



# NATIONAL INDIAN EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

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## **Testimony of the National Indian Education Association**

### **United States Senate Committee on Indian Affairs**

#### **Oversight Hearing on “Early Childhood Development and Education in Indian Country: Building a Foundation for Academic Success.”**

**February 26, 2014**

The National Indian Education Association (NIEA) appreciates the work of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs for recently holding a hearing on “Early Childhood Development and Education in Indian Country: Building a Foundation for Academic Success.” We request this written testimony be submitted into the record. NIEA is the most representative and inclusive Native education organization in the United States. NIEA's principal goal is to advance comprehensive and equal educational opportunities for American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian students. Through this vision, NIEA supports sovereignty over education by strengthening traditional Native cultures and values that enable Native learners to become contributing members of their communities.

The federal government must uphold the United States’ trust responsibility to Native education and including early education within that context is critically important. Research suggests that early education is the most effective and cost-efficient investment the federal government and Native communities can make because providing a strong education foundation increases a student’s future academic success, quality of life, and ability to attain college and careers.

#### **The State of Native Education**

Native education is in a state of emergency. Native students lag far behind their peers on every educational indicator, from academic achievement to high school and college graduation rates. Just over 50% of Native students are graduating high school, compared to nearly 80% for the majority population nationally. Further, only 1 in 4 Native high school graduates who took the ACT scored at the college-ready level in math, and only one-third in reading as compared to more than half for white graduates. This resulted in only 52 percent of Native students enrolling immediately in college in 2004.

Increasingly alarming, only 40 percent of those students actually graduated college with a bachelor’s degree by 2010. Nearly 62 percent of White students graduated. For Native students to succeed in secondary and post-secondary education, they must have a strong foundation in early childhood learning. A child’s brain grows the fastest in the first five years of life, and research shows that high quality early education has a positive impact on a child’s cognitive, social, and emotional development to help prepare for success in school and in life.

## **Equity in Early Education**

### **Cultural Inclusion and Familial Engagement**

Early childhood education models should advance the unique linguistic and cultural identities of Native children and students, so that our children are educated in their Native language as well as English and use assessment tools appropriate to the language of instruction. Models should support multiple delivery systems, such as family-child interaction learning programs and home visit programs that have strong familial engagement components and display measurable success rates. Instruction in early childhood education can be delivered in a multitude of models, which take advantage of and reinforce the fact that families have a critical support role in a child's education, particularly during their formative years. Research illustrates that actively including families throughout a child's early education will improve verbal, motor, and adaptive skills as well as guarantee greater academic success in subsequent years.

### **Collaboration Opportunities**

Indian head start and early childcare programs, as well as tribal education agencies, have decades of experience providing early educational opportunities to Native children. Tribal inclusion is particularly imperative for achieving the goals introduced in recent grant competitions, like Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge, which seeks to prepare more children for kindergarten and build a strong foundation for educational success. For Native students in tribal communities, tribal partnership and input exemplifies locally directed education and is critical to developing a student-centered learning environment that meets Native children's unique cultural and linguistic needs.

As the Department of Education continues to administer programs and grant competitions, it is essential that the federal agency recognizes the right of tribes to govern their individual programs under self-governance grants under Public Law 100-297 or Public Law 93-638 self-determination contracts. Ensuring tribes are in the position to work effectively and efficiently with all federal agencies – as they do with the Department of Health and Human Services to administer Indian Head Start programs – is essential as tribes expand authority over their local education systems.

Congress should also ensure early education partners are working with Native-serving institutions of higher education, such as Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), because tribal citizens and reservation residents often choose to attend TCUs as they are local, affordable institutions of higher education. Collaborating with these institutions would help ensure that partnerships include stakeholders that better understand Native students' needs. Further, partnerships with TCUs would, in turn, support TCU students and result in a culturally cognizant workforce that better understands and works within early education systems.

### **Full Funding**

The Head Start model, with its holistic approach, has been extraordinarily effective in Native communities. Head Start has been and continues to play an instrumental role in Native education by combining education, health, and family services to model traditional Native education – accounting for its success. While sequestration was stymied for the next two fiscal years, it is critical Congress permanently replaces the sequester to protect Native education programs, like Head Start, from future reductions.

Current funding dollars provide less for Native populations as inflation and fiscal constraints increase, even though research suggests there is a return of at least \$7 for every single dollar invested in Head Start. NIEA requests Head Start and Early Head Start funding levels to be increased to \$9.6 billion to replace the disparaging effects of sequestration and provide upfront federal investment in Native children and avoid more costly social interventions in the future. This additional funding would allow early education to reach more tribal communities and help more Native people by triggering the Indian special expansion funding provisions (after a full Cost of Living Allowance has been paid to all Head Start programs).

### **Increased Access**

Early education programs must ensure equal access for Native communities and Native-serving institutions in order to better serve our populations. For example, the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) is ineligible for the Department of Education's Race to the Top competitions. This exclusion fails to honor both the federal government's trust responsibility to provide Native children with a quality education as well as Executive Order 13592, "Improving American Indian and Alaska Native Educational Opportunities and Strengthening Tribal Colleges and Universities," which aims to leverage and coordinate federal resources to expand educational opportunities for Native students.

While the BIE does not operate Head Start programs, the agency operates 44 Family and Child Education (FACE) programs, which are designed as integrated models for an early childhood and parental involvement program assisting Native families in BIE-funded schools. These programs promote the early identification of children with special needs to provide appropriate services as well as deliver support for the unique cultural and linguistic diversity of each Native community served by the program.

NIEA requests that the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs and Congress ensure that tribes and the BIE are explicitly included as Congress develops early education models, provides oversight to federal agencies administering grant competitions, and works with the Administration as it proposes new initiatives, like the recently proposed \$300 million FY 2015 Race to the Top – Equity and Opportunity competition. Because the competition is aimed at improving the academic performance of students in the nation's highest poverty schools, Congress should ensure that tribes and the BIE are eligible entities to compete and better serve the nation's highest-need and most vulnerable students – Native children.

### **Conclusion**

Once again, NIEA appreciates the continued leadership of this Committee and we look forward to working closely with its members under the leadership of Chairman Jon Tester and Vice-Chairman John Barrasso. We share your commitment to advancing early learning and making improvements to ensure the programs serving Native communities are the most efficient and effective as possible. If you have any questions, please contact Clint J. Bowers, NIEA Policy Associate, at [cbowers@niea.org](mailto:cbowers@niea.org).