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Breaking Cycles of Adversity

Effective Prevention Strategies in Schools

Promising Justice Practices in Native Communities Issue Brief 3

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In Brief: What are Prevention Strategies in Schools?

*By fostering educational success, strengthening social connections, and reducing interactions with the justice system, **school-based prevention strategies** create long-term benefits for individuals, families, and communities. Prevention programs aim to **reduce the risk** of young people becoming involved in the juvenile justice system by **addressing the underlying factors** that contribute to delinquency. These programs work to **promote positive decision-making and healthier life choices**, and in turn prevent substance use, violence, school dropout, and other behaviors that increase the likelihood of justice system involvement.*

School-based prevention strategies are crucial as they can reach a broad student population and mitigate potential issues before they escalate. For American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) youth, culturally relevant prevention programs help enhance social connections, foster healthy relationships, strengthen identity, and improve mental and physical health, which are critical protective factors against justice system involvement. These types of programs equip students with essential skills, such as emotional regulation, conflict resolution, and decision-making, while also reinforcing cultural traditions and community support systems. Ultimately, these proactive and cost-effective approaches help break cycles of adversity and support the overall well-being of AI/AN youth.

ABOUT PROMISING JUSTICE PRACTICES

The *Promising Justice Practices in Native Communities* project invites representatives from Native communities to come together to share learnings about promising practices for youth involved in, or vulnerable to involvement with, the criminal justice system. Participants exchange knowledge on implementing culturally responsive practices, highlighting positive outcomes for participating youth, and considering how promising practices can be adapted and applied in their own communities. By sharing our learnings, we hope to grow our individual and collective capacities to support and nurture Native youth.

ABOUT FHI 360'S NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR WORK AND LEARNING

[FHI 360](#) is a global organization that mobilizes research, resources and relationships so that people everywhere can access the opportunities they need to lead full, healthy lives. We listen to, learn from and work with communities to expand social and economic equity, improve health and well-being, and strengthen resilience. By bringing together deep expertise and diverse perspectives, we collaborate with partner communities and peer organizations to build enduring networks and expand our collective impact. In everything we do, we advocate for access and equity for people everywhere, enabling them to create their own paths forward.

FHI 360's [National Institute for Work and Learning](#) advances solutions in education and workforce systems. We focus on two key drivers of individual well-being – education and employment – to improve lives.

Effective School-Based Interventions

School-based prevention programs focused on middle and high school students integrate indigenous values and traditions to delay or prevent substance use, treat mental health issues, support healthy relationships, prevent violence, and promote academic success. These strategies help to avert young people from involvement with the justice system and disrupt cycles of adversity that have long-lasting effects for AI/AN youth, families and communities.



Substance Use Prevention

One such intervention is the culturally adapted **Be Under your Own Influence (BUYOI-AI/AN)**, a substance use prevention media campaign directed at AI/AN youth living on reservations and attending middle schools in the Northern Plains.



All students exposed to BUYOI-AI/AN had a reduced risk of first-time alcohol use by the end of the intervention period."

-Crabtree et al., 2021

Disparities in the Justice System and Risk Factors among School-Age Youth

AI/AN youth are more vulnerable to becoming involved with the justice system due to combination of historical, social, economic, and systemic factors (GAO, 2020). Historical trauma continues to impact the physical and mental well-being of Native people today, increasing the risk of early substance abuse, exposure to violence, and involvement in the justice system (GAO, 2020; Rolnick, 2016).

AI/AN youth are **7 times more likely** to be judged unfairly than non-Hispanic white youth

18% of AI/AN youth lived with a parent who served time in jail

The average incarceration rate for AI/AN is more than 2 times the national average

40% of reservation-dwelling AI/AN children had tried alcohol by 8th grade

44% of reservation-dwelling AI/AN children had tried marijuana by 8th grade

AI/AN children are **2 times more likely** to be victims of violence than any other racial/ethnic group

AI/AN youth have the **lowest graduation rate** among all racial/ethnic groups

Addressing these disparities requires a comprehensive approach that prioritizes culturally responsive interventions.

Drawing on community participatory research, BUYOI—a school-based intervention previously validated in other settings—underwent structural and cultural adaptations to align with tribal history and identity. The campaign demonstrated effectiveness in reducing the risk of first-time alcohol use among AI/AN middle school students (Crabtree et al, 2021).



Mental Health Support and Social-Emotional Learning

Tribal officials interviewed by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) cited substance misuse, challenges in the education system, and mental health issues as key contributors to juvenile delinquency in their communities (GAO, 2020). Hence, addressing the mental health challenges faced by current generations is essential to mitigating the lasting effects of historical trauma.

