

## Education



**With regard to education (including early childhood development, K-12, and postsecondary/vocational training opportunities), the Commission received evidence about the importance of tailored education for Native students from early childhood through higher education and about the critical role that Native cultures and languages can play in supporting Native student success.**

## 8

**Expand access to the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program**

**With the aims of decreasing infant mortality and of improving health and child welfare outcomes for American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian mothers and children, Congress and the Department of Health and Human Services shall expand access to the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Program. To do so:**

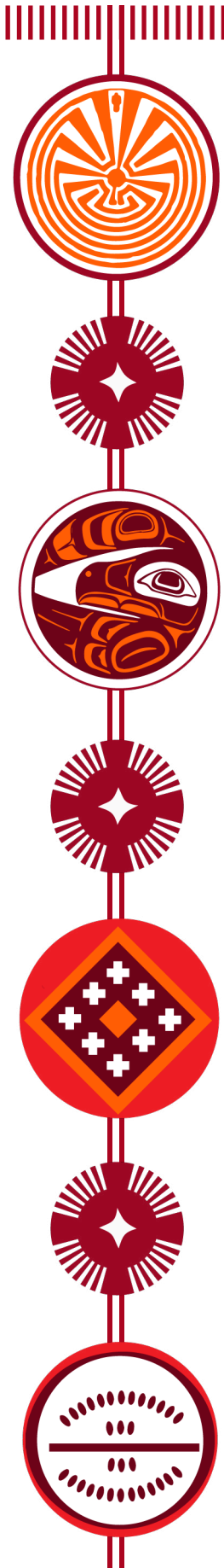
- **Congress shall amend the Native Hawaiian Health Care Improvement Act or enact new legislation authorizing the Department of Health and Human Services to expand the Tribal MIECHV program eligibility to include Native Hawaiians.**
- **The Department of Health and Human Services shall end competitive grantmaking for Tribal and Native-entity MIECHV and develop formulas for the distribution of Tribal and Native-entity MIECHV Program Development and Implementation funds and for Tribal and Native-entity MIECHV Program Implementation and Expansion funds that are inclusive of Native Hawaiian entities and provide for minimum allocations so that smaller programs are not disadvantaged; distributions above the minimum shall be based on the total funding authorized by Congress and the total number of Tribal and Native applicants.**
- **Congress shall expand overall funding for Tribal and Native-entity MIECHV, to appropriately support Native Hawaiian-entity MIECHV and to accommodate the redesign of Tribal and Native-entity MIECHV as a formula funded, noncompetitive program with sufficient funds for meaningful program delivery.**

Early childhood development is key to later thriving. The MIECHV program is a proven success and a vital resource for families in Tribal communities who commonly face higher risks and barriers to achieving positive maternal and child health and welfare outcomes. Through Tribal MIECHV, health, social service, and child development professionals partner with families in a home visiting format to together address the goals of improving maternal and child health, preventing child abuse and neglect, reducing crime and domestic violence, increasing family education and earning potential, promoting children’s development and readiness to participate in school, and connecting families to needed community resources and supports.

Nonetheless, many Tribes face significant barriers to participating in MIECHV, including limited resources and limited experience applying for competitive grants—and Native Hawaiian communities are not eligible to participate in the Tribal program. Solutions to these obstacles include increased funding, transition to a formula funding for Tribal MIECHV programs (rather than competitive grants), and inclusion of Native Hawaiian entities as qualified applicants.

**“ Early intervention can substantially reduce the impact of poverty on children’s development when it is sufficiently intensive and reaches the families who need it the most. Poverty chronically deprives children of the resources necessary for them to thrive, as well as decreasing their resilience to stress and various physical illnesses.”**

**HILARY GOURNEAU**  
*Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes*  
**Director, Head Start Program**  
 Northwest and Rocky Mountain Regional Hearing,  
 Commission on Native Children



