping the social and political landscape of Montana. An educated and contemporary Montana citizen has basic knowledge of Montana tribes.

Essential Understandings:

1. There is great diversity among the twelve sovereign tribes of Montana in their languages, cultures, histories, and governments. Each tribe has a distinct and unique cultural heritage that contributes to modern Montana.
2. Just as there is great diversity among tribal nations, there is great diversity among individual American Indians as identity is developed, defined, and redefined by entities, organizations, and people. There is no generic American Indian.
3. The ideologies of Native traditional beliefs and spirituality persist into modern day life as tribal cultures, traditions, and languages are still practiced by many American Indian people and are incorporated into how tribes govern and manage their affairs. Additionally, each tribe has its own oral histories, which are as valid as written histories. These histories predate the “discovery” of North America.
4. Though there have been tribal peoples living successfully on the North American lands for millennia, reservations are lands that have been reserved by or for tribes for their exclusive use as permanent homelands. Some were created through treaties, while others were created by statutes and executive orders. The principle that land should be acquired from tribes only through their consent with treaties involved three assumptions: I. Both parties to treaties were sovereign powers; II. Indian tribes had some form of transferable title to the land; III. Acquisition of Indian lands was solely a government matter not to be left to individual colonists or states.
5. There were many federal policies put into place throughout American history that have affected Indian people and continue to shape who they are today. Many of these policies conflicted with one another. Much of Indian history can be related through several major federal policy periods:
 - Colonization/Colonial Period, 1492-1800s
 - Treaty-Making and Removal Period, 1778-1871
 - Reservation Period – Allotment and Assimilation, 1887-1934
 - Tribal Reorganization Period, 1934-1953
 - Termination and Relocation Period, 1953-1968
 - Self-Determination Period, 1975-Present
6. History is a story most often related through the subjective experience of the teller. With the inclusion of more and varied voices, histories are being rediscovered and revised. History told from American Indian perspectives frequently conflicts with the stories mainstream historians tell.
7. American Indian tribal nations are inherent sovereign nations and they possess sovereign powers, separate and independent from the federal and state governments. However, under the American legal system, the extent and breadth of self-governing powers are not the same for each tribe.

Background

In 1972, Montana rewrote its constitution. The constitutional delegates wrote, in Article X, Section 1(2), "The state recognizes the distinct and unique cultural heritage of American Indians and is committed in its educational goals to the preservation of their cultural integrity." In 1999, the Montana Legislature passed House Bill 528 into law, which codified the constitutional intent as MCA 20-1-501. This law is known as Indian Education for All and states, "... every Montanan, whether Indian or non-Indian, be encouraged to learn about the distinct and unique heritage of American Indians in a culturally responsive manner; and . . . every educational agency and all educational personnel will work cooperatively with Montana tribes ... when providing instruction and implementing an educational goal. . . . It is also the intent of this part, predicated on the belief that all school personnel should have an understanding and awareness of American Indian tribes to help them relate effectively with American Indian students and parents, that educational personnel provide means by which school personnel will gain an understanding of and appreciation for the American Indian people."

Immediately after passage of Indian Education for All the Office of Public Instruction brought together representatives from all the tribes in Montana and created the Seven Essential Understandings Regarding Montana Indians. These essential understandings are some of the major issues all Montana tribes have in common. In Montana, we recognized the significance of the Indigenous voice. We knew that if our efforts were to succeed, the information taught needed to be coming from the tribes themselves.

Since the creation of this historic document, other states have developed their own sets of essential understandings for the tribal nations in their respective states, and several of these include Colorado, Nevada, North Dakota, Oregon, and South Dakota. In addition, the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian developed a national set of essential understandings based on our model.

Acknowledgements

This revised version of the Essential Understandings was updated in conjunction with educators from across Montana including several of the original participants from the 1999 meetings - Norma Bixby (Northern Cheyenne), Julie Cajune (Salish), and Joyce Silverthorne (Salish).

The review process included members of the Montana Advisory Council for Indian Education.

Special thanks go to Dr. Heather Cahoon (Pend d' Oreille) who synthesized the comments and input received during our revision process and provided additional background information.

