

# National Indian Education Association (NIEA) Trauma Informed Research & Strategies



**WHY THIS WORK IS IMPORTANT.** At the heart of National Indian Education Association (NIEA) are Native students from Pre-K through post-secondary. Tragically, this target population bears the burden of historical events that began centuries ago. With arrival of European settlers in the 1600's, colonizers here in the United States have—in the words of Carlisle Boarding School founder Richard Pratt—endeavored to “kill the Indian and save the man.” One aspect of the cultural genocide forced on Native communities was the removal of Native children from their homes and communities to boarding schools that prohibited the practice of traditional lifestyles and mandated the acceptance of Christianity and English ways.

Now, four hundred years later, the hegemony experienced by the ancestors of today's Native youth is still felt within them contemporarily as a form of **HISTORICAL TRAUMA**. Epigenists are beginning to uncover scientific proof that intergenerational trauma is real, and historical trauma can be seen as a contributing cause in the development of illnesses such as PTSD, depression and type 2 diabetes, high rates of addiction, suicide, mental illness, and sexual violence may in part be influenced by historical trauma. Trauma leaves a mark in your DNA that spans across the lifespan. Childhood trauma can lead to the adult onset of chronic diseases, such as heart disease, depression, drug abuse, violence and being a victim of violence.

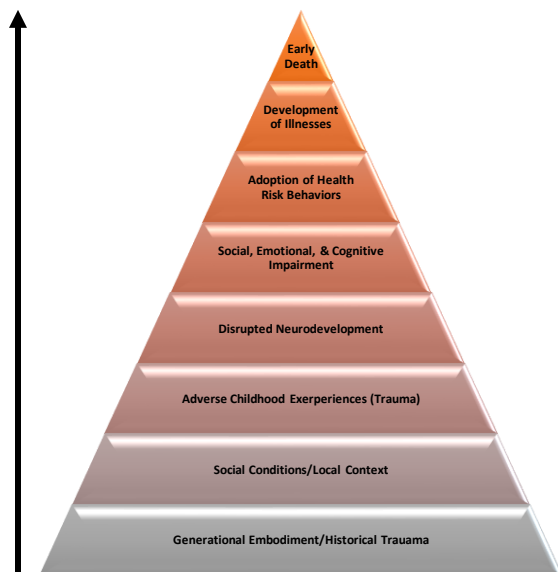


Figure 1: Progressive Implications of Historical Trauma (ACE Pyramid as supported by the CDC-Kaiser ACEs study)



**THE IMPACT ON OUR CHILDREN.** Traumatized children experience changes in brain structures, neurochemistry & genetic expression, which can impair their cognitive development and academic success. In situations of prolonged childhood trauma or ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences), a child's brain and body will produce an overload of stress hormones that can harm the function and structure of the brain. Because children's brains are developing at a rapid pace, this can be particularly harmful to them, changing how they will learn, respond to stress and make decisions for the rest of their life. Examples of these changes are reflected in our Native students' success; our students are held back more frequently than their non-Native peers, score lower on standardized tests compared to the national average., graduate from high school at a rate of between 53%-67% compared to the national average of 81%, and only 39% of Native students who enroll in a four-year, post-secondary institution actually graduate.

**NIEA'S RESPONSE.** Founded in 1969 by a group of Native educators who recognized glaring deficits in the education of Native children, NIEA is a leading advocacy organization advancing comprehensive culture-based educational opportunities for American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians. NIEA has made tremendous strides over the past 49 years in addressing this broad problem...but there is still much more work to be done.

Thanks to the latest grant from NoVo Foundation, NIEA built a foundation for helping Native students break their silence and share stories of resilience from historical trauma through trainings and workshops. Specifically, we completed the NIEA Indigenous Empowerment and Resilience Project (Blanket Exercise) in partnership with Kairos Canada, trauma-informed solutions and strategies trainings. In partnership with the [National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition](#), we also developed educator training modules and a high school curriculum on 'Exploration of Trauma-Informed Solutions: Understanding the Impact of Historical Trauma and Boarding Schools.'



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## RESEARCH ON TRAUMA INFORMED SCHOOLS.

Research suggests that instructional and policy interventions may improve educational outcomes for AI/AN students (Center on Standards and Assessment, 2016). However, these changes alone are not enough. What is needed are trauma-sensitive and culturally-based interventions that improve outcomes for Native students, address inequities, and acknowledge the systematic efforts to strip American Indian/Alaska Native/Native Hawaiian populations of tribal identities, languages and culture (Brave Heart et al., 2012; Mitchell, 2012).

A trauma-sensitive approach offers one potential solution. The [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration \(SAMHSA\)](#), a leader in promoting positive behavioral health, offers guidance to helping organizations across sectors understand trauma and develop trauma-informed approaches. Notably, in this guidance SAMHSA recognizes the importance of cultural, historical and gender issues as a key principle, explaining that a trauma-sensitive system “leverages the healing value of traditional cultural connections” and “recognizes and addresses historical trauma” (SAMHSA, 2014). Applying this approach to K–12 education, at the most foundational level, trauma-informed schools prepare teachers to understand and recognize the symptoms of trauma and apply strategies that support ALL students, especially those displaying trauma-induced behaviors.

## RESOURCES AND CITATIONS

Brave Heart, M.Y.H., Elkins, J., Tafoya, G., Bird, D., & Salvador, M. (2012). Wicasa Was’aha: Restoring the traditional strength of American Indian boys and men. *American Journal of Public Health*, 102(S2), S177-S183.

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Felitti, V. J., Anda, R. F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D. F., Spitz, A. M., Edwards, V., Koss, M. P., & Marks, J. S. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 14(4), 245–258.

Mitchell, F. (2012). Reframing diabetes in American Indian communities: A social determinants of health perspective. *Health and Social Work*, 37(2), 71–79.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2014). SAMHSA’s concept of trauma and guidance for a trauma-informed approach (HHS Publication No. SMA 14-4884).



**RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES.** NIEA strongly supports culturally based education including social and emotional learning as one solution to trauma resiliency. This includes joint efforts from all stakeholders in the community, home, and school to build and utilize knowledge and skills to become more culturally responsive and trauma-informed to help our Native students both inside and outside the classroom. The following are a few recommendations for being trauma-informed:

## TRAUMA-INFORMED STRATEGIES

- Develop meaningful relationships with each student.
- Teach social skills, character and cultural values, and behavior regulation.
- Conduct learning outside of the classroom for connections to land, water, and community.
- Create and foster a safe environment.
- Focus on and value both individual and group identity.
- Be actively and respectfully involved in community cultural events relating to students.
- Allow space for public and/or private storytelling and journaling.
- Use methods for discussion that may allow for “silent” conversations especially for quiet or reluctant students.
- Support student choice/flexibility in assignments, project, and assessments.
- Invite community elders, parents, or even social/mental health support into the classroom especially when sharing culturally sensitive topics or engaging with difficult content.

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