# CASE STUDY

## HUMMINGBIRD INDIGENOUS FAMILY SERVICES

Hummingbird Indigenous Family Services initiated its community impact efforts in the summer of 2019 through the launch of an Indigenous doula and lactation counselor program, Daybreak Star Doulas. Established in collaboration with the United Indians of All Tribes Foundation and funded by King County's Best Starts for Kids tax levy, the program hired two doulas who swiftly engaged with Indigenous families. This commitment to community wellbeing expanded in the summer of 2021 with the establishment of Hummingbird Indigenous Family Services, dedicated to providing holistic support for Indigenous families, with a particular focus on maternal health and breastfeeding. Hummingbird's deeply rooted values include:

- Believing every parent is the perfect parent for their baby
- Believing that healthy mothers and babies are the foundation of a healthy community
- Believing that abundance and generosity are essential in Indigenous resiliency
- Believing that abundance and generosity are a community responsibility
- Believing in the validity of traditional knowledge



- Believing in centering Indigenous people in all work
- Believing in the importance of providing culturally relevant care

Hummingbird Indigenous Family Services addresses historical trauma, systemic barriers, and cultural disconnection through a suite of culturally sensitive, impactful programs for Indigenous families during the pre- and postnatal periods. The Indigenous BirthKeepers initiative includes a full-spectrum doula program, which reduces maternal stress. The Nest provides a guaranteed basic income from pregnancy through a child's third birthday, which enhances wellbeing by reducing financial insecurity. The storytelling program empowers parents to reshape their narratives, and the Pilimakua Family Connections program further supports the wellbeing of Indigenous children and families through Indigenous-centered services, including home visiting.

Hummingbird's comprehensive approach—emphasizing culture, community involvement, and income support—offers a valuable, replicable example of how Native communities can truly transform maternal and family care. While it is not a MIECHV-certified program, it speaks to MIECHV's goals of improving maternal and child health, preventing child abuse, reducing crime and domestic violence, increasing family education and earning potential, promoting children's development and readiness to participate in school, and connecting families to needed community resources and supports in an innovative and culturally appropriate manner.



## 9

## Support Native culture and language learners in early childhood programs and K-12 schools

Congress and the Department of Education, Bureau of Indian Education, Administration for Children and Families, and other Federal departments and agencies that fund and support the education of American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian students shall make every effort to provide, maintain, and sustain American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian culture and language learning (and especially language immersion) in early childhood education programs and in K-12 schools. To do so:

- Congress and relevant executive branch agencies shall provide funding and programmatic support to Tribal and public schools for:
  - » Culture- and community-specific curricula that teach local Indigenous languages and embrace community-specific ways of knowing and doing
  - » Language- and community-specific teacher recruitment strategies, including appropriate remuneration and flexible certification, that consider the different stages of Native language revitalization
  - » Outdoor, field, and place-based education attuned to seasonal life and to familial cultural practices and knowledges
  - » Native culture- and language-appropriate placement-related assessments, particularly

in the transition from Native community-centered preschool programs to mainstream kindergartens, so that receiving schools are able to recognize and use cultural strengths as a component of readiness assessment and of placement decisions

- Congress and relevant executive branch agencies shall provide funding and technical assistance for Tribes, Tribal organizations, and Native Hawaiian entities to build or improve Tribal/Native schools, assist them in taking over management of Federal and public schools, and/or start their own schools.
- Where state standards require graduates from publicly funded secondary schools to meet an art, history, or language requirement, state boards of education shall ensure that Native classes or requisites, designed in conjunction with local Tribes and Native communities, are available to students in publicly funded schools that serve an appropriate number of Native students (where “an appropriate number” is defined in the same manner as in the Title VI Indian Education Formula Grant program, with the caveat that a school is obligated to provide classes even if it does not receive such Title VI monies), and that these classes are eligible to satisfy graduation requirements.
- Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) and Native American-Serving Nontribal Institutions (NASNTI) shall offer teacher training and training in curriculum development as well as other programming appropriate for supporting this recommendation.

