Indigenous Family Special Education Guides: Practical Tools for Equitable Collaboration

COSA Special Education Conference | October 22, 2026

Presented by Stacy Parrish and Brandon Culbertson



A big WELCOME to Special Educators joining us in the space today.

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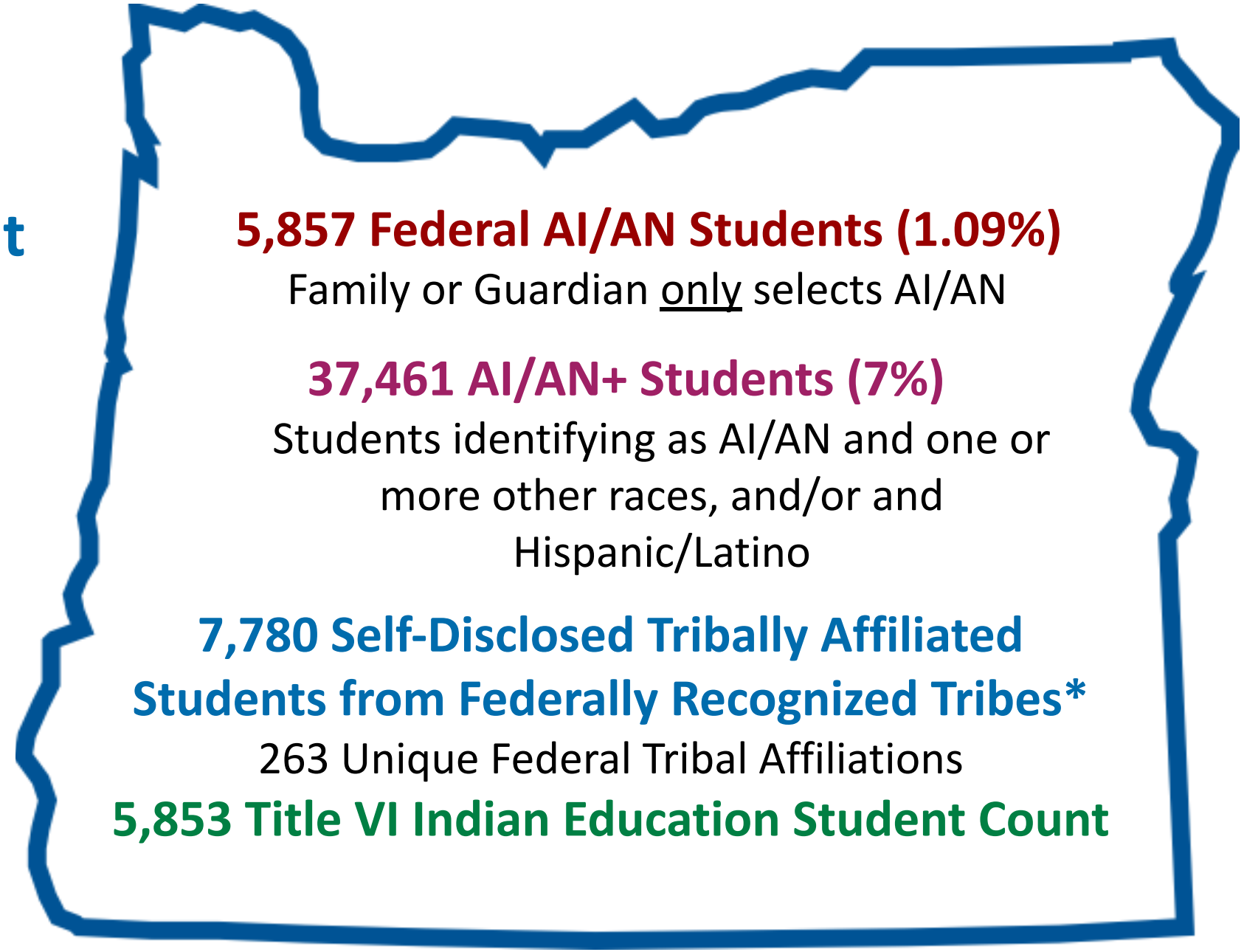
THANK YOU for all you do to support our students, families, and educators.

