

From the Middle School Desk to the Principal's Office: Supporting Indigenous Educator Pathways

By Barbara Jones and April Chavez

Making a Difference for American Indian and Alaska Native Students: Innovations and Wise Practices was a three-part webinar series for tribal, state, and federal education leaders.¹ Through panels and breakout sessions, participants shared their knowledge on transforming outcomes for Native American students, administrators, educators, and communities. This overview shares lessons learned on how to support Indigenous educator and leader pathways. Below are principles of practice distilled from the webinar discussions and panels.

Start Early

Joel Isaak (Dena'ina), a session panelist and the Tribal Affairs Director for Alaska's Department of Education and Early Development echoed many voices to say one way to recruit more Indigenous teachers is to facilitate students' early and regular engagement in the teaching profession. For example, for grow-our-own efforts to be successful, K–12 students need exposure to and experience with working in the education profession early on. Middle school students can begin supporting younger classrooms as aspiring paraprofessionals. High school students can take early childhood development (ECE) courses and get hands-on experience in ECE classrooms. For this to work well, districts can partner with local community colleges to offer dual enrollment. ECE programs such as Head Start can partner with local high schools to develop opportunities for students to intern in ECE classrooms. Isaak shared, "You need to start really early and make that strong connection with the youth to guide them on those pathways... Our turnover rate for local people who live in the communities is much lower." Teacher turnover has been a challenge across rural communities, and the need to have local community members teach in schools is key.

Identify Barriers

Currently, the greatest barrier to recruiting Native teachers - discussed in both the session panels and small group discussions - is teacher certification. Certification limits pose challenges for educational coverage, especially in smaller districts. There is a need for greater support in general for Indigenous youth and other community members who may be interested in pursuing teaching certification. This support can include greater exposure to the profession, access to training, logistical support to navigate training hurdles, financial support, and exam options. A question surfaced: Who should make the decisions or be the gatekeepers for accrediting Indigenous-informed curriculum and educator licensure? There was also an identified need for alternative certification pathways for Indigenous culture bearers and

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.

language teachers and parity in compensation for those teachers. Joel Isaak shared that in Alaska,

What was happening was, if you are speaking in your target language and there's no Praxis exam in your target language, and you have to have a Praxis to become certified for pay equity, then you functionally can't have an immersion program with licensed teachers that speak that language.

Many people also mentioned that there needs to be greater access and opportunity for Indigenous language and culture teachers to receive general teacher training. One participant stated, "If someone doesn't have an educational background, it can be difficult for emerging educators to keep students' attention and manage the classroom, even if they do manage to acquire an alternative certificate. Alternative certificates should expand to teach other educational skills like lesson planning and classroom management."

Lead Change through Partnerships, Cohorts, and Mentorships

Shifting to also consider Indigenous leadership pathways, Alison Robbins, Executive Director of the Blue Lake Rancheria Tribal Education Agency, and Maggie Peters, Ner-er-ner/Puhliklah (Yurok) and Karuk, and Principal of Hoopa Valley High School, shared about a grow-your-own administrators' program ([GYOA](#)) at the Blue Lake Rancheria in California. Robbins explained how she was tasked with finding the funding to develop a program to "create Native American administrators who could lead change within their schools and districts... [and] embrace the same vision of self-determination and education that our tribe does." The program has accomplished this through

- partnering with the leadership credentialing program at Cal Poly Humboldt,
- developing a cohort model of Indigenous educators interested in pursuing leadership roles in their communities,
- pairing program participants with other Indigenous leaders as mentors, and
- conducting and responding to extensive needs-sensing efforts to address barriers to participants' success.

One of the GYOA participants was Maggie Peters. She described her experience as a part of a prospective-leader cohort along with other Native educators, stating that "we grew a sense of family. ...I think that when you take this step with multiple people who are all participating in a program together, we definitely felt empowered. I felt empowered because we were occupying a space as a cohort within a larger cohort, and Native voices were really elevated." Webinar participants also shared their personal and professional accounts of how relationships have impacted their leadership journeys, citing that they are

- a vital tool counteracting teacher burnout,
- key for pushing forward state and local policy efforts to meaningfully integrate Indigenous knowledges and histories into the curriculum, and
- build trust between tribal entities and state and local government agencies.

Maggie Peters also shared that applying the approaches described above is possible. She believes if we lead with love,

Leading with love to me is having the strength to be selfless, being brave to be innovative, thinking of things that have never been done before. Being aware and considerate of actions and how they may impact others and being committed to advocate despite the possible consequence of leading with that love.

Embrace Humility

Many webinar participants expressed that community members are essential partners in designing solutions to the educational challenge of developing and supporting teachers. One participant stated that a critical component of this work is “gaining trust with tribal members, [and seeking to] repair tense relationships.” Many shared specific examples from their experiences of effective strategies for improving lasting relationships with tribal partners. These include

- starting with humility
- time with tribal representatives
- active listening
- responsiveness
- follow-through
- honoring/acknowledging expertise
- identifying barriers
- patience
- commitment
- soliciting feedback
- investigating personal biases
- earning trust
- ethical stewardship (e.g., of data)

Secure Funding

There needs to be funding behind the vision to make these ideas a reality. This can include leveraging ESSER, ARP, and CARES Act funds. Individuals and institutions involved in developing Indigenous educator pathways benefit from understanding funding streams and how to leverage them to support educators and prioritize tribal engagement. As representatives from the Federal Office of Indian Education pointed out, available funds are flexible, and people should not be afraid to ask about different ways to use them. Efforts to identify federal and state funding streams that can be granted directly to Tribes also support tribal sovereignty and their autonomy to lead the development of systems serving Native students and educators.

Make It Tribally Centered

To truly support tribal communities, their schools, and educators (current and future), these efforts must center Native experiences, including knowledge, culture, and language. Engage Elders throughout the teacher and leader training and induction processes. Partnerships can be built to engage tribal members and networks of Indigenous educators to develop place-based curricula and to teach Indigenous history, culture, and language. This also speaks to the importance of representation. Indigenous educators need support across the system from other Indigenous teachers and leaders to stay in the profession. This support network can provide them practical tools, opportunities, and inspiration to move forward.

Share Data and Communicate

Lastly, recruitment and retention efforts must be based on relevant school and state data. Partnering with state agencies ensures that Indigenous educator pathway efforts are targeted where needed and responsive to workforce demands. Successful efforts to support Indigenous educators and students must also be disseminated within and beyond Indigenous communities to celebrate the work. This builds enthusiasm among prospective educators and renews the commitment of those already in the field.

In closing, sharing these best practices is intended to support all those engaged in opening and sustaining Indigenous educator pathways. Hopefully, these ideas will also expand partnerships and provide emergent guidelines to build upon this important topic in future work.