



National American Indian & Alaska Native

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network

Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

CULTIVATE

Rooted in Culture, Destined to Grow

School Mental Health Program



Culture Is Prevention:
Connecting Native Youth
to Their Heritage

145 North Riverside Drive, Iowa City, Iowa 52242
mhttcnetwork.org/native

Director's Corner



Welcome to CULTIVATE: Rooted in Culture, Destined to Grow, a newsletter of the National American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health TTC, K-12 School Mental Health Program. We have worked on Native issues in K-12 education for close to 3½ years and now we would like to share some of our experiences and highlights. The target audiences for this newsletter are school leaders, administrators, and school staff, from teachers and counselors to people working with students in other capacities around the school and in after-school programs.

We have all been through a very difficult couple of years because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Tribal and urban Indian communities have been hit very hard in so many ways because of high mortality rates and limited infrastructure to handle social distancing, remote learning, and other requirements to protect community health. We discovered early on that many Native children and their parents lost contact with the school system during the strict social distancing policies imposed on all of us. At the same time, we were deeply impressed by the incredible resiliency Native communities showed throughout this very trying time; as just one example, they had the highest vaccination rate of any ethnic group in the U.S.

The lead article in this inaugural newsletter, written by Melody Redbird-Post, PhD, (Kiowa), focuses on increasing collaboration between Native schools, Native parents, and their communities.

Anne Helene Skinstad

Anne Helene Skinstad, PsyD, PhD
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Many communities showed great creativity in how to offer cultural events during these trying times, and participating in Native ceremonies safely became very important as well as taking care of each other both professionally and in our families. Art factors into Native cultural lives very much and C. Allison Baez, PhD, member of the Tap Pilam Coahuiltecan Nation-Aguateca Paguame Clan is sharing with us the importance of art in healing mental health issues in Native children, as well as Native communities and elders. She shows us that there is evidence of a positive relationship between cultural continuity and reduced suicide in Native youth. “Culture is prevention” is a very important mantra for how to familiarize our children with their culture and use Native teachings as a way to prepare, protect and build resiliency in our children and our communities.

Teresa Brewington, MBA, MEdL (Coharie enrolled, Lumbee descent), co-director of the K-12 initiative, shares with us her vision of what the school should represent for our children and the role of the school in the Native community. We hope you find the content here both informative and useful!

Co-Director Insights

A successful school is a place where students are eager to learn and achieve; where teachers guide, engage, empower, and motivate, and parents are involved in their child's education. This starts with developing a positive school climate, embedding this in all our interactions with each other. It is vital for our Native children that they have a sense of community -- where we help each other, care about one another, respect, gather, and communicate with each other. A community that fosters a sense of belonging. I believe that a school is a hub for making these community connections.

"We must protect the forests for our children, grandchildren and children yet to be born. We must protect the forests for those who can't speak for themselves such as the birds, animals, fish and trees."

-Qwatsinas
(Hereditary Chief Edward Moody) Nuxalk Nation

It is essential that teachers, parents, and the community shower our Native students with all they need to become a success – the person they are supposed to be. Our children's future success depends on what we do for them today. I believe a child's character is influenced by their experiences, existence, connectedness and culture; together, these attributes shape who they will become.

Educators are given the privilege and responsibility to influence students' characters. This level of influence is promoted both by opportunities in a school's program offerings and curriculum and by the school's culture. As a teacher, it is your responsibility to connect with both the students and the parents. Through interactions that show genuine compassion, willingness to learn about the child's culture and an understanding and acknowledgment of the past atrocities towards our Native people, connectedness is achieved.

We want students to love attending school. For that to happen, we need a school culture that fosters exploration, eagerness, and enthusiasm; where they can have fun, learn, socialize, and explore. Native children are our future. Regardless of whether you have one or 30 Native children attending your school, get to know them and show them that they belong. Have a powwow at your school; incorporate books, videos, and activities into your lessons that represent Natives; take the opportunity to listen to and learn from their stories. These are some great ways to make that child feel connected.

The success of our Native children's future depends on what we do today. For this reason, it's crucial to have a positive school culture where teachers want to teach, students want to learn, and parents and the community want to be involved. Hear me as you hear Hereditary Chief Edward Moody speak for those who can't speak for themselves - our children, our future, and their future.



