

Exploring the multicultural educational curriculum for Native American children in the U.S.

Call for Input on ensuring quality education for peace and tolerance for every child

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SUMMARY

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The U.S. government's education policy regarding Native Americans has evolved continuously, growing significantly following decades-long oppression against Natives. Since the 1970s, various acts and policies have been enacted to formulate a solid foundation for some hopeful level of achievements in Native education. While there have been some successes, the Native education system in the U.S. is fractured and underfunded, creating a paradox trap of preserving Native culture while also assimilating them into American society.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Established in 2006, the **Bureau of Indian Education**, a division of the U.S. Department of the Interior, is responsible for providing education services to Native American students. The model of Native education has two types of schools: **tribally controlled schools** (TCS) or **BIE schools**. The TCSs are managed— in terms of finances, curriculum, teachers, language, etc.—by the local tribal governments, while BIE schools are run by the BIE. Legislation like the *Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975* and the *Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (following the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001)* improved the tribal autonomy and accountability in the quality of education, ensuring that Native students have excellent, culturally-relevant education. These efforts aim to preserve Indigenous languages and traditions while simultaneously providing equal opportunities for all Native students against fellow Americans in the public system.

EVALUATING EFFICACITY

Education:

- **Improved high-school graduation** rates but data indicates **declining graduation rates in higher education**.
- Miniscule representation of Native Americans in the educational sector.
- Receives the **lowest in Federal Financial aid** among all US ethnicities.
- Experiences of **microaggressions and discrimination** from schools and teachers.
- Native schools underfunded, in disrepair, and lack modern technologies.

Culture: Issues such as prejudice, barriers to cultural expression & representation, and a decline in fluent speakers for some native languages threatens the preservation of Native histories and cultures.

CASE STUDY

The case study of the Navajo Nation demonstrates how the U.S. educational department collaborates with Native American local authorities to provide an **inclusive curriculum** for Native American students, blending national academic standards with teachings that preserve the Native American culture.

- *Tséhootsooí Diné Bi'ólta';* the example of a Tribally Controlled School which has a curriculum that aims to make its students **fully bilingual in English and Diné** before graduating.
- *Navajo Preparatory School Inc*; an elite school that follows the curriculum of the International Baccalaureate Organization to educate **competitive students** with high standards of education and profound multiculturalism.
- *Operation of the Head Starts programs*; a U.S. social government plan to **support the most vulnerable groups** by the Navajo Nation authorities.
- *Diné College*; Navajo Nation's community college, **one of the most successful Tribal Colleges,** yet still deeply **behind the national standards** in terms of graduation rate.
- *Teaching Diné Language and Culture in Navajo Schools: Voices from the Community* Ann Batchelder's paper discusses that Diné language teachings during mandatory school hours **cannot be successful if it lacks the continuation of the learning process in the households.**

Introduction of the Education Policies for Native Americans in the US

The American educational policy for Native Americans has undergone continuous metamorphosis, evolving from its early days of cultural suppression to thematically more inclusive and supportive measures. Initially, the US-federal legal maxim for Native Americans was characterized by the **systemic & physical erasure of their cultural heritage**, utilizing hostile legislation and boarding schools to literally limit and eliminate their ability to express their ethnic and cultural identity. It was not until the late 20th century which saw a fundamental reversal of this hostile dogma, dismantled and replaced with foundationary measures in an attempt to **initiate the path towards reconciliation and the protection of the Native American community**, examples being the repeal of the Indian Act in 1971 and the implementation of 1972 Indian Education Act & 1972 Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act, which engaged in the preservation of Native [Indian] cultures & history, as well as incorporate relevant communities into the US education system. In summary, the late 20th century saw a thematic paradigm shift, placing greater focus and importance to the native communities in the United States.

In accordance with the objectives of these past policies, acts and legislation, the United States currently implements acts such as the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative, which aims to address historical grievances of the Indian populace between the 17th – 20th century by administering investigative reports into historical atrocities committed against the communities and providing policy **recommendations for healing and redress**[1]. California in particular implemented the 2022 California Indian Education Act which encourages Indian tribes and local educational agencies to create **high-quality curriculum materials and incorporate Native feedback** to promote Native American history & cultures; and close the gap between them and their peers[2]. Then, on 25 October 2024, President Joseph Biden established precedent by being the first president to issue an official statement of apology for the creation of Native American boarding schools[3]. These initiates thematically reflect a broad commitment to reversing destructive policies and addressing the unique educational & social needs of Native American students – marking a significant step towards the encouragement and preservation of their culture, history, and traditions. However, these developments are **confounded by pre-existing challenges and recent developments which threaten to undermine the efficacy of their policies or even reverse them entirely**. Nevertheless, the legal framework continues to evolve, adapting to minute-by-minute developments and paradigm shifts.

