



U.S. Department of the Interior  
**Bureau of Indian Education**

# Working Respectfully With Tribal Leaders to Strengthen Relationships

## **A Resource for School Leaders**

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### **Purpose**

This resource is intended to help school leaders build and strengthen partnerships with Tribal leaders and staff in order to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students. This can be accomplished best through open discourse and collaboration between the two parties, recognizing that Tribal governments are sovereign nations that promote self-determination for the approximately half million American Indian students in the United States.

Overseeing the daily operations, supervision, and management of a Tribal school, the school leader's job is to help students not only meet but also exceed a variety of academic expectations. To promote student development and respect the Tribe's legacy, the leader must prioritize academic excellence while also incorporating the Tribal community's cultural values and traditions—systems of knowledge—into the educational setting.

This guide introduces five principles, along with suggested practices, strategies, and reflection questions, to help Tribal and school leaders develop a valued and cooperative relationship. Each principle builds a bridge of understanding for how to braid the Tribal community's values and traditions into the school's mission and vision.

The guidance and suggestions in this guide are adapted from *Working Respectfully With Indigenous Communities Around Data, Research, and Evidence: A Resource for State Education Agencies*, produced by REL West in 2021.



## Audience

This resource aims to facilitate effective collaboration between school leaders—including principals, assistant principals, and leadership teams—and Tribal communities, including legislative leaders, departmental staff, and members. The objective is to improve Indigenous students' academic and social–emotional well-being by combining school and Tribal resources.

## Principles for Working With Indigenous Communities to Strengthen Relationships

For the purpose of building solid, long-lasting relationships with Indigenous communities and Tribal leaders, it is imperative to put students' needs first. In addition, school leaders who are new to or have limited experience working in a Tribal school must incorporate Indigenous knowledge and expertise into their plans for school improvement to improve student achievement. These plans will involve working with Tribal leaders and staff to develop school goals, set academic expectations, and indigenize academic curricula.

## How to Use This Guide

To use this guide effectively, approach it as a three-step process. Begin by thoroughly understanding each principle, and then assess its application to your particular school to ensure that the school's work is also consistent with Tribal community values. Next, tailor the suggested practices included with each principle to your school's environment and create new practices to meet your specific needs. Finally, use reflective questions to assess and track your progress and create custom questions tailored to your specific challenges and goals. The detailed steps to walk you through this process are listed below.

### Step 1: Identifying Principles

- Review the description to gain an understanding of the principle.
- Identify parts of the principle that may require further discourse to develop a broader understanding of the description.
- Apply the identified principle: Correlate and connect each one to the school and Tribal community as needed.

### Step 2: Implementing Suggested Practices

- Review the practices and identify how you can use the suggestions within your school.
- Using the practices as a foundation, identify additional practices that can be developed and enacted that are unique to the user's school and Tribal community.

### Step 3: Engaging With Reflective Questions

- Review each reflective question and identify how each one can be utilized as an indicator to illustrate the user's progress toward the identified principle.
- Develop additional reflective questions that are unique to the school and Tribal community and can serve as supplementary assessments for the launch of suggested practices.



## Principle 1: Develop Your Indigenous Literacy

Indigenous literacy refers to having a fundamental understanding of a community’s history, culture, language, and experiences. Each federally recognized Tribe is a sovereign nation with a distinct history. However, this understanding must also recognize the complexities that result from historical interactions, which can influence current trust levels and cooperation between schools and Tribal communities.

A Tribal community’s experiences with federal appropriation and extraction may cause reluctance to establish relationships with school leaders and staff, especially when it comes to collecting information and data that the community may consider private. Furthermore, indications of outdated cultural stereotypes or the use of one standard approach with all Indigenous groups may be immediately off-putting to Tribal leaders.

Respect for Indigenous partners’ ways of knowing, being, and doing is demonstrated by following their leadership on national- and community-specific practices. Speaking with Tribal representatives enables the school leader to learn about the Tribal community while also identifying and understanding unique processes and protocols for working with school leaders.

