



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

White House Initiative on American Indian
and Alaska Native Education

School Environment Listening Sessions FINAL REPORT



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October 2015

**White House Initiative on American Indian and Alaska Native Education
U.S. Department of Education**

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U.S. Department of Education

Arne Duncan
Secretary

White House Initiative on American Indian and Alaska Native Education

William Mendoza
Executive Director

October 2015

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Letter From the Executive Director

October 2015

Dear Federal, Tribal, State, and Local Leaders:

The Obama administration is committed to the needs of Indian Country and to the education of Native American youth. U.S. Department of Education (ED) Secretary Arne Duncan has made it a priority to strengthen opportunities and outcomes for all students, including Native American students. As a result of the secretary's commitment to Native youth and ED's consultations and listening sessions with tribal leaders and tribal communities, the White House Initiative on American Indian and Alaska Native Education (WHIAIANE or initiative) and ED's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) began a series of listening sessions to hear directly from Native youth, parents, school officials, and tribal communities regarding school environments — the first nationwide effort of its kind.

We met with students, teachers, and their advocates across the nation to hear their stories and experiences firsthand. Through their tears, hurt, and anger, participants voiced their concerns regarding the conditions they experience in schools and institutions of higher education. They shared that, for a variety of reasons, school environment improvement efforts are not reaching Native American youth. Many issues remain unaddressed, including the harm that is created by the use of Native mascots and logos. Additionally, they shared that when raising concerns or seeking recourse for harms, they are frequently dismissed or met with hostility. Native youth, parents, and advocates say they are alone in their efforts to address these issues and that circumstances are often unbearable. They asserted that the failure to address these concerns limits our Native youth opportunities and life outcomes. This, they say, ultimately is detrimental to their tribes, states, and our nation as a whole.

We thank and commend Native youth and others who bravely spoke out about the painful experiences they have endured and continue to endure in schools and institutions of higher education across the country. Their struggles and continued efforts will not go ignored by this administration. Moving forward, we intend to honor these stories shared with us by working with you to help ensure that every Native American has the opportunity to receive a complete and competitive education in a safe and healthy school environment.

Sincerely,



William Mendoza
Executive Director
White House Initiative on American Indian and Alaska Native Education

Acknowledgments

The White House Initiative on American Indian and Alaska Native Education (WHIAIANE) is very grateful to those who have contributed to the creation of the *School Environment Listening Sessions Final Report*. We appreciate the hard work of the 2014–15 WHIAIANE policy assistants who contributed research to, and wrote and edited the report. We thank the U.S. Department of Education’s (ED’s) Office for Civil Rights (both in ED’s Washington, D.C. headquarters as well as in the department’s regional offices) for its support and leadership throughout the listening sessions and the development of this report. We also want to extend our appreciation to ED’s Office of the General Counsel and Office of the Secretary for their ongoing guidance and assistance.

Without the commitment and diligence of the local planning committees, our nine listening sessions would not have occurred. These committees of state and tribal community members worked to identify panelists, enlisted and prepared youths for sharing their stories, and engaged with the communities. We are grateful for all of their hard work. We would also like to acknowledge the generous support of parents and families who also took time and trusted us with their experiences and stories during the listening sessions. Finally, a special thanks to the tribal leaders who participated in the listening sessions and provided continuing support. It has been amazing to experience this process and to work beside the many dedicated individuals without whom the listening sessions and report would not have been realized.

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Individuals

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Councilman Mitch O’Farrell
Rudy Ortega Jr.
Jorie Paoli
MaryAnn Peltier
Dwight Pickering
Glenn Pinkham
Tom Porter
Lori Quigley
Marty Reyes
Ray Rodgers
Richard Rose
Paul Rykken
Madrienne Salgado
Jacqueline Schram

Katsitsionni Fox
Madeline Freeman
Jon Greendeer
Trevor Greene
Brent Greenwood
Raphael Guillory
Jessica Haase
Lucyann Harjo
Pauline Harris
Dirk Hunter
Lyle Ignace
Brian Jackson
Lynnette Jordan
Richanda Kaquatosh
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JP Leary
Aurora Lehr
Stacy Lieberman
Tracy Littlejohn
Robert Mann
San Manuel
Kim Marcus
Mitch McGehee
Gail Morris
Neil Morton
Barbara Munson

Tommy Segundo
Sarah Sense-Wilson
Shelly Severson
Wenona Singel
Paula Starr
Tatum Steele
Lee Stepha
Carolyn Stanford Taylor
Michael Taylor
John Teller
Diana Terrazas
Adrienne Thunder
George Tiger
Ella Tonuchuk
Amy Tromp
Jacob Tsothigh
Niki Vandenberg Bullying
Pamela Villesenor
Kyle Wark
Doreen Wawronowicz
Aubree Wensman
Kevin White
Patricia Whitefoot
Mary Wilber
Mark Wilson
Star Yellowfish

Entities

American Civil Liberties Union of Wisconsin
Autry National Center of the American West
Bartlesville School District
Black River Falls School District
California Bird Singers
Cherokee Nation
College of Indian Community School of
Milwaukee
Eastern Washington University
Edison Reserve Officers' Training Corps
Edmond Indian Education
Eklutna Tribal Council
Esteves School of Education
Fernandeño Tataviam Band of Mission Indians
First Alaskans Institute

Muscogee Nation
Native American Indian Education Association
of New York
New York State Education Department
Noli Indian School
Oklahoma Advisory Council for Indian
Education
Oklahoma City Public Schools Native
American Student Color Guard
Oklahoma State Department of Indian
Education
Owasso School District
Pechanga Tribe
Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Tribe
Renton School District

First Nations Studies, UW-Green Bay
Gerald L. Ignace Indian Health Center
Ho-Chunk Nation
Indian Community School of Milwaukee
Indian Community School of Milwaukee Eagle Singers
Indian Health Care Resource Center of Tulsa
Instructional Leadership Executive Directors
Highline School District
Ithaca College
La Crosse School District
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Milwaukee Public Schools
Muckleshoot Indian Tribe

Sapulpa School District
Schenectady Community College
Seattle Clear Sky Native Youth Council
Seattle Public Schools
Sherman Indian High School
Sherman Indian High School White Rose Singers
South Central Comprehensive Center
State of Wisconsin
State of Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction
Tataviam American Indian Education Center
Tomah School District
Toppenish School District
Torres Martinez Tribe
Tulsa Public Schools
United Indians of All Tribes Foundation
United Native Education Alliance
University of Wisconsin
Viejas Tribe
Widening the Circle
Wisconsin Indian Education Association
Wisconsin Indian Education Association Indian Mascot and Logo Task Force

Executive Summary

To improve education for American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) students, tribal leaders, educators, and Native youth called upon WHIAIANE to collect information on school environment experiences — from teachers, parents, community members, and the students themselves. Tribal leaders and tribal communities wanted members of the initiative to hear about the challenges these students face in gaining high-quality education, with a focus on the quality of their school environments.

To meet this need, WHIAIANE, in collaboration with OCR, worked with tribal leaders and communities to design and execute a series of nationwide listening sessions regarding the school environments of AI/AN students. In October and November 2014, nine gatherings were held in seven states from New York to California to Alaska.

These sessions drew over 1,000 attendees in total and allowed WHIAIANE and OCR to gather information from all stakeholders in AI/AN education. WHIAIANE acted as a listener, allowing students and others to speak openly about their school environments.

“You just have to be you, and you just have to be real. The only way to change things is to hear from real people,” said Valerie Davidson, trustee of the First Alaskans Institute, who served as the moderator for the listening session in Anchorage, Alaska. WHIAIANE imparted similar instructions at each session in an effort to encourage a safe environment for participants to share their stories.

Throughout the sessions, the initiative collected information about the challenges related to school climate, including bullying, student discipline, potentially harmful Native imagery and symbolism, and the implications of all of these school climate issues. With regard to Native school mascots and symbols, the initiative is aware that some people strongly favor retaining their school mascots. During the listening sessions, however, initiative staff members did not hear this viewpoint; thus it is not reflected in this report.

WHIAIANE found feedback from these sessions invaluable in forming its recommended next steps. The initiative further expects that information from these sessions will guide its future work and goals — to address the unique and culturally related academic needs of AI/AN students and to ensure that they receive an excellent education.

❖ **Recommendations primarily pertaining to the federal government include the following:**

- **Identify and share positive community practices.** Identify current school programs as models for implementing change and share best practices among grantees funded by the U.S. Department of Education.

- **Conduct outreach and engagement regarding the civil rights complaints process.** OCR, in coordination with WHIAIANE, should conduct outreach regarding the process for filing a civil rights complaint. Parents and students should have easy access to the procedures and resources for doing so.
- **Provide guidance regarding mascots and imagery.** OCR should explore ways to guide schools and institutions of higher education regarding the potentially harmful effects of Native imagery and symbolism, including school mascots and logos, especially on Native youth.
- **Better identify and report the race and ethnicity of students.** Conduct outreach to encourage states and school districts to improve Native students' self-identification of race and ethnicity. To help meet the needs of AI/AN students, support the disaggregation of racial and ethnic data-reporting at the state and district levels through the use of subcategories for students in the Hispanic and "two or more races" categories.

❖ **Recommendations primarily pertaining to states and local districts include the following:**

- **Support Native American languages.** As a foundation to providing a better environment for Native students, where appropriate, states and school districts should support the preservation and revitalization of Native languages and the worldviews embedded in them. One way this could be done is through in-school and out-of-school programs and credit-bearing coursework.
- **Promote positive school discipline.** Promote school discipline policies that encourage effective and culturally responsive strategies for avoiding inequitable application of suspensions and expulsions. Examples include peer-to-peer mediation and restorative justice.
- **Address teacher and school staff attitudes and behavior.** Encourage educators and school staffs nationwide to complete cultural competence training to better understand the cultural, social, linguistic, and historical context AI/AN students bring with them to school.
- **Address negative student attitudes and bullying.** Encourage schools to implement policies that discourage bullying. Promptly and effectively remedy the bullying when it happens, and provide more support to victims. Train school staffs on recognizing and addressing bullying. Additionally, encourage schools to offer programs that promote inclusion, and educate students and families about reporting bullying.
- **Promote cultural awareness.** Promote the accurate instruction of Native American history and culture to all school staffs and create initiatives for parents and tribal leaders to engage with students. States and districts should analyze resources, strategies, and professional development opportunities to ensure that tribal histories are included accurately.

- **Analyze mascots and imagery.** States and local school districts should consider the historical significance and context of Native school mascots and imagery in determining whether they have a negative effect on students, including Native American students. States and districts should also work with schools to develop and implement actions to change potentially harmful imagery and symbolism present in their student environments.
- **Address access and equity challenges.** States and local districts should promote better understanding among schools about the access and equity challenges that AI/AN students may face, such as inadequate facilities and transportation, and encourage the development of culturally responsive, flexible school policies and resources necessary to support students.
- **Appropriately identify students with disabilities.** Promote training for educators on effectively distinguishing AI/AN cultural and language differences from disabilities.

Administration Initiatives

In 2011, President Obama signed Executive Order 13592, titled *Improving American Indian and Alaska Native Educational Opportunities and Strengthening Tribal Colleges and Universities*. The White House Initiative on American Indian and Alaska Native Education (WHIAIANE) was created by the executive order. The initiative resides within the U.S. Department of Education.

WHIAIANE actively promotes better educational opportunities and outcomes for American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) students. It is committed to furthering tribal self-determination and helping to ensure that AI/AN students, at all levels of education, have an opportunity to learn their Native languages and histories, and receive complete and competitive educations, preparing them for college, careers, and productive and satisfying lives.

As part of its effort to better understand the educational disparities faced by AI/AN youth, the White House compiled the *2014 Native Youth Report*. In addition to addressing the historical consequences of misguided federal policies, the report provides valuable insight into young Native Americans' educational experiences, including high school completion rates, school environment statistics, and information on the numerous educational obstacles currently faced by Native students.¹

Research has shown that opportunity gaps involving education frequently occur for young people of color.² Within these communities, President Obama's My Brother's Keeper (MBK) initiative was created to help resolve these gaps for boys and young men. The initiative promotes equal opportunities for all young men, regardless of their circumstances, by aiming to ensure the following six milestones:

1. All children enter school cognitively, physically, socially, and emotionally ready.
2. All children read at grade level by third grade.
3. All youths graduate from high school.