Legal framework of Native American Education

The establishment of education for Native Americans has been in continuous development stages over several decades with the Snyder Act of 1921[4] being a landmark law, **providing financial support and technical or vocational education for reservation schools and education programs**.

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[1] U.S. Department of the Interior. (n.d.). Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative | Indian Affairs. Www.bia.gov; US Department of the Interior. https://www.bia.gov/service/federal-indian-boarding-school-initiative.

[2] California Legislative Information. (2022, September 26). Bill Text - AB-1703 California Indian Education Act: California Indian Education Task Forces. Leginfo.legislature.ca.gov. https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB1703.

[3] Cochran, L. L., & Gangitano, A. (2024, October 25). Biden becomes first president to apologize for Native American boarding school policy. The Hill. https://thehill.com/homenews/education/4953809-joe-biden-apology-native-american-boarding-school-policy/.

[4] LibGuides: Indian Law: Indian Education. (n.d.). https://libguides.law.asu.edu/indianlaw/education.

In the United States, there are two models of integration of Natives: tribally controlled schools (TCS) and Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) schools[5]. The tribally controlled schools are directly managed by the tribal government, as per the Tribally Controlled Schools Act of 1988, with enrollment for years K-12, including pre-school. These schools are not administered by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, unlike the BIE schools. The BIE schools, or Bureau operated schools, are funded and governed between the BIE and the U.S. Department of Education. The Department of Education sends funds for the services and education for elementary or secondary BIE students. That being said, TCSs can also receive grants or contracts from the BIE, to an extent.

Under the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975, certain government agencies and departments, like the Interior, Health, Education, and welfare, can enter contracts with or **make grants directly to federally recognized Indian tribes**. The autonomy of the tribes applies here as they have discretion over where the funds are administered. Furthermore, Public Law 100-297 places the Tribes to have educational sovereignty and management so as to ensure their Indian children are enveloped in their respective cultural and traditional belief systems.

To mitigate the oppression of Native language and culture curricula, tribal leaders established the National Indian Education Association in 1969. It is a forum to determine the best ways of preserving and incorporating Native American history in public schools and educating Natives in their own systems. A study commissioned in 1972, Background Study No. 17 Education, by the Constitutional Convention Commission, found that U.S. states have an obligation to "**provide equal educational opportunities for Indian children through adequate financial support; eliminate all forms of discrimination against Indians; and allow for the existence of schools that meet the indigenous cultural needs of Indians by fostering educational diversity and community control**"[6]. This study emphasized the important role U.S. states have in the education of Native Americans. On the federal level, there have been various acts to resolve problems within the education system. Notably, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act[7] in 2001 was the revolutionary law for K-12 education in the U.S. from 2002-2015. It **established numerous responsibilities and obligations for the schools and the states**. **Schools were, for the first time, fully held accountable for how kids learned and achieved, student performance, and teacher qualifications**. It also provided more federal funding to the schools so as to support kids from low-income families. There were four main goals of the NCLB Act: 1) accountability systems on student progress via state exams; 2) high academic standards on the subjects taught; 3) report cards on student performance; 4) quality of the teachers, being "highly qualified" for their subjects. Certain provisions, such as Title VII, highlighted the legal impact of this law on Indians, Native Hawaiians, and Alaska Natives in which it states that all provisions of the NCLB extend to the schools serving Natives and providing dedicated resources for Indigenous students' cultural, linguistic, and educational needs. **This act was later replaced and improved**

[5] Bureau of Indian Education. (n.d.). *Tribally Controlled schools | Bureau of Indian Education*. https://www.bie.edu/topic-page/tribally-controlled-schools.
[6] *Chapter 1*. (n.d.). https://www.usccr.gov/files/pubs/nam/ch1.htm.
[7] Title *VI SEC. 6002. INDIAN EDUCATION — Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)*. (n.d.). Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). https://www.everystudentsucceedsact.org/title-vi-sec-6001-conforming-amendments.

significantly by the bipartisan Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015 that ameliorated the standards and grievances in the Native schools, narrowing the capacity of the federal government in determining education policy.

