



Creating a Safe and Connected School Climate for American Indian Students

Guidance for Montana schools: Developed with Montana students

The importance of school climate:

The U.S. Department of Education defines school climate as the extent to which a school community creates and maintains a safe school campus; a supportive academic, disciplinary, and physical environment; and respectful, trusting, and caring relationships throughout the school community. A positive school climate, where students feel safe and connected, is critically important to academic success as well as emotional wellbeing.

The creation of this document:

The school experiences of American Indian students are often different from that of white students. However, very little research and literature exists to guide schools on how to create a positive school climate for American Indian students. The recommendations featured in this guide are informed by the research literature that is available as well as the lived experiences of a group of Montana Urban American Indian students. Student input was gathered through a series of focus groups and interviews during the 2021 and 2022 school year.

Staff from the Office of Public Instruction's Coordinated School Health Unit, American Indian Student Achievement Unit, and Tribal Relations and Resiliency Unit would like to thank the students and their advisor for their time and contribution to this document; the voices of these students are powerful, valuable, and greatly appreciated.

How to use this document:

The United States Secret Service and United States Department of Education has developed evidence-based guidance on the steps necessary to create a safe and connected school climate. This document outlines those recommendations and offers additional guidance for meeting the needs of American Indian students in Montana. Some strategies also include tools and resources for schools to help put the strategy into practice. The Montana Office of Public Instruction is currently working on additional tools and resources that are relevant to the topics outlined here. As those tools and resources become available this document will be updated.

Creating a Safe and Connected School Climate for American Indian Students:

1. Assess the school's climate

Recommendation (U.S. Secret Service & U.S. Department of Education):

Regularly (once a year or more) and systematically gather data from students, faculty, and stakeholders to assess the climate of a school.

- Utilize surveys, focus groups, and screening data to create an overall picture of the school's climate. Use the findings to inform efforts and plan ways to enhance safety and respect within the school environment.
- Once assessments are complete, provide the results to all those who may be affected by the climate of the school including students and their families.
- Never make assumptions about the experience of students and staff in the school-setting.
- Empower students to make positive change. Empowerment will build from students feeling like they are being listened to.

Additional guidance for American Indian students:

The experiences of American Indian students may be uniquely different from other student groups. It's important to identify those experiences in a way that promotes understanding and continues to ensure the safety of American Indian students in the process. Recommendations:

- Assess American Indian students' experiences in ways that respect students' rights to be heard and remain anonymous.
- Let American Indian students represent themselves in a way that is meaningful to them; asking a single student to represent an entire group of students is often not appropriate unless a student has affirmatively expressed comfortability with this and volunteers to serve in this capacity.
- Provide multiple ways to provide feedback on school climate assessments and allow students to self-select how to participate. For example, provide anonymous surveys and the opportunity to participate in focus groups with peers and allow students to select their preferred method of participation.
- Whenever possible, utilize a trusted staff member to assist in gathering student input. School staff with a similar lived experience of American Indian students may be the best positioned to maintain feelings of safety during the information gathering process.

Resources to put this strategy into practice:

- [U.S. Department of Education School Climate Survey](#)- National Center of Safe and Supportive Learning: This freely available school climate survey can be used in grades 5-12. A staff survey and parent survey are also available.
- [Guidance for Measuring and Using School Climate Data](#)- National Association of School Psychologists: This document provides information on positive school climates and provides guidance on how to measure school climate and utilize the data that is gathered.

2. Emphasize the importance of listening in schools

Recommendation (U.S. Secret Service & U.S. Department of Education):

Encourage two-way, respectful listening between school staff and students about academic and non-academic concerns.

