



Tribal Early Learning Report

2024 - 2025



Introduction

For centuries, Tribal and Indigenous communities have long practiced many of the components that early learning aims to address *preparing young children for the next milestone of life by supporting their cognitive, physical, and social-emotional development and well-being.*

However, Black, Indigenous & People of Color (BIPOC) communities are often referenced, and framed in a negative context – using negative language regarding disparities in health, socioeconomic status, and lack of educational attainment to name a few.

Funding is often intended to increase positive outcomes for these communities, but typically there is no, or minimal, input from the community itself about ways to effectively make these gains or increase positive outcomes in a way that works for the community itself. We know that trauma, and historical trauma have negative impacts on the development of a child and communities at large. Systems framing communities in a negative manner only highlight deficits and problems and need to acknowledge that communities know what they need, and they have the necessary answers. The most impactful change happens when practice is grounded in the culture, community and traditions of the community.



Purpose - Acknowledging Strengths & Solutions



The purpose of this report is not only to highlight the challenges and barriers, which is typical practice, but we intend to also highlight the strengths and success of Tribal and Indigenous communities. We want this report to serve as an advocacy tool for additional funding and provide guidance on how funding can provide the flexibility needed to meet the unique needs of these communities.

We also hope that it aims to support “systems” in changing the way we think about implementation of early learning services in Tribal and Indigenous communities. In this report Native Hawaiian communities are also included in the interview process. This community was not spared from the western colonization and still faces many of the same challenges that Native communities face to this day.

Process

In fall of 2024 Start Early Washington’s Community Partnerships Manager, Alex Patricelli, initiated individual 60-minute interviews with early learning leaders at various Tribal and Indigenous communities across Washington State. Eleven interviews occurred with leaders representing 8 local Tribes as well as 2 Tribal/Indigenous organizations, and a Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) funded Tribal school.

Each participant was given questions prior to the interview with the participant determining which questions they wanted to focus on, or answer, throughout the interview time. Interviews were recorded only for note taking purposes and to anonymously quote interviewees using their exact language. This report has been reviewed by those that participated in the interview process for accuracy and additional information was added as necessary.



8

Local Tribes

2

Tribal/Indigenous
Organizations

1

BIE Funded
Tribal Schol

Core Themes

Strength-Based Approach

Shifting the focus from deficits to honoring cultural strengths, wisdom, and community knowledge. Emphasizing family and community care. Children are raised communally.

Cultural Integration

Programs embed traditions in caregiving, food, and ceremonies. Preserving kinship support, cultural knowledge once stripped by colonization, and emphasizing how programs help restore identity and tradition.

Home Visiting as a Tradition

Creating space for supporting intergenerational knowledge, building community trust, and practicing traditional values.

System Misalignments

Rigid, colonial models don't reflect Tribal and Indigenous lifeways, understanding how standardized tools are often culturally inappropriate, and data systems ignore storytelling and cultural impact.

Funding Barriers

Restrictions on cultural practices like gifting, medicines, and tribal holidays and the inflexibility of billing models.

Key Needs



Flexible, culturally aligned funding



More indigenous birth/lactation workers and prenatal-3 support



Improved and expanded infrastructure, staffing, and visibility of home visiting work



Greater investment from Tribal leadership



Community Findings

Traditional Values

Cultural values consist of family and community ties, shared sense of community, physical resources (food, plants, animals, water, land), generational knowledge and teachings, caring for the youth, and honoring elders.

Weaving together culture and program implementation

Early learning looks to support child's development in all domains (cognitive, motor, social-emotional), support caregivers in establishing secure attachment, reduce the likelihood of childhood abuse and/or neglect, create community and provide support to caregivers from children's earliest ages.

“All families are family.”

In Tribal communities, it is not uncommon to work with or provide services to, or with, relatives. Likewise, some programs have created clear policies and procedures for their work setting due to fear of nepotism or favoring relatives or friends. However, it's not uncommon for programs to supervise their own relatives. There are programs where staff are related to or have close connections outside of their professional setting.

“My mother was my home visitor. She was the only Tribal home visitor in my area when I became pregnant with my first son. If it wasn't for her connection to early learning and home visiting work, I wouldn't have the same connection to Tribal communities, my work, or my culture that I have today.”

