



Report

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Prepared By: Natasha Davalos

Witness: Natasha Davalos, Policy Analyst I, LESC; Cristal Suazo, Tribal Education Director, Pojoaque Pueblo; Karla Moore Ph.D., Tribal Education Director, San Felipe Pueblo; Quentin Candelaria, Tribal Education Assistant, San Felipe Pueblo

Understanding Tribal Education Sovereignty

Education is a fundamental right for all students, impacting the future of individuals and communities. For Indigenous Tribes in New Mexico, education carries additional significance as it includes preserving cultural customs, languages, and traditional practices. Given this importance and the stipulations of the Indian Education Act and the Bilingual Multicultural Education Act, it is essential to clearly define and understand Tribal education sovereignty. Conversations with Tribal education leaders across the state have shown that Tribal education sovereignty embodies self-determination in education, enabling tribes to exercise their inherent rights to self-govern and make critical decisions about the educational processes that affect their people.

Martinez and Yazzie Consolidated Lawsuit

In July 2018, Judge Sarah Singleton found the state had failed to meet its constitutional obligation to provide an adequate, sufficient education for all students, specifically naming concerns for economically disadvantaged students, English learner (EL) students, Native American students, and students with disabilities. A key finding highlights the significant benefits of a strong, culturally relevant curriculum for students with respect for their cultural and linguistic values. New Mexico's Indian Education Act (IEA) and Bilingual Multicultural Education Act (BMEA) recognize the value of multicultural education, mandating culturally relevant learning environments and instructional materials, though these provisions have not been fully met. Research shows that culturally supportive curricula enhance student achievement, while the lack thereof can undermine it. However, the 2018 court finding noted culturally responsive pedagogy is not well integrated, and professional development in this area is limited and fragmented. Ultimately, Judge Singleton found that New Mexico's education system does not adequately meet the cultural and linguistic needs of Native American students.

In defining Tribal education sovereignty, the goal is to enhance understanding and broaden perspectives when evaluating remedies to the *Martinez and Yazzie* education sufficiency lawsuit.

Key Takeaways

Tribal education sovereignty is defined as the inherent right of Tribal nations to self-govern and control the education of their citizen's.

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Understand the fundamentals of Indian education to ensure the success and autonomy of Tribal education sovereignty.

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Tribal education leaders collectively identified four key themes that strengthen Tribal education sovereignty, including areas of support.

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There are opportunities to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students.

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Policy recommendations are aimed at strengthening Tribal education sovereignty.

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Methodology

To define and understand the multifaceted aspects of Tribal education sovereignty, Legislative Education Study Committee (LESC) staff traveled to Tribal communities around the state to conduct a qualitative review with educational representatives from 12 Pueblos, four higher education professionals specializing in Native American Studies, and one school district Indian Education Director. Tribal education leaders were asked to share their experience as it relates to Tribal education sovereignty. The following questions were provided to Tribal education leaders:

1. What are the fundamental principles and practical implications of Tribal education sovereignty, particularly concerning the rights of Indigenous Tribes to self-governance, cultural autonomy, and equitable access to education across the state?
2. In what ways do the principles and exercise of Tribal educational sovereignty diverge from those of individual sovereignty and governmental sovereignty?
3. How does Tribal education sovereignty intersect with broader issues of educational policy, jurisdictional authority, and community engagement, and what are the implications for addressing historical inequities and promoting culturally responsive education for Native American students?
4. What are the key challenges and opportunities associated with integrating Tribal sovereignty principles into broader efforts to reform educational systems and promote educational equity for Indigenous communities as it relates to the findings of the *Martinez-Yazzie* education sufficiency lawsuit?

Understanding the difference

It's important to distinguish Tribal education sovereignty from broader Tribal sovereignty. Tribal education sovereignty is a specific application of Tribal sovereignty in the realm of education. It involves Tribes having control and decision-making power over the educational systems, curricula, policies, and practices for their communities. At its core, Tribal education sovereignty is about self-determination in education, empowering Tribes to shape the learning experiences of their students and preserve their cultural heritage. By exercising control over education, Tribes have the ability to sustain Tribal identity, pass on Indigenous knowledge, and shape the future of Tribal nations.

Tribal sovereignty refers to the inherent right of Native American Tribes to govern themselves and exercise authority over their lands, resources, and people. It stems from their status as sovereign nations predating the formation of the United States. Individual sovereignty is the freedom and autonomy of individuals to make choices about their lives without undue government interference, as protected by principles like personal liberty.