4. All youths complete postsecondary education or training.
5. All youths out of school are employed.
6. All youths remain safe from violent crime.

A private-sector effort called Boys and Men of Color is also available to marginalized youths. This group strives for student success and has goals similar to those of the MBK initiative.

To assist schools in better serving all students, the U.S. departments of Education (ED) and Justice (DOJ) have also launched the Supportive School Discipline Initiative (SSDI) to support the use of school discipline practices that foster safe, supportive, and productive learning environments while keeping students in school. SSDI focuses on partnerships between education, police, and court officials that aim to reduce the disproportionate exclusionary discipline and youth arrests or referrals to the juvenile justice system experienced by students of color and students with disabilities. A major SSDI milestone was the ED and DOJ release of a school discipline guidance package that includes a letter explaining how schools can administer student discipline without discriminating on the basis of race, color, or national origin; guiding principles for improving school climate and discipline drawn from emerging research and best practices; a directory of federal school climate and discipline resources; and a compendium of pertinent state school discipline laws and regulations. The guidance package and related materials are available at www2.ed.gov/school-discipline.

During the first few months of his presidency, President Obama created the White House Council on Women and Girls (the council) to ensure that every agency, department, and office in the federal government accounts for the needs and aspirations of women and girls in every aspect of their work. The council and presidential administration have demonstrated dedication to providing better access to education for women and girls of color. The council's November 2014 report, *Women and Girls of Color: Addressing Challenges and Expanding Opportunity*, cited improved educational achievement outcomes for women and girls of color. From 2009 to 2012, the graduation rate at four-year colleges and universities increased by 2.7 percentage points for AI/AN women, the second highest increase during this period for any race or ethnicity.³

To help begin a national dialogue about creating policies and programs to mobilize and cultivate the next generation of Native leaders, the president announced the Generation Indigenous (Gen-I) initiative in December 2014. Gen-I is a comprehensive effort designed to address the educational needs, physical health, mental health, and social service needs of Native youth to ensure all of them can reach their full potential. The initiative focuses on improving the lives of Native youth through new investments and increased engagement, including a targeted youth-engagement program, a new demonstration grant priority through the U.S. Department of Education, and a continuation of Bureau of Indian Education reform efforts. Key programs address education, health and nutrition, juvenile justice, housing, and youth engagement.

2014 Student Environment Listening Sessions

The WHIAIANE collaborated with tribal leaders and communities to design and execute the school environment listening sessions. The sessions involved on-site meetings at nine locations across the country during October and November 2014. Along with opportunities to participate in person at the events, the public could submit comments for the record via e-mail at tribalconsultation@ed.gov.

In these listening sessions, WHIAIANE and OCR requested to hear testimony from students, school staff, and community members on school environments for AI/AN students, with the goal of better understanding the challenges and opportunities that AI/AN students face. While focusing on the voices of Native youth, the listening sessions were also open for input from teachers, school administrators, parents, and community advocates.

Listening Session Locations

WHIAIANE and OCR held listening sessions in nine locations across the nation. This report includes testimony gathered from these sessions.

Table 1. Listening Session Locations and Dates

City	State	Location	Date
Franklin	Wisconsin	Indian Community School of Milwaukee	10/10/14
Anchorage	Alaska	Dena'ina Civic and Convention Center	10/21/14
La Crosse	Wisconsin	La Crosse Center	10/26/14
Troy	New York	Russell Sage College	11/5/14
Los Angeles	California	Autry National Center of the American West	11/13/14
Oklahoma City	Oklahoma	Oklahoma City Public Schools Administration Building	11/18/14
East Lansing	Michigan	Kellogg Conference Center	11/19/14
Tulsa	Oklahoma	Wilson Teaching and Learning Academy	11/21/14
Seattle	Washington	Daybreak Star Cultural Center	11/24/14

Introductory Presentations

At each listening session, federal staffs delivered introductory presentations to the local audience to introduce WHIAIANE, its goals, and its major topics of concern, and to explain the U.S. Department of Education's commitment to equal access and educational excellence for all students through OCR. The presentations covered information on several topics, including non-discriminatory discipline in schools, the potential harm caused by Native school mascots, and the process to file a complaint with OCR.

Discipline Issues. Presentations by federal staff members included information on school discipline. Data shows that many schools rely heavily on suspension and expulsion for disciplinary actions.⁴ The use of suspension as discipline has steadily increased over the last 40 years. About 95 percent of suspensions occur over nonviolent, disruptive behavior.⁵ Overall, students of color, including AI/AN students, are suspended and expelled at a rate that is disproportionately higher than their white classmates' rate. Schools suspend AI/AN boys at more than twice the rate of white boys and AI/AN girls at more than three times the rate of white girls.⁶

Suspension and expulsion negatively affect students by causing loss of instructional time and missed opportunities. Affected students are

- less likely to graduate on time;
- more likely to be suspended again;
- more likely to repeat a grade;
- more likely to drop out; and
- more likely to become involved in the juvenile justice system.

The wide-reaching impact of suspension and expulsion make it imperative to address disparities in rates of school discipline.

Mascots and Imagery. There are approximately 2,400 public schools in the United States with Native mascots or nicknames that incorporate American Indian caricatures. WHIAIANE estimates that 64 percent of these are of particular concern because they depict a demeaning combination of two-dimensional or three-dimensional caricatures of Native Americans. These schools are frequently distant from tribal support centers like tribal reservations, Indian lands, or urban native centers. Nationwide, WHIAIANE estimates that 94 percent of school districts, including Bureau of Indian Education-funded schools, had 10 percent or fewer AI/AN students in their student body during the 2012–13 school year.⁷ As a result, their schools contain low numbers of AI/AN students. Therefore, AI/AN students who may be harmed by those mascots are often isolated from AI/AN support networks.

Civil Rights. Federal staffs shared that there are several federal resources available to aid the improvement of school environments for AI/AN students. *Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964*

protects students from discrimination based on race, color, or national origin. *Title VI* prohibits differing treatment based on race. *Title VI* also forbids schools from adopting rules that, although not implemented for a racially discriminatory purpose, result in students of a certain race being disproportionately affected without an educational justification.

Students themselves may file discrimination complaints with OCR. Parents, teachers, or others who are aware of discrimination may file a complaint on behalf of the student. Usually, the complaint must be filed within 180 days of the incident. OCR investigates complaints to determine if a school discriminated, encourages schools to voluntarily resolve such concerns, and monitors agreements by schools to remedy discrimination.

Local Presentations

In each listening session, local experts led a presentation related to school environments for AI/AN students. While many of the presentations communicated messages of hope, the presenters also called attention to the unfair and harmful treatment many AI/AN students experience within their learning environments, especially those in schools away from tribal support networks and with low AI/AN enrollment. The following section provides highlights, drafted by WHIAIANE, of the introductory presentations provided at each site. The content of each highlight reflects our understanding of the speaker's research and opinions.

Franklin, Wisconsin

Dr. Lyle Ignace (Coeur d'Alene), Executive Director of the Gerald L. Ignace Indian Health Center

The story of a young Wisconsin student provides a helpful case study to understand Native student environments. A young boy, who initially was living with his great grandmother on the reservation, was transferred to a public school hundreds of miles away. After being separated from his tribal community and brought to an entirely new environment, he experienced a rough transition into his new school. Despite never having been identified as needing additional behavioral support, within his first two weeks he was targeted as a "bad kid" and set apart from the other students. In one instance, the youth's gym teacher forced him to stand by himself on the red line of the gym floor during class time. This experience was isolating and damaging as the child transitioned to a new school.

After the transfer, the staff responsible for the student, who was eligible for special education services and who had an Individualized Education Program, quickly shifted its focus from helping him adjust to his new school environment to implementing strict behavioral interventions.

Through Dr. Ignace's presentation of this case study, youths, parents, and community members at the listening session were able to begin the conversation about what AI/AN students

experience in their school environments and how the environment deeply impacts their ability to receive a quality education.

Anchorage, Alaska

Kyle Wark (Tlingit), Researcher and Policy Analyst, Alaska Native Policy Center, First Alaskans Institute

Alaska Natives endured many hardships in the past, and the pain of those hardships exists today, manifesting in a variety of ways. Alaska Natives suffered the traumas of forced assimilation; both boarding schools and applications for U.S. citizenship required denying connections to tribal communities and cultures. Alaska Natives are struggling to recover from these hardships and still face frequent discrimination, which has an adverse effect on many of the students' academic experiences.

La Crosse, Wisconsin

Barbara Munson (Oneida Nation of Wisconsin), Board Member, Wisconsin Indian Education Association

Wisconsin Indian people have been actively educating the public about and advocating for the elimination of Native team names and logo stereotypes in K–12 public education settings since Carol Hand, a Sokaogan Chippewa woman, filed a discrimination complaint against the Milton School District on behalf of her daughter in 1991. When Hand's daughter received recognition for academic excellence in French language studies, her award certificate was printed over the Milton School District's Redman logo, which depicted the head of a Plains Indian warrior in feathered headdress. This symbolism turned the intended honor into a mockery of the younger Hand's culture, and instead of feeling pride, she experienced revulsion. Her mother tried to educate school officials, and when that failed, she filed a discrimination complaint against the school district. The Hand family experienced verbal threats and eventually moved from the area. The case was not decided by the courts because the complainant no longer resided in the district.

David O'Connor (Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa), American Indian Studies Consultant, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

Wisconsin has 11 federally recognized American Indian nations and tribal communities in the state. About 13,000 American Indian students attend public, charter, private, or tribally controlled schools in Wisconsin. Educational decision making is becoming increasingly data driven, and in Wisconsin there is a great deal of information publicly available for schools, parents, families, and community members to monitor and analyze student progress. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction encourages the examination of this education data.

Troy, New York

Dr. Michael Taylor (Seneca Nation), Visiting Professor, Ithaca College; and Dr. Richard Rose (Cherokee), Adjunct Professor, Schenectady Community College

Inaccurate data, showing fewer AI/AN students than there really are, may lead to difficulty in hearing and addressing student concerns. For example, in 2010, the U.S. Census reported the number of AI/AN students at almost twice the number calculated by the state of New York. The state may have failed to count many urban Indians living in New York City. The inaccuracy of this type of data is a huge issue, with federal and New York state population data matching only 14 percent of the time. Inaccurate data likely means that many student concerns are never identified and subsequently not addressed.

In a 2014 article published by the Center for American Progress, the authors state that research has shown that the use of Native mascots can cause AI/AN youth to internalize cultural abuse.⁸ These Native stereotypes are so powerful that a young Native man was cajoled into dressing up and playing the “Plains Indian” during a school assembly. Not realizing he was subscribing to an unhealthy stereotype, he grew confused and unhappy when classmates stood up and started shouting at him in disapproval.

Negative depictions of Native Americans can make students feel stressed, anxious, confused, or embarrassed, leading them to feel increasingly uncomfortable in their student environment. Because AI/ANs are perceived as conquered, their identity effectively becomes a commodity and form of entertainment. The commonly seen caricature of a “Plains Indian” wearing a “war bonnet” and “war paint” becomes a metaphor in the public eye, obstructing the view of the real Native Americans who are a vastly diverse people. Native mascots persist because they are profitable for private corporations. However, this type of imagery is damaging to AI/AN youth because it interferes with their sense of identity.

Los Angeles, California

James V. Fenelon, Professor of Sociology and Director at Center for Indigenous Peoples Studies, California State University, San Bernardino

California has one of the largest AI/AN populations of any state in the nation. Among that population, students face discrimination against their heritage, internalized oppression, and stereotyping. Native mascots reinforce negative stereotypes.

Historically, the Native Americans of California endured time at missions that attempted to snuff out Native culture. California data shows that AI/AN students in California still experience disadvantages due to their history and the issues they face. These disadvantages often inhibit AI/AN student success and must be addressed so that students may succeed.