For programs to be effective in addressing the mental health challenges of AI/AN youth, they must incorporate Native traditions and values in [Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered Care](#). One such program is the **Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS)**, which can be adapted for cultural relevance. CBITS helps students reduce symptoms of PTSD, depression, and anxiety while improving social and academic functioning. Through individual and group sessions based on cognitive behavioral therapy, students develop essential skills such as emotional regulation, relaxation, conflict resolution, and problem-solving while processing traumatic memories and grief (Morsette et al, 2012). A study by Morsette et al. (2012) found that a CBITS program implemented across three reservations in the northwestern U.S. led to a measurable reduction in trauma symptoms for 5th to 8th-grade AI/AN students.



Healthy Relationships and Violence Prevention

AI/AN children and youth face heightened risks of experiencing familial violence, bullying, gender-based violence, gang involvement, and incarceration (Pabla, 2021; Brockie et al, 2015; Latimer, 2004). Addressing these deep-rooted challenges requires culturally grounded interventions that promote healing, resilience, and the restoration of strong family and community ties.

The **Healthy and Empowered Youth (HEY)** project, a school-based intervention for AI/AN high school students on reservations, promoted healthy relationships, self-esteem, and substance abuse prevention. From 2010 to 2012, students participated in a 27-session, 90-minute curriculum enriched with video production, media literacy, guest speakers, field trips, and extracurricular activities



Students gained life skills, increased their confidence and self-esteem, and became more involved in their culture and community."

-Rushing et al., 2017

(Rushing et al., 2017). Research showed improvements in mental health, self-esteem, moral values, leadership, and cultural pride, with most students reporting having a trusted adult for personal support (Rushing et al., 2017).



Academic Success

According to the GAO, 10 of 12 tribal officials identified educational challenges—such as truancy, bullying, and lack of culturally responsive instruction—as key risk factors for juvenile delinquency (GAO, 2020).

School suspensions are ineffective at promoting behavioral improvement and instead increase AI/AN youth’s risk of repeated suspensions, social isolation, academic decline, dropout, and juvenile justice involvement (Accavitti & Newland, 2013). Programs that tackle these education issues through culturally responsive approaches are essential to breaking the cycle of academic disengagement and reducing juvenile justice involvement among AI/AN youth.

The **Native American Dropout Prevention Initiative (NADPI)**, a three-year project that ran from 2006 to 2009, aimed to reduce dropout rate, increase graduation rates, and improve academic performance of AI/AN students attending both tribal and public schools in two Arizona communities. The program incorporates Apache traditions and values into educational strategies, emphasizing social norms, language, and history, while highlighting the critical role of parental and community involvement (Chang & Leong, 2024). Although the program successfully reduced dropout rates, its impact on graduation rates remained inconclusive (LeCroy & Milligan Associates, 2009).



Restorative Justice

AI/AN youth are more likely than their peers to enter the justice system for status offenses and offenses linked to family conflict and substance abuse (Rolnick & Sekaquaptewa, 2022). Implementing restorative justice

practices that emphasize community healing, cultural connection, and rehabilitation can help prevent AI/AN youth from entering the justice system and break the cycle of incarceration.

Tribal Healing to Wellness Courts have been shown to foster positive behavior change, case dismissal and sentence suspension (DeVall et al, 2022). School-based restorative practices, rooted in restorative justice principles, are designed to repair harm and build positive relationships through open communication and accountability. These practices—including proactive circles, restorative circles, and restorative conferences—



Overall suspension rates and racial suspension rate disparities decreased more in Restorative Practice schools than non-Restorative Practice schools.”

-Agustine et al., 2024

have proven effective in disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline. A study conducted in San Diego, CA, found that, when implemented correctly, restorative practices significantly reduced both school suspensions and juvenile felony arrests (Augustine et al, 2024).

Recognizing that the challenges faced by AI/AN youth are deeply interconnected, it is essential to address them through comprehensive, culturally responsive approaches. By implementing school-based prevention programs that honor Native values and traditions, communities can foster supportive environments that promote resilience, healing, and long-term well-being. When prevention efforts are effective, they not only reduce justice system involvement but also strengthen families and communities, creating a foundation for future generations to thrive.

Neah Bay High School's Story



It's just a lot of dedication and hard work on the part of the teachers, staff, the community, and the kids taking responsibility for their own learning."

-Principal Alice Murner, quoted in Altstatt Menchaca, T. (2015)



A Story of Resilience and Partnership: Neah Bay High School's Journey to Success

Neah Bay High School, situated on the isolated Makah Indian Reservation in Washington State, presents a compelling case study in educational transformation. Once struggling in the lowest five percent of Washington State schools and labeled a "Priority School," Neah Bay High School achieved remarkable success by strategically implementing effective school programs while fostering a strong partnership with the Makah Tribe and integrating aspects of their culture. This journey underscores the power of community collaboration and culturally responsive approaches in enhancing Native student achievement.

