

Tribal Advocacy for Educational Change

By April Chavez and Barbara Jones

This overview describes themes from the *Tribal Advocacy for Educational Change: Systemic Approaches* webinar.¹ Tribal leaders from New Mexico and Washington addressed the ongoing realities of colonization that impact public education systems. They detailed how tribes, governments, and Native-serving organizations are designing systemic approaches to ensure students are ready to participate in their tribal communities and have the skills to pursue their education and careers. The following themes emerged from presentations and participant comments and represent a combination of strategies and philosophical approaches to support Indigenous educational legacies and promote student advancement.

Why This Work Is Needed

Disparities in academic outcomes have persisted for generations throughout the kindergarten through grade 12 (K–12) education system. Approximately one-half million Indigenous² students in the United States experience disproportionate outcomes in school—high rates of special education identification, suspension, and chronic absenteeism.³ High school graduation rates for Indigenous students at 74% remain the lowest of any other ethnic group in the United States.⁴ In New Mexico, for example, a judge ruled that their state failed to comply with state and federal laws required for student success. These statistics highlight that the United States education system does not effectively meet the needs of Indigenous students. In response, the webinar series addressed challenges in the education systems and explored solutions by centering voices from Indigenous educators, Elders, and leaders, allowing participants to listen and learn directly from the voices of Indian Country.

Teaching and Learning Foundations

The need for strong cultural foundations to build resilient students, dynamic leaders, and stronger nations was an emergent webinar theme. Centering traditional Indigenous lifeways and beliefs into teaching challenges the power imbalances and racism inherent in Western schooling. These practices are an expression of tribal sovereignty and serve as its sustaining force. As Regis Pecos (Cochiti Pueblo) and Carnell Chosa (Jemez Pueblo) stated,

¹ This webinar was part of a series called *Making a Difference for American Indian and Alaska Native Students: Innovations and Wise Practices* organized by the Regions 11, 13, 15, 16, and 17 Comprehensive Centers, the Western Educational Equity Assistance Center (WEEAC) at WestEd, and the Regional Educational Laboratories West, Northwest, Southwest, and Central.

² Native American, American Indian, Native, and Indigenous are terms used throughout this text to refer to Indigenous peoples of the United States.

³ Collier, 2012; Hanson, 2021; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019a; U.S. Department of Education, 2019

⁴ Related issues that have become critical during ongoing recovery from the pandemic are attendance, mental and emotional health and well-being, equitable access to learning opportunities (e.g., remote learning) and educator shortages, particularly in the recruitment and retention of Indigenous educators, who comprise only 0.5 percent of the teacher workforce in the United States.

“To this day, tribal communities remain invisible in public education institutions and are largely excluded from the governance of public schools. We have little to no influence over the design of programs and the investment of resources. A fundamental cause lies in a history of institutional racism and an ongoing violation of our children’s civil rights.”⁵

For these reasons, tribal educators and leaders are reclaiming their children’s education by asserting their educational sovereignty, namely, their right to determine the nature of their children’s education. Patricia Whitefoot, a panelist, the Education Chair for the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians, and an Elder of the Yakama Nation, shared an example from her childhood of following traditional migratory patterns and traditions with her family. She now supports young people today to do the same.

“As a young child, my family followed our ancestral migratory ways of life where we traveled great distances to gather salmon, to gather deer roots and berries to sustain our livelihood in our usual and accustomed places. ... Our children, my grandchildren, my great-grandchildren are doing the same thing. They’re basically following in the ancestral footprints of their ancestors.”

Whitefoot issued a call to action for education systems to integrate and adapt to these lifeways and practices that sustain tribal communities. Additionally, participants mentioned the need for place-based school assignments, tribal sovereignty instruction, and culturally responsive disciplinary practices as foundational for student success. These support Indigenous lifeways, foster students’ sense of belonging, and promote their ability to take healthy risks. Whitefoot offered an example of a healthy risk taken by her middle school students who demonstrated their pride by wearing their traditional regalia to school.

Flexibility

The need for education systems to accommodate the values, languages, and cultural calendars of Native students and their communities requires greater flexibility. One participant shared that language restoration and preservation are critical to maintaining culture and should be an integral part of education. One idea that resonated with many was advancing the availability of the Seal of Biliteracy for students who speak their Native language. Cultural activities are often not aligned with school schedules, which can negatively impact performance outcomes if measures do not incorporate student learning outside the classroom. As one participant shared, truancy policies can be oppressive. Participants suggested expanding definitions of key concepts such as truancy, family, discipline, achievement, and learning to better align with the cultural values of students and communities.