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

Tribal Leaders: Archie Mason, Speaker, Osage Nation Congress; and Edwina Butler-Wolfe, Governor, Absentee Shawnee Tribe

Tribal leaders have continually witnessed issues in the school system related to Native youth. Complaints to federal agencies seem to go unheard. Educators often ask the tribal leaders for help; they need someone to hear them and know the tribes will listen, even if they cannot help. Problems facing AI/AN students need national attention.

Community Leaders: Sydna Yellowfish, American Indian Education Coordinator, Edmond Public Schools; and Susan Whitehorse Johnson, Indian Education Director, Walters Public Schools

Positive events, like Indian Youth Career Day, encourage Native youth by providing examples of Native American professional successes. The Edmond Public Schools also run an Oklahoma Indian Student Honor Society and host the annual Oklahoma Indian Challenge Bowl, an academic competition about Oklahoma tribal and U.S. history. These programs improve school for many AI/AN students because participation affirms their cultures and identities. These programs also support and promote student identities. More funding for Indian education is needed to continue these types of programs.

East Lansing, Michigan

Matthew Wesaw (Pokagon Band of Potawatomi), Director, and Melissa Claramunt, Native American Liaison, Michigan Department of Civil Rights

Research supports the negative impact of Native mascots and imagery. When youths see their tribes' sacred icons, images, and artifacts used as props, self-esteem and cultural pride suffer. Ultimately, harmful imagery perpetuates stereotypes and condones cultural abuse from others.

Tulsa, Oklahoma

Jacob Tsotigh (Kiowa), Indian Education Technical Assistant Coordinator, South Central Comprehensive Center; and Dwight Pickering, Director of American Indian Education Culture/Heritage, Oklahoma State Department of Indian Education

Oklahoma shows opportunity for progress in AI/AN education. Several initiatives, such as the Native American taskforce, are working to improve education for AI/AN students. The taskforce assesses education and provides suggestions to school superintendents, who share those suggestions with state officials. After this process, schools realized the possibility of teaching Native languages.

Many aspects of Oklahoma's education for AI/AN students still need improvement. For example, minority students need more support to ultimately decrease their overrepresentation within the juvenile justice system.

Seattle, Washington

Patricia Whitefoot, Yakama Nation, President-Elect, Board of Directors, National Indian Education Association; and John McCoy, Tulalip Tribes of Washington, Washington State Senator

The health and well-being of Native children are central to tribal sovereignty and to the success of tribal communities. The Native Children's Agenda is an initiative that aims to improve the social, emotional, and mental health of children to set them on the path to a successful future.

AI/AN students need increased support from the schools that serve them to overcome the disadvantages they face. Improving school environments will be a critical component of improving school outcomes for AI/AN students.

Student Voices Session

WHIAIANE heard through the listening sessions that some students, parents, or school staff may fear retaliation for verbalizing negative educational experiences. While the listening sessions aided in collecting many useful findings about AI/AN school environments, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan also chose to conduct a Student Voices session where students could discuss concerns with the secretary and his senior staff, including Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights Catherine Lhamon. The Student Voices session allowed those interested in sharing their stories in a less public forum to connect with Secretary Duncan directly. Fifteen students who participated in the 2014 school environment listening tour joined the secretary on Dec. 8, 2014 at the U.S. Department of Education's headquarters in Washington, D.C. This session acted as a capstone to the listening sessions in collecting information on school environments. Testimony from this session appears throughout this report.

Tribal Consultations

Throughout the U.S. Department of Education’s consultations with tribes and tribal communities, tribal leaders have urged the department to gather information from Native youth about the quality of their school environments and to take action to improve Native students’ school experiences. WHIAIANE’s school environment listening sessions emerged from the department’s previous listening sessions with tribal leaders as well as formal tribal consultations. Testimony from these efforts regarding Native student environments appears throughout this report.

Issues and Recommendations

During the listening sessions, WHIAIANE gathered information from participants on many issues such as bullying, student mental health, instructional content, and Native languages. This report summarizes that information. Each section includes a brief description of a common theme found across listening sessions followed by supporting data and testimonies from youths, parents, teachers, and others affected by these issues. The report also discusses community programs that bring hope and success to AI/AN students and present areas in need of improvement. To convey speaker thoughts and attitudes as authentically as possible, this report includes direct quotes from the listening sessions and from previous tribal consultations. Please be advised that some of the language included in the direct quotes may be graphic. The report also includes summaries of select testimonies; within the testimony sections of the report, any statement attributed to a participant that is not in direct quotations is a paraphrase of the participant’s statement. Where possible, the report reflects participants’ tribal affiliations based on available public information. Within this report, the terms “American Indian and Alaska Native,” “Native American,” and “indigenous” are used interchangeably as is necessary for each term’s specific use.

Positive Community Practices

WHIAIANE heard that many schools, tribes, and urban Indian communities already institute practices to improve educational experiences for AI/AN students. Existing efforts incorporate culture and languages in the school curricula and provide these students with extracurricular programming. These practices report successes for the children they serve. A next step involves learning from these practices and scaling them to a larger level, enabling other communities across the nation to build from these positive practices.



Students brainstorming ideas

Recommendation

Study and learn from successful community practices to inform actions for similar programs in the future.

The following quotations and summarized testimonies from WHIAIANE’s listening sessions demonstrate the many positive efforts already in place to support positive environments for Native students:

Testimony

“We go to Anchorage area high schools and bring [Alaska Native youth] to the [Alaska Native] Heritage Center, and they take dance or art classes, and those [who] are involved increase their graduation rates. . . . Heritage Center has kept one hundred percent of our middle school students going to the next level.”

Annette Evans Smith (Yup’ik, Suqpiaq, Athabascan), President,
Alaska Native Heritage Center
Anchorage Listening Session

“We focus on the emotional impact of school on boys. One of the major projects is an after-school club. We have community members come and interact with the boys to help them discover who they are. We have two camps every summer for younger kids. . . . We do a ‘dreams’ process graphic illustration setting for the boys that they do with their parents and teachers to build relationships and set goals with them. We do family nights at the schools, and it’s been a great program to be a part of. This is the last year, but we are trying to get more funding.”

Lori Moore, Project Coordinator, Project Ki’L
Anchorage Listening Session

According to Native American Liaison Melissa Claramunt, the Michigan Department of Civil Rights incentivizes AI/AN students to seek higher education by providing the Michigan Indian Tuition Waiver. This waiver allows eligible students to attend public Michigan higher education institutions free of tuition.

Lansing Listening Session

“I work at an elementary school with five Native students. One of the things I feel is a big issue with school discipline is we don’t have Native identity in the schools. They don’t see successful Natives where they are. ... When we talk about Native history, I always dress ... in my traditional dress, and for my Native students, that’s always their highlight because they are represented.”

Cho Werito (Muscogee [Creek]/Navajo), Teacher
Oklahoma City Listening Session

The Rural Alaska Community Program provides children with resources for success. The program’s community development director, Cathie Clements, shared that these resources include child success programs and an elder mentoring program in which elder volunteers tutor children and pass along cultural teachings.

Anchorage Listening Session

Bunky Echo-hawk (Pawnee/Yakama), an artist and activist, spoke about the importance of cultural education, along with classroom education, to help Native Americans heal from centuries of educational injustice by fostering pride in what makes them unique.

“Education is a foundation of what we need to heal as individual nations and as individuals ... The stories that were presented [today] were stories I experienced, as well, in my own education. It made me look back a few more generations to the boarding school era, where things have changed. There has been some progress.”

Tulsa Listening Session

The Alaska Native Cultural Charter School has addressed some of the issues facing Alaska Native students, said Principal Patsy Shaha (Alutiiq). It adheres to a different curriculum than traditional schools. For example, the school offers two hours per week of Yup’ik instruction. Elders visit the school to speak each week. The school offers a berry-picking trip in the summer and an ice-fishing expedition in the winter.

Anchorage Listening Session

Issues and Concerns

Although positive community programs have succeeded in improving educational experiences for many AI/AN students, WHIAIANE heard from participants that issues such as cultural shaming and negative teacher attitudes persist in many learning environments. The following sections describe issues that WHIAIANE identified as harmful to students and others.

Hesitancy to File Civil Rights Complaints

During the listening sessions, people experiencing alleged civil rights offenses reported to WHIAIANE that they hesitated to file formal complaints with OCR. Often, the victims expressed fear of retaliation in the forms of isolation, loss of employment, or even endangerment of one's self or family.

Although OCR has taken several steps to simplify the process for filing complaints of civil rights violations and to inform communities of schools' obligations to prevent discrimination and



retaliation, some students and community members reported that they found the filing process too difficult to complete. WHIAIANE also heard, due in part to the lack of consistent reporting, that many harmful actions and attitudes exist within school environments. Increasing victims' comfort in the process of filing complaints is crucial to effectively addressing these issues and improving school environments.

Students sharing their experiences

Recommendation

WHIAIANE and OCR should conduct outreach to inform people about what constitutes a civil rights violation and the procedure for filing complaints of discrimination with OCR. The U.S. Department of Education should provide technical support throughout the process to those who choose to file.

Testimony

“I also want to thank OCR for their information [on filing a civil rights complaint] today. We need to make sure that everyone has this information because if more people had it, you would be flooded with reports. I wish I had this information a few years ago because I would have been using it a ton.”

Sarah Adams-Cornell (Choctaw), Parent
Oklahoma City Listening Session

“The accessibility for parents to the enforcement agency — at the federal level, this process of justice is broken. The due process to file a complaint and to get school districts to comply with plans. ... the barriers are put up at the federal level. The Office [for Civil Rights] cuts parents off. Something has to change — process, policies. ... We even had lunch with upper people in the department of education, and we couldn’t access the department of education for the particular case. If we are having trouble trying to access this, imagine the parents who are on their own.”

**Deborah Sioux Cano-Lee, Board President, Washington Indian Civil Rights Commission
Seattle Listening Session**

Lack of Detailed Racial and Ethnic Data

Numerous factors beyond the classroom impact the school environment. For example, WHIAIANE heard that when students who self-identify as fully or partially AI/AN are under-reported, they do not receive important school services for Native students. ED’s *2007 Final Guidance on*



Educators listening to presentations

Maintaining, Collecting, and Reporting Racial and Ethnic Data to the U.S. Department of Education implements the Office of Management and Budget’s 1997 government-wide standards and requires the collection of racial and ethnic information from individuals and the reporting of aggregate data collected in seven categories.⁹ The 2007 guidance permits states and districts to create racial or ethnic categories that are subcategories of the seven reporting categories if the school or state collecting the data deems such distinctions valuable. For example, if there is a diverse population of Hispanics who are also AI/AN, and differentiation of the multiple subcategories is worthwhile to the state or school, data within the Hispanic category may be collected. These subcategories would be for the use of the state or educational institution and would not be reported to the department.

Multiracial school districts and schools are encouraged to consider the use of subcategories of data about students who identify as AI/AN to inform actions that will help students succeed. Participants during the listening sessions also encouraged the federal government to explore revising its government-wide racial and ethnic reporting categories.

Nationally, approximately 31,000 fewer AI/AN students were reported in 2010–11 than 2009–10 after the U.S. Department of Education’s new guidelines for reporting race and ethnicity data on students went into effect. In some states, this cut the number identified as AI/AN in their school systems by 30 percent.¹⁰ Due to the updated two-part question format in the reporting procedure, most of these students were identified as Hispanic despite their connections to tribal communities. In WHIAIANE’s listening sessions, participants raised concerns that under-

identification of AI/AN students has resulted in those students not receiving important school services available for Native students.

Recommendation

To more effectively highlight and address AI/AN student issues, states and local districts should ensure that students and staff are provided with the opportunity to self-identify their ethnicity and race on the two-part data collection form. If one or both parts of the two-part question are unanswered, school officials should take steps to ensure that the respondent has intentionally refused to complete both parts of the question before using observer identification if there is not enough information in the response to allow for proper reporting within one of the seven racial categories. In addition, ED should provide technical assistance to states and districts to improve implementation of the department’s 2007 guidance on the collection and reporting of race and ethnicity, including technical assistance for creating subcategories of the reported Hispanic and races categories at the state and school levels for those who are American Indian/Alaska Native.

