



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. AIAN Head Start programs also incorporate native language and culture in all aspects of service delivery, enhancing cognitive development, academic success, and cultural identity among children. This approach fosters self-esteem, preserves cultural heritage, and promotes social cohesion, ensuring holistic development and better educational outcomes.

Currently AIAN Head Start and Early Head Start serves nearly 20,000 children in 151 grantees across 26 states.

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.

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 and culture bearers do not meet the teacher qualification requirements. Tribes should be able to develop their own teaching qualification requirements to insure that their cultural heritage is not forever lost.

The Office of Head Start supports the full integration of AIAN languages and culture in Head Start, however, requiring research-based curricula for AIAN Head Start programs can be a barrier to including native language and culture. Such curricula are often developed based on mainstream cultural norms and educational practices. This can limit the flexibility needed to incorporate indigenous languages and cultural teachings, which may not be adequately represented in standardized research.

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,



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!

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.

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.

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.

AIAN Head Start/Early Head Start Numbers by State



	Programs	Funded Enrollment	Staff	Funding
AK	13	2,259	593	\$37,016,665
AZ	12	2,973	677	\$45,609,220
CA	13	701	253	\$14,175,046
CO	1	56	14	\$802,255
ID	3	319	104	\$5,022,173
KS	2	(44)	22	\$2,234,609
ME	1	20	11	\$1,059,276
MI	3	562	181	\$8,373,764
MN	8	959	277	\$17,105,513
MS	1	260	135	\$2,554,490
MT	6	1,436	433	\$17,854,166
NC	1	230	89	\$3,497,979
ND	4	566	187	\$11,649,366
NE	3	346	113	\$5,942,705
NM	15	1,400	303	\$18,171,373
NV	3	361	64	\$4,626,580
NY	2	63	17	\$1,632,380
OK	13	2,553	727	\$31,407,692
OR	5	236	61	\$4,945,778
SC	1	112	31	\$1,907,444
SD	7	2,000	460	\$24,730,573
TX	2	134	37	\$1,393,117
UT	1	215	34	\$2,129,066
WA	18	1,283	526	\$26,867,135
WI	10	1,067	441	\$14,628,011
WY	1	261	51	\$3,210,876

*Enrollment and Staff numbers from the 2023 Program Information Report, FY '23 Funding Information

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.