

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
CONTACT: [press@niea.org](mailto:press@niea.org)

**National Indian Education Association launches first-of-its-kind Education Sovereignty initiative at the 54th Annual Convention and Trade Show**

**Albuquerque, New Mexico, October 20, 2023** – This week, the [National Indian Education Association](#) (NIEA) announced the launch of the **It Begins with Us** campaign, a groundbreaking Education Sovereignty initiative, at the organization’s 54th Annual Convention and Tradeshow Opening Assembly in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

NIEA is leading national movements to address the United States education crisis for *all* students. The organization recognizes that Native education is American education and that leading from Indigenous values benefits Native and non-Native students alike. **It Begins with Us** aims to create systemic change through Education Sovereignty at the community level with educators, teachers, tribal and community leaders, and policymakers.

“NIEA is leading a major paradigm shift in American education. As Native people, we can unite in one voice demanding that Indigenous children be prioritized and not used as political fodder in partisan conflicts,” said NIEA Executive Director Diana Cournoyer (*Oglala Lakota*).

“**It Begins with Us** is an extension of NIEA’s **Whole Child Initiative**, advocating for learning systems that meet all students exactly where they are socially, emotionally, and mentally through holistic education and wrap-around services.”

**It Begins with Us** recognizes that as sovereign nations, tribes can prioritize education by forming education departments and participating in local, state, and federal government. By utilizing Education Sovereignty, tribal nations help shift, support, and serve all students from early education to high school and beyond. “**It Begins with Us**” was also the theme of this year’s NIEA Convention.

“Through Education Sovereignty, NIEA is focused on prevention, support, building resiliency, and developing protective factors. **It Begins with Us** is about creating much-needed positive change in our education system,” said Tesia Zientek (*Citizen Potawatomi Nation*), President of NIEA’s Board of Directors. “Sovereignty is a tool we must use boldly. A tool led by tribal leaders accompanied by an intentional multidisciplinary collaboration within our communities.”

“**It Begins with Us** is being designed to help evolve and drive systems of change directly from our communities. While there is a lot to be done in all sectors, Indigenous children need to be a top priority as we move forward,” said Cournoyer. “We need to see tribal leaders organizing for education. We need our leaders to push for change at the local, state, and national levels as sovereign nations.”

**It Begins with Us** is one of NIEA’s many groundbreaking education initiatives. As an organization that advocates for Native children at every level of government, NIEA has created

a questionnaire to help prioritize focus areas and aid in advocating for Native people on Capitol Hill. To directly participate in improving Native education, [please take the survey here.](#)

For more information on **It Begins with Us** and Education Sovereignty, visit NIEA's website [here.](#) For all press inquiries, please contact [press@niea.org](mailto:press@niea.org).

\*\*\*

*The National Indian Education Association (NIEA) advances comprehensive, culture-based educational opportunities for American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians. NIEA was formed in 1969, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, by Native educators who were anxious to find solutions to improve the education system for Native children. The NIEA Convention was established to mark the beginning of a national forum for sharing and developing ideas and influencing federal policy.*