



## Washington State Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

“The Practitioner’s Best Friend”  
[www.wsascd.org](http://www.wsascd.org)

### ‘Critical Questions’ Series October 2015

#### Why is it Important to Teach Native History and Culture?

In May 2015, Washington Senator John McCoy (Tulalip) successfully sponsored a bill requiring that tribal history and culture be taught in Washington’s common schools. Washington Senate Bill 5433 was seen as a refinement of a 10-year-old Washington State House Bill (HB 1495) sponsored by then Representative McCoy *encouraging* such teaching. In support of HB 1495 and SB 5433, Washington State’s Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) has published curriculum developed in collaboration with Washington’s tribes—free and available at [indian-ed.org](http://indian-ed.org). This curriculum entitled, *Since Time Immemorial* is endorsed by all 29 federally recognized tribes in Washington and can be adapted to incorporate unique regional differences through collaboration between school districts and the local tribe(s).

What might seem to some like a mere adjustment in social studies curriculum can also be framed—by Native peoples—as an important step in healing education systems after decades of tumultuous history. For generations the role of education systems in Washington State and beyond was to enforce federal policy calling for the eradication of Native languages and cultures and the assimilation of Native people into mainstream “American” ways of being. This forced assimilation caused incredible trauma for Native communities and their children forced to attend Indian boarding schools; for many, the trauma can still be felt in tribal families today. Many contend that this trauma is a considerable factor in the ongoing struggle for Native students in today’s schools. This ongoing struggle is call to action for educators seeking success for all students.

In a study from the early 1990s, the *Indian Nations at Risk Task Force*, (United States Department of Education, 1991) a committee assembled by the United States Secretary of Education to determine solutions to the ongoing struggle for American Indian students in meeting their fullest potential, culture is implicated in many important ways. Citing federal assimilationist policy from the 1880s, the task force highlighted the importance of strategically and intentionally incorporating traditional tribal cultures into schooling to both reverse the impact of such assimilation policies and strengthen tribal communities through student success in contemporary times. Task force members make the following suggestions:

- Educators must incorporate culture and language into regular instruction.

- The community must be highly participatory and collaborative in efforts to educate children.
- The pedagogy of the school must genuinely incorporate students' backgrounds and experiences into the school program.

More recently, and locally, Washington State's OSPI published *Proposed Standards for Culturally-Responsive School* (2000). This set of standards begins to become somewhat more specific about what educators will actually *do* in schools in which tribal culture is recognized and leveraged. OSPI's Office of Native Education suggests the following standards: Educators who have been properly trained are responsive to and incorporate local Native ways of knowing, learning and teaching in their work. Educators who meet these standards:

1. Use the local environment and community resources on a regular basis to link what they are teaching to the everyday lives of the students.
2. Participate in community events and activities in an appropriate and supportive way.
3. Work closely with parents to achieve a high level of complementary educational expectations between home and school.
4. Recognize the full educational potential of each student and provide the challenges necessary for them to achieve that potential.
5. Adapt instruction to the culturally contextual learning & cognitive styles, and needs of their American Indian students.

As school districts and teachers work to meet the requirements of SB 5433, suggested standards, strategies, and solutions from the past several decades can be realized. The use of *Since Time Immemorial* allows for authentic and accurate inclusion of Native history and culture in today's classrooms. This inclusion is a major step in improving educational outcomes for Native students. Where once policies actively sought the elimination of Native history and culture, we can now create learning environments where rich stories can be told from the perspective of this land's Indigenous people. So, why is it important to teach Native history and culture? We teach Native history and culture because now is the time to make schools places that truly serve *all* students in ways that help create healthy, knowledgeable members of society. Now is the time to take steps to right the wrongs of history in any way we can. Using culturally based curriculum acknowledges history and allows students to achieve their potential as future tribal leaders; no longer are Native communities invisible or disregarded in the school system.

In today's diverse classrooms, though, the answer to this critical question (Why is it important to teach Native history and culture?) is complex. The same classrooms serving our students of tribal descent serve students from many rich, diverse cultures. Why might the teaching of Native history and culture be important for all students? Because Washington's 29 federally recognized tribes are unique in our history and contemporary society, it is important that an accurate account is shared with our non-Native neighbors. *Since Time Immemorial* offers history and culture free of common stereotypes (pilgrims and Indians, and other pre-1900 ideas of Native people from other regions, for example). Using curriculum written with local tribes allows for the development of

cross-cultural relationships that are built upon a foundation of understanding of true tribal history and culture. This foundation will lead to a more productive and just society.

References:

*Proposed Standards for Culturally-Responsive Schools: Indian Education Plan for Washington State.* (2000). Olympia: Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction.

*Since Time Immemorial.* indian-ed.org

United States. (1991). Indian nations at risk: An educational strategy for action : final report of the Indian Nations at Risk Task Force. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Education.

Anthony B. Craig (Yakama), Ed.D.  
Marysville School District  
Director, Cultural Competency & School Support  
[anthony\\_craig@msd25.org](mailto:anthony_craig@msd25.org)

Chelsea Craig (Tulalip)  
Marysville School District  
Teacher/Cultural Specialist  
[chelsea\\_craig@msd25.org](mailto:chelsea_craig@msd25.org)

Chrissy Dulik-Dalos (Makah)  
Marysville School District  
Manager, Indian Education Department  
[chrissy\\_dulik\\_dalos@msd25.org](mailto:chrissy_dulik_dalos@msd25.org)