

Listening Deeply and Responding Accordingly

R15CC Facilitates a Community of Practice Rooted in the Perspectives of American Indian Education Directors

June 2024

American Indian Education Directors' Work Context

Indigenous students¹ in the United States experience disproportionate outcomes in school, including high rates of special education identification², suspension, and chronic absenteeism³. Despite the systemic inequities that affect Native students, state educational agencies (SEAs) employ few staff who specialize in the education needs of these students. Each state has a single American Indian Education (AIE) Director, and, according to Region 15 Comprehensive Center (R15CC) project documents, a total of 11.5 full-time equivalent positions are assigned to supporting American Indian educational programs or services in Arizona, California, Nevada, and Utah. These SEA personnel serve a critical role in ensuring that the region's roughly 445,000 Native students⁴ and families affiliated with more than 166 federally recognized tribal governments⁵ located in these states have access to high-quality, equitable educational opportunities and outcomes.

Recognizing the unique role that each state's AIE Director plays for the young people they serve, the R15CC designed and facilitated a Community of Practice (CoP) specifically to address the needs of the region's AIE Directors. The CoP creates opportunities for engaging in relevant and timely professional learning, sharing evidence-based practices, and creating coherence among SEA staff as they work to advance equity for Indigenous students in their states.⁶

1 Several different terms—including Native American, American Indian, Native, and Indigenous—are used interchangeably throughout this text to refer to Indigenous peoples of the United States.

2 National Center for Education Statistics. (2023). Students with disabilities. Condition of education. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgg>

3 de Brey, C., Musu, L., McFarland, J., Wilkinson-Flicker, S., Diliberti, M., Zhang, A., Branstetter, C., & Wang, X. (2019). *Status and trends in the education of racial and ethnic groups 2018 (NCES 2019-038)*. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2019/2019038.pdf>

4 Recent state enrollment data for American Indian and Alaska Native students show that Arizona serves approximately 46,618 students, California serves approximately 388,693 students, Nevada serves 3,671 students, and Utah serves approximately 6,025 students (Arizona Department of Education, 2024; California Department of Education, 2024; State of Nevada Department of Education, 2024; Utah State Board of Education, 2024).

5 Bureau of Indian Affairs (2024).

6 This impact story is based on information from participants of the American Indian Education Directors CoP and on data collected as part of a 5-year evaluation study of R15CC support to SEAs conducted by the Utah Education Policy Center (UEPC) at the University of Utah.

The Community of Practice Process

The AIE Directors CoP, which has met virtually approximately once per month since 2020, supports members in taking a systemic approach to addressing the academic challenges that face Indigenous peoples, recognizing the rich cultural assets that Native students, families, communities, and nations bring to designing solutions. CoP sessions are centered on reciprocal learning among participating members and experts in the field about topics identified by CoP members as important and timely for their context. Participants share effective practices relevant to their respective states and across the region. They discuss current strategies or projects and learn about research-based practices, tools, and resources to support their work. CoP topics have included budgeting and planning for one-time federal and state funds, Indigenous leadership in education, ecological models and frameworks for supporting Native student outcomes, biliteracy seals, professional learning for teachers, and chronic absenteeism.

It's all common themes throughout [the CoP], you know, all four of the states, which is so empowering because I feel like I'm working all by myself. Nobody else is doing this work that I see day-to-day, so it's so important to connect with other people.

SEA CoP Participant

Outcomes

One of the most significant impacts of the CoP has been the meaningful relationships that AIE Directors from the four states have established with each other. Participants have suggested that the CoP is a space for them to share authentic problems of practice with those who understand the work's unique nature and can offer advice and guidance. They also described the CoP as a space to break down silos and combat the isolation that AIE Directors experience in their roles.

Relationships are resources. They're human resources that we can access in really powerful ways to do our work better and to bring people together who have the same vision of an asset-based orientation to help benefit Native students. We focus on the problems, but these individuals in this circle also see the opportunities and have frank conversations about approaches that can help transform outcomes for students.

R15CC CoP Facilitator

CoP Resource Development

The R15CC, in partnership with the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) West, the Western Educational Equity Assistance Center (WEEAC), and the Comprehensive Centers (CCs) in Regions 11, 13, 16, and 17, also leveraged the CoP to support the creation and dissemination of resources⁷ to advance equitable outcomes for Native students and make an impact in the field.

Partnerships with the CoP and the CCs led to a three-part webinar series, *Making a Difference for American Indian and Alaska Native Students: Innovations and Wise Practices*, with 445 participants, including 140 tribal nations and 35 states. The series explored systemic efforts and innovations that prepare, recruit, and sustain American Indian and Alaska Native educators, including alternative licensure pathways. It also described how tribal governments and Native-serving organizations design and fund programs to nurture students for school, college, career, and community life. The R15CC supported CoP members in facilitating a session at the 2023 National Indian Education Association (NIEA) Annual Convention and Tradeshow, extending this valuable network's reach beyond the region. The CoP also supported the development of a two-part *Tribal Data Collection and Governance* webinar series in collaboration with the R13CC, the WEEAC, the NIEA, and the University of New Mexico's College of Population Health Center for Participatory Research to engage 450 tribal, SEA, and local educational agency leaders to explore principles, policies, and systemic practices for collecting and using Native student data to improve student outcomes. The webinar series participants represented 86 Tribal Nations and 37 states.

Convening this CoP brings national issues, resources, and collaborative opportunities into focus for SEA leaders. As one participant shared, "One of the most useful ways I have applied new knowledge is having a growth mindset. Using vocabulary that is strength-based and not deficit-based is always modeled in our meetings and is a good reminder to build hope in our work."

The content of this report was developed under a grant from the Department of Education through the Office of Program and Grantee Support Services) within the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, by the Region 15 Comprehensive Center at WestEd under Award #S283B190053. These resources provided may contain the views and recommendations of various subject matter experts as well as hypertext links, contact addresses, and websites to information created and maintained by other public and private organizations. The U.S. Department of Education does not control or guarantee the accuracy, relevance, timeliness, or completeness of any outside information included in these materials. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Education. No official endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education of any product, commodity, service, enterprise, curriculum, or program of instruction mentioned in this document is intended or should be inferred.

⁷ Sample resources: <https://www.wested.org/resources/working-respectfully-with-indigenous-communities-around-data-and-evidence-a-resource-for-state-education-agencies/>; <https://weeac.wested.org/resource/indigenous-educator-pathways/>; https://www.wested.org/wested_event/making-a-difference-for-american-indian-and-alaska-native-students-innovations-and-wise-practices/