

Interventions to Increase High School Graduation Rates for Native American Students

— September 2019 —

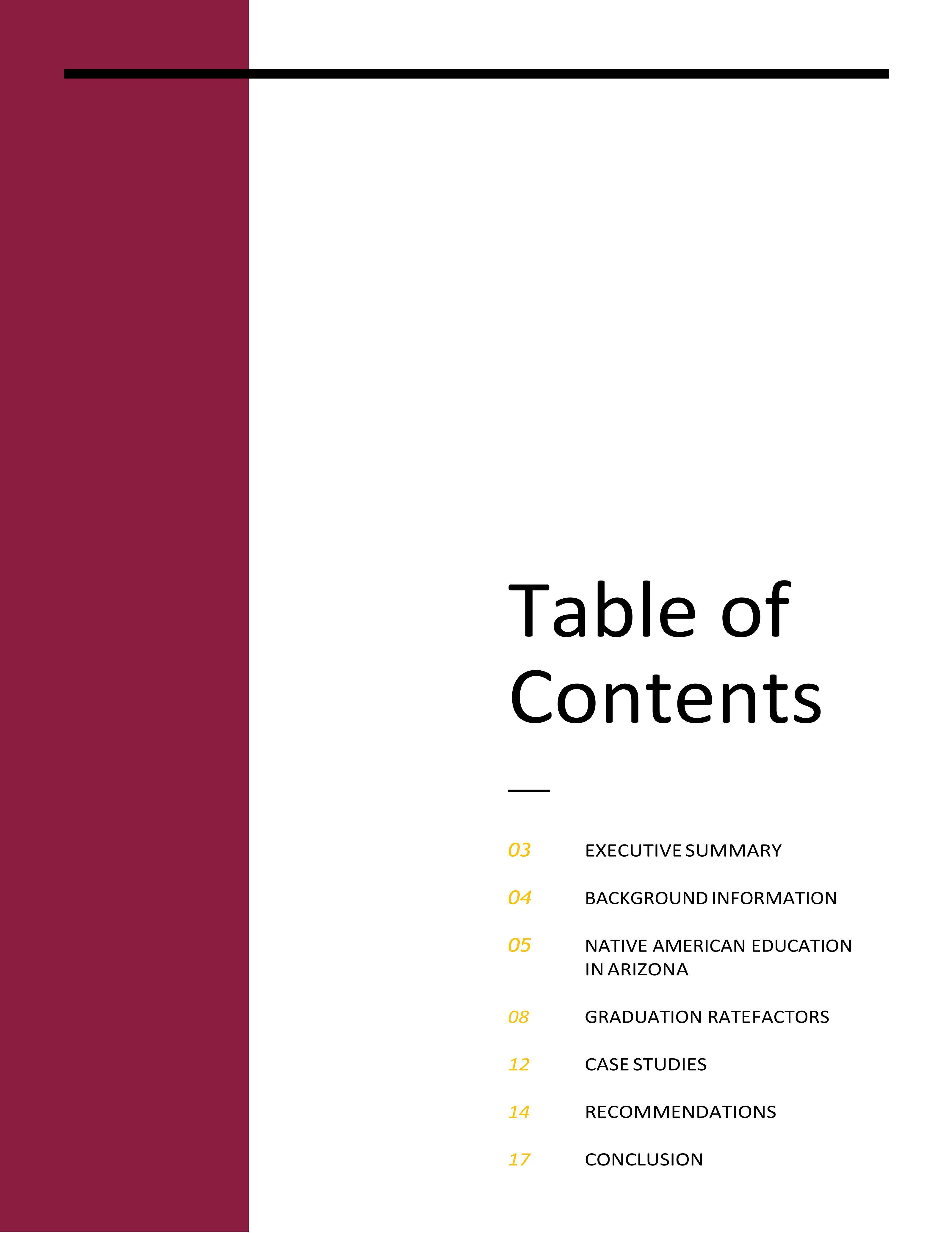


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Executive Summary

Continuing to raise the national high school graduation rate is of the utmost importance within the education sector. Although many student populations have seen significant gains in their graduation rates, Native American students have struggled to make the same strides.

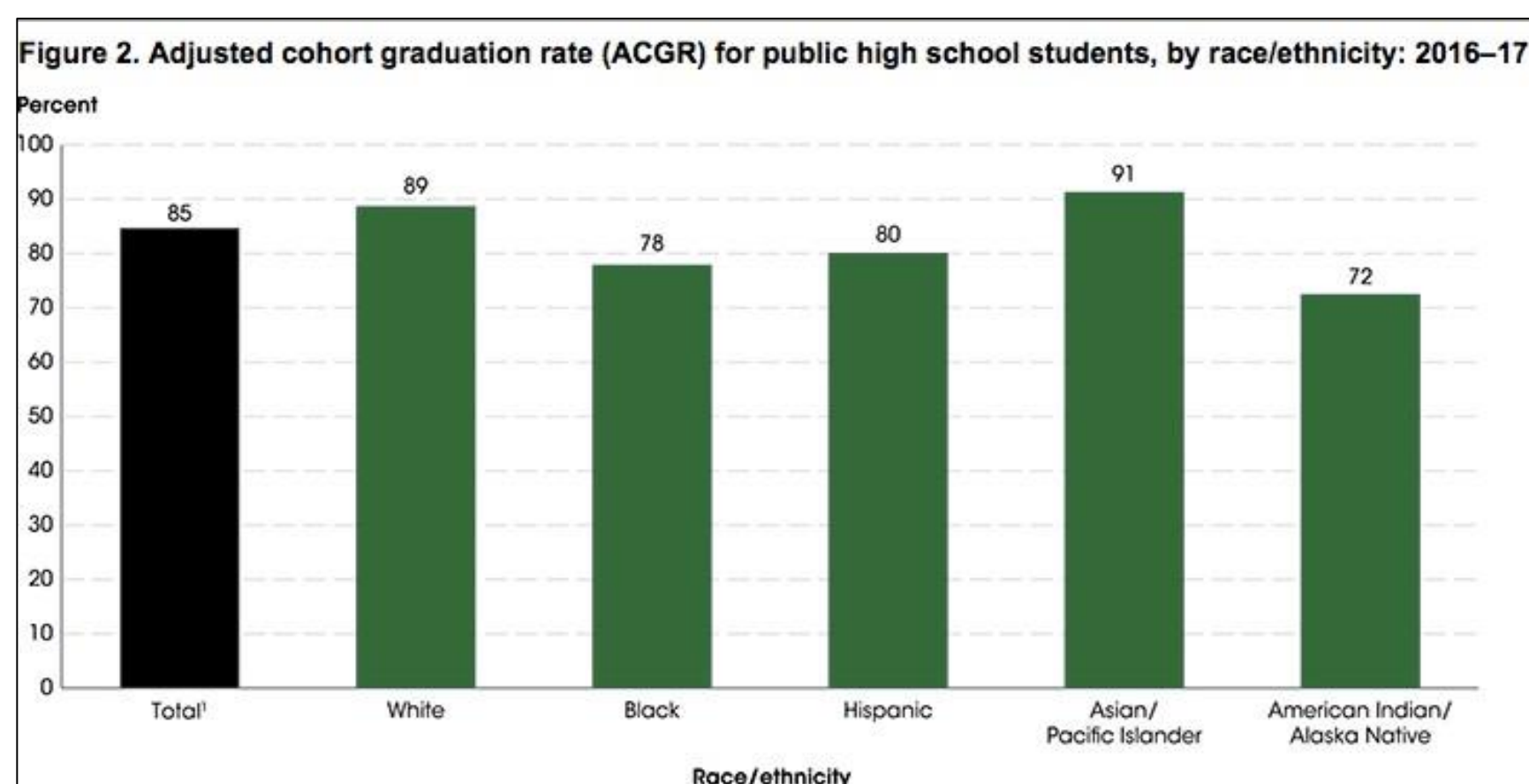
This paper explores many of the factors that contribute to the Native Americans high school graduation rate, and the positive impacts that can be made by educators and policymakers to improve these rates over time.

