

## News From the Field

# Santa Fe Indian School: A High-Performing Native American School in New Mexico

Since 2010, the U.S. Department of Education's [White House Initiative on American Indian and Alaska Native Education](#) has conducted tribal consultations, listening sessions, and tours across the country to learn about education matters affecting Native American and Alaskan Native students. In 2015, one of the Initiative's tribal consultation tours took place in Albuquerque, New Mexico. One goal of the tour is "to close the achievement gap between Indian students and non-Indian students, decrease the alarmingly high dropout rates of all American Indian and Alaska Native students, and help preserve and revitalize Native languages" (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

In this same spirit, REL Southwest's [New Mexico Achievement Gap Research Alliance](#) recently toured the [Santa Fe Indian School](#) (SFIS) to learn about its efforts to close the achievement gap, decrease dropout rates, and preserve Native cultures and languages for Native American students. SFIS has created a learning environment and culture that buoys students and motivates them to beat the odds while preserving their proud history, culture, heritage, and languages. We found much to learn from the school's approach to producing high-achieving, high-performing Native American students.

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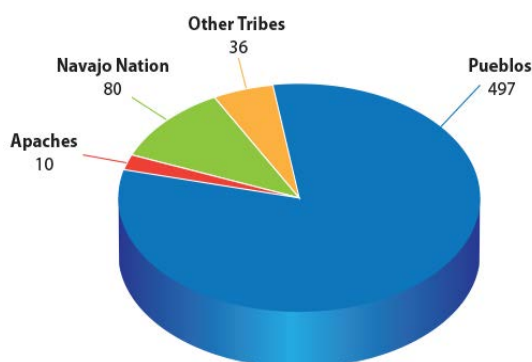
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## Santa Fe Indian School Demographics

Founded in 1890 by the U.S. federal government, SFIS is now owned and operated by the 19 Pueblo Governors of New Mexico. The school is housed in the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) Northern Pueblos Education Line Office and serves students in grades 7–12. In the 2013/14 school year, SFIS served a total of 623 students. The majority of the student population comes from the 19 Pueblos, and the remainder is made up of students from the Apache, Navajo, and other tribes. About 75 percent of students live on campus.

Student Enrollment Information



Source: Santa Fe Indian School

## High-Performing Native American Students

SFIS provides rigorous academics in an environment that respects and values students' cultural beliefs, traditions, and tribal communities. The result is high-performing students who are steeped in the ways of their ancestors. According to the U.S. Bureau of Indian Education Annual School Report Card, in 2013 the four-year cohort graduation rate for SFIS was 82.1 percent, well ahead of New Mexico's state rate of 70.3 percent and the national rate of 81 percent. In 2014, about 90 percent of the school's 100 seniors planned to pursue postsecondary education. Moreover, the SFIS Class of 2014 earned \$3.5 million in scholarships, with six students awarded the prestigious Gates Millennium Scholarship.

Four-Year Cohort Graduation Rate



Source: U.S. Bureau of Indian Education Annual School Report Card

## SFIS Path to Student Success



In February 2015, Ada Muoneke, REL Southwest's research alliance manager, met with Roy Herrera, SFIS superintendent, and Anya Dozier Enos, Ph.D., SFIS director of curriculum and professional development as well as a REL Southwest Governing Board and alliance member. The group discussed what makes SFIS such an exemplary school, able to boast high student academic performance and graduation and college attendance rates. Superintendent Herrera attributes the success to several factors, including strong academics, small class sizes, teachers who know and understand their students, the integration of Native culture and ways of life into the curriculum and instruction, special programs for exceptional students, a deep sense of community, and collaboration with tribal communities.

The REL Southwest Governing Board met at SFIS. Pictured from left are Mike Pecos, SFIS Dean of Students, and Governing Board members Dr. Anya Dozier Enos, Dr. Norma Neely, Tresha Spoon, and Dr. Gary Ritter (back row). The statue represents the Spirit of the Pueblo Revolt and honors perseverance, athleticism, and motivation.

## Culturally Responsive Academic Curricula, Instruction, and Assessment

The SFIS staff employs culturally responsive pedagogy. This approach promotes the use of culturally supported instruction for culturally and linguistically diverse learners (National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems, n.d.). Policy findings from the *Indian Education in New Mexico 2025* report, commissioned by the New Mexico Public Education Department's Indian Education Division, found that schools that strengthen cultural identity and indigenous language instruction promote success among Native American students (Jojoba et al., 2011).

Despite such research findings, there exists some tension in the national conversation about culturally sensitive curriculum and whether it helps minority students score well on performance assessments and state standardized tests. Felisa Gulibert, Ph.D., SFIS high school principal, elaborates, "We understand that the Common Core State Standards must be addressed and that understanding must be demonstrated through assessment; however, we do not accept that our curriculum, which is culturally responsive to our Native communities, should be minimized or take a back seat to standardized testing."

One example of such culturally responsive curricula at SFIS is the Senior Honors Project. To graduate, all seniors must complete this project, which involves conducting extensive research on an issue pertaining to the health, vitality, and sovereignty of their tribal communities. The Senior Honors Project, the culmination of the SFIS education program, is measured by the Ideal Graduate Rubric, a Common Core-aligned rubric developed by SFIS stakeholders.

