

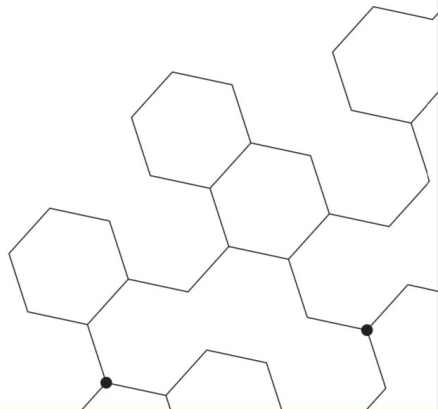
“Those Wounds Are Still Pretty Fresh”: How State Education Leaders’ Understanding and Engagement Shapes English Learner Identification of Indigenous Students

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When Indigenous Students are Identified as English Learners: Contexts, Opportunities and Dilemmas

Research Brief

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Elva Reyes-Espinosa addresses a meeting of the parent-teacher association at Fairmount Elementary, a dual-language-immersion school in Glen Park. Meetings are conducted in Spanish and English. Photo by Nadia Mishkin / Public Press

01.25.2017 | by JEREMY ADAM SMITH |

In 1998, California [Proposition 227](#) tore the state apart. Requiring English-only instruction to discourage schools from teaching immigrant students in their home languages, the measure passed by a wide margin.

What Schools Can Do So They Don't Exclude English Learners From Core Courses

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 By [Ileana Najarro](#) — September 18, 2024 | Corrected: September 18, 2024
 4 min read



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Understanding the needs and experiences of Alaska Native English learner students

Most research on English learner (EL) education has centered on immigrant origin students, and little research has examined the needs and experiences of Indigenous EL students in the United States or Alaska. Indigenous and non-Indigenous students differ in their eligibility for EL services: Indigenous EL students may speak English as their primary language, but non-Indigenous EL students must speak a primary language other than English. Racialized in a historical pattern of forced cultural assimilation and heritage language deprivation, many Indigenous communities have faced—and continue to face—critical barriers to accessing culturally and linguistically sustaining, adequately resourced, and equitable schooling, including EL services.

The Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Northwest conducted a study of Alaska EL policy and practice as it relates to Alaska Native students to examine student characteristics and patterns in identification as an EL student, EL service provision, and “reclassification” from EL to non-EL students. This infographic presents information from the study that may guide future policy and research to ensure that Alaska Native EL students receive culturally sustaining, high-quality education to support their academic progress, as well as the development of both their heritage and English language skills.

Characteristics of Alaska Native EL students

WHO ARE ALASKA NATIVE EL STUDENTS?
 From 2011/12 to 2018/19:

- 24% of Alaska Native kindergarten students were EL students
- 12% of non-Alaska Native kindergarten students were EL students
- 80% of Alaska Native EL kindergarten students reported Spanish as their home language
- 24% of non-Alaska Native EL kindergarten students reported Spanish as their home language

