

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



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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 21st century (Equity and ESSA). According to the October 2025 student count, 4,974 students in kindergarten through twelfth grade (K-12) in Colorado identified as American Indian or Alaska Native, representing approximately 0.6% of the state's total student enrollment (Colorado Department of Education, 2026). 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 highly diverse, representing students from many Tribal Nations across the United States. Among Colorado AI/AN students, the Lakota (Sioux) tribal affiliation is one of the most commonly reported, while the Navajo Nation represents one of the fastest-growing tribal populations in the state (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). 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+ Tribal Nations with historic ties to the State of Colorado, and two federally recognized Tribes-the Southern Ute Indian Tribe and the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe-are located in the southwestern 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 Unites States. To learn more about Colorado's Ute People and their contributions of today visit: [Southern Ute Indian Tribe](#) and [Ute Mountain Ute Tribe](#)

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: [CDE: American Indian Education Webpage](#)

Sovereignty and Identity Development

Currently, there are 574 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](#)).

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.

The Colorado Commission of Indian Affairs (CCIA), an office under the Lieutenant Governor, serves as the official liaison between the State of Colorado and sovereign tribal governments. The Commission ensures direct contact with the tribes as well as with Colorado's urban Indian communities, facilitating communication among 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 574 federally recognized tribes is unique, with no two tribes being exactly alike. Every tribe has its own history, government, culture, traditions, beliefs, and values. It is important to recognize that each student experiences their cultural connection in an individual way (SAMHSA, 2010). For educators, learning about a student's personal and family history, cultural identity, traditions, roles and responsibilities within (or outside of) their tribe, and their specific tribal community communicates validation and strengthens the student's sense of identity. Identity development for American Indian students is highly personal, reflecting a unique understanding of oneself and one's experience as an American Indian or tribal person (Perry G. Horse, 2005).

***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 have the same educational needs as all other students and therefore do not require specific considerations or culturally responsive supports.

Research has consistently highlighted disparities affecting AI/AN students, including underrepresentation in gifted and talented programs, overrepresentation in special education, lower graduation rates, and higher rates of disciplinary actions such as suspensions and expulsions nationwide. However, much of this research often treats AI/AN students as a single, homogeneous group, which oversimplifies their needs and overgeneralizes how educational opportunities should be provided. AI/AN students frequently comprise a small portion of the student population within a classroom, school, or district and can easily be overlooked [National Indian Education Study 2019](#).

Analyzing data at the local level often requires examining each student individually, particularly in smaller populations. Understanding national trends while exploring local data can highlight areas requiring further attention and encourage a deeper understanding of AI/AN students in classrooms, schools, and districts.

Learning about each student’s individual cultural background and considering specific factors such as spirituality, naturalistic tendencies, leadership, visual/spatial abilities, artistic and musical talents, creative problem-solving, and communication strengths (Tonemah & Brittan, 1985; Gentry, 2010) are critical to supporting AI/AN student success. Programs and curricula should reflect students’ cultural contexts and be delivered in ways that align with their learning preferences and cognitive styles (Omdal et al., 2010). It is essential to assess the opportunities available to AI/AN students within classroom, school, and district settings and determine whether they are sufficient to guide students toward academic and personal success.

Assumption #2 – School and district public events that include Native regalia, symbolism, traditions, imagery, and/or artifacts are assumed to honor American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) students.

School or district public events that include Native regalia, symbolism, traditions, imagery, and/or artifacts are intended to honor AI/AN students. When organizing such events, it is

essential to engage in a community-based, inclusive, and participatory process with the school or district's AI/AN community and students. Without a full understanding of the Native representations being used, there is a risk of misrepresenting Native culture and causing harm to AI/AN students.

Planning any event that includes Native representations must be done in partnership with the AI/AN community and students to determine how best to honor, teach, and represent AI/AN people. Students should be able to articulate what is happening during these events, why it is happening, and the significance of Native representation from the perspective of American Indian and Alaska Native communities.

Educators have a responsibility to provide students with learning opportunities that deepen their understanding of AI/AN people and avoid perpetuating stereotypes, assumptions, or misinformation. Schools and districts also carry the responsibility of educating and influencing students to appreciate the complex narratives of AI/AN communities, told directly by the people themselves.