Learning Arc of our Time

- See high-level **Native student data** snapshots
- Understand **Native student support** in Oregon's school districts
- Learn about the **intended purpose** of the Indigenous Family Special Education Guides
- **Preview the mini-guides and implementation guide**, familiarizing yourselves with the content
- Engage in **Q and A**

2025-2026 Native Student Demographic Snapshot



5,857 Federal AI/AN Students (1.09%)

Family or Guardian only selects AI/AN

37,461 AI/AN+ Students (7%)

Students identifying as AI/AN and one or more other races, and/or and Hispanic/Latino

7,780 Self-Disclosed Tribally Affiliated Students from Federally Recognized Tribes*

263 Unique Federal Tribal Affiliations

5,853 Title VI Indian Education Student Count

*This data comprises a new data collection required by ODE in SY 24-25.

Special Education Data Snapshot

In school year 2024-2025–

- **20% of AI/AN Students** received Special Education Services. This is in comparison to 15.4% statewide.
- **10.3% of AI/AN graduates** received a Modified Diploma. This is in comparison to 4% of All Graduates statewide receiving modified diplomas.

2024-2025 School Age SECC Media File
School Year 2024-2025 Cohort Graduation Rate

Nationally, American Indian or Alaska Native students with disabilities are more likely to drop out than all students with disabilities.

U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. (2021, August 13). *OSEP Fast Facts looks at race and ethnicity of children with disabilities served under IDEA.* Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). https://sites.ed.gov/idea/osep-fast-facts-looks-at-race-and-ethnicity-of-children-with-disabilities-served-under-idea

Light and Shadow

Education is an important priority for our tribal communities. It is how we preserve our language, culture, and identity, and how we will protect our sovereignty for years to come.

