

Challenges for Rural Native American Students With Disabilities During COVID-19

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic unexpectedly changed almost all aspects of people's everyday lives. This included new challenges in the education of Native American students with disabilities who live in rural and remote areas of the United States. Native American students with disabilities living on reservations are served by local schools, tribally controlled schools, and Bureau of Indian Education schools under the provisions of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. In rural reservation communities during COVID-19, special education services for students with disabilities were significantly disrupted. Contributing factors were high rates of poverty, lack of adequate funding and staffing for health care, populations with higher rates of chronic illness, high percentages of homes with no running water or electricity, shortages of certified special educators, and barriers to alternative forms of education due to lack of access to high-speed internet and technology.

Keywords

rural special education, Native American students, COVID-19, cultural and linguistic diversity

The National Conference of State Legislatures (2020) reports there are 574 federally recognized tribes in the United States, and Native Americans comprise 1.3% of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). More than half of individuals who identify as native peoples (i.e., American Indian and Alaska Native) live in rural or small-town communities, and 68% live directly on or close to their tribal lands (Dewees & Marks, 2017). School-age children living on reservations are served by local public schools, tribally controlled public schools, as well as Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) schools.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) specifies requirements for serving all students with disabilities in the United States, including Native American students with disabilities (IDEA, 2004). The Office of Special Education Programs (2020) reported Native American students represent roughly 1.3% of the students with disabilities who were served under part B of IDEA in 2019. The U.S. Government Accountability Office (U.S. GAO, 2020) reported that BIE schools provide special education services to more than 6,000 Native American students with disabilities. BIE schools have identified 15% of their students as having disabilities (U.S. GAO, 2020). Unfortunately, the U.S. GAO (2020) also reported that not all of the Native American students with disabilities in BIE schools received the total amount of time for special education services as required in their individualized education programs (IEP). As a result, in May 2020, the U.S.

GAO issued seven recommendations that made BIE schools more accountable for providing services to their students with disabilities. The key recommendations included providing improved staff training, establishing consistent policies for making up missed special education service time, and working with stakeholders to recruit and retain qualified service providers for students with disabilities (U.S. GAO, 2020). It is in the context of these existing challenges that schools serving Native American populations were faced with providing special education services to students with disabilities during a global pandemic. The purpose of this article is to describe the challenges for rural Native American students with disabilities during COVID-19 and to present educational adaptations utilized by some schools.

Effects of COVID-19 in Families and Implications for Schools

The COVID-19 global pandemic led many states to issue orders to close schools in spring 2020. Some states issued shelter-in-place orders that restricted travel and discouraged

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gatherings of more than 10 people. These orders created challenges and changes in normal routines for people in the United States and also resulted in unique implications for Native American communities. By April 2020, the disease began to cause deaths and hospitalizations within Native American communities in the Southwest. Several tribes closed smaller, more remote communities to outsiders and restricted travel. Other tribes implemented curfews to reduce gatherings. These changes created hardships for Native American students and their families by cutting them off from education and social support. Educational gains for Native American students with disabilities were already at stake because of local teacher shortages, lack of access to health services and water for some families, and the lack of high-speed internet in many areas.

Teacher Shortage in Rural Communities

The national teacher shortage impacts rural Native American communities in several ways (Garcia & Weiss, 2019), and now with COVID-19 there are new challenges. Native American students, including students with disabilities, may have missed beneficial instruction during COVID-19 in schools with long-term substitute teachers or no teacher assigned to a classroom. Districts may not have had the money to continue to pay substitute teachers. In addition, substitute teachers may not have had access to the same learning materials and remote learning resources compared with the contracted teachers.

Native American Families Affected by COVID-19

Native American families face challenges which are familiar to many rural residents such as difficulty accessing health care and poorer health than urban peers (Benitez & Seiber, 2018). In addition, compared with other rural families, Native American families have more limited availability of medical care, clean water, and food (Deweese & Marks, 2017). Among other factors, the health complications faced by the Native American population are also due to poverty and limited access to preventive health care programs (Martin & Yurkovich, 2014). During the COVID-19 pandemic, local lockdowns in tribal areas added to the difficulty of obtaining educational support services, food, and medical attention.