Educational systems play a vital role in shaping the knowledge and skill sets of students. However, the significant disconnect between Native ways of knowing and public—and even Tribal—school curricula may be a contributing factor to lower academic achievement, higher dropout rates, and diminished cultural self-esteem among Native students. To bridge the gap, inclusion of and emphasis on language and cultural revitalization in curricular materials

needs to be a priority, both for academic achievement and the development of positive self-identity that supports it. Many Native communities already are involved in this work to varying extents; this recommendation seeks to augment and amplify such efforts and, in so doing, supports and expands on the *Multi-Agency Initiative to Protect and Preserve Native Languages* launched by the U.S. Departments of the Interior, Education, and Health and Human Services in 2021.

**“ Across nations, we all share similarities regarding the drum, the land, and the plants. Consequently, all of our Tribally controlled schools are actively working to enhance our culture and language. This effort is rooted in the understanding that self-identity is deeply connected to these cultural aspects. During interviews with our students, one of them expressed, ‘If we don’t get exposed, we don’t learn.’”**

**CONNIE ALBERT**  
**Education Program Administrator, Office of Tribally Controlled Schools, Bureau of Indian Education**  
 Eastern Regional Hearing, Commission on Native Children

The Commission was particularly concerned about:  
 1) young students with early, advantageous Native language immersion experiences (whether home-based and/or preschool or Head Start) being subsequently disadvantaged by inappropriate, culturally biased mainstream kindergarten placement assessments; 2) the lack of robust and ubiquitous language immersion programs in elementary schools and related barriers to Indigenous language teacher certification; and 3) older students being denied the option to count instruction

in their Native language or cultural arts toward graduation requirements. Guided by the comments at the Commission’s regional hearings, the recommendation focuses on strategies that consider the various stages of language revitalization. The goal is to provide adequate resources to not only start and develop Native language and cultural programs but also to maintain, sustain, and strengthen those that already exist.

# CASE STUDY

## PUEBLO OF JEMEZ DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

In 1999, following an extensive visioning process, the Pueblo of Jemez resolved to take ownership over the education of Jemez children, redefine education to fit its own needs, and build capacity for educational leadership. As a result, the Jemez Department of Education (JDE) has become a key player in the academic *and* cultural education of the Pueblo's children and youth.

Change began with organizational redesign: the JDE adopted a comprehensive approach focused on assisting all Pueblo learners, from infants to adults, and on engaging all schools and education services serving Pueblo children. Next, the Pueblo leveraged community support and strategic institutional partnerships, including guidance from the New Mexico Charter School Coalition, to become the first Tribe in New Mexico to establish charter schools. The Pueblo opened San Diego Riverside (K-8) in 1999 and Walatowa High (grades 9-12) in 2003, after overcoming opposition from the local public school district and winning an appeal to the state school board.