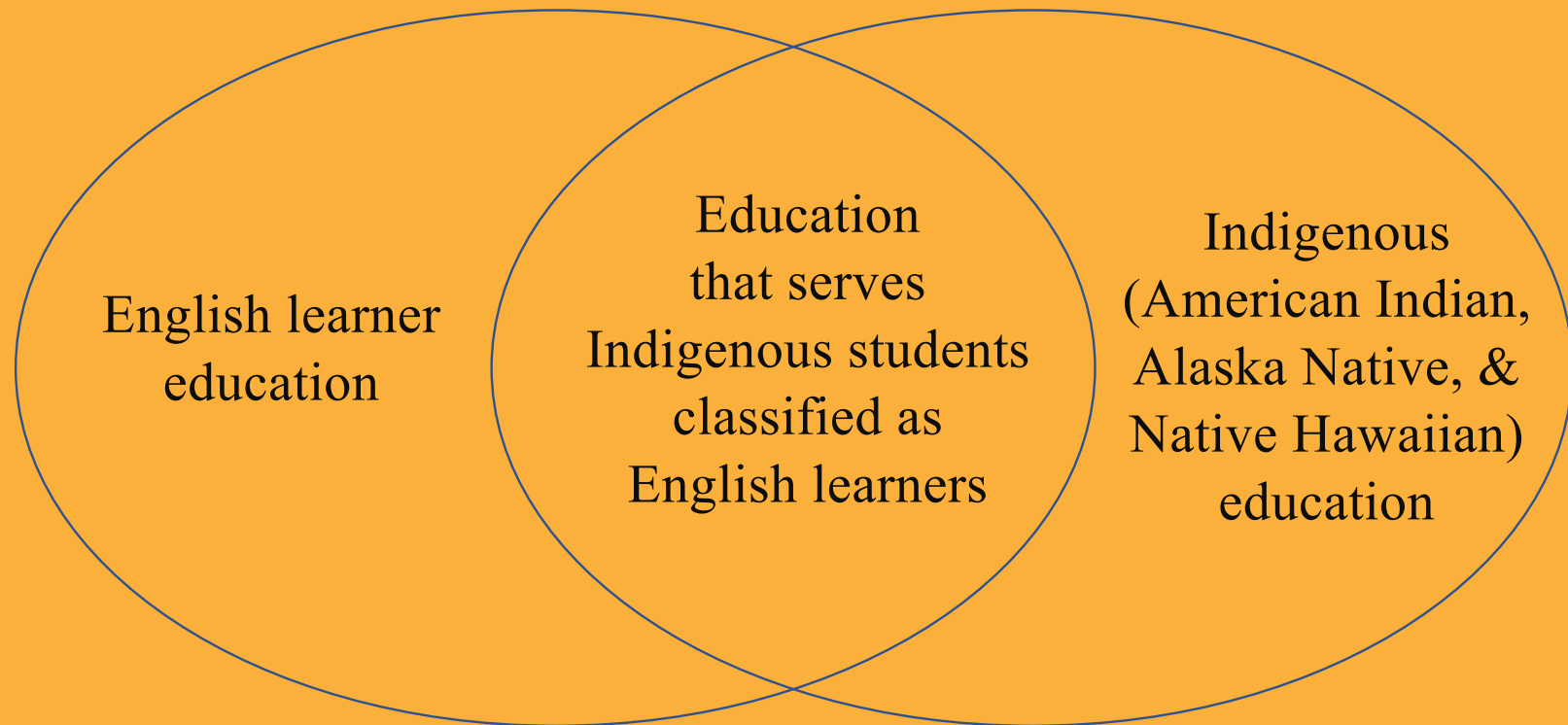
WHERE ARE ALASKA NATIVE EL STUDENTS?

- Rural remote schools:** Alaska Native EL students represented 23 percent of kindergarten in rural-remote schools, which are schools in small off-road communities. In urban, urban fringe, and rural/hubring locales, they represented 6 percent or less of kindergartners.
- Economically disadvantaged schools:** Alaska Native EL students represented 27 percent of kindergarten in schools where 75 percent or more of the population was economically disadvantaged, compared to 6 percent or less in schools with lower percentages of economically disadvantaged students.
- Schools without English as a second language (ESL) teachers:** Alaska Native EL students represented 19 percent of kindergartners in schools without ESL teachers, compared to 3 percent or less in schools with one or more ESL teacher.

*Home language in this context refers to the Indigenous language spoken historically and/or currently by the Indigenous group to which an individual belongs. Identification of students as Alaska Native EL students who have ancestry from EL status to report English proficiency based on reporting a set of criteria, typically determined by the state and based on assessment performance. This study focused on kindergartners in the state of Alaska. Alaska Native students at the first winter school and are not included in this study. Students who were eligible for the National School Lunch Program during the study period, as defined in a state-based residency. The report refers to sex as recorded, with being an understanding from a substance necessary perspective, where families may share or mislabel or misreport resources, such as sex, gender, and family, in their households.