Initial research indicates that incorporating Native culture, language, and history into curriculum can diminish the invisibility that many students feel and help decrease the high levels of discrimination and suspensions that students endure. In addition, to create a sense of trust between Native students and their families, schools should strive to build connections with tribal leaders and get their input on what Native students might need. Finally, schools should maintain rigorous graduation requirements for all their students, and create tutoring/mentoring programs to help their students graduate with high levels of proficiency. These solutions, and others, will be discussed in the ensuing pages.

Background Information

Native American youth in the United States bring in a unique set of strengths to the schools they attend. Their personal knowledge of Native American history in the United States brings new and important perspectives into the classroom, which are beneficial toward accurately understanding their history and culture. Their method of seeing the overall harmony and unity of specific concepts provides a deeper understanding of classroom topics.

Even with their important strengths and unique methods of learning, the average four-year high school graduation rate for Native students is 72% compared to a national average of about 85% -- placing them at the lowest end of the spectrum compared to any other race or ethnicity (NCES). A study done in 2013 showed that graduation rates in the United States (for all public schools) are rising and rapidly approaching new milestones, with Native American graduation rates slowly improving until 2008, when they began declining again (Swanson).

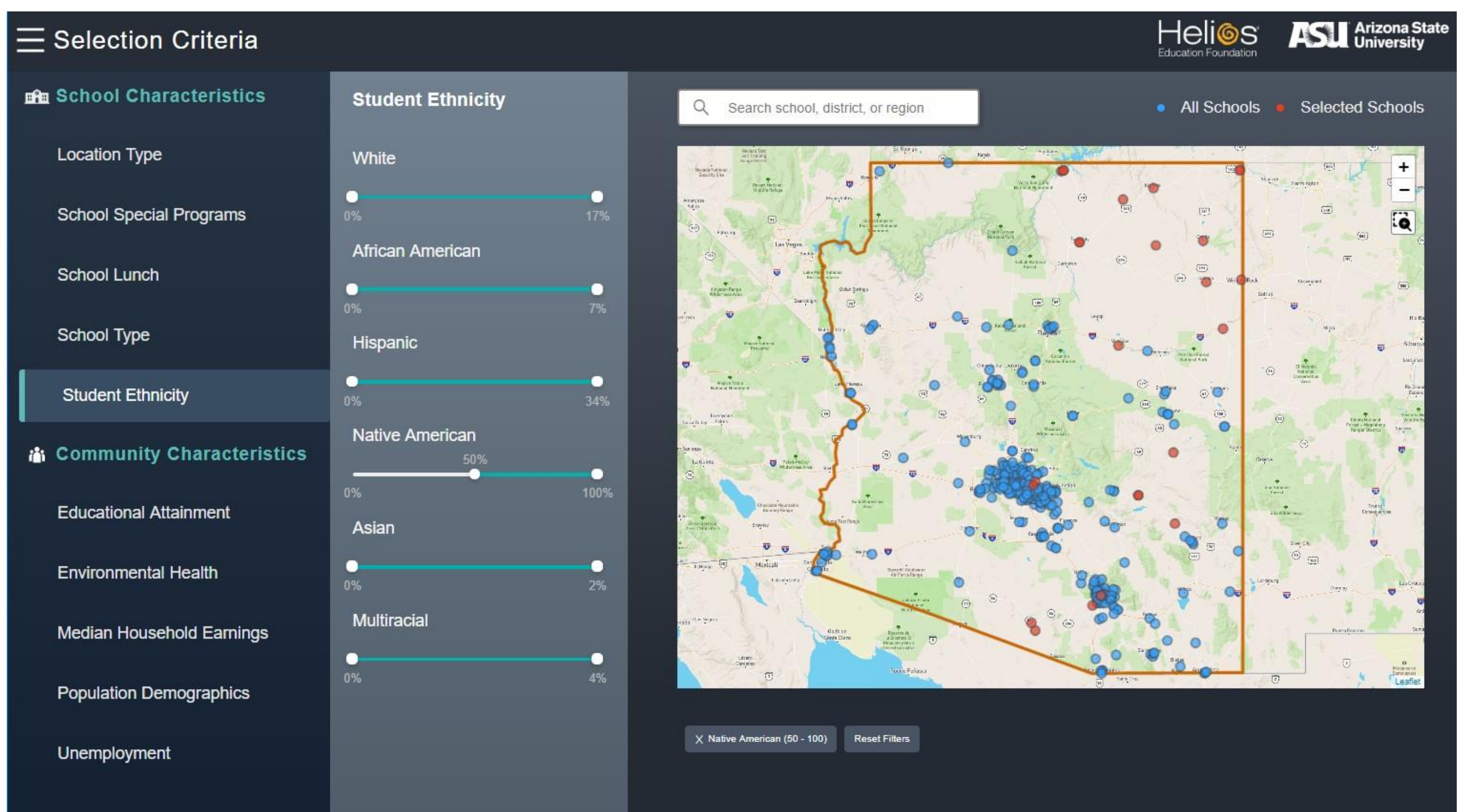


National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019

The causes of these low graduation rates are complex and systematic. They involve issues related to discrimination, microaggressions, invisibility, and an insufficient, inaccurate curriculum of Native American history being taught in school (Clarren). These intricate underlying issues have reshaped the way that Native American students fit into and view the United States' education system. Most of these trends could be related back to the major discrimination that Native Americans experienced in the last century of the United States, and are associated with a genuine distrust of the traditional school system and a lack of intercultural sensitivity in schools by both teachers and students alike.