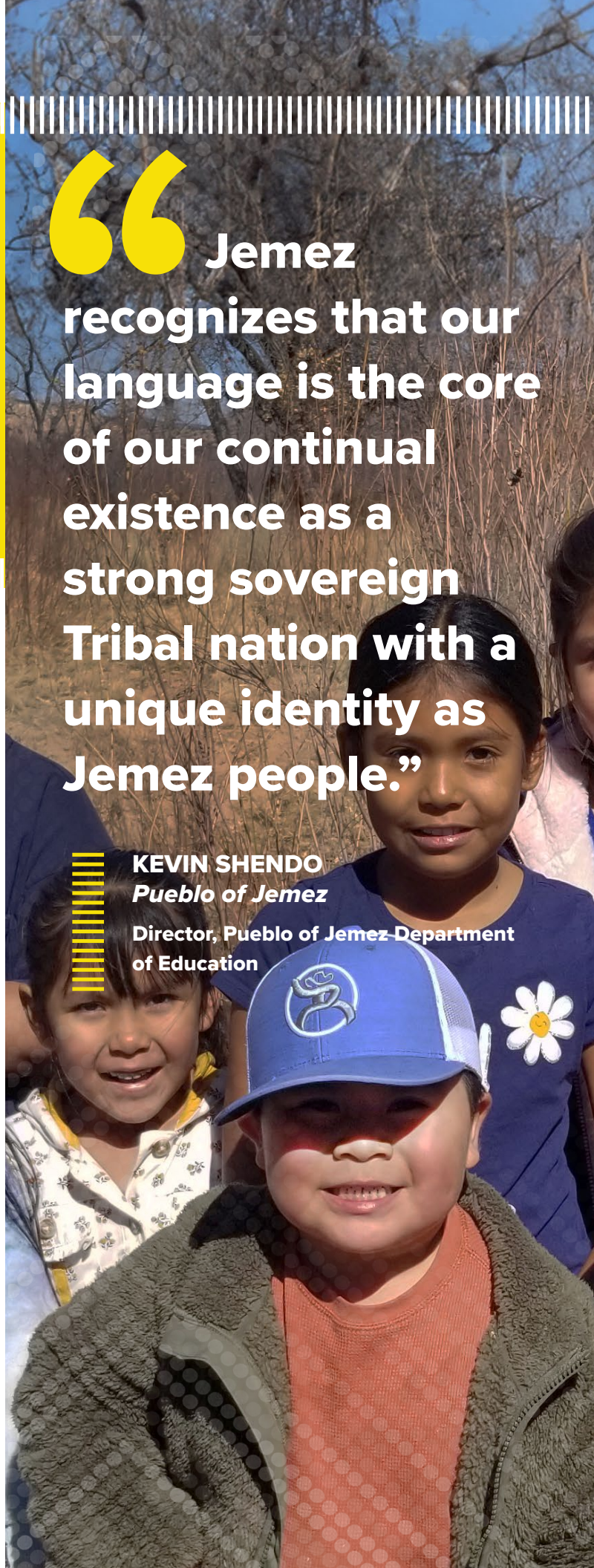
Guided by the community's vision and a problem-solving orientation, the Pueblo continued its march toward educational sovereignty, step by step:

- In 2007, the JDE formed a research partnership, "Becoming Jemez," with Arizona State University, the University of Colorado, and Denver AI/AN Head Start Research Center to document the positive effects of Native language immersion in Head Start programs, transforming the national Office of Head Start's

“Jemez recognizes that our language is the core of our continual existence as a strong sovereign Tribal nation with a unique identity as Jemez people.”

**KEVIN SHENDO**  
*Pueblo of Jemez*

Director, Pueblo of Jemez Department  
of Education







recommendations for curriculum delivery and instruction in Native/Home languages other than English.

- In 2016, building on their extant partnership to administer Title VI Federal Indian Education Formula Grant program funds in lieu of a school district (the only Tribes in New Mexico to do so), the Pueblos of Jemez and Zia formed an E-rate consortium—which succeeded in securing an FCC award to build a high-speed, self-provisioned fiber optic network to serve the Tribes’ libraries and schools.
- In 2017, with support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Better Way Foundation, and the New Mexico Department of Public Education-Indian Education Division, the JDE worked with consultants and the Universities of New Mexico and Hawai’i to develop a Tribally defined, viable, tested, and authentic oral language assessment in Jemez (Towa, an unwritten language) for use in public, charter, and Bureau of Indian Education schools in Jemez.
- In 2026, the Jemez Department of Education will enroll its first cohort of educators in a new Jemez Immersion Licensure program offered through the University of Hawai’i-Hilo to support continued teacher training and capacity building; the cohort’s anticipated graduation date is spring 2028. Starting in fall 2024, master’s cohort to co-develop the Jemez Teacher Licensure Program, modeled after the Kahuawaiola Teacher Licensure Program, will formally begin. This cohort also will serve as adjunct faculty for the Jemez Immersion Teacher Licensure Program.

Through the JDE’s support of language and culture-infused curricula from pre-K through grade 12, dual language and immersion programs for children ages 0-9, and emphases on both academic rigor and community-integrated experiential learning, Jemez has created a community in which 80% of the population speaks Jemez (Towa), 94% of Walatowa High Charter School students graduate, and 98% are accepted to college or proceed directly into career-related training or employment. The Pueblo of Jemez has demonstrated that Native children who know who they are, where they come from, and are supported in their aspirations to succeed can excel academically and strengthen their nations.



