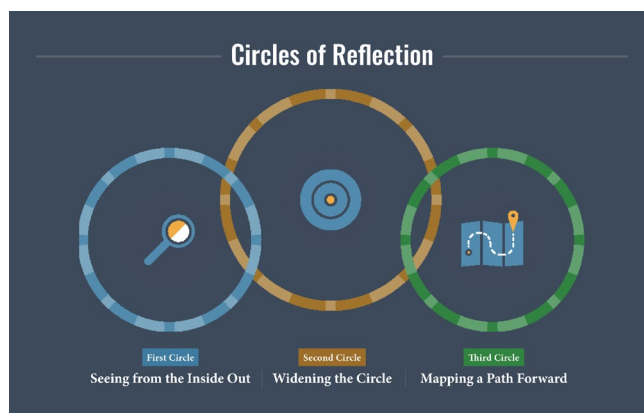


Circles of Reflection Fosters Collaboration for the Benefit of Native Students

The need for collaboration on Native Education spurred a new framework for supporting Native students.

National Comprehensive Center (NCC) began developing *Circles of Reflection* (*Circles*) in 2019 to support collaboration between state education agencies (SEAs), local education agencies (LEAs), and Tribal education departments (TEDs) to lift Native voices and address Native students' needs. *Circles* has been used in five states so far and shared with Regional Comprehensive Centers (RCCs) and through the CCNetwork website, leading to broader access and impact.

With support from the U.S. Department of Education (Department), NCC's [Native Education Collaborative](#) developed the *Circles* communication framework, drawing on Talking Circles which are familiar to many Native communities. NCC gathered feedback for the framework from a panel of Native education experts, including Native education directors, advocates, and SEA and LEA staff, who recommended six critical topics for reflection and action in the *Circles* process:

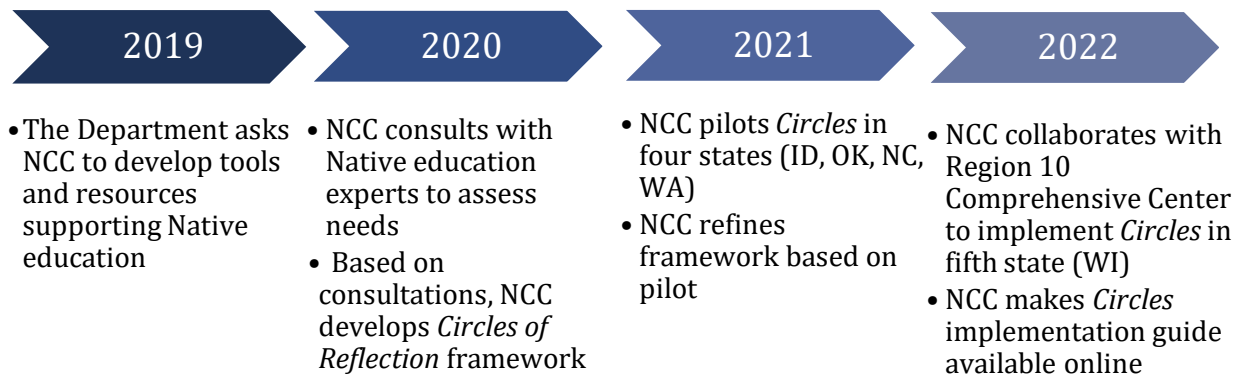


- Native Culture and Language
- Tribal Consultation and Sovereignty
- Effective Teachers and Leaders
- College and Career Readiness and Access
- Physical and Behavioral Health
- Promising Programs and Practices

Talking Circles are an Indigenous methodology of getting people together and allowing equal representation of voice. So, for many Tribes, it's a familiar structure for having conversation and trying to problem solve.

– Project Leader

Circles of Reflection Timeline



Circles of Reflection provided a unique opportunity to elevate Native voice in education and rapidly gained traction.

In 2021, the *Circles* pilot was implemented in four states, resulting in each state establishing 90-day action plans that detail next steps and ensure commitment to continue the collaboration.

To continue improving the framework and expanding its reach, in 2022, NCC worked with [Region 10 Comprehensive Center](#) (R10CC) to implement *Circles* in Wisconsin. NCC guided R10CC staff through the framework and recorded reflections and lessons learned.

One key takeaway in Wisconsin was the need for *Circles* to be adaptable to the context of each state or jurisdiction.

Wisconsin was focused on early childhood education in Native communities, so project leaders tailored the materials accordingly.

Native Education Needs Identified in Pilot Phase

- Increasing Tribal representation in curriculum development
- Focusing on Native culture and language in LEA programs and educator professional development
- Developing pipelines for Native teachers and leaders through Grow Your Own (GYO) programs
- Fostering norms of collaboration and consultation between educators and Tribal members
- Establishing/Identifying funding streams supporting Native education and programming
- Establishing a repository of Native education research and best practices

How often do you sit and see non-Indigenous people be quiet in a room and let the others talk who aren't represented? *Circles* allowed that to happen.

—R10CC Staff Member

States gained new perspective and chose to continue the work.

A formative evaluation¹ found evidence of SEA capacity gains through *Circles* pilot participation. One SEA staff member commented that the *Circles* process allowed for “inadequacies” to be uncovered in a non-judgmental way. Others said they felt more responsibility for engaging with Tribes and took ownership of the process versus relying solely on the Indian Education Director to advocate for Native education.

Following the pilot, Oklahoma continued to use *Circles*’ processes for Tribal collaboration—demonstrating the sustainability of the framework. Project leaders in Oklahoma now hold monthly calls with Tribes, drawing on the *Circles* methodology, that one Tribal member described as fostering new dialogue with the state that continues to grow. The calls also helped increase collaboration between the state and Tribes, including working together to organize Native American Day events that drew over 1,000 students and teachers.

I don’t know if we would have progressed as much, gained so many specific [goals], if it hadn’t been for the framework and the moderators.

—Circles of Reflection participant in Oklahoma

In 2022, NCC made [Resources to Help States Advance Education for Native Students: Circles of Reflection](#) available online to broaden its reach and help states and jurisdictions build capacity. The implementation guide has already been downloaded more than 100 times. *Circles* is gaining support and has garnered interest from more states. R10CC staff said they gained a clear understanding of the *Circles* process and its materials from NCC facilitators and were grateful for the framework. As one staff member said, “It would have been a lot of work to figure out from scratch” without NCC support.

What’s next for Circles of Reflection?

The *Circles* process as well as success stories from states are now being shared at national conferences and events. R10CC said they will “definitely” consider *Circles* as an option to support other states in engaging with Native groups, and Oklahoma is encouraging other states and jurisdictions to take notice and learn how they can better engage their Native communities on behalf of Native students. Additionally, NCC is developing a step-by-step online toolkit with detailed facilitation guides for SEAs to conduct *Circles*, which will allow more RCCs and SEAs to build collaborations that can help Native students thrive.

This story was developed under a Cooperative Agreement with the U.S. Department of Education. However, the contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the U.S. Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal government.

A copy of this publication can be downloaded from <https://www.compcenternetwork.org/>.

¹ Gordon, J. (2021). *Circles of Reflection Pilot Project Evaluation*. Rockville, MD: National Comprehensive Center at Westat.

