



## **Building Cultural Awareness in Support of American Indian/Alaska Native Students**

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### **Introduction**

Despite the American promise of equal educational opportunity for all students, persistent achievement gaps among more and less advantaged groups of students remain, along with the opportunity gaps that create disparate outcomes. The passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) represents an opportunity for the federal government, states, districts, and schools to equitably design education systems to ensure that the students who have historically been underserved by these same education systems receive an education that prepares them for the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Equity and ESSA). During the 2016-17 school year, 61,235 total students in Kindergarten through twelfth grade (K-12) indicated they were American Indian or Alaska Native in Colorado (ESSA State Report Card 2019). As educators, it's important to include even the smallest of student populations when examining equal educational opportunities for all students and persistent achievement gaps in classrooms, schools and districts.

Colorado's American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) student population is very diverse with the largest tribal group being Lakota, and the largest growing tribe being the Navajo Nation (2010 Census Bureau report). Each tribe has a distinct history, culture, traditions, and presence in Colorado today which play a significant role in the identity of Colorado's AI/AN students. The majority of Colorado AI/AN students reside in the Denver and Colorado Springs areas. There are 48 tribes with historic ties to the State of Colorado and two federally recognized tribes in the southwest corner of our state.

The Southern Ute and Ute Mountain Ute Indian Tribes occupy ancestral lands located in Ignacio and Towaoc, Colorado. Today, there are over 7000 Ute People, most of whom live on one of two reservations in Colorado and a third in Fort Duchesne and White Rock, Utah. The Ute tribes are sovereign nations within the United States. They have the right to make and enforce laws within their land. The Ute People continue to play a significant role in many aspects of Colorado's political, legal, cultural, environmental and economic issues. The ideals, principals and practices of citizenship have always been a part of Ute Indian society. The rights and responsibilities of Ute individuals have been defined by the values, morals and beliefs common to their culture. Today, the Ute People may be citizens of their tribal nations, the states they live in and the United States. To learn more about Colorado's Ute People and their contributions of today visit: [Nuu Ciu Strong: Unit 5 Ute Citizenship and Tribal Government](http://www.colorado.gov/pacific/sites/default/files/atoms/files/Ute%20Unit%205%20Pages.pdf) (www.colorado.gov/pacific/sites/default/files/atoms/files/Ute%20Unit%205%20Pages.pdf)

The purpose of this document is to build cultural awareness, to better support the needs of AI/AN students in the classroom, school and district settings. Knowing our AI/AN students academically, socially and personally allows educators to connect meaningfully, modeling respect, acceptance and inclusion. Establishing a meaningful relationship with students, requires understanding and embracing who they are, learning about their history, family and tribal community and experiences. All students have a story and a voice and understanding their story and hearing their voice can support an equitable learning environment that educators work so hard to create. To learn more about the demographics and academic outcomes of Colorado's AI/AN students, please visit: [ESSA State Report Card: Chapter 8](http://www.cde.state.co.us/fedprograms/statereportcard) (www.cde.state.co.us/fedprograms/statereportcard)

## Sovereignty and Identity Development

Currently, there are 573 sovereign tribal nations (variously called tribes, nations, bands, pueblos, communities and Native villages) in the United States that have a formal nation-to-nation relationship with the US government. These tribal governments are legally defined as "federally recognized tribes". Self-government is essential if tribal communities are to continue to protect their identity. Tribes have the inherent power to govern all matters involving their members, as well as a range of issues in Indian Country. The essence of tribal sovereignty is the ability to govern and to protect and enhance the health, safety, and welfare of tribal citizens within tribal territory. Tribal governments maintain the power to determine their own governance structures and enforce laws through police departments and tribal courts. The governments exercise these inherent rights through the development of their distinct forms of government, determining citizenship; establishing civil and criminal laws for their nation; taxing, licensing, regulating, and maintaining and exercising the power to exclude wrongdoers from tribal lands. In addition, tribal governments are responsible for a broad range of governmental activities on tribal lands, including education, law enforcement, judicial systems, health care, environmental protection, natural resource management, and the development and maintenance of basic infrastructure such as housing, roads, bridges, sewers, public buildings, telecommunications, broadband and electrical

services, and solid waste treatment and disposal [National Congress of American Indians](http://www.ncai.org/about-tribes) (www.ncai.org/about-tribes)

The Colorado Commission of Indian Affairs (CCIA) is an office, under the Lieutenant Governor, that serves as the official liaison between the State of Colorado and sovereign tribal governments. The Commission ensures direct contact with the tribes and also with Colorado's urban Indian communities to facilitate communication between the Southern Ute, Ute Mountain Ute, the other 48 historic tribes of Colorado, American Indian organizations, state agencies, and other affiliated groups representing the interests of Native students in Colorado.