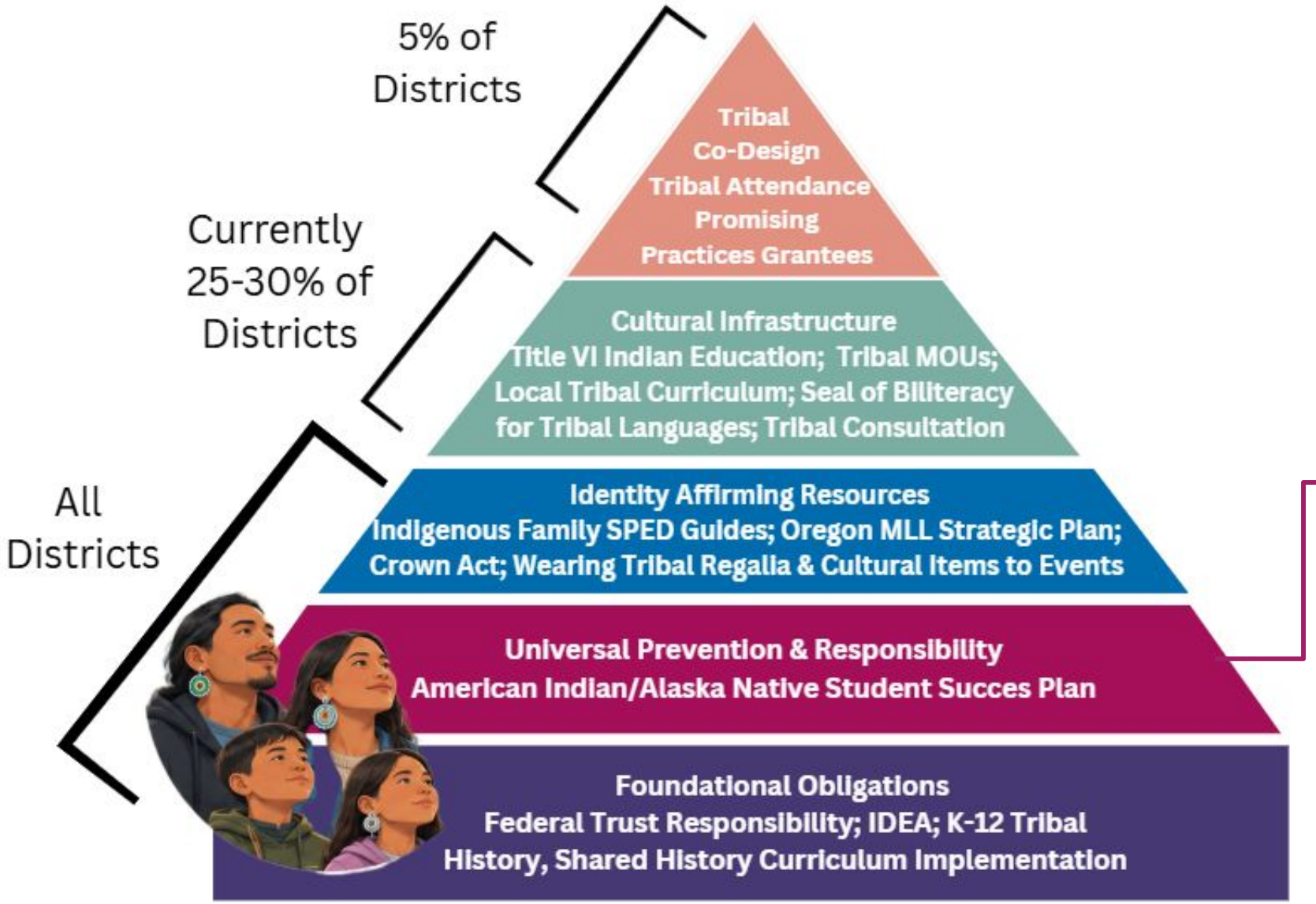
Education is a responsibility our Native students are guaranteed by this Nation's trust responsibility to them.

Indigenous values are inherently anti-deficit, intergenerational, and rooted in culture.

It is not education Native students oppose, but *schooling*.

Adapted from the concept of Subtractive Schooling by Valenzuela

Native Student Support in Oregon's School Districts



- Champion Tribal Languages
- Address Inequity in Native Student Data
- Pursue Native Excellence
- Cultivate Holistic Systems of Support
- Center Culturally Responsive Approaches

Oregon Districts with Native-Focused Infrastructure

Title VI Indian Education
Ashland SD
Athena Weston
Beaverton
Bethel
Cascade
Central Point
Clackamas ESD
Clatskanie
Columbia Gorge ESD
Coquille
Corvallis
Dallas
David Douglas
Dufur
Eagle Point
Eugene
Grants Pass
Harney County SD 3
Hillsboro
Hood River
Jefferson County 509J
Klamath County
Klamath Falls City Schools
Lake Oswego
Lincoln County
McMinnville
Medford
Molalla River
Newberg-Dundee
North Bend
North Clackamas
North Wasco
Oregon City
Pendleton
Phoenix-Talent
Pilot Rock
Portland Public Schools
Powers
Reynolds
Roseburg
Salem Keizer
Scappoose
Sheridan
South Wasco
Southern Oregon ESD
Springfield
Three Rivers/Josephine
Willamette ESD
Willamina
Yoncalla

Tribal Attendance Promising Practices Grantee
Coos Bay
Harney County SD 3*
Jefferson County 509J***
Klamath County*
Lincoln County*
North Bend*
Pendleton*
Roseburg**
Salem-Keizer*
Willamina*

Mascot Districts
Amity
Banks
Molalla*
Philomath
Siletz Valley School (Charter)*
Rogue River
Roseburg**
Scappoose*

AI/AN SSP Grantees FY26-27
Clackamas ESD*
Columbia Gorge ESD*
High Desert ESD
Hillsboro*
Jefferson County 509J***
Portland Public Schools*
Southern Oregon ESD*