Testimony

“Data reports are great, but we are losing data on mixed race [students]. We need data to be American Indian and Alaska Native alone and American Indian and Alaska Native mixed. We need the Department of Education to report this out.”

Malia Villegas (Sugpiaq/Alutiiq), Kodiak Council Member
Anchorage Listening Session

“I go to education conferences, but they mostly deal with reservations and rural environments. They don’t mention urban communities and the issues facing urban Native education.”

Philip Hale (Navajo), Education Director, Southern California Indian Center, Inc.
Los Angeles Listening Session

“Because Native students are dispersed as a sprinkling across the districts here and there, change is not deemed as important since their numbers are not noticeable and our students are less likely to speak out ... or are patronized or not listened to if they do.”

Alana Tsoitigh, (Kiowa), Former Teacher
Written Testimony

“The education of American Indians and Alaska Natives is very complex. There is no one way to address local situations. We know that one size does not fit all. It takes an effort that is holistic in nature.”

John Tippeconnic (Comanche/Cherokee), Director, American Indian Studies Program
Arizona State University
Written Testimony Los Angeles Listening Session

Native Languages

Native languages across the United States are dying, and the worldviews embedded within them perish along with the languages. WHIAIANE heard that excluding Native cultures and history from classrooms harms the identities of AI/AN students. Including Native languages and cultures in curricula is healing for students and can begin to address a history of exclusion that began with mission and boarding schools and continues today. Existing research supports a need for further integration of Native languages into school curricula:



Student welcoming song

- In 2011, 33 percent of AI/AN students in grade eight had reading teachers who reported integrating AI/AN culture and history into instruction at least once a month.¹¹ While some teachers clearly strive to support Native languages, there is room for improvement. During the listening sessions, WHIAIANE heard that many youths are concerned about the loss of Native languages and need opportunities to embrace and preserve the languages.
- Of American Indians and Alaska Natives ages 5 and older, 27 percent speak a language other than English at home.¹² This significant number of AI/AN students would benefit from further support of their Native languages, which are a crucial component of their cultural identities.

Recommendation

State and local districts should seek support from schools and communities to help ensure the preservation and revitalization of Native languages through the development of culturally appropriate opportunities, such as through in-school and out-of-school programming and credit-bearing coursework.

Testimony

“Most teachers promote Spanish as the dominant language to learn, yet we live on an Indian reservation. I think ... the Seneca language will disappear if nothing changes.”

Raienkonnis Edwards (Mohawk), Recent High School Graduate
Troy Listening Session

“I would like to bring languages into our schools — our Native languages and many more; it spreads our language around. Our languages are dying. One Native language just died away because the last man who spoke it died.”

Charitie Ropati (Yup'ik), Student
Anchorage Listening Session

“How many people can understand our language that are in this room today? That’s where we need to start with our curriculum and our education... It doesn’t matter what language or what tribe you’re from. It’s important that we emphasize our culture, and our culture is very important... If you take a look at this circle — sovereignty, culture, identity, language — which one supersedes the other? If we take care of our culture, our language, and our identity, we take care of sovereignty. ... We need to take a look at the cultural component that’s implemented in the school.”

Robert Van Zile (Sokaogon Ojibwe), Ojibwe Language and Culture Teacher,
Indian Community School of Milwaukee
Franklin Listening Session

“Research indicates Native students who have a strong foundation in their language and culture perform better academically. ... People always ask, ‘Why do you think that is?’ Because they see themselves in that situation. They see themselves represented.”

David O’Connor (Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa)
American Indian Studies Consultant,
Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction
Franklin Listening Session

“The *No Child Left Behind Act* requires that a teacher be considered ‘highly qualified’ in order to teach a language for school credit. Most of our fluent tribal speakers are elders and do not always have a degree or certification to become ‘highly qualified.’ ... The tribes are the best judge to say who is an expert speaker of their language.”

Edwina Butler-Wolfe, Governor, Absentee Shawnee Tribe
Oklahoma City Listening Session

School Discipline

Disciplinary practices that are based on a student's race, color, or national origin violate federal law and are detrimental to the success and self-esteem of AI/AN students. Several instances of discriminatory discipline were reported during the listening sessions.

Over the last 10 years, almost half of all youths in the federal justice system were tribal youth. A tribe's court system and ability to provide rehabilitative services are major factors in determining which courts handle youth offenses. Tribal officials often express concerns that exposing youths to the federal justice system could have long-term negative influences that they would carry with them upon exiting the system.¹³

Additionally, other existing research highlights disproportionate disciplinary measures:

- AI/AN students represent less than 1 percent of the student population but 2 percent of out-of-school suspensions and 3 percent of expulsions.¹⁴
- Schools suspend AI/AN boys at more than twice the rate of white boys (13 percent of AI/AN boys receive an out-of-school suspension, compared to 6 percent of white boys).¹⁵
- Schools suspend AI/AN girls at more than three times the rate of white girls (7 percent of AI/AN girls students are suspended, compared to 2 percent of white girls).¹⁶
- About 95 percent of suspensions occur over nonviolent, disruptive behavior.¹⁷

Recommendation

States and local districts should promote school discipline policies that are culturally responsive, consistently applied, and non-discriminatory.

Testimony

“When I was in 10th grade, I got randomly pulled out of class because [the teacher] thought I was high. They scared me and brought [me] to the nurse's office. I asked what was going on, and it was awful because I am not one of the kids who causes trouble. She took my blood pressure and asked if I was high. They searched my bag and emptied my pockets. After I went to the vice principal's office, they found pepper spray because I live in a bad neighborhood. I was transferred to an alternative school and wasn't notified. My mom had to get an attorney to get me back into school. It shut me down and threw my year off.”

Student
Seattle Listening Session

“I’ve seen people be [beaten] and jumped. During my first few weeks in high school, there were a lot of fights. I’ve been told Natives are weak and dumb and no one likes them. One time, I went to the restroom, [and] I got hit and beat up and got suspended and kicked off the basketball team. The principal said, ‘Natives love starting fights.’ I didn’t even start the fight. Our school now has a thing called ‘breaking down the walls,’ which brings kids together to talk about the things we like about each other, and that’s really helped.”

Student
Los Angeles Listening Session

“We view them as criminals, and then we expect them to get in the classroom ready to learn. . . . I want our kids to show up to school knowing they are coming to an educational facility, not jail.”

Cedric Sunray (MOWA Band of Choctaw Indians), Teacher
Oklahoma City Listening Session

“Some people are bullying me because they are doing stuff, and I get blamed for it. . . . The boys are calling me a girl because of my long hair.”

Christopher “Benton” Covarrubias (Jicarilla Apache, Ohkay Owingeh, Ute, Basque, Maya)
First-Grade Student

“When my son [Benton] got in a mutual fight, I was the only parent notified of the fight.”

Laurie Covarrubias (Jicarilla Apache, Ohkay Owingeh, Ute and Basque), Parent
Los Angeles Listening Session

“[There is] a four-year-old boy from the Lac du Flambeau Tribe who recently began attending a public school hundreds of miles away from his tribal community. . . . At this point, the . . . boy has only been in his new school for two weeks. Immediately, he began to have problems in school. The teachers complained that he was out of control and couldn’t keep his hands to himself. He is yelled at in front of other staff and told to ‘stop it.’ . . . As his punishment, he was told to spend the entire gym period standing on a red line on the gym floor on the far side of the gym because he can’t control himself. Within only two weeks, the staff at his new school has deemed him as a bad kid.”

Dr. Lyle Ignace (Coeur d’Alene), Executive Director of the Gerald L. Ignace Indian Health Center
Franklin Listening Session

Hostile Learning Environments

Research shows that hostile school environments are known to damage students' self-esteem and make them feel unsafe in the classroom, decreasing their likelihood of success.¹⁸ WHIAIANE heard during the listening sessions that many students experience hostile or discriminatory



Students reflecting on testimony

behavior from teachers, school administrators, or classmates.

While some student testimonies were positive, most reflected struggles with teachers, fellow students, or both. Many students perceived low expectations or unfair disciplinary actions from educators. Students also shared numerous instances of being bullied or isolated by their classmates.

The following speaker testimonies demonstrate an overall concern about hostile learning environments.

Testimony

“I am concerned about the Native American students within our public school systems based on the alarming nationwide statistical data I have seen. It shows victimization, bullying, cyber bullying, racial tensions, substance abuse, gang activities, and the need for additional safety measures for both student and teacher.”

Edwina Butler-Wolfe, Governor, Absentee Shawnee Tribe
Oklahoma City Listening Session

“We shouldn't be put into a category by the color of our skin. ... Being categorized is a big problem for our youth. ... When people talk down on you, that kind of makes you feel like 'what am I?' ... It makes you question who you are, and you shouldn't have to question who you are because you are who you are.”

Silvia Jacobs (Menominee), Recent High School Graduate
Franklin Listening Session

“My name is Hau'olihiwahiwa Moniz. There's no nice way to make it sound white, so it stuck out... and I think that a lot of Natives can speak to [the] importance of a name, because it is who we are. We stand behind our name. That was one of the biggest culture

shock[s]. People butchered my name through ignorance, through the inability to pronounce it, but what I found was this overwhelming sense of ‘I will not try to pronounce it.’ ... They nicknamed me ‘Hawaii’ instead. It [is] hard when you go somewhere and no one calls you your actual name. ... Six months without someone referring to who you are, that’s not fun.”

Hau’olihiwahiwa Moniz (Native Hawaiian), College Student
Student Voices Session

“I have seen in the schools, and what has been brought to my attention in the court, were not only the bullying in schools, but the discrimination that the schools allow to happen in their institutions.”

Mary Ann Mills, Council Member, Kenaitze Indian Tribe
Reno Tribal Consultation

“In my many years of experience working in the educational field, I witnessed inequitable education and disadvantages to minority groups — and fastidiously to Native American students. ... I and many other Native leaders have stated our concerns, and not much has improved. The uphill battle for many tribes is the tumultuous relationship with local school district administration, teachers, and the undemocratic curriculum and state standardized tests that are geared towards upper- and middle-class society.

We need culturally responsive education. We need programs that are fully funded, and schools need to hire educators that create holistic educational systems. I believe states need to mandate that all schools ... teach Native American content even if they do not have Native American students enrolled in their schools. Our country additionally needs schools that consider the whole child. ... Schools need instructional leaders who can create supportive strategies that enhance cultural values and who are willing to explore promising practices to improve school designs to meet the multifaceted needs of our Native American students. Moreover, we need to require states to create school climates and curriculum that are conducive to our Native American students’ learning styles. Plus, we need to demand that [the] state standardized test be culturally sensitive to Native American learners.”

Juanita Holtyn (Port Gamble S’Klallam), Career and Education Director
Written Testimony

Teacher and School Staff Attitudes and Behavior

WHIAIANE heard that attitudes and actions of teachers and school administrators often contribute to students' discomfort or frustration about their learning environments. Some students who attended listening sessions reported unfair assumptions about Native Americans from teachers or other school staff, resulting in low expectations or creating an environment of subtle racism that students may endure and often internalize.

Recommendation

States and local school districts should encourage cultural competence training for teachers and school staff to reduce misconceptions and stereotyping.

Testimony

“Being Native at public school is really hard. ... My teachers don't understand me. ... I feel like an outcast.”

Blue Haase (Cherokee), Student
Tulsa Listening Session

A student recalled needing assistance with explaining Native American culture for a cultural identity assignment. When she approached her teacher for assistance, the teacher commented that all Native Americans are alcoholics.

Seattle Listening Session

“In my eighth-grade history class, my teacher gave a lesson about Natives in general and said Natives were ‘violent, vicious vermin,’ and this made me really mad. The teacher used the word ‘cannibal,’ and after, my classmates turned to me and said, ‘Are you a cannibal?’ This is direct bullying, but nothing can be done about it because that’s what the teacher said. So my sister, mother, and I came into the school and presented on the actual history of Columbus. We shouldn’t have to do this. The teacher should know the correct history. We gave another perspective. The teacher should know both sides.”