## 10

**Expand primary and secondary education to include Native Peoples' histories and cultures**

The Federal, state, and Tribal governments shall leverage all opportunities available to assure that elementary and secondary schools within their jurisdictions acknowledge the United States' Indigenous people and incorporate lessons on place-based history and culture written by relevant Native communities into school curricula and programming; no schools that receive public (Federal and state) funds are exempt from this recommendation, regardless of the percentage of enrolled Native students. Therefore, Congress shall provide funding for the following:

- Curriculum and planning staff at state and local levels to consult and collaborate with the Native communities whose geography they share to develop educational approaches that recognize the history and ongoing presence of Native Peoples in the United States.
- Native communities to develop self-determined content, standards, and metrics that hold schools


(and themselves) accountable for implementing this recommendation.

- Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) and Native American-Serving Nontribal Institutions (NASNTI) to offer teacher training and training in curriculum development as well as other programming appropriate for supporting this recommendation.
- State and Federal licensing agencies for primary and secondary school teachers to require current and future educators to demonstrate knowledge of the Native Peoples located in the geographies they serve through proof of completion of a course—designed or approved by relevant Native communities—that addresses American Indian, Native Hawaiian, and Alaska Native topics including but not limited to local Native Peoples' histories, state and Federal relations, and Native culture, values, and traditional knowledge, utilizing curricula that either are designed by relevant Native communities or have the express approval of those communities.

To better serve both Native and non-Native students, elementary and secondary schools must incorporate more information about American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian Peoples into their curricula. Teaching Indigenous history, culture, and language strengthens Native children and youth's resilience through positive reinforcement of their identities and sense of belonging, which ultimately supports school attendance, grade completion, and closure of the achievement gap. Education about Indigenous contributions to civics, math, science, and the arts not only expands non-Native student learning but also promotes social and emotional development and cross-cultural understanding.

The Commission recognizes the challenges of this recommendation. State and local school systems will need to update curricula and invest in program development and

teacher training. Tribes will need to develop their capacities to engage with nontribal school systems and assist in standard setting and accountability. TCUs and NASNTIs will need to develop curricula appropriate for undergraduate, graduate, and professional development programming, especially if they are to support teachers not only at Tribally controlled schools but also at public and other mainstream schools. Schools and school districts that already have adopted "Indian education for all" can provide guidance and lessons learned to others, but the work requires appropriating adequate Federal funds.



**“ We started an educator prep program — where we are actually decolonizing prep programs, to train teachers that understand trauma and how it affects the brain, and therefore they know how to teach those types of learners. We wanted them to know how to integrate culture, we wanted these teachers to be able to go to these school systems and be able to connect to these students.”**

 **LONA RUNNING WOLF**  
*Blackfeet, Haida, Little Shell Cree*  
**Former Director of American Indian Student Achievement, Montana Office of Public Instruction**  
Northwest and Rocky Mountain Regional Hearing, Commission on Native Children

11

**Ensure Native students’ access to educational services through appropriate enumeration of Native children and youth**

**Congress shall amend the Indian Education Formula Grants to Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) program, as authorized under Title VI, Part A, of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) and reauthorized under the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA), to require school districts and states to count Native children and youth in the most expansive way possible. In the executive branch, the Office of Management and Budget shall revise its guidance to the Department of Education and any other executive branch department or agency that provides educational services to Native children and youth on how to count American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians to include multiracial individuals.**

Federal government data classification standards have led to an undercount of American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian populations at many Federal agencies. In

particular, Office of Management and Budget (OMB) guidance has resulted in the Department of Education not counting as American Indian/Alaska Native (AIAN) any student who identifies as AIAN in combination with another race and/or Hispanic or Latino. Because American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians self-identify as multiracial more than any other group in the United States, and because nearly one-third of the U.S. Native American population also identifies as ethnically Hispanic or Latino, these enumeration policies diminish the count of Native students in public schools. Funding for Native students thus is provided at much lower levels than the true population count warrants, limiting schools in their efforts to serve Native students and denying students the benefits and services that could assist them in achieving success.

