

Addressing the Cultural and Non-Academic Educational Rights of American Indian Students in Minnesota during COVID-19
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The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need to supplement nonacademic services that students typically received in-person at school prior to the onset of the pandemic. This is especially true for American Indian students in Minnesota, whose communities already face higher disparities and less access to resources. Under Minnesota's American Indian Education Act of 1988, American Indian students have the right to participate in American Indian education programs, which are designed to provide culturally relevant education and support the academic achievement and positive reinforcement of the self-image of American Indian students.¹ Mental health access and community involvement, two of the most important facets of extracurricular programming compromised by the pandemic, can be addressed through these programs. At a time when the pandemic has triggered historical trauma for American Indian communities that have a painful history with infectious diseases and government control, COVID-related limitations on access to mental health service are especially concerning. American Indian cultures rely on community interaction, which has been hindered due to social distancing. Addressing these issues is particularly vital for tribal schools, American Indian charter schools, and public schools with large enrollments of American Indian students. Though community and tribal initiatives have created some structures to support youth during the pandemic, more is needed, especially as tribes experience financial hardships due to the pandemic, such as lost gaming revenue.

To address the cultural and non-academic educational rights of American Indian students during the COVID-19 pandemic, schools with high populations of American Indian students

¹ Minn. Stat. § 124D.74 (2020): <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/cite/124D.74>.

must expand their culturally appropriate extracurricular resources by collaborating with American Indian tribes and communities. American Indian communities are fighting more than just a virus; they are wrestling with the American legacy of genocide.² Isolation due to social distancing prompts reminders of colonization and further harms American Indian communities that rely heavily on community and culture in daily activities and learning.³ The lack of access to culturally appropriate education is also reminiscent of the forced assimilation of generations of American Indians in boarding schools. While these issues are felt by American Indian communities as a whole, they can be extremely damaging and confusing for American Indian youth, especially as they become increasingly isolated from their friends and school communities. These issues impact American Indian youths' mental health as they struggle to understand the world around them and could worsen an already high suicide rate – from 2003 to 2014, 35.7% of American Indian/Alaska Native suicides were committed by youth aged 10 to 24, compared to 11.1% of white suicides committed by the same age group.⁴ These problems demand culturally appropriate prevention to redress the history of American Indian community disruption and disassociation from culture.

Knowing that cultural connection and wellbeing are intertwined, tribal communities in Minnesota have recognized that the burden of addressing this legacy does not fall solely on schools to address; school districts require the support and expertise of tribes and American Indian communities. As reservations have closed their borders or issued emergency orders to

² Scott, C. (2020, April 17). *COVID-19: Native American leader says elders need protection*. Retrieved July 10, 2020, from <https://spectrumnews1.com/ca/la-west/inside-the-issues/2020/04/17/native-american-leader--elders-need-to-be-protected-during-covid-19-pandemic>.

³ Native Hope. (2020). *Mental health issues from historical trauma plague Native Americans*. Retrieved July 10, 2020, from <https://blog.nativehope.org/mental-health-issues-from-historical-trauma-plague-native-americans>.

⁴ Rachel A. Leavitt, MPH et al. *Suicides Among American Indian/Alaska Natives — National Violent Death Reporting System, 18 States, 2003–2014* (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention: Morbidity & Mortality Weekly Report 2018), 238.

protect their members from COVID-19, there has been a resurgence of community education efforts that rely on traditional practices and culture, which is critical to supporting youths' needs during this crisis. As cultural events and pow wows have been cancelled, some tribes have seized the opportunity to encourage their children to further their education through traditional means. While this education does not always coincide fully with schools' educational goals and assessment criteria, extracurricular cultural programming can support students' mental health needs, increase their involvement with their communities and traditions, and engage those who may otherwise struggle with virtual education. According to a Minnesota Department of Education report, in 2018 only 51% of American Indian students graduated high school within four years.⁵ The disconnect triggered by the pandemic and virtual education could cause an even greater educational gap for American Indian students with lingering consequences after high school.

As Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe Chief Executive Melanie Benjamin stated,

Nothing...restricts Band members or others from engaging in cultural activities, ceremonial life, or exercising hunting, fishing, and gathering rights in accordance with existing Band law. In fact, this is a moment in time when I would strongly encourage Band members to engage in our cultural traditions as much as possible. There has never been a more perfect time to be outdoors spending time in the woods or near the water. The sap is running, green shoots are sprouting up next to snow banks, and the spring harvest is nearly here. Being reminded of the gifts the Creator gave us can do worlds of good for our children, our families, and our own spirit.⁶

Several tribes have also encouraged members to participate in seasonal fishing or maple syrup harvesting while adhering to social distancing guidelines, which provides additional job training and educational opportunities.⁷

⁵ Minn. Dep't of Educ., *The State of Our Students: 2019* (Minn. Dep't of Educ. 2019), 8.