Evaluating the Efficacy of the Educational Policies

Statewide, the policies provided - on aggregate - **mixed-to-poor effectiveness in terms of addressing educational discrepancies experienced by the Native-American population**. For instance, the National Indian Education Association (NIEA) notes that high school graduation rates for Native Indians grew from 67% in 2012 to 74% in 2019, marking a solid improvement but noted that the rate remains lower than the national average. The cause for this lower graduation rate stems from complex and systemic issues, ranging from discrimination & microaggressions to an "insufficient, inaccurate curriculum of Native American history being taught in school[8]". Alex Serrurier of Columbia Law highlights modern-day systemic prejudice against Native American, citing examples such as arbitrary hair policies targeting certain native hairstyles in schools, and the detriment of expressing certain religious or cultural practices during graduations[9]. **In terms of infrastructure, school choice remains to be "limited" for AI/AN student**s, with traditional public schools as the only option for "84% of school districts with significant (greater than 25%) AI/AN student populations"; and that many Native American schools are in a state of disrepair and missing essential technology. On top of this, Native schools lag in performance - notably there was a case where a 5th-grade student had "barely touched long division" (ProPublica, 2020). **These setbacks have resulted in 46.000 Native students not receiving a quality education in 2020**. In the context of undergraduate & graduate programs, since the fall of 2010, Native American enrollment overall had declined by 38% from 196.000 to 121.000, with undergraduate enrolment declining by 40% (from 179.000 to 107.000)[10]. Moreover, the National Postsecondary Student Aid survey recorded more nuanced results, stating that 45% of Native American students received a Title IV financial aid compared to 40% of all students – however noted that among all the racial/ethnic groups received the lowest average amount of $6.985[11]. Moreover, Native American students only made up 0.7% of all postsecondary enrolment, and only 28% of 18-24-year-old Native Americans were enrolled in college, compared to the 38% average for the overall U.S. population[12]. On a more encouraging note, the average Native American graduate ten years after receiving a

Associate's, bachelor's, master's, and doctor's degrees conferred by postsecondary institutions, by race/ethnicity and sex of student: 2021–22

Level of degree and sex	Total	American Indian/ Alaska Native	Asian	Black	Hispanic	Pacific Islander	White	Two or more races
	Percentage distribution of degrees conferred to U.S. citizens and permanent residents							
Associate's degree	989,762	0.8	6.5	12.3	26.7	0.3	49.3	4.0
Male	367,458	0.7	7.4	10.1	25.5	0.3	51.9	4.1
Female	622,304	0.9	6.1	13.6	27.4	0.3	47.8	4.0
Bachelor's degree	1,920,632	0.5	8.9	10.4	17.0	0.2	58.8	4.3
Male	786,001	0.4	9.7	8.8	15.6	0.2	61.0	4.2
Female	1,134,631	0.5	8.3	11.5	17.9	0.2	57.3	4.3
Master's degree	764,026	0.5	8.2	13.0	13.3	0.2	61.6	3.3
Male	267,254	0.4	9.5	11.0	12.6	0.2	62.9	3.3
Female	496,772	0.5	7.4	14.0	13.6	0.2	60.9	3.3
Doctor's degree[1]	178,546	0.4	12.6	10.4	9.9	0.2	63.1	3.5
Male	72,764	0.4	12.9	8.0	9.8	0.2	65.2	3.5
Female	105,782	0.4	12.5	11.9	10.0	0.2	61.6	3.5

[1] Includes Ph.D., Ed.D., and comparable degrees at the doctoral level, as well as such degrees as M.D., D.D.S., and law degrees that were classified as first-professional degrees prior to 2010–11.

[8] Arizona State University. (2019). *Interventions to Increase High School Graduation Rates for Native American Students*. ASU. https://decisioncenter.asu.edu/sites/default/files/dcedex_white_paper_-_native_american_hs_graduation_interventions_september_2019.pdf.

[9] Serrurier, A. (n.d.). *Indigeneity in the Classroom: Avenues for Native American Students to Challenge Anti-Critical Race Theory Laws*. Columbia Law. https://jlsp.law.columbia.edu/files/2024/05/Serrurier.pdf.