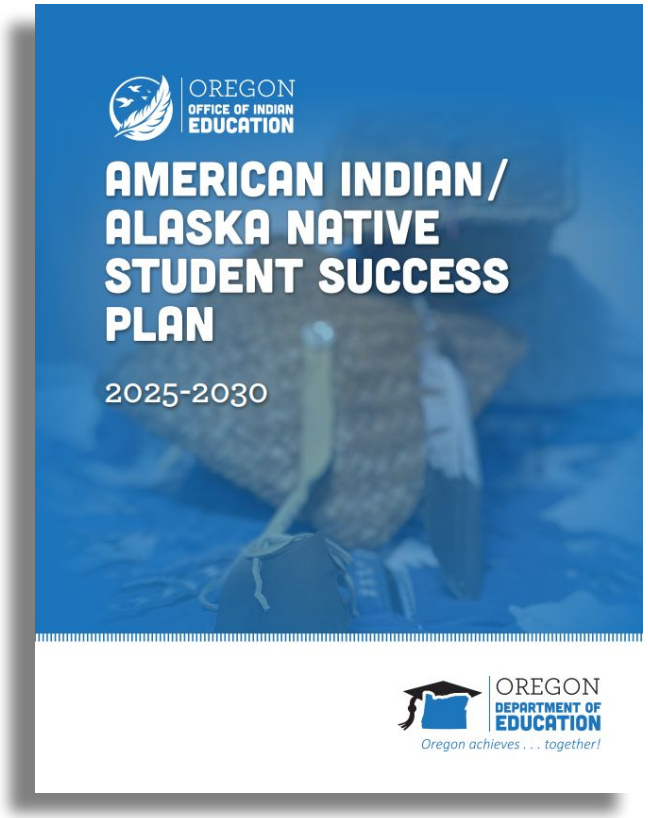
Tribal Nation Partnerships & Oregon School Districts, ESDs, and RENs

