



NATIONAL INDIAN EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

Education Sovereignty

ADVANCING SOVEREIGNTY WITH THE EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS ACT

The National Indian Education Association (NIEA) believes all Native students should have access to a high-quality academic and cultural education that prepares them to thrive. The reauthorization of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is an opportunity to increase the educational tools available to Native students and spark economic growth in Native communities across the country. Congress must uphold its federal trust and treaty responsibilities by ensuring all American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian students have the access to the learning systems, they deserve.

Early-Childhood Education

Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs can provide a wide range of community and family-based services that encourage and promote well-being for families and learners. By including provisions that strengthen collaboration with federal and state entities, ESSA can ensure a continuum of educational services from infancy to adulthood. A strong ECE foundation with parental support and resources sets families on a trajectory that promotes foundational knowledge and increases the capacity to be involved and engaged throughout their child's educational experience. NIEA calls for increased access to birth to Pre-K programs that bridge home-to-school learning pathways, and promote family engagement in literacy, nutrition and growth. In addition, these programs should nurture culture and language learning, and promote school entry and social skills development.

Native-serving Early Childhood and Head Start programs are some of the most successful Federal programs that focus directly on the unique circumstances faced by Native children by addressing health and education disparities as well as family and community needs in a holistic manner akin to traditional cultural practices. Many Native communities have begun advocating and obtaining permissions for alternative assessments for Head Start that are more community oriented. This also includes creating and integrating culture and language standards and assessments that align with Tribal knowledge and understanding.

Professional and Workforce Development

For Native students, it is uniquely important to engage, recruit, train, and retain a diverse cadre of teachers. This effort must prioritize meeting students where they are socially, emotionally, and culturally while also responding to community needs. It also means including culturally grounded trainings and workforce focused teacher development. Now more than ever, there is a need for a more diverse workforce that supports trades and entrepreneurship, including specialized career paths. Vocational and Technical (VoTech) teacher development has been most helpful in our rural communities by opening high-quality programs that focus on work-based learning experiences, internships, and job shadowing. This allows Native students the opportunity to participate in culturally relevant curriculum that aligns with their community's needs. For Native students in rural and remote areas, this also provides the opportunity to build economic growth within their communities. We call upon Congress for diversification of funding for schools that provide innovative and alternative career pathways that offer living wage options.



It is also imperative that culturally grounded professional development for educators and administrators is available. These opportunities will primarily support the needs of Native students by incorporating cultural curriculum development that includes supports for social and emotional learning, culturally responsive pedagogy, civic engagement, and healing-centered educational practices. Though some states are utilizing funding and legislation to provide more culturally- grounded professional development that builds instructional practice and advocacy capacity, these efforts are still insufficient in addressing the inequities in Native education. Professional development should also extend to district and state leadership serving Native communities.

NIEA Recommendations

The Every Student Succeeds Act includes several key provisions which aim to better support underserved children. However, as we look to Congress to reauthorize ESSA, additional work is needed to ensure that the federal government upholds its trust responsibilities to Native nations and to ensure that the needs of our Native youth are addressed.

- **Culturally Relevant Social Emotional Learning**

Programs that support Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), including Native languages and cultural programming have been effective strategies in closing the achievement gap for Native youth and have been rehabilitative. SEL strategies have been proven effective in mitigating the effects of complex trauma and improving academic achievement. More resources must be given in remote areas, as well as hands-on implementation at the school and community levels. This includes mental health specialists.

- **Protecting and Strengthening ICWA**

ICWA faces many challenges, including the recent Supreme Court Case *Brackeen v. Haaland*. Tribal Nations and Congress must work together to ensure that colleagues across the federal government are educated on the benefits of ICWA, its relationship to good child welfare practices, and opportunities to strengthen ICWA implementation and protect the law at federal, state, and local levels.

- **Inter-Generational Trauma and Culturally Appropriate Services**

The Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policy Act would establish a comprehensive examination of the Indian boarding school legacy and would ensure Native students, both past and present, have their stories heard and their traumas addressed. We urge Congress to pass this legislation and thoroughly own up to the negative effects of the boarding school era in Indian Country, including those effects that directly impact our students in the classroom today. This must also include culturally appropriate support services for students who attend both BIE-funded schools and public schools.

For additional information, please contact Julia Wakeford, NIEA Policy Director, jwakeford@niea.org; Shanise Ka'aikala, NIEA Legislative Analyst, skaaikala@niea.org; and Stephanie Hawk, NIEA Tribal State Policy Associate, shawk@niea.org