Each of the 573 tribes is unique and no two tribes are exactly alike. Each tribe has its own history, government, culture, traditions, beliefs and values, and it's important to understand that each student has experienced their cultural connection in their own individual way (SAMHSA, 2010). As an educator, learning about personal and family history, cultural identity, traditions, role and responsibilities within the tribe or not within the tribe, and the student's specific tribal community communicates validation and strengthens a student's identity. Identity development as an American Indian student is highly personal. It is a particular way one feels about oneself and one's experience as an American Indian or tribal person (Perry G. Horse, 2005).

## Family and Tribal Community

Family, Elders and tribal community play a significant role in the life of an AI/AN student. Acknowledging and learning about each can support educators' ability to bridge the two cultural worlds in which the student lives. For example, many native communities utilize the diverse perspectives, experiences, and expertise of its members to educate its children. The insight that an Elder provides to a Native student is just as important as the instructions a child receives from his or her classroom teacher. While there are many evidence-based, innovative practices approved by educators for family and community engagement, engaging with Native communities requires establishing an approach that is committed and distinctive (NIEA, 2017). Communication with tribal members and communities consist of understanding preferred styles and methods, etiquette Do's and Don'ts, examining your own belief system about Native people and checking your assumptions and building cultural awareness. It is acceptable to admit limited knowledge of tribal culture and invite members to educate you about specific cultural protocols in their community (SAMHSA, 2010). The effort one puts in to learning and identifying strengths within the family and tribal community can provide insight into the student's learning, ultimately increasing engagement and academic success.

***Don't walk behind me; I may not lead. Don't walk in front of me; I may not follow. Walk beside me that we may be as one. Ute Indian Proverb***

## Assumptions

The following assumptions limit our ability to fully understand the assets and capabilities each student brings through their own experiences, background and personal stories. To be effective, educators must have an appreciation for the diversity in their classroom, school and district. They must view difference as the “norm” and reject notions that any one group is more competent than another. This entails learning from and about each other, developing respect for differences, and the willingness to teach from this perspective. Moreover, there must be an acknowledgement that the educators’ views of the world are not the only views (Elizabeth B. Kozleski, 2010).

**Assumption #1- American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) students do not need special considerations.** Much research has been done to highlight the under representation of AI/AN students in gifted and talented programs, over representation of AI/AN students in special education programs, low graduation rate, and over representation in disciplinary actions eg. suspensions and expulsions nationwide. The research can generally view AI/AN students as if they are one group of students, oversimplifying needs and overgeneralizing how those opportunities are to be met. AI/AN students are most often a small population of students within a classroom, school or district and can easily be overlooked [NIE: A Report on the Status of AI/AN Students in Education](http://www.beta.nsea-nv.org/assets/docs/HE/mf_aianreport.pdf) (www.beta.nsea-nv.org/assets/docs/HE/mf\_aianreport.pdf). An analysis of data at the local level may require looking at each student individually, depending on the size of the student population. Knowing what the research is saying at the national level and exploring the data at the local level will sound an alarm for learning more about AI/AN students in classrooms, schools and districts.

Learning about the individual cultural background and specific considerations like spirituality, naturalistic, leadership, visual/spatial, artistic, musical, creative problem solving, and communication strengths (Tonemah & Brittan, 1985; Gentry, 2010) are key components to the success of AI/AN students. Programs and curriculum should be tied to their culture and delivered according to learning preferences and cognitive styles of the students (Omdal et al. 2010). It is important to identify the opportunities available to AI/AN students within the classroom, school and district settings relevant to them and ask if they are enough to guide them towards success.

**Assumption #2- School/District public events that include Native regalia, symbolism, traditions, imagery and/or artifacts honor AI/AN students.** When organizing a public school/district event that involves Native regalia, symbolism, traditions, imagery and/or artifacts, it is important to engage in a community based, inclusive and participatory process with the school/district’s AI/AN community and students. Without a full understanding of Native representations being used, we risk teaching a misrepresentation of Native culture, and risk hurting AI/AN students. Planning any

event, that includes Native representations, must be done in partnership with the AI/AN community and students on how to best honor, teach and represent the AI/AN People. Students should be able to articulate what is happening during any event that includes Native representation and why it's happening, as well as the significance of Native representation from the perspective of American Indian and Alaska Natives. Educators have a responsibility to provide students with learning opportunities that strengthen their knowledge about AI/AN People and not perpetuate stereotypes, assumptions and/or misinformation. Schools/districts have the additional responsibility of educating and influencing students to understand the complex narrative of a group of people from the people themselves.