Due to an underfunded health system in tribal communities, there has been a shortage of health care providers resulting in chronic diseases not being managed well (Sarche & Spicer, 2008; U.S. GAO, 2018; Westmoreland & Watson, 2006). With a shortage of health care workers, there are also fewer health care providers available to test and treat individuals for COVID-19. A shortage of testing kits and protective equipment for health care providers also has been reported in many Native American communities

(Bawden, 2020; Schultz, 2020). As a result of these challenges, the Navajo Nation has been severely affected by COVID-19 and labeled as an epicenter of the coronavirus in the United States by the White House coronavirus task force (Jones, 2020).

Meeting basic needs of food, water, shelter. Not only is health care a concern, but lack of water and other necessities increases the risk of COVID-19 within Native American communities. Social distancing can be difficult because Native American families live in larger family units that include extended families. These families have difficulty accessing running water, so washing hands frequently also is a struggle (American Medical Association, 2020). It is estimated that 15% to 50% of families in the Navajo tribal community may not have running water (Utacia Krol, 2020). In a radio interview with KTAR (2020) about the pandemic response, the Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez reported that many families do not have access to a water supply at their homes and must routinely haul water for household needs. Hauling water often entails driving some distance to water pumps or wells and filling plastic containers or large water tanks and driving back to the homesite. This was a serious issue during COVID-19 due to the extended periods of time that families were required to shelter-in-place.

From mid-March through fall 2020, several Native American communities were on lockdown, which made it harder for families to buy necessities or access water. The precautionary measures put in place by tribal leaderships varied widely. Pueblo communities and small reservations were able to close access to outsiders and limit residents' trips outside of the reservation (Osage Nation, 2020; Pueblo of Acoma, 2020; Tohono O'odham Nation, 2020).

Navajo Nation families were not allowed outside of the immediate area of their homes and could not be in contact with non-household members (Navajo Nation, 2020). While tribal members could travel to feed livestock, other travel was restricted to weekday daylight hours only. As a result, members of the Navajo Nation had to stock up on supplies to ensure they had essential items during their required shelter-in-place time (KTAR, 2020).

Lack of access to water is not just within the Navajo Nation. Morales (2019) reported that for every 1,000 Native American homes, 58 lacked plumbing. This number was in stark contrast to the number of White households that lacked plumbing which were three out of 1,000 (Morales, 2019). Approximately 99% of the general population in the United States has access to clean water and sewage disposal in contrast to 17% of Native American households (Indian Health Services, 2019).

Native American families, especially in remote tribal areas, may not have electric service and must depend on generators to power all appliances that require electricity,

including computers. Moreover, the wellness of children is compromised if families are struggling with providing daily meals when they rely on the school to provide meals such as breakfast and lunch during the school year. As casinos, tours, and other sources of revenue were closed, tribes were unable to provide sufficient funds for health care and child protective services (Mineo, 2020).

Access to internet in rural Native American communities. The number of Native American individuals with access to high-speed internet is much lower than the national average of 82% (Wang, 2018). The U.S. Census Bureau reports only 53% of the individuals who live on tribal lands located in rural areas have access to high-speed internet (Wang, 2018). An even lower rate was cited by McGill (2018), who found only 17% of the total population of individuals who live on tribal lands have access to high-speed internet. Closures of brick and mortar schools highlighted the educational barriers rural Native American families face when distance education requires access to high-speed internet.