Teresa Brewington, MBA, MEdL
Coharie Enrolled, Lumbee Descendent
Co-Director, National American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Technology Transfer Center
K-12 School Mental Health Program
Co-Director, National American Indian and Alaska Native Child Trauma Treatment Center

For School Leaders, Administrators, and Staff:

Collaborating and Communicating Effectively with Native Families

Melody Redbird-Post, PhD (Kiowa)

To increase K-12 school staff collaboration and communication with Native families, school staff can consider ways to implement various strategies that are grounded in Native culture (culturally informed, culturally grounded) into their K-12 school settings. Recent research can inform the action steps taken by K12 school staff to incorporate culturally informed practices into family engagement initiatives and activities.

Before we get started with the research review on family engagement practices, several key terms should be defined:

Family engagement. For our purposes here, family engagement is defined as engaging children's families in their children's learning and ensuring that family engagement approaches are grounded in trust and respect, with special attention to honoring each family's unique story.

Communication. What does communication mean in the context of K-12 school staff working with Native children's families? Communication involves establishing a dialogue between school staff and children's family members. Effective communication builds trust, cultivates respect, and increases mutual awareness and understanding.

Collaboration. Collaboration involves two or more parties working intentionally towards a shared vision. In K-12 school settings, collaboration with Native families involves effective supports to ensure each child achieves their full educational and developmental potential.

Now that we have defined our key terms, we turn to what research findings say about family engagement in Native communities. In one study, Mackety and Linder-VanBerschot (2008) found that Native parents described four kinds of school-oriented parent involvement.



First, Native parents especially appreciated when school staff (i.e., teachers, counselors, etc.) communicate directly with them about their children. Second, Native parents were highly motivated to attend student-centered school events such as back-to-school nights, open houses, parent-teacher conferences, student showcases, student science fairs, etc. Third, Native parents got involved in their children's school setting through participating in volunteer activities such as book reading and chaperoning field trips. Fourth, Native parents sought opportunities to advocate for their children's educational process through activities such as parent-teacher conferences, progress reports, and invitations to special education meetings.

Mackety and Linder-Van Berschot (2008) also asked Native parents about the ways in which they participated in their children's education through various home-oriented parent engagement activities; Native parents described six kinds of home-oriented involvement:

Showing interest in their children's education

Helping their children with schoolwork

Reading with their children

Encouraging and rewarding their children for educational progress

Meeting their children's needs

Involving extended family members and the Native community



When Mackety and Linder-VanBerschot (2008) asked Native parents to describe their preferred strategies for getting involved in their children's school setting, Native parents listed the following:

Printed and electronic correspondence

Communications about their children

School staff that are respectful of parents' educational and cultural values

Open-door policy in school settings

Culturally respectful environment at school sites

Cultural activities and resources, such as American Indian programs, resource centers, after-school activities, clubs for children and families, as well as an advocate or liaison at the school to welcome and assist American Indian parents and children

Despite the ways that Native parents described their involvement in their children's learning, there were various barriers that were identified in the study. Mackety and Linder-VanBerschot (2008) found the following four school-oriented barriers to Native parent involvement:

Unwelcoming school environment

Previous negative experiences with education

Perceptions of lack of cultural sensitivity

Different styles of interpersonal communication

These barriers were described by Native parents as the primary challenges they faced when attempting to get more involved in their children's education.

In another recent study, Bardhoshi, Duncan, and Schweinle (2016) emphasized that school staff should place emphasis on explicitly and intentionally inviting Native parents into their children's educational process as a foundational step towards effective family engagement. School staff should explore ways they can accommodate the various logistical needs of children's families, such as scheduling events during times that allow for family participation, providing childcare during events, and being innovative in ways to engage parents. Family engagement approaches should involve collaboration between the school staff, family members, and even community organizations, especially when accounting for the unique cultural identities of Native parents.

Researchers Jesse, Northup, and Withington (2015) found that children who identified closely with their Native culture also had statistically significant gains in school completion, attendance, extracurricular activities, quality of instruction, and motivation. This study demonstrated that school settings that incorporate culturally based education practices can provide educational benefits to Native students and their families.

Another study from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2004) found that Native parents and grandparents were "united in their strong belief that education is the primary tool for success in life. While they talked about education as a step toward a better standard of living, they also talked about education as providing their children with the flexibility to understand how to be successful in a changing world. A number of parents talked about education as broadening their child's understanding of society around them and as better preparing their child to be a contributing member and leader in that society."



