



National Indian Child Care Association

# Policy Agenda

The National Indian Child Care Association (NICCA) Policy Agenda aims to advocate for equitable, culturally grounded early care and education (ECE) for Native American, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian children. This agenda is crucial for addressing systemic disparities and ensuring that Native children have the opportunity to thrive in their formative years.

Currently, Native children face significant challenges, including higher rates of poverty, limited access to quality ECE, and the lasting impacts of historical trauma. These issues contribute to educational and health disparities that hinder the potential of Native children. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive and culturally sensitive approach.

## The Importance of Early Care and Education

Early care and education (ECE) is a cornerstone for individual and societal advancement, providing critical benefits during the first five years of rapid brain development. High-quality ECE nurtures cognitive and social-emotional growth, laying the foundation for future learning, improved educational success, greater earning potential, and better health outcomes.<sup>i</sup>

For American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian children, access to culturally appropriate and high-quality ECE is particularly crucial. These children often face unique challenges, including higher rates of poverty and limited access to educational resources.<sup>ii,iii</sup> Nearly one-third of American Indian and Alaska Native children live in households below the federal poverty line, and they are at higher risk for adverse experiences in early care and learning environments.<sup>iv</sup>

What's more, the legacy of historical trauma, including the forced assimilation policies and boarding school experiences, continues to affect American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian communities today. These traumatic events have led to intergenerational cycles of violence, abuse, and mental health challenges.<sup>v</sup> Understanding and addressing this historical trauma is essential in creating supportive and effective ECE environments that respect and incorporate Indigenous cultures and identities.

Investing in ECE yields substantial returns for society as well. Children who receive quality early education are more likely to graduate from high school and pursue higher education, ultimately contributing to a more skilled and competitive workforce.<sup>vi,vii</sup> Studies show that early childhood education has at least a four to nine time return

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on investment per dollar.<sup>viii,ix</sup> However, despite its clear benefits, access to quality ECE remains uneven, particularly in low-income regions.<sup>x,xi</sup>

ECE is not merely a preparatory phase but a critical investment in the future. By providing children with a strong foundation during their formative years, we are investing in a brighter future for our communities and cultivating well-rounded individuals who will positively contribute to society.<sup>xii,xiii</sup>

## Disparities Facing Native American, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian Children

Native American, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian children face unique and persistent challenges that place them at a disadvantage compared to the broader population. These disparities stem from historical injustices, systemic inequities, and underinvestment in programs that serve Native communities. Understanding these challenges is critical to crafting policies that address their needs and support their thriving.

### Economic Inequities

- **Higher Poverty Rates:** Native children experience poverty at disproportionately higher rates than their non-Native peers. According to federal data, nearly 1 in 3 Native children live in poverty, compared to about 1 in 6 children nationwide.<sup>xiv</sup>
- **Limited Access to Resources:** Remote locations and underfunded infrastructure in many Tribal communities exacerbate challenges, limiting access to essential services such as child care, education, and health care.<sup>xv</sup>

### Educational Disparities

- **Lower Academic Achievement:** Native children often face significant barriers to educational success, with lower rates of high school graduation and college attendance compared to the general population.<sup>xvi</sup>
- **Inadequate Early Education Opportunities:** Many Native communities lack access to high-quality ECE programs, putting Native children at a disadvantage before they even enter kindergarten.<sup>xvii</sup>

### Health Challenges

- **Higher Rates of Health Issues:** Native children experience higher rates of chronic health conditions, including asthma, obesity, and diabetes. Mental health challenges, including higher rates of suicide among Native youth, are also prevalent.<sup>xviii</sup>
- **Limited Health Care Access:** Geographic isolation and underfunded Indian Health Service (IHS) facilities often mean that Native children and their families struggle to access timely and quality health care.<sup>xix</sup>

### Cultural and Language Barriers

- **Loss of Native Languages:** Historical policies, such as boarding schools, aimed to suppress Native languages and cultures, resulting in a generational disconnect. This loss impacts identity development and community cohesion for Native children.<sup>xx</sup>
- **Need for Culturally Relevant Education:** Native children often lack access to curricula and educators who reflect their cultural heritage, which can lead to disengagement from the education system.<sup>xxi</sup>