**Assumption #3- Colorado's American Indian history is accurately represented in current curriculum and the American Indian perspective is included for a comprehensive look at historical events.** The Indigenous People of Colorado occupied the land thousands of years before the first European settlers arrived. However, much emphasis in schools is placed on the conflicts, battles and wars before, during and after the colonial time period in written history. Native history for Native People is most often communicated through stories told by Elders. This form of communication and perspective is often missed in textbooks, providing a limited view, if any on historical events involving Native Americans. As a result, educators must search for resources that include the Native perspective on Colorado and American history. Colorado has partnered with the Southern Ute and Ute Mountain Ute tribes to provide a fourth-grade resource guide that includes 26 lessons on the Ute tribes of Colorado. Lessons are divided into 5 sections that teach about the history, people, culture, traditions and contributions of the Ute People then and now. The most current 2020 Colorado Academic Standards (CAS) are included in each lesson in order to provide educators with a description of what students need to know, understand and be able to do. All lessons can be modified to use at any grade level. In order for Colorado to continue to understand, appreciate and preserve Colorado's Native history, educators have a responsibility to teach about the long and rich history of the tribes, from the perspective of the tribes. To learn more about Colorado's resource guide to teach about the Ute People of Colorado, please visit: [Nuu-ciu Strong: A Colorado Fourth Grade Resource Guide](http://www.colorado.gov/pacific/ccia/node/234841) (www.colorado.gov/pacific/ccia/node/234841)

**Assumption #4- The Colorado Department of Education (CDE) has guidance on American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) students' cultural expression during a high school graduation ceremony.** The Colorado Constitution and Colorado state laws give much authority to administer schools to local communities. This is intended to empower local communities and provide stakeholders a voice on local policy and procedure, which include graduation requirements and public events/ceremonies. Therefore, the CDE does not provide guidance on cultural expression allowable/not allowable during a high school graduation ceremony for AI/AN students.

When developing local policy and procedures for graduation ceremonies, it is important to

know that cultural and religious traditions are deep-rooted in the identity of AI/AN students. Milestone ceremonies, such as a high school graduation, are significant to AI/AN culture and identity, as they are in most other cultures within the United States. An eagle feather, as one example, signifies the strength it took to reach this milestone and the resilience it will take to continue into the next stages of life. To receive these items to wear at a ceremony is considered an incredible honor, which makes this display of cultural regalia even more significant. For some AI/AN students, wearing an eagle feather may be just as important as receiving the actual diploma. By wearing these items, students are also able to honor their ancestors and the generations of resilience it took for them to cross the graduation stage (Zoey Serebriany, 2019). Each tribe has its own way of honoring students for graduation ceremonies and it is important to take the time to learn about the tribes in your school/district.

## Resources and References

Colorado has a wide range of expertise and resources available to support an increased cultural awareness of AI/AN students. The following are Colorado based resources to support educators.

- [Title VI-Indian and Alaska Native Education](http://www.cde.state.co.us/cde_english/titlevi) (www.cde.state.co.us/cde\_english/titlevi)
- [Nuu-ciu Strong: A Colorado Fourth Grade Resource Guide](http://www.colorado.gov/pacific/ccia/node/234841) (www.colorado.gov/pacific/ccia/node/234841)
- [Culturally Responsive Instruction for Native American Students](http://www.reddgiant.com/centerx/culturally-responsive-instruction) (www.reddgiant.com/centerx/culturally-responsive-instruction)
- [Southern Ute Indian Tribe](http://www.southernute-nsn.gov) (www.southernute-nsn.gov)
- [Southern Ute Cultural Center and Museum](http://www.nativeamerica.travel/listings/southern-ute-cultural-center-museum) (www.nativeamerica.travel/listings/southern-ute-cultural-center-museum)
- [Ute Mountain Ute Indian Tribe](http://www.utemountainutetribe.com) (www.utemountainutetribe.com)
- [Ute Mountain Ute Tribal Park](http://www.utemountaintribalpark.info) (www.utemountaintribalpark.info)
- [Colorado Commission of Indian Affairs](http://www.colorado.gov/ccia) (www.colorado.gov/ccia)
- [Denver Indian Center](http://www.denverindiancenter.org/) (www.denverindiancenter.org/)
- [History Colorado: Ute Tribal Paths](http://www.historycolorado.org/story/exhibits/2016/03/18/ute-tribal-paths) (www.historycolorado.org/story/exhibits/2016/03/18/ute-tribal-paths)
- [History Colorado: Written on the Land Exhibit](http://www.historycolorado.org/exhibit/written-land) (www.historycolorado.org/exhibit/written-land)
- [Governor's Commission to Study American Indian Representations in Public Schools](#)

([www.colorado.gov/pacific/sites/default/files/atoms/files/CSAIRPS-Report-2016.pdf](http://www.colorado.gov/pacific/sites/default/files/atoms/files/CSAIRPS-Report-2016.pdf))

- [Ute Indian Museum in Montrose](http://www.historycolorado.org/ute-indian-museum) ([www.historycolorado.org/ute-indian-museum](http://www.historycolorado.org/ute-indian-museum))
- [Native American Education in DPS Part 1](https://www.soundcloud.com/truenorth303/native-american-education-in) ([www.soundcloud.com/truenorth303/native-american-education-in](https://www.soundcloud.com/truenorth303/native-american-education-in))
- [The Original Coloradans \(PBS\)](http://www.pbs.org/video/colorado-experience-original-coloradans) ([www.pbs.org/video/colorado-experience-original-coloradans](http://www.pbs.org/video/colorado-experience-original-coloradans))

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