Infographic provided by Crystal Wood, Alaska

Where is this work situated?



Indigenous education context

- Educational sovereignty and self-determination (Brayboy et al., 2015)
- Boarding school history (Adams, 1995; Barnhardt, 2001; Child, 1998; Hirshberg, 2008; Vitale, 2020)
- Continuing – privileging of Standard American English and devaluing Indigenous knowledges and cultures (Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018; Jester, 2002)
- Heritage language loss (Siebens & Julian, 2011); non-Standard American English (Leap, 2012)
- Barriers to culturally sustaining, equitable schooling (Barnhardt, 2001; McCarty & Zepeda, 1995; Spring, 2016)



Photo Credit: Brian Adams

English learner education context

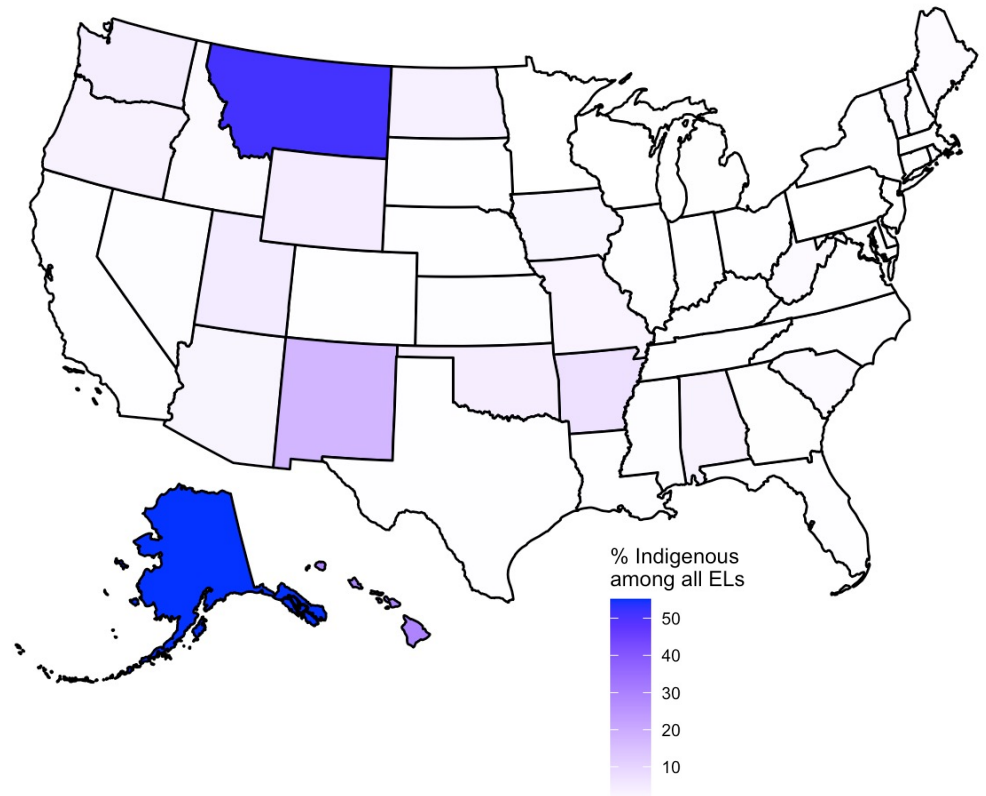
- Protected status of students
- Core elements: (1) identification; (2) English development service provision; (3) accessible content service provision; (4) annual evaluation; and (5) exit
- Attached to federal and state funding; varies by state
- Focused on immigrant-origin (Carjuzaa & Ruff, 2016; Villegas, 2020)
- Differentiated definition for Indigenous students



Photo Credit: Brian Adams

Indigenous English learner education context

- In 2016, there were 66,714 Indigenous ELs (1.35 % of the entire EL population).
- About 8% of American Indian and Alaska Native students and 15% of Hawaiian and Pacific Islander students are classified as EL.
- Indigenous ELs are concentrated in certain states/districts. Examples: Montana (three-quarters of ELs); Alaska (half); 100% in at least 68 districts in the U.S.



