

INTRODUCTION

[“In Nevada, there are \[twenty\] federally-recognized tribes, comprised of 27 separate reservations, bands, colonies and community councils. The Tribal Nations are not a special interest group or to be considered race based. The Tribal Nations are sovereign governments.”¹](#)

The 0.8% of Nevada’s 486,682 students who identify as Native American attend schools in urban and rural areas, including the 5 public schools that are on or near reservations throughout the Great Basin.

As we lead and learn, we have come to understand the importance of opening an engagement with a [land acknowledgement](#) to show gratitude and respect of Indigenous communities, the traditional stewards of specific locations and to recognize the original inhabitants of a location before and during the onset of colonialism.²

[Following this tradition](#), we offer a land acknowledgment showing respect to Nevada’s Tribal Nations.³ We acknowledge and honor the lands of Wašiw (Washoe), Numu (Northern Paiute), Nuwu (Southern Paiute) and Newe (Western Shoshone) of the Great Basin. We also extend acknowledgement to all First Nations and/or Indigenous Nations lands across North America. We pay our respects to the elders, past, present, and future generations, and extend our respect to all Native Veterans.

The state of Nevada Indian Education Department has identified [Essential Understandings](#) (a brochure that is currently being revised) of the history and contemporary lifestyles of the Great Basin Native American Tribes and simultaneously published five lessons that support these understandings.⁴ One of Nevada’s fourth grade social studies textbooks references Nevada Native Americans on 24 of the 249 pages. An additional five lessons were produced by [Project Tahoe](#) and are available as a resource to all educators.⁵ These resources are valuable for classroom instruction; however, they do not provide the in-depth learning opportunities our students, families, and educators deserve. Currently, none of Nevada’s colleges or universities provide Nevada Native American studies as a requirement to earn a teaching degree. While the Education Programs Professional for Indian Education at the Nevada Department of Education and additional schools and districts are working to create curriculum materials and awareness, we understand that the historical narratives in schools across Nevada often have not included the contributions, voices or experiences of our Indigenous People. As Teach Plus Nevada Policy Fellows, current classroom teachers, and teacher leaders, we seek to include and honor the rich

heritage of our Indigenous students, families and educators by ensuring that all classrooms have the opportunity to experience all perspectives of the historical narrative.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The discovery of the [remains of Indigenous children at the Carlisle boarding school](#) in Pennsylvania has elevated a need to better understand the lived experiences and perspectives of our Native American citizens.⁶ Nevada has its own scarred history of removing children from their homes with the goal of assimilating them into Western culture. Established in 1890 and closed in 1980, the [“Stewart Indian School was part of a nationwide program that began in 1879 - forcibly removing American Indian children from their families and placing them in off-reservation boarding schools across the country. The schools were intended to assimilate and “civilize” Native children into white society.”](#)⁷ Initially this was intended as a way for Indigenous children to access traditional, westernized education.

Elevating our collective voices to make positive change in the lives of Indigenous people honors their humanity and offers an opportunity to understand and address the widening achievement gap for Nevada’s Native American children. [“As Indigenous students, parents, or community members navigating the current educational system alone is not possible.”](#)⁸ It is critical to listen to and understand the stories and shared history of Indigenous people in order to propose relevant recommendations to our state leaders and legislators. Teach Plus Nevada Senior Policy Fellows organized and facilitated three community panel series with Indigenous students, families, and educators.

STUDENT, FAMILY, & EDUCATOR PANELS: REFLECTIONS

During a three-part panel series hosted by Teach Plus Nevada Senior Policy Fellows in the Fall of 2022, Native American students, families, and educators engaged in discussions about what they most need and want from Nevada’s educational institutions. Family reflections were heartfelt and emphasized the desire for their children to be “culturally strong” and have opportunities to take active roles in Native American communities. The participants expressed their deeply rooted belief that the embedding of their cultural language and heritage in schools and classrooms is essential for future generations to thrive, realizing that they are on the [cusp of losing their language](#).⁹ Their priority goal is for their children to become self-sufficient and “embrace a balanced life of two worlds”; living in a westernized culture **and** holding onto the knowledge and resilience of their dance, their language, their traditions, and their connection with Earth.

“Our ancestors and elders were forced to shed their identity at the door.”