### Systemic Underinvestment

- **Inadequate Federal Funding:** Tribal communities receive less per capita investment in early care and education, and health services compared to other populations, perpetuating cycles of inequity.<sup>xxii,xxiii</sup>

- **Underrepresentation in Research and Policy:** Native children are often overlooked in national data sets and policy discussions, resulting in a lack of targeted solutions to address their needs.<sup>xxiv</sup>

### Housing Instability

- **Overcrowded and Inadequate Housing:** Native families are more likely to live in overcrowded or substandard housing. This instability affects children's ability to focus on learning and impacts their overall well-being.<sup>xxv</sup>
- **Homelessness and Housing Insecurity:** Native children experience homelessness at higher rates than their peers, contributing to educational and emotional instability.<sup>xxvi</sup>

### Food Insecurity

- **Disproportionate Rates of Food Insecurity:** Native families experience food insecurity at disproportionately high rates, with many facing challenges in accessing affordable and nutritious food due to geographic isolation, systemic inequities, and underfunded food assistance programs. This has profound effects on the physical health, cognitive development, and educational success of Native children.<sup>xxvii,xxviii</sup>
- **Barriers to Food Access:** Many Native communities are located in food deserts, where access to fresh and nutritious food is severely limited. This lack of availability contributes to higher rates of diet-related health issues, such as obesity and diabetes, among Native children and families.<sup>xxix</sup>

By recognizing and addressing these disparities, we can work toward creating equitable opportunities for Native American, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian children. Policies that invest in culturally grounded, holistic approaches to early care and education, education, and community well-being are essential to closing these gaps and ensuring a brighter future for Native children.

## About the National Indian Child Care Association

As the only national collective voice for Tribal child care, the National Indian Child Care Association (NICCA) is uniquely positioned to champion the needs of Native children, families, and communities in the realm of early care and education (ECE). NICCA blends deep cultural understanding with actionable advocacy to address the unique challenges faced by Native communities. NICCA recognizes that ECE in Tribal communities is not one-size-fits-all. It must be rooted in an individual Tribe's values, traditions, and languages. By advocating for policies and practices that respect and integrate these cultural foundations, NICCA ensures Native children can thrive both within and beyond their communities.

Native children face systemic disparities in access to quality ECE, which perpetuate cycles of inequity. NICCA works tirelessly to close this gap, advocating for equitable funding, resources, and support to empower Native families and build strong, culturally grounded ECE programs. NICCA emphasizes the holistic development of Native children, focusing on their physical, social-emotional, cognitive, and cultural well-being. This approach ensures that Native children are not only prepared for academic success but also deeply connected to their identity and community.

NICCA serves as a resource and ally for Tribal ECE professionals, offering training, technical assistance, and support. By strengthening the capacity of these programs, NICCA helps Tribal communities create and sustain high-quality ECE systems. As a leader in Tribal ECE policy, NICCA works with federal, Tribal, and state governments to ensure that Native voices are heard in decision-making processes. NICCA's advocacy has led to tangible policy changes that improve the lives of Native children and families.

NICCA believes that investing in Native children is an investment in the future of Tribal nations. By addressing the unique challenges of ECE in Native communities, NICCA lays the foundation for stronger families, resilient communities, and a thriving future. NICCA's work is not just about improving early childhood care today; it's about

creating the opportunity for every Native child to grow, learn, and succeed while staying connected to their cultural roots.

## Tribal Early Care and Education by the Numbers

The Tribal Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) is a federal program that provides funding to Tribes and Tribal organizations to support early care and education (ECE) services for American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) children and families. Its purpose is to increase access to high-quality, affordable child care while supporting parental employment, education, and job training. Tribal CCDF programs are designed to meet the unique cultural, linguistic, and developmental needs of Native children, ensuring they receive ECE that is both enriching and culturally grounded. Additionally, the program empowers Tribes to exercise self-determination in implementing ECE systems that reflect their community's values and priorities.