Data from a survey by the National Indian Education Association (NIEA, 2020) show 58% of Native American public school students had access to broadband internet, while 22% accessed the internet through the use of a cell phone. Another 16% of Native American students in the survey reported that they had no access to the internet during school closures (NIEA, 2020). In addition, 40% of students who attended BIE schools responded that they had no access to internet services during school closures. Just over 21% of students who attended BIE schools reported they had access to broadband internet services with another 34% reporting they used a cell phone as their internet service (NIEA, 2020). Based on this information, rural Native American students were at a disadvantage compared with their rural and urban peers (Siess, 2016). Rural Native American students may have missed out on continuing their learning during school closures, and students with disabilities could have missed their instructional services entirely during this time.

One of the major issues with internet access in rural Native American communities involves the cost associated with internet services. Siess (2016) reported that Native American communities are among the highest in regard to poverty (around 26%) and unemployment (over 50% for individuals who live on tribal lands). Native American families in rural areas may not have the money needed to pay for high-speed internet services (Siess, 2016). An additional issue is that infrastructure would need to be built to provide more access to internet on tribal lands. When mapping out what areas need internet services, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) declares an area is served if at least one individual in the area is subscribed to a high-speed internet service (McGill, 2018). This means that one household on rural tribal land could have access to high-speed internet, and

the community would be considered served under FCC guidelines. In this case, the FCC may not invest in infrastructure in this region and would instead rely on private companies to develop high-speed internet services in this area (McGill, 2018). Cost, location, and mapping all play a factor when considering internet access on tribal lands.

Examples of Service Delivery in the COVID-19 Environment

It is within the context of the aforementioned challenges that we present the following scenarios of Native American students in rural communities and how COVID-19 affected their educational services. The first scenario describes a student living in a remote tribal community and the second scenario describes a student living in a small rural community near tribal lands.

Scenario 1: Native American Student Living in Remote Native American Community

Billy and his two younger siblings (a 4-year-old and a 2-year-old) are being raised by their paternal grandparents on their tribal land in a remote rural town. Billy is a first grader and has a developmental delay with challenges in reading, writing, and communication. Billy's grandparents speak both their tribal language and English at home but are more fluent in their tribal language. Billy's grandparents have been listening to the news and realize that they are at high risk of being negatively affected by COVID-19. Their age and health conditions put them at high risk given that Billy's grandma has diabetes and his grandpa has high blood pressure. All schools in Billy's state closed just after spring break. Billy's general education and special education teachers called and spoke to Billy's grandparents about the school closure. In this conversation, his teachers discovered that Billy's family not only does not have a computer or internet access but also has no running water or electricity. Moreover, it was difficult for both parties to hear and understand what the other was saying due to the poor cell signal strength available where Billy lives. The teachers wanted to provide Billy with a computer which he could use to connect to the internet hotspot at the community library parking lot that is located 40 miles from Billy's home, including 15 mile of dirt roads that are impassable when muddy. The computer could provide Billy access to speech therapy online and connect to the internet for Google Classroom and his classwork. However, because Billy's home has no electricity, his teachers realized Billy would not be able to recharge the computer. The teachers then arranged to have educational packets mailed to the family's post office box. When Billy's grandparents first received the weekly packets, they sat down with Billy to work on the worksheets. These sessions ended up being frustrating for

both Billy and his grandparents, because Billy's grandparents did not completely understand the directions that were written only in English. Eventually these sessions stopped all together.

When Billy's teachers called to check in on how Billy was doing, his grandparents explained that they did not understand the directions. Billy's grandparents shared about their high level of stress due to their age; health problems; being in charge of feeding and providing for three young children; worrying about the risk of COVID-19 infection; and having to continue to go into public places at least once each week to haul water, buy food, and pick up their mail. On one occasion, Billy's teachers tried to explain the worksheets on the phone, but they realized that due to the poor cellular signal strength, their efforts were futile. It was difficult enough having a simple conversation over the phone. Billy did not make progress in any of his IEP goals during the COVID-19 school closure. Unfortunately, Billy's story could be a reality for many Native American students during the school closure due to COVID-19.