Native American Education in Arizona

Native American educational attainment rates are alarming at the national level. However, we wanted to understand, at a more nuanced level, how Native American students performed in Arizona. The Decision Center for Educational Excellence (DCEdEx) at Arizona State University has created an Arizona High School Outcomes Tool that allows users to explore school-level data in Arizona. Utilizing this tool, our team identified high schools in Arizona with 50% or more Native American students to understand their unique challenges that they might face in relation to peer institutions.

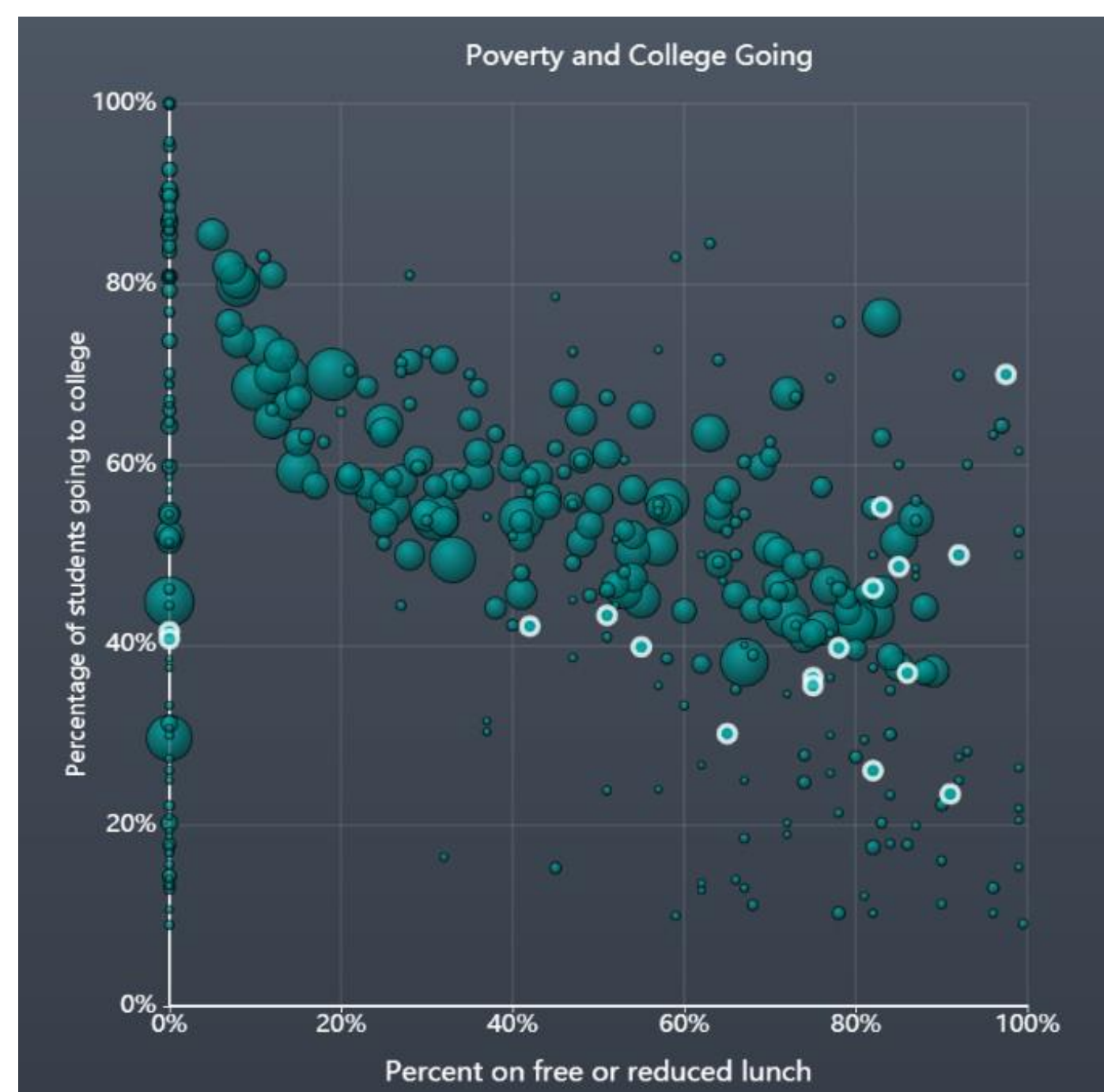
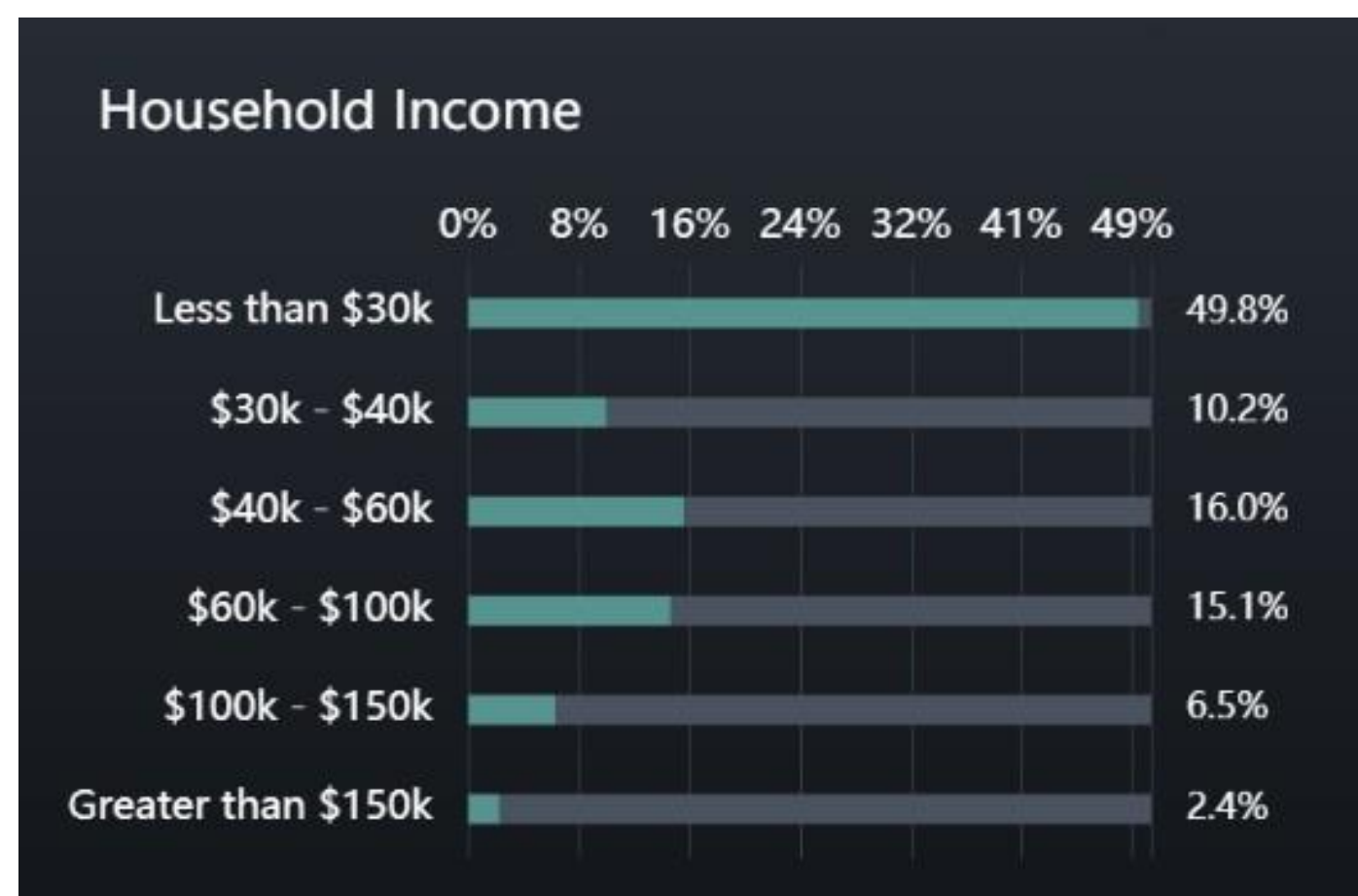