**546**

Federally Recognized Tribes served by CCDF

**264**

CCDF Tribal Lead Agencies

**50**

Integrated CCDF Plans in PL 102-477

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**575,452**

American Indian/Alaska Native children under 13 years of age

**\$598**

Million appropriated for Tribal CCDF in FY2024

**\$76**

Million towards infrastructure projects in FY2023

## Policy Vision and Goals

The National Indian Child Care Association (NICCA) is committed to advancing policies that ensure Native children have access to high-quality, culturally grounded early care and education (ECE). Our policy agenda focuses on addressing systemic disparities, empowering Tribal communities, and building a strong foundation for future generations of Native children. This agenda reflects NICCA's mission to advocate for equity, cultural preservation, and holistic well-being in ECE.

# 1

## Secure equitable funding for Tribal ECE programs.

**Problem** Native children face significant disparities in access to quality early care and education (ECE) due to underfunded Tribal programs. Nearly one-third of American Indian and Alaska Native children live in households below the federal poverty line, limiting their access to essential educational resources. Additionally, Tribal communities often receive less per capita investment in ECE compared to other populations.

**Reform** **Ensure Parity in Federal Funding:** Advocate for funding formulas that address the unique needs of Tribal communities, including geographic isolation and culturally specific programming.

**Increase CCDF Allocations for Tribes:** Push for increases in the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) to better support Tribal ECE systems.

**Support Integration, Braiding, and/or Cost Allocating of Funding Streams:** Advocate for policies that allow Tribal programs to integrate and braid multiple funding sources, such as Head Start, Early Head Start (HS/EHS), Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships (EHS-CCP), Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV), and Tribal Early Learning Initiatives (TELI). This approach ensures efficient use of resources, reduces administrative burdens, and supports comprehensive service delivery.

# 2

## Promote holistic early care and education systems.

**Problem** Native children often lack access to culturally appropriate ECE programs that support their holistic development. Many Native communities face barriers to implementing comprehensive ECE systems that address physical, social-emotional, cognitive, and cultural development. This lack of culturally relevant education can lead to disengagement and lower academic achievement.

**Reform** **Cultural Integration:** Promote policies that require culturally appropriate practices throughout all aspects of ECE including curricula, developmental screenings, and early intervention services that are rooted in Tribal values, languages, and traditions.

**Streamline Services for Efficiency:** Advocate for the alignment and streamlining of federal and Tribal early childhood programs to simplify service delivery, eliminate duplication, and ensure seamless support for families.

**Support Comprehensive Services:** Advocate for integrated approaches addressing physical, social-emotional, cognitive, and cultural development in early childhood programs.

**Encourage Collaboration Across Programs:** Promote strengthening of ECE services through partnerships between Tribal child care programs, HS/EHS, EHS-CCP, MIECHV, TELI, and other initiatives to deliver a coordinated and holistic system of care for Native children and families.

## 3

### Strengthen the early childhood workforce.

**Problem** There is a shortage of qualified ECE professionals in Tribal communities, exacerbated by low wages, limited professional development opportunities, and housing challenges. This shortage impacts the quality and stability of ECE programs, hindering the development of Native children.

**Reform** **Recruitment, Training, and Retention:** Advocate for financial incentives, loan forgiveness, and professional development opportunities to attract and retain Native professionals in ECE. Tailor training programs to meet the unique needs of Tribal communities and prioritize culturally relevant approaches.

**Livable Wages and Benefits:** Promote policies that ensure competitive wages and comprehensive benefits for ECE professionals to enhance workforce stability and quality.

**Address Housing Challenges:** Support affordable housing solutions, such as subsidies, stipends, and partnerships with Tribal housing authorities, to alleviate housing barriers for educators, particularly in rural and remote areas.

**Foster Educator Well-Being:** Encourage mental health resources, self-care initiatives, and culturally supportive work environments to sustain a resilient and thriving workforce.

## 4

### Invest in infrastructure and technology.

**Problem** Many Tribal ECE facilities are outdated and lack modern amenities, impacting the quality of care and education provided. Additionally, limited access to technology hinders the ability of Tribal early learning programs to utilize modern tools and resources.

**Reform** **Facility Upgrades and Construction:** Advocate for continued and increased funding to build and maintain safe, modern ECE facilities in Tribal communities.

**Access to Technology:** Promote investments in digital infrastructure to support Tribal early learning programs with modern tools and resources.