These Tribal education leaders explored the historical context of Indian education, shared current challenges, and discussed ongoing efforts by Indigenous communities to reclaim and redefine their educational systems.

Tribal Education Leaders Define Tribal Education Sovereignty

Education encompasses academic, cultural, social, and practical learning that prepares all students to succeed in all areas of life, guided by their community's core values and ways of knowing. It goes far beyond school walls. This comprehensive approach to education is echoed in the principles of Tribal education sovereignty, which honors the autonomy of Indigenous communities to shape their own educational pathways. Recognizing the unique needs and strengths of each community, Tribal education sovereignty

acknowledges that Tribes know best how to educate their students.

Tribal education leadership defined Tribal education sovereignty as the inherent right of Tribal nations to self-govern, self-determine, and control the education of their citizens and make decisions about education policies, programs, and curriculum that align with their cultural values and priorities. It involves Tribes having control over education funding, standards, language instruction, and culturally relevant teaching. By emphasizing community engagement, cultural relevance, and the integration of Indigenous languages, values, and practices, Tribal education sovereignty distinguishes itself from mainstream Western education approaches, which often neglect the unique needs and strengths of Native communities.

Interviews with Tribal education leaders revealed key themes in areas where Tribal education sovereignty can have a positive impact on all students. By implementing Tribal education sovereignty, a comprehensive approach can emerge, encompassing language preservation, culturally responsive teaching, community-driven educational initiatives, and fostering positive and trusting relationships. Moreover, flexible funding can support Tribes in achieving full education sovereignty, allowing them to adapt and respond to the unique needs of their students and communities, including the support of a strong educational infrastructure.

The Historical Impact on Indian Education

Tribal education leaders stress the importance of understanding the fundamental aspects of Indian education to ensure external stakeholders support the success and autonomy of Tribal education sovereignty. The legacy of historical encounters and trauma continues to impact today's education systems far more than is commonly acknowledged. The intergenerational effects of boarding schools, persistent inequities, and lack of representation still affect students and their families. To overcome these historical traumas and callous regulations, it is essential to recognize and understand the complex history of Indian education. While there is a vast array of historical legislation, policies, and regulations at both the federal and state levels that have had a profound impact on Indian education, this section will offer a concise overview of the key developments that have shaped the landscape of Native American education.

Significant Federal Legislation and Indian Education Reports

The Indian Citizenship Act (1924) (also known as the Snyder Act). The Snyder Act formally granted Native Americans citizenship of the United States. However, despite this milestone legislation, Native Americans continued to face obstacles in exercising their right to vote, as the U.S. Constitution delegated voting rights to the states. Although the Fifteenth Amendment (1870) guaranteed all U.S. citizens the right to vote regardless of race, Native Americans in New Mexico, however, were denied this fundamental right until the landmark 1948 *Trujillo v. Garley* decision.

Merriam Report: The Problem of Indian Administration (1928). The 1928 Merriam Report was critical of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) school system and prompted changes in the federal approach to Indian education. It found that the most fundamental need in Indian education was a shift in perspective, noting that past education efforts were based on removing Indian children from their home environments. The report argued that the Indian educational program should establish its own objectives tailored to each



reservation or Tribal group, emphasizing that traditional, unrelated academic schooling was not the solution to the “Indian education problem.”

Johnson-O’Malley Act (1934). The Johnson-O’Malley Act provided financial assistance for education, healthcare, and other services to Native Americans within eligible state or territory boundaries. It authorized the United States Secretary of the Interior to contract with states, territories, political subdivisions, and non-profit agencies for these services. The act aimed to encourage states to invest in the education and welfare of Native Americans by offering federal aid, thereby mitigating the financial impact of tax-free Indian lands on state resources.

Report on Indian Education (1969). The 1969 Report on Indian Education, titled "Indian Education: A National Tragedy - A National Challenge" (also known as the Kennedy Report), concluded that national policies for educating American Indians were significantly flawed and failed to provide equal educational opportunities. The report highlighted high dropout rates, low academic achievement compared to white students, a scarcity of American Indian teachers and principals, and a diminished sense of academic ability among Native children. It drew attention to the failures of both public schools and Bureau of Indian Affairs schools in adequately educating American Indian children.