We found that the current high school graduation rate for students in the selected schools was 71.2%, which was 9.5% lower than the State of Arizona's graduation rate of 80.7%.*

*These are the graduation rates for all students within these schools. This does not distinguish between Native American and Non-Native students.

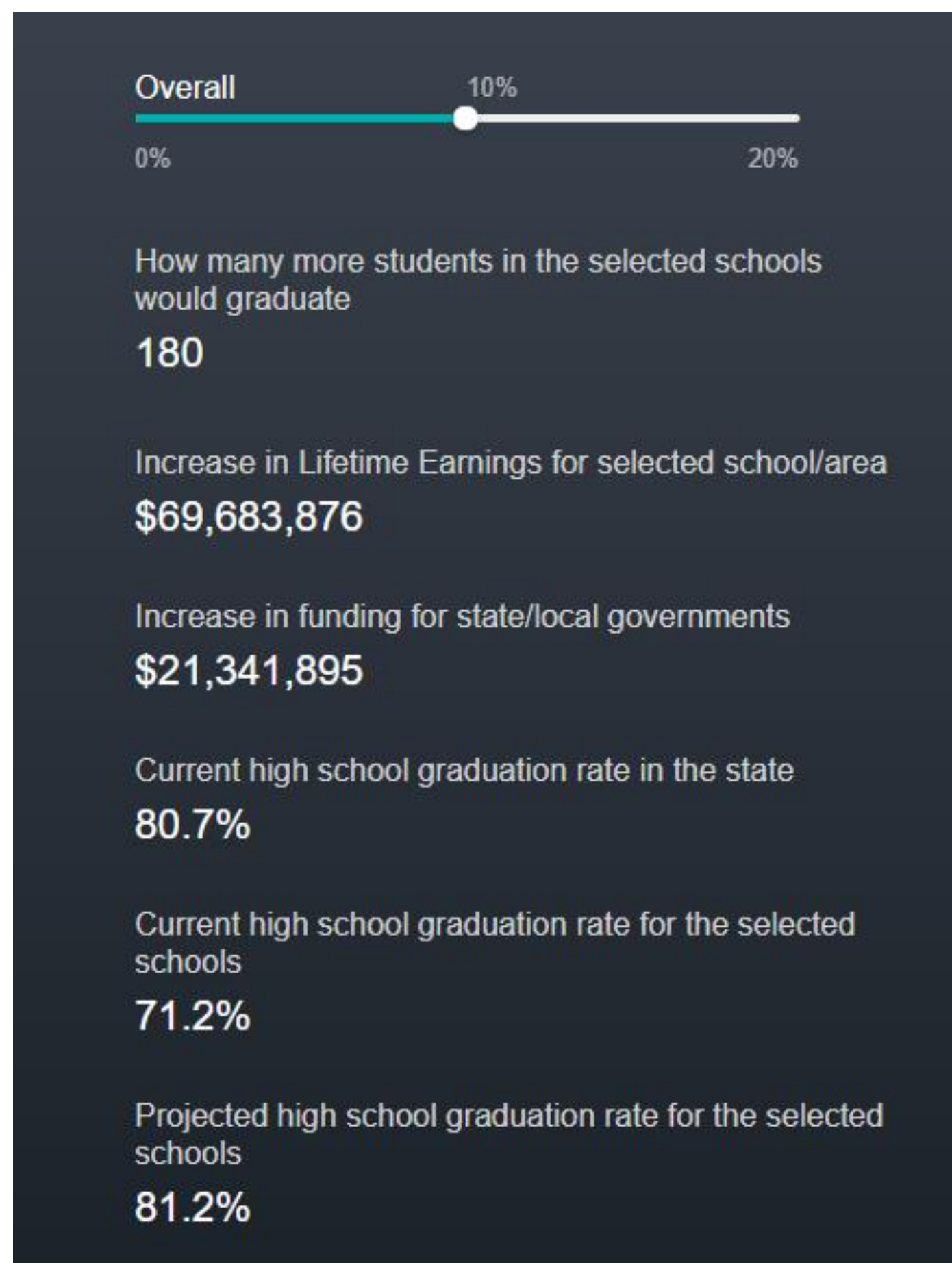
Native American Education in Arizona

Why is the graduation rate for schools with 50% or more Native American students nearly 10% lower than for all students? There are many factors inhibiting Native American students from graduating, one of the most prominent being poverty. The DCEdEx tool shows that about 50% of these students live in households that make under \$30,000 per year and over 31% of these families are on free and reduced lunches. Other factors are chronic absenteeism and high suspension rates, which are both linked to lower graduation rates.