Three programs shared they have familial connections as well as a shared passion for early learning. These ties can often lead to serving their own family members in programs or working alongside each other in the community. Nieces and nephews, grandchildren, or their children could be eligible for services. Regardless of the relationship programs reported referring to all program participants as “relatives” or family honoring the traditional value of connectedness.

“That’s how I talk about our relatives, which is what we call our clients. It actually, feels like I’m talking about my relatives - I had a few grant funders, and outside people reflect that back to me of like, “Wow, you really talked about them as if you’re related to them”. I was like, Yeah, well, some of them I am and the ones that I’m not, I should still treat them like that, because that is the respect they deserve. I would never say anything about them that I wouldn’t say about my own relative, or say to their face, and I know all my staff feel the same way.”

There are programs that exist who have created a position for a “grandmother figure” to attend visits with a home visitor or be available to go into classrooms to provide extra support and cultural connections. Some programs refer to them as “Kiya” meaning grandmother in Lushootseed which is a language spoken by several tribes in Washington. This role supports cultural connection, and offers support to staff during home visits, in the classroom or during community events.



“Many programs support multigenerational homes. This is also a traditional value that many cultures hold that childrearing is not solely the parent’s responsibility, they are not expected to understand what it takes to raise a child, it’s the responsibility of the community to support the child’s growth and development. “It takes a village” is a phrase known by many and this is demonstrated in the way Tribal and Indigenous communities operate.”

Programs and participants lean on the community for cultural connections. Participants shared that they utilize community knowledge keepers, for example where to gather traditional foods or for traditional activities like weaving, or storytellers. Participants shared that community members have a “thirst” for cultural connection after western colonization.

“I'm really glad that I grew up knowing how to do a lot of things because then that let me come in and also teach parents that wanted to know, because people are thirsty for culture. They want to know it. And we're coming into a generation back from our boarding school era to the ICWA act. So, there's some families who were removed from our communities who were totally stripped of that [culture], a hundred percent stripped, and didn't get to learn it/[culture] and so that teaching didn't get passed on to these other generations. And some people feel really bad about that. And so they don't really feel a part of the community, because they feel like they missed out on that aspect, or don't know how or can't teach it, you know, and so opening the door in that area to say, “Hey, come on in. We'll learn this together.”

*To learn more about ICWA visit www.bia.gov/bia/ois/dhs/icwa

Every decision made is a direct reflection of culture. One participant shared that everything they do has some element of culture whether it be who they invite, how they set up the room during gatherings, what food they provide at gatherings, what activities they plan for, all the way to the materials they provide for families. All things are thought of and planned around culture. Another interviewee shared ways they are intentional about including culture into services. Bringing traditional dances and songs into the classroom or home visits.





“There's some type of cultural element in the planning and delivery of everything. I would say that we even use culture when thinking about things like diapers and ointments and breastfeeding support. We think about our indigenous relatives like we think about sustainability. We think about what we are historically, you know, are allergic to or what our preferences are. So, I would say we use culture in every part of our program services which just happens naturally because we're serving our own people. We do explore some partnerships like some work with the language department or cultural department.”

While resources are often limited, interviewees shared they look for cultural relevant resources. Tribal TANF, WIC, housing, Indigenous doulas/birth workers, indigenous lactation consultants, and language teachers. Many also shared that they collaborate closely with ICW. Often the program itself is viewed as a cultural resource for the community. As stated above, some families are able to make connections back to community and culture through their connections to early learning programs.

All participants shared they would like to have home visiting work. This work is viewed as traditional. Allowing space for knowledge to be shared from generation to generation, tending to our children, and creating community.

“I truly believe in meeting people where they're at. Literally and figuratively. Meeting people where they're at cognitively, emotionally, mentally, all the things. But also, in their homes.”

Misalignments

Many participants shared that planning for services takes additional time due to being very intentional about the integration of culture into services. This looks like incorporating language, researching culturally relevant resources and materials, or making cultural adaptations to their models. Programs are often going above and beyond what is expected of them in terms of their contact but there is nowhere to adequately convey all the “extras” that programs do for families. Data is often focused on quantitative measures and the value of storytelling is lost. Participants shared that the true impact gets lost frequently because there is no way for them to report about the activities outside of what their model or funder is looking for.

