

Advancing Equity for Indigenous Students

A Cross Comprehensive Center and Regional Educational Laboratory Collaboration

In the past year, the Region 15 Comprehensive Center (R15CC), Region 13 Comprehensive Center (R13CC), and Regional Educational Laboratory West (REL West) partnered to convene directors of Indian education at state education agencies (SEAs) to learn together, explore challenges and opportunities of practice, and advance equity for Native students. This brief describes the need for this monthly convening and the collaborative approach of R15CC, R13CC, and REL West to facilitate this Community of Practice (CoP), and initial results.

Need

Approximately one-half million American Indian students in the United States experience disproportionately high rates of special education identification, suspension, and chronic absenteeism (Collier, 2012; Hanson, 2021; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019a; U.S. Department of Education, 2019). In 2019, 7.2% of American Indian students in California were suspended at least once, compared to 2.9% of their White peers. Disparities in academic outcomes have persisted for generations throughout the kindergarten through Grade 12 (K–12) education system. One example is evidenced by National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading scale scores for fourth grade American Indian students that illustrate a pervasive gap from 1994 through 2017 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019b). High school graduation rates for American Indian students, at 74%, remain the lowest of any other ethnic group in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). This disproportionality is due to structural inequities that persist in educational systems, including, but not limited to, hostile school climate and policies that do not accommodate absences for ceremonial and cultural observances (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

Despite significant needs for Native students, the full-time equivalent (FTE) SEA positions allocated to American Indian education in states served by R13CC (New Mexico, Oklahoma) and R15CC (Arizona, California, Nevada, Utah) range from one to six FTEs in each agency. Facilitated connections between SEA Indian education directors are needed to bridge learning opportunities and resources that help address persistent disparate outcomes for Native students.

Assistance

Indigenous R15CC and R13CC staff facilitate a monthly CoP in close partnership with REL West staff. The team bridges participants to the human and programmatic resources of the National Comprehensive Center and U.S. Department of Education's Office of Indian Education. Participants have access to a Padlet of information resources that relate to Indigenous education topics.

The structure of the hour includes community building, a content focus on systemic issues affecting Native students and educators (Native teacher recruitment and retention, culturally relevant and responsive assessment, Indigenous language revitalization), and dialogue about collaborative opportunities. Participants contributed to the development of [Working Respectfully With Indigenous Communities Around Data, Research, and Evidence: A Resource for State Education Agencies](#), published by REL West in December 2021. The resource supports SEA staff members as they build partnerships with tribal leaders to improve educational outcomes for Native students using data, research, and evidence.

Initial Results

- By meeting for one hour monthly in the past year, CoP participants have had direct access to and learned from staff of the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, Arizona Department of Education, Bureau of Indian Education, National Comprehensive Center, New Mexico Public Education Department, Nevada Department of Education, Oklahoma Department of Education, U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Indian Education, Utah State Board of Education, and WestEd.
- In response to the question, “How is the CoP supporting you in your practice?” participants stated
 - “This is an exciting time to share because this has never been done. The sharing is refreshing and having the OIE personnel attending the sessions supports this effort.”
 - “The CoP is helping to validate claims I share about Indigenous students, knowledge systems, and ways of being to my organizational leaders who also attend.”
 - “CoP has selected topics that are current issues within Indian Country.”
- REL West partnered with R13CC and R15CC to present a webinar, [Working Respectfully With Indigenous Communities Around Data, Research, and Evidence: A Resource for State Education Agencies](#), on December 14, 2021. Four hundred eighty-three individuals participated from the United States, Caribbean, and the Pacific regions.
- As a result of the infographic resource and webinar, SEA staff members are more prepared to work with Indigenous peoples in their states, particularly during the process of planning, collecting, analyzing, and using findings from data collection and research efforts to improve academic and wellness outcomes for Native students. This is illustrated by respondent feedback:
 - Ninety-eight percent of 90 participant survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed with statement “I expect to apply information from the webinar in my work.”
 - Ninety-seven percent of 90 participant survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement “I have greater capacity to use research on principles and practices for working with Indigenous communities to inform decisions about policies or practices in my agency/organization/school.”

References

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