Scenario 2: Native American Student Living in Small, Rural Community

Bonnie lives off the tribal land in a small and rural town with her parents, one grandparent, and two siblings. Her parents work minimum wage jobs and are living paycheck to paycheck. They rely on the grandmother to watch the children when they work. After the public school evaluation last year, Bonnie was classified as a student with developmental delay. Now that she is in second grade, she is receiving special education services in reading, writing, math, and speech. She was making adequate progress on her goals, and the parents noticed an improvement in her speech. In mid-March of 2020, all parents within the school district received a notice that students would not be returning to school for the rest of the school year. The school district provided Bonnie and her siblings with tablet computers, but there is no internet access at home. Her teacher suggested two companies that provided a free trial of internet services. Her parents initially had difficulty setting up internet access on the tablets and navigating the internet, but they received support from the children's teachers.

Bonnie's mother was laid off when the retail store she was working for temporarily closed. Her parents also had to juggle work, school Zoom meetings, and homework assistance for each of the three children. Bonnie started to exhibit concern concerning behavior, and her parents noticed she was regressing in her speech. Fortunately, her special education teacher was able to have individual online sessions with Bonnie to help her with homework and provide behavioral strategies for her parents to implement. The speech therapist was also able to do weekly online sessions to assist

Bonnie with her articulation. At the end of the school year, Bonnie made a slight improvement on her academic goals and made up for her regression in speech.

During COVID-19, some family members were unemployed or were forced to work from home. This was a major challenge for parents working at home and homeschooling their children at the same time. For other parents, they homeschooled their children but also had to worry about their financial situation and caring for elderly family members. Many of the challenges depicted in Bonnie's case were experienced by families living in small towns. Fortunately, most families had access to technology, even if it was a smartphone, or schools provided some devices and resources for internet access. Though online learning was difficult, especially for students receiving special education services, for some students this instructional mode was successful. However, the concern remains for those students who were not able to access online learning due to lack of technology, internet access, lack of necessities, or one of the many challenges faced by parents.

Educational Services Provided During COVID-19

Distance Learning and COVID-19

As a response to COVID-19 school closures, the U.S. Department of Education (U.S. DOE, 2020) declared schools were allowed to provide special education services to students through distance learning. The U.S. DOE also allowed IEP teams to meet and decide how these distance-learning services would take place. In a question and answer fact sheet, the U.S. DOE outlined services that could be done in the home to meet the educational needs of the student such as delivering instruction through phone calls, using different online learning modules to deliver instruction, and providing parent supported activities (U.S. DOE, 2020). These policies and guidelines applied to all students including Native American students in rural settings.

NIEA conducted a survey of their members, educators, and stakeholders in April 2020 to gather information regarding Native American student performance during COVID-19. NIEA found that in the United States 68% of the public schools serving Native American students, including those with disabilities, provided education services from March to May 2020 using an online mode. These public schools also provided technology to the students to allow them to access the learning modules at home. Another 17% of the public schools that serve Native American students went to an online or distance learning model and did not provide technology to their students. Only 4% of the public schools that serve Native American students closed for the year without providing any further instruction to their students (NIEA, 2020).

Schools funded by the BIE based their school closures on the risk level of their specific communities (BIE, 2020). In this regard, BIE released a letter to their schools stating the procedures for school closures due to COVID-19. Requirements included canceling all extracurricular activities and coordinating possible closure decisions with local public health officials (BIE, 2020). NIEA also collected information from BIE schools regarding how they provided support to students during the school closures. According to NIEA (2020), the BIE response indicated that 34% of BIE schools sent home learning packets for their students to work on during school closures, and 30% of BIE schools opted for a distance-learning model by sending students technology devices to use at home (NIEA, 2020). In addition, 21% of BIE schools closed during COVID-19 and did not provide any services to their students, including students with disabilities (NIEA, 2020).