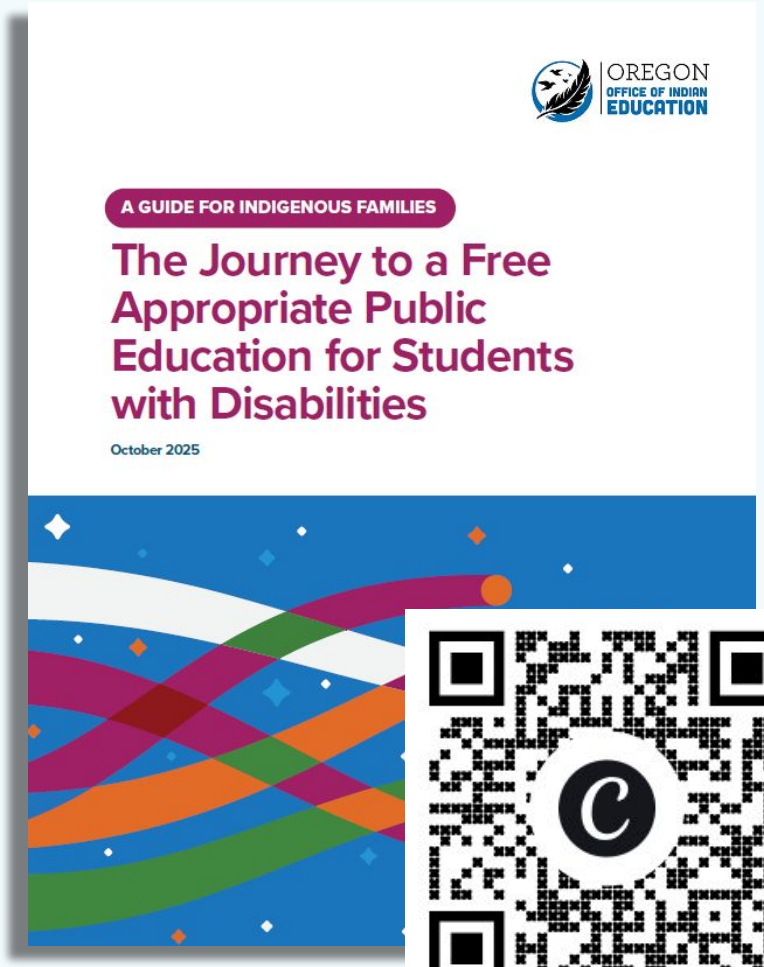


Address Inequity in Native Student Data

OBJECTIVE 2B: Address Disparate Identification of Native Students in Special Education

- Ensure accurate identification of Native students in special education by providing additional guidance to school districts and ESDs on the analysis of data to identify disproportionalities beyond federal requirements, by promoting culturally responsive assessments and tools, *and advocating for the use of informational resources to empower Native families with their rights and responsibilities in Special Education.*





Source: https://www.oregon.gov/ode/students-and-family/equity/NativeAmericanEducation/Documents/SB13%20Curriculum/Indigenous_SPED_Guide_2025_508c_.pdf

The Guides -

- Comprehensive Guide: “The Journey to Ensure a Free and Appropriate Public Education for Students with Disabilities: A Guide for Indigenous Families” (pictured left)

- Mini Guide 1 - “Getting Started with Special Education - Navigating the Special Education Referral Process”
- Mini Guide 2 - “Parent/Caregiver Rights in Special Education”
- Mini Guide 3 - “Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)”
- Mini Guide 4 - “Discipline for Students in Special Education”
- Mini Guide 5 - “Choosing an IEP or a 504 Plan”

Infographic Quick Summaries -

- “Centering Indigenous Ways of Knowing in Special Education”
- “IEP At-a-Glance”
- “Parents Rights in Special Education: At-a-Glance”

Intentionality of the Guides

- Begins with “A Message for Indigenous Families”
- Storytelling - Talia and Eli
- Family-Centered Design - Plain language
- Native representation
- Efficacy and Empowerment



Introduction.
A Message for Indigenous Families

Dear Indigenous Families,

This guide was created to honor the sacred role you play in your child's life and learning. In Indigenous communities, education is not confined to classrooms—it is a lifelong journey shaped by relationships, cultural teachings, and the wisdom of extended family networks. Children are sacred, and their learning is a shared responsibility carried by parents, grandparents, aunties, uncles, cousins, and community members. Everyone has a role.

We know that navigating special education systems can feel overwhelming, especially when those systems don't always reflect your values, histories, or ways of knowing. But your perspective is essential. You carry deep insight into what motivates your child, what brings them joy, and what challenges them. That wisdom belongs at the center of every decision made about your child's education.

We also recognize the historical trauma that Native communities carry—the legacy of boarding schools, forced removal, and cultural erasure has left deep wounds. These experiences may shape how you engage with schools today. But trauma does not define us. Your resilience, humor, and love for our children are powerful medicines. Laughter is good medicine, and so is advocacy.

This guide is here to help you navigate the special education process with confidence and clarity. Whether you're attending an IEP meeting, reviewing an evaluation, or simply wondering what comes next, we hope this resource empowers you to speak up, ask questions, and ensure that your child's educational journey reflects who they are and where they come from.

You are not alone. You are part of a larger story—one of strength, healing, and cultural pride. Your child deserves an education that honors their identity, and you have the right, the wisdom, and the support to help make that happen.

As an Indigenous family member with a child in special education, it's important to remember that your child's individuality is a strength. In many Indigenous knowledge systems, each person carries unique gifts and a special purpose. Learning happens in many ways—through relationships, nature, and ancestral knowledge. Supporting your child's voice, identity, and sense of responsibility helps them grow in ways that are meaningful and connected.