(OELA, 2020; NCES, 2020)

Why does this matter? How might EL identification impact Indigenous students?

Help

- Financial resources (Sugarman, 2021)
- Services that support heritage language development/revitalization (Smallwood et al., 2009)
- Services that support academic success and/or the ‘language of school’ (Standard American English) (Carjuzaa & Ruff, 2016)
- Access to teachers and other educators trained to work with multilingual students (Master et al, 2016)

Harm

- Perpetuation of historical imposition of English language and use (NIEA, 2020)
- Provision of inappropriate services that take away time from instruction (Ryan & Arnaq Wilde, 2024)
- Segregation from non-EL classified peers and/or stigmatization by teachers or peers (Gándara & Orfield, 2012)
- Barriers in accessing instruction/classes not available to EL-classified students (Biernacki et al., 2023)

Federal policy context: ESSA EL definition

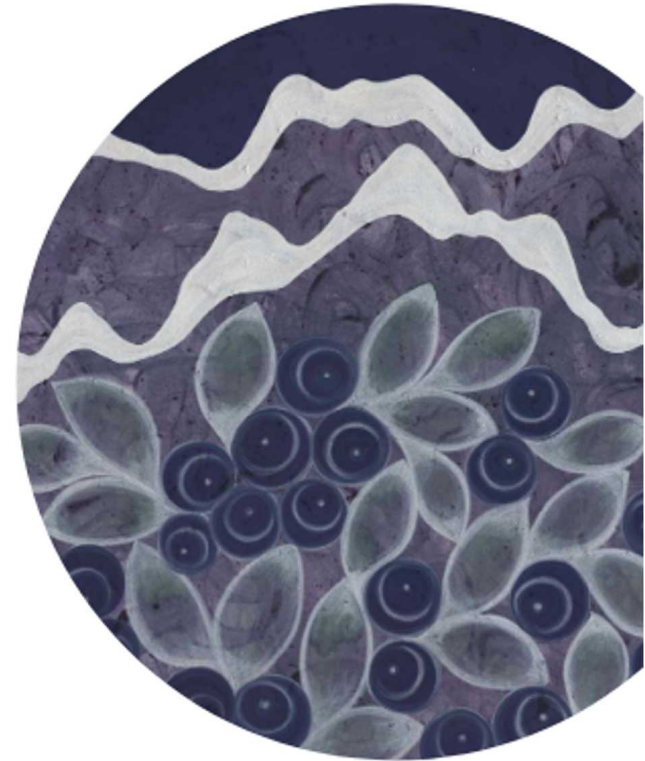
ESEA Section 8101(20)(C)

An individual:

- (A) who is aged 3 through 21;
- (B) who is enrolled or preparing to enroll in an elementary or secondary school; AND
- (C)
 - (i) who was not born in the United States or whose native language is a language other than English; or
 - (ii) who is a Native American or Alaska Native, or a native of the outlying areas; and who comes from an environment where a language other than English has had a significant impact on the individual's level of English language proficiency; or
 - (iii) who is migratory, whose native language is a language other than English, and who comes from an environment where a language other than English is dominant

AND

- (D) Whose difficulties in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language may be sufficient to deny the individual
 - (i) the ability to meet the challenging State academic standards
 - (ii) the ability to successfully achieve in classrooms where the language of instruction is English; or
 - (iii) the opportunity to participate fully in society.