The Makah community has long faced challenges due to historical injustices and governmental neglect, which fostered distrust in outside systems. Despite these difficulties, Makah traditions of resilience and community have been integral in addressing educational challenges. Starting in 2005, Dr. Ann Renker, a school principal and former teacher and Head Start director with deep ties to the Makah community, partnered with the Makah Tribal Council to spearhead efforts to improve Neah Bay High School's performance. This partnership prioritized cultural continuity by integrating Makah language and culture into the curriculum, while fostering a growth mindset, positive learning environments, and a focus on academic achievement. These initiatives, grounded in Native values of community and cultural preservation, have helped bridge historical divides, creating a shared vision for the educational success of Makah youth.

These combined efforts yielded extraordinary results. By 2013, 100% of Neah Bay High School graduates received acceptance letters to universities, colleges, technical schools, or the military for three consecutive years.



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Funding Opportunities for Prevention Strategies in Schools

The federal agencies and foundations listed below have offered grant opportunities in recent years that supported programs in Native communities. As the new presidential administration sets policy priorities, budget allocations and grant opportunities from federal agencies are likely to shift but some grant programs may continue. Some of the funding sources listed here may not be accepting current grant applications but typically open new opportunities periodically, meaning interested parties should check sites regularly for new announcements of open application periods.

1. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) – Tribal Youth Programs and Services

OJJDP provides grants to Tribes aiming to enhance their juvenile justice systems. These grants support prevention, intervention, and treatment strategies that benefit Native youth. The funding is designed to be flexible, accommodating the unique cultural and systemic needs of each Tribe.

Url: <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/programs/tribal-youth-programs-and-services>

2. Department of Justice (DOJ) – Tribal Grants

The Department of Justice offers various grants to support Tribes in enhancing their justice systems, including programs focused on crime prevention, youth violence interventions, and substance abuse treatment. These grants aim to address the comprehensive needs of justice-involved youth and adults within tribal communities.

Url: <https://www.justice.gov/tribal>

3. Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA)

The Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) offers a variety of funding opportunities aimed at enhancing the nation's criminal justice system. These grants support state, local, and tribal jurisdictions in areas such as law enforcement, courts, corrections, treatment, justice information sharing, and community-based initiatives.

Url: <https://bja.ojp.gov/>

- 4. Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) – Tribal Healing to Wellness Courts**
The Tribal Healing to Wellness Courts website provides information on funding opportunities aimed at supporting tribal communities in enhancing public safety and victim services.

Url: <https://wellnesscourts.org/>

- 5. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) – Native Connections Grant**

The Native Connections program is a five-year grant initiative assisting American Indian and Alaska Native communities in identifying and addressing the behavioral health needs of Native youth. It focuses on reducing substance misuse and suicide risk among youth up to age 24 by supporting the development of culturally relevant prevention and treatment strategies.

Url: <https://www.samhsa.gov/communities/tribal-affairs/funding-opportunities/native-connections>

- 6. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) – Circles of Care Grant Program**

Circles of Care supports the planning and development of community-based systems of care for children with mental health challenges and their families. While the grant does not fund direct services, it aids in building local capacity and infrastructure to improve mental health, substance abuse prevention, and wellness services for Native youth.

Url: <https://www.samhsa.gov/communities/tribal-affairs/funding-opportunities/circles-care>

- 7. National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities (NIMHD)**

The National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities (NIMHD) offers a variety of funding opportunities aimed at advancing minority health and reducing health disparities.

Url: <https://www.nimhd.nih.gov/>

- 8. William T. Grant Foundation**

The William T. Grant Foundation offers several funding opportunities aimed at supporting research and initiatives to improve the lives of young people in the United States.

Url: <https://wtgrantfoundation.org/>

9. Graham Boeckh Foundation

The Graham Boeckh Foundation (GBF) is dedicated to transforming mental health services, with a particular emphasis on youth. They collaborate with governments and other philanthropic organizations to initiate and fund strategic projects aimed at creating integrated, youth-focused mental health services.

Url: <https://grahamboeckhfoundation.org/>

10. MacArthur Foundation – Criminal Justice Program

The MacArthur Foundation's Criminal Justice Program is dedicated to addressing over-incarceration and reducing racial and ethnic disparities within the United States' justice system. A central initiative of this program is the Safety and Justice Challenge, which collaborates with cities and counties to develop and implement strategies aimed at safely decreasing jail populations and eliminating inequities.

Url: <https://www.macfound.org/programs/bigbets/criminal-justice/>