Isabella Cornell (Choctaw), Student
Oklahoma City Listening Session

“[My teacher] began making remarks on [Columbus Day], and I thought it was really mean and unprofessional of him. I remember defending myself and saying something like, ‘At least my people don’t go around raping other people’s women,’ and [my teacher] said, ‘Yeah, and my people’s women don’t go around raping other people’s men.’ For me, it was a really weird and confusing remark that he made because it wasn’t true.”

There's another comment he made when my sister said, 'My president didn't go around randomly killing 38 people.' I think he said, 'Well, my people didn't go around scalping random people.' I am just really mad, and during the debate I was mad. The teacher could have stopped it and been professional about the topic. He didn't have to continue his remarks. He should have had the upper hand and said that this is not okay. He also could have said, 'end of argument.'

I know that claims are past history and that it has already happened, but if that's true, why didn't his comments stop? People who are racist have no respect. I know that this was very wrong, and I also know that I could have stopped the argument, but so much of me wanted to prove how my people actually are. I know for a fact that if this were some other kind of event, say, like the Pearl Harbor attack or 9/11, if we were to make jokes about these things, it wouldn't be funny and people would get really offended. So I don't think it's okay to start making jokes about Native people and how our history was.

Through the whole thing, I feel like I did the right thing. I need to stand up for my people and myself, but at the end of that class, [my teacher] said that me and my sister won the argument, and as a prize, we will win a [smallpox] blanket. He didn't have to say that to make himself feel good or better about himself. This whole thing made me mad, and it probably would have made thousands of other Native people mad or even angrier than that."

Sarah Rave, Student
La Crosse Listening Session

"The research tells us that ... if somebody is more grounded in their culture and has more of a sense of self and identity, then they're more likely to succeed in the classroom."

Russ McDonald (Dakota/Arikara), President, United Tribes Technical College
Fort Yates Tribal Consultation

Tatiana Ticknor (Tlingit, Dena'ina, Yup'ik), a student, indicated that teachers at her previous school often treated her like she needed special help when she did not, perhaps because she spoke in her Native tongue. In fact, at the time of the session, she was on track to graduate early.

Anchorage Listening Session

"My sister ... is a freshman at Albuquerque High School. ... Earlier this year, in her health class, they had studied statistics of diabetes among Native Americans. ... She said her teacher, during their class time, he was giving a lecture on obesity, and at the end he said, 'If you want to know more, just ask anyone who is Native or in the Native community.' My sister, being a freshman this year and the only Native American in that classroom, felt the pressure and felt all the rest of

the students' eyes looking at her. ... I applauded her for speaking out right away and not holding it in. She addressed her teacher by saying she did not think what he said was right and found it offensive. ... Later that evening, the teacher apologized by calling our mother. My mother ... shared with him the negative impact of what he said had on her [daughter] and the rest of the students."

Shandiin Church (Pokagon Band of Potawatomi/Navajo), College Student
Lansing Listening Session

"This past year I graduated [high school], and I went through 4 years of being harassed by my band director. He would address me as 'squaw.' Over the years, he would make jokes about my heritage. 'Oh, are you doing something Cherokee? Are you going to become a princess or something?'"

Liz Burns (Cherokee), Recent High School Graduate
Anchorage Listening Session

"I have nieces who are having issues getting access to information about college because their school guidance counselors are telling them that Indians don't normally make it to college. (Instead, they end up pregnant.)"

Cheri Thomas, (Quinault/Yurok), Commissioner, Los Angeles Native American Indian Commission
Los Angeles Listening Session

"There was this teacher in the high school who was a history teacher. Two of my friends were talking to the teacher about Native Americans, and he brought up bad stuff about Native Americans. They fought that response. ... [My friend] said that their white men raped our Native women and he said, 'Well, they are Native women. They're all bound by white men,' and the students were really hurt by that. All the other kids just laughed; they thought it was just a funny joke."

Calista Stumblingbear (Ho-Chunk), Student
Student Voices Session

"If you are brown enough, you don't belong in the advanced classes."

This is how Valerie Davidson (Yup'ik), Trustee of the First Alaskans Institute, summarized low teacher expectations for AI/AN students. She shared a story of a student who earned a perfect score on a test; yet, her teachers told her the class was too difficult for her.

Valerie Davidson (Yupik), Trustee, First Alaskans Institute
Anchorage Listening Session

“The biggest issues are ... not those incredible good and bad stories; it’s a more subtle racism of low expectations.”

Janelle Vanasse, Director of Secondary Education at Lower Kuskokwim School District
Anchorage Listening Session

“I remember being in high school and my teacher ... said, ‘All Indians are on food stamps.’ I was the only Native in class and was really embarrassed.”

Jacqueline Holder (Comanche), Chair, Indian Education Parent Advisory Committee
Oklahoma City Listening Session

Student Attitudes and Bullying

Bullying fosters a climate of fear and disrespect that can seriously impair the physical and psychological health of its victims. It also creates conditions that negatively affect learning, thereby undermining the ability of students to achieve their full potential. Some bullying may qualify as harassment under federal antidiscrimination laws enforced by OCR.

Bullying and harassment may take many forms, including verbal acts and name-calling; graphic and written statements, which may include the use of cell phones or the Internet; or other conduct that may be physically threatening, harmful, or humiliating. They do not have to include intent to harm, be directed at a specific target, or involve repeated incidents. Harassment creates a hostile environment when the conduct is sufficiently serious. Such hostility interferes with or limits a student’s ability to participate in or benefit from the services, activities, or opportunities offered by a school. When such harassment is based on race, color, national origin, sex, or disability, and a school fails to respond appropriately if it knew or reasonably should have known about the harassment, it violates the civil rights laws that OCR enforces.

A 2013 study by Evelyn M. Campbell and Susan E. Smalling reported that 54 percent of AI/AN students participating in the 2010 Minnesota Student Survey experienced some form of bullying. Of those students, 29.3 percent experienced threats, 47.5 percent experienced physical violence, and 23.5 percent experienced both.¹⁹ Additionally, in several states with high Native student populations, including New York, Vermont, North Dakota, South Dakota, Oklahoma, and Maryland, AI/AN students were the most likely or second most likely to be bullied of any racial or ethnic group.²⁰ Campbell and Smalling’s study demonstrated that “these high levels of victimization and potential bullying experienced may lead to several issues for students, including not feeling safe in school, problems with academics, and potentially dropping out.”²¹

According to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data from 2011 through 2013, the rate of suicides among AI/AN students ages 10 through 17 reached 6.5 percent, the highest rate for any race or ethnicity during this same two-year period.²² A 2011 study linked bullying as a contributing factor to the rising suicide rate among AI/AN youth, reiterating the sense of urgency

around bullying that the listening sessions highlighted. The study advises that “culturally responsive educators teach skills related to empathy and compassion, and establish social norms and rules that respect all students.” The study continues, “AI/AN students attending culturally responsive and inclusive schools will feel connected, empowered, and better prepared to address discriminatory bullying and harassment.”²³

During the listening sessions, many speakers shared stories of bullying and harassment that ranged from name-calling to physical attacks. Several students reported distress due to being isolated from others at school. WHIAIANE heard evidence of inadequate counseling and behavioral health support to address such harm. Specifically, WHIAIANE heard that bullying of AI/AN students is commonly ignored by teachers and school staff, and that AI/AN students who respond to racial affronts are often punished as the instigators of misconduct.

Recommendation

States and local school districts should promote training for all school staff so they can fairly and effectively recognize and respond to incidents of bullying. In addition, schools should provide counseling and support to victims of bullying, publicly affirm that incidents of misconduct are unacceptable, implement policies that promptly and effectively address bullying (including a mechanism for Native students, teachers, and staff to provide feedback on a school’s efforts), offer age-appropriate programs that promote acceptance, educate students and families about how to report bullying, and institute school climate assessments that address these issues and that are more inclusive of AI/AN students.

Testimony

“A kid in my class said, ‘Do you want a blanket to celebrate Columbus Day?’ I laughed, but he kept asking me as if it was a joke. Well, I know he took it as a joke, but to me, I thought it was really messed up and it wasn’t okay.”

Sarah Rave, Student
La Crosse Listening Session

I’m a sixth-grader at the Black River Falls Middle School. We were playing ‘lightning,’ and, basically, people call me ‘Big Brown.’ When I’m playing football, basketball, or baseball, I usually beat them, and then they are mean to me. They call me a ‘Redskin,’ ‘Brown Head,’ ‘Black Head,’ and I really don’t like it. On the playground, while playing kickball, the other team is all white, and they wanted our team to be the Redskins. . . . When the white team would get us out, they would say, ‘Cowboys attacked the Redskins!’ I don’t like how they came up with names like Redskins. I don’t like that. It’s mean.”

Dontay Cloud, (Ho-Chunk), Student
La Crosse Listening Session

“I had a friend named Hunter Deer. Due to tragic events, he had committed suicide. ... Upon hearing the news, there is this kid, and you want to know what he said? ... ‘Well, if I was Native too, I’d kill myself as well.’”

Raienkonnis Edwards (Mohawk), Recent High School Graduate
Troy Listening Session

“[Other students] always thought that I wasn’t a part of them. They always used to have groups, and they never let me be a part of it. They always excluded me from everything.”

Ralph Williams-Humphries, Student
Franklin Listening Session

“My first winter was really harsh. I couldn’t really afford to get a coat by myself, so I was walking class to class with a quilt, ... so a lot of classmates really thought that that was quite hilarious, ... and my classmates called me ‘Hawaii cow tipping,’ where they would come up behind me and scare me on the ice to make me fall because they thought it was really funny.”

Hau’olihiwahiwa Moniz (Native Hawaiian), College Student
Student Voices Session

“We also have to look at our bullying programs because, as much as I support anti-bullying programs, many that I have seen claim to be race-neutral. They don’t deal with the fact that much of our bullying — not all, certainly — but much of it is race-based. We need conversations about that. As a white person, I’d say white people don’t have many conversations about race. Race is not an issue on the table. One of the privileges of being white is that you don’t have to think about race very much, and that is something that we, as educators, have to confront with our colleagues, but more importantly, those in higher-ups should also address it.”

Bob Peterson, Then-President of the Milwaukee Teachers Education Association
Franklin Listening Session

“There were two students having a very heated debate about a girl and trashing her. I didn’t like that, and I said, ‘What the heck are you doing? Why are talking like this [about] her?’ And he ... looked me dead in the eye and said, ‘Shut up, you stinky savage,’ and he spit in my face. ... I like to be a peaceful kind of guy, but I stood up ready for a fight, and I was quite angry. The teacher had seen the whole thing, and he only reacted when I stood up. I had a teacher restrain me, and I got into trouble and the teacher played it off like some kind of joke.”

Raienkonnis Edwards (Mohawk), Recent High School Graduate
Troy Listening Session

“We brought two girls to a teacher training — high school girls, and they had thick accents — brilliant, lovely girls. In the Anchorage school district, they don’t talk because they are made fun of because of their thick accents. So they went through all of their schooling without speaking.”

Annette Evans Smith, President, Alaska Native Heritage Center
Anchorage Listening Session

“Our school has been using the term ‘Wahoo,’ which is a derogatory term used in the early ages of the United States. ... I wasn’t too happy with that, but nobody else seems to care because they are already so used to the bullying and name-calling that they are just like, ‘Oh, I’m just going to give up.’ Some have dropped out.”

Autumn Martin (Pokagon Band of Potawatomi), Student
Student Voices Session

Susan Wells (Kenaitze Indian Tribe/ Dena’ina), a teacher, reported that being Native American can mark students or teachers for bullying. Because she “doesn’t look Native,” she worked at a school for five years before the human resources office learned of her heritage. They approached her and told her that she needed to transfer, saying, “If they know you are Native, you become a target.”

Anchorage Listening Session

“I have been in public school forever. Since I was 5 years old, I’ve been passed around to different family members and foster parents. Growing up, I was in foster care, and I was the only Native kid around. I was separated out and no one wanted to play with me. ... I went to live with my uncle on [the] Navajo reservation, and even though I was Native, I was bullied

because I didn't understand my culture. There is discrimination everywhere. At first I was discriminated [against] because I was Native and then because I wasn't Native enough."

