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Many Indian kids lag in language skills

Schools may face radical steps to narrow the gap

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FORT HALL, Idaho - One of Michele Hernandez's earliest memories from 1960s southern Idaho is calling across the playground to a kindergarten classmate.

Suddenly, a teacher pulled her inside the schoolhouse by the arm and washed her mouth out with soap.

The punishment wasn't for profanity.

It was for speaking Shoshone, her grandmother's language.

"I was living in two worlds," said Hernandez, now a tutor at IT Stoddard Elementary School in Blackfoot. "You always had to keep a lookout for the other side, depending on who was looking."

Her job today: She helps teach English to American Indian youngsters classified by Idaho as "Limited English Proficient," or LEP.

While students are no longer punished for speaking their native tongues, English in Indian Country remains sensitive, because American Indian students still trail behind white peers in language skills, records from several states show.

Under the No Child Left Behind Act, many schools with large Indian populations could eventually be forced to take radical steps if the achievement gap doesn't narrow, including painful reorganizations or transporting students to higher-performing schools.

"It certainly has directed attention to the problem, which has existed for a long, long time," said Jon Reyhner, a professor at Northern Arizona University and Indian literacy expert. "Indian kids come into school behind, in terms of vocabulary."

According to a 2005 Mississippi State University report, rural American Indian and Alaska Native children were the least likely of major ethnic sub-groups in rural America to be proficient at letter recognition upon entering kindergarten.

State education records from Idaho, Montana and nearby North Dakota show American Indian children trail virtually

every other category of students in meeting No Child Left Behind targets.

For instance, among North Dakota 8th-graders, 39.9 percent of Indians were reading at grade level, compared with 75 percent of white students, according to 2003-2004 figures.

In Montana, 22 percent of students at the the Crow Agency public school on the Crow Indian Reservation read at grade level. Across the state, American Indians from 17 Indian language backgrounds account for 11 percent of the public school population - and 90 percent of its 6,952 LEP students.

"The average Indian child starts school with a vocabulary of about 3,000 words," said Joe Lamson, a spokesman for the Montana Office of Public Instruction in Helena. "The average white student starts with a vocabulary of 15,000."

Children raised in Indian country may also learn a different dialect of English, one that includes native words. Chris Loether, an anthropology professor at Idaho State University in Pocatello, said many Fort Hall-area residents speak what they call "Red English."

"They've got this dialect, which to them is an identity marker," Loether said. "And it gets stronger as they get older."

There were 592 Indian children in Idaho's \$8 million LEP program last year. Public schools in Indian communities are already facing No Child Left Behind sanctions, according to Idaho Department of Education records.

Deep poverty is a major reason that Indian children struggle with their English skills, experts say.

Still, some Indians are optimistic about a new plan announced Nov. 18 by U.S. Education Secretary Margaret Spellings to allow up to 10 states to measure not just how students are performing, but how that performance is changing over time.

"Gains have been made by our students, but we were coming from so far behind," said Lillian Sparks, director of the National Indian Education Association in Washington, D.C.

Indians say the aim is a system that helps Indians boost their English without sacrificing their native heritage.

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