



## *Indigenous Educators Spotlight*

# Superintendent Christie Abeyta of the Santa Fe Indian School: A Cultural and Community-Driven Approach to Improving Graduation Rates

By April K. Chavez

## Introduction

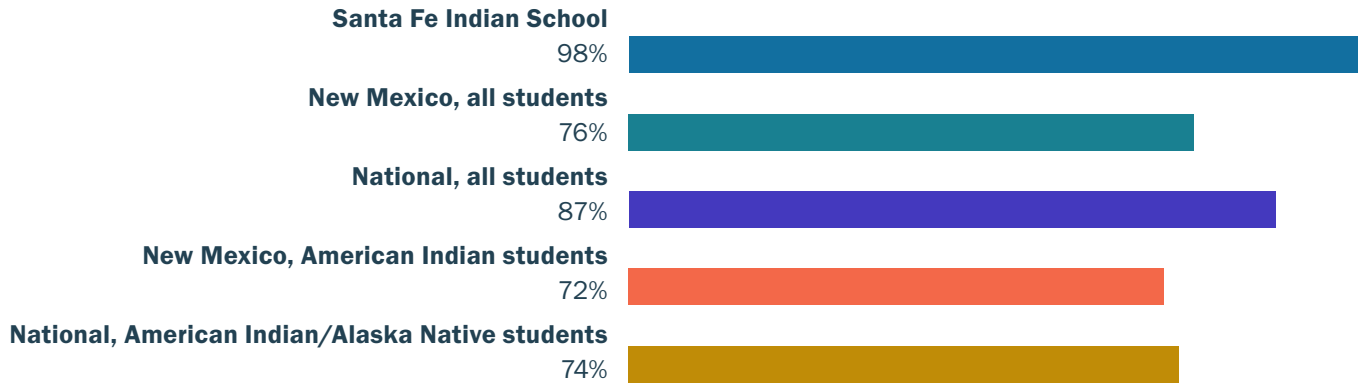
The Santa Fe Indian School (SFIS) has culturally responsive teaching and a community-based education system and has had persistently strong high school graduation rates. This brief shares insights about the school's success from the perspective of the SFIS's Superintendent Christie Abeyta. At a recent convening of state- and federal-level directors of American Indian and Alaska Native education,<sup>1</sup> Superintendent Abeyta generously shared stories about her family and how her traditional Pueblo core values deeply inform her role as an educator and her vision for the SFIS. Underscoring the importance of centering culture and community reciprocity, she explained that “what’s important is ... how we prepare [students] for their adulthood and how they will contribute back to the community.”

In 2022, 98 percent of students graduated from the SFIS in 4 years (Santa Fe Indian School, 2023), exceeding New Mexico's high school graduation rate of 76 percent and the national average for all students in the United States of 87 percent (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024) (see Figure 1). In the same year, public high schools in New Mexico reported graduating 72 percent of American Indian students in 4 years (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2024). Nationally, public schools graduated 74 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native students in 2022 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024).

1 The Comprehensive Centers (CCs) in Regions 13 and 15 and the Western Educational Equity Assistance Center (WEEAC) at WestEd partner to convene a community of practice for directors of Indian education at state education agencies (SEAs). The CCs develop and implement capacity-building technical assistance to support SEAs. The Region 15 CC serves Arizona, California, Nevada, and Utah. The Region 13 CC serves New Mexico, Oklahoma, and the Bureau of Indian Education.



**Figure 1. Four-Year Cohort Graduation Rates, 2022**



Note. National Center for Education Statistics (2024); New Mexico Public Education Department (2024); Santa Fe Indian School (2023).

“The Santa Fe Indian School has this community approach to education and a communal sense and responsibility to the people here,” said Abeyta, explaining the high graduation rates. “It’s the long-term investment. ... Our communities depend on our school systems to prepare those next [generations of] leaders.”

Superintendent Abeyta represents the Pueblos of Santa Clara, Santo Domingo, Ohkay Owingeh, and Isleta of New Mexico. An SFIS alumna herself and former girls’ basketball coach, she is the first female superintendent of the SFIS. She is a part of a long legacy of Indigenous educational leadership to assert educational sovereignty and self-determination within the SFIS and throughout New Mexico.

## Abeyta and the Santa Fe Indian School

In 2021, the SFIS welcomed Christie Abeyta as the school’s first woman superintendent. Also notable is that Abeyta is among the only 0.61 percent of superintendents nationally who, according to a 2022–23 study published by the School Superintendents Association, self-identify as American Indian or Alaska Native; and whereas 72.86 percent of superintendents nationally self-identify as male, just 26.44 percent self-identify as female (Thomas et al., 2023).

The SFIS is in the heart of Santa Fe, New Mexico. Established in 1890 during the boarding school era, the school originally functioned to assimilate Native students and eradicate Native culture altogether. In 1976, the SFIS became the first school in the United States to establish tribal control through the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act.

Today, the SFIS is a tribally controlled school that is owned and operated by the 19 Pueblo Governors of New Mexico. Together, the Pueblo leaders maintain the “rights and responsibilities to educate New Mexico Indian children in a manner that supports their cultural and traditional belief systems” (Santa Fe Indian School, 2023). The SFIS provides academic and student living programs for grades 7 through 12 and serves a population of approximately 700 students from the 19 Pueblos, the Navajo and Apache Nations, and other tribes throughout the Southwest.