Educational Settings for Native American Students

Three educational settings in the Southwest and their responses to COVID-19 restrictions were examined for this article. The first setting, P-12 public schools serving Native American students on tribal lands, includes schools administered by the tribes similar to local public schools in other communities. The second setting, P-12 public schools serving Native American students not on tribal lands, comprised rural public schools in communities that are adjacent to tribal lands, but the lands are not managed by the tribes. These schools have a high percentage of students who are Native American. The final setting is a tribal community college.

Preschool Through 12th-Grade Public Schools Serving Native American Students on Tribal Lands

Public school districts located on Native American reservations followed state and tribal guidelines regarding school closures. Sometimes teachers were unable to access their classrooms, and students who had been on spring break could not pick up books or personal belongings. For this reason, some teachers provided distance instruction using personal resources, while others had access to school or district offices to use district phones, computers, and internet. The level of remoteness of the tribal nation may have affected the ability of each community to implement a successful distance-learning program (C. Running Bear, personal communication, June 8, 2020). Although weather and road conditions routinely hinder school attendance, most school districts regularly include flexible make up days in their calendars to address school weather closures. Distance

learning options are not generally used for most districts on Native American reservations.

School example one on reservation—Phone calls, text, online, and mail. The following example provides details on how one public school located on tribal lands provided services to students in spring 2020 (C. Running Bear, personal communication, June 8, 2020). This occurred after face-to-face instruction had ended by tribal mandate. In this instance, teachers at an inclusive preschool located on tribal lands in rural southwestern United States met twice a week to plan their preschool lessons. This early childhood program served roughly 20 students on the campus of a preschool through sixth-grade elementary school. Approximately 96% of the students were Native American.

Barriers. A major barrier faced by this program during the school closure was technology. Sometimes the virtual classes did not work. When this happened, the team tried again the next day. Families without internet access in this district were able to connect to the classes and teachers with cell phones. All of the children were initially able to receive services; however, by mid-May, some families stopped answering their phone calls. This happened either because families faced limited data and call minutes or because families were feeling overwhelmed by the continuing health crisis. In addition, extended school year (ESY) activities which provide services to students for a few weeks each summer were canceled.

Success and observations. Several procedures were put in place to provide essential services. First, text messages with ideas for gross and fine motor activities that could be done at home were sent to families each day. Second, the special education teacher also conducted virtual classes online three times each week for approximately 15 to 30 min. This allowed the students to see each other and their teacher. These classes typically had no more than five students at a time. During the virtual classes, the teacher would conduct activities that went along with the theme of the lesson, including reading a story, singing, or leading physical activities such as dancing or yoga.

The speech pathologist, occupational therapist (OT), and physical therapist (PT) provided consultative services through phone calls. In addition, they mailed parents hard copies of suggested activities to do at home with their children. The speech pathologist also participated weekly in the virtual class, and the OT and PT participated biweekly. The preschoolers with disabilities continued to receive these related services according to their IEPs in this manner during the school closures. The parents in this community gave positive feedback about how this preschool program continued to provide services to their children. School personnel

conducted IEP meetings via phone and computer with the families.

According to the teachers and administrators involved, a major strength of this program was the willingness of the teachers to learn and try new ways of teaching. Stronger connections were formed between the teachers, parents, and related services staff as more parent contact took place during this time than ever before. Parents called the teacher for specific ideas or guidance as needed. Team planning was a contributor to the success of this program as was focusing on the children and their interests.

This preschool program's staff has made plans to improve on their service delivery if distance learning continues or begins again in the future. These plans include creating a reading library that families can access from their phones and recording the class sessions for those students who miss the virtual class session. The school district will buy laptops for each K-12 student and iPads for each preschool student to use from home.

School example two on reservation—Instructional packets. In another public school district on tribal lands, teachers decided to provide educational services to their students through paper instructional packets. This decision was made based on the challenges faced by the families, including a lack of internet connections. Approximately 1,800 students, preschool through 12th grade, are served by this school district. Roughly 92% of the students are Native American.

