



NATIONAL INDIAN EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

## NATIVE LEARNING SYSTEMS & THE WHOLE CHILD INITIATIVE

*As NIEA works with Congress on the future of education, it is imperative that an emphasis on healing centered learning systems is incorporated into legislation. Currently, students across the country face a new landscape of stressors that continue to have a substantial impact on youth's mental health. For Native communities, the pandemic exacerbated pre-existing issues in our most vulnerable youth.*

### Fostering the Whole Child Approach

The NIEA Whole Child Initiative seeks to reclaim the brilliance of our Native students through the power of Education Sovereignty. The goal of the Whole Child approach is to create a framework in which community, family, and culture are at the center of the academic wheel. This approach aims to close the gaps that fail to address the mental, spiritual, physical, and emotional needs of our Native students. This approach has become increasingly important as educators and policymakers recognize the unique challenges that Native students face in their education. This approach seeks to address the issues that Native communities face by integrating these elements into education, promoting cultural identity and connection to community as a means of supporting student success.

NIEA, with assistance from the Center for Educational Improvement, is exploring how *Compassionate School Practices*<sup>1</sup> can foster positive outcomes for Native students. The intent of the Compassionate School Practices model is to address the trauma and needs of children in schools through four pathways: prevention, support, building resiliency, and developing protective factors. NIEA and CEI are committed to alleviating trauma, embracing greater equity, and creating healing school communities. By caring for our most vulnerable youth, we are working to serve and support our youth by rectifying the ways our children have been neglected for centuries.

### The Whole Child Approach in Legislation

The Whole Child approach can help Native American students succeed by promoting a positive school environment. Unfortunately, many schools have overlooked the unique cultural and educational needs of Native students, which has resulted in high dropout rates and poor academic performance. However, a study conducted by the National Indian Welfare Association has found that the Whole Child Initiative can improve academic performance and attendance, as well as reduce the likelihood of high-risk behaviors such as substance abuse and violence. When students feel a sense of belonging and connection to their school, they become more engaged in their learning and motivated to succeed.

Incorporating culturally responsive teaching practices has been proven to enhance the academic outcomes of Native American students. Studies have shown that Native American students with a strong sense of cultural identity are more likely to graduate from high school and pursue higher education. Therefore, prioritizing the promotion of well-being and cultural identity can help ensure that Native American students have a positive and rewarding educational experience.

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<sup>1</sup> Mason, C., Asby, D., Wenzel, M., Volk, K. T., & Staeheli, M. (2021). *Compassionate school practices: Fostering children's mental health and well-being*. Corwin.

## NIEA Recommendations

Congress has made strides in addressing our most vulnerable youth and the need for fostering compassionate school practices through programs and legislation. However, 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 in the child welfare and juvenile system 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 seen as supportive in rehabilitation. 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.
- **Traditional Knowledge and Data Sovereignty in Education**  
By collecting and publishing meaningful and accurate data about how programs serve and support Native students and by providing resources to support the holistic needs of children, the American educational system can better ensure all Native students are having their needs met. Further, by allowing funding for culturally-relevant, professional training to educators and supporting the development of culturally responsive curricula in schools, Native students will be better able to feel safe and seen in classrooms where they can thrive.
- **Tribal Consultation and Community involvement**  
Fulfill ESSA by ensuring local school districts and local education agencies are conducting meaningful and regular consultation with Native tribes when developing and implementing all new curriculum programs and funding pathways which specifically affect Native students. Establish partnerships between schools, healthcare providers, families, and communities to address the health needs of Native youth. This can include the expansion of school-based health centers and the development of community-based programs that promote healthy behaviors and attitudes.
- **ESSA and Whole Child**  
Amend the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to include provisions that support the Whole Child approach in Native communities. This can include provisions that prioritize the incorporation of cultural knowledge and language into the curriculum, and provisions that support the provision of culturally appropriate and relevant resources and materials.

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