A practice focuses on the “how” of doing things on a regular basis, whereas a strategy focuses more on the “why” and “what” in the context of achieving larger goals. Practices can be part of a strategy, but a strategy is usually a larger plan that specifies which practices to use and when.

### Practices

- » Devote time and resources to learning about a community’s history, culture, and experiences (Ferland et al., 2021).
- » Seek primary sources of information through direct interactions, experiences, and personal relationships with Tribal community members and leaders to better understand contemporary Indigenous realities (White House Office of Intergovernmental Affairs, 2009).
- » Determine whether the community comprises one or multiple Tribes (e.g., White Mountain Apache and San Carlos Apache are distinct Tribes) (Molina & Layland, 2020).

### Strategies

- » Interview community leaders to understand structures, preferred communication pathways, methods to gather or convey information, and student support systems.
- » Provide adequate time for Tribal decision-making processes, allowing leaders to thoroughly evaluate the consequences of decisions for their community.



## Reflective Questions

- What specific aspects of the Tribal community, its students, or families would I like to learn more about?
- Are there any aspects of the school that the Tribal community is unfamiliar with or wants to learn more about?
- What is the historical relationship between the school and the Tribe(s)?
- Do I provide members of the Tribe(s) with ample time and space to share their perspectives and histories, thereby allowing the Tribe to identify and understanding any differences?
- Do I share clarifying feedback from meetings or discussions with all school partners?
- Does the Tribe have a Tribal education department or agency? Have I identified a point of contact? How should I proceed with communication?

## Principle 2: Fostering Collaboration Through Self-Reflection

Building trust and establishing a sense of shared responsibility are crucial for building strong relationships that foster collaboration. These elements are essential for working together to develop school goals, set academic expectations, and integrate those expectations into school improvement plans, all with the goal of improving student outcomes. Tribes often feel an obligation to contribute to the success of schools located in their communities. Therefore, efforts should be made on behalf of the school to include the Tribe whenever possible so that their voices become a part of the school's mission and vision.

However, Indigenous knowledge traditions have frequently been dismissed or marginalized, hindering the development of such trust (Blanchard, 2020; Gardner-Vandy et al., 2020). It is important to remember that Tribal communities do not have an inherent responsibility to engage with a school leader. Therefore, it is critical to approach these potential partnerships with humility and a service orientation.

School leaders must recognize that effective relationship-building often requires a deliberate pace. Moving slowly at times can pave the way for rapid progress later. Building trust is a nuanced process that requires time and multiple levels of communication before a true partnership is established between all parties.

### Practices

- » Reflect on your own beliefs about Indigenous peoples.
- » Review the school's previous engagement efforts with Indigenous communities, focusing on communication and collaboration. Learn from what has worked and what has not and build from that point.

### Strategies

- » Listen to Tribal leaders to learn about their priorities and incorporate those priorities within school improvement efforts.
- » Make Indigenous students' needs a central topic of conversation in order to establish a common focus for collaboration with Tribal leaders.



## Reflective Questions

- Do I explain concepts that may be challenged by Indigenous knowledge systems to ensure that school partners can understand the school's goals for reshaping culture?
- Do I create meeting agendas that align with a Tribe's communication style?
- Do I provide regular updates and reports to the Tribe regarding the school's annual report card and other relevant information?
- Do I provide regular updates to the Tribe through collaborative meetings?

## Principle 3: Invest in Sustaining Mutually Beneficial and Reciprocal Relationships

To foster meaningful engagement with Indigenous leaders, school administrators must use a variety of communication methods and reach mutual agreements on process-related matters. School leaders should devote time, as well as human and financial resources, to cultivating and sustaining relationships that extend beyond specific school initiatives. They should also keep Tribal leaders updated on any potential changes in the school, such as a change in leadership, school staff, and curriculum.