## 5

### Support Tribal data sovereignty and research.

**Problem** Tribal communities often lack control over data related to their ECE programs and outcomes, leading to gaps in research and policy development. This lack of data sovereignty can result in policies that do not fully address the needs of Native children.

**Reform** **Support Tribal Data Sovereignty:** Advocate for policies that allow Tribes to collect, own, and control data related to their ECE programs and outcomes.

**Invest in Research on Native Early Childhood Development:** Push for funding and partnerships to address gaps in research focused specifically on Native children.

**Promote Culturally Appropriate Data Collection:** Encourage integrating Indigenous storytelling and other culturally relevant methods into research to ensure data reflects Native communities' authentic experiences and perspectives.

## 6

### Advocate for child and family well-being.

**Problem** Native children and families face numerous challenges, including food insecurity, limited access to health care, mental health services, and housing. Many Native families experience food insecurity due to geographic isolation and systemic inequities. Geographic isolation and underfunded Indian Health Service facilities limit access to quality health care, contributing to higher rates of chronic health conditions among Native children. Mental health challenges, including higher rates of suicide, are prevalent due to historical trauma. Housing instability, including overcrowded and substandard housing, further impacts children's well-being and educational stability.

**Reform** **Comprehensive Family Support Services:** Promote policies connecting ECE programs to health care, nutrition, and housing services. Advocate for increased funding and cultural flexibility in food programs, such as the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), to better serve Native communities. Support direct Tribal access to the CACFP program as a Lead Agency. Encourage the incorporation of culturally relevant menu options in food programs to ensure that Native children receive nutritious and culturally appropriate meals.

**Mental Health and Trauma-Informed Care:** Advocate for funding and training for early intervention services, mental health services, and trauma-informed care in Tribal ECE settings.

# 7

## Align and streamline federal program requirements.

**Problem** Tribal ECE programs often face administrative burdens due to misaligned federal program requirements. This misalignment can hinder the effective delivery of services and limit local decision-making.

**Reform** **Streamline Federal Program Requirements:** Advocate for flexible, aligned federal programs serving Tribal children to reduce administrative burdens and support local decision-making.

**Respect Tribal Sovereignty:** Push for policies enabling Tribes to tailor programs to their community-specific needs.

# 8

## Enhance support for remote and underserved areas.

**Problem** Native children in remote and underserved areas face significant barriers to accessing quality ECE. Geographic isolation and limited transportation, housing, food access, and other social service options further exacerbate these challenges.

**Reform** **Expand Access to ECE in Remote Areas:** Advocate for targeted funding to increase access to ECE in rural and remote Tribal communities.

**Support Transportation Solutions:** Promote funding for transportation services to connect families in underserved areas with ECE opportunities.

# 9

## Promote climate resilience and sustainability.

**Problem** Tribal ECE centers are increasingly affected by climate challenges, such as extreme weather and environmental hazards. These challenges can disrupt ECE services and impact the safety and well-being of Native children.

**Reform** **Support Environmental Adaptation:** Advocate for funding to help Tribal ECE centers adapt to climate challenges, such as extreme weather and environmental hazards.

**Promote Sustainable Practices:** Encourage policies supporting renewable energy, sustainable building materials, and other environmentally conscious practices in ECE infrastructure.



## Recommendations By Agency

Achieving equitable and culturally relevant early care and education (ECE) for Native children requires collaborative efforts at all levels of government and within Tribal communities. These recommendations outline specific actions for Congress, federal agencies, Tribes, and states to address systemic challenges, enhance service delivery, and ensure the holistic well-being of American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian (AI/AN/NH) children and families.

## Recommendations for Congress

**Increase and allocate funding based on need.** Increased funding is needed to better support ECE programs serving AI/AN/NH children and families, as **current funding levels for the Child Care and Development Fund program only serve 6.4% of Native children** in need of early care and education services. Funding allocations should be determined using a data-driven method based on the actual number of Native children requiring services, rather than a flat percentage, to ensure Tribes receive sufficient resources to effectively address the unmet needs in their communities.

**Ensure meaningful consultation** by requiring consultation with Indian Tribes, including Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiians, as well as the National Indian Child Care Association (NICCA), experts in Tribal early childhood development, and linguists on policies, regulations, and program implementation. Particular focus should be given to licensing and standards, Native language acquisition, and child development.