[10] Postsecondary National Policy Institute. (2023). Postsecondary National Policy Institute Native American Students in Higher Education CENSUS OVERVIEW. In *Native American Students in Higher Education*. PNPI. https://pnpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/NativeAmericanFactSheet-Nov-2023.pdf.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

bachelor's degree reported to "having an income averaged a gross income of $76.602, similar to the national average of $76.370[13]". Regarding teachers and educational professionals, the NIEA also reports a significant underrepresentation of AI/AN teachers, even in majority AI/AN schools with "a vast majority" of teachers being white (61%), compared to only 29% being AI/AN. To this end, the discrepancies in educational attainment become more apparent when comparing AI/AN populations to the other races/ethnicities in the U.S.. The National Center for Education Statistics highlights the marked absence of AI/AN students & pacific islanders in postsecondary institutions between 2021 and 2022 (table on the side)[14]. These statistics reveal **clear indication of significant postsecondary educational underrepresentation among Native American & Pacific Islander populations statewide** and across all educational levels compared to both the overall U.S. population and amongst other represented races/ethnicities, especially when compared to White and Hispanic populations (e.g., 0.5% AI/AN vis-a-vis 61.6% White conferred a Master's). Unfortunately, underrepresentation is not the only challenge faced by Native Americans as some parts of their identity face existential crisis.

On the subject of the promotion and preservation of Native American cultures, Voice of America highlights the **rapid decline of some native american languages such as the Lakota** and states that "there are only about 10 to 15 languages left in the U.S. that have any viable chances in terms of moving forward beyond the next 50 years". This is a result of an alarming lack of immersion schools in the U.S. and a loss of last fluent speakers - bringing about the "demise of their indigenous songs and prayers[15]". It is important to note however that linguistic decline is not the case for all Native American languages. To this end, the individual cases shed valuable insight on the complexities and nuances of U.S. educational policies affecting Native American communities.

Case Study - Navajo Nation Educational System

The case study of Navajo Nation illustrates how the government of the United States of America has adapted its education system to welcome and include Native American children, their culture and their history. Navajo Nation is the largest Indian reservation in the U.S. within the 574 Indian American and Alaskan Native tribes recognized by the U.S. government. The Navajo territory is located in the States of Utah, Arizona and New Mexico and has its capital in Window Rock, AZ, where the government of the semi-autonomous Indian territory resides.

In the eyes of Native Americans, after historically being persecuted by the U.S. government, protecting and advocating for their culture is vital and imperative. In the Navajo Nation, the Department of Diné Education (Diné being the native language of the tribe) controls the so-called 'Tribally controlled schools' (TCS). Since 1984, **these schools have included in their educational curriculum, at all grade levels, Diné language and Navajo culture classes**[16]. This modification of the standard U.S. educational curriculum arises from the slow but continuous disappearance of Native

[13] Ibid.
[14]National Center for Education Statistics. (2003). *The NCES Fast Facts Tool provides quick answers to many education questions (National Center for Education Statistics)*. Ed.gov; National Center for Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=72.
[15]Hermann, S. (2023, October 9). *Native American Languages Fight for Survival*. Voice of America; VOA. https://www.voanews.com/a/native-american-languages-fight-for-survival/7302835.html.
[16] Batchelder, A. (2000). Teaching Diné Language and Culture in Navajo Schools: Voices from the Community. Learn in beauty (Northern Arizona University). https://jan.ucc.nau.edu/jar/LIB/LIB1.html.

languages, and hence culture. In the case of Dine, according to the National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education, in 1999, there were only around 148,000 Navajo speakers in a Nation of over 250,000 people (statistics vary by source).

While the community wishes for its children to be immersed in their native culture, Navajo families have the choice of attending either 'Tribally Controlled Schools', Bureau of Indian Education' Schools, or State Public Schools, **depending on the choice of each school to dedicate a certain number of teaching hours of the Navajo culture**. An example of one school with an impressive, culturally immersive curriculum is Tséhootsooí Diné Bi'ólta'. This school aims to simultaneously teach the Diné language and culture, as well as English to allow for students being proficient speakers in both, which is made possible by the school's 13 Native language teachers and 5 English language teachers. Firstly, during kindergarten, first and second grade level, classes are taught fully in Diné. English is then integrated into the curriculum for approximately 10% of the instruction[17].This number increases as the students reach graduation to provide them with the **sufficient English speaking abilities** to easily and completely **integrate the American non-tribal society.**

