

Experts Workshop: Rural Early Childhood Forum on Native American and Alaska Native Early Learning

National Center for Rural Early Childhood Learning Initiatives (Mississippi State)
American Indian Leadership Program (Penn State)
Center on Rural Education and Communities (Penn State)

Concept:

The National Center for Rural Early Childhood Learning Initiatives at Mississippi State University (known as Rural Early Childhood) will sponsor the Rural Early Childhood Forum on Native American and Alaska Native Early Learning in conjunction with the *American Indian Leadership Program* and the *Center on Rural Education and Communities* of The Pennsylvania State University. Our goal is to shape national policy, and improve the well-being of Native American and Alaska Native young children.

Participants in this forum will revisit the American Indian and Alaska Native Education Research Agenda (Strang and Von Glatz, unpublished) that was prepared in response to 1998 White House Executive Order 13096. Our aim is twofold: first, to assess the current state of rural Indian early childhood education, with an emphasis on the years prior to formal school entry, as well as educational leadership as it pertains to rural Indian early childhood education; and secondly to initiate research to fulfill the goals of the research agenda.

Anticipated Outcomes:

- The development of partnerships and connections between scholars and communities resulting in fundable projects addressing identified gaps in Indian Education research;
- Publication of workshop proceedings as an integrated set of research and policy briefs;
- Expanded papers published in a reputable peer-reviewed academic journal (e.g. *Journal of Indian Education* or *Journal of Research in Rural Education*);

Background:

There is currently a notable absence of research on Indian Education. Regardless of the logistic, cultural and other challenges that may be to some degree responsible for this gap, arguably the lack of knowledge in this area is to the detriment of Indian educators and the Indian communities with whom they work. The absence of research, however, is not due to a lack of important unanswered questions.

Mississippi State's *National Center for Rural Early Childhood Learning Initiatives*, (NCRECL), Penn State's *American Indian Leadership Program* (AILP) and the Penn State's *Center for Rural Education and Communities* (CREC) jointly propose to convene an experts conference comprised of academics, Indian educators and community leaders

to assess the state of the knowledge and develop an agenda and action plan for most needed research in the area of rural Indian early childhood education.

Invited workshop participants, recognized as experts in their research/issue areas, will revisit the 1998 Clinton Executive Order on Indian Education and the Executive Order's subsequent implementation. Approximately 15-20 participants will present short papers synthesizing research gaps in key areas of Indian Education, and will participate in roundtable discussions to determine a best course of research, partnership and action, identifying most needed areas of research as well as strategies for partnering with communities and leveraging resources to carry out this work.

This workshop will convene July 28-29, 2005 for a day and a half meeting at the Clinton Center in Little Rock, Arkansas. We hope to organize a follow-up meeting in October 2005 to coincide with the National Indian Education Association meetings in Denver. The initial meeting will focus on establishing partnerships and research action agendas. The follow-up meeting will focus on strategies to identify and secure resources for collaborative research. Following the meetings, the Mississippi State and Penn State organizers will jointly publish the workshop proceedings as an integrated set of research and policy briefs. We plan to subsequently publish extended versions of the same papers in a special edition of a peer-reviewed journal.

Central Questions to be Addressed at the Workshop:

1. How are infant and pre-school-age American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) children's health and well being related to rural (reservation and non-reservation), suburban, small town, large city, etc. residence? How does this relationship compare with the overall population? What methods are effective in promoting health and wellness among AI/AN families, particularly among those in rural settings? Please include a definition of well being.
2. What is the level of effectiveness for early childhood programs and activities for AI/AN children in promoting school readiness, especially in rural contexts? How must early childhood programs be structured so that they foster the fundamental skills that children are expected to have when they enter school?
3. To what extent do AI/AN children and their families in reservation, rural, urban, and other settings have early childhood education opportunities available to them? How can a network of tribal early childhood programs that address issues, resources, and action plans be organized, particularly within rural settings?
4. What early childhood education programs and activities appear to promote effective use of English as a primary and/or second language? What programs and activities are effective in developing, preserving, and/or revitalizing native language and culture?

5. How is the incidence of disabilities among infant and pre-school-age AI/AN children related to rural (reservation and non-reservation), suburban, small town, large city, etc. residence? How can early childhood programs accommodate AI/AN children with disabilities?

6. Considering that transitions between different early care and education settings (Head Start, preschool) and between early care and education and kindergarten are challenging for all young children and their families, what special considerations are necessary for young AI/AN children? What transition models exist in tribal, BIA, and public schools for young AI/AN children? Have any models been measured to be effective?

7. What are the characteristics of effective leaders in rural and reservation schools and communities serving American Indian and Alaska Native children, including early childhood and K-12 programs? What are the key contextual factors leaders should consider and how do tribal languages and cultures influence leadership?

8. To what extent are rural and reservation American Indian and Alaska Native communities (parents, tribes, and others) involved in their children's schools and programs? How does grade level, percentage Native enrollment, teacher, administrator, curriculum, school governance, location of school, community characteristics and tribal differences impact involvement? What are some best practices specific to American Indian and Alaska Native children for promoting family and community involvement in Early Childhood programs and schools?

For more information about this initiative, contact:

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