Special education, when done right, is about giving your child the tools they need to succeed. It's not a label—it's a support system. Schools are required by law to partner with families to create plans that help students thrive. Your role is powerful, and your advocacy helps ensure that every part of your child's journey—from the first evaluation to graduation—is rooted in pride, purpose, and possibility.

Oregon Department of Education | *A guide for Indigenous families*

Why These Guides Matter

For Students

- Support that elevates their strengths, honors their identity, and ensures their voice is present in this process

For Families

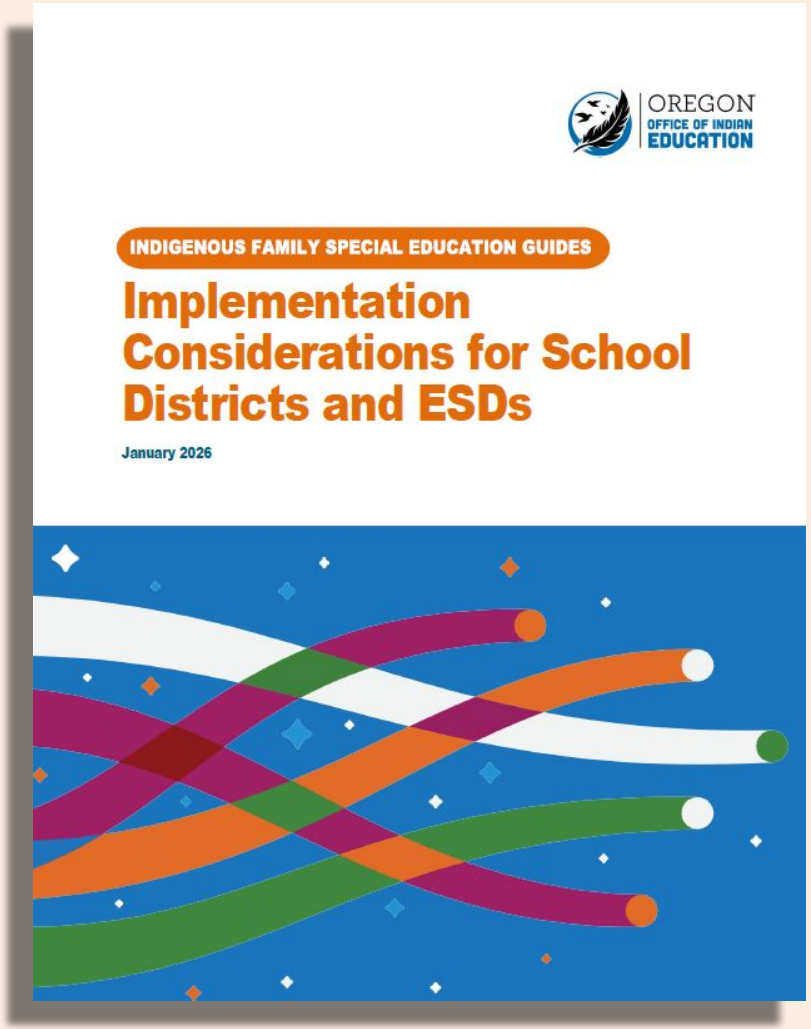
- Increase visibility and belonging
- A starting point for questions; strengthen confidence in advocacy

For Educators

- A culturally responsive tool (generalized) for supporting the process and listening to family priorities

For Systems

- Move from compliance to partnership; create conditions for shared power
- Increase Native visibility



Source: https://www.oregon.gov/ode/students-and-family/equity/NativeAmericanEducation/Documents/SB13%20Curriculum/Implementation_Districts_ESDs_Indigenous_SPED_Guide_.pdf

Implementation Considerations

Recommended Phase	District Context	Focus
Phase 1 – Share-Ready Awareness	Small rural district, minimal Special Education staff	Internal sharing + 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-inform 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 + concerning Indigenous IEP outcomes and wants systems improvement	Data dive, empathy interviews, feedback from Indian Parent Committee or Indigenous families, leading to systems action

🟧A District's context, capacity, and need determines implementation.