Now that we have reviewed some research findings, we can explore specific strategies that K-12 school staff may consider implementing in their school settings. Establishing intentional and open communication between the staff member and the child's family member is key.

Communication can involve the following activities:

Taking the time to get to know the child and their family

Sharing positive, genuine, and specific information about the child with the child's family members

Recognizing the child's strengths and sharing them with the family

Using simple, clear, and objective descriptions of the child's behavior



Communication strategies between school staff and families can be one-way or two-way. One-way communication strategies include newsletters, bulletin boards, school handbooks, and progress notes. These one-way communication strategies help keep parents informed about school activities and policies. Two-way communication strategies are an important part of building partnerships with Native families. It is essential for school staff and parents to engage in an exchange of ideas, including sharing information on assessment and instruction to build productive partnerships.

Ultimately, it is important that school staff implement strategies that invite two-way communication with families. Ongoing communication helps families feel welcome and encourages families to be a part of school activities. Open communication helps to break down barriers between the school staff and the family as well as the family and the classroom.

Communication strategies that school staff can use include sending out a classroom or school newsletter to families, placing parent information boards where family members can easily view important details about the classroom or school, providing handouts on upcoming events in the school or community, hosting parent-teacher conferences, and establishing parent committees at the classroom or school site level for parents to provide feedback on educational programs and activities.

Family engagement initiatives are most successful when family input is considered. Annual parent surveys are a great way to gauge parent interests and to plan family engagement activities for the upcoming school year. Offering opportunities such as storytelling, volunteering in the classroom, coaching, powwows, and feasts are culturally grounded ways to engage families. As indicated by the research, families who participate in these types of events often become more involved in both the school and their children's educational process.

School staff can also involve families by discussing opportunities for the family members to support the child's learning at home, as well as by inviting the parents or other family members to share a favorite storybook or tell traditional stories in their children's classroom. School staff can give parents the opportunity to be involved as volunteer teacher assistants or tutors as well as encourage parents to serve as coaches for various school sporting events. School staff can celebrate children and their families through hosting youth powwows, traditional song and dance events, traditional feasts, or other traditional activities, as appropriate. Culturally grounded family engagement includes activities where families are seen as partners alongside school staff in their children's education.

School staff should carefully consider their school and classroom climate when developing family engagement initiatives. It is important to create a warm, respectful, and welcoming classroom environment to ensure that children's family members feel invited into the school setting and into their child's classroom. In situations where school staff may be unfamiliar with the particular tribal nation that the child or family identifies with, staff should intentionally create opportunities for the child's family members to participate in cultural awareness activities at the families' discretion. These activities could be as simple as opening a dialogue with the child's family members to learn more about the child's cultural identity.

Other activities could involve the family members sharing a traditional story, regalia, traditional sports, or other culture-specific activities with the school staff and their child's classroom. School staff can invite children and their families to school family nights or family celebrations where a meal is provided as well as an opportunity for guest speakers to present on various topics of interest to parents. The school staff can also provide opportunities for parent education such as offering training or workshops on topics of interest to children's families. There can also be opportunities for conducting culture or language camps that can involve parents, community members, or other tribal programs. Schools could also encourage opportunities for family engagement through hosting language fairs, knowledge bowls, or science fairs.



School staff also can support strong collaborations with families through opportunities at the school district level.

These opportunities could involve:

Sharing information with families on when school board meetings occur and identifying expectations for attending

Sharing information with families on how to get involved in the Indian Education Parent Committee or other parent advisory council at the district level.

Sponsoring districtwide events to support students and families, such as powwows, feasts, celebrations, cultural sharing events, community resource fairs, health screening fairs, etc.

Building partnerships with tribal nations in the area and identifying ways tribal programs can support school staff and families

Promoting information about nearby tribal nations and sharing information about tribal services and programs with families

Building partnerships in the community with community-based organizations and sharing information about available community resources and services for families

Hosting an accessible and engaging website with relevant and easy-to-find information on the district, schools, programs, and services

Having a clear and consistent social media presence for families to find up-to-the-minute information about the district, schools, programs, and services.

