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# To Better Serve American Indian and Alaska Native Students, Schools Must Replace Punishment with Relationships

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American Indian and Alaska Native students continue to face unequal school conditions and outcomes. In 2021–22, their four-year graduation rate was 74 percent, compared with 87 percent nationally. Recent federal Civil Rights data released in 2025 show that Native students are overrepresented in referrals to law enforcement and school-related arrests. They are also 1.4 times more likely than White American students to attend a school with security staff but no counselor, social worker, nurse, or psychologist. Nearly half of Native students were chronically absent in 2021–22. A 2026 study of 22 principals in Oklahoma and Alaska suggests a better path: schools are more effective when leaders replace automatic punishment—routine removal for low-level or subjective behavior—with relationship-based, culturally responsive, trauma-informed support.

Exclusionary discipline, such as suspensions that keep students out of the classroom, can push students further from graduation and deepen distrust. When students lose instructional time through suspension—or attend schools that invest more in security than support—school becomes harder to trust and harder to complete. Leadership representation matters here, too. Only 0.6 percent of public-school principals are American Indian or Alaska Native. When Native students rarely see themselves in school leadership, and when non-Native educators are not trained to distinguish cultural difference or trauma responses from defiance, behavior is more likely to be misread as disrespect or noncompliance.

Fortunately, states and districts already have models that show how to address these challenges in practice. Alaska's Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools and the Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative show how local knowledge, elder expertise, language, and experiential learning can be built into everyday schooling, not saved for special events. Tribal History/Shared History shows how this can be paired with professional learning: the curriculum was created with Oregon's nine federally recognized tribes, and educators can use self-paced training modules to learn how to teach it well. At the federal level, the State Tribal Education Partnership program offers a model for formal collaboration by helping Tribal Education Agencies work directly with state and local school systems. The larger policy lesson is simple: culturally responsive practice should be built into public systems, not left to whichever principal happens to value it.

## How can state leaders, school districts, and university partners support Native students?

**State agencies and licensure bodies should require culturally responsive and trauma-informed leadership preparation.** Training should cover tribal sovereignty, local histories, bias reflection, and how trauma can shape behavior in ways adults misread. Alaska's standards are useful because they give school leaders concrete expectations: connect learning to local culture, treat community knowledge as instructional

expertise, and hold schools accountable for whether students can see themselves in what they learn and how they learn it. For the trauma side, Safe Spaces offers a scalable model of free, online staff training, and the National Native Children's Trauma Center shows how technical assistance can be tailored to Native communities rather than imported as a generic add-on.

**Districts and school boards should rewrite discipline codes so removal is the last resort, not the default.** That means reducing mandatory or near-automatic suspensions for vague, low-level behaviors such as classroom disruption, disrespect, or other subjective "defiance" judgments when safety is not at risk. Those categories invite bias because adults interpret them rather than observe a clear, serious threat. Oakland Unified provides a concrete example: its restorative justice model uses community-building circles, harm-repair conferences, and individual supports, and schools with restorative justice coordinators saw large drops in suspension. Indigenous Learning Lab points in the same direction by having Native students, families, educators, and community members help design a culturally responsive discipline system rather than merely comply with one.

**States and districts should formalize tribal partnership and public accountability.** Handbooks, school websites, calendars, strategic plans, and improvement plans should clearly say how districts consult tribes, support Native students and families, and honor Native languages and histories. The Juneau Indian Studies Program shows what this can look like in practice: Cultural Specialists work in classrooms, track attendance, discipline, and academic progress, support after-school activities, and help with staff development and family advocacy. Watonga High School in Oklahoma offers another practical example: staff connect students and families to tribal and school resources, monitor attendance closely, and respond to barriers before absence becomes disconnection. Oklahoma's Office of American Indian Education and the Oklahoma Advisory Council on Indian Education provide state-level entry points that should be preserved, resourced, and made more visible.

**States, tribes, universities, and federal agencies should build Native educator pipelines—and fund the staffing that relationship-centered schools require.** Native leadership will not grow on rhetoric alone. The Indian Education Professional Development program was designed for this purpose, and current examples show how it can work: Northern Arizona University's American Indian School Leadership program trains Native teachers to become principals, and Cherokee Nation's teacher cohort combines scholarships, stipends, mentorship, and classroom support to place Native teachers in public schools. Relationship-centered schools also need enough adults to do the work. The School-Based Mental Health Services program can help districts hire credentialed providers, and Alaska's Rural Professional Housing initiative shows why retention supports matter in remote communities where stable housing can determine whether schools keep teachers at all.

These policies do not lower expectations. They make high expectations more reachable by pairing rigor with belonging, cultural respect, and support for trauma and unmet needs. Native students are not better served when schools remove them faster. They are better served when schools understand their communities, keep them connected to instruction, and build systems strong enough to survive leadership turnover. The approach is also practical: Alaska, Oklahoma, Oregon, California, Wisconsin, and federal programs already show pieces of it in action. The task for policymakers is to connect those pieces, fund them, and make them durable across schools, districts, and principal transitions.

**Read the full study for free in *Educational Administration Quarterly*.**