



# American Indian Alaska Native Head Start: *Principles for Continued Success* National Indian Head Start Directors Association (NIHSDA)

April 2021

**Introduction.** AI/AN Head Start programs provide a model of success that can be strengthened, expanded, and drawn upon as our country seeks to expand access to early childhood education, improve outcomes for native youth across the board, and increase tribes' ability to design and administer early childhood education funds and programs.

AI/AN Head Start is the most important and successful federal program focused on the dire circumstances faced by all too many native children, principally by addressing health, education, family and community needs in a holistic manner that is akin to traditional native learning styles and cultural practices. AI/AN Head Start's family- and community-centered model is one of the few programs providing resources to address the special needs of young AI/AN children, who on a daily basis must deal with the depression-era economics, terrible crime, and poor health outcomes that make native youth the most at-risk population in the United States.

*Currently AI/AN Head Start and Early Head Start serves 23,208 children in 153 programs across 26 states. Seventy-two percent of staff are native, and 46 percent of staff are current or former Head Start parents.*

**Improving AI/AN Head Start.** AI/AN Head Start programs provide critical services, often in extremely difficult circumstances. Strengthening and expanding programs is important to AI/AN Head Start's continued success.

**Categorical eligibility for AI/AN children.** AI/AN children are developmentally vulnerable similar to other categorically eligible children and experience high rates of the same risk factors. They also suffer from health disparities, a higher incidence of disabilities, historical trauma, and a damaged cultural identity. Head Start programs offer a unique array of comprehensive services to children and families that provide support and early intervention, as well as being vital to tribal efforts to preserve Native language and culture. AI/AN children should be categorically eligible to attend tribally operated HS/EHS programs to combat these severe and systemic conditions that affect all Native youth.

**Culturally appropriate evaluation tools.** AI/AN Head Start is deeply committed to providing excellent programs. However, there needs to be further dialogue about developing reliable measurements of program quality in culturally diverse environments. The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) lacks valid research on American Indian and Alaska Native children and was designed as a professional development tool rather than a monitoring tool. Triennial reviewers using CLASS have not proved to be culturally sensitive, placing programs in jeopardy based on the Designation Renewal System's (DRS) criteria. Scientific standards should include principles of traditional knowledge and culturally derived research for the purposes of conducting studies and evaluations of AI/AN Head Start programs, which would allow for greater consideration of cultural and behavioral norms.

**Culturally appropriate instruction.** AI/AN Head Start is on the frontline in the preservation of native language and culture, which have proven to be key elements in native student confidence and success in



## Head Start Works

Region XI Children's Growth and Development

**Region XI Head Start serves children and families in programs operated by federally recognized AI/AN tribes.**

### What is Region XI Head Start?

The information below is from the AI/AN Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) 2015, a descriptive study of the children, families, and programs in Region XI.

### Language, Literacy, and Math Skills

Region XI Head Start children make gains in language, literacy, and math skills across the program year, although they lag behind other children of the same age nationally.

Over the course of the program year, children make progress toward national norms, gaining between 1.2 and 2.6 standard score points in English receptive and expressive vocabulary, letter-word knowledge, and early math.



### Social Skills and Approaches to Learning

On average, teachers report improvement in Region XI children's social skills and approaches to learning skills during the program year.

According to teacher reports, Region XI Head Start children demonstrate better social skills on average by the spring of the Head Start year than they did in the fall.

Children also show more positive approaches to learning skills (such as attention, persistence, and ability to work independently) in the spring than in the fall.



### Executive Function Skills

Region XI children improve their performance on a measure of executive function over the Head Start program year.

Children's performance on an executive function measure improves from 41% in the fall to 54% in the spring.



later years. Culture and language play a critical role in AI/AN Head Start programs, yet many native elders are not certified teachers. Tribes should be able to develop their own locally designed teaching certification programs and their own culturally appropriate curriculum.