Through establishing an inviting, culturally grounded atmosphere that includes intentional, two-way communication with Native children's families, school staff can effectively provide various opportunities for family engagement.



Indigenous Healing Arts as Therapy: Hear the Drum. Weave a Basket. Heal the Soul.

C. Allison Baez, PhD

Tap Pilam Coahuiltecan Nation - Aguateca Paguame Clan
MHTTC K-12 School Mental Health Program Manager

The goal of therapy is to help people heal as they deal with life's struggles or issues. Art therapy involves the creative process to help people explore self-expression, gain personal insight, and develop coping skills (NCBI, n.d.). When people create art, it expresses emotions. This act of expression can also develop self-awareness, help ease stress, or boost self-esteem (Haen, 2019). Research supports that school-based art therapy promotes positive benefits for children and adolescents, such as processing trauma, improving communication skills and/or behavioral concerns, and coping with other issues in their lives. Offering art therapy in K-12 environments will give our children and youth the opportunity to process issues in their lives in a non-threatening, creative method to help them heal. Many students appreciate the break from traditional classroom educational expectations to express themselves.

When we use creative practices such as healing arts, we promote healing and wellness. Healing arts also help with coping and personal change. Since the onset of the pandemic, children across the country have experienced drastic changes to their everyday lives. Some have had support to work through the changes, while others have had their issues intensified. Parents and educators have continued to offer support and have been open to other strategies for working with their children. Using art to heal is not a new concept. We have used our tradition and culture for hundreds of years to express ourselves in ceremony and everyday life. Much of both include art. Native traditional healing arts include music, art, dance and movement, poetry and writing, and more.

Findings from various studies demonstrate that art therapy helps children, adolescents, and adults explore their emotions, improve self-esteem, manage addictions, relieve stress, improve symptoms of anxiety and depression, and cope with physical illness or disability. Healthcare professionals and therapists who incorporate art into their sessions work with students and their families in a variety of settings; schools, private counseling sessions, hospitals, wellness centers, and community-based environments are appropriate for art therapy.

**“There is a great need for the Art Therapy way of healing for our Native youth;
to save our children and preserve our culture.”**

- Ronald Lincoln,

Pomo Spiritual Leader and advisory board member for the Indigenous Healing Arts Alliance

(<https://indigenoushealingarts.org/program.html>)

Dance - Writing - Expressive - Music - Drama



Various Types of Art Therapies

Children and their families need to know that no artistic talent is necessary for art therapy to succeed because the therapeutic process is not about the artistic value of the work, but rather about finding associations between the creative choices made and a client's inner life.(3) For example, using art therapy can help revive a memory. When someone tells a story, it may reveal more from the unconscious mind.

Art therapy is a culturally relevant, ethnocentric healing modality that provides a clinical component as well as cultural continuity, as traditional Native healing practices do. Researchers at the University of British Columbia have found a distinct, positive relationship between cultural continuity and reduced suicide and suicidal behavior among Native youth (US, 2010). With the benefits of art therapy providing such a positive impact, it is worth pursuing and utilizing in a K-12 setting.

Our future K-12 newsletters will provide suggestions for using Indigenous Art Therapy with children and youth. We know that there is strength in our cultural traditions. When we include our culture in the educational environment, we can help create a healing pathway for a child's success. When our children's words are not enough, let us help them create art!

Make a cornhusk doll

<https://www.teachersfirst.com/lessons/nativecrafts/cornhusk.cfm>

Make a Native American pinch pot

<https://www.teachersfirst.com/lessons/nativecrafts/pinchpot.cfm>

Make a dream catcher

<https://www.teachersfirst.com/lessons/nativecrafts/dreamcatcher.cfm>

Early American weaving

<https://www.teachersfirst.com/lessons/nativecrafts/weaving.cfm>



Learning From the Professionals

An Overview of the AI/AN MHTTC K-12 COVID-19 Exploratory Needs Assessment

Noah Segal, MPH

Manager for Evaluations and Special Projects
Native Center for Behavioral Health

When COVID-19 began to spread across the United States in March 2020, so too did closures for many schools, programs, and services supporting Native youth. In response to the rapidly changing situation, the AI/AN MHTTC asked itself and its partners what we could do to support Native students, teachers, counselors, and school personnel during these difficult times.

