

Indigenous Educator Pathways: Creating Positive Student Outcomes

By Barbara Jones and April Chavez

“We need teachers, administrators, and leaders who understand what is at stake if our language and culture is lost.”

- Session Participant

Indigenous educators are critical levers in promoting positive Indigenous student outcomes. This overview, based on the webinar series *Making a Difference for American Indian and Alaska Native Students: Innovations and Wise Practices*,¹ describes key considerations for opening Indigenous educator pathways. These considerations emerged from a synthesis of comments from webinar panelists and participants, including state and tribal leaders, scholars, education practitioners, Native language teachers, and traditional knowledge keepers.

Need for Indigenous Teachers

Recruiting and preparing Indigenous teachers contributes to the survival of Indigenous communities, cultures, and languages. Indigenous teachers and administrators disrupt Western educational paradigms that have not produced positive outcomes for Native students by putting Indigenous epistemologies, languages, and place-based learning in place. Students also do better socially, culturally, and academically when they have teachers who are also role models they identify with. Moreover, Indigenous teachers may build learning environments that offer a sense of belonging and safety to Native students by providing culturally aligned educational experiences and curricula.

Nation-Building

“Our role is to prepare Indigenous educators who are grounded in their culture, language, land, and tribal worldview.”

- Carrie Billy, President and CEO of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium and member of the Navajo Nation

A principle that arose during the webinars was that of educators and schools as Native nation-builders. Nation-building is a process by which “a Native nation enhances its foundational capacity for effective self-governance and for self-determined community and economic

¹ The series is presented in partnership by six federally funded technical assistance centers, including: Region 11, Region 13, Region 15, Region 16, and Region 17 Comprehensive Centers, the Western Educational Equity Assistance Center (WEEAC) at WestEd, and the Regional Educational Laboratories West, Northwest, Southwest, and Central.

development.”² This idea strongly connects to tribal sovereignty, including sovereignty over education for tribal youth. Nation-builders include schools and educators at all levels, from early childhood through higher education. Carrie Billy, a member of the Navajo Nation and President and CEO of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium, shared, “As nation-builders, tribal colleges offer degrees in whatever’s important to build a nation, and one of the first things is teachers, training teachers in a way that resonates with the worldviews of their students.”

Culturally Sustaining Practices

With that in mind, supporting teachers as nation-builders includes the work of tribes and higher education institutions designing professional learning and educator preparation programs in partnership. In this way, not only are schools across Indian Country strengthened, but also Native nations themselves. Webinar participants reiterated that Indigenous communities have inherited legacies of assimilation and colonization, and as such, prioritizing relationships and kinship in designing educational programs for Indigenous communities is integral for envisioning new futures. Alison Robbins, Executive Director of the Blue Lake Rancheria Tribal Education Agency, stated, “Our BOE [Board of Education] knows that educational sovereignty, which they see as reclaiming the school system and decolonizing it from a sole focus on the Western worldview, would not be achieved unless there was a way to cultivate a culturally and linguistically responsive educational environment in which tribal citizens could flourish.”

Panelist Angelina Castagno, Director of the Institute for Native-serving Educators at Northern Arizona University, asked, “What is the role of teachers in the nation-building process?” She described her Institute’s approach to supporting Indigenous education communities as “really grounded in culturally responsive, culturally revitalizing, sustaining, relevant pedagogies and philosophies. ... We know from research that this is what is important for young people, this is what makes schooling relevant, what makes it meaningful, and what contributes to success and to thriving young people and communities.”

This concept foregrounds that schools are essential for rebuilding Native nations. In envisioning and creating culturally responsive programs (including for teachers-in-training), nations are strengthened.

Relationship Focus

“Bringing everyone together in an organized way, a systematic way, scheduled way, really helped break down a lot of the barriers.”

- Carrie Billy

Webinar participants noted that supporting Indigenous educator pathways requires building solid relationships. At the macro level, this involves building trust between communities, schools, tribal education departments, tribal colleges, and other higher education institutions.

² Jorgensen, M. (2007). In *Rebuilding Native Nations: Strategies for Governance and Development* (p. xii). Introduction, University of Arizona Press.

At the micro level, it involves creating structures and partnerships that individuals across the system can leverage to support one another effectively.

Supporting the Whole Person

Another important theme from the webinar was supporting the whole person when recruiting and retaining Indigenous educators. Indigenous teachers-in-training have practical and socioemotional needs that need addressing. Practical needs include health insurance, housing, sufficient stipends, internet access, computers, and schedule flexibility.

In addressing the socioemotional needs of Indigenous teachers-in-training and current teachers, participants identified various supports to enhance their sense of belonging and feeling nurtured, recognized, and relevant. Participants described the following strategies:

- Schools and teachers network with local tribes and other Indigenous educators.
- Higher education institutions use culturally sustaining curricula in teacher training.
- Schools design mentorship programs with Indigenous worldviews in mind.
- Training programs use a cohort model for pre-service training, induction, and beyond.
- Schools support teacher cohorts to center place, language, and culture in their work.
- Indigenous educators collectively Indigenize the student curriculum.
- Schools solicit extracurricular support from local tribes.