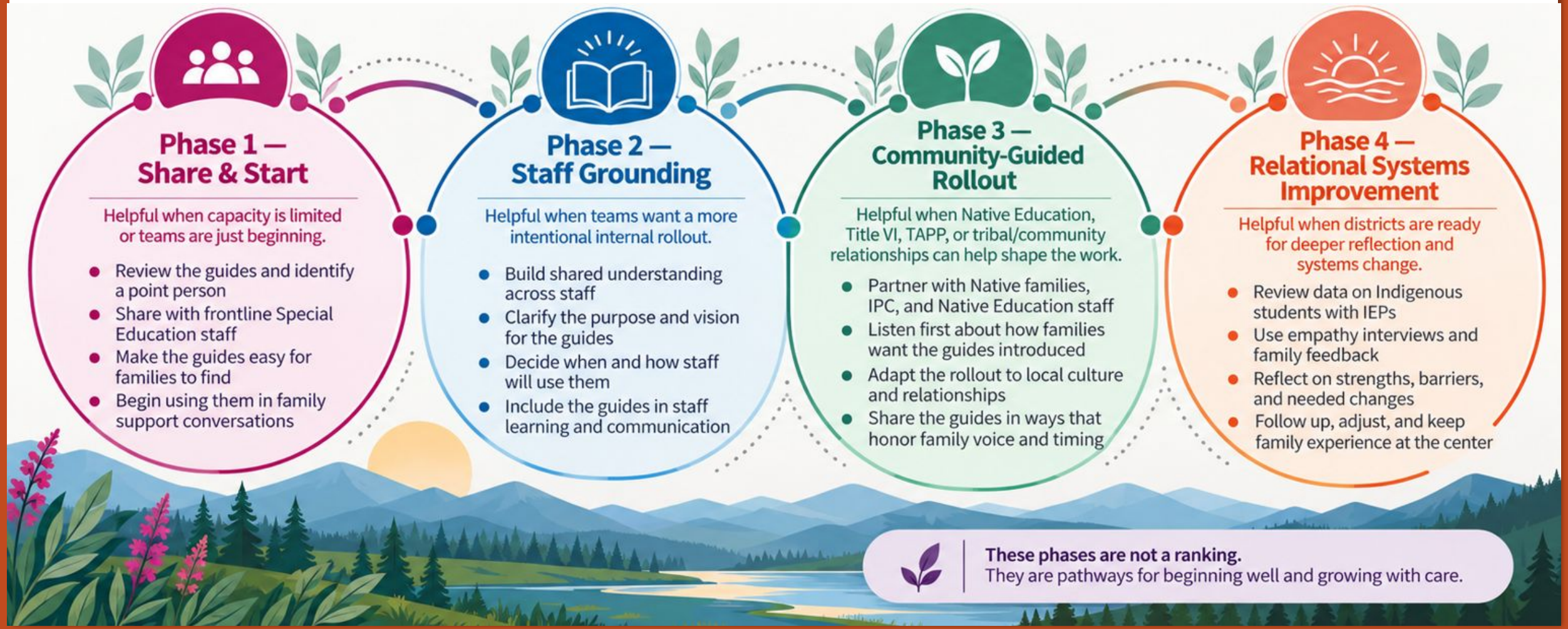
Table Activity (10 Minutes)

- ❑ Browse one Mini-Guide - consider a topic aligned to a family's current need
- ❑ Browse the Implementation Guide - contemplate your approach

Discuss:

- What stands out?
- What could your district's next step be?
- What barriers might exist?

Implementing the Guides



Making Change for Indigenous Students



- Continue learning accurate Native history and the Lands on which your district or ESD resides
- Honor tribal sovereignty
- Understand historical and contemporary contexts
- Use the guides as one practical step toward increasing family efficacy and empowerment
- Partner with Indigenous families
- Center Indigenous student voice; experiences shed light on systems

Questions/Comments;

Individual Help? Visit with us!

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