



INTEGRATING IDENTITY AFFIRMATION WITH TEACHING AND LEARNING



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NATIVE AMERICAN COMMUNITY ACADEMY ALBUQUERQUE, NM

“The initial listening sessions at NACA were intended to capture, gather, and include the voices of community and families. That’s been paramount in our school’s history. We want our school to serve the community, and to understand the nuances, the needs, the pull of the community, the families, the students — versus having the students, the families, the community, adjust to us.”

ANPAO DUTA FLYING EARTH
former Head of School

The Native American Community Academy (NACA) was founded in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in 2006 as a response to the local interest in a school that would deeply understand and serve the needs, strengths, and goals of its local Native American community. Led by former executive director Kara Bobroff and former head of school Anpao Duta Flying Earth, the NACA founding team organized listening sessions with over 200 people from the community to develop the NACA mission, which attends equally to academic preparation, identity, and wellness.

Culturally responsive and sustaining education

NACA utilizes culturally responsive and sustaining education, which supports positive outcomes for all learners by affirming and building students’ cultural identities while making connections between these identities and the skills students learn in school.¹

Historically, schooling for Native Americans did not attempt to develop students who were secure in their cultural identity. In fact, 19th-century government-run boarding schools forcibly removed young Native children from their families to assimilate them into the dominant White culture;² while there, tactics used to erase Native culture and identity included cutting students’ hair and forbidding Native language, rituals, and religions.³ These generational losses and traumas continue to impact Native populations today in the form of psychological, economic, social, environmental, and physical distress.⁴

For Native American students and other students of color, a strong and positive sense of racial, ethnic, and cultural identity is positively associated with mental health as well as academic achievement, motivation, and

“That connection to who we are as a people and a community is relevant to the content in terms of Western education and what our students are going to be exposed to in the future . . . We want those doors of opportunities to be open, and at the same time, they have to have full understanding and confidence of who they are because it was supported in the school curriculum.”

ZANE ROSETTE
Head of School

persistence.⁵ Educators and schools play a crucial role in promoting or inhibiting this identity development, as students spend at least one-quarter of their waking hours in schools and classrooms.⁶ Learning environments can be affirming spaces when they incorporate key dimensions of students’ identity in curricula, among faculty and staff, and even in the faces of their peers, thus helping students of color overcome feelings of invisibility or marginality that often undermine their success.⁷

Connecting identity to curriculum

To combat this historical erasure, the NACA team has rooted its K–12 programming in Indigenous education. Each morning starts with a morning blessing, which incorporates the Native tradition of an intentional start to gatherings or meetings through poetry, music, or another way to consider the NACA core values. Adolescent students can take classes in Indigenous literature, history, or science, as well as courses in the Navajo, Lakota, Tiwa, Zuni, and Keres languages. A land-based healing and learning team is also developing experiential education opportunities to integrate cultural and spiritual knowledge tied to lands for Native communities through tasks that incorporate hunting, land ceremonies, and trips to culturally significant locations. Students are also encouraged to express their identity by dressing in traditional Indigenous attire and participating in traditional songs and dances at major events.

This affirming culture has succeeded in developing students’ cultural identities while also helping them achieve strong academic outcomes on

Native American Community Academy **BY THE NUMBERS**

Number of Students	475	Student Demographics	13% Latinx*
Geographic Setting	Urban		0% Black
Grades Served	K–12		2% White
School Model	Public charter school		0% Asian or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
Conditions for Equitable Learning & Development	Personal & Learning Environment		79% Native American*/Alaska Native
		6% Multiracial	
		21% Students with disabilities	
		16% English language learners	
		100% Eligible for free/reduced-price lunch	

*Student Demographic data sourced from public.tableau.com and nces.ed.gov. NCES lists Latinx as “Hispanic” and Native American as “American Indian.”

standardized tests and post-secondary attainment. Former students have noted that their experiences at NACA allowed them to contend with complex questions of identity earlier than peers who attended other schools. Giving all youth the tools, time, and space to engage in such identity exploration and affirmation can ultimately promote happier, well-adjusted, and more engaged students who are secure in their sense of self,⁸ which leads to better academic and life outcomes over time.



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Consider while you listen . . .