Participants shared a need for flexibility when meeting with families from Indigenous communities. There are times when families take part in cultural events and may be gone for periods of time. This leaves programs in a precarious position. Leaving the program unable to meet visit dosage or frequency expectations outlined by their model or funder. Programs understand the importance of participating in these events and they still have contractual obligations to meet. Programs shared appreciation for the flexibility to offer virtual services in addition to face-to-face as well as the ability to also meet families where they feel most comfortable. Programs shared they understand that ideally, they would meet with families in their homes, however, sometimes there needs to be a well-established relationship first.

Having a well-established relationship also means having the right person in the position to provide services. Programs often times take longer to post for a position due to the Tribes internal process. Once a position is posted it may take longer to fill. Considerations like cultural matching, experience, and reputation in the community are factors when hiring for positions at these programs.





Evidence based work is rooted in colonization. Participants desired flexibility to have work centered within their community context and ownership over what is researched and reported. Participants shared there needs to be flexibility in what services look like. Funding often is focused on evidenced based models, but programs see and feel the gaps of these models. Participants shared that there is no perfect model and there needs to be room to meet the needs of the community. This may also look different from community to community. Models are explicit about what services need to look like. Most models do not specifically call out culture or leave space to integrate culture or make those connections for families. When programs integrate culture, it takes more than the allotted time for services. Several participants share that there needs to be room for more community designed work.

“I think it's like the flexibility of home visiting. I'm really quite astounded in a bad way that Washington doesn't have community-based pathways [at the state level]. If I'm going to be honest, especially because I found out from Tribal MEICHV recently that States have the capacity to choose that. There's literally nothing in the way. Washington doesn't get national funds, that the National Funding is like you need to use evidence-based funding, which is what I thought happened Tribal MIECHV, when I was talking to them about it, was actually like, well, actually, Washington could choose. And I was like what we are like, one of the most Liberal States of America, and we still don't have a community designed pathway.”

Funding is usually tied to increasing outcomes for indigenous communities. Families that are low income, have child welfare involvement, are homeless, and have mental health or substance use issues are the target population for funders. Participants shared that both models and funders need to understand there is a level of case management that takes place when supporting families with high needs. This may lead to programs not meeting the fidelity of their model and unable to report on all their activities to funders.

Due to the high rate of forced removal of AI/AN and Indigenous children, there is still significant stigma attached to home visiting or home-based services. Families typically take longer to enroll and engage in services, especially if there has been previous child welfare involvement. Program staff have shared that there is nowhere to report on the level of effort it takes sometimes to enroll a family that could benefit from services.

Defining a “slot” that aligns with the work. If there is child welfare involvement due to ICWA Tribes will prioritize kinship placements. This means a child could be placed with family who is already enrolled in services, but the family is counted as one slot. This is significant work for the program but only counted as one slot while serving multiple children in the home. Home visitors may be serving the foster family and bio-parents or

multiple children in the home are eligible for services.

The type of data that is required of programs is also a source of stress. One program reported “as an NFP nurse Home Visitor I have to get creative on how I collect data.”

“The federal government and state have things they require us to collect. When we're looking at outcomes and data we collect. Is this what we should be doing with our tribal families? Are we even collecting the right data? We all have to use the same tool for IPV but maybe that's not the right tool. We need more freedom with that. There are worries about how the information will be used and if it will be used against us?”

Another program shared that there are screenings that feel culturally insensitive. Tools like PICCOLO do not feel appropriate to conduct with their families. While there is data to support this tool being utilized Tribal/Indigenous communities, it does not adequately represent the amount of work home visitors do to support this the completion of this requirement. Programs often times are completing this because it's required and consistent incompleteness of these screenings and assessments could jeopardize their funding. Programs have shared concerns around how culturally insensitive tools are harmful to the relationship between providers and their families.



“As far as data, I love Tribally specific data.”

Many participants shared that they are limited in their abilities to provide support to their community members. Often times this means they have to refer families outside of their community. The resources that the family may be referred to may not have any cultural connection or context. All participants shared that there is a need to be able to offer all levels of support for children and families within their own community. Whether that is indigenous birth workers, lactation support, childcare, education, and medical – and these resources are often not available.