The Commission proposes that the Department of Education use the more expansive definition of “Native student” that includes both AIAN alone and in combination. This change will increase the availability of Federal funding for Native children in public schools, generating a more equitable and supportive environment to help keep them on track for a thriving life.

12

**Ensure state government accountability for funding for Native students**

**Congress shall require every state that receives Federal funding for American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian students in primary and secondary education systems through any title of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended, or the Johnson O’Malley Act to ensure that Federal educational funds received pursuant to these Acts and intended to support Native students are spent on American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian students.**

Many states receive Impact Aid, Title VI, and Johnson O’Malley funding for supplemental education activities for American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian students in their student bodies. Methods of support vary from academic counselors and tutors to art, dance, music, and Native sports. However, combining these funds into general fund activities and siphoning them away from the Native student target audience defeats Congress’ purpose and the intent of the funding. For example, some states have taken a percentage of Impact Aid for the general state education fund, depriving Native students of resources due to them. This recommendation requires a rigorous monitoring and enforcement system to be implemented by the Department of Education.

## 13

**Strengthen school, family, and community partnerships**

**Tribal, state, and Federal education agencies shall collaborate to identify, disseminate, and fund community-school partnership models that can be implemented in Tribal, public, and charter school settings, engage multiple levels of community and school leadership, and employ a continual process of review, assessment, and recalibration by school leadership to promote Native student academic success and graduation. Efforts shall be particularly focused on school completion strategies, dropout prevention, and closing the achievement gap through the scaling of demonstrated models of success within and outside Native communities.**

Because more than 90% of American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian students are educated in nontribal public schools, Native student success programming must reach beyond educational environments that Tribes, Tribal organizations, and Native Hawaiian entities control. Evidence points toward the success of models that both connect students to the broader community and engage school leadership, from teachers to administrators to school boards; Communities in Schools is one example. By integrating community programs into the school environment, by connecting students to out-of-school support systems, and by paying close attention to student needs, to the specific factors that motivate individual students, and to progress reports, community and school partners can help students achieve consistent school attendance, grade-level progress, and ultimately, graduation success. The focus here is on scaling up efforts that have generated demonstrable, positive results both in and out of Native communities to support success for Native students.

## 14

**Expand afterschool programming for Native children and youth**

**In consultation with Tribes and Tribal organizations, Congress shall fund and relevant executive branch agencies shall enhance Native children's overall learning readiness by expanding, developing, and promoting robust afterschool programs for Native youth. Such programs must be culturally based and trauma-informed, partner with parents/caregivers, and as needed, provide referrals to trauma-informed behavioral health providers; where appropriate, local capacity also shall be expanded through community partnerships.**

Comprehensive afterschool programs keep children and youth safe and help them succeed in school and in life: studies show that quality afterschool programs positively affect a range of student issues, including reading and math achievement, school engagement, school attendance, grade promotion, graduation, and health and wellness. Quality afterschool programs for Native children and youth not only offer homework help, physical recreation, creative outlets, workforce exposure, and beneficial social interactions but also provide supervision in a safe, culturally competent, trauma-informed, and services-rich environment. Unfortunately, many Native children and youth lack access to programs tailored to their specific needs.

The Commission's recommendation seeks to address this shortage by expanding Indigenously informed afterschool programming in and beyond Native communities. Funding, service provision, and collaboration with local Native communities and non-Native organizations will help build high-impact, culturally competent afterschool programs.

# CASE STUDY

## NORTH DAKOTA TRIBAL COLLEGE SYSTEM APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAM

Contemporary Tribal economies have diverse workforce needs, and hiring managers often are challenged to find Native candidates to fill open positions. Similarly, many employers realize the benefits of hiring Native staff, but have difficulty identifying Native job seekers in their fields. Responding to these needs, the North Dakota Tribal College System (NDTCS), a network of five Tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) in North Dakota, created the Tribal College Apprenticeship Program (TCAP), an “earn and learn” opportunity supported by private funding from large regional employers.

