



INDIGENOUS FAMILY SPECIAL EDUCATION GUIDES

Implementation Considerations for School Districts and ESDs

February 2026





Invitation. A Message for School Districts and ESDs

Dear Esteemed Educational Leaders,

Thank you for the work you do each day to provide access to inclusive, individualized, equitable, and flexible instruction and support to students with disabilities. In the [2025-2030 American Indian and Alaska Native Student Success Plan](#), Objective 2B asks districts to “Address Disparate Identification of Native Students in Special Education”. One goal to support this is for the Office of Indian Education to advocate for the use of informational resources to empower Native families with their rights and responsibilities in Special Education.

OIE has completed an Indigenous Family Special Education Comprehensive Guide and a full Mini-Guide Series to ensure Indigenous families have clear, culturally grounded, and legally accurate information about their student's Special Education rights and services. These guides can be accessed on the OIE Special Education web page. This project represents more than a deliverable—it is a commitment to healing, agency, and equitable access for Native families who have too often been underserved or misunderstood in Special Education.

We invite your partnership to help us share these guides with Indigenous families to further support them in navigating the Special Education system in your district. We have provided implementation considerations below. Districts may scale guide use based on their size, staffing, Title VI Indian Education or other related Native programming, and student outcome data for Indigenous students served by an IEP.

ESD guidance can be found at the end of this guide.

Implementation Considerations

Recommended Phase	District Context	Focus
Phase 1 – Share-Ready Awareness	Small rural district, minimal Special Education staff	Internal sharing with frontline Special Education staff distribution
Phase 2 – Staff Grounding & Guided Sharing	Mid-size district, Special Education team wants structured learning	Building collective understanding among essential staff roles
Phase 3 – Community-Centered Rollout	District has a Title VI Indian Education or Tribal Attendance Promising Practices Grant	Co-informs rollout approach so families receive guides in a way that honors them
Phase 4 – Data-Informed Relational Implementation	District has a Title VI Indian Education or Tribal Attendance Promising Practices Grant + a focus on improving outcomes for Indigenous students served by an IEP and desires systems improvement	Data dive, empathy interviews, feedback from Indian Parent Committee, TAPP, or Indigenous families, leading to systems action

Wayfinding. Overview of Each Guide

Here are the overviews for each guide to help you determine when to utilize it with families:

The Journey to Ensure a Free and Appropriate Public Education for Students with Disabilities: A Guide for Indigenous Families

This is the most comprehensive guide. It kicks off with an important letter to Indigenous families about the purpose of the guides.

It covers seven areas - Parent Involvement, Does my Child Have a Disability?, the Special Education Referral Process, Developing an IEP, Transition Services: Planning for Life After High School, Discipline and Student Protection and IEP vs. 504 Plans. It also contains rich appendices.

Share this resource, while also providing an orientation to it, to every Indigenous family new to or already involved in the Special Education or 504 process.

Mini-Guide 1 - Getting Started with Special Education - Navigating the Special Education Referral Process

This mini guide shares the story of Talia who knows her son Eli needs extra help in school. It has Q and A about MTSS and Special Education processes.

Mini-Guide 2 - Parent/Caregiver Rights in Special Education

This mini guide shares what rights families and students with IEPs have in education in a Q & A format. This guide breaks down the Procedural Safeguards in a family-friendly way.

Mini-Guide 3 - Individualized Education Programs

This mini guide shares one family's experience building an IEP. It includes a Q&A on IEP development and implementation.

Mini-Guide 4 - Discipline for Students in Special Education

This mini guide helps parents understand their rights while navigating the discipline process when a child has an IEP.

Mini-Guide 5 - Seeking the Right Support: IEPs and 504 Plans

This mini guide describes the difference between an IEP and a 504 plan to help families understand the right supports for their child.

Centering Indigenous Ways of Knowing in Special Education

This guide shares examples for families to make sure the IEP process includes and honors their Native culture.



Phase 1. Share-Ready Awareness

District Context

Small rural district, minimal Special Education staff

Focus

Internal sharing and frontline Special Education staff distribution

Waypoints to Support Implementation

This phase focuses on basic awareness and distribution. District staff receives the guides and shares them directly with Native families as foundational resources.



Share Internally. The Special Education Director distributes the guides to all Special Education staff and building leaders. Building leaders ask case managers to review the guides and understand their purpose.



Distribute to Families. Case managers share the guides—and a brief explanation of their purpose—with Native families. Staff may provide electronic copies or help families access the guides on the OIE Special Education webpage.

Throughout the year, staff should re-share the most relevant guide when new Special Education needs or situations arise.

TIP: Add these resources to your district's Special Education webpage for easy family access.