Federal Indian Education Acts (1972 & 1975). The U.S. Department of Education allocated funds for the special needs of Indian students in public schools with 10 or more Indian students, now known as Title IX Indian Education. Priority funding was given to Indian Tribes and organizations for discretionary programs. The act established the National Advisory Council on Indian Education to oversee its provisions, set program priorities, and assess Indian education. It also enabled the Department of Education to work with Indian community colleges and authorized set-asides for training teachers of Indian children. The Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 further addressed Indian education in public schools and led to the creation of the Indian Education Division at the state level, though it relied on existing resources within the State Department of Education.

Native American Languages Act (1990). The Act declared that Native Americans have the right to use their languages, supporting Tribal efforts to integrate language preservation into education programs. The Act recognized the distinct cultural and political rights of Native Americans, affirming that their traditional languages are integral to their cultures and identities, and are crucial for the transmission and survival of Native American cultures, literatures, histories, religions, political institutions, and values.

Every Student Succeeds Act (2015). The Every Student Succeeds Act includes provisions that support Tribal roles in education and emphasize the importance of Native languages and cultural instruction. It aims to ensure Indian students gain knowledge of Native communities, languages, histories, traditions, and cultures. The act also establishes language immersion programs and activities that address the unique cultural and educational needs of Indian children, incorporating qualified Tribal elders and seniors.

New Mexico’s Indian Education

Indian Education Act (2003). The Indian Education Act mandates the Public Education Department (PED) to collaborate with Tribes in creating educational programs that respect cultural differences and promote academic success for Native students. The act



requires public and charter schools to provide equitable, culturally, and linguistically relevant education, ensuring the overall success of Native students.

State Tribal Consultation Act (2009). The State Tribal Consultation Act mandates that the state provides services to benefit its Indigenous citizens. Regarding education, the act requires regular communication and collaboration among parents, Tribal education departments, community organizations, the Public Education Department, universities, and policymakers to improve educational opportunities for American Indian students.

Identified Needs to Practices Full Tribal Education Sovereignty

Tribal education leaders expressed gratitude in sharing the significance of Tribal education sovereignty for their community and its potential benefits when fully implemented. While discussing its impact, several key themes emerged, identifying the need for extensive support in:

- language preservation initiatives;
- culturally responsive teaching;
- community-driven educational initiatives; and
- fostering positive and trusting relationships.

Additionally, Tribal education leaders emphasized the importance of flexible funding and a robust education infrastructure in achieving full education sovereignty, sharing their insights on how these elements can empower Tribes to exercise their right to self-determination in education.

Language Preservation Initiatives

A crucial aspect of Tribal education sovereignty is the preservation of language, with some Tribal leaders advocating for immersion programs as a solution to the growing risk of language loss in their communities. Without language preservation efforts, Tribal communities face the threat of cultural erasure. Tribal education sovereignty empowers Tribes to exercise full autonomy in designing and delivering language education programs, tailoring them to their unique cultural, linguistic, and community needs.

There are several significant reasons why Tribes need language preservation initiatives. For instance, Tribal educational leaders emphasize that language preservation initiatives are essential for revitalizing and sustaining their cultural heritage and identity. While some Tribes limit access to their native language classes to enrolled Tribal members as a way to safeguard their language and cultural heritage, it is crucial for outside parties to recognize and honor this boundary, acknowledging the significance of Tribal education sovereignty in preserving cultural autonomy and intellectual traditions. Ultimately, Native American languages are deeply connected to traditional knowledge, practices, and worldviews, making language loss a critical threat to cultural integrity. It enables the transmission of ancestral wisdom and teachings to future generations, as many core values, histories, and spiritual beliefs are embedded within Native languages.

While the importance of advancing Tribal sovereignty in education was touched upon during the qualitative review, it requires dedicated support and attention, as the majority of the discussion has centered on preservation initiatives.

Equally important, language preservation initiatives support cognitive development and academic success. [Research](#) indicates that grounding children in their first language aids in learning other languages and enhances critical thinking abilities, leading to better educational outcomes. Tribal education leaders also note preserving the cultural context and community usage of languages, not just its academic teaching, is crucial. The goal is to teach languages within the community setting, not just as a school subject.

Active use of Indigenous languages fosters a sense of identity and belonging, especially for youth. This strengthens cultural pride and connectedness within the community, positively impacting youth development.

