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Increasing American Indian and Alaska Native Content in English Language Arts Standards: A Tool for Education Leaders

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About This Tool

There is a systemic lack of American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) content in the academic standards of states across the country, especially in English language arts (ELA).

To increase inclusion and amplify the contributions of AI/AN peoples, WestEd's [Region 13 Comprehensive Center](#) (R13CC) developed this tool. It is designed to help state education agencies (SEAs) incorporate high-quality, authentic AI/AN content into their ELA standards review and revision processes to support learning for all students.

Background

Almost 90 percent of social studies curriculum standards do not mention AI/AN history after 1900, and 27 states do not mention AI/AN peoples in their K–12 curricula at all.ⁱ AI/AN content and contributions are even less prevalent in ELA standards, with most states not yet meaningfully referencing, representing, or reflecting AI/AN cultures, philosophies, or contributions in their standards.

Incorporating the histories, cultures, and contributions of different populations in state standards supports academic achievement and social–emotional learning for students of all backgrounds.ⁱⁱ For instance, curricula that reflect the diversity of student populations can help foster a positive self–concept for students and facilitate connections between students’ life experiences and the content they are learning. Diverse curricula can also help students learn about different cultures and perspectives, which promotes the attitudes, knowledge, and skills needed to join a global workforce.

AI/AN students make up 2.9 percent of the U.S. population, and 90 percent of them attend public schools.ⁱⁱⁱ While Alaska (22.0%), Oklahoma (12.0%), Montana (11.0%), South Dakota (10.7%), and New Mexico (10.3%)^{iv} have the highest percentages of AI/AN students, it is imperative that all states prioritize diverse and inclusive curriculum standards to support learning for all students.

Categories for States to Consider When Developing Native-Inclusive ELA Standards

To inform this tool, the R13CC examined how the 50 states and the [Bureau of Indian Education](#) (BIE) represent AI/AN peoples and their contributions in ELA standards. The R13CC identified three states that currently incorporate AI/AN content and contributions into their ELA standards: Minnesota, Montana, and New Mexico.

Based on the findings and relevant research, the R13CC team identified five categories for SEAs to consider as they develop practical Native–inclusive ELA state standards:

- » Population, Language, and Terminology
- » State Policy
- » Grade Levels and Areas of ELA Content
- » Existing AI/AN Standards
- » Authentic Resources

[Appendix A](#) illustrates examples of the ELA standards in Minnesota, Montana, and New Mexico in relation to the five categories listed above.

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AI/AN Content in ELA Standards: Planning Tool

The following tool outlines key considerations for SEAs during their ELA state standards adoption processes.^v It is structured into sections based on the five previously mentioned categories. Each section provides a succinct overview along with planning questions aimed at integrating need–sensing, raising awareness of AI/AN contributions and communities, and action planning to facilitate SEAs in crafting inclusive, high–quality learning expectations inclusive of AI/AN content and contributions.

These sections are designed to be non-sequential, and certain questions may appear in multiple sections. This design is intended to assist SEAs in navigating the tool according to their specific needs.

Users can document their responses to the questions in the fillable fields provided below. (For a printable list of the planning questions, refer to [Appendix B](#).)

Population, Language, and Terminology

Identify the federally and state recognized AI/AN tribes in your state and determine what language or terminology will be used when referencing these groups in your state standards. Seek guidance on culturally sensitive approaches from an advisory body, representatives from local tribes, and community members.

1. Which federally recognized and state-recognized tribes are located in your state?
2. What language or terminology will be used when referring to American Indian and Alaska Native peoples in your state standards (e.g., Native American, American Indian, Indigenous People, First People)? Why?
3. What is your SEA's process for meaningful consultation with tribal governments located in your state? How will you work with tribal governments and AI/AN organizations to answer the questions in this category?
4. How will you consult with the state advisory body, commission, or council regarding inclusion of American Indian and Alaska Native peoples in the ELA standards?

State Policy

Explore your state's policy regarding timelines for ELA standards adoption and legislation in support of AI/AN or local tribe inclusion. Identify how you will consult with key partners about including AI/AN content in your state standards.