**Quality improvement funding.** Targeted quality improvement funding for AI/AN Head Start is needed that can be flexibly expended to support programs in providing competitive teacher wages, transportation, childhood trauma-informed care and mental and behavioral health services, and internet access. This funding is intended to facilitate programs in building on their demonstrated success through improved capacity and in recognition of the need to address historic disparities in AI/AN Head Start resources.

**Expanding services.** AI/AN Head Start has a long history of providing critical services to tribal communities, however only about 49 percent of the eligible AI/AN child population is enrolled in AI/AN Head Start; and only 167 tribes and tribal organizations have Head Start and/or Early Head Start programs. That leaves over half of the tribes without access to AI/AN Head Start.

**Facilities funding.** Many AI/AN Head Start programs operate out of the oldest buildings on their reservations. Lack of adequate physical facilities hinders the ability of these programs to meet the very specific health and safety needs of young children. Without the necessary physical infrastructure, programs struggle to furnish the foundation for success that AI/AN Head Start seeks to provide.

**Principals of AI/AN Head Start's Success.** Several characteristics have contributed to the continued success of AI/AN Head Start programs and should be preserved.

**Federal-to-Tribal model.** The Head Start Act has, importantly, preserved the government-to-government relationship between Tribes and the United States by maintaining consultation requirements and ensuring that funds flow directly from the federal government to the tribes. Tribal programs have traditionally had difficulty securing funds that pass through the states. Ensuring the continued direct federal-to-tribal relationship is essential to AI/AN Head Start's success.

**Specific set asides for AI/AN Head Start.** The Head Start Act provides set asides for AI/AN Head Start. Funds that are specifically designated for AI/AN Head Start programs are vital to program stability and growth.

**Ensuring AI/AN Head Start programs are held harmless.** NIHSDA welcomes expansion of early childhood education, opportunities to increase tribal self-determination, and increase in programs for native youth more generally. It is important that such initiatives preserve AI/AN Head Start's stability and viability by, at a minimum, ensuring that AI/AN Head Start programs are held harmless and that funds continue to be specifically designated for AI/AN Head Start.

**Utilizing the AI/AN Head Start Model.** AI/AN Head Start provides a model that can be drawn upon in crafting early childhood education expansion, other tribal educational programs, and older native youth. Our programs focus on the whole individual—including health, education, and culture—as well as on the whole family and the whole community, creating a vibrant and safe learning environment for our native children.

## Language and Culture Preservation

In the late 1860's, the federal government began a program to "civilize" American Indians, with education as the principal weapon in what became a campaign to wipeout native culture and identity. This effort did great damage to the continuation of native beliefs, cultures, and languages. Native languages are in retreat, but the native spirit has endured. Much of the harm is being undone by native peoples through culturally based education programs. AI/AN Head Start is on the frontline in the preservation of native language and culture, which have been proven to be key elements in native student confidence and success in later years. AI/AN Head Start programs have taken a variety of steps to address challenges and opportunities for integrating language and culture, including:

- To successfully transmit their language some programs have developed innovative ways to support teachers, including providing tools to help teachers integrate words, greetings, and phrases into everyday classroom activities.
- Elders are involved in the classroom, working with young children using traditional cultural practices. They speak the tribal language, sing tribal songs, and tell traditional stories.
- Some programs have made efforts to engage parents in tribal language-learning activities to combat resistance to learning a second language.
- The Head Start Program Performance Standards provide for the full integration of tribal language and culture in Head Start classrooms, in the curricula, and in program systems and services. Many tribes implement a culturally and linguistically responsive curriculum. Some even operate full immersion classrooms. Still, other programs have constructed culturally appropriate environments to highlight the tribe's cultural traditions.

*The National Indian Head Start Directors Association (NIHSDA) has been the voice of American Indian and Alaska Native Head Start programs for over 40 years, and during that time we have developed a wealth of knowledge regarding early childhood education in Indian Country. NIHSDA welcomes the opportunity to work with Congress and the Administration as our country works with tribes to address the dire needs of native youth.*