LISTENING SESSIONS

The founding team at NACA engaged over 200 people from the Albuquerque community in a needs-sensing process before the school opened. The findings from these sessions informed the school's three-pronged focus on academic preparation, identity, and wellness. What is the value of hearing what families want out of public schooling? How does your school capture and address the concerns of the local community? Would you describe this as a formal or informal process, and how might that impact whose concerns get addressed?

RACIAL, ETHNIC, AND CULTURAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Courses in Indigenous history, language, and literature, as well as land-based learning opportunities, help NACA educators develop and affirm their students' racial, ethnic, and cultural identities — a central part of NACA's mission. How would you describe your early experiences learning about your racial, ethnic, or cultural "group"? Did your experiences in school play an important role in your identity today? How does your school currently address race, ethnicity, and culture?

Related Resources



Edutopia held this [Q&A](#) with Zaretta Hammond, author of *Culturally Responsive Teaching and The Brain*, an overview of how to implement culturally responsive teaching in the classroom.



This [panel conversation](#) between Dr. Joanna Lee Williams of Rutgers University and Dr. Virgil Moorehead and Chris Shaw of Two Feathers Native American Family Services explores the concept of racial salience — or the extent to which race plays a role in self-concept — for Native American youth and other youth of color.

Conditions for Learning and Development

In their work, school leaders and educators must attend to a range of conditions that can promote — or inhibit — learning and development.⁹ These include Personal Conditions, Learning Environment Conditions, and System Conditions.

PERSONAL CONDITIONS

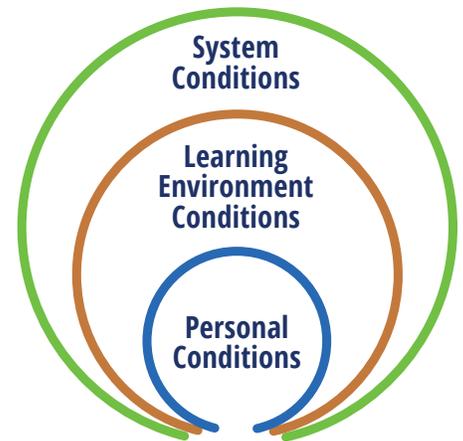
Conditions that bolster and ensure health and well-being within individuals in school communities, including social and emotional health and well-being as well as the physical, mental, and behavioral health of students and the adults who care for them.

LEARNING ENVIRONMENT CONDITIONS

Conditions that foster safe, supportive environments and responsive, reliable relationships. These conditions include school climate and trauma-informed and restorative practices, as well as the policies, structures, and systems in place at the district, school, and classroom levels. Together, these can promote resilience, provide protective factors, and ensure that every person — regardless of background, circumstance, or identity — can learn, grow, and thrive.

SYSTEM CONDITIONS

Conditions stemming from the complex community and social factors that can influence health and well-being. Here, cross-sector collaboration between schools and other sectors — such as health, mental health, justice, child welfare, housing, and anti-poverty efforts — can accelerate schools' positive impacts on the development and well-being of students and families.



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is a series of stories that capture promising practices shaping the landscape of social and emotional learning and support in schools across the country.

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- ² Trusty, J., Looby, E. J., & Sandhu, D. S. (2002). *Multicultural counseling: Context, theory and practice, and competence*. New York, NY: Nova Science Publishers.
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- ⁴ Brown-Rice, K. (2013). Examining the Theory of Historical Trauma Among Native Americans. *Professional Counselor*, 3(3).
- ⁵ Wakefield, W. D., & Hudley, C. (2007). Ethnic and racial identity and adolescent well-being. *Theory into practice*, 46(2), 147–154.
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- ⁷ Umaña-Taylor, A. J., Kornienko, O., Bayless, S. D., & Updegraff, K. A. (2018). A universal intervention program increases ethnic-racial identity exploration and resolution to predict adolescent psychosocial functioning one year later. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 47(1), 1–15.
- ⁸ Tatum, B. D. (2007). *Can we talk about race?: And other conversations in an era of school resegregation*. Beacon Press.
- ⁹ Garcia Coll, C., Lamberty, G., Jenkins, R., McAdoo, H. P., Crnic, K., Wasik, B. H., & Garcia, H. V. (1996). An integrative model for the study of developmental competencies in minority children. *Child Development*, 67(5), 1891–1914. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1131600>