1. When were the ELA state standards last updated in your state?
2. When should the ELA state standards next be updated in your state?
3. What rules, laws, or legislation support the inclusion of American Indian and Alaska Native peoples in your state's standards?
4. What is your SEA's process for meaningful consultation with tribal governments located in your state? How will you work with tribal governments and AI/AN organizations to answer the questions in this category?
5. How will you consult with the state advisory body, commission, or council regarding inclusion of American Indian and Alaska Native peoples in the ELA standards?

Grade Levels and Areas of ELA Content

Seek guidance on content selection from local tribes, cultural experts, and educators who can provide authentic insights into both ELA and AI/AN cultures. Consider which grade levels you will prioritize for incorporating AI/AN content. Ensure that materials are age-appropriate and align with educational objectives.

1. How can American Indian and Alaska Native content be incorporated across all grade-level standards?
2. Which areas of the ELA standards (e.g., reading, informational texts, writing, listening, speaking) will incorporate American Indian and Alaska Native content?
3. How did American Indian and Alaska Native tribes impact and influence your state through their cultures and contributions?
4. What significant American Indian and Alaska Native historical and contemporary events, authors, literature, stories, and cultural references might you want to include in your standards? Why?
5. What is your SEA's process for meaningful consultation with tribal governments located in your state? How will you work with tribal governments and AI/AN organizations to answer the questions in this category?

6. How will you consult with the state advisory body, commission, or council regarding inclusion of American Indian and Alaska Native peoples in the ELA standards?

Existing AI/AN Standards

Evaluate other content area standards in your state that include AI/AN content. Seek inspiration from other states that incorporate AI/AN content into their ELA standards (see [Appendix A](#) for examples).

1. Which other content area standards (e.g., social studies, math, science, art) in your state include American Indian and Alaska Native peoples? How can those standards be used as inspiration for your state's ELA standards?
2. How do other states incorporate American Indian and Alaska Native content into their ELA standards (e.g., Minnesota, Montana, New Mexico)? How can this be used for inspiration in your state?

Authentic Resources

Compile a comprehensive list of authentic and accurate curricular resources, including literature, historical documents, and cultural materials related to American Indian and Alaska Native literature and topics. Ensure diverse perspectives and expertise are reflected.

1. Which literary texts, books, and stories authored and illustrated by American Indian and Alaska Native people might you include in your standards?

2. Does literature by non-Native authors provide evidence that they consulted with knowledgeable people within the tribal nations or communities depicted in the text?
3. Does literature include realistic portrayals of modern life among American Indian and Alaska Native peoples?
4. Does literature treat retellings or traditional stories with respect as sacred stories (not myths, legends, or folktales)?
5. Which American Indian and Alaska Native authors, literature, stories, and cultural references are specific to your state?

Next Steps

1. Based on the questions that you have explored in the categories above, what next steps will your SEA take to include American Indian and Alaska Native content and contributions in your state's ELA standards?

Appendix A. Examples From States That Incorporate AI/AN Content Into Their ELA Standards

The R13CC found three states—Minnesota, Montana, and New Mexico—that incorporate AI/AN content and contributions into their ELA standards. Table A1 shows examples of AI/AN-related content in the ELA standards in Minnesota, Montana, and New Mexico based on the five categories listed in the planning tool.

Table A1. Examples of AI/AN Content in English Language Arts Standards in Minnesota, Montana, and New Mexico

Category	Minnesota	Montana	New Mexico
Population, Language, and Terminology	<p><i>AI/AN tribes in the state:</i> There are 11 federally recognized American Indian tribes with reservations throughout Minnesota. Seven of these are Anishinaabe (Chippewa, Ojibwe) and four are Dakota.</p> <p><i>Collective term(s) used to reference AI/AN peoples:</i> No collective term is used.</p> <p><i>Tribal nations referenced in the standards:</i> Dakota and Anishinaabe</p>	<p><i>AI/AN tribes in the state:</i> Montana has 12 federally recognized American Indian tribes: Assiniboine, Blackfeet, Chippewa, Cree, Crow, Gros Ventre, Kootenai, Little Shell Chippewa, Northern Cheyenne, Pend d'Oreille, Salish, and Sioux.</p> <p><i>Collective term(s) used to reference AI/AN peoples:</i> American Indians</p> <p><i>Tribal nations referenced in the standards:</i> None</p>	<p><i>AI/AN tribes in the state:</i> New Mexico has 23 federally recognized American Indian tribes, including 19 Pueblos, 3 Apache tribes, and the Navajo Nation.</p> <p><i>Collective term(s) used to reference AI/AN peoples:</i> Native Americans</p> <p><i>Tribal nations referenced in the standards:</i> None</p>
State Policy		<p>The standards reflect the state's constitutional mandate that all educators must provide instruction that includes the distinct and unique heritage and contemporary contributions of American Indians in a culturally responsive manner. (See IEFA, MCA 20-1-501 Article X, resources, and materials.)</p>	

