

Centering Indigenous Ways of Knowing in Special Education

As a Native parent, you have the right to ensure your child's individualized education program (IEP) reflects your family's or community's culture, values, and ways of knowing. The IEP process is rooted in Western education systems, which often fail to incorporate Indigenous understandings of learning, knowledge, and well-being. In many Indigenous communities, ability is viewed through a holistic and spiritual lens, and this cultural perspective should inform how schools approach referrals, assessments, and IEP meetings.

Your voice matters.

Caregiver priorities should guide help guide a child's experience in special education process. Your child's language and culture should be recognized as strengths, not treated as barriers. Members of your extended family or your Tribal community can also play a vital role in supporting your child's learning. You can advocate for inter-generational, home-based, and community-led special education support, including holding meetings in community spaces and involving Elders and cultural knowledge keepers. Below are some examples of how you can make sure your child's IEP process includes and honors your culture.

Request that the “strengths and interests” section of your child’s IEP includes cultural and community-based learning, such as participation in ceremonies, language learning, or environmental/experiential activities.

Encourage educators to see humor and storytelling as signs of engagement and strength, not distraction.

Ask for cultural liaisons, representatives from the respective Tribe, or Tribal Education staff members to be part of the special education planning process when possible.

Ensure that service providers (speech, occupational therapy, counseling) are trained or provided guidance in how to use culturally respectful practices.

Ask that the IEP team recognize attendance at cultural or spiritual events as valid educational experiences and excused absences.

Collaborate with teachers to provide flexible learning plans that allow your child to stay connected to both school and community life.

Encourage the school to recognize and record cultural guardians or extended family members as contacts in the student file, in addition to legal parents or caregivers.

Request time for relationship-building before or after meetings for informal visits, phone calls, or check-ins that build mutual trust amongst family/caregivers and school staff members.

Ask that the IEP team receive training on Indigenous history (Tribally specific, when possible) and trauma-informed/healing-centered engagement and strategies.

Advocate for IEP goals that include outdoor learning or land-based activities when appropriate, such as gardening, river restoration, or animal care.

Explain how connection to place strengthens your child’s focus, identity, and mental health and ask that it be part of their learning plan.