- Encourage and empower students to share feelings with school staff.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assist school staff in looking for non-verbal cues that may indicate a student may be hurting or in need of care or assistance. • Understand some students may have difficulty verbally expressing feelings.
<p>Additional guidance for American Indian students: Respectful listening may look different for American Indian students depending on community and family social and cultural norms. Recommendations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whenever possible, utilize a trusted staff member who is familiar with community norms to assist in gathering student input and support two-way listening. <p>Students who contributed to the creation of this document also emphasized the importance of school staff actively checking on students to gauge the status of their wellness, noting it is often challenging for students to ask for help directly.</p>
<p>Resources to put this strategy into practice:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitating Listening Circles- International Institute for Restorative Practices: This professional development resource provides information and guidance on facilitating listening circles to provide students and school staff with an opportunity to speak and listen to each other.

3. Take a strong but caring stance against the code of silence

School staff cannot intervene to help if they are unaware that help is needed. [Research shows](#) students are more likely to speak up about concerns when the students perceive they are cared about and will be treated fairly⁹; zero tolerance policies may discourage students from speaking to adults and school staff.⁹

<p>Recommendation (U.S. Secret Service & U.S. Department of Education): Encourage students to bring concerns to school staff.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure students know they are cared about and feel a sense of belonging at school. • Ensure students know how to contact school staff inside and outside of normal school hours about concerns.
<p>Additional guidance for American Indian students: A positive relationship between schools and American Indian students <i>and</i> their families/caregivers is necessary for fostering feelings of safety in school. Schools are encouraged to actively create opportunities for equitable engagement and purposefully work to eliminate inherent power dynamics. Recommendations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use common, understandable language in communications with families and caregivers. Avoid technical jargon, acronyms, and terms that are not commonly used outside of the school setting. • Work with all members of a student’s family and larger support system. Always honor the kinship ties and unique definitions of familial relationships used by students and their families. • Ensure the space where engagement takes place is one that lends itself towards equity and feelings of security. For example, hold meetings in the library vs. an office and arrange chairs in a circle. School staff with a similar lived experience of American Indian students can assist in these efforts.
<p>Resources to put this strategy into practice:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family and Caregiver Engagement- Office of Public Instruction: The guidance provides schools with tips on creating strong, authentic partnerships with families and caregivers

- [Tribal Engagement](#)- Office of Public Instruction: This guidance provides schools with tips on engaging with tribes, tribal communities, and American Indian families and caregivers. This guidance was developed in partnership with the American Indian Student Achievement and Tribal Relations and Resiliency units.

4. Find ways to stop bullying

Recommendation (U.S. Secret Service & U.S. Department of Education):

Bullying is a continuum of abuse, ranging from verbal taunts to physical threats to dangerous acts. Bullying is not playful behavior; always respond to acts of bullying.

- Treat both the bully and the student who is the victim of bullying in a respectful manner.
- Establish a foundation of pro-social behavior that promotes conflict resolution, peer mediation, and active listening.

Additional guidance for American Indian students:

[Everyday discrimination](#) may be experienced by American Indian students in ways that are not immediately apparent or recognizable to school staff. Recommendations:

- Educate school staff on everyday discrimination and how these experiences effect a student’s stress level and ability to learn and thrive.¹

Even well-meaning interactions in the school setting can cause American Indian students to feel bullied or unsafe. Students who contributed to the creation of this document described instances where their teachers drew attention to their appearance and/or heritage in ways that made the student feel uncomfortable and unsafe even though the teachers were not trying to cause harm.

Recommendations:

- Never ask an American Indian student to educate others on aspects of their culture or history; let the students decide if and when they may wish to do this.
- Never make assumptions about the culture and history of American Indian students. Each American Indian student is unique with unique lived experiences.

Resources to put this strategy into practice:

- [Essential Understandings Regarding Montana Indians](#)- Office of Public Instruction: This resource provides essential information and best practice guidance for school staff working with American Indian students. *Essential Understanding 2* is of particular relevance to the additional guidance featured above.

5. Empower students by involving them in planning, creating, and sustaining safe and connected school climate

Recommendation (U.S. Secret Service & U.S. Department of Education):

Climates of safety and connection are collaborative in nature.

- Involve all members of the school community, especially students, in creating a safe and connected school climate.
- Help students engage in positive, productive activities in school and in the community.