Category	Minnesota	Montana	New Mexico
<p>Grade Levels and Areas of ELA Content</p>	<p><i>AI/AN content is found in the following:</i></p> <p>Grades K–12: Listening, Speaking, Viewing and Exchanging Ideas (LSVEI); Literary and Informational Texts</p> <p>Grades 6 and 9: Writing</p>	<p><i>AI/AN content is found in the following:</i></p> <p>Grades K–5: Reading Standards for Literature; Informational Texts; Writing Standards; Listening and Speaking</p> <p>Grades 6–8: Reading Standards for Literature, Informational Texts, Writing Standards</p> <p>Grades 6–8: Literacy in History; Science and Technical Subjects</p> <p>Grades 9–12: Reading Standards for Literature, Informational Texts, Writing Standards</p> <p>Grades 9–12: Literacy in History; Science and Technical Subjects</p>	<p><i>AI/AN content is found in the following:</i></p> <p>Supplemental standards</p> <p>Grades 3–12: Reading Literature</p> <p>Grades 6–12: Informational Texts</p>

Category	Minnesota	Montana	New Mexico
<p>Existing AI/AN Standards</p>	<p><i>Examples of other content area standards that feature AI/AN content:</i></p> <p>Social Studies:</p> <p>Citizenship and Government, 4th Grade</p> <p>1.4.1, 1.4.2 Governmental Institutions and Political Processes: Explain and evaluate processes, rules and laws of United States governmental institutions at local, state and federal levels and within Tribal Nations.</p> <p>History, 5th Grade</p> <p>5.4.21.1 Explain the religious, political and economic reasons for the movement of people from Europe to the Americas and examine the impact of colonization and settler colonialism on Indigenous peoples.</p>	<p><i>Examples of other content area standards that feature AI/AN content:</i></p> <p>Social Studies:</p> <p>Geography, 2nd grade</p> <p>SS.CG.2.2 Explain the roles of people who help govern different communities including tribal communities</p> <p>History, 3rd grade</p> <p>SS.H.3.1 identify tribes in Montana by their original and current names</p>	<p><i>Examples of other content area standards that feature AI/AN content:</i></p> <p>Social Studies, 7th Grade:</p> <p>Geography 14. Human Environmental Interactions and Sustainability</p> <p>7.31. Analyze land use patterns of Ancestral Pueblo, Mogollon, and Athabaskan peoples.</p> <p>7.32. Discuss the importance of resource shortages on the lifestyles of the Mogollon and Ancestral Puebloans.</p> <p>History 15. Historical Change, Continuity, Context, and Reconciliation</p> <p>7.33. Connect cultural adaptations of the Pueblo, Apache, and Diné people to today.</p> <p>7.34. Compare and contrast Athabaskan culture, agricultural practices, and settlement patterns with those of the Pueblos.</p>
<p>Authentic Resources</p>		<p><i>Example of specific AI/AN literature mentioned in ELA standards:</i></p> <p>James Welch’s <i>Fools Crow</i>, where the author retells the Pikuni traditional story, “Star Boy” (RL.9–10.9)</p>	

Appendix B. List of Questions for SEAs to Consider as They Develop Practical Native-Inclusive ELA State Standards

The following is a list of the questions presented in the *AI/AN in ELA Standards: Planning Tool*.

Population, Language, and Terminology

1. Which federally recognized and state-recognized tribes are located in your state?
2. What language or terminology will be used when referring to American Indian and Alaska Native peoples in your state standards (e.g., Native American, American Indian, Indigenous People, First People)? Why?
3. What is your SEA's process for meaningful consultation with tribal governments located in your state? How will you work with tribal governments and AI/AN organizations to answer the questions in this category?
4. How will you consult with the state advisory body, commission, or council regarding inclusion of American Indian and Alaska Native peoples in the ELA standards?