Federal policy context: ESSA EL definition

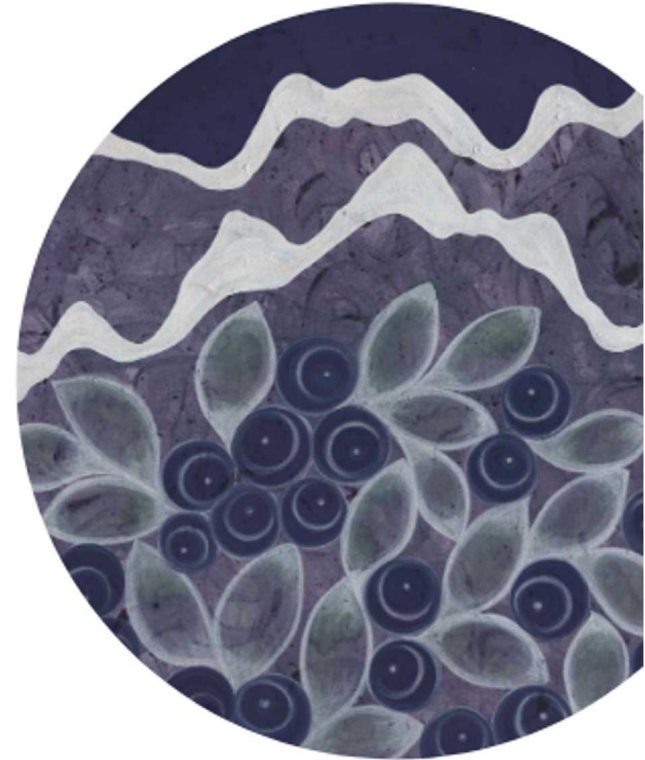
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Turn & Talk

What brought you to this session today?

What interests or experiences do you have
with this topic?

What questions do you have and hope to
answer?

Research Questions

1. To what extent do state EL leaders know and understand federal and state EL identification policies for Indigenous students? How does their level of understanding influence their implementation of Indigenous EL identification policy?
2. To what extent do state EL leaders:
 - (1) have knowledge of the context of schooling for Indigenous populations?
 - (2) engage with Indigenous stakeholders in their state?How do these factors influence their work around Indigenous EL identification?

Who are state EL leaders and what do they do?

- Legislature makes binding education law
- State Education Agency as policy intermediary
 - Interpreting federal and state law
 - Providing guidance and tools
 - Monitoring districts' implementation
 - Providing training and resources
- EL leaders – lead EL/Title III activities within state agency
 - Often siloed

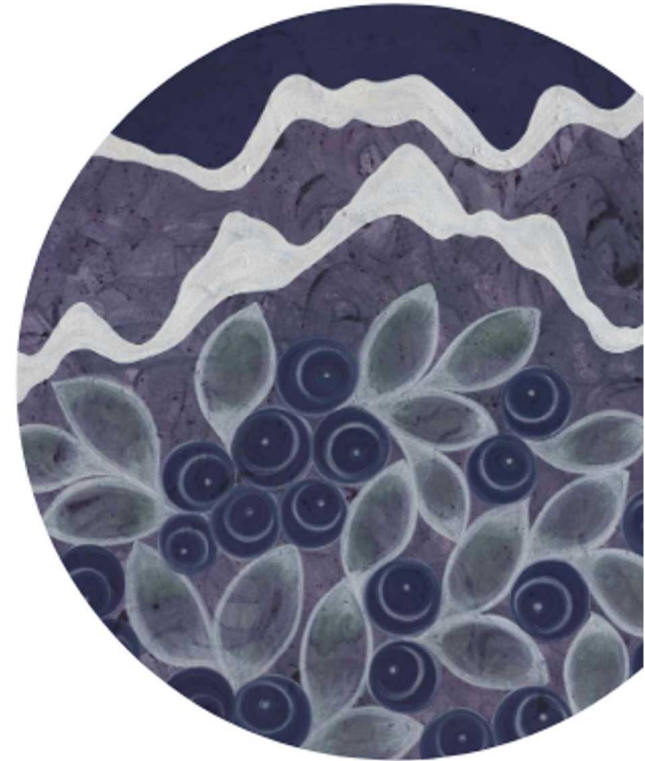
Data & Methods

Data

- Interviewed state EL leaders from 25 states about
 - Knowledge/interpretation of federal and state EL policies
 - Indigenous students and stakeholders in their state
 - Types of EL services offered to Indigenous students
 - Opinions about current Indigenous EL policies and practices
- EL leaders were invited to include other SEA leaders in the interview (Title VI, etc)