In addition to being underfunded, there are also high levels of restrictions on funding that is received. Things like “gifting” are viewed as a traditional value by honoring a

person with something to show appreciation for sharing their time and expertise. The gift is usually something not of monetary value, however this can't be explicitly named in a contract or on invoices when purchased. Purchasing traditional medicines must be labeled as something else in order for programs to get materials. Terms often used by these communities must be changed due to it not being viewed as "appropriate" expenditures.

For some funders paying programs based on enrolled family's participation in the program has also been a concern for some programs. One program shared what was said to their program from a funder. *"We're not going to pay you unless you see the client. Well, you know our clients often go to the Columbia River to fish for salmon, and they might be gone a month or two. And we'll try to stay in contact with them if we can. I don't feel like there's an understanding about the cultural practices."* Another example this participant shared was around when someone passes away or the additional holidays that a Tribe might recognize.





The Needs

All participants shared a need for adequate and flexible funding. Programs need funding to attend trainings that are culturally aligned, purchasing materials that are culturally relevant, being able to provide meals when gathering, and to host community events. Indigenous communities value community gatherings and programs often spend time searching for additional funding to be able to hold community cultural events. Materials, food, and information are planned with the community in mind but often take resources that are not considered allowable expenses or are insufficiently funded leaving the program searching for resources to fill the gap. Many participants applied for and received the Tribal Early Learning Funds from the Office of Tribal Relations out of the Department of Children, Youth, and Families which has been a helpful resource. Participants shared their appreciation for these funds and hope for their continuation.

All participants shared that if given the chance they would have home visiting work in their community. Participation in home visiting activities can be viewed as traditional. Tending to the next generation, passing along knowledge, and creating community for families all align with home visiting purposes and culture.

“Researching and trying to conceptualize how would our indigenous families feel really supported in parenthood. I stumbled upon home visiting, and I thought this made perfect sense! This is literally what we used to do! That’s something me and my staff talk a lot about. We’re just bringing our villages back! This is what we did. If I was back home, my aunties would be over all the time, or I would be over there. My cousins would be there. HV is the key to language and culture reclamation sustainability and just to preservation of our indigenous families in general.”

All participants shared there is a need for early learning support to be established or continued. There are 7 local Tribes in Washington State that have no early learning connections. 8 Tribes have home visiting services. There are also 2 Tribal organizations that serve the broader community. Overall, there is limited prenatal-3 support for families.

Most participants shared that there is a need for indigenous birth workers and lactation support. Many times, families get referred to providers outside of their community. They have faced discrimination and inadequate care. American Indian and Alaska Native people have higher maternal mortality rates than any other race/ethnic group according

to a report from Washington State Department of Health. The National Library of Medicine released an article titled *Crossing the Quality Chasm: A New Health System for the 21st Century* (LOM, 2001) which helped highlight the need to shift the paradigm, proposing the concept of patient-centered care and describing it as “respectful of and responsive to individual patient preferences, needs and values, and ensuring that patient values guide all clinical decisions”. The article goes on to state “this conceptualization recognizes that knowledge accumulated over time—about the person, the family, and the community in which they live—creates a better foundation for recognizing health problems and the delivery of care that is appropriate in the context of other needs individuals might have.”

We need more visibility of early learning work (more specifically home visiting). Many of the programs are smaller programs. Programs are often comprised of a supervisor and 1-2 home visitors. Often times these programs get combined with Head Start/Early Head Start. While these programs all serve to support young children, home visiting is focused on the caregivers' support more directly.

We need to support increased understanding and support from Tribal leadership. Program staff shared that leadership applies for funding without truly understanding what will be required. Often times (as highlighted above) services are much more intensive than initially understood. Early learning leaders within Tribal communities see this work as not only education but also preventative work and would like to see an increase in support and investment from their own Tribes. This supports programs from leaning on federal, state, and local partners and from protection from funding risks. Things like reporting and invoicing, finalizing and signing contracts, and the hiring process take longer due to Tribes internal process. Complying with federal, state, and local timelines is difficult for these programs.



Conclusion

Tribal and Indigenous early learning programs thrive when grounded in community and culture. Supportive policies, funding flexibility, and authentic partnerships are essential for sustained impact and cultural preservation.





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We raise our hands to the 12 early learning leaders for their time and expertise in developing this report and to the more than 30 individuals who have continued to raise the voices of early learning and Indigenous communities through informal conversations that also helped shape this report. Start Early Washington's Learning Reports are made possible in part by the generous support of Ballmer Group.