Student
Los Angeles Listening Session

Lack of Cultural Awareness

WHIAIANE heard testimony regarding cultural repression or a lack of cultural awareness from teachers, administrators, and students. Whether unintentional or deliberate, such intolerance is multifaceted and creates uncomfortable or hostile situations for AI/AN students.

In 2011, 56 percent of AI/AN students in grade four reported knowing some or a lot about their tribe or group's history or traditions. Additionally, 43 percent of students in grade eight reported having some or a lot of knowledge of current issues important to AI/AN people.²⁴ These numbers illustrate much room for improvement in encouraging cultural pride and knowledge among students.

Approximately a quarter of AI/AN students in grades four and eight received instruction from teachers who had acquired knowledge "to a large extent" from living and working in an AI/AN community.²⁵ Further, only 30 percent of school administrators serving AI/AN fourth-graders reported having AI/AN community members visit the school to share tribal nation history and traditions more than three or more times a year in 2011.²⁶ As demonstrated by numerous listening session testimonies dealing with culturally insensitive teachers, formal training on working with AI/AN students could help improve teachers' cultural knowledge and sensitivity.

Cornell Pewewardy of Portland State University writes that

*culturally responsive teaching uses the child's culture to build a bridge to success in school achievement. Building such a bridge requires a degree of cultural literacy often absent in mainstream classrooms where the vast majority of AI/AN students are taught by non-Native teachers. Some research has shown that where the students and teachers share the same culture, learning is enhanced. This may be the result of AI/AN teachers' increased awareness of Native learning styles and their ability to fine-tune their teaching to their students' learning needs.*²⁷

Throughout the listening sessions, WHIAIANE heard testimony related to the concerns surrounding irrelevant, inaccurate, and potentially harmful effects of history lessons, as well as inappropriate use of Native American clothing, songs, dances, customs, and arts. Participants conveyed that these erroneous lessons often force Native youth into the position of having to correct the teacher, which marks them as targets for further bullying if the issue is not handled appropriately. WHIAIANE heard that history lessons, in particular, may be harmful because they often fail to report accurate Native American history.

Recommendation

States and school districts should consider including Native American history and culture in their curricula, including treaty rights and tribal sovereignty. An examination of resources, strategies, and professional development, as well as strengthened parental and tribal engagement with students, can help address persistent educational knowledge gaps.

Testimony

“At school there is not much covered on Native Americans. Our teachers only talk about Natives sometimes, usually in November around Thanksgiving. That’s not really the right time because Native people are here all the time. They teach us about friendly pilgrims and Indians—that white people and Indians have been friends all along, but we know another story. . . . I would like our teachers to change the way they teach so Indians are not just about [the] past, but in the present, and we learn more than one story.”

Kiki Shawnee, Student
Oklahoma City Listening Session

“I was taught to learn our ways and respect them, but that’s not what other kids were taught. They were taught to be ashamed of our culture. It’s considered lame to be a bird dancer. . . . Schools don’t teach enough about how important our history is and how the tribes are dwindling. We are losing our language and our culture, but it’s hard to share that with our peers. We need to be taught about where we came from.”

Student
Los Angeles Listening Session

“I would sink down in my seat,” said Conrad Church (Pokagon Band of Potawatomi), a parent, when recalling how Native Americans were portrayed as “savages” in history lessons at his school.

Lansing Listening Session

“After centuries of colonization, I find it hard to feel that my opinions or perspectives matter or have value in the dominant culture. . . . Many times, we are the only Native students in the classroom. Most times, we are also the first Native person encountered by the mainly white student population. Sometimes, it is hard to not feel like the ‘token Indian.’ Somehow, we end up being representative of an entire race, rather than an individual with the same wants and needs as everyone else.”

Terry Jones (Seneca), College Student
Los Angeles Listening Session

“My people are smart; we’re hard working; we’re not losers. Thousands and thousands of years of ancestral rights gets boiled down to coconut bras, grass skirts, and nice beaches. ... Our Kaponapona Program [is] supposed to help our students. It’s supposed to teach them about basic Hawaiian things like our culture, our language. However, it seems to have been watered down in the past years to nothing more than paper cutouts of flowers and macaroni strings.”

Hau’olihiwahiwa Moniz (Native Hawaiian), College Student
Student Voices Student

Isabella Cornell, a student, reported that her teachers lectured about the first Thanksgiving every November, dressing the children up in headdresses. This bothered her because headdresses are sacred items.

Oklahoma City Listening Session

“In my history class, my history teacher asked [a group of students] to forget who [they] were, and they would become part of the Lakota. He would be represented as Chief Black Buffalo. We had to write a speech on Lewis and Clark. We had to share those with the class, and he asked the other group to hiss to disagree or bang on the tables if they agreed to it. For him to teach that in high school was incorrect.”

E. A. Molly Pinkham (Nimi’ipuu/Tlingit), Student
Seattle Listening Session

“I have tried to bring many of my friends that are not Nishnabe to as many powwows or youth council things. ... We have an arena, which is the one that we dance around. [It’s a] circle, which is the heartbeat of our songs. When I took [my friend] over there and tried to ... explain, she was like, ‘Do you kill people there?’ and she kept going on with questions like, ‘Do you still have tomahawks? Do you use them? Have you ever scalped somebody?’ and I wasn’t mad. She had been programmed by regular schools to say [Natives] were savages.”

Autumn Martin (Pokagon Band of Potawatomi), Student
Student Voices Session

“Our music teacher makes us sing patriotic songs with lyrics like, ‘pilgrims’ pride; land where my fathers died; let freedom ring.’ This is offensive to me.”

Lakota Dimond (Hunkpapa Lakota), Student
Seattle Listening Session

“I think teaching more on the high school level and being more proactive on history [is important]. In Hollywood, there is this romanticized version. It plays into the problems we tend to face — we don’t exist or we are drunks. We bring no value to this world.”

Tamera Begay (Navajo), Law Student
Lansing Listening Session

“I am sad to hear that the land run [reenactments] are still happening. I remember doing them in school, and I have always hoped they would stop. When I was in fourth grade, my teacher asked my parents if I could be the first kid to walk out for the land runs to make it more authentic and let the kids take my land. My parents were very upset by this.”

Corey Still (United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians), Listening Session Moderator
Oklahoma City Listening Session

“When I was in kindergarten, my class did a land run reenactment. We ran on the playground and put flags in the ground and claimed the land. I don’t remember the teachers telling us it was Indian land and people were taking it from them. It makes me feel frustrated, mad, and sad that we had to do this. Why do teachers teach something that isn’t right? I want land run reenactments to stop. My mom made a deal with the principal. She said we can do Native American presentations at the school to teach about Native history, language, dance, and the awesomeness of our culture if [the school] will stop doing land run reenactments, and my principal said yes! They promised to never do land run reenactments again, but not everyone can go to my school. I think all schools should do this.”

Gabby Cornell (Choctaw), Student
Oklahoma City Listening Session

“I have been working with Native American services in Oklahoma City, and I was able to get advice from a lot of the people here to talk about the land run reenactments... It’s worth talking about again because it’s something we can change. They changed it in Norman, so they can change it here. We can’t just bring complaints; we have to bring solutions.”

Sarah Adams-Cornell (Choctaw), Parent
Oklahoma City Listening Session

“[Early elementary school years] are very formative years in our education system. They lay the foundation for all the knowledge that is gained later in life. [As a future teacher,] I am already contemplating how I’m going to handle in-class discussion about topics such as Thanksgiving. While it wouldn’t be appropriate for me to discuss how the first Thanksgiving was really a celebration of the massacre of 700 Pequot men, women, and

children by a colonial war party with a group of kindergarteners, I also don't want to 'reenact' a 'first Thanksgiving' by having half the class dress as pilgrims and the other half dress as Indians wearing war bonnets. The tribes in that area didn't even wear war bonnets. No educator should have to face such a significant moral conflict on how to teach history."

Amanda Anderson (Choctaw), College Student
Oklahoma City Listening Session

Gabriel de los Angeles (Snoqualmie), a doctoral student, indicated that current teachings about AI/AN culture tend to lack positivity and hope. He stated that schools need to inject joy into Native studies, whether that is through art, theater, storytelling, music, or other forms of "play."

"Play is exploration. Play is power. ... Play is hope. Play is healing."

Seattle Listening Session

"When I was in first grade, we were doing a Thanksgiving project, and we had to decorate war bonnets, and I was told mine was wrong when I did it based on my Native culture."

Walter Ahhaitty (Kiowa/Comanche/Cherokee), Planner and Grant Writer,
Southern California Indian Center
Los Angeles Listening Session

"I never learned about any other tribes or even my own tribe in my school sometimes. Not seeing myself within the school textbooks definitely harmed, especially if someone is trying to tell you to be a lawyer or teacher someday. If you don't see yourself in that context, or see it as some type of negative, it definitely has an impression on you."

David O'Connor (Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa), American Indian Studies
Consultant,
Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction
Franklin Listening Session

Hau'olihiwahiwa Moniz, a Native Hawaiian student who moved to the mainland to attend school, encountered many stereotypes from other students. She was told she did not look Native Hawaiian because she does not have curly hair and is not "very dark." They asked questions such as, "Do you like pineapple?" and "Have you ever seen an airplane?"

Troy Listening Session

“There’s different definitions of success from federal government versus tribal governments. . . . Honor and respect for the Native way of life should be taught. This should be done because our people have been here for thousands of years, teaching success in a different way.”

Rick Rowland (Sun’aq Tribe of Kodiak), Construction Management Apprentice at Alutiiq, LLC
Anchorage Listening Session

Tee Shawnee, an educator and parent, reported that her oldest son’s school forced him to read multiple textbooks with inaccurate and archaic depictions of Native Americans.

“He would come home aggravated and upset, saying the books they were forced to read and write reports on were grossly inaccurate and one-sided. Our third-grade student asks questions as to why they only talk about Native people in the past tense and Thanksgiving seems to be the only time of year we are mentioned.”

Oklahoma City Listening Session

Laurie Covarrubias spoke about teaching her son the truth of Columbus Day and how that has affected and continues to affect American Indian people. However, she shared her concerns that society forces her son to celebrate it. Her son, Christopher “Benton” Covarrubias, a first-grader, reported that he was sent to the principal’s office after he discouraged his classmates from celebrating Columbus Day.

Los Angeles Listening Session

“Oftentimes, if you are a Native teacher, your role becomes multifaceted. . . . For instance, if there is a problem with a Native student or family, [other teachers] hand it to you as though it is a foreign topic that they need translated.”

Tee Shawnee, Educator
Oklahoma City Listening Session

“It’s not right for Native kids to go to school and have people look at them and say, ‘You are not worth understanding.’ There’s an attitude of, ‘Since I don’t understand you, I’m not accountable to you.’”

Dr. Bradley Scott, Director of Educational Transformation and Innovation,
Intercultural Development Research Association
Oklahoma City Listening Session

“There was one incident when a teacher was talking to my daughter ... and told her, ‘You all lived in teepees,’ and my daughter said, ‘No, we lived in ciporokes,’ meaning wigwams. It all comes back to identity for our kids. ... I just want the White House to know ... about the loss of identity. It’s here. It’s happening. Something has to happen with school systems.”

Samson Falcon (Ho-Chunk), Parent
La Crosse Listening Session

“We need to make Native American studies a mandatory course, even if just for one credit. Washington State is working on incorporating lesson plans based on Washington tribes’ language and history. This is a thing we could do in Oklahoma because we have a large Native population. Teachers could pull lesson plans from a website and implement them into their already written plans. In Washington, they are incorporating indigenous people into American history. When they do talk about our history, they lump us into one people group, ‘Native American,’ and I think that’s why it’s easy to use us as mascots.”

