

## Circles of Reflection: Supporting Early Learning for Wisconsin's Native Communities

### Overview

Wisconsin's Circles of Reflection (CoR) addresses early learning challenges and opportunities for American Indian or Alaskan Native (AI/AN)<sup>1</sup> children and families. Developed by the National Comprehensive Center's Native Education Collaborative, CoR engages state, tribal, and local education agencies in cycles of issue discovery, stakeholder engagement, and implementation planning to provide high quality, motivating educational experiences that improve Native students' academic attainment.<sup>2</sup> The Region 10 Comprehensive Center (R10CC) partnered with the National Comprehensive Center (NCC) to support the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) and AI/AN representatives through this process.

Wisconsin's 12 Tribal Nations have a rich history that predates the establishment of the United States and Wisconsin.<sup>3</sup> Spanning 10,000 years, Indigenous people in what later became Wisconsin established cultures anchored in language, art, and custom, and built communities that farmed, hunted, and traded through vast networks. Sadly, like in many other states, significant gaps exist between AI/AN students and other students in Wisconsin, disparities resulting from hundreds of years of colonization, forced assimilation, and suppression of Native culture. In 2021-22, AI/AN students were less likely to graduate in four years (78% versus 90% overall) and less likely to score proficient or better on the state ELA assessment (17% versus 37% overall) and state math assessment (16% versus 39% overall). AI/AN students also attended school less frequently (88% versus 93% overall) and were more likely to be suspended (3% versus 2% overall).<sup>4</sup>

Recognizing historical inequities, Wisconsin's Act 31 requires K-12 educators to build knowledge on Tribes in the state so that they can accurately teach about these Nations and their sovereignty.<sup>5</sup> Despite Act 31, challenges still exist. Non-Indigenous educators, policy makers, and leaders have difficulty entering authentic partnerships to improve Native student education due to insufficient knowledge and capacity concerning tribal history, culture, and sovereignty. CoR provides a way to address these issues by honoring the expertise and

<sup>1</sup> Terms used are in keeping with US Dept of Education report: Rampey, B.D., Faircloth, S.C., Whorton, R.P., and Deaton, J. (2021). *National Indian Education Study 2019* (NCES 2021-018). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics.

<sup>2</sup> Source: [Native Education Collaborative](#)

<sup>3</sup> There are 11 federally-recognized Tribes in Wisconsin and one, the Brothertown Nation, that seeks federal recognition.

<sup>4</sup> Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. (2023). [WISEdash Public Portal](#). Statistics retrieved February 15, 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. (2023). [State Statutes for American Indian Studies in Wisconsin](#). Accessed March 13, 2023.

sovereignty of Native educators while deepening DPI's understanding of critical aspects of Native student education. The project's ultimate goal is to develop a more collaborative relationship between the Nations, the educators instructing their students, and DPI, leading to concrete improvements for students. In this way, CoR's multi-jurisdictional approach can be part of long-term, structural changes in how Wisconsin engages with Tribes to address systemic gaps and historic inequities.

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## The Circles Process for Early Learning

The CoR project brought together many participants from different organizations. In addition to the NCC, R10CC, and DPI, participants included members of the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin, Oneida Nation, Ho-Chunk Nation, Mole Lake (Sokaogon Chippewa Community) Band of Lake Superior, and Stockbridge-Munsee Community Band of Mohican Indians. There were nine participants from the seven Nations, one district leader who is also a tribal member, and 21 DPI participants. DPI representatives included three cabinet-level leaders, seven division directors and assistant directors, and 11 staff from four divisions. Four DPI staff from four different teams (math and literacy, teaching and learning, special education, and policy and research) engaged as core planning team members.

In both the near and long term, the Early Learning CoR centers the voices of Native educators in resource and support discussions to maximize early childhood education in their communities. Following extensive planning meetings to adapt the CoR protocol to early learning, the CoR process took place between May and September 2022 and consisted of three Circles milestones spanning five meetings.<sup>6</sup> Meeting goals focused on reflective engagement between DPI, Tribes, and LEAs to improve early learning outcomes for Wisconsin's Native students. Experts from the NCC Native Education Collaborative facilitated each event, with support from R10CC. At the first Circle, DPI participants reflected on current early learning resources and efforts for Native learners. During the second Circle, tribal participants reacted to and elaborated on the first Circle inventory. At the third Circle, all partners identified their desires for future improvements and brainstormed ideas for possible 90-day action plans.