To hear the needs directly from the community, we initiated weekly Listening Sessions for school professionals, where we created a space for school professionals to share the challenges, barriers, and successes they were experiencing as the country faced the impact of COVID-19 and children began to return to school. We also provided resources and support for participants as best as we could.

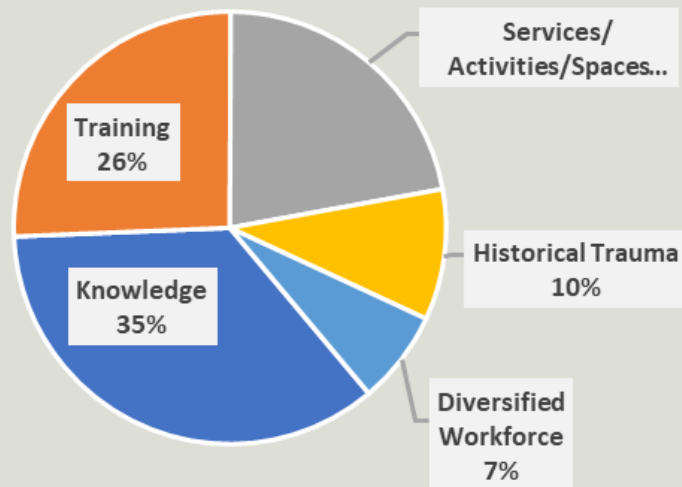
Participants often mentioned challenges related to transitioning to virtual/hybrid teaching, supporting the well-being of their students, staff burnout, lack of support and other topics. However, participants also described innovative ways they were adapting to the difficulties presented by COVID, including more community outreach, virtual cultural activities, and investing in technology infrastructure.

Because the Listening Sessions rendered information that was not systematically collected, we decided to develop a more formal needs assessment among school personnel working with Native youth. The assessment was conducted over four months during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, from October 2020 to February 2021. School mental health professionals were surveyed with qualitative and quantitative methodology to help tailor services. Goals of this assessment were to:

- 1.Understand how schools are providing behavioral health services to Native students during the COVID-19 pandemic;**
- 2.Recognize the unique needs of schools that serve Native students;**
- 3.Identify any differences in responses based on participant or school demographics;**
- 4.Use this information to guide current and future MHTTC K-12 initiatives.**

To the researchers' knowledge, there had never been a national needs assessment conducted on this population, especially related to COVID-19.

Native Specific Needs



A total of 235 individuals from 21 states participated in the virtual needs assessment administered through Qualtrics. Of this group, 54.55% (N=126) identified as American Indian or Alaska Native (AI/AN), 43.29% (N=100) did not identify as AI/AN, and 2.16% (N=5) preferred not to say.

Participants listed more than forty job titles in relation to Native youth. The most common was a teacher (28.44%), followed by support staff (19.11%), school mental or behavioral health worker (12.44%), and administrator (8.00%). Nearly half of the participants (49.13%) worked in a public school serving Native students. This was followed by those who identified as working in a Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) school (18.12%) or a Native American Tribal School (18.12%).

A diverse research team with the AI/AN MHTTC and the University of Iowa College of Public Health conducted quantitative and qualitative analyses of the survey responses. The formal report of the needs assessment is expected later this year; in the interim, we have identified several important takeaways to help inform decision-making and guide programming as COVID-19, and many of the challenges expressed by participants, continue to persist.

“Listen, hear us, take our suggestions, don’t immediately dismiss them. Additional cultural training and teaching practices for ALL students needs to be addressed throughout schools.”

– Respondent

6 key themes from this needs assessment:

Student support: Specifically related to emotional, psychological, and social well-being. participants noted the need for more support for schools, families, and their communities.

Adaptation and safety challenges: Adaptation challenges included changes to remote learning, social distancing, and other mitigation policies resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Needed resources: Respondents noted the need for several resources for promoting the well-being of their students, frequently mentioning the need for training, education, and behavioral health services. The chart presented in Figure 1 shows a comparison of the behavioral health services participants have in their schools versus what they want added. School counselors and partnerships with outside organizations were the most common services already in place whereas peer support and after-school behavioral health programs were the most frequently desired to be added.

Disagreement in the desired COVID-19 precautions: There were conflicting responses in how participants felt COVID-19 precautions should have been handled. Some felt that remote learning, though positive for physical health, negatively impacted the educational, social, and emotional well-being of students.