⁵ Rudigar, A. (2020) Pathways to Education Sovereignty. Taking a Stand for Native Children. Tribal Education Alliance, New Mexico.

Building Capacity

Infrastructure

Beyond teaching and learning foundations for all Indigenous students, participants discussed infrastructure support to ensure students have the building blocks they need to succeed in their education (e.g., internet access, reliable school transportation, and designated spaces for studying in the community). As Dr. Niki Sandoval (Santa Ynez Band of Chumash), the Director of the Western Educational Equity Assistance Center (WEEAC) at WestEd, stated,

“Leaders I’ve worked with and interviewed through the years have identified the importance of a strong educational infrastructure as a path to cultural survivance, economic opportunity, and long-term financial self-sufficiency.”

Community Connections

The panelists demonstrated how they enact their tribal nation’s sovereign right to self-determination and the important function of effective collaboration. They showed how building capacity goes beyond buoying infrastructures and education systems to strengthen tribal sovereignty. As such, panelists made it vehemently clear that this work *must* first come from within the communities because they are their own experts. Panelists Derrick Lente from Isleta and Sandia Pueblo and member of the New Mexico House of Representatives and Regis Pecos, former governor of Cochiti Pueblo and co-founder of the Indigenous think tank, *Leadership Institute*, advocated for Indigenous peoples to build their capacity to meet their own peoples’ needs at all levels of the system, including education, legal, and political.

Together, they focused on developing the *Tribal Remedy Framework*, a comprehensive plan to meet the educational needs of New Mexico’s Native students and their tribal communities. The plan was a response to the landmark *2018 Yazzie/Martinez v. State of New Mexico* court ruling, which found that the state had not been meeting the needs of Indigenous students. The *Tribal Remedy Framework* includes three major pillars:

- Elevate the role of tribal education departments.
- Develop community-based educational systems.
- Promote culturally and linguistically relevant education.

Lente described the multi-layered approaches of the Tribal Remedy Framework and the systematic and paradigmatic impacts throughout New Mexico, including targeted efforts within the state legislature to secure funding for Native students and communities. Pecos highlighted the significance and importance of people serving as community leaders rather than relying on those from the outside to enact and follow through with this work. Moreover, he talked about creating structures to elicit recommendations from a wide range of tribal leaders and community members. He discussed the power of tribes working together to reach common goals. When finalizing the framework, Pecos explained the statewide engagement process he spearheaded with New Mexico’s tribal nations, a process that sent him and his team traveling from tribal community to community.

“It was an incredible engagement of people at multiple levels in our communities across the entire spectrum involving all of the 23 sovereign nations of New Mexico that resulted in tribal resolutions as the formal endorsement of the Tribal Remedy Framework that we have on record. It is really an unprecedented unification of all 23 tribal nations.”

Spirituality

Each panelist echoed that their work—from advocating for flexibility and cultural responsiveness in the classroom to crafting and coordinating legislation in the statehouse—relies upon their spiritual foundation and that of their tribal communities. Some spiritual underpinnings mentioned during the webinar include the connectedness and interdependence of all things and the generosity of spirit. For Regis Pecos, the work of protecting Indigenous education sovereignty and culture,

“Become the seeds of transformation to guarantee that lifeways gifted to us by our creator would survive through this engagement ... it’s not just political engagement. It is a spiritual journey on behalf of the children, on behalf of those yet to be born and on behalf of all who’ve defined our inheritance.”

Conclusion

The webinar highlighted the importance of capacity building, community collaboration, and centering Indigenous lifeways and values within education systems to protect tribal sovereignty. Panelists demonstrated how, as tribal members and nations, they have the knowledge and ability to continue to build the capacity to meet the needs of their people at all levels, including cultural, legal, political, and beyond. Lente left participants with an important takeaway question:

“How do we take those wishes and those dreams of those parents, those students, those tribal leaders, those educational experts and advocates for our children, and develop them into legislation to direct policy or change policy? How do we now direct funding and funding streams into helping to create capacity within our own communities to really see this transformation of education for our youngest and most vulnerable?”

As tribes develop the next generation of Indigenous advocates, educators, researchers, and scholars to serve as tomorrow’s leaders, the Tribal Advocacy for Educational Change webinar demonstrated how their cultural teachings and spirituality will continue to serve as one of their most powerful guiding forces.