Publication Note: When referring to the indigenous peoples of Alaska, Hawaii, or the 48 contiguous states of the United States, it is appropriate to use the terms "Alaska Native," "Native Hawaiian," and "American Indian" respectively. While the term "Native American" came into the usage in the 1960s, most tribal groups in Montana refer to themselves as "American Indian." "Indigenous" is a term that has recently come into common usage in national and international realms, but being as tribally specific as possible is always the best approach to using the correct terms of identification and description. Multiple terms are used in this document in addition to relevant tribal specific references.

Essential Understanding 6

History is a story most often related through the subjective experience of the teller. With the inclusion of more and varied voices, histories are being rediscovered and revised. History told from American Indian perspectives frequently conflicts with the stories mainstream historians tell.

KEY CONCEPTS

- History is a story most often related through the subjective experience of the teller.
- Much of America's history has been told from the Euro-American perspective. Only recently have American Indians begun to write about and retell history from an indigenous perspective.
- A huge amount of political capital is involved in the telling of history.
- History is a primary vehicle through which power is distributed and used; thus, the whole notion of political identity and ideology and who the United States is as a nation plays into how the story is told, and who has been privileged to tell the story.
- It is critical that history curricula include the stories and experiences of individual men and women of diverse racial, ethnic, and religious groups.
- Providing students with textbooks, primary source documents, and surviving oral traditions allows them to gain an objective view of history and provides them with a historical context in which to situate and understand the experiences and perspectives of these groups in American society today.
- By giving students the opportunity to view our past through the eyes of many, they can begin to create their own view of our collective history, understand the present, and become better prepared to engage the problems of the future.

BACKGROUND

Our stories play a decisive role in defining our identities; they shape how we view ourselves, the world around us, and our place within it. Just as tribal oral traditions have shaped the identities, views, and values of tribal people, written histories have shaped the identities, views, and values of Americans. However, "there is little evidence in classroom materials – textbooks, curricula, national learning standards – of important historical and contemporary events that include American Indian knowledge and perspective, and little or no integration of these events into the larger narratives of American and world history."²⁹ As a result, history told from American Indian perspectives frequently conflicts with the stories mainstream historians tell.

Take, for example, the implications inherent in the assertion that Columbus "discovered" America. In reality, as we know, there were millions of indigenous people already living here; "Columbus and his successors were not coming into an empty wilderness, but into a world which in some places was as densely populated as Europe itself, where the culture was complex, where human relations were more egalitarian than in Europe."³⁰

Similarly, referring to Lewis and Clark as the "Corp of Discovery" implies they were entering an uninhabited country waiting to be claimed. Salish educator and historian, Julie Cajune states, "There is a huge political amount of capital in the telling of history. Alan Munslow said that history is never innocent storytelling. It's a primary vehicle through which power is distributed and used. And so, the

whole notion of political identity and ideology and who the United States is as a nation plays into how the story is told, and who has gotten to tell the story.”³¹

Because of this, it is crucial our history curricula include the view “from the shore” to balance the view “from the ship.” Likewise, it is important to include the perspectives of individuals and not just nations or governments. As Howard Zinn points out, history has often been told as the story of a nation, but “nations are not communities and never have been. The history of any country [...] conceals fierce conflicts of interest between conquerors and conquered, masters and slaves, capitalists and workers, dominators and dominated in race and sex.”³² The histories of nations thus provide an inaccurate and simplistic view of history that handicaps students by keeping them from fully understanding and being able to contextualize the complicated situations arising in the world today.

Therefore, it is critically important that history curricula include the stories and experiences of individual “men and women of diverse racial, ethnic, and religious groups.”³³ Providing students with textbooks, primary source documents, and surviving oral traditions allows them to gain an objective view of history. It also provides them “with an historical context in which to situate and understand the experiences and perspectives of these groups in American society today.”³⁴

By giving students the opportunity to view our past through the eyes of many, they can begin to create their own view of our collective history, understand the present, and become better prepared to engage the problems of the future.



Fort Parker site of the original Crow Agency just outside Livingston, near the Crazy Mountains where Crow Chief Plenty Coup had a powerful vision. Sheep Mountain is in the background.