### Practices

- » Ensure that your school allocates resources to support ongoing engagement with the Tribal community in order to assess community needs and priorities for school improvement.
- » Demonstrate transparency in consultations with Tribal leaders by actively listening and sharing back what you have heard and how you will respond.

### Strategies

- » Clarify and build common understanding about the vision and goals of collaborative work by thoroughly explaining acronyms, vocabulary, terminology, and teaching/learning methods (both Tribal and school-related).
- » Utilize a variety of modes of communication—including in-person and remote meetings, telephone calls, postal mail, email, and social media—to maximize access to and participation in the consultative process with Tribal leaders.

## Reflective Questions

- Do I provide structured and descriptive explanations when introducing new ideas and suggestions to foster change in the school's culture of teaching and learning?
- Do I anticipate questions by considering what Tribal leaders and school partners will likely initially find difficult to understand?



- How do I encourage regular communication between the school and the Tribe(s)?
- Have I considered planning regular meetings between the school and Tribe(s) to connect and collaborate?
- Have I identified meeting locations outside of the school?

## Principle 4: Recognize and Integrate Indigenous Expertise

Many education-related conversations and research continue to present deficit views of historically marginalized children, families, and communities based on race, class, language, and culture (Valencia, 2010). Integrating Indigenous expertise, practices, and traditions into lesson plans, ancillary materials, and teacher development models helps ensure that teaching and learning are culturally relevant and sustainable. Addressing colonialism and anti-racism positions Indigenous community members as experts, recognizing Indigenous voices and participation in decision-making (Ferland et al., 2021).

### Practices

- » Recognize the community's diverse expertise, including Elders, Tribal government representatives, educators, and others, and form partnerships to develop culturally relevant content and school improvement plans.
- » Determine how Indigenous families are represented in your school's consultancies, working groups, and other advisory bodies based on their race, geography, culture, and other characteristics.

### Strategies

- » Seek professional training for staff on how to incorporate Indigenous knowledge, instructional strategies, and methods into the classroom.
- » Identify the designated person in the Tribal community who can support your efforts to incorporate Indigenous perspectives and practices into the school curriculum for students.

### Reflective Questions

- Have I identified the long-term effects and impact of indigenizing schooling on students and the Tribal community?
- Have I considered how I can position Tribal leaders and Tribal members as Indigenous theorists as opposed to positioning them as subjects and finding value and relevance in their contributions to the school?
- How can I challenge the dominant idea of deficit thinking in my Tribal school?
- Have I reviewed the school's lesson plan templates, curriculum, and instructional methods to identify how to incorporate Indigenous knowledge into the classroom?



## Principle 5: Partner With Tribal Communities to Inform School System Improvements

Collaborative planning for managing and operating a Tribal school with Tribal communities helps pinpoint the support services they can contribute to the school medical/dental/vision services, health and nutrition programs, grant writing services, social services, and behavioral services, which are some of the common forms of assistance provided by a Tribe. Collaboration and regular communication keep school staff informed about the administrative and procedural steps required to secure those services. An office of Tribal relations that coordinates outreach to Indigenous communities may reduce redundant data requests from schools (Gardner-Vandy et al., 2020).

### Practices

- » Respect Indigenous data sovereignty, a Tribal nation's right to own and control how its data are collected and applied (U.S. Indigenous Data Sovereignty Network, n.d.).
- » Develop and propose alternative policies and procedures that take into account Tribal department organizational charts as well as their internal operating and management processes.

### Strategies

- » Prepare responses to provide clarity to those who want to understand divergent views found within Indigenous and non-Indigenous methods within the school setting.
- » Include other school leaders and staff in meetings with the Tribe so that they receive current information.

### Reflective Questions

- How do I demonstrate respect for diverse (Indigenous) viewpoints?
- Have I identified and developed a partnership with the Tribe and its staff to assist the school's effort for improvement and identify how the Tribe can support the school's improvement goals?



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