Challenges to language preservation initiatives. Some Tribal education directors shared their challenges in finding fluent speakers to teach their language, as most remaining fluent speakers are over the age of 60 and only a few are actively teaching. Due to the limited number of language teachers, some Tribal communities struggle to provide multiple opportunities for members to participate in language classes. Other Tribal education leaders highlighted similar challenges, noting that their previous language programs were not as effective as they desired because they focused solely on vocabulary words rather than conversational phrases. In response, some Tribal education directors advocate for immersion programs to improve language retention, inspired by the success from the Jemez Pueblo immersion program initiative. However, limited and timely funding, resources, and community engagement posed significant obstacles to sustaining these efforts.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Culturally responsive teaching and culturally relevant learning are essential for several reasons. A culturally responsive education helps create an inclusive and affirming learning environment for students from diverse cultural backgrounds. When students' cultures are valued and integrated into the curriculum, they experience a greater sense of belonging and engagement. This approach promotes better academic outcomes by connecting learning to students' lived experiences, prior knowledge, and cultural frames of reference, making the content more meaningful and relatable.

Tribal education leaders have also noted that culturally relevant learning fosters positive identity development by affirming students' cultural identities as assets rather than deficits. This affirmation enhances healthy self-esteem and counters negative stereotypes, while also preparing students to effectively navigate and relate respectfully to other cultures. For Native American students specifically, culturally responsive education is an exercise of Tribal educational sovereignty. It allows Tribes to decolonize education by centering Indigenous ways of knowing, languages, histories, and values.

Furthermore, culturally responsive teaching leverages the strengths students bring from their home and community cultures to enhance learning. [Research](#) suggests aligning school and community cultures, along with educator involvement in the community, can significantly affect the academic performance of Native students. Teachers who are knowledgeable about Indigenous culture can greatly enhance the success of Native youth in educational settings. By doing so, they create more equitable and empowering educational experiences for culturally diverse students.

Challenges to implementing a culturally responsive education Implementing culturally responsive teaching and culturally relevant learning in schools faces several notable



barriers. Tribal education leaders have observed that many teacher preparation programs lack a focus on Indigenous education or culturally responsive pedagogies. As a result, teachers may lack the knowledge and skills to effectively incorporate students' cultural backgrounds into the curriculum and instruction. Additionally, there is a shortage of Indigenous teachers who share the cultural backgrounds of their students and can serve as role models. This shortage raises concerns that non-Indigenous teachers may struggle to fully understand and validate their students' cultures.

Further, there can be a significant disconnect between the schools and the Indigenous communities they serve. Tribal education directors note culturally responsive education that includes Indigenous histories and perspectives benefits all students. However, this approach can be met with resistance from some schools, and meaningful consultation and collaboration with communities is frequently lacking. Compounding this issue, state-mandated curriculum standards and high-stakes testing create pressure for teachers to adhere to a prescribed, often Eurocentric, curriculum, leaving little flexibility to adapt lessons to be culturally relevant.

Lastly, developing culturally relevant curricula, providing teacher training, and supporting Indigenous language programs require adequate and sustainable funding, which is often lacking for Indigenous education initiatives.

Community-Driven Educational Initiatives

Community-based learning and community engagement provide numerous benefits for tribal education sovereignty. It allows tribes to have greater input and involvement in the education of their students by creating opportunities for Tribal leaders, elders, and community members to contribute their perspectives, cultural knowledge, and support systems, ultimately enhancing the educational experience for Native youth. Community involvement enables the incorporation of traditional knowledge, practices, and values into the curriculum and learning environment. By involving community members in education, the experience is enriched for all involved as it allows for the sharing of expertise in language, history, arts, and other cultural domains. Furthermore, it fosters a sense of communal support and connection for students. When the community is engaged, students feel their culture and identity are valued, which can improve their engagement, motivation, and overall success.

The Importance of Tribal Libraries

Tribal libraries are crucial in preserving and promoting Tribal cultures, languages, and educational sovereignty. These libraries serve as community hubs, offering access to resources, classes, and intergenerational learning opportunities tailored to the specific needs of Native American communities. Beyond providing books, they facilitate community-based learning experiences such as sewing classes, language classes, coding, and skills workshops, which help pass down traditional knowledge and aid in mainstream education. They also offer essential services like public school registration, hotspot and laptop lending, bridging the digital divide. Tribal libraries prioritize listening to and meeting the community's needs, rather than imposing top-down programs, and create inclusive spaces for all ages, including teenagers, to engage in cultural activities and learning.

By offering culturally relevant curricula and resources developed with community input, Tribal libraries support Tribal education sovereignty. They are critical for sustaining Native cultures, languages, and self-determination in education, empowering communities to define and work towards their own vision of success.