Mental health: Several themes were mentioned in relation to mental health challenges, including those related to trauma, stress, and student social-emotional support.

Native-specific and culturally relevant needs: Among the needs that were culturally specific, the most mentioned need was again a call for increased knowledge of Native culture, accounting for 35% of the Native-specific needs mentioned. A breakdown of the Native specific needs mentioned can be found in Figure 2. Additionally, we found that non-Native participants reported that more of their behavioral health programs were culturally adapted as compared to Native participants. This statistically significant difference suggests that non-Native school professionals have a different perception of what culturally adapted programming looks like as compared with their Native counterparts.

“We have never had any behavioral health training at my place of work. I can’t describe a training I know nothing about. I don’t know the skills I need to be able to help these students.”

-Respondent





“We are a Native (majority) school and the way of teaching and what we’re teaching are not traditional or cultural. It’s American.”
 -Respondent

This novel exploratory needs assessment, though limited in scope and size, is a first step in creating a systematic way for school professionals to provide feedback regarding the needs and assets in their schools. However, there are 574 federally recognized tribes and many additional state and tribally recognized communities. It is important to recognize the diversity of this group and that each of these populations have different strengths, needs, and access to resources. Though we do not attempt to generalize these findings to all schools serving Native youth, it is the hope that this assessment can function as a template for a larger, more comprehensive needs assessment in the future and act as a starting point for making decisions on how to best help schools serve their Native students by providing more focused trainings and the resources lacking that could greatly improve both staff and students’ experiences.