Special education teachers and related services staff called the families who chose to continue special education services. Next, depending on whether the family had internet services, a computer, and a printer, staff either mailed packets home to parents or posted these packets on the school's webpage. Students with disabilities also received educational packets from their general education teachers. Packets were either posted online or provided as hard copies that were delivered by school bus to the various bus stops.

Barriers. A number of barriers were encountered in this school in delivering special education services. First, 15% of parents with children on IEPs declined special educational services during the initial COVID-19 school closures. This was allowed by IDEA part B subpart D section 300 (IDEA, 2004). A barrier for online therapy was that some families depended on using the local/community free Wi-Fi hotspots during the school closures. If they encountered difficulties with technology while at a remote Wi-Fi hotspot, there was no technical support available. In these cases, the students were unable to receive services for that week. Although families expressed satisfaction with the educational packets they received for their child's special education services, some parents reported that teachers or service providers

were contacting them too frequently. These parents asked for the phone calls to stop. The parents' complaints could be attributed to the increased use of the family's cell phone minutes.

Another barrier that the special education staff encountered in this school district was the lack of resources such as internet and computers. Roughly 30% of families of children with IEPs did not have internet access. Some parents also did not log their children on at the agreed upon time for teletherapy, causing the child to miss therapy for that week. Grandparents raising their grandchildren also seemed to have difficulty understanding what distance learning was and their role in helping their grandchild receive special education services through teletherapy or online resources.

Success and observations. For students with disabilities, related service staff provided online therapy, and special education teachers utilized educational packets to meet the IEP goals for individual students. The instruction, educational activities, and assignments were individualized in each student's instructional packet to address the strengths and needs of the individual student with disabilities.

For students with severe disabilities, service providers worked together to ensure the students had equipment at home such as walkers, communication devices, and assistive technology to continue working on their goals. Equipment was picked up by families when possible and delivered if the family could not come to the school. Daily phone or virtual contact was provided based on the IEP or parent request.

Preschool Through 12th-Grade Public Schools Serving Native American Students Not on Tribal Lands

Another rural district in the southwestern United States that is not on tribal lands served approximately 400 Native American students out of a total of 750 students enrolled in the district. In addition, 320 students enrolled in the district schools were Hispanic. Of the total school district population of 750 students in preschool through 12th grade, there were 125 students identified as individuals with disabilities and 160 students classified as English learners. Almost all students qualified for free and reduced-price meals.

Barriers. A public school in the southwestern United States where about half of their student population was Native American conducted a district survey related to online instruction. The results showed that 70% to 80% of the students did not have internet access at home. The survey also revealed that some parents had transportation issues.

Success and observations. Based on this survey, paper instructional packets were determined to be the most effective vehicle for education. The special education staff delivered

educational packets to homes on a weekly basis. All service providers were required to contact parents at least once a week and provide all services listed on students' IEPs. As special education providers had contact with families every week, most students receiving special education services were able to complete their work packets and benefit from special education resources.

Tribal Community College

Another educational institution affected by COVID-19 was a rural tribal community college that included students with disabilities in the Southwest. This college offers associate degrees for vocational skills, preparation for 4-year university degrees, and certifications in casino gaming, social services, and substance abuse prevention. In addition, certificates can be completed in carpentry, electrical, plumbing, construction, and painting. Students must also enroll in two or more courses related to Native American culture and language.

Barriers. At this tribal community college, there were challenges that had to be addressed related to COVID-19. The most significant challenge was the decision to go completely online in the middle of the spring 2020 semester. This decision alone brought several issues to the forefront.

A major barrier that had to be overcome initially was teaching students with disabilities how to use the technology fluently. Many were not familiar with basic word processing, document storage and retrieval, and certain protocols, including how to download a file or use the internet to do research. This required faculty to address these skills within the context of each class. Many times, the faculty had to learn how to do the task first. In addition, faculty needed to develop a connection with each student with a disability and establish a facilitative relationship. Faculty had to learn the concepts of task analysis and chaining to help break assignments down into component parts.