Integrating tribal culture and indigenous language into how teachers teach and students learn is a crucial part of the overall philosophy at SFIS. Advocates of culturally sensitive instruction and assessments believe this approach is key to student success (Nelson-Barber, 2010), and SFIS staff uses the approach to help increase student performance on large-scale standardized assessments, such as the New Mexico Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career (PARCC) assessments.

**The SFIS "Ideal Graduate" will understand the issues facing tribes in the Southwest and will be committed to maintaining Native American cultural values. Graduates 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.**

— SFIS Website, 2015

## Engaging the Tribal Community As Experts in their Children's Education

In 2014, SFIS made adequate yearly progress (AYP) for the third consecutive year, as determined by the Bureau of Indian Education. This achievement marks sustained progress after the district failed to make AYP in 2009 and was required to restructure. Subsequently, SFIS made a concerted effort to improve student performance on standardized tests. To guide this effort, teachers, residential advisors, and school staff were joined by other experts—tribal leaders, elders, alumni, parents, and the students themselves—to "craft a school that honors traditional ways of teaching and learning while better preparing students to be successful in the technologically rich mainstream society," says Patricia Sandoval, director of planning and evaluation.

To that end, in 2011, SFIS created student-centered data teams to help personalize teaching and individualize instruction. At the middle school level, SFIS also implemented professional learning communities to support response to intervention in math and reading. "Remediation and enrichment classes were created to continue to better prepare students for high school," says Larkin Vigil, SFIS middle school principal. Dr. Dozier Enos notes, "Over the past 20 years, SFIS has coupled community-based, real-world problem-solving with higher-order thinking skills to intentionally prepare students for success in both their home communities and the mainstream world."

Key to the school's success is building relationships among all groups at all levels—students, teachers, education leaders, tribal elders, and the community—to foster a deep sense of collaboration with the community. For example, students at SFIS interact with tribal elders and governors at meetings, hosted brunches, and traditional Feast Day celebrations.

**The Santa Fe Indian School is a sovereign educational community, building upon its rich cultural legacy to be the leader in Native American education.**

— SFIS Website, 2015

## It Takes a Village: SFIS Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR)

Another critical element of success at SFIS is a focus on supporting students' physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. For example, the staff believes it is important to involve the community when deciding how students should be

disciplined instead of adjudicating troubled youth.

**Discipline is based on the way of life our grandpas and grandmas fought to protect: respect. It is not just discipline, but built on things unique to our communities—it can be in response to being in trouble, having a traditional responsibility, or transitioning from one stage in life to the next. We [in the community] invite family, godparents, tribal leaders to gather and speak [give advice].**

**SFIS is able to mirror this community process. It is all about giving the student the opportunity to succeed; it is not punitive. Our communities are accessible. We go out to the student's community with our staff and have this process for two to three hours with whoever the family/tribal leadership thinks is important to invite—tribal leaders, parents, aunties/uncles, godparents. No decisions are made, but, no matter what, the student is encouraged and everyone ends up being on the same page.**

**SFIS still has boundaries for our students—students are dismissed (or parents may withdraw them) for serious violations. However, we went from 30 of these dismissal-parent withdrawals two years ago (before the ADR process started) to 11 last year, and we are at 6 this year. It is essential for our children to have the opportunity to succeed. They are our future, so we must promote this.**

— Mike Pecos, SFIS Dean of Students

## SFIS Emerges as Leader Among BIE Schools

SFIS concluded three weeks of administering the PARCC performance-based assessment in March 2015. Of the 183 BIE schools located in 23 states across the nation, SFIS was one of only two that administered the PARCC computer-based assessment. In addition, SFIS was the only BIE school in New Mexico to include students in grades 9 and 10 in the standardized assessment. Students in grades 7–11 completed the Mathematics and English Language Arts/Literacy PARCC assessments, with all students in grades 7–10 taking the computer-based version of the test. For the Spring 2015 testing period, BIE required all students in grades 7, 8, and 11 to take the PARCC assessment.

As part of the transition to the new PARCC assessment, Dr. Gulibert, SFIS high school principal, expressed that "it was critical for students to take the computer-based version of the assessment for the purpose of familiarizing them and faculty members with the platform and the process so that they may maintain equivalence with other students of their age."

## An Environment of Cultural Respect, Warmth, and Excellence



Touring SFIS, one cannot miss the sense of accomplishment, community, cultural pride, and respect that permeates the campus. SFIS community members greet visitors even before they reach the front desk. The school's learning spaces are adorned with statues and other reminders of important indigenous men and women, tribal accomplishments, and the proud history and heritage of Native Americans. The dormitory staff are proud to show visitors around the hall, including the traditional meditation room for students—the Heart Room.

"It is a true partnership with academics that creates an environment of continuous learning beyond the academic day," says Louise Naranjo, SFIS high school student living director. "In the residential program, we validate who students are and where they come from daily."

### Contributors

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### About the Alliance

REL Southwest's [New Mexico Achievement Gap Research Alliance](#) brings together researchers, policymakers, and practitioners, such as SFIS staff, to identify and reduce obstacles to academic success among the state's K–12 Hispanic and Native American students. The overall goal is to use data and research evidence to reduce achievement

gaps and address other education problems of policy and practice.

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