



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

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**Introduction.** AIAN 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.

AIAN 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. AIAN Head Start's family- and community-centered model is one of the few programs providing resources to address the special needs of young AIAN 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 AIAN Head Start and Early Head Start serves nearly 20,000 children in 153 grantees across 26 states. Seventy-two percent of staff are native, and 46 percent of staff are current or former Head Start parents.*

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

**Allow Tribes Flexibility in Establishing Enrollment Eligibility for AIAN Programs.** Many AIAN Head Start programs are unable to fully serve their Native communities in the manner Congress originally intended because of overly restrictive income limits, despite the broader impacts of long-term poverty within their communities as well as suffering from historical trauma and a damaged cultural identity. AIAN 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. AIAN programs should be allowed the discretion to enroll AIAN children regardless of income.

**Workforce.** Despite the critical importance of high-quality early care and education, the ECE workforce is undervalued and poorly compensated. This issue is even more challenging for Black, Indigenous, and people of color ECE professionals. Insufficient compensation is a significant barrier to creating an accessible, high-quality ECE system and fuels high rates of turnover, which can negatively impact children's development as well as can overly inflate professional development costs. Funding is needed to enable programs to pay wages that are comparable to the K-12 system for jobs that are comparable in experience and credentials.



*In a thoughtfully designed classroom a diminishing language is being given a breath of life. Executive Director of Cook Inlet Native Head Start Ethan Petticrew can hardly contain his glee about the Yup'ik Immersion Program that takes place here, "This is a big deal; we are literally changing the course of history."*

*The history he speaks of is well-known among the Alaska Native Community. It is the story of cultural assimilation and how many Alaska Native cultures have been threatened by the endangerment of their languages — one of the most powerful resources to understanding the culture and history of a people. But history can be rewritten, and it is exactly what the Yup'ik Immersion Program aims to do.*

*The program operates in conjunction with the Anchorage School District, and Clare Swan Early Learning Center. Children from birth to 5 years can begin to learn Yup'ik in a classroom facilitated by language experts who speak their Native tongue 100 percent of the time. The classroom is located in their new Naqayeh't'ana T'uh building that incorporates traditional Native design elements such as LED firepits with "smoke hole" skylights to replicate the houses where traditional stories and indoor learning took place.*

*The combined passion and determination of these key-players and their support systems has thus far resulted in the immersion classroom going from two half-day classrooms of 17 children, to one full-day classroom of 20; and from program offerings only lasting until children were 5 years old, to a continuation program at College Gate Elementary School!*

**Quality improvement funding.** Targeted quality improvement funding for AIAN Head Start is needed that can be flexibly expended to support programs in providing transportation, childhood trauma-informed care, and mental and behavioral health services. 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 AIAN Head Start resources.

**Culturally appropriate instruction.** AIAN 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 later years. Culture and language play a critical role in AIAN 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.

**Facilities funding.** Many AIAN 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 AIAN Head Start seeks to provide.

**Expanding services.** AIAN Head Start has a long history of providing critical services to tribal communities, however only about 49 percent of the eligible AIAN child population is enrolled in AIAN 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 AIAN Head Start.

**Principals of AIAN Head Start’s Success.** Several characteristics have contributed to the continued success of AIAN 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 AIAN Head Start’s success.

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

**Ensuring AIAN 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 AIAN Head Start’s stability and viability by, at a minimum, ensuring that AIAN Head Start programs are held harmless and that funds continue to be specifically designated for AIAN Head Start.

**Utilizing the AIAN Head Start Model.** AIAN 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.

*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.*

AIAN Head Start/Early Head Start Numbers by State				
				
	Programs	Funded Enrollment	Staff	Funding
AK	17	1,064	350	\$31,362,324
AZ	18	3,403	810	\$49,238,566
CA	17	703	238	\$12,738,309
CO	1	56	14	\$774,844
ID	5	378	107	\$4,881,313
KS	5	79	36	\$2,166,087
ME	3	60	24	\$1,007,001
MI	6	681	200	\$8,146,513
MN	13	1,098	357	\$16,634,502
MS	2	268	85	\$2,483,145
MT	12	1,436	426	\$17,361,288
NC	2	230	96	\$3,064,912
ND	6	555	202	\$11,341,817
NE	5	314	117	\$5,773,333
NM	23	1,411	332	\$19,473,938
NV	3	362	87	\$4,493,837
NY	2	63	18	\$1,576,990
OK	21	2,653	784	\$31,767,777
OR	8	241	84	\$4,788,665
SC	1	112	40	\$1,846,054
SD	12	1,241	215	\$24,070,635
TX	1	137	35	\$1,343,050
UT	1	215	37	\$2,071,183
WA	27	1,605	556	\$26,920,581
WI	14	1,108	338	\$14,212,817
WY	2	261	61	\$3,124,595

\*Enrollment and Staff numbers from the 2022 Program Information Report, FY '22 Funding Information