⁶ Benjamin, M. (2020, April). Message from the Chief Executive. *Ojibwe Inaajimowin*, 2.

⁷ Draper, K. (2020, April). Traditional medicines helping communities. *Ojibwe Inaajimowin*, 15; Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe. (2020, May). 2020 ogaa harvest guidelines for Mille Lacs Lake. *Ojibwe Inaajimowin*, 10; Chavers, C. Tribal Council update from Chairwoman Chavers, 4; Savage, B. Sawyer news, 5

Tribes have also increased their efforts to improve mental health access for their youth during the pandemic. Mille Lacs Mental Health Supervisor Crissy Wade has been building services and programming for youth, especially given the mental and emotional strain the pandemic is causing for Band members.⁸ Ge-Niigaanizijig, which is a comprehensive after-school mentoring program that includes culture, community, career, and education, has transitioned to virtual outreach and provides student with mentorship and afterschool programming.⁹

Many urban American Indian organizations have utilized COVID-19 as a way to expand their reach and services online. American Indian language classes which were typically offered in person are now offered virtually, providing students the opportunity to socialize with their community and gain a deeper understanding of their cultural worldview that can only be revealed through understanding their traditional language.¹⁰ Other programs include virtual plant walks in which students can learn about the traditional plants and medicines their ancestors used and how they can be used today.¹¹ At the Ain Dah Yung (Our Home) Center in St. Paul, the Ninijanisag (Our Children) Program conducts weekly drum and dance groups through Zoom. Staff incorporate storytelling into the teachings and youth can practice traditional dances at home or outside.¹²

Schools with large populations of American Indian students must initiate collaboration with these existing programs to supplement the services their students receive during the

⁸ Larson, B. (2020, July). Mental health program: Helping in times of crisis. *Ojibwe Inaajimowin*, 6.

⁹ Larson, B. (2020, July). Ge-Niigaanizijig Program: New director stresses mentorship, transitions. *Ojibwe Inaajimowin*, 8.

¹⁰ American Indian Community Housing Organization. (2020). Facebook. Retrieved July 20, 2020, from <https://www.facebook.com/events/936858253456937/>.

¹¹ American Indian Community Housing Organization. (2020). Facebook. Retrieved July 20, 2020, from <https://www.facebook.com/AICHOMn/>.

¹² Ain Dah Yung (Our Home) Center. (2020). *Ninijanisag*. Retrieved July 20, 2020, from <https://adycenter.org/ninijanisag>.

pandemic. This teamwork will increase opportunities for students to maintain healthy relationships with their communities and provide additional oversight to ensure they have access to additional mental health care when needed. Creating these structures and relationships now will also build pathways to improve idea and resource sharing after the pandemic for ongoing support to American Indian students in Minnesota.

During the COVID-19 pandemic American Indian communities have cared for their children by providing cultural education, services, and resources, which demonstrates a model of service delivery for American Indian students. They have adapted to the changing demands that the pandemic has prompted by relying on traditional values and honoring their ancestors' sacrifices. This sense of community is central to addressing American Indian youths' mental health and isolation. As Dr. Carson Gardner, a member of the White Earth Emergency Operations Center team and the White Earth Health Department highlighted,

[Five hundred] years ago, our Anishinaabe [Ojibwe] ancestors had no chance to win the smallpox battle. We, here and now, have a very good chance to win the COVID-19 battle. We should not squander that chance – our ancestors' sacrifices made it possible for us, their descendants, to have that choice now.¹³

Providing services to Minnesota's American Indian students requires the partnership of schools, tribal governments, and American Indian communities. These partnerships must rely heavily on the expertise of American Indian communities, their tribal customs, and their ways of healing and caring for their children. These cultural components are crucial to support their mental health needs and foster a sense of community, while recognizing historical trauma and the unique challenges American Indian students face during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Collaborating with tribes and tribal communities will help ensure that American Indian children

¹³ Padrta, G., ed. (2020, May). Annual White Earth celebration and powwow postponed. *Anishinaabeg Today: A Monthly Chronicle of White Earth Reservation*, 1.

have access to cultural education and mental health supports during the COVID-19 pandemic and build a structure for the future.

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