Native American Education in Arizona

The Arizona High School Outcomes Tool also uses the underlying data to show that increasing the graduation rates of these schools by 10% to meet the state average would allow ~180 more students to graduate, would increase their lifetime earnings by nearly \$70 million, and would increase the funding for state/local governments by more than \$21 million (assuming current educational and economic trends remain constant). Improving Native American high school graduation rates is not only a good decision morally, it is a good decision financially.



1. Poverty

Graduation rates are often correlated to a student's economic status, with students living in poverty less likely to succeed in school than students in middle or high incomes. The American Psychological Association found that in 2009, Students in the bottom 20th percentile of family incomes were five times more likely to drop out of high school than those in the highest 20th percentile (Chapman, Laird, Ifill, & Kewal Ramani, 2011, Table 1). Further, the U.S Department of Education Compendium Report showed that between the years 2000-2006, low income students were about twice as likely to dropout as middle-income students (NCES, 34). Thus, poverty is a considerable factor in whether a student stays in school and how well a student does in school.

Using the Arizona High School Outcomes Tool, we found that almost half of students in majority Native American schools have a household income of \$30K or less, and about 30% use food stamps.



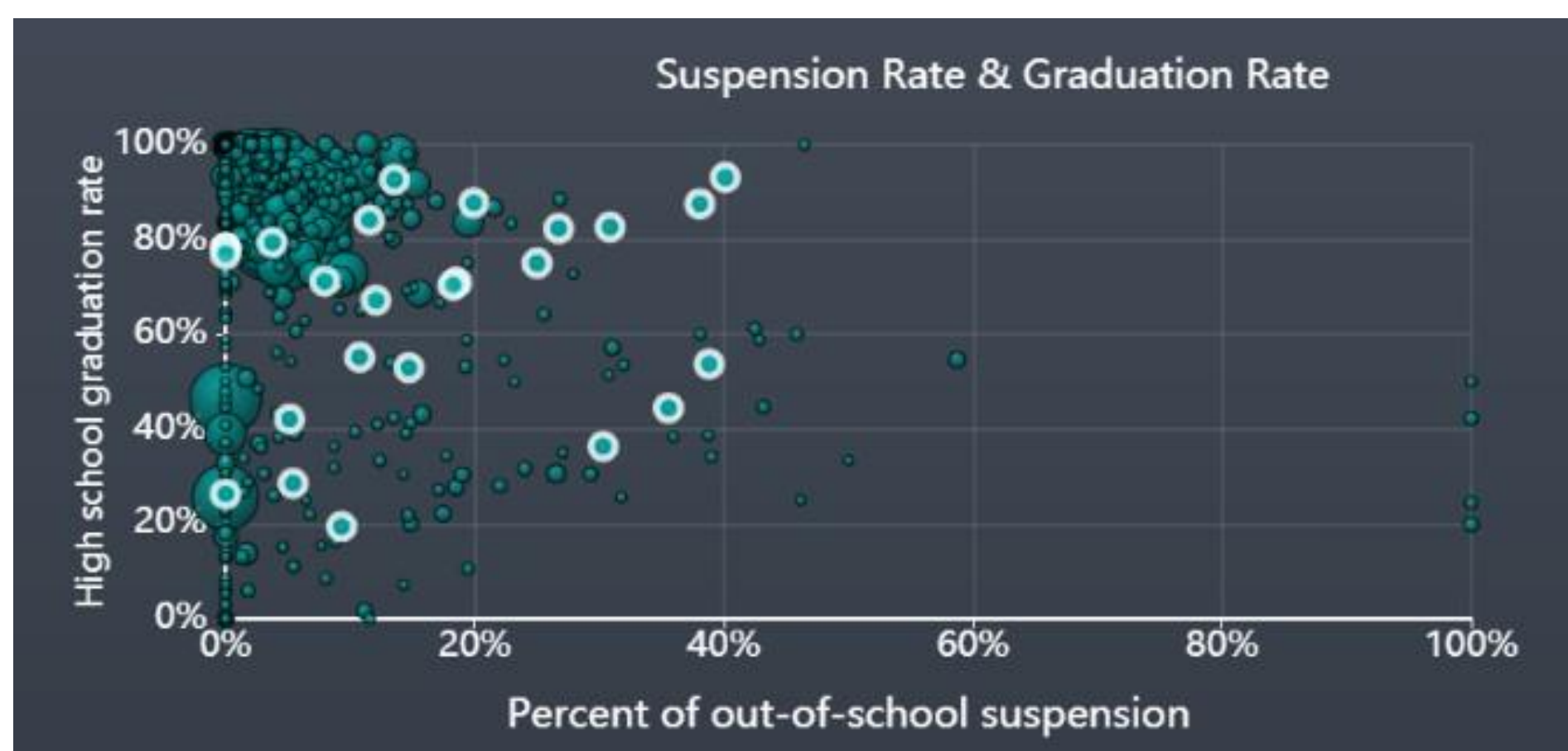
In addition, 27% of the adults in these communities live without health insurance and children in these communities are exposed to violence at more than twice the rate of the state average. These students grow up in some of the most challenging circumstances and their graduation rates suffer because of this.



2. Discrimination, Macroaggressions, & Suspensions

The second major factor leading to sub-par high school graduation rates for Native American students is a lack of cultural sensitivity within schools and discrimination from students and teachers. While difficult to quantify, this factor can lead Native American students to feel less important, and even invisible, within their own schools.

In the Jefferson County High School District in Oregon, Native American students were more than twice as likely to be suspended from school as their white peers. Even though they made up one-third of the district's student population, they received about two-thirds of all expulsions (Clarren). In addition to the example in Oregon, Native American students in Arizona face similar difficulties. The Arizona High School Outcomes Tool available through The Decision Center for Educational Excellence (DCEdEX), showed that of the 24 public high schools with over 50% Native American students in Arizona, 8 had suspension rates over 20%. With each suspension a Native American Student receives, their probability of dropping out increases and their pathways to success is prolonged.