**Add language in Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) that would authorize Tribes to access FBI fingerprinting.** This change supports the implementation of consistent background checks and enhances the safety of ECE services in Tribal communities.

**Provide dedicated funding and technical assistance for the implementation of early childhood mental health consultants in Tribal ECE programs.** Emphasize the need for coordination with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to align mental health initiatives with Tribal-specific needs and inclusive of trauma-informed care practices.

**Allow Tribes to define a relative caregiver** to provide more flexibility and support for families, ensuring children can remain within their community and maintain cultural connections. This allows Tribes to consider the unique family structures and cultural practices of their Tribe.

**Create of an exempted caregiver category for cultural care providers.** This category will include elders and other Tribal knowledge holders who can provide culturally relevant care and education to our children.

**Enable direct Tribal access to the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)** by amending CACFP law and regulations to explicitly include "Tribe and/or Tribal organization" as eligible sponsors under the CACFP, ensuring direct access to administer nutrition programs that meet the unique needs of AI/AN/NH communities.

**Increase funding and cultural flexibility in food programs** by increasing funding and accepting incorporation of culturally relevant menu options in programs like the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) to better serve AI/AN/NH communities.

**Support paid family leave** through the implementation of a universal paid family leave policy to ensure all families, including those in Tribal communities, have the opportunity to care for their children during critical early years without sacrificing financial stability.

**Strengthen and expand Head Start** by increasing funding and resources for Head Start and Early Head Start programs to enhance accessibility and support culturally relevant services for AI/AN/NH children, fostering their holistic development and school readiness.

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## Recommendations for Federal Agencies

**Enhance data accuracy on AI/AN children** through coordination with Tribes and across agencies, including Census Bureau, Department of Commerce, Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Education, Department of Agriculture, Department of Labor, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs within the Department of the Interior, among others. Accurate data is critical for effective policymaking and resource allocation for Tribal ECE programs.

**Streamline and simplify the Tribal CCDF Plan** to reduce duplication and ensure that child count data are submitted at the same time in a single document. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families should ensure that Tribal Plans, including child count data and basic demographic information, are publicly accessible to support transparency and inform Congress and policymakers in setting funding levels based on the actual number of AI/AN children.

Use the Department of Health and Human Services Interagency Task Force on Child Safety to **address barriers to interstate background checks and program compliance**, examining challenges Tribes face in accessing interstate background checks and compliance with the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) and National Sex Offender Registry (NSOR). Provide targeted solutions to support Tribal Lead Agencies in meeting regulatory requirements while maintaining Tribal sovereignty.

**Ensure meaningful consultation** by holding formal consultations and informal listening sessions with Indian Tribes, including Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiians, as well as the National Indian Child Care Association (NICCA), experts in Tribal early childhood development, and linguists on policies, regulations, and program implementation. Announcements of consultations and listening sessions should be announced with reasonable advanced notice and made publicly available through the appropriate website channels as well as distributed by email to Tribal leaders, Tribal CCDF administrators, the National Indian Child Care Association, and experts in Tribal early childhood development.

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## Recommendations for States

**Recruit and train culturally competent ECE staff and licensing staff** in high AI/AN/NH population states. This ensures that ECE programs are better equipped to meet the unique cultural, linguistic, and developmental needs of Native children and families.

**Facilitate Tribal access to state criminal databases** by creating processes allowing Tribes to access state background checks for ECE professionals to ensure compliance with federal regulations and child safety.

## Recommendations for Tribes

**Coordinate CCDF, Head Start, and other early childhood programs for greater alignment.**

Tribes should coordinate programs to reduce duplication and improve service delivery. This includes aligning program standards, policies, needs assessments, data collection, and monitoring efforts. Such coordination will enhance efficiency and ensure more culturally relevant and integrated services for AI/AN/NH children and families.

**Ensure that ECE professionals receive compensation, including wages, benefits, and supports, that is sufficient and aligned with their duties and roles.** Tribal governments hold the authority to determine the wage structures, benefits, and supports that ECE professionals receive and, as such, should implement structures that compensate ECE professionals sufficiently.

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