However, Tribal education leaders have noted a lack of staffing and resources for Tribal library programs, making it difficult to fully implement educational programs and services for children. There is also concern about the need for open dialogue and collaboration between Tribal library and education programs, as well as the necessity for the state to address funding challenges, reporting requirements, and ensuring resources effectively meet the needs of Native communities.

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Tribal education leaders also noted that community involvement provides opportunities for intergenerational learning and knowledge transfer. Community members, especially elders, can share their wisdom and life experiences with younger generations, preserving cultural continuity. They are phenomenal sources of traditional knowledge, customs, and languages. Elders bridge the gap between generations, creating opportunities for youth to learn about their cultural heritage and maintain Tribal identities.

Additionally, Elders often serve as advisors and leaders in Tribal communities. Their insights guide the development of culturally relevant curricula, teaching methodologies, and educational policies that align with the Tribe's values and vision for sovereignty. Elders also model and reinforce traditional values, beliefs, and practices that are foundational to Tribal sovereignty. Their involvement in educational settings helps instill these principles in younger generations, encouraging the continuity and advancement of Indigenous ways of life. Tribal education leaders also stated that elders offer invaluable historical context and perspectives on the struggles and resilience of their Tribes. This understanding helps shape educational approaches that acknowledge past injustices while empowering students to reclaim their sovereignty and self-determination. By actively involving elders in educational processes, Tribal communities can ensure that their sovereignty is deeply rooted in their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and intergenerational wisdom.

Community engagement builds trust and strengthens the relationship between the Tribe and the education system. Tribal education leaders have noted open communication and collaborative efforts with the community can help promote accountability and responsiveness to the specific needs and priorities of the Tribal community. Some initiatives Tribal education leaders are doing to involve the community is through catered community events and parent surveys to understand what the community wants and needs in terms of education options. Through active engagement, the education system can better understand and address the unique challenges and aspirations of the community it serves. Overall, community engagement empowers Tribes to shape the education of their youth in alignment with their values, traditions, and aspirations for the future.

Barriers to community engagement and involvement. Tribal education directors explained that trying to get Tribal families involved in the public school system is challenging due to the historically negative relationship between many Native American communities and Western education systems. This has created distrust and made it difficult for community members to participate in their youth's education. Similarly, there is a culture of fear around speaking up, as it has led to retaliation in the past. Tribal education leaders also note a stratification within the community, where only certain people are seen as the voices for education matters. When others outside of the group try to get involved, it requires confidence building and overcoming the perception that their voices are not the ones typically looked to for input on schools and children's education.

Other barriers preventing community members, especially parents and guardians, from participating in Tribal education initiatives include time constraints, limited childcare options, and restricted access to education, making it challenging for them to actively contribute to these efforts.

One Tribal education leader suggested involving more than just parents when collecting input on curriculum decisions and expressing concerns about students' education. "Opening up" these types of education meetings to the entire community allows



grandparents, aunts, uncles, and siblings, as many are often very engaged and want to be part of their family members' education.

Overall, while there are people involved in programming and making suggestions within the Tribal community, broader community engagement in Tribal education sovereignty faces barriers like time constraints, lack of access to education, and a reluctance to be singled out or go against the established norms of the community.

Fostering Positive and Trusting Relationships

Tribal education sovereignty partly relies on building and maintaining strong, trusting relationships that are culturally responsive and inclusive. The relationship between schools, government agencies, and worldwide Indigenous groups has a profound positive impact on the educational experiences and outcomes of Native American students. Relationships between Tribal education departments and schools vary but fostering robust partnerships with key stakeholders like educational program directors, superintendents, principals, and teachers is essential for asserting Tribal education sovereignty. Tribal education directors highlighted the value of strong relationships with schools, which facilitate collaborative initiatives such as after-school programs that use school facilities. Tribal education directors also acknowledged that partnerships are mutually beneficial, as schools can lean on their Tribal communities for supplemental support in areas like funding for field trips and curriculum materials. Relationship-building efforts include regular meetings, professional development opportunities, and the creation of collaborative bodies like the Education Collaborative, which coordinates with local schools. Tribal liaisons and school Indian education directors serve as crucial bridges between schools and Tribal communities, working to strengthen connections and address challenges, despite sometimes facing resistance on specific issues.

