**BUILDING A BRIGHTER FUTURE FOR NATIVE STUDENTS**

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Dr. Heather Shotton is president of the National Indian Education Association (NIEA), the nation’s leading advocate for American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian students. A longtime activist for Native education, Shotton calls on the nation to build a brighter future in which “all Native students get a high-quality teacher who is subject matter competent, culturally responsive, and compassionate to our children.” In a candid NEA interview, Shotton describes how educators can make this future a reality.

**What’s the most crucial issue facing today’s Native students?**

No one singular issue affects all Native students because they’re so diverse regionally, tribally, and culturally. There is one central concern that touches the majority of Native students, however, and that is adequate funding for Indian education. Our students have been particularly hard hit by sequestration because of cuts to federal education programs like Title VII of ESEA, which funds public and Bureau of Indian Education schools.

**How can educators and schools promote the academic success of American Indian and Alaska Native children?**

I can’t stress enough the importance of ongoing collaboration with Native communities and tribes. Working closely with Native populations, especially in areas where there is a strong Native presence, is one of the best steps educators and schools can take to better understand our students’ unique academic and cultural needs. [See “Native Ways of Knowing.”]

**We see what educators can do at the school level, but how can NEA, the Association, help NIEA build a brighter future for Native students?**

NEA and NIEA can partner on projects and policy. They can develop a repository for Native curriculum and lesson plans—for use with Native and non-Native teachers—as well as an advocacy toolkit to assist NEA members in advocating, on a local level, for culturally appropriate programs in their schools. NEA can carry NIEA priorities for ESEA that support our tribal priorities with Congress and the Administration. And in a gesture of solidarity and strength, NEA has become an organizational member of NIEA to show our members—and yours—that we have and share common goals.
Why is it important for American students of all ethnicities to learn about Native culture?

The history of Native people is such an elemental part of the makeup of this country. We all understand the benefits students derive from learning about the diverse cultures of their fellow students, but it’s particularly important as it relates to Native children, who are so invisible in the classroom and curriculum. Learning about Native history enhances the educational experience of all students and builds acceptance for Native students among their teachers and classmates.

As president of NIEA, what’s your vision for Native Education?

Our vision at NIEA is a holistic approach that promotes academic achievement from early childhood through post-secondary education, providing students with the resources they need for college and career readiness. Native students are the future leaders of our community. They are the vehicle for securing our Native languages and cultures and strengthening our tribal communities.

Crash Course in Native Education

American Indians and Alaska Natives maintain a unique legal status as sovereign nations due to treaties signed with the U.S. government in exchange for vast tracts of aboriginal land. The education of Native children, who comprise over one percent of the U.S. student population, is a federal obligation that reflects this complex and multilayered relationship:

Public Schools. Ninety-three percent of AI/AN students attend mostly rural and urban public schools that are off reservation, although a small number of public schools are on tribal lands. Over 50 percent of these students attend schools where less than 25 percent of the student body is AI/AN. Public schools on and off tribal lands are funded by individual states and are subject to state standards and assessments. Some states with sizeable AI/AN populations hire Indian education staff to serve as liaisons between the Native community and the superintendent’s office.

BIE Schools. Almost seven percent of AI/AN students attend schools funded by the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), at the U.S. Department of the Interior. BIE is responsible for 184 elementary and secondary schools and dormitories located on reservation land in 23 states. Fifty-nine of these schools are BIE-operated as well as funded.

Tribal Schools. The remaining 125 BIE-funded schools are operated by tribes who have complete administrative control, including curricula, assessment, and hiring of school staff.

Private and Charter Schools. A fraction of AI/AN students attend private—often mission-operated—schools on Indian lands or charter schools on and off reservation.