Furthermore, Navajo Nation specifically targets the education of its elite students in the Navajo Preparatory School Inc by offering education at the very high standards of the **International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO)**. The objective is to make the **Navajo students competitive players** with strong academic and multicultural backgrounds to attend the best higher institutions in the world and reach high professional careers. Additionally, the Navajo community is also dedicated to support the education of the most vulnerable groups through the Head Start programs. These are American social programs which are usually operated by the state, but in the case of the Navajo population regarding the education field **were handed to the Native American Navajo authorities**, a first for such a responsibility to be delegated to a Native American authority. This delegation of power into the hands of the Navajo Nation Council is another component of the understanding between the Native tribal leaders and the U.S. government that the **local entities are the best suited to provide assistance to Native Americans**, but is also an exceptional proof of trust towards the Native American authority in education matters.

The education delivered by Navajo Nation does not end at secondary education, as its Council created in 1968 Diné College, the first tribal community college. In addition to providing more standard classes and professional training, the college also offers to its students to study the Diné language, culture and history in the Center for Diné Studies. The purpose is to provide undergraduate education in a culturally familiar and safe environment in **order to lower the number of dropouts of Navajo students**. On one hand, this example can be considered as a success as in 2022 there was a 100% retention rate for full-time undergraduate students (number of first-time students who began their studies the previous fall and returned to school the following fall)[18]. On the other hand, the graduation rate in 2022 for the completion of studies in 150% of normal time was 20%. Compared with the group median of Diné College (composed of 34 colleges from the Carnegie Classification of Tribal Colleges)

[17] Tséhootsooí Diné Bi'ólta' Navajo Immersion School. (n.d.). Our Mother Tongues. Retrieved November 8, 2024. http://ourmothertongues.org/language/Navajo/8.
[18] Dine College. (n.d.). Data USA. Retrieved November 8, 2024. https://datausa.io/profile/university/dine-college.

which has a 16% rate, the results are encouraging[19]. Nevertheless, when compared to the U.S. mean of 64.6%, **the numbers show important delays in postgraduate education levels in Tribal Colleges**, revealing deeply rooted underlying challenges and disparities even in one of the most organized tribes of the country.

Are integrating Native language and culture classes in the scholar curriculum enough? *Teaching Diné Language and Culture in Navajo Schools: Voices from the Community,* Ann Batchelder's paper discusses the limits of the Diné language teachings during mandatory school hours by collecting testimonies from the community[20]. The study concludes that the **lack of homogeneity in the beliefs of the community** regarding how children should be educated and introduced to the Diné culture and language undermines the success of the Navajo Nation Schools. Indeed, the study points out that, according to Burnaby (1996), the **support of the community and the continuation of the learning process in the household** is a critical factor in **determining the success of language and culture programs.**

The case study of the Navajo Nation demonstrates how the U.S. educational department collaborates with Native American local authorities to provide an inclusive and qualitative curriculum for Native American students, **blending national academic standards with teachings that honor and preserve Native American culture.**

Conclusion

To conclude, incorporating Native language and culture courses into the standard American curriculum both preserves and honors the Native American heritage. It allows for Native Americans to fully live and embrace their multiculturality as U.S citizens and tribe members, something that for decades was not possible. That being said, it is not an easy task as the history of the relationship between the U.S government and the Native Americans is, to say the least, complicated. Repairing the deep tears within the Native American population will require respect, tolerance, time and understanding. **Inclusive and multicultural education is crucial in this process, but it may involuntarily perpetuate the segregation of the Native Americans**.

Similar to the stories of other minority groups in the United States, the balancing act of preserving a culture, language, history and peoples while simultaneously melding into the identity of an "American" is a trial paramount to none. Native Americans often find themselves in the midst of a dilemma: to uphold the traditions and expectations their families and tribes have, or to become the everyday American their passport reflects. The U.S. government has not facilitated a pathway for Natives to embrace both with education missing an important reparation of deep disparities. Hence, with the educational system on its own, **the question of balance could become a double-edged sword, twisting in both directions until a final decision is made: Native or American**.

[19] IPEDS. (2021). IPEDS DATA FEEDBACK REPORT 2021 Diné College. https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/dfr/2021/ReportPDF.aspx?unitId=105297.
[20] Batchelder, A. (2000). Teaching Diné Language and Culture in Navajo Schools: Voices from the Community. Learn in beauty (Northern Arizona University). https://jan.ucc.nau.edu/jar/LIB/LIB1.html.