Innovation and flexibility are hallmarks of the TCAP. As a group, the NDTCS colleges have identified traineeships in areas such as business administration, finance, early childhood education, social work, HVAC, plumbing, heavy equipment, welding, building trades, auto tech, commercial driver’s license (CDL), carpentry, information technology (IT), nursing, and TCU-based professional positions—but each TCU designs its own TCAP project to match college capacities and local economic needs. Administratively, the TCUs rely on a creative combination of college work-study, internship, and apprenticeship programs to provide students with on-the-job skills training. Students choose among their TCU’s TCAP





options and earn either a fully funded two-year degree or a technical certification, whichever is appropriate to their field of study. Depending on the apprenticeship position and location, students also may have the option of earning a bachelor's or master's degree.

All NDTCS member institutions are accredited by the Higher Learning Commission, just as state colleges and universities are, which ensures that students receive quality academic education. As Tribally chartered entities, the collaborating TCUs also are committed to teaching Indigenous languages and engaging Tribal cultures in their curricula. Through TCAP, students can augment these academic and cultural learning experiences with exposure to high-demand occupations and meaningful, lifelong career paths.

For TCAP participants, the combination of academic education, cultural education, and vocational education increases the relevance of higher education, reduces its cost, and incentivizes college completion. For communities in the rural northern Great Plains, TCAP is equally—if not more—impactful. By identifying and leveraging place-based opportunities to support the workforce needs of both Native and non-Native employers, the Tribal College Apprenticeship Program anchors businesses, sustains economies, promotes cross-cultural engagement, strengthens families, improves public safety, and improves wellbeing for all.



## 15

**Expand opportunities in higher education for Native students**

**Congress, the Department of Education, and state governments shall increase American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian students' access to higher education (where "higher education" is understood to include a recognized postsecondary credential consisting of an industry-recognized certificate or certification, a certificate of completion of an apprenticeship, a license recognized by the state involved or Federal government, or an associate or baccalaureate degree) through increased funding and by creating and modifying relevant programs and regulations. In particular, Congress, the Department of Education, and state governments shall ensure that:**

- **Native students who are admitted to qualifying programs receive tuition, room, and board at no cost for a student's first degree, license, or certificate/certification**
- **The Pell Grant Program and other forms of Federal financial aid are modified to include assistance to Native students pursuing technical education or other short-term training or certificate programs (see H.R. 6585, The Bipartisan Workforce Pell Act, introduced December 5, 2023)**
- **Accredited institutions develop Native American student support services that help students maintain satisfactory academic progress (for example, staying on track to graduate within 150% of their program length) and mitigate their risks of dropping out prior to graduation/completion**

The Commission bases this recommendation on the Federal trust responsibility. Native American students long have been underrepresented in postsecondary education, resulting in attainment and employment gaps. The proportion of American Indian students receiving bachelor's degrees, for example, is less than half that of white Americans, with Alaska Natives faring somewhat worse, and Native Hawaiians faring somewhat better. A key component of this recommendation is the expansion of qualifying postsecondary programs other than academic degrees to the definition contained in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. These certifications/certificates increase earning potential without requiring a two- or four-year degree.

This recommendation instructs Congress, the Department of Education, and state governments to find similar ways to create more affordable pathways by which Native students can gain a college education or earn a credential. Amending the Pell Grant Program to include assistance to Native students pursuing technical education or other short-term training or certificate programs is one necessary approach. Other options may be for the Federal government to increase the value of Pell Grants overall or to create a program for Native students modeled on the Chafee Educational and Training Vouchers Program. At the state level, more state governments should follow the lead of states that already offer tuition-free undergraduate education to qualified Native residents; in states with Promise programs, still more progress could be made through an expansion of outreach and services specifically intended for Native community members.