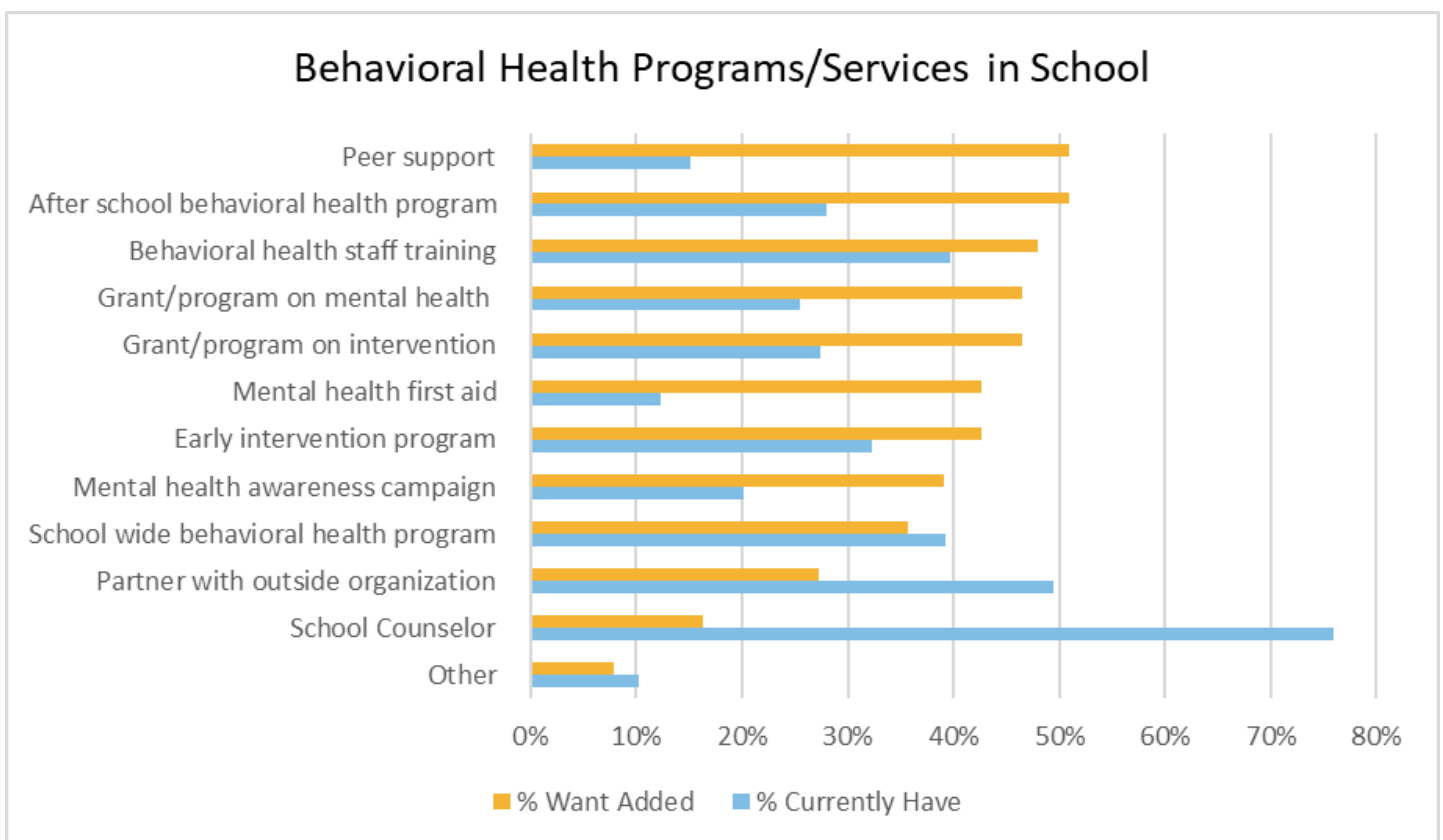


Figure 2

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Current Initiatives

Through a Native Lens

A Culturally Responsive Curriculum/ PD Training in Working Effectively with AI/AN Students

The primary focus will be on culturally responsive teaching with educators who serve AI/AN students in a K-12 environment. Through training we will help those who serve Native children to have an increased empathy and understanding towards Native traditions and culture. The curriculum will provide generalized instruction for non-Native teachers and Native teachers. We will use evidence-based and experience-based culturally appropriate methods for working with educators.

Warrior's Mindset

An Afterschool Character Education Curriculum

Focusing on the resiliency of AI/AN youth, students will learn to demonstrate how this applies to their own lives. The content areas will address character development such as compassion, courtesy, courage, honor, honesty & justice, family, and community, and more. Students will be able to self-navigate the online curriculum to learn about their own strengths and develop areas for a growth mindset.

Telehealth

A Native Youth Mental/Telehealth Initiative

This is an ongoing training cohort provided by JBS International that includes one month of intensive training for schools and mental health organizations. It provides an opportunity to learn and utilize HIPAA-compliant telehealth for one year.

Sacred Seeds

An Individualized Education program (IEP) Advocacy Training

The MHTTC K-12 initiative is partnering with the Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates (COPAA) to create a certified IEP advocate training tailored specifically for Native parents and community members. The training will teach participants all the ins and outs of the IEP and help them feel more comfortable and confident in their ability to advocate for their child.

Cultural Learning(s)

A Mental Health Curriculum: Healing First in Traditional Strengths

Native pedagogy, including lessons on strands of trauma and breathing: We are developing curricula that may be used by professional educators, i.e. teachers, school counselors, psychologists, and certified school leaders. The modules are designed with topics that discuss and explore self-image, identity, confidence, decision-making, choices, and outcomes. The module topics reflect three developmental stages (elementary, middle, and high school). Native pedagogy includes the tools to provide professional development and training for professional educators and stakeholders to better support Native students and improve their outcomes in the education system.

Crisis and Resiliency Initiative



Pathways to Crisis, Recovery, and Resiliency

Team Technical Assistance Opportunity:

The National American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Technology Transfer Center, the K-12 program, and the National American Indian and Alaska Native Child Traumatic Stress Initiative are pleased to announce a collaborative project with Jacqueline S. Gray, PhD, retired research associate professor. This collaborative technical assistance project is focused on helping communities create their own crisis and trauma resiliency teams. After completing the training, participants will possess the knowledge and skills to go out into their Native community as a facilitator. This technical assistance program includes 6+ learning collaborative sessions focusing on the following topics:

Identifying key stakeholders

Identifying traumas affecting community

Engaging local schools and districts

Cultural considerations

Community engagement opportunities

Utilization of media

For more information, please contact: native@mhttcnetwork.org

Upcoming Events

Here are some of our planned events for the coming months. Please [visit our website](#) or [join our mailing list](#) to stay up to date and get registration details.

Practicing Mindfulness

Tuesdays, June through August 2022
Details to be announced

Healing Foods

Thursdays, June through August 2022
Details to be announced

