



Washington Office of Superintendent of
PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

Supporting Native Students Experiencing Foster Care

SUPPORTING NATIVE STUDENTS EXPERIENCING FOSTER CARE

Five Guiding Practices for Schools

Native Student Success Framework in Practice

2026

Office of Native Education

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IMPORTANT FRAMING

Supporting Native students experiencing foster care requires compliance and relationships.

This resource was developed by the Native Student Success Program within the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction's (OSPI) Office of Native Education as a practical application of the Native Student Success Framework. The framework provides a relationship-centered approach to Native student success, and this resource applies that approach specifically to supporting Native students experiencing foster care.

This resource is not intended to replace existing foster care laws, guidance, or required procedures. Instead, it offers a relationship-centered perspective that complements existing guidance while honoring Tribal sovereignty and supporting Native student success.

Schools, districts, agencies, caregivers, and Tribal partners all share a responsibility to support Native youth, and these relationships can be complex. Students may be citizens or descendants of Tribes within Washington state, Tribes outside Washington state, Alaska Native communities, or First Nations. In some cases, schools and partners may not know a student is Native, which can prevent students from receiving the rights, protections, services, and cultural connections they are entitled to.

This resource is intended as a simple starting point for schools, districts, and partners as they consider who needs to be in relationship, what they need to understand about each student, and how they can work together to support Native students experiencing foster care.

Schools and partners should use this resource alongside applicable state and federal foster care requirements, OSPI foster care guidance, and Native education laws and guidance linked in the Resources section.

FIVE GUIDING PRACTICES

1. Begin with Relationships

Reflect: Who needs to know this student before they can support this student?

Consider: Build trust with students, families, caregivers, Tribal representatives, and community partners while carrying out required procedures and responsibilities. Relationships create the context for adults to work collaboratively to meet each student's individual needs while ensuring their rights are upheld.

Remember: Relationships create the conditions where Native students can thrive.

2. Honor Tribal Sovereignty

Reflect: Who should we be in relationship with?

Consider: Tribes are sovereign governments with inherent authority to govern their own citizens, communities, and affairs. Recognizing Tribal sovereignty means approaching Tribal partners with respect, building relationships over time, and honoring each Tribe's unique history, priorities, and ways of working.

Remember: Collaboration is grounded in relationship, not transaction.

3. Recognize and Honor Every Student's Unique Story

Reflect: What do I know about this student's identity, family, and community connections, and what still needs to be learned?

Consider: Avoid assumptions. Every Native student's story is unique. Learn how each student identifies and connects to their family, Tribe, culture, and community. Supporting the whole student includes attending to their academic needs while recognizing the importance of their connections to family, Tribe, culture, and community.

Remember:

A student may be:

- A citizen of a Washington state Tribe
- A citizen of a Tribe outside Washington state
- Alaska Native
- First Nations (Canada) with or without dual citizenship to the United States
- Eligible for Tribal enrollment but not enrolled in a Tribe
- Living far from their home Tribal community
- Connected to multiple Tribal or cultural communities

4. Help the Right People Connect

Reflect: Who needs to be part of this conversation?

Consider: Students already have important rights and protections. Those rights are most effectively realized when the adults supporting a student understand one another's roles, communicate openly, and work together toward shared goals. Sometimes the most important step is helping the right people come together around the student.

Remember: Rights are realized through relationships.

5. Keep Leading with Relationships

Reflect: How can this interaction strengthen trust, belonging, and connection?

Consider: Policies and procedures matter, but relationships give them meaning. When people understand one another, communicate openly, and work together with respect, compliance becomes a reflection of shared responsibility rather than simply a checklist.

Remember: Every interaction is an opportunity to strengthen a student's sense of belonging, identity, safety, and connection.

TAKEAWAY

Begin with relationships. Grow from there.

Honor Tribal sovereignty. | See the whole student. | Build with community.

Resources

For additional guidance, requirements, resources, and partnership:

1. OSPI Foster Care Program: [Foster Care](#)
2. OSPI Office of Native Education: [Native Student Success](#)
3. [Treehouse Educational Advocacy](#): Educational advocacy and barrier removal support for students experiencing foster care
4. DCYF Foster Parenting & Kinship Care: [Foster Parenting & Kinship Care | Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families](#)
5. Western Washington Native American Education Consortium: [WWNAEC](#)
6. Washington State Governor's Office of Indian Affairs: [Tribal Education Departments](#)
7. National Indian Child Welfare Association: [About NICWA - NICWA](#)
8. OSPI Student Engagement & Special Programs Division: [Students Experiencing Homelessness](#)

How This Resource Was Co-Created

This resource was developed by the Native Student Success Program within OSPI's Office of Native Education through a relationship-centered process grounded in the Native Student Success Framework.

Contributing partners brought specialized knowledge and expertise to the development process through conversation, reflection, revision, and member checking. Their contributions strengthened the resource and helped ensure the guidance reflects foster care systems, Tribal sovereignty, and educational advocacy practice.

We are grateful to our partners for their time, expertise, and collaboration.

Contributing Partner	Contribution
Foster Care Program, OSPI	Foster care policy, implementation, and systems guidance
Tribal Consultation Program, Office of Native Education, OSPI	Tribal sovereignty, government-to-government relationships, and community engagement
Treehouse Educational Advocacy	Cross-system knowledge, student-centered advocacy practices, and barrier removal expertise

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