The educators panel recognized and gave voice to the atrocities that their ancestors and elders were subjected to when they were coerced to deny their heritage and identities through forced assimilation in educational institutions. One of our panelists, Lynn, shared, “Our ancestors and elders were forced to shed their identity at the door.” The education panelists' reflections mirrored those of the family panelists; demonstrating a theme and advancing a vision of how to assist their dreams. These Indigenous educators acknowledged, “We know we will not have Native Teachers in all schools.” They noted that it is a shared responsibility of educators and leaders within state institutions to ensure that [Native American] students see themselves reflected in the curriculum, teaching, and learning resources and materials in order to understand how their

story is also a part of past, present, and future historical narratives. As education leaders, they envision designing school and classroom environments that [support Native American students in developing self-efficacy and respect](#).¹⁰ They want to ensure that students graduate from school with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to be a “productive, tribal [community] member.”

Student panelists reflected on their most memorable learning experiences, collectively acknowledging that engaged learning begins with students' interests and is project-based, hands-on, and experiential. The student panelists expressed their desire for shared and collaborative learning experiences that prioritize their prior knowledge and experiences. They passionately conveyed that they want their heritage and culture to be an embedded perspective of historical teaching, so that they learn about pieces of their own story that have been missing. The students noted the need for educator sensitivity when teaching about Native American history and experiences—recalling the judgment felt when learning about such in traditional classrooms.

In hosting the community panel series, we recognized the importance of holding space for our Native American students, families, and educators so that each panelist could passionately and confidently speak to what is important within Native American educational experiences. Collectively, they present informed suggestions for creating rigorous and relevant learning experiences that are impactful for learners.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

1. Design an accessible, living curriculum.

Educators across our state need access to accurate and appropriate resources and lessons that support teaching and [learning about Native American culture](#) as well as eliminate cultural appropriation in the classroom.¹¹ The resources must address learning about Native American history as a *shared* American history, “not that of Native and non-Native” as expressed by the Native American community members on the panels. In order to create a living curriculum, resources must be vetted, regularly added to a digital library, and reflect the rich, multi-dimensional traditions and cultures of American history.

2. Hold brave spaces and create opportunities to connect tribes and bands with local school communities.

Students, families, and educators emphasize the critical need, value, and benefit to engaging elders with our school communities. This endeavor can be facilitated through hosting roundtables and asking elders from the community to help develop plans that support common priorities and goals of local communities. These forums [encourage and hold space for everyone to participate](#) by supporting the education ecosystem and bringing communities together.¹² When we welcome and leverage the brilliance within our local communities, tribes, and bands, strong partnerships are established and each of us benefit from the shared, communal learning experiences.

3. Incorporate teaching the language of tribes into our schools and classrooms.

[“For the last 400 years, Native American languages across the United States have been dying out. Over 200 have become extinct.”](#)¹³ In order to preserve Native American languages, schools must expand the courses offered to include learning Native American languages as electives. Embedding courses that affirm Indigenous cultures and empower students to embrace their identity will support and reinforce cultural and tribal knowledge. We want healthy children “who are comfortable in their skin.” School communities have a social responsibility to cultivate and preserve this shared history—and to facilitate and support each of our students’ identities.

CONCLUSION

Our school communities are richly diverse with children, families, and educators who have dynamic needs, strengths, beliefs, and values. As a collective, we have a moral obligation to design and deliver an excellent and equitable education for all of our children. Recent events elevating the consequences of [Indian Boarding schools](#) in North America have revealed a distressing and traumatic history.¹⁴ We must acknowledge the lived experiences that have impacted an entire culture. Native American cultures do not exist only within historical contexts. [They are present](#), resilient, strong, and boldly representing their people's rich cultural heritage.¹⁵ Their narratives, individually and collectively, persist. We must support and educate our youth as they lead and advocate for our Native communities. We must appreciate, honor, and support our Indigenous students, families, and educators in Nevada.

"If you don't see me as a Native Woman then you just miss me. We have more language for that now, and we are in a tug of war in the philosophies as to how that is presented."

Lynn Manning-John, Vice Principal Owyhee Combined School

TEACH PLUS NEVADA SENIOR POLICY FELLOWS

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ENDNOTES

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