The second major challenge was that the Native American students from this tribal nation generally did not have access to computer technology or the skills to use this technology within a learning management system (LMS). This situation was further complicated by community college faculty who had not used online instruction.

Success and observations. The college on this tribal nation implemented some innovative actions to address these concerns. The staff provided iPads with keyboards to any student who needed the technology. The tribal college also offered to pay for the students' phone usage as a hotspot to provide internet access. Recognizing the need for staff training, there was a concerted effort to train faculty on how to use the LMS and other tools (e.g., Zoom) to convert previously face-to-face courses into an online, blended format.

For students with disabilities, an individualized approach was incorporated that included personal contact between the faculty and student to ensure that the student understood the assignments and could complete them and upload them into the LMS. Contingent upon the needs of the student, this could require touching base several times a week. This was modeled after innovations used in telehealth that allows for one-on-one contact and feedback.

Recommendations

CARES Act Funds

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act was passed by Congress on March 27, 2020 (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, 2020). The CARES Act allotted \$8 billion for federally recognized tribal governments to use for "necessary expenditures" related to COVID-19 (Congressional Research Services, 2020). BIE received \$69 million and appropriated \$46 million for BIE and tribally run schools to improve distance learning, information technology (IT) equipment, Wi-Fi connectivity, and services related to COVID-19 (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2020). Improving IT equipment and distance learning at the school level is important. However, if families do not have electricity and internet capabilities at home, then distance learning becomes impossible unless the local government is involved with providing a telecommunication infrastructure. The CARES Act has granted tribal communities the potential for schools and communities to work together in providing distance-learning opportunities for Native American students in rural areas.

The Cherokee Nation in northeastern Oklahoma received \$332 million in funding from the CARES Act. This tribal nation plans to utilize this money for restoring tribal operations, purchasing protective equipment such as masks and gloves, improving IT infrastructure, economic recovery, and health projects (Anadisgoi, 2020). The Navajo Nation (2020) has proposed to use the \$600 million allocation from the CARES Act to improve basic services, especially for the elderly. Native American tribal governments can utilize the financial resources from the CARES Act to address the unexpected expenses related to the COVID-19 pandemic. These needs and expenses could be different in each tribe depending on factors such as rurality, size of communities, and existing infrastructure.

The CARES Act also set money aside for health care services and hospital development in rural areas (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020). While the funds awarded did not support hospital and health care development on tribal lands directly, this money could help nearby rural communities provide health services to tribal members. Individuals who live on tribal lands could more readily access services needed to help stop the spread of the

novel coronavirus with federal funding provided in the CARES Act. Indian Health Services received \$1.032 billion from the CARES Act as well (Congressional Research Services, 2020). The financial resources from the CARES Act can positively impact the basic human needs of the Native American population who currently do not have access to running water, electricity, and adequate health services.

Recommendations for Districts and Teachers

Although schools may be unable to address all barriers encountered in Native American communities, providing educational packets seemed the most effective and reliable means to engage the greatest number of students and maintain communication with families. For kindergarten to 12th-grade students, teachers can then make personal contact that focuses on guided practice while checking for understanding. Short sessions of 10 to 15 min could be developed to ensure the student is able to complete the work.

Paper packets can be delivered using regular bus routes as needed. This reduces physical access issues for students to acquire their educational materials. Students and families are generally able to travel to and from their bus stops to pick up their packets. Educators are encouraged to create their own instructional materials while considering the Native American families' culture and family situations. Some elder family members may lack proficiency in the English language and might be unable to help the students complete their work. Households may have many children working on different assignments, so helping each child individually may prove difficult. Furthermore, Native American families might be struggling with basic necessities and completing school assignments may not be a priority.