Phase 2. Staff Grounding and Guided Sharing

District Context

Mid-size district, Special Education team wants structured learning

Focus

Building collective understanding among essential staff roles

Waypoints to Support Implementation

This phase focuses on building shared understanding across all Special Education staff. Teams engage in close reading of the guides and develop clear plans for how the guides will be used to support Native families during IEP processes.



Share Purpose and Vision. The Superintendent shares the guides with the Special Education Director. Together, they review the materials and develop a structured learning plan that allows district and building Special Education staff to internalize the guides and understand their role in supporting Native families.



Review all the Guides Together. At an upcoming Special Education staff meeting, the Special Education Director frames the purpose and importance of the guides. Staff review the guides collectively and discuss how they will use them during IEP meetings and other family interactions. Each school site drafts a plan for how and when the guides will be shared with families.



Share Internally. The Special Education Director distributes the guides to key student-facing staff (child development coordinators, counselors, social workers, etc.) along with the district's purpose and vision for the guides. Staff are encouraged to familiarize themselves with the guides so they can share them proactively and when family needs arise.



Distribute to Families. Case managers introduce the guides—and their purpose—to Native families as a supportive resource. Staff may share electronic copies or help families access the materials on the OIE Special Education webpage.

TIP: Add these resources to your district's Special Education webpage and individual school webpages for easy access.



Phase 3. Community Centered Rollout

District Context

District has a Title VI Indian Education or Tribal Attendance Promising Practices Grant

Focus

Co-Informs rollout approach so families receive guides in a way that honors them

Waypoints to Support Implementation

In this phase, Special Education and Native Education staff collaborate to prepare a learning plan and introduce the guides to the Indian Parent Committee (IPC) or to Native families. Districts review data on Native students with IEPs, identify key patterns, and share these findings with families to have authentic conversations with them and to shape a meaningful rollout of the guides.



Share Purpose and Vision. The Superintendent shares the guides with the Special Education Director and key Native Education program staff. The district reviews data on Native students with IEPs to identify patterns. Together, staff develop a plan to share the data and introduce the guides—and their purpose—to the IPC (if applicable) or Native families.



Share Guides with Indian Parent Committee or Native Families and Community. The Special Education Director and Native Education staff engage the IPC or Native families with transparency, sharing both the purpose of the guides and insights from the data review. Families receive the guides with supportive questions to help them understand the content and to shape how the guides should be shared district wide to all Native families.



IPC and/or Families and Community Inform Rollout Approach. District staff actively listen as the IPC or Native families provide input on how the guides should be introduced to families. The district refines the rollout plan based on this guidance and identifies follow-up steps to support implementation.



Distribute to Families. Using the co-informed rollout plan, the district shares the guides with Native families in a timely, culturally responsive manner.



Phase 4.

Data-Informed Relational Implementation

Full Implementation Path

District Context

District has a Title VI Indian Education or Tribal Attendance Promising Practices Grant + a focus on improving Indigenous student IEP outcomes and desires systems improvement

Focus

Data dive + empathy interviews + feedback from Indian Parent Committee or Indigenous families + systems actions

Waypoints to Support Implementation

This phase is intended for districts ready to deeply examine their practices and strengthen culturally responsive Special Education systems.



Share Purpose and Vision. The Superintendent and Special Education Director review the guides and establish a shared commitment to using them as part of broader systems improvement. A cross-team group (Special Education leadership, Native Education staff, student services staff, and Title VI/TAPP staff) meets to outline goals, review district values, and plan for a relational implementation process centered on Native family voice.



Collect and Analyze Internal Data. District teams review data related to Indigenous students with IEPs to identify patterns, strengths, and areas for improvement.

This may include:

- referral and evaluation patterns
- IEP service delivery
- academic progress
- discipline and attendance trends
- family participation in meetings

Patterns are summarized in plain language to prepare for transparent sharing with Indigenous families and the IPC (if applicable).



Share Data and Conduct Empathy Interviews with Indian Parent Committee

or Native Families and Community. The Special Education Director and Native Education staff meet with the IPC and/or Native families to share the purpose of the guides, why this deeper review is occurring, and what the data shows.

The District prepares for and conducts empathy interviews (individual or group format) to hear truths (including hard truths) from families about their experiences navigating Special Education. Prompts may explore:

- clarity and communication about the process and their rights
- feelings of belonging or exclusion
- meeting experiences
- cultural safety
- hopes for their child's learning journey

District staff listen without defensiveness and ensure family stories and experiences are honored throughout.

TIP: A resource for Group Empathy Interview Considerations can be found on the next page.



District Reflects on Empathy Interview Data. The cross-team group reviews what was learned from empathy interviews, identifies themes, and reflects on system conditions that may create barriers or contribute to family experiences. These insights help shape future actions and shape a co-informed rollout plan. Reflection questions may include:

- What strengths did families name?
- What harms, frustrations, or unmet needs surfaced?
- What system practices require change?
- What supports should be added for staff or families?