Tribal education leaders report their communities engage in collaborative efforts with universities, organizations, and other Tribes, facilitating mutual learning and knowledge sharing. These partnerships enable the exchange of best practices in areas such as language immersion programs, educational and governmental structural reform, curriculum development, teacher training, and community engagement strategies for Indigenous education. Through these partnerships, Tribes are empowered to develop their own teacher certification programs, cultivate a skilled workforce of Indigenous educators, and build expertise in specialized areas like language instruction methodologies. For instance, Jemez Pueblo's Immersion School and Cochiti Pueblo's Keres Learning Center became models for successful initiatives in revitalizing their language and cultural education. Many Tribal communities have partnered with both pueblos to exchange knowledge and implementation efforts. Similarly, Tribal communities turn toward each other for guidance and support on Indian education initiatives, including navigating complex educational systems. For instance, Tribes have collectively advocated for legislation and policies that support Tribal education sovereignty. Partnerships also create opportunities for Tribes to secure grants,

House Bill 250 (2019)

In 2019, House Bill 250 (HB250), Native American Student Needs Assessment, proposed amendments to the Indian Education Act to better address the educational needs of Native American students in New Mexico. This bill required historically defined Indian impacted school districts, including charter schools, to conduct needs assessments to identify services needed to assist Indian students in achieving academic success and becoming college- or career-ready. HB250 aimed to address the unique educational challenges faced by Indian students by ensuring that their needs are prioritized and met through collaborative efforts between schools and tribal communities.

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share facilities and infrastructure, and pool resources for initiatives like after-school programs and language preservation efforts.

Relationships with indigenous groups worldwide also allow Tribes to exchange knowledge on revitalizing languages, integrating cultural practices into education, and sustaining traditions across generations. By fostering these partnerships, Tribes aim to establish self-governed education systems, develop Tribally controlled schools and colleges, and exercise sovereignty over curricula, standards, and teaching methodologies.

Building these relationships enables Tribes to learn from each other, access resources, advocate for change, build capacity, and ultimately achieve greater autonomy and self-determination in educating their youth. While positive examples of partnership exist, there is a need for deeper engagement, trust-building, and shared decision-making between Tribes, schools, and state personnel.

Challenges with fostering positive and trusting relationships. While there are often challenges in Tribal-school relationships, the level of collaboration can vary significantly based on several factors. Some schools are open to working with Tribes, but the degree of collaboration frequently depends on individual school leadership. In some cases, there is a collaborative relationship where Tribes have input on curriculum, programs, and decision-making for Native students. However, in other instances, Tribes have little control or say in how their students are educated. Tribal education directors sometimes feel their role is undervalued and marginalized within school districts. Tribes often feel excluded from education policy decisions due to a lack of government and district support, as well as insufficient consultation and partnership from state agencies and school districts. Moreover, meaningful input from Tribes in developing school policies and curriculum is often lacking. Specific obstacles include the absence of meaningful Tribal consultation by state education agencies, conflicts between public school systems and Tribal goals and cultural practices, and inadequate representation of Native Americans in school leadership and teaching positions, leading to a lack of transparency and inclusivity. Relationships tend to be stronger when Tribal education staff have direct connections with principals, teachers, and federal program directors who oversee budgets and implementation. Conversely, relationships with superintendents alone may not translate to meaningful change without engagement from those working directly with students.

Access to funding sources, such as Indian education funds, gives Tribes more leverage to create their own programs and initiatives in partnership with schools. However, a lack of flexible funding can limit the ability of Tribes to negotiate changes within the standard school system. Positive relationships develop when school staff make efforts to learn about and incorporate Tribal histories, languages, and cultural practices. Conversely, a lack of cultural awareness or resistance to Tribal input can strain these relationships. Tribes with well-developed education plans and strategies find it easier to collaborate effectively with schools. On the other hand, Tribes still developing their vision for education sovereignty may struggle to articulate their needs and goals. In essence, while some Tribal-school partnerships are highly collaborative, others remain superficial or strained due to factors such as personnel changes, funding constraints, cultural disconnects, and internal Tribal capacity issues.

Regular attendance at school board meetings enables Tribal representatives to stay informed and advocate for their community's interests. However, they often encounter challenges, as these boards can sometimes be overly political and may not effectively involve the community in decision-making processes. Genuine community engagement is



essential for Tribes to achieve sovereignty over their education. Tribal education leaders have expressed the need for public school education authorities to engage more frequently with the community at the grassroots level. Addressing this disconnect will help ensure that school boards and education authorities actively listen to Tribal communities and incorporate their perspectives and needs into policies and curricula.

