

AMERICAN INDIAN EDUCATION

EMPOWERING AMERICAN INDIAN LEARNERS | BRIEF 3

WHO IS THIS LEARNER?

The American Indian learner thrives in educational settings that value autonomy and authenticity. Activities that promote the sharing of ideas, identification of patterns, and opportunities for leadership are all appropriate. Educators are encouraged to foster student-to-student connections and activities that focus on the mastery of leadership. American Indian learners in the classroom today are only a handful of generations away from relatives who experienced historical trauma that undoubtedly affects their perspectives. Achieving equitable education requires practices that value and acknowledge tribal citizenship (Sabzalian, 2019).

School districts throughout Oklahoma have a growing opportunity to practice strategies that empower American Indian leadership. Empowering the American Indian identity supports a student's preferred tribal affiliation, native language, and cultural knowledge through a lens of positive reinforcement. It is important not to rely on personal bias, stereotypes, or anecdotes if they are not supported by peer-reviewed American Indian literature. American Indian learners may have multiple tribal affiliations¹ that can help educators identify how to use those affiliations to inform their relationship approach.

¹ American Indian Diverse Learner Briefs #1 and #2 explain tribal affiliation diversity.

WHY IT MATTERS

In 2020, Oklahoma State Department of Education (OSDE) conducted an enrollment survey of all 39 tribal nations to identify how many of their citizens are 3-18 years of age. The OSDE found that there are approximately 156,000 American Indian students enrolled in at least one of the 39 Tribal Nations in Oklahoma. It is important to note, that not all of tribally-enrolled students reside in Oklahoma but it indicates substantial representation. Oklahoma public schools in 2018-19 served approximately 131,000 Title VI American Indian students. Over 400+ school districts who received Title VI Indian Education formula funding. These figures matter because the American Indian learner subgroup is a growing population that will likely see future increases as the OSDE Wave system enhances tribal affiliation identification (Guerrero, 2020).

THINGS TO CONSIDER

- Create individual growth plans for American Indian learners for them to explore and gain exposure to connections that support their tribal affiliation(s).
- Create Individual Career Academic Plans for students to assist them in identifying pathways for their future success.
- Share any questions you may want to ask American Indian learners, with a peer colleague to verify if the questions are appropriate regarding Native culture.
- Develop a shared expectation with the classroom that if a topic concerning American Indian identity occurs, negative characterizations will not be tolerated.
- Build partnerships with tribal families, representatives, and appropriate officials to support student learning.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- How familiar am I with what tribal nations have a substantial presence in my local community and do I know how to connect with those respective nations?
- What Native American Student Services are available at my school?
- What services or resources (e.g., Native American Student Services office) does our school offer American Indian learners (Shotton, 2013)?
- What questions have I asked American Indian learners related to negative imagery or nonverbal cues that cause the learner to have hurtful experiences at our school?
- Who are American Indian educators, at my school, who can be a good peer mentor to my professional learning?
- Who are American Indian educators, with a local tribal nation, who can be a good peer mentor to my professional learning?

ATTENDING TO EQUITY: TOOLS AND STRATEGIES

It is important to recognize that reaching out to American Indian learners doesn't require some sort of unique gesture. It will require educators to be authentic, humble and sincere with their own knowledge gaps (Shotton, 2013). In order to amplify the trust building process, please consider attending to equity strategies below:

- **Be** a teacher and the student. Openly admit to your American Indian learners that you have limited knowledge regarding certain aspects of Indigenous communities.
- **Learn** to laugh at yourself. American Indian learners are attracted to educators who can employ humor as a technique to building stronger relationships.
- **Advocate** for accommodations.
- **Ask** if there are any institutional practices and/or experiences that are currently offending their indigenous culture/identity.
- **Find** a professional peer. It is important that you connect with another professional educator to collaboratively employ helpful methods.