District Shares Reflections with the IPC and/or Families Who Inform Rollout Approach and Next Steps. The district returns to the IPC and/or Native families to share what was learned and how their insights are shaping next steps. This step ensures rollout is not only informed by families but **co-created** with them. Families are invited to provide additional guidance on:

- how the guides should be introduced to families
- where in the Special Education process the guides should be used
- communication strategies
- additional supports needed for culturally responsive engagement



Distribute to Families. Using the co-designed rollout approach, the district shares the guides with Native families. The guides are used proactively in referral conversations, evaluation processes, and IEP meetings. Staff support families in accessing electronic versions on the OIE Special Education webpage.



Continuous Improvement and Ongoing Follow Up

The district maintains communication with families and the IPC throughout the year and during the improvement cycle, checking in on:

- how the guides are being used
- whether the family experience of Special Education is improving
- emerging needs or concerns

Data is revisited and adjustments are made as part of a continuous improvement cycle that keeps Indigenous family experiences at the center.

TIP: Build follow-up into existing Special Education and Title VI/TAPP meeting structures to sustain momentum.

Group Empathy Interviews

Group Empathy Interview Considerations

This article [Empathy Interviews](#) by Kari Nelsestuen and Julie Smith can help you gain a deepening understanding of the purpose of empathy interviews. Only trained, trusted individuals should facilitate these interviews.

Sample Framing: Today we're listening to the lived experiences of families, so our district can improve the Special Education experience in ways that uplift community voice, cultural connection, and healing.

Suggested Question Progression

Opening and Identity Grounding

- “Please share how you identify your Indigeneity today (for example: Tribal Nation, Native, Mixed, etc.).”
- “What is one word you’d use to describe how you feel when you think about your identity?”

Remind facilitators to honor self-chosen identifiers per community preference.

Pride and Safety

- “Tell us about a time you felt proud as an Indigenous parent/caregiver supporting your child.”
- “What happened, and what made you feel that pride?”

Struggle and Naming Barriers

- “Share about a time Special Education systems (school meetings, paperwork, discipline, or learning plans) felt confusing, frustrating, or hard to navigate.”
- “What was happening? What emotions did you or your child feel?”
- “What made it difficult – people, process, language, timing, or something else?”

Turning Toward Needs + Support

- “When you think about Special Education, what do you wish schools or districts did *with* you, instead of *to* you?”
- “What supports make communication feel clear, supportive, and culturally safe?”
- “Who would you want at the table when new student/family rights guides are introduced?”

(Examples to name in facilitation: Special Education Director, family advocate, Title VI Indian Education staff, Tribal education partner, Indian Parent Committee representative, etc.)

Special Education-System Specific

- “When you hear there are new guides from the Office of Indian Education explaining Special Education rights written specifically for Indigenous families, what feels most important about how your district shares or introduces them?”
- “What questions should always be included to guide implementation for families like yours?”

Close with Hope & Continuity

- “What is a dream you hold for your student when it comes to their learning plan, supports, and identity being honored in school?”
- “What is a dream you hold for yourself as an advocate for your student?”

TIP: End with gratitude and appreciation for families sharing their truths, acknowledgment of their partnership, and the district’s commitment to learning from their lived experiences. Decide on a date when the district will provide reflections and next steps with families.



Shared Services. Education Service Districts

ESD Context

ESD has a Title VI Indian Education Consortium; all other ESDs can still utilize the steps below in accordance with their context of how they support districts with Special Education or with American Indian and Alaska Native students.

Focus

Strategic partnership with school districts who are members of the consortium to support them in their Phased Implementation.

Waypoints to Support Implementation

The ESD Title VI Indian Education lead(s) reach out to the various school district superintendents who are members of the consortium to support with implementation phase the district has chosen.



Unified Purpose and Strategic Collaboration. ESD Title VI Indian Education staff ensures the district has received the information about the guides. Together, ESD and District staff collaborate on how to best work together to implement the guides based on the phase that works best for the school district.

ESD Title VI Indian Education staff have unique knowledge of Native students and their families served by the consortium, as well as access to the Indian Parent Committee. This relationality can greatly help with the implementation of the guides.

ESDs can -

- Bring a critical Indigenous lens to any data or systems analysis needed to strengthen Special Education practices in the district.
- Support districts with hosting family nights to share the guides and can also help the district conduct empathy interviews.
- Help elevate student, family, and tribal community voices on issues related to Special Education and how to help the district continuously improve the educational experience of Indigenous students and families.
- Provide professional development opportunities to educators to help them better serve Indigenous students.