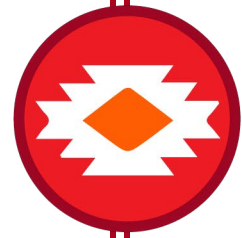


16

**Expand loan forgiveness for Native students**

**The Federal government shall forgive the Federal student loans of any American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian graduate who works for five consecutive years in any sector of public service or for any Native entity or entities; the Commission defines a “Native entity” as any organization owned or controlled by a Tribe or Tribal organization as defined in 25 U.S.C. §5304(e); any Native-serving entity receiving funds through programs of the Departments of the Interior, Health and Human Services, Justice, or Education; or any Federal or state government agency that serves Native communities.**

The Federal government offers a variety of student loan forgiveness programs for workforce recruitment purposes. These include the Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program, Teacher Loan Forgiveness Program, Attorney Student Loan Repayment Program, and Loan Repayment Program for health professionals working for the Indian and Public Health Service. Recognizing the beneficial nature of loan forgiveness in these professions, the Commission seeks to expand loan forgiveness both for the impact it will have on American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian individuals’ educational attainment and for the impact it will have on Native communities in terms of their ability to attract a high-quality workforce. The recommendation acknowledges the many ways Native communities organize their governing systems, service provision, and economies and, in so doing, expands the pool of eligible employers and bolsters portability (the opportunity to change employers and advance careers while continuing to accrue credit toward loan forgiveness).



# CASE STUDY

## FREE TUITION PROGRAMS FOR NATIVE STUDENTS IN MINNESOTA

With costs for colleges and universities skyrocketing across the nation, and the burden of student debt causing many to question the value of higher education, focus has turned to how to relieve that burden. For Native students, many of whom are first-generation college students and have low or moderate incomes, the cost burden of higher education often looms even larger.

In Minnesota, however, free tuition for higher education is increasingly a reality. The state's commitment to affordable higher education for all residents has developed over time, starting with the Minnesota State grants, which supplement Federal Pell Grants for Minnesota-resident students. In 2005, the state layered the U Promise Scholarship on top of the grant program and, in 2021, added the Promise Plus Free Tuition program, which supports Minnesota-resident students with family income less than \$50,000 who are enrolled at any of the University of Minnesota campuses. Beginning in fall 2024, the North Star Promise Scholarship will allow students with family incomes under \$80,000 to pursue a two- or four-year degree or certificate program at any of the University of Minnesota campuses, Minnesota State colleges, or Minnesota-based Tribal colleges without paying tuition (after applying all other scholarships, tuition waivers, stipends, and grants).





In addition to the general Minnesota free tuition programs, the following opportunities are designed specifically for American Indian and Alaska Native students:

- The University of Minnesota Morris long has admitted American Indian, Alaska Native, and Canadian First Nation students, regardless of state of residency, tuition-free. The original buildings on the Morris campus, built more than a century ago, housed an American Indian boarding school, first administered by the Catholic Church and later by the U.S. Government. When the boarding school closed, the campus was transferred to the State of Minnesota with the stipulation that tuition for Native students would always be waived.
- In 2021, the University of Minnesota created the Native American Promise Tuition Program, which affects all campuses in its system. Eligible freshmen and transfer students from the 11 Federally recognized Tribes in Minnesota with household incomes up to \$125,000 pay no tuition or fees.
- Minnesota's Native students also are eligible for the Minnesota Indian Scholarship Program, which provides postsecondary financial assistance to Minnesota-resident students who demonstrate financial need and are enrolled at least three-quarter time as an undergraduate (up to \$4,000) or at least half-time as a graduate student (up to \$6,000) and are at least one-quarter Indian or a member of any Federally recognized Tribe or Canadian First Nation.

While these free tuition programs often do not cover costs such as fees, books, and living expenses, still other programs are available to supplement the scholarships and make the achievement of higher education goals possible. The flexibility offered among certificate, two-year, and four-year degree programs allows the free tuition programs to meet students where they are and support them to realize their dreams.



**“ The health system is difficult to navigate, especially for mental health care. Looking for professionals that can relate to the Indigenous Native experience and that have values that align with my values and cultural traditions are hard to find. People who aren’t like you don’t understand what your story is and how you can navigate your world.”**

 **KAYLA HARSTAD**  
***Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa***  
**First-year university student**

Youth Panel, Northwest and Rocky Mountain Regional Hearing,  
Commission on Native Children