Johnnie Jae Morris (Otoe-Missouria/Choctaw), “Not Your Mascot” Board Member
Oklahoma City Listening Session

“My pre-kindergarten child was asked to make an Indian costume (headband with paper feather) for their class Thanksgiving feast. The class made items and decided whether or not they wanted to be Indians or pilgrims. I have met with the school to bring up the issue, but the school said it was part of the curriculum. However, they don’t ask kids to dress up as other races. I also asked them to address the kids being taught the ‘10 little Indians’ song, which is about massacring Indians. They changed that, but won’t change the costumes for the feast.”

Lucinda Myers, (Muscogee Creek), Parent
Oklahoma City Listening Session

“Our son came home and told us about being taught a ‘Native American’ song in class. I asked him what tribe the song was from. He didn’t know. He told his dad that the teacher said the music wasn’t specific to a tribe and that it was a Native American song. ... He should not be singing a song that he did not know or understand the words to, especially a Native song. My husband also explained ... that the song probably is [or] was used in ceremony or for a specific purpose, and to be truly honorable, we should know why we are singing that song before singing it.”

Donna Chrisjohn, Parent
Written Testimony

“He who controls the past, controls the future,” said a school activities coordinator who noted the need to present history to more accurately reflect the past.

Tulsa Listening Session

“Eighty-seven percent of the representations of Native Americans in the curriculum today in the United States are pre-1900. That’s ridiculous in 2014.”

Chad Uran (White Earth Anishinaabe), Anthropologist
Seattle Listening Session

“Native people are still facing termination — termination by erasure. The exclusion of the hundreds upon hundreds of contributions of Native American people to this world erased from school [curricula] significantly impacts not only the way society views us, but the way our people view themselves.”

Sarah Adams-Cornell (Choctaw), Parent
Oklahoma City Listening Session

“Our staff realizes that we are Indian 12 months out of the year, and not just November. However, we still get some hesitation from the teachers allowing our lessons into the classroom the other months of the year.”

Raymond Rodgers (Seneca-Cayuga/Cherokee), Director for Indian Education
Sapulpa School District
Tulsa Listening Session

“Elementary schools, which are the foundation for learning and identity, can be the worst. Many teachers at this level continue to perpetuate the lies, myths, and stereotypes that have been there for eons, simply because ‘It’s always been that way’, and ‘That’s how I was taught.’”

Alana Tsoitigh, (Kiowa), Former Teacher
Written Testimony

“My students say, ‘How did I not know about this stuff or this history?’ I say, ‘Because it’s not a requirement or a part of the curriculum.’ We need to talk about this stuff in public to allow people to cry and laugh and work through what’s happened to us.”

Victoria Hykes Steere (Iñupiaq), Professor and Parent
Anchorage Listening Session

Mascots and Imagery

The use of Native school mascots, such as “Chiefs” or “R--skins,” has long been a concern for tribal communities. WHIAIANE has gathered much information from students and other advocates who oppose these mascots. Numerous testimonies during the listening sessions illustrated how stereotypical imagery and symbolism harm all students, especially AI/AN



Young student prepares testimony.

students, by interfering with self-identity, perpetuating negative stereotypes, encouraging bullying and teasing, and creating unhealthy learning environments. Often, students may not even be aware of or able to articulate the subconscious influence such images and symbolism can have on their psychological development. These harms have spurred many schools, colleges, and boards of education to eliminate such mascots, and have led many associations and civil rights organizations to call for ending their use.²⁸ Though a considerable number of institutions

have changed their mascots, over 2,400 schools have yet to do so. Listening session participants indicated that the federal government must do more to help schools and institutions understand the harmful effects that stereotypes, including imagery and symbolism in the form of mascots or logos, have on all students, particularly AI/AN students.

Harmful stereotypes, including via imagery and symbolism in the school environment, impact many vulnerable populations, including those identified on the basis of race, ethnicity, and disabilities. During the listening sessions, WHIAIANE heard concerns that the continual presence of stereotypes in schools also psychologically damages the students who perpetuate them. Research supports this idea, indicating that perpetrators experience increased self-esteem while engaging with stereotypes at the expense of Native students.²⁹ However, perpetrators of these stereotypes are not developing holistic and multi-dimensional understandings of other people, which can result in lower levels of empathy and hinder cross-cultural communication skills.

Many tribes and tribal councils have issued formal statements and resolutions urging the removal of Native mascots. The Inter-Tribal Council of Five Civilized Tribes asserts, “Negative images and stereotypes about American Indians as mascots contribute to a hostile learning environment that affirms the negative images and stereotypes that persist in America about American Indians.” Over 40 other tribes and councils have issued similar formal statements opposing Native mascots, including the 20 tribes of the Inter-Tribal Council of Arizona, the Juaneño Band of Mission Indians, the Peoria Tribe of Indians of Oklahoma, the 12 tribes of the Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Council, the Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin, and the Oneida Tribe of Indians of Wisconsin.

In addition to issuing formal statements and resolutions, many tribes and tribal organizations have publicly supported efforts to eliminate Native mascots. The United South and Eastern Tribes, Inc. have affirmed their support of the Oneida Indian Nation's "Change the Mascot" campaign. In 2011, the Great Plains Tribal Chairman's Association (GPTA) testified before the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs on the stereotypical representation of Native Americans as mascots. In its testimony, GPTA asserted, "We find the use of Native American mascots to be dehumanizing and disrespectful."³⁰ Executive Director Scott Vele of the Midwest Alliance of Sovereign Tribes has also spoken out on multiple occasions against Native mascots and imagery.

Likewise, in 2013, the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) stated,

*When exposed to these images, the self-esteem of Native youth is harmfully impacted, their self-confidence erodes, and their sense of identity is severely damaged. Specifically, these stereotypes affect how Native youth view the world and their place in society, while also affecting how society views Native peoples. This creates an inaccurate portrayal of Native peoples and their contributions to society. Creating positive images and role models is essential in helping Native youth more fully and fairly establish themselves in today's society.*³¹

The listening sessions gathered numerous testimonies that validated NCAI's concerns regarding mascots and imagery.

The American Psychological Association issued a statement in 2005 affirming that

*the continued use of American Indian mascots, symbols, images, and personalities ... is a form of discrimination against Indigenous Nations that can lead to negative relations between groups ... [and] has a negative impact on other communities by allowing for the perpetuation of stereotypes and stigmatization of another cultural group.*³²

The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights similarly commented,

*The stereotyping of any racial, ethnic, religious or other groups when promoted by our public educational institutions, teach all students that stereotyping of minority groups is acceptable, a dangerous lesson in a diverse society. Schools have a responsibility to educate their students; they should not use their influence to perpetuate misrepresentations of any culture or people. Children at the elementary and secondary level usually have no choice about which school they attend. Further, the assumption that a college student may freely choose another educational institution if she feels uncomfortable around mascots and imagery is a false one. Many factors, from educational programs to financial aid to proximity to home, limit a college student's choices. It is particularly onerous if the student must also consider whether or not the institution is maintaining a racially hostile environment for Indian students.*³³

Recommendation

States and local school districts should consider the historical significance and context of Native school mascots and imagery in determining whether they have a negative effect on students, including Native American students. OCR should explore providing guidance to schools, districts, states, and institutions of higher education regarding civil rights compliance when hostile environments are created by the potentially harmful Native imagery and symbolism, including school mascots and logos. OCR, states, and school districts should work with schools to develop and implement actions to change potentially harmful imagery and symbolism.

Testimony

“In high school, my mascot was the ‘Redskins’ and I had to watch my classmates make posters saying we are going to ‘skin’ our sports opponents. The other teams would make posters that said they are going to send us home on a ‘trail of tears.’

I’m now in college, and I recently had to write a peer-review paper, and I wrote on the mascot issue. I had a classmate say that Natives don’t exist anymore, so no one should be upset by the mascot issue. I asked, ‘Well, am I real?’ He said, ‘You don’t live in a teepee, so no.’ It’s still a slap in the face every time. I thought I had moved on, but it still hurts every time.”

Amanda Anderson (Choctaw), College Student
Oklahoma City Listening Session

“We are not token Indians. We are people. We are important.”

Katsitsionni Fox (Mohawk), Artist and Documentarian
Troy Listening Session

“We should be worried. We should be more than worried. We should demand that our school systems at the department of education ... at the local, state, and national level[s] take these issues up with diligence. We know that the promotion of mascots, logos, and nicknames has a very negative effect on students of all races. We also know anti-education has to be deep. It has to deal with stereotypes. It also has to deal with accurate history.”

Bob Peterson, Then-President, Milwaukee Teachers Education Association
Franklin Listening Session

“One of the public schools in Oklahoma City did change their mascot name from Redskins. ... They are getting ready to vote on a new mascot. They wanted to know how they could work better with the tribes.”

Edwina Butler-Wolfe, Governor, Absentee Shawnee Tribe
Reno Tribal Consultation

“We need to build allies — allies who are non-Native, to introduce [the issue of mascots]. Whenever I was talking to someone, they would say that, for Natives, it is too sensitive. It is not that they are too sensitive. It is overly offensive.”

Roderick Cook (St. Regis Mohawk), Director,
Mohawk Higher Education Program, SUNY Fredonia
Troy Listening Session

“I’ve been in many schools with Native mascots. The kids I work with around that subject come and talk about how hurtful that is. It’s hard for them to go into school rallies because of all the war cries and whooping.”

Michael Folsom (Choctaw), School Psychiatrist
Los Angeles Listening Session

“I think there’s a disconnect between tribal leaders and youth. ... You don’t get a lot of complaints [about the mascot issue] because we’ve been taught that that’s just how things are, and we’ve just accepted that.”

Mahgan Miles (Cheyenne and Arapaho), State Tribal Education Partnership (STEP) Program
Coordinator
Oklahoma City Listening Session

“[My grandsons] have long hair, and last spring, I got a call from my youngest grandson, and he said, ‘I want to come home. Some of the kids are teasing me because we are ‘braves,’ and they say I’m the mascot.’ They are the only Native kids there, and so they are alone. That’s exactly why I have been an advocate for change all these years because of kids [who] have to endure this type of discrimination. Seemingly harmless kidding can have a lasting impact.”

Jacob Tsotigh (Kiowa), Grandfather
Oklahoma City Listening Session

“I am afraid to attend any football games in the community I live in because I’m not sure how I would react toward those expressing derogatory remarks or behavior toward my race. ... I do not feel honored or respected and fear for any young indigenous [people] still finding themselves.”

Tosawi Saddler (Chippewa/Cree), Cofounder, Indigenize, Inc.
Oklahoma City Listening Session

“Some people say that we have more important issues to worry about. I believe that the dehumanization caused by the use of derogatory mascots is a major contributing factor as to why we have more important issues to worry about.

It is a dehumanization tactic, born of institutional racism, similar to the derogatory terms and imagery ... used by Hitler to usher in the Jewish holocaust. ... The use of derogatory and stereotypical caricatures used to falsely depict Native Americans ... hold an eerie resemblance to the caricature-like pictures of people with exaggerated facial features ... used in old Nazi propaganda newspapers, ... which were used to influence and incite negative public opinion, and thus the dehumanization of Jewish people. ... It seems to me that we allow those who profit from its offensiveness to lead the discussion. It’s dangerous because it ignores atrocities. ... We are not just offended. We are scared.”

Alecia Onzahwah (Kickapoo), Cofounder, Indigenize, Inc.
Oklahoma City Listening Session

“The use of Native American imagery not only harms [those] students, but contributes to the enhanced ... self-image of non-Native students. This ... results in the widening of the opportunity gap. It is only those who have the power — those in the majority — [who] have the ability to caricaturize, symbolize, or create a mascot of another group of people. Hence, the equality gap. ... It is not about what is offensive or who finds something offensive, but how the presence of that ‘something’ impacts the learning environment, alters the climate, and negatively influences how a student can participate in it and benefit from it.”