The Opportunities of Tribal Education Sovereignty

Promoting Tribal sovereignty in education requires fostering meaningful relationships, providing sufficient resources, and empowering tribes to take ownership of educational programs that cater to their communities' unique needs. Tribal education leaders shared valuable insights and best practices on how state, local education agencies, and fellow Tribal education leaders can work together to advance Tribal education sovereignty and improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students.

Opportunities Regarding State and Local Education Agencies

Addressing funding restrictions and providing flexible, sustainable support enables tribes to develop programs tailored to their needs. Recognizing Tribes as equal partners in education policy decisions empowers them to shape education that truly serves their citizens.

By engaging in meaningful Tribal consultation and mutual respect, building strong partnerships between Tribes, school districts, and state agencies can lead to a profound positive impact on the academic journeys and success of Indigenous students, fostering a supportive and inclusive education environment. This collaborative approach has the potential to honor Tribal autonomy and promote culturally responsive education that supports the success and well-being of Indigenous learners. In particular, a New Mexico public school Indian Education Director has taken significant steps to build relationships with the Native American community, launching initiatives driven by the Indian Education Department, and recognizing that further efforts are needed to achieve meaningful and lasting engagement. They organized community events to foster connections and involve families, aiming to be visible and integrated into the communities they serve.

Opportunities for Internal Structures

Tribal education leaders shared their expertise on improving their internal structures, highlighting successful strategies and emphasizing the importance of recognizing and

The Ke Kula 'O Nāwahīokalani'ōpu'u Initiative

Tribal educator leadership visited Hawaiian language immersion programs in Hawai'i, including those at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo and on the island of O'ahu. They were impressed by the integration of Hawaiian language and culture in schools at all levels, from preschool to high school. Particularly noteworthy was the Ke Kula 'O Nāwahīokalani'ōpu'u program, which unites an early childhood center, charter school, and public high school in a comprehensive Hawaiian language immersion setting on a single campus.

This model inspired Tribal leadership to consider aligning their own early childhood, charter school, and other programs in their communities. Additionally, it was observed that some public schools in Hawai'i offered a full Hawaiian immersion strand alongside a standard English curriculum, providing parents with educational choices for their children.

Tribal education leaders also met with the University of Hawai'i at Hilo to learn about the Kahuawaiola Indigenous teacher training program, which prepares educators for Hawaiian language immersion settings, inspiring Tribal leaders to develop their own immersion teacher licensure program. The inclusion of the Hawaiian language and culture in Hawai'i's schools is seen as a model for integrating and valuing indigenous languages within an education system through immersion programs.

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respecting the distinctiveness of each sovereign nation. While some commonalities may exist, they stressed that Tribal communities should not be approached through a comparative lens, but rather understood and engaged with in a way that honors their unique cultural identities and experiences.

According to Tribal education leaders, effectively supporting students requires a clear vision that includes steps for promoting long-term sustainability and capacity-building and -retention. Although some Tribal leaders may be hesitant to adopt new approaches, Tribes may benefit from prioritizing the rebuilding of their internal governing structures to further support schools and external educational entities. Strengthening internal governance has been shown to enhance the functionality and maintenance of education programs and initiatives. Creating a supportive environment also necessitates strong community engagement, effectively addressing historical trauma, and nurturing relationships within and between communities.

This approach emphasizes intentional community building, reorganizing internal governing structures, and focusing on relationship building as the foundation for transformational change in education for Native American students.

Benefits to the State of New Mexico from Thriving Tribal Communities and Tribal Education Sovereignty

The implementation of Tribal education sovereignty and the flourishing of Tribal communities can have numerous benefits for the state of New Mexico:

- Educational Innovation and Collaboration**

Tribal education systems that incorporate indigenous knowledge and pedagogies can serve as models for innovative educational practices. These practices could be adopted or adapted by other schools in New Mexico, promoting educational excellence across the state. Collaboration between state-run and Tribally controlled schools can lead to the exchange of best practices, thereby improving the quality of education statewide.

- Community Empowerment and Stability**

Empowering Tribal communities through education sovereignty builds stronger, more resilient communities capable of addressing their own needs and challenges. This empowerment contributes to social cohesion and stability within the state, fostering a sense of unity and shared purpose.