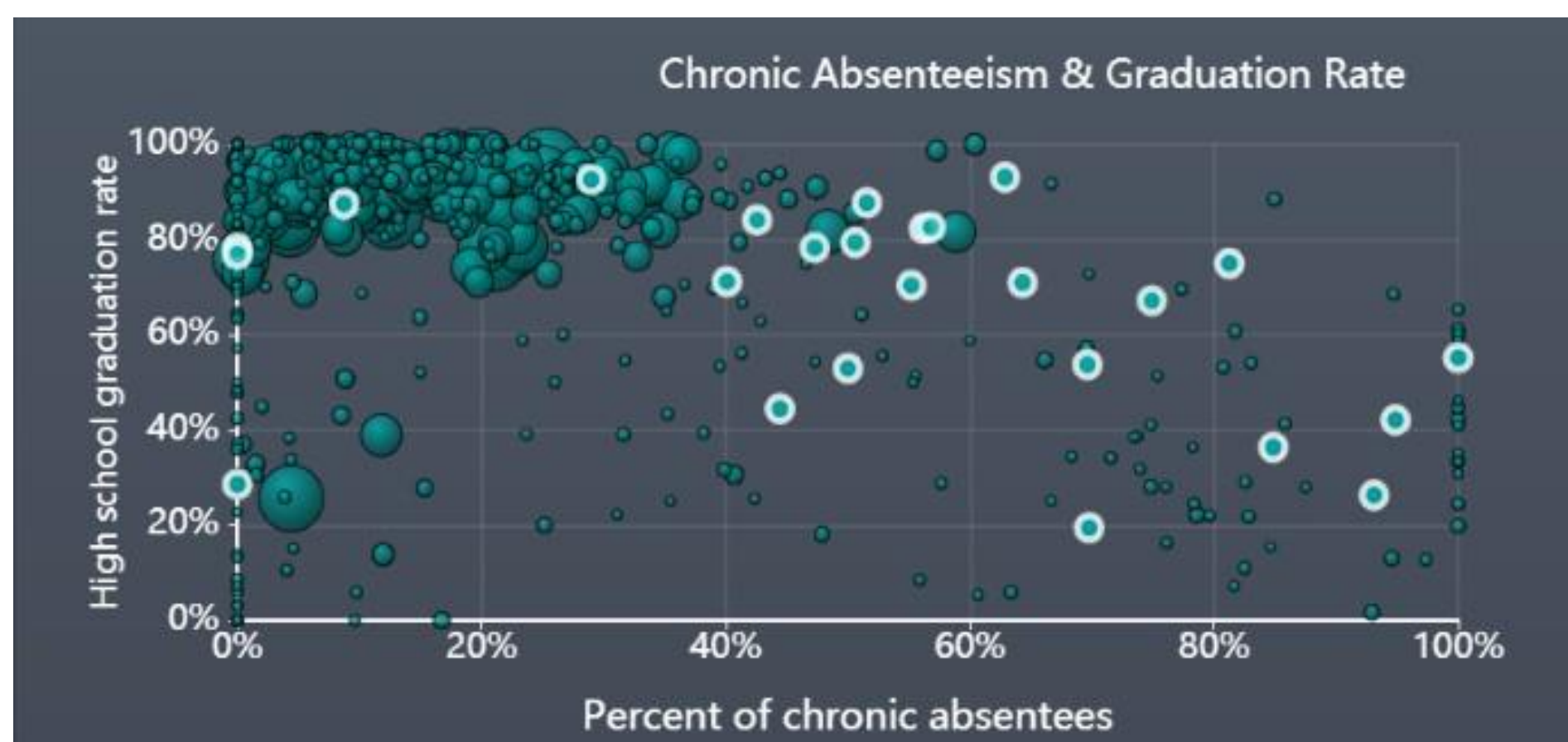


Invisibility is also a real problem that Native American students face in schools, and in essence it is the modern form of discrimination used against them (AICF). In addition to feelings of invisibility, when they are recognized as Native American, students are subject to being called racial slurs by their peers as well as to having their history diminished by their teachers and school officials in general (Clarren).

3. Distrust of Traditional School Systems

There is a large distrust of the traditional school system that stems from the forceful residential boarding school systems that schooled generations of Native Americans (Brenna). These schools intentionally de-emphasized Native American culture and stripped students from their language, history and culture (Johnston- Goodstar). The 1878 Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs states that one goal of schools was for the children to be "removed from the influence of their parents..." so that the children would not resume their traditional tribal ways (pp. xxv-xxvi). These events led Native American communities to question the intentions of contemporary public school, and created a disconnected relationship between tribes and School districts, especially because accurate Native history is still lacking in many curriculums (Johnston-Goodstar).

Native American children often see significantly higher chronic absenteeism rates fueled by this distrust. Native American ceremonies do not align with the Gregorian calendar and are often overlooked. Students may miss weeks of school due to a cultural ceremony, making it difficult to make up what they missed (Wilcox). Compounded by unrecognized cultural holidays, we find that schools in Arizona with 50% or more Native American students are significantly more likely to have students with chronic absenteeism. 20 of the 24 schools in Arizona with 50% or more Native American students have chronic



absenteeism rates over 40%.

A history of systematic oppression against Native Americans in the United States has caused a major division in how traditional school systems are currently viewed by Native American parents, tribes, and students. Native American high school graduation rates are negatively impacted by this perception and distrust.

4. Lack of Native American Representation

The final major factor leading to lower high school graduation rates is the lack of cultural representation that Native American students have within the curriculum. Many students, and even their teachers, lack the appropriate awareness of Native American culture and language, which can lead to many Native American students feeling invisible or isolated, and make it harder for them to pursue their education. An example of this can be seen from children in the Morongo School in California, a school which is sovereign under the Morongo Tribe. Before the Morongo school opened, children who were enrolled in nearby public schools said that the disconnect from their heritage led to feelings of invisibility and low self-esteem, which ultimately affected their success in school (Maxwell). When the Morongo School opened, it focused heavily on including the tribes' native culture, language, and traditions in the curriculum to offset the invisibility that many students felt from attending the public schools nearby.

“Our analysis revealed a generalized ignorance of Native American historical experiences with schools and the impact of this history on contemporary Indian life. Many in the community believed that knowledge about historical trauma and boarding school experience was an essential pre-requisite to teaching in school” (Johnston-Goodstar, 2017). From this, it is evident that not having accurate Native American history taught in schools strongly affects a Native students educational experience, as well as how their peers and teachers view Native American culture.

