



THE NATIONAL COMMISSION ON NATIVE CHILDREN OUTLINES PRIORITIES FOR PROMOTING NATIVE CHILDREN'S EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

As the first national Commission dedicated solely to promoting the health and well-being of Native children, the Alyce Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff Commission on Native Children is committed to lifting up the issues faced by Native children and communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the pandemic progresses, the disproportionate impact on Native communities has become clear, with many communities struggling with high infection rates, overwhelmed health systems, and shuttered economies. The incredible health, well-being, and economic threats posed by COVID-19 come in the context of existing resource limitations and challenges in Native communities. The COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to make things much worse for Native children and their communities, whether rural, reservation, or urban.

Native children are particularly vulnerable when it comes to promoting their educational success during the pandemic. Native children already have poor educational outcomes compared to other children, with only 74% of Native students graduating from high school in 2017-2018, compared to 89% for White students, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. The learning disruptions caused by the pandemic will likely aggravate the situation. More than 90 percent of the 644,000 Native students in the United States attend public schools in their states and communities. Serving nearly 48,000 Native students, the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) funds federally- and tribally-operated schools located primarily on and near tribal lands. Many other Native students attend private, parochial, and charter schools. Regardless of whether Native children are attending public, private, or BIE schools, the Commission has identified four key priorities related to supporting Native children's learning, development, and success during the pandemic.

1. **Prioritize expansion of access to technology, including broadband internet, to allow students to participate in school remotely.** The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the existing "digital divide" as students across the country have attempted to transition to attending school remotely. A history of underfunding in Native schools, particularly those located on and near tribal lands, has resulted in outdated technology infrastructure and computer equipment. Though technology availability differs between schools, many schools serving Native students lack the resources to provide laptops or tablets for students to use at home. Further, in 2017, the National Center for Educational Statistics reported that 36 percent of Native students nationwide did not have internet access in their homes, compared to 18 percent of their peers

nationwide. Due to lack of internet access at home and lack of access to learning technology, schools serving Native students have struggled to implement virtual education options during the pandemic. It will be critical for Congress, the Administration, and Native communities to take steps to improve Native children's access to broadband internet as well as technology that allows them to fully engage in remote learning opportunities.

2. **Increase training and professional development for teachers working with Native children to improve their ability to implement distance learning.** With large numbers of Native students likely to continue learning remotely (at least part of the time) as the pandemic progresses, it is important for their teachers to be well-trained to teach effectively in the virtual space. Experts indicate that teachers ideally should receive several days, weeks, or months of in-depth preparation before launching a virtual learning program. This includes learning strategies to make the instruction engaging, ample time to practice the technology in order to deploy it effectively, and strategies to communicate and engage successfully with parents and families so that they can support their children's learning. For most teachers, including those serving Native students, this type of training has not been available, resulting in a patchwork of quality and gaps in accessibility and, ultimately, a lack of engaging and effective online learning. As Congress, the Administration, and Native communities consider actions to address the consequences of the pandemic, it will be necessary to focus on increasing access to this type of training and professional development for teachers that work with Native students.
3. **Ensure that Native children have access to mental health supports to address the impacts of COVID-19 related trauma.** A disruptive event like the COVID-19 pandemic creates traumatic upheaval in the lives of children. Traumatic and stressful life experiences in childhood can impact children's brains and biological systems, increasing the risk for both learning difficulties and mental health problems. It is likely that we will see an increase in trauma-triggered behaviors among Native children (e.g., students acting out in school, increased substance misuse, and increased violence) related to the COVID-19 pandemic. There is a need to support Native children's increased access to trauma-informed mental health supports – particularly supports that are culturally appropriate, can be delivered in the educational setting, and promote children's social and emotional health. Trauma can impact children at any age, so appropriate mental health resources and programs need to be ready to provide services from early childhood through higher education.
4. **Focus on supporting Native children's health and well-being, including addressing food insecurity and protecting children from abuse and neglect.** The pandemic has resulted in challenges to many aspects of child and family health and well-being, which are exacerbated when children are not regularly attending school in-person and can impact their academic performance. Many Native families rely on school-based nutritional programs to provide children with healthy breakfasts and lunches; though some school systems serving Native students have been able to adapt their food distribution efforts to reach most students, there continue to be children who are not connected to schools and are unable to access these supports. It may be helpful to consider increasing the size of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations benefits to these families to address food insecurity. Another threat to children's well-being resulting from the closure of schools is the increased risk of undetected abuse, neglect, and violence within the home. Teachers are among the mandated reporters who see children outside their home environments and are able to identify signs of maltreatment and link children to supportive services to ensure

their safety. It will be important to invest in strategies to identify and address child abuse and neglect and domestic violence – including training teachers and others interacting with children virtually to recognize signs of abuse and respond appropriately.

There is an urgent need for additional funding across the educational system and in Native communities to address the issues outlined above. The government programs and resources that are in place need to be fully funded and include flexibilities and tribal set-asides so that culturally-informed and community-specific practices can be put in place. The Commission on Native Children stands ready to serve as a resource to Congress, the Administration, and Native and community leaders as they consider any future actions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including ways to support Native children's educational success.

About: *Established by Congress, the Alyce Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff Commission on Native Children (Commission) is established as an independent federal entity to conduct a comprehensive study on federal, state, local, and tribal programs and develop recommendations on solutions that would improve the health, safety, and well-being of American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian Children.*

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