State Policy

1. When were the ELA state standards last updated in your state?
2. When should the ELA state standards next be updated in your state?
3. What rules, laws, or legislation supports the inclusion of American Indian and Alaska Native peoples in your state's standards?
4. What is your SEA's process for meaningful consultation with tribal governments located in your state? How will you work with tribal governments and AI/AN organizations to answer the questions in this category?
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Grade Levels and Areas of ELA Content

1. How can American Indian and Alaska Native content be incorporated across all grade-level standards?
2. Which areas of the ELA standards (e.g., reading, informational texts, writing, listening, speaking) will incorporate American Indian and Alaska Native content?
3. How did American Indian and Alaska Native tribes impact and influence your state through their culture and contributions?

4. What significant AI/AN historical and contemporary events, authors, literature, stories, and cultural references might you want to include in your standards? Why?
5. What is your SEA's process for meaningful consultation with tribal governments located in your state? How will you work with tribal governments and AI/AN organizations to answer the questions in this category?
6. How will you consult with the state advisory body, commission, or council regarding inclusion of American Indian and Alaska Native peoples in the ELA standards?

Existing AI/AN Standards

1. Which other content area standards (e.g., social studies, math, science, art) in your state include American Indian and Alaska Native peoples? How can those standards be used as inspiration for your state's ELA standards?
2. How do other states incorporate American Indian and Alaska Native content into their ELA standards (e.g., Minnesota, Montana, New Mexico)? How can this be used for inspiration in your state?

Authentic Resources

1. Which literary texts, books, and stories authored and illustrated by American Indian and Alaska Native people might you include in your state standards?
2. Does literature by non-Native authors provide evidence that they consulted with knowledgeable people within the tribal nations or communities depicted in the text?
3. Does literature include realistic portrayals of modern life among American Indian and Alaska Native peoples?
4. Does literature treat retellings or traditional stories with respect as sacred stories (not myths, legends, or folktales)?
5. Which American Indian and Alaska Native authors, literature, stories, and cultural references are specific to your state?

Endnotes

- i National Congress of American Indians. (2019). *Becoming visible: A landscape analysis of state efforts to provide Native American education for all*.
- ii Porterfield, A. (2023, September 1). *Supporting Native American students through culturally relevant education*. Regional Educational Laboratory West. <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/Products/Region/west/Blog/107352>
- iii Jones, N., Marks, R., Ramirez, R., & Rios-Vargas, M. (2021). *2020 census illuminates racial and ethnic composition of the country*. United States Census Bureau.
- iv National Indian Education Association. (n.d.). *Data on Native students*. <https://www.niea.org/native-student-data>
- v The following sources informed the development of the Planning Tool: Center for Standards, Assessment, and Accountability at WestEd. (n.d.). *Culturally responsive instruction for Native American students*. WestEd. <https://csaa.wested.org/spotlight/culturally-responsive-instruction-for-native-american-student>; Center for Standards, Assessment, and Accountability at WestEd. (n.d.). *Standards review and revision toolkit*. WestEd. <https://csaa.wested.org/spotlight/standards-review-and-revision-toolkit/>; Janzer, C. (2019, November 29). States move to add Native American history to curriculum. *US News & World Report*. <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/articles/2019-11-29/states-move-to-add-native-american-history-to-education-curriculum#:~:text=A%20recent%20report%20shows%20that,2019%2C%20at%208%3A00%20a.m>; Lieberman, M. (2023, September 5). Schools struggle to properly count Native students. Some states want them to try harder. *Education Week*. <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/schools-struggle-to-properly-count-native-students-some-states-want-them-to-try-harder/2023/09>; Native Knowledge 360°. (n.d.). *Native American literature in your classroom*. National Museum of the American Indian: Smithsonian. <https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/informational/native-american-literature-in-your-classroom>; Nelson-Barber, S., & Trumbull, E. (2015). *The Common Core initiative, education outcomes, and American Indian/Alaska Native students: Observations and recommendations*. The Center on Standards & Assessment Implementation at WestEd. <https://www.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/1458229495resourcethecommoncoreinitiativeeducationoutcomesandamericanindianalaskanativestudentsobservationsandrecommendations-3.pdf>

For more information about the Region 13 Comprehensive Center, visit the [Center's webpage](#).