Methods

- Data-driven codebook consisting of major emergent themes
- Analytic memos synthesizing each of three parent codes



Do state EL leaders impact Indigenous EL identification? If so, how?

State EL Leaders' Work Impacts Indigenous EL Identification

- Writing non-regulatory statewide guidance documents on EL education
- District monitoring and targeted support
- Providing consultation, training, and professional development
- In most states, leaders' work omitted Indigenous EL identification, likely leading to undifferentiated identification.

We have some [districts] that are far ahead of the curve and others that are still learning. So, part of our work often is to look at those Title III applications, look at what kinds of things folks are doing in their districts, and then also try to provide them with support and connect them with our Office of Native Education and all of the resources that they're providing so that they can be culturally and linguistically responsive.

To what extent do state EL leaders know and understand the differentiated EL definition for Indigenous students?

How does their level of understanding influence their work on Indigenous EL identification?

State EL Leaders Communicated Gaps in Understanding and Specific Questions around Indigenous EL Identification

- State EL leaders from 12 of the 25 states had little information or knowledge of how to interpret ESSA’s Indigenous EL definition.
- Two areas of confusion:
 - Who counts as “Native American or Alaska Native, or a native of the outlying areas”?
 - What does “significant impact” and “who comes from an environment” mean?
- Many state leaders were not actively engaging in Indigenous EL identification practices.

I was aware that [the Indigenous EL definition] was there. But beyond that I guess I probably haven't pondered it much.

Nobody's really put guidance on significant impact and what is significant to me may not be significant to the administration in the next building over or the next cube over.

To what extent are state leaders knowledgeable about and collaborating with Indigenous stakeholders?

How does this level of engagement influence their work on Indigenous EL identification?

Many State EL Leaders Had Limited Specific Knowledge and Little Engagement with Indigenous Stakeholders in Their States

- Leaders from 11 states discussed the history of colonization, including language loss.
- Many leaders didn't know who Indigenous students and stakeholders were in their state.
- Only leaders from 4 states spoke of collaboration with Tribal governments and Indigenous communities.
- Limited knowledge of and collaboration with Indigenous stakeholders led to inaction.

I think there's an acknowledgment here that there's been damage done by the educational system in the United States to Native families. And testing a student for their English skills, especially on an assessment that really is designed for non-native English speakers, can feel, again, like a system imposing itself and determining what that student needs and doesn't need.

I'm just not aware of any major Indigenous groups in our state to work with.

What questions or concerns do state EL leaders have about the identification of Indigenous students as ELs?

How do these concerns influence their work on Indigenous EL identification?

State EL leaders felt that resources and guidance to promote relevant and beneficial EL services for Indigenous students are lacking.

- Leaders from 11 states were concerned that Indigenous ELs in their state were being served exclusively through services, largely inappropriate, designed for immigrant-origin EL students.
- Conflicting views:
 - EL services should meet students' individual needs, not group needs (7 states).
 - EL services for Indigenous students should be different (11 states)
 - Culturally-sustaining & Indigenous language revitalization
 - Academic English development

What I would hate to see is this influx in identification [of Indigenous students] and no services to support that identification, which I think is a real risk.

We're moving towards dual-language types of models with Tribal languages. It's about supporting English skills, but also supporting Tribal language skills and that regrowth of Tribal languages here.