## Graduation Rates

Historically, public educational systems in the United States have produced the highest dropout rates and the lowest graduation rates for American Indian and Alaska Native students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). What are the causes of these outcomes? In the 2018 *Yazzie/Martinez v. State of New Mexico* case, the court found that New Mexico had violated Native American students' civil rights by failing to comply with state and federal laws regarding the education of Native Americans and had "not studied or developed effective educational systems for Native American students" (New Mexico Center on Law and Poverty, n.d.). This seminal case highlights the deep structural issues that challenge positive Native student outcomes.

## Culture and Identity as Social Justice

Given the violent and assimilative histories of federal American Indian policies and their historical and ongoing impact on American Indian education today, developing a strong cultural identity can serve as an important protective factor for students (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). A strong cultural identity can increase one's self-understanding and improve academic engagement, and it can protect against mental health symptoms and buffer distress.

Each Indigenous nation has its own unique educational system. When schools implement or develop culturally responsive teaching and curricula, they are actively fostering equitable outcomes for students, educators, and administrators by honoring the educational heritages of their students. In the words of Mandy Smoker-Broaddus from the Sioux and Assiniboine nations, culturally responsive teaching is a

**responsibility to know, understand, and respect the various backgrounds, cultural heritage, whatever it is that students bring to the classroom. To have an awareness of that and to utilize student's prior knowledge, which comes from their families, homes and communities and building off that. (Domzalski, 2021)**

Using culturally responsive curricula is an intentional departure from the deficit mindset. Research has shown that students are more likely to have better academic performance and engagement when they feel connected to their schools and educators and when they identify with school culture (American Psychological Association, n.d.). Smoker-Broaddus further defines culturally responsive teaching as "what we teach and how we teach diverse populations. It's a combination of pedagogy, curriculum, actual instructional delivery, and the attitude and beliefs that we bring to the classroom" (Domzalski, 2021).



## Community Based and Community Responsive

According to Superintendent Abeyta, one of the best ways the school prepares its students is by “really embracing the communities that our school [is] in.” The SFIS is accomplishing this through a system of robust culturally responsive teaching and community-based education.

According to the SFIS website, since 1995, the Community Based Education Department (CBED) has drawn upon “‘circles of wisdom,’ meaning the multilayered practice of wisdom that exists in tribal communities, combining community knowledge with student experiential learning and working towards resolution of community issues and problems.” In partnership with SFIS teachers and their tribal communities, students are inspired and encouraged “to pursue related advanced education and career paths [so they may] apply their knowledge and skills in their own communities.”

The SFIS is committed to developing and retaining Native and non-Native culturally responsive educators. Native educators are more likely to remain in schools or communities that center Indigenous culture in the curriculum and partner with Indigenous communities to share cultural knowledge (Brey et al., 2022). For continual educational development, the SFIS partnered with the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Southwest to assist in the development of Performance Evaluation Rubrics for Principals and Educators. The evaluations guided by these rubrics prioritize equity, cultural responsiveness, and communities of care and support for students. These culturally sustaining pedagogies are a premier example of educational sovereignty.

## Senior Honors Project

All SFIS teachers are required to incorporate tribal, community, and cultural elements into their curriculum. These culturally sustaining pedagogies culminate in a final Senior Honors Project (SHP) in which students design a community action project that addresses real concerns in current global and local Indigenous communities. The SHP is a capstone empirical research graduation requirement. The goal of the SHP is to develop essential thinking, research and design, and communication skills to support students in their academic and professional pursuits and as active members of their respective tribal communities. The titles of recent SHP projects illustrate the relevance of these projects to tribal communities and society:

- **Something in the Air: The Effects of Wildfires on Native Communities**
- **Getting Help: It’s Okay to Not Be Okay While Being a Single Parent**
- **Anti-Blackness Isn’t Traditional: Anti-Blackness in Indigenous Communities**
- **Missing Children in Native Communities: The Untold Story**
- **Reclaiming Our Beautiful Land: Eliminating Irresponsible Dumping on Santo Domingo Tribal Lands**
- **Working Together: Overcoming COVID-19**

## Transformational but Not New

Indigenous nations maintain educational traditions that have sustained their communities from time immemorial. The SFIS is one example of a sovereign educational community that is grounded in core values and supported by the parents and communities that the school represents and actively serves. Reciprocity, mutuality, or symbiosis—the inclusion of tribal leadership, family, and community—is not new to Native communities. Indeed, this shared responsibility for children is what has long strengthened tribal communities and appears to be a key contributor to the SFIS’s high graduation rates. The graduating class of 2023 has secured more than \$1.2 million in college scholarships.

In 2002, the SFIS leadership and community codified their prioritization of centering education within culture and community by drafting their institutional “measure of success” statement, which describes “the ideal graduate” as follows:

***Santa Fe Indian School graduates will understand the issues facing tribes in the Southwest and will be committed to maintaining Native American cultural values. They will participate in the culture of their communities and will have the skills to pursue the education or careers that will benefit them, their families, and their people. These skills include: Creative problem solving, using the analysis of complex problems, the synthesis of collected data, and the communication of clear solutions; Critical, confident, independent and interdependent, life-long learning; Working productively with all types of people and making good choices.***

The SFIS provides students with a rigorous academic program in an environment that respects and values tribal communities’ cultures and traditions. As a community, nourished by culture and community, the SFIS is educating the next generation of Indigenous leaders.

For more on the SFIS, see *Native Students and High School Success: Lessons on Achieving Graduation From Five Bureau of Indian Education Schools*, a recent paper highlighting schools that have high graduation rates and that implement high-impact practices, elevate standards, and reinforce supports without lowering expectations (Berliner, 2024).

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