Assumption #3- Colorado's American Indian history is accurately represented in current curricula, and Indigenous perspectives are included to provide a comprehensive understanding of historical events.

The Indigenous peoples of Colorado occupied the land for thousands of years before the arrival of the first European settlers. However, much of the emphasis in schools is placed on conflicts, battles, and wars before, during, and after the colonial period as documented in written history. Native history for Native communities is most often communicated through stories told by Elders, a perspective frequently absent from textbooks. This omission provides a limited understanding—if any—of historical events involving Native Americans.

As a result, educators must seek 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 containing 26 lessons on the Ute tribes of Colorado. The lessons are organized into five sections that teach about the history, people, culture, traditions, and contributions of the Ute people, both historically and today. Each lesson includes alignment with the 2020 Colorado Academic Standards (CAS), offering educators clear guidance on what students need to know, understand, and be able to do. All lessons can be adapted for use at any grade level.

To ensure that Colorado continues to understand, appreciate, and preserve its Native history, educators have a responsibility to teach the long and rich history of the tribes from the tribes' own perspectives.

To learn more about Colorado's resource guide for teaching about the Ute people, please visit [Ute Nations and Resources](#)

Assumption #4- The Colorado Department of Education (CDE) lacks guidance on cultural expression for American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) students during high school graduation ceremonies.

Governor Jared Polis recently signed [Senate Bill 23-202](#) into law. The bill requires Colorado schools, school districts, and colleges to allow qualified students to wear and display traditional Native American regalia at graduation ceremonies. “Traditional regalia holds cultural and spiritual significance for Indigenous people when they celebrate important moments in life,” said bill sponsor Sen. Sonya Jaquez Lewis, D-Longmont. “Traditional regalia tells the story of the family that they come from, their history, their culture, and identifies each person as an individual.”

When developing local policies and procedures for graduation ceremonies, it is important to recognize that cultural and religious traditions are deeply rooted in the identities of American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) students. Milestone ceremonies, such as high school graduations, hold significant cultural and personal meaning for AI/AN students, as they do in many other cultures across the United States. For example, an eagle feather symbolizes the strength required to reach this milestone and the resilience needed for the journey ahead. Receiving items to wear at a ceremony is considered a tremendous honor, which underscores the significance of displaying cultural regalia. For some AI/AN students, wearing an eagle feather may be as meaningful as receiving the diploma itself. By wearing these items, students also honor their ancestors and recognize the generations of resilience that have led them to this achievement (Zoey Serebriany, 2019). Each tribe has its own traditions for celebrating student accomplishments, so it is important to take the time to learn about the tribes represented in your school or district.

Resources and References

Colorado has a broad range of expertise and resources to support increased cultural awareness of American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) students. The following are Colorado-based resources available to support educators:

- [CDE: American Indian Education Webpage](#)
- [Guidance for Identifying Eligible American Indian and Alaska Native \(AI/AN\) Students for English Language Development \(ELD\) Services Under Title III](#)
- [Title VI-Indian and Alaska Native Education](#)
- [Ute Nations and Resources](#)
- [PBS Jicarilla Apache Tribe Resources](#)
- [Southern Ute Indian Tribe](#)
- [Southern Ute Cultural Center and Museum](#)
- [Ute Mountain Ute Indian Tribe](#)
- [Ute Mountain Ute Tribal Park](#)
- [Colorado Commission of Indian Affairs](#)
- [Denver Indian Center](#)
- [History Colorado: Ute Tribal Paths](#)

- [History Colorado: Written on the Land Exhibit](#)
- [Governor's Commission to Study American Indian Representations in Public Schools](#)
- [Ute Indian Museum in Montrose](#)
- [Native American Education in DPS Part 1](#)
- [The Original Coloradans \(PBS\)](#)

The Colorado Department of Education (CDE) is proud to have developed this document in collaboration with educators, district leaders, and American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) youth, all of whom generously shared their experiences and insights on what cultural awareness means to them in classroom, school, and district settings. We sincerely thank everyone who contributed their time, expertise, and knowledge in support of AI/AN students in Colorado.

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