Along with delivering paper education packets, schools can use the bus routes to distribute weekly non-perishable meals. Not only has instruction been interrupted, but most Native American students also rely on school meals throughout the school year. Based on data, 94.4% of Native American students attending public schools had access (i.e., delivery, pick-up points, or pick up at school) to meals during school closures, whereas 85% of Native American students attending BIE schools had access to meals during school closures (NIEA, 2020). Therefore, it would be beneficial for the well-being of the students to deliver or provide pick-up points for meals (Dani et al., 2005).

Another way to promote the well-being and educational outcomes of Native American students with disabilities could be to incorporate functional skills into lesson plans. Examples of incorporating functional skills into academics are available from the Native Education for All (NEFA) initiative (IllumiNative, 2020). This initiative provides free digital lesson plans and activities for distance learning. Resources include art guides, information on Native

American art, culture, and history. These resources are available to all students in prekindergarten through eighth grade and are easy to follow. For example, students in prekindergarten through second grade can gain an understanding of symmetry by learning about weaving and creating their own work. In Grades 3 through 5 students can learn about the Native Youth Special Olympics and practice their motor skills by attempting the scissor broad jump. In Grades 6 through 8, students can learn about Native American food and cook with their family by following the recipe for Cherokee bean bread. There is potential to adapt these activities to local resources and cultures. All of these activities and other educational projects offered by the NEFA initiative can help students with or without disabilities learn through hands-on experience and keep families engaged (IllumiNative, 2020).

Native American students also can benefit by learning about their own culture. NEFA lesson plans include tips for parents and additional information to learn more about specific topics (IllumiNative, 2020). Although lesson plans are online, they can be downloaded for offline use or printed. Educators can print these lessons and provide them to families. When creating a curriculum for Native American students, educators can show respect to families and the community they serve and foster a sense of belonging by involving tribal community members in the curriculum/lesson development (Gilliard & Moore, 2007). Therefore, educators should first consult with Native American families and community members they serve when designing a lesson or curriculum.

Students also can tap into their culture by connecting with elders to learn their native language, gain more familiarity with cultural practices, and strengthen life skills. Further extensions of native language learning could incorporate telling a story in their native language, writing about the history of their language, teaching the language to another family member, or finding a pen pal who also speaks and writes the student's language to exchange letters in the native language.

It is recommended that schools and districts serving Native American students be proactive and plan or improve upon a special education distance learning program that can be utilized in the future as needed. Schools might survey parents and educators to find out what challenges and successes occurred with distance learning during the school closures due to COVID-19. These data can be analyzed to identify common obstacles families faced with distance learning so that plans can be developed to overcome these obstacles in the future.

Technology Grants

Native American families are struggling with technology accessibility. Many Native American schools do not have

enough funding to provide all students and educators with laptops for virtual education (NIEA, 2019). The NIEA has requested \$175 million for wireless hotspots and laptops for students and educators at Native American schools. As most distance learning is taking place online, wireless hotspots would allow students to access instruction at home. High-speed broadband and laptops at home would be optimal to meet the needs of the family and ensure network access remains consistent. In addition, tribal governments in rural areas are eligible to apply for \$125 million competitive distance learning, telehealth, and broadband grants through the CARES Act (Congressional Research Services, 2020). These funds could provide technology access for distance learning to more rural Native American students with disabilities and special educators at Native American schools.

Conclusion

It is important to view the challenges encountered in the COVID-19 pandemic as opportunities to identify new strategies for effective teaching and learning with rural Native American students with disabilities. Teaching and learning activities that were usually easy to accomplish before COVID-19 required new thinking and creative procedures to complete when schools were closed. During the COVID-19 pandemic, everyone was forced to think differently. This provided the impetus for teachers, students, and family members to acquire adaptive skills and learning that would not otherwise have been available. These new skills and knowledge can provide unique opportunities for the education of Native American students with disabilities living in rural and remote areas.

Authors' Note

To maintain the privacy of individuals and to respect the sovereign status of Native American nations, individual and tribal identities have not been associated with some of the specific information and schools.

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