Case Study: Quill Valley District, New Notions Program, 2015

The Quill Valley District has a student body of 850 students, 30% of which are Native American. Even though the Native students in the district make up such a high percentage of the overall student body, their graduation rates fall below 50%, compared to an average district overall of 87% (Wilcox).

What they did:

The Quill Valley District decided to create a new program at the school to combat these low graduation rates: The New Notions program. New Notions would offer a “personally- relevant, real-world, experiential, and inter-disciplinary learning experience aligned to Native students’ own learning goals,” (Wilcox). The program implemented a number of interventions to make that they deemed necessary for students to graduate without sacrificing their culture.

- A. **Adapted school schedules to students’ lives outside of school.** Native American students sometimes had to miss multiple weeks of school to attend cultural ceremonies. These ceremonies are a significant part of a Native American child’s life, but they often have to miss school in order to attend, putting them behind their peers.*
- B. **Prioritized developing students’ sense of worth in contributing to their communities and societies.** Internships and service-learning opportunities for at least two-days per week were part of the schools’ curriculum, allowing for Native students to not only engage with their communities, but develop a sense of self-worth.*
- C. **Offered effective supports that emphasize connecting to an adult.** Instructional time centered on what is called “Advisory”, where students connected with an adult who worked them in an independent study model, and stayed with them throughout all four years of high school.*
- D. **Partnered with families.** The school involved the students’ parents from the beginning by asking them why they wanted their child to attend the new notions school in the admissions application. This initial involvement led parents to be continually involved with their child’s education, but also led teachers to be aware of each student’s family and community experience.*

The Results:

The New Notions program graduated 27 students in the five years since its inception. Dropout rates had fallen from 15% in the second year of the school’s existence to 2% after the implementation of the program (Wilcox).

Case Study: Morongo School, Morongo Indian Reservation, CA

The Morongo School in California is a school created by the Morongo Indian Reservation specifically for its Native youth. It was created because “Tribal leaders believed that young people were not getting enough meaningful exposure to the history and experience of California tribes, which was affecting their achievement” (Maxwell).

Before the Morongo School opened, students who attended public school outside of their reservation had feelings of isolation and low self-esteem which stemmed from a disconnection from their heritage. Kids who were attending public schools were either failing or wanting to drop out, like one tribal leader’s daughter who wanted to drop out in the 9th grade because of negative comments made by her teacher. (Maxwell)

The intervention

The Morongo School was created specifically for native students to succeed and is a strong example of what every student needs. The Morongo tribe instituted a number of interventions that were focused on connecting their students to their native culture, something they could not achieve at the public schools in the area. These interventions included:

- A. **Creating small class sizes.** No class had more than fifteen students, and every teacher in the lower grades had an aide.*
- B. **Connections with tribal elders.** To make sure students were connected to their culture, tribal elders spent the day with Morongo students twice a week, teaching them the native languages, songs, and cultural traditions that were unique to them.*

Results

Bringing tribal elders and traditional languages into the school’s curriculum eliminated many of the feelings of invisibility and isolation that students had previously felt. Further, there was growth in mathematics and reading performance. After the first year of the school’s opening, only 30% of students were proficient in reading and math, but two years later that number was raised to 61% in math, and 51% in reading (Maxwell). Overall, these results demonstrate that after being in touch with their culture, students were able to improve in how well they were doing in school. This also strengthens the ideology that representation in school matters, especially to students who are often underrepresented (whether it be through their culture, religion, etc.).

Recommendations

Elementary schools and High Schools in the state of Arizona that hold a visible population of Native American Students evolve if they want to foster success in their students. These changes are not heavily reliant on the financial resources of a school or a district, but rather, on their willingness to change the narrative of Native American students and their historically low graduation rates. Based on our research, we have compiled a list of specific interventions that can be implemented to increase the graduation rates of Native American students in Arizona.



Recommendations

1. Creating Relationships, Building Trust

Building a relationship between schools and Native American communities will help offset the distrust of school systems that stem from the forceful residential boarding systems of previous generations. Even the simple action of asking tribal leaders to voice their concerns on the education system can be effective in building trust between a school and its native community, and lead to a more positive learning experience for Native students which will in turn develop higher graduation rates.

This involves:

- I. **Bringing Native American elders and mentors into schools.** These mentors can talk to students about the culture and represent themselves as successful role models.
- II. **Partnering with families.** Simply incorporating parents into the school system by discussing their students' grades, making meetings with the parents of at-risk students, and creating more robust parent organizations can drastically improve relationships. (Wilcox)
- III. **Bringing tribes into the picture.** Meeting with tribes continually to talk about concerns for their students is a necessary step.

In addition, the National Indian Education Association created a four-step, research-based process that schools can use to build relationships with their native students and their tribes. The process includes making Consensus-based decision making, knowing Native communities, Acting with respect, and sustaining progress. Full article: <http://www.niea.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/NIEA-BuildingRelationships-FINAL.pdf>

2. Cultural Awareness

Feeling invisible or not represented in school can negatively impact a student's attitude towards their education and increase their desires to dropout before graduating. In order to decrease the invisibility and isolation that many Native American students feel, schools must increase their awareness of Native American culture, and make it prevalent in their schools.

This involves:

- I. **Providing cultural awareness/sensitivity training for teachers.** Providing additional training for teachers on how to appropriately teach Native American history in the classroom.
- II. **Teaching Native American languages.** Cloquet high school in Minnesota taught a first hour Ojibwe language and culture class which improved first-hour attendance for Native American students (Hollingsworth).
- III. **Creating safe spaces in schools.** For example, a school could create a Native American education room where students can eat lunch, talk to other Native American students, and get tutoring help.
- IV. **Normalizing Native culture for all students.** Bringing tribal leaders into schools to talk to *all* students about Native American culture can build respect and tolerance from all students.