- Long-Term Sustainability**

Education that integrates traditional ecological knowledge and sustainable practices supports the state's environmental sustainability and conservation efforts. Additionally, ensuring the transmission of Native languages and cultural practices to future generations maintains the cultural identity and continuity of Tribal communities, benefiting the state's diversity and cultural richness.

- Economic Benefits**



The empowerment of Tribal communities through education sovereignty can spur economic development. Educated and autonomous Tribal communities are likely to contribute even more to the state's economy by establishing businesses and entrepreneurial ventures. Additionally, a well-educated Native workforce enhances the overall skill level and productivity of New Mexico's labor market, fulfilling essential roles across various sectors.

- **Social and Community Well-Being**

Improved educational outcomes and economic opportunities within Tribal communities are associated with reductions in poverty, substance abuse, and crime, thereby benefiting broader society. Furthermore, education that integrates traditional knowledge and practices promotes holistic well-being, potentially lowering healthcare costs and improving public health outcomes.

The state of New Mexico would derive substantial benefits from thriving Tribal communities and the implementation of Tribal education sovereignty. These benefits include enhanced cultural diversity, stronger state-Tribal relations, innovative educational practices, economic growth, and improved social outcomes. Collectively, these advantages contribute to the overall prosperity and well-being of the state, Tribes, and its residents.

Next Steps

Tribal education sovereignty covers a wide range of areas, but during the qualitative review Tribal education leaders highlighted universally important topics. Tribal education sovereignty is essential for addressing systemic inequities affecting Native American students, supporting cultural preservation, and empowering Tribal nations. This final section offers policy recommendations and coalition proposals aimed at strengthening Tribal education sovereignty and empowering Tribes to reclaim their authority and shape the educational future of their communities.

The Legislature could consider:

- **Strengthening or clarifying the requirements for Tribal consultation and collaboration to ensure more inclusive and effective educational management.** Redefining the meaning and significance of Tribal consultations and government-to-government relationships by including Tribal leadership at every step of their student's education is crucial for respecting Tribal education sovereignty, ensuring cultural sensitivity, and fostering effective collaboration. This approach leads to informed decision-making, empowers Tribal nations, and strengthens trust and partnerships. By prioritizing the insights and priorities of Tribal leaders, policies and actions become more culturally appropriate and successful, ultimately reflecting the true needs and aspirations of Tribal communities.
- **Investing in mediation supports for Tribal consultation.** Investing in mediation supports can be fundamental for facilitating more effective Tribal consultations by enhancing communication, resolving conflicts, and ensuring cultural awareness. This approach streamlines the consultation process, making decision-

making more efficient and productive, conclusively leading to more respectful and beneficial outcomes for all parties involved.

- **Continue investing in Teacher and School Leader Pipeline.** Increased investment in developing a pipeline of Native teachers and school leaders is essential for ensuring representation, fostering cultural relevance, and providing role models for Native students. It builds community trust, addresses historical educational inequities, and empowers tribal communities by integrating their voices and perspectives into the education system. This investment can help ensure that educational leadership reflects the diversity of the student population, promotes culturally relevant pedagogy, and provides an effective educational experience for Native students

The Public Education Department could consider:

- **Providing more flexibility in funding and technical assistance to better address the unique needs of various educational programs and initiatives.** This flexibility could enable more innovative and tailored solutions for different educational contexts, aligning with Tribal community goals and best practices.
- **Funding directly to Tribes to support culturally responsive community after-school programs and other educational initiatives.** Tribes, having the best understanding of their students, are the most suitable authorities to determine the best approaches for creating a more holistic and inclusive educational system.

Tribal Education Departments could consider:

- **Establishing cohesive visions that drive local programming and foster collaboration with state and local officials, including community engagement.** A robust vision can help align efforts and resources towards common goals, improving the overall impact of educational initiatives.

Local School Districts could consider:

- **Adhering to both the spirit and the letter of the law regarding consultation and Culturally and Linguistically Responsive (CLR) instruction.** This commitment ensures that educational practices are both legally compliant and culturally sensitive.
- **Re-evaluate community engagement efforts.** Effective community engagement is crucial for schools and districts to better connect with their communities, leading to stronger partnerships and more meaningful educational experiences for students. This involves acknowledging the unique needs and strengths of each Tribal community and implementing effective communication efforts. Schools should actively participate in their communities' cultural events, provide opportunities for feedback and take action based on that feedback, and showcase student work to involve parents and community members. Additionally, creating inviting spaces within schools for community use can further strengthen these relationships.