Additional guidance for American Indian students:

Respectful communication may look different from American Indian students depending on community and family social and cultural norms. Recommendations:

- Whenever possible, utilize a trusted staff member to assist in gathering student input. School staff familiar with these norms and/or with a similar lived experience of American Indian

students may be the best positioned to encourage participation in school planning and organizing activities.
Resources to put this strategy into practice: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eight Ways to Encourage Student Voice- KnowledgeWorks: This recourse contains tips for educators to encourage student voice and increase the opportunities for school staff to practice two-way listening.

6. Ensure that every student feels he or she has a trusting relationship with at least one adult at school

<p>Recommendation (U.S. Secret Service & U.S. Department of Education):</p> <p>Ensure every student has a trusting relationship with at least one adult at school.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage school staff to continually monitor students and offer support when needed. • Encourage school staff to show they care about their students’ wellbeing.
<p>Additional guidance for American Indian students:</p> <p>Recommendations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whenever possible, utilize school staff with a similar lived experience of American Indian students as they may be the best positioned to foster trusting in schools. • Make concerted efforts to provide school staff with opportunities to better understand the lived experiences of American Indians students in a way that is safe for the student by allowing the students to lead these interactions. Circles are a great way to generate understanding and build positive, trusting relationships.
Resources to put this strategy into practice: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship mapping- Harvard: Relationship mapping is a no-cost, highly impactful strategy to help ensure each student at a school has a positive relationship with at least one staff member

7. Be aware of the physical environment and their effects on creating comfort zones

<p>Recommendation (U.S. Secret Service & U.S. Department of Education):</p> <p>Building structure, facility safety plans, lighting, space, and architecture among other physical attributes will contribute to feelings of safety at school.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider the ways the physical structure of a school contribute to feelings of safety and actual security; work to maximize both the feelings of safety and actual security as much as possible.
<p>Additional guidance for American Indian students:</p> <p>American Indians often possess a relationship to physical space that is unique and an essential component of their wellbeing.³ When a connection to the physical learning space is facilitated, schools can better support these feelings of belonging which often result in higher attendance rates and a greater sense of security:³ Recommendations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a designated, physical space for American Indian students to call “theirs” that will contribute to feelings of belonging and safety. • Create spaces that welcome American Indian students by prominently and accurately displaying the culture of the American Indian students attending the school. Visual representation of indigeneity can signal to American Indian students and their families that students are safe, welcome, and able to retain and grow their personal and cultural identity within the educational setting.^{3,10}
Resources to put this strategy into practice:

- [Heart Butte School murals celebrate Indigenous culture and tradition](#): This news article describes the way Heart Butte school worked with American Indian artists to create visual displays of the Blackfeet Tribe's history and culture in a way that solicits pride and traditional tribal values.

8. Emphasize an integrated systems model

Recommendation (U.S. Secret Service & U.S. Department of Education):

An integrated systems approach involves multiple people and agencies working towards the common goal of supporting students.

- Strive to develop strong partnerships within a school and between a school and the community as these relationships are vital to creating supportive networks in and outside of the school settings. An integrated system will look different for each school and each community.

Additional guidance for American Indian students:

American Indian students and their families will have varying levels of familiarity and comfortability with utilizing community services, including health and mental health services. Recommendations:

- Utilize a trusted staff member or specialty trained staff or community member, such as wraparound facilitators, to help connect students and their families with resources and facilitate an integrated systems model.

Resources to put this strategy into practice:

- [Community Resource Mapping Toolkit](#)- Project 10 transition education network: The toolkit helps identify partners/assets in a community and walks partnership organizations through the process of forming a common goal and working towards a shared outcome.
- [Multi-tiered System of Support](#)- Office of Public Instruction: The multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) framework promotes a tiered approach to supporting students to better meet the dynamic and changing needs of students. Of particular relevance is the guidance on creating [Collaborative Teams](#).

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