3. Modifying School Curriculum

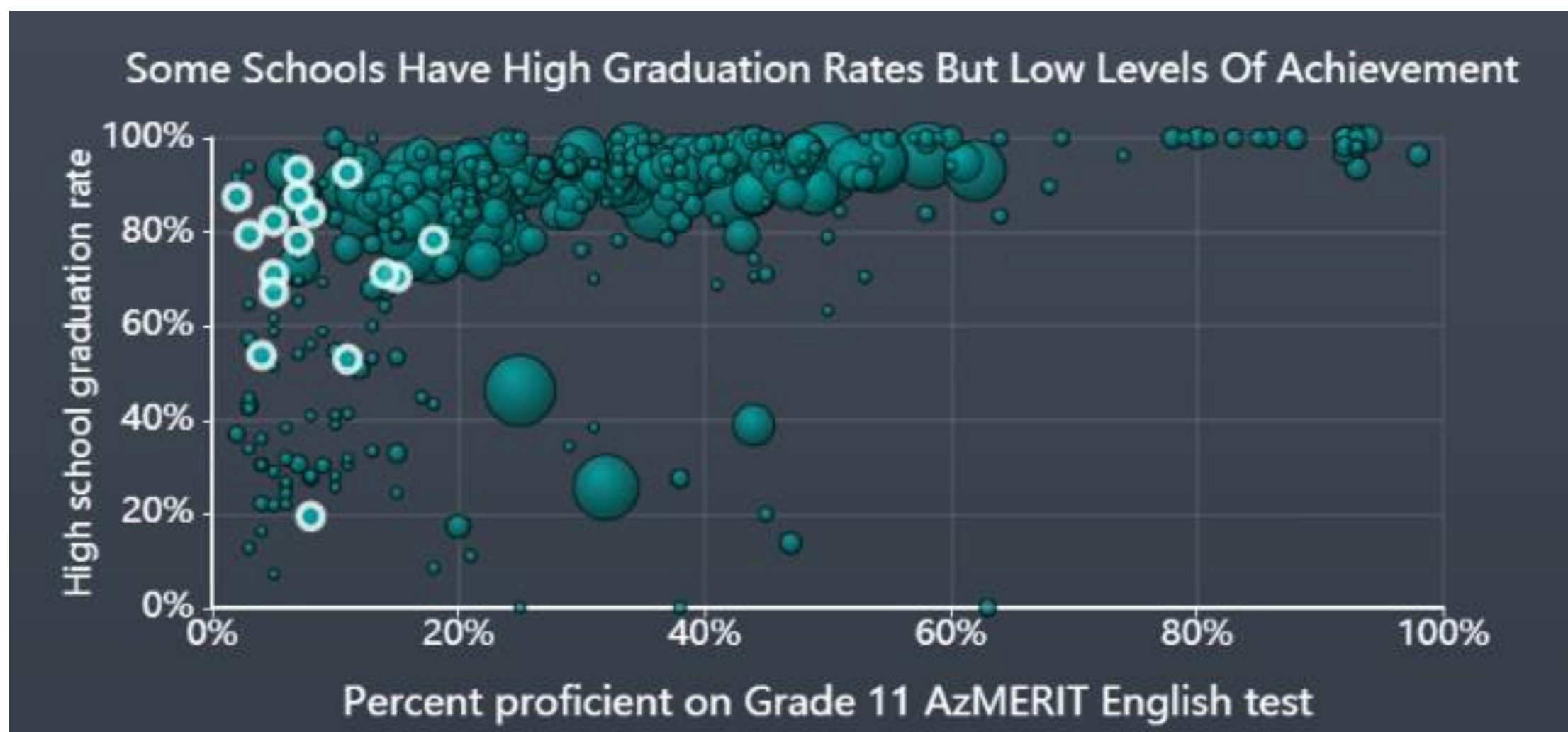
Many Native American students have different learning skills from their peers due to the culture they grew up in. Because of their upbringing and cultural traditions, it is generally said that Native American may students show strength in holistic, right hemisphere information processing. Moore (1989) similarly reported that studies of Native American students show that they are global learners who learn much more easily if they can see an overall picture, unity, and harmony in a situation. The Quill valley district and the Morongo school have both offered alternate curriculums which were focused around Native American culture and resulted in larger success rates for their students.

This involves:

1. **Becoming flexible with absences:** native students often have to miss weeks of school due to cultural ceremonies that often go unrecognized in traditional school calendars.
2. **Giving importance to Native American history in the classroom:** This includes providing lengthier and more in-depth information on the importance of Native American history, and making sure that it is being taught in an accurate and culturally appropriate manner.

4. Increase Rigor

Using the Decision Center for Educational Excellence's database, it was shown that all students who graduated from schools in Arizona with a Native American population of 50% or more graduated with less than a 20% proficiency on the grade eleven AZ Merit English exam.



Research done by the Brookings institute shows that in order for students to obtain the long-term economic and social benefits that they should be getting from a high school diploma, they need more than just a diploma, but at least a 2.5 GPA. Lowering the standards of receiving a high school diploma will end up hurting students in the long run, and prevent them from achieving future successes (Sawhill). Graduating with high levels of achievement must be a priority so that after graduating, students can go on to be more successful.

This involves:

- I. **Maintaining moderate graduation requirements for students:** not lowering standards.
- II. **Create tutoring programs in schools:** Tutoring programs will help aide students in achieving these required proficiency levels.
- III. **Monitoring students' progress early on:** Creating achievement plans for students who show signs of falling behind.

Conclusion

Native American students carry many unique qualities that are overlooked in the traditional school system. These involve their attention to holistic orientation, mutualism, and even the respect they have for individual differences. Schools often ignore tribal history and Native students experience discrimination, harassment, and suspensions more than their peers. Implementing a curriculum focusing on tribal languages, culture, and history, especially in schools that carry a large Native American population, is necessary in fostering success and increasing graduation rates among their students. This not only creates a culture of Native American representation within schools, which decreases feeling of invisibility among students, but can also be used as a tool in educating non-native students on a culture which is imbedded in United States history.

By implementing minor changes, especially in the areas of culture and representation, Native students are likely to be more successful and achieve higher graduation rates. Creating relationships with tribes, involving the parents of students, and integrating a curriculum that involves Native American student's culture, language, and history, are all steps that can be done in order to make sure Native students feel represented and accepted in their schools, which will lead to their higher success rates.

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The vision of the Decision for Educational Excellence Powered by Helios Education Foundation at Arizona State University is to empower all Arizona students to maximize their potential, experience an excellent quality of life and contribute to healthy and vibrant communities. Partnering with ASU's Decision Theater and other ASU researchers and thought-leaders, we will bring together data and convene key stakeholders to examine the education system and model and visualize the impact of potential new policies and innovative solutions on education outcomes. The Decision Center for Educational Excellence will:

- Collect local and national data on student performance, schools and the current education system

- Leverage ASU resources, content knowledge, analytics, computational modeling, and visualization

- Drive stakeholder involvement among educators, parents, students, policymakers, civic groups, business leaders, and others