Melissa Claramunt, Native American Liaison, Michigan Department of Civil Rights
Lansing Listening Session

“[School mascots represent] bullying at its worst because it is done openly ... and our youth, who face some difficult challenges and often struggle to find a reason not to exit this world by their own hand, see that an entire school, an entire community, an entire nation, allows it. ... When will this nation accept our word as truth for how derogatory mascot[s] and imagery affects us and our children? When will the truth be admitted that the ‘redskins’ term was historically used as a reference for the outright genocide of our people by the offering of

monetary rewards for the bloody scalps of our men, women, and children? When discussions occur that reference historical atrocities, Native people are often told, ‘get over it; it’s in the past,’ but the belief that it is in the past is erroneous. It is not in the past when we are reminded of the brutal genocide on a daily basis. ... How is a ... Native child supposed to feel safe in a world where a term once used to offer monetary rewards for the bloody scalps of children is so acceptable?”

Sarah Adams-Cornell (Choctaw), Parent
Oklahoma City Listening Session

“[After complaining about the school mascot], our country mailboxes were destroyed, two windshields in our cars were smashed, and I received anonymous letters and phone calls calling me scurrilous names. ... Comments in the news articles locally, statewide, and even nationally were unbelievable. Much hatefulness and untruth was printed. A pickup truck filled with people drove past my house shouting ‘Indians forever.’ Four years later there are many, many local residents who refuse to speak to me, even to just nod. ... Although many residents have moved on to a healthier place with a non-racist name, a few continue to remind me through their actions of their extreme unhappiness because I ‘took away their Indians.’ As a 67-year-old white woman, I feel able to remain in my home. I can live with those poor, sad, uneducated adults who continue to be angry with me. Can you imagine what life would have been like and would continue to be like for a First Nation adult, or worse, a student? I can’t.”

Marsha J. Beggs Brown, Former Teacher
Written Testimony

Access and Equity Challenges

During the listening sessions, WHIAIANE heard that, both inside and outside school, many AI/AN youth lack access to the resources they need. Homelessness, a significant issue among this student population, directs a student’s attention to his or her fundamental needs rather than academic success. Lack of Internet access at home or the lack of college advisors in school are other common issues that interfere with AI/AN students’ abilities to succeed academically.



Students prepare testimony.

Some Native students may also need to travel or work during certain weeks of the year. Schools should accommodate student schedules when they pertain to cultural activities and responsibilities.

Connectivity and the infrastructure necessary to bridge the digital divide continue to be challenging across tribal communities, as almost a third of AI/AN families lack basic telephone service. As Katia Savchuk indicated, “The rapid pace of technology risks leaving Native populations even further behind.”³⁴ During the listening sessions, WHIAIANE gathered testimonies to support the existence of these gaps in access, ranging from a lack of Internet access to school closure. WHIAIANE also heard that inadequate and inconsistent funding for AI/AN education often hinders progress in the improvement of school environments, which ultimately subjects students to unhealthy or unsafe learning atmospheres.

In 2011, 49 percent of AI/AN students in grades four and eight attended rural schools. This percentage is significantly higher than for any other racial or ethnic group. The same study found that only 78 percent of students in grade four and 83 percent of students in grade eight had computers in their homes, which made AI/AN students the least likely of any racial group to have computer access at home.³⁵ Further, over 30 percent of AI/AN students were enrolled in high-poverty public schools in 2011.³⁶ The poverty rate among AI/ANs was 27 percent in 2012 compared to 15 percent for the nation, and, at 34 percent, AI/AN child poverty was 13 percentage points higher than the national average of 21 percent.³⁷

Native American children are between six and nine times more likely than white children to live in areas of concentrated poverty.³⁸ Many of the students living in these communities do not have consistent access to transportation or adequate resources to complete school assignments. In 2011, 72 percent of AI/AN students in grade four and 66 percent of AI/AN students in grade eight qualified for free and reduced-price lunch under the National School Lunch Program.³⁹

Recommendation

States and local districts should inform schools about the access and equity challenges AI/AN students, including those with disabilities, may face and encourage the development of culturally responsive, flexible school policies, resources, and services necessary to support students.

Testimony

“You also have to look at the testing protocol that’s being forced on all of us. ... We have kids [who] didn’t get diplomas because they didn’t pass their exit exams. The tests were in April, and that’s during whaling season. There is only one time to take the test.”

Debby Edwardson, Board of Education President, North Slope Borough School District
Anchorage Listening Session

“Native American advisors are the first link for children who don’t have much knowledge of their culture and also play an important role to those children who do have knowledge, but may feel isolated because there is nobody like them in their classrooms. They also provide a role model as someone who has gone on to gain a higher education.”

Amanda Anderson (Choctaw), College Student
Oklahoma City Listening Session

“At the school, we need more funding. We also need more mentors. I want to study forensic science. I haven’t met anyone who has studied that. I want to hear from successful Natives in a variety of jobs who beat the odds. Bring these good examples in to show us what’s possible — people who didn’t end up back on the reservation pregnant.”

Rachel Neskahi (Navajo, Fort Mohave, Ute Mountain), Student
Los Angeles Listening Session

Danny Littlejohn (Ho-Chunk), a parent, spoke about difficulties with school transportation. He noted that his son rides the metro city bus, but that younger students often cannot utilize public transportation to get to school. This limits students’ attendance and opportunities.

Seattle Listening Session

“Having a counselor is more important than algebra because I’ve never used [algebra]. But having someone to say, ‘You are beautiful. Do you want to go to college? Did you eat today? What’s wrong?’ is important.”

Cynthia Erickson, (Athabascan), 4H Group
Anchorage Listening Session

“Additional funding would make it possible to help us to help more students with issues that they face, such as not having the ability to participate in school sports and programs or even having the proper clothes to be in the choir or debate teams.”

Raymond Rodgers (Seneca-Cayuga/Cherokee), Director for Indian Education
Sapulpa School District
Tulsa Listening Session

“We need more funding to meet our education goals. Grant moneys cannot make up the lack of funding. We’ve had to cut back on our reading and cultural programs, which teach our kids about our language and our ways. A people without language cannot call itself a people. In California there have been major cuts to public schools. This leads to larger classes. I fear that my school will become like public schools with overcrowded classes. I want more for my school.”

Lucille Briones, Board Chair, Noli Indian School Board
Los Angeles Listening Session

“Many of our schools in rural Alaska are dilapidated. There is no running water [and] no indoor toilets.”

Mary Ann Mills, Council Member, Kenaitze Indian Tribe
Reno Tribal Consultation

“The state of Oklahoma gets money from our casinos [that is] earmarked for education. Where is that money? Do we get it back? How is it helping our schools?”

Archie Mason (Osage), Speaker, Osage Nation Congress
Tulsa Listening Session

“School systems could become more accountable for the education of Native American students if funding for Indian education programs, like Impact Aid and *Title VII*, were administered by the tribal education agencies in that respective area. Currently, schools are only required to have public hearings or oversight committees appointed by school administration. Tribes are often not given adequate notification for these hearings and may not be asked to participate at all. As a result, the funds are often spent for educational services for the entire school population, not the Native American students for [whom] the funds are allocated.”

Edwina Butler-Wolfe, Governor, Absentee Shawnee Tribe
Oklahoma City Listening Session

Misidentification of Students With Disabilities

Appropriately serving students with disabilities is a complex and ongoing issue. During the listening sessions, participants shared two areas of concern related to special education that negatively impact AI/AN students.



Adult presenting his concerns

First, Native students are often overrepresented in special education.⁴⁰ During the listening sessions, WHIAIANE also heard from parents and others that they feel misunderstandings related to cultural or language differences are often a factor in identifying students as having disabilities. Additionally, WHIAIANE heard that teachers often have low expectations of AI/AN students, which, if internalized, may discourage the students' academic efforts.

Under the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)*, states are required to review the districts in their state to determine the extent to which the disproportionate representation of racial and ethnic groups in special education is the result of inappropriate identification. States also are required to collect and examine data to determine whether “significant disproportionality” based on race and ethnicity, is occurring in the state and local districts with respect to (1) the identification and discipline of students with disabilities; (2) the placement in particular educational settings of children with disabilities; and (3) the incidence, duration, and type of disciplinary actions, including suspensions and expulsions of students with disabilities.

When a significantly disproportionate number of students from a particular race or ethnicity is identified, states must: (1) provide for the review and, if appropriate, revision of policies, practices, and procedures used in identification, placement, or discipline to ensure that they comply with the requirements of the *IDEA*; (2) require the district to publicly report on the revision of policies, practices, and procedures; and (3) require the district to reserve 15 percent of its *IDEA* Part B funds to provide comprehensive, coordinated early intervention services to children in the district, particularly, but not exclusively, children in those groups that were significantly over-identified.

The department has afforded states broad discretion in defining significant disproportionality and in establishing procedures for identifying its existence within their states. Consequently, there is wide variation in how significant disproportionality is defined and identified in districts across states.

Dr. John Tippeconnic has noted that AI/AN students are disproportionately represented in special education compared to students in any other racial or ethnic group.⁴¹ In 2012–13, 16.3 percent of AI/AN students received special education services under *IDEA*, which was the highest rate for any racial/ethnic group.⁴²

In 2012, AI/AN students ages 6 through 21 were 90 percent more likely to be identified with a specific learning disability, compared to children ages 6 through 21 in all other racial or ethnic groups combined.⁴³ AI/AN students were also 70 percent more likely than their non-Native peers to be identified as having a significant emotional disturbance.⁴⁴ During the listening sessions,

WHIAIANE heard evidence of these disproportionate identifications, as well as other challenges related to serving students with disabilities.

The second issue that participants raised during the listening sessions was that, due to the over-identification of AI/AN students as having disabilities, schools sometimes fail to effectively identify and serve AI/AN students who actually do have disabilities.

Research suggests that, to help alleviate erroneous identification of students with disabilities and to effectively serve those with disabilities, educators assessing AI/AN students should: (1) apply a combination of formal and informal assessments; (2) involve parents and families in the assessments; (3) be aware of cultural and linguistic differences; and (4) interpret results of standardized tests with caution.⁴⁵

Recommendation

States and local school districts should promote training for all school staff so that they can appropriately identify AI/AN students with disabilities and ensure that the processes for identifying and serving AI/AN students with disabilities take into account their unique needs, including Native American language and culture.

Testimony

“I noticed a lot of my peers were in special education, but they are not special ed. ... They just do not have the support at home or the extra guidelines for someone to reach out and give them what they need.”

Katie Laroque (Oneida/Ojibwe), Student
Franklin Listening Session

Robyn Chaney (Curyung Tribal Council), a parent, expressed that the schools ignore students with disabilities. For a full year, her child’s school denied her the services she needed.

“We’ve gone through a grievance process with the state because there are kids getting neglected.”

Anchorage Listening Session

“One-third of our kids in our focus schools are special ed. They are coming with social issues and acting out, and all of a sudden they are in the IEP process. When I look at the kids that I know, they are not special ed.”

Richanda Kaquatosh (Menominee), Program Coordinator, First Nations Studies
Franklin Listening Session

“So many Native kids are labeled as disabled when it’s not a disability — it’s cultural. They are brilliant; they are just expected to perform in a world they don’t connect to.”

Mike O’Connor, Adult Participant
Los Angeles Listening Session

Shandiin Church (Pokagon Band of Potawatomi and Navajo), the adult sister of a high school student, reported that many schools are not wheelchair accessible. After breaking both legs in an accident, she temporarily used a wheelchair. She attended her sister’s basketball game and found there was no designated space for someone in a wheelchair to sit.

“It is the adults. They know what is wrong, but it is now on the students to make a complaint.”

She suggested mandatory Americans with Disabilities Act training for all public school administrators.

Lansing Listening Session

Looking Forward

The courageous testimony during the 2014 school environment listening sessions highlighted several critically important themes, including bullying, stereotypes, harmful imagery and symbolism, and school discipline. These issues deeply impact AI/AN student experiences, and it is the priority of WHIAIANE and the president’s administration to ensure safe, appropriate, inclusive, and nondiscriminatory learning environments for all students. Significant work remains to be done to ensure student environment issues are addressed for the long term to fulfill the president’s and the secretary’s priorities for Native youth, and to address the problems detailed in this report. In response to the impactful testimony given by the listening session participants, WHIAIANE is partnering with offices across the U.S. Department of Education to develop initiatives, bring awareness to the concerns of Native youth, and encourage positive, safe, and productive learning spaces for all students.

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