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National Indian Education Association
National Native Education Agenda
A Transition Paper for the Department of Health and Human Services

The National Indian Education Association (NIEA), established in 1970, is a membership-based organization, with a mission to “support traditional Native cultures and values, to enable Native learners to become contributing members of their communities, to promote Native control of educational institutions, and to improve educational opportunities and resources for American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians throughout the United States.”

Many aspects of the education of American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians are deeply rooted in federal law and policy. Education is an essential component of tribal sovereignty, the federal trust responsibility, and Native self-determination principles recognized under the U.S. Constitution, treaties, statutes, executive orders, and court decisions. The new Administration must embrace this foundation and build on it to effectuate positive changes for the future of America's indigenous tribes, communities, and children.

The education of Native Americans lags far behind that of the rest of the country. Nearly 90 percent of the 620,000 Native American students attend public schools with their non-Native peers. Approximately 7 percent of Native students attend schools administered by the Department of Interior, Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), a system of 184 schools for educating American Indian students spread over 23 states. The federally supported Indian education system includes 48,000 students, 29 tribal colleges, universities and post-secondary schools.

American Indians have the lowest level of educational attainment of any racial or ethnic group in the United States. The national graduation rate for American Indian high school students was 49.3 percent in the 2003–04 school year, compared to 76.2 percent for white students (EPE Research Center 2007). Further, only 13.3 percent of Native Americans have an undergraduate college degree, relative to the national average of 24.4 percent.

NIEA sets forth below its highest priorities for Native education policy, program, and funding changes, and affirms its commitment to working in partnership with the Department of Health and Human Services on these matters.

1. Convene a White House Conference on the Needs of Native Youth.

NIEA supports a White Conference to develop strategies that implement sound cultural appropriate approaches related to the development of Native children which includes their social, emotional, mental, and physical health. The national graduation rate for American Indian high school students was 49.3 percent in the 2003–04 school year and Native teenagers suffer from poverty, suicide, teen birth, and substance abuse at rates higher than the national average. Given the current status and situation

of Native children, the wellbeing of Native children should be an important national priority. National organizations involved with Native American children are working collaboratively to develop strategies that promote educators and school communities working within tribal and Indian communities to assist in the development of local partnerships, given their responsibility to provide educational services, daily contact with Native American students, and relationships with parents and families.

2. Support Native Language programs under the Administration for Native Americans, Administration for Children and Families.

The Esther Martinez Native American Languages Act preserves and fosters fluency in Native American languages through grants to tribes, tribal organizations, schools, and universities to develop and bolster Native language immersion and revitalization programs. Research shows that Native children who participate in language immersion and revitalization programs perform better academically than their Native peers who do not participate. Native languages are not spoken anywhere else in the world; and, if they are not preserved, then they will disappear forever. In Native communities across the country, Native languages are in rapid decline. It is a race against the clock to save Native languages. NIEA promotes increased support to the Administration for Native Americans specifically for the Esther Martinez Native American Language Grant Program.

3. Increased Support for Indian Head Start.

Over the last eight years, after factoring in inflation, Indian Head Start has seen a loss of funding of at least 15%. When the Head Start Act was reauthorized, Congress recognized that Indian Head Start had not received its fair share of expansion dollars for many years and established a formula where, if there was sufficient funding, Indian Head Start would get special expansion funds, in addition to the COLA enjoyed by most non-Indian programs. Please support sufficient new appropriations to allow for expansion funding for Indian Head Start.

4. Implementation of Common Sense Regulations of the Head Start Act.

In December 2007, the Head Start Act was reauthorized. Since then, the Office of Head Start has been drafting new regulations. Although there has been some consultation with Tribes, the Indian Head Start community is concerned that the OHS is taking an unhelpfully restrictive view on draft regulations. The next Administration should ensure that the regulations are true to the spirit of the Head Start Act, particularly in the areas of the structure of the governing body of Head Start programs (most Indian Head Start programs are governed by Tribal Councils who have ready access to the expertise called for in the Act) and the range of possible uses for Indian Head Start special expansion funds, which should include, as Congress intended, expanding programs from part-day to full-day and from home-based to center-based, as well as other quality-related actions.

5. Consultation with the Tribes and Head Start Community as required by the Head Start Act.

When the Head Start Act was reauthorized, several new provisions were added that requires consultation with, with Indian tribes and experts in AIAN early childhood education and development; on the review and promulgation of new performance standards, (Sec. 641A. (a)(2)(D)). Although no tribal consultations have taken place

on these standard, the Office of Head Start continues to move forward with the promulgation of the performance standards. NIEA requests that any promulgation of these new standards be postponed until these consultations take place. Additionally, NIEA would like the Office of Head Start to conduct a needs based study as required by the Act Sec. (649. (k)) to ensure that the needs of Native Head Start students are being met

6. **Assuring new Pre-K initiatives support Indian Head Start and apply at Bureau of Indian Affairs, and other tribal schools.**

There is a lot of momentum for expanding pre-K services, possible to a universal basis. While certainly an excellent initiative, any such expansion should be done in a manner which strengthens, rather than undermines, existing Head Start programs, and which applies to BIA, and other tribal schools.

NIEA encourages the new Administration to adopt these policies and believes with good faith collaboration that we can provide our children with an education that honors their Native identity while simultaneously preparing for successful futures by providing them the opportunity to incorporate into the curriculum their rich cultural heritage, language, traditions, and native ways of knowing.