The project evaluation included a talking circle focus group with Native education leaders, an interview with DPI staff, and a survey of DPI staff supporting the Circles work. One member of the DPI staff shared their appreciation that the R10CC "allowed us the flexibility [to] adjust to where we were at, as opposed to where they wanted us to be." They thought the process was "more collaborative than directive" and appreciated the two NCC facilitators. The facilitators were described as having "strong skills and some incredible knowledge," giving DPI "an opportunity to expand what we know." This DPI staff member was confident the agency would repeat the CoR process in the future because "down the road, now we can do this ourselves."

Tribal participants appreciated the opportunity to be heard by DPI staff. When sharing

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<sup>6</sup> Circles One and Two had two meetings each to cover the breadth of topics and maximize representation.



what they most valued, they stated, “It was nice hearing everyone share out...learning we share similar challenges. It was also nice to have someone ask us the question...to look within...to analyze the situation that we're in.” This participant reported that having become “acclimated to their situation,” simply being asked questions during the Circles process allowed them to “analyze [their] situation from a fresh new perspective.” The questions in the Circles made them aware of their expectations and the “American Indian resiliency” that allowed their people to “survive so many removals and war and disease.” This acknowledgement was a powerful CoR process result, allowing this participant to realize the resources that are still needed and to share that information with peers and with DPI. Another Native participant echoed that the Circles process allowed them to reflect on the “goals that certain Native communities have” and the “different ways to approach” those goals. One participant was glad to be at the Circles but would have liked more people there to gather a diversity of views from more Tribes.

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## Outcomes

The primary short-term, positive outcome of the Circles of Reflection work has been the simple yet important process of bringing together leaders and staff from across DPI to better understand early learning issues impacting Native American learners and the work others in the agency are doing related to these topics. Circles have also created the following positive, short-term outcomes internally at DPI: kicking off within-agency dialog about early learning programs and policies, identifying strengths and areas needing attention, elevating voices of Native American educators to inform support, and leveraging resources more efficiently by identifying themes and priorities that run parallel to the focus of the Young Learners Tribal Language Revitalization Preschool Development Grants.<sup>7</sup>

Native educators felt encouraged by how CoR lifts Native voices and the potential value of the resulting documents. Following observations at the second Circle about lack of ongoing engagement and follow-through from institutions partnering with Tribes, one focus group participant shared that “many times American Indian voices get overlooked or just get disregarded. And so our voices need to be at the table.” A second participant was “excited that there's some kind of a document that's going to be generated” as a result of the Circles process. Another participant affirmed that she participated in the CoR because “having that document puts the validity into our voices that have been there for generations.” These participants suggested the resulting document should be widely shared because “more training is needed or how to teach the Indian child.”

There were positive and important learning experiences for non-Indigenous partners as well. As part of an embedded and authentically engaged process, non-Indigenous colleagues (including R10CC and DPI staff) learned the importance of creating reciprocal relationships through listening and trust building. Non-Indigenous participants also built skills, capacities, and awareness for working with Tribal Nations and Indigenous people. For example, allowing

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<sup>7</sup> Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. (2023). [Young Learners Tribal Language Revitalization - Federal Grant](#). Accessed March 13, 2023.

time to carefully think about and respond to questions, sharing information in advance and not in a rushed way, and the importance of providing even small honoraria for participants symbolically communicated the value of and investment in shared knowledge and wisdom. Non-Indigenous participants also learned more about AI/AN student populations and the schools they attend, which are typically public schools.

It is significant that DPI staff now feel they have the capacity to continue the CoR process themselves, with one DPI staff appreciating the “gentle” and reflective stance of the process and the “natural, authentic” desire to learn about the perspectives of Wisconsin’s tribal members. One participant thought the CoR process demonstrated that, to grow this work in the future, DPI should go beyond the minimal training on Native learners required for employees. This person stated how valuable it was that DPI’s AI consultant made the CoR process feasible and meaningful, yet how critical it was for DPI more broadly to be more connected to Native communities. They hoped one result of CoR is that her colleagues will “become more aware and take some ownership in a way that they haven't [previously].”

In the near term, R10CC will continue supporting completion of the language acquisition action plan to shed light on the topic of Native language acquisition and assessment for early learners. R10CC will also assess implementation of action plan recommendations. In the longer term, the action plan may lead to follow up actions related to Native language development. Finally, R10CC will share recommendations about the CoR process for early learning with the Nations, the NCC and other regional Comprehensive Centers, and DPI.