Implications of our work:

- State EL leaders, who are critical to policies and practices regarding the identification of Indigenous students as ELs, need the understanding, relationships, and skills to work in this area.
 - Clarity on the meaning and intent of the differentiated definition is needed from the federal government. State and local leaders and educators can press the DoE for this clarity.
 - State EL leaders should incorporate Indigenous students' and families' interests in EL policy and planning through Tribal consultation and other means such as collaboration with state Indian Education/Title VI divisions.
 - Local educators and leaders can also work with Indigenous families and leaders in their communities to ensure that EL identification and services are appropriate, accessible and meeting their needs and interests.
 - There is a need to reconsider and broaden the types of supports available to Indigenous students classified as ELs, especially with regard to Indigenous language revitalization programs (as seen in federal NAM grants).
-

If you are...	You can...
A parent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with Tribes, education leaders, and schools to ensure that your child is fairly evaluated for Title III English learner (EL) eligibility based on federal and state law and guidance, and if identified, is provided with meaningful and beneficial services that support their holistic language and academic growth.
A teacher or school administrator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluate how well EL identification and services are working for Indigenous students in your classroom and building, discuss and address successes and challenges with your colleagues, and share information with district and state personnel.
A Tribal leader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage government-to-government processes with federal, state, and local governments to develop EL identification and service provision policy guidance.
A school or district Title VI or Indian education director	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In cooperation with local and state Title III/EL education directors, provide opportunities for Indigenous communities and families to share their experiences and educational interests with regards to EL identification and services. • Collaborate with Title III/EL director to design, assess, and/or implement beneficial EL identification and service provision for Indigenous students.
A school or district Title III or EL education director	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reach out to local Indigenous students, families, and communities to raise awareness of what EL identification means to students and to understand their needs and interests with regard to EL services. • Collaborate with Title VI/Indian education director to design, assess, and/or implement beneficial EL identification and service provision for Indigenous students. • Communicate with state Title III/EL education director about ways to improve policies, resources, and supports for Indigenous EL students.
A state Title VI or Indian education director	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborate with state Title III/EL director to align EL identification and services with Indigenous students' and families' interests. • Communicate with school and district Title VI/Indian education directors about community and family interests and needs related to EL identification and services.

A state Title III or EL education director	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide opportunities for Indigenous communities and families to share their experiences and educational interests and be involved in policymaking related to EL education. Consider flexible state-level policies that allow for local and Tribal adaptations. • Develop guidance, training, and material resources about Indigenous student EL identification procedures and services that are aligned with the results of Tribal consultation processes. Resources might include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Expanded staffing of Indigenous educators within state and local EL divisions; ○ Improved data collection around Indigenous students. • Oversee the implementation of EL identification and service provision for Indigenous students at district and school levels.
A federal education policymaker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a government-to-government process with Tribes nationally to develop, issue, and disseminate federal guidance related to the meaning and intent of the Indigenous student EL definition, and Indigenous EL identification processes and services. • Share guidance with states that includes promising practices for articulating and implementing the differentiated eligibility. Critically, this guidance needs to be developed through government-to-government processes, centering the perspectives and interests of diverse Indigenous constituents. • Clarify that Indigenous language revitalization programs and services are eligible Title III services supporting Title III's twin goals of language development and academic success of Indigenous EL-identified students.
An advocate for Indigenous and/or multilingual students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educate and hold education agencies accountable for identifying and serving Indigenous students as ELs (Title III eligible) in ways that are not only in compliance with state and federal law but also beneficial to those students and aligned with Tribal and family goals. • Work with education agencies across levels to plan and implement Title III/EL services that are in alignment with Indigenous sovereignty and Tribal goals and values.

Advice to give

- What knowledge do you think state EL leaders need for their work with Indigenous English learner education?
- What kinds of engagement and collaboration practices should state EL leaders have with Indigenous stakeholders?

Thank you!

Q&A

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Links to research brief and papers:

[Research brief](#)

[50 state scan](#)

[Interviews with state leaders](#)



Photo credit: Brian Adams

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