

Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)

Office of Head Start Tribal Consultation

Region X

October 18, 2018

Dena'Ina Convention Center

Anchorage, Alaska

Summary Report

Greeting and Introductions

Angie Godfrey, Regional Program Manager, Office of Head Start (OHS), Region XI American Indians and Alaska Natives (AIAN), opened the meeting at 1:10 PM, stating that she and Deborah Bergeron, Ph.D., Director, OHS, were here to listen. She then invited the four participants to introduce themselves.

Sovereign Nations Meaningful Consultation

Kenaitze Indian Tribe, has had a successful partnership with the Office of Head Start (OHS) since 1998. Currently, the program is providing comprehensive services for 57 funded Head Start slots and 48 Early Head Start home-based slots, along with 20 preschool slots and 40 after school slots (kindergarten–3rd grade) through a Department of Education Alaska Native Education grant. This has expanded the Kenaitze service continuum to include prenatal, and birth through 3rd grade.

The Kenaitze Tribe appreciates knowing that OHS embraces the Tribe's interconnected beliefs and sustaining principles of family, stewardship, spiritual beliefs, and education. Each is interwoven to make the whole. Head Start is the foundation in fulfilling that journey.

However, the Tribe has several concerns: Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS); preservation of language and culture; Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) and its use; the spirit of the place and program facilities; teacher qualification, training, and compensation; transportation; and program funding.

Head Start Program Performance Standards: While HSPPS has done much to strengthen programming and performance standards, much work remains. With the increase in the flexibility for more appropriately individualized grantees to meet the needs of their communities and families, the adjustability of program objectives and strategies to meet unique challenges remains a priority. The Tribe has an ongoing interest to ensure that these core traditions, practices, and values are well blended into the curriculum, enrollment standards, and stated outcomes for the children these programs service.

- Specific to the HSPPS Final Rule, the Kenaitze Tribe requests that each standard be adequately funded to ensure full implementation and stability of intent.

Native Language: Native language is primary to maintaining core traditional values and provides a dedicated foundation for continuing traditions, practices, and culture. In recognition of the value of language preservation and its direct link to our cultural heritage, the Tribe's Education Committee seeks opportunities to support early childhood education experiences in a multitude of ways. Under the leadership of the committee, the Language Revitalization Project, in conjunction with our grants team, is identifying and pursuing funding, partnerships, and broad methods of collaboration to bring a dedicated cultural component to our Head Start program.

The Kenaitze Tribe embraces the research-based findings that indigenous children communicate and learn differently than other cultures. In addition, the values of humility and harmony are shown to negatively impact personal achievement, as superiority is not within the traditional norms of their culture. People in indigenous cultures also seek opportunities to work together rather than in isolation and are visual and intuitive. Their culture is based largely on observation and their reflective style illustrates that it may take additional time for them to respond to questions as they gather more evidence prior to answering a question. Lastly, storytelling is a powerful traditional tool in teaching and its value cannot be understated.

The Kenaitze Tribe believes that culturally responsive teaching is a form of specialized instruction that affirms the background of students, considers their culture as their strength, and reflects and utilizes students' learning styles. To bring these considerations and findings into a national early childhood teaching model is a challenge that remains a priority to us.

Currently the Tribe's Head Start program collaborates with our Yaghanen Youth Program and Language Preservation components to work in partnership to strengthen the viability of dedicated language and cultural components. Language and culture should have a greater depth of focus within the curriculum, and additional resources and professional expertise should be available through viable and sustainable funding opportunities.

A priority at this time is engaging qualified Alaska Native language speakers in the classroom setting. Identifying certified staff, maintenance of credentials, supporting their capacity to learn and implement Native languages, and retaining these highly specialized and skilled individuals over time is an ongoing challenge. Competitive wages within center-based teaching staff is a goal. The Kenaitze Tribe believe that highly qualified teachers who hold appropriate degrees or credentials and who partake of continuing education is primary to early childhood development. Specifically, in Alaska Head Start programs must remain competitive to retain qualified staff. All AIAN programs should be funded adequately to pay and retain staff within the national levels. Our competitors are private preschools and public pre-K programs, which can pay more than Head Start does. With that circumstance comes the inability to retain staff from an already highly limited pool.

Facilities: At this time, one of Kenaitze's greatest challenges is facilities that comply with Head Start's significant requirements. In Alaska adequate property—from identification, construction, remodeling, and upgrades, to maintenance—are costly and are also impacted by seasonal changes. The spirit of a facility goes to the character and integrity of the program. It also goes to who we Kenaitze are as Alaska Native people.

A special interest of the Tribe is to provide a learning environment that embraces the sense of culture and tradition throughout the facility as well as the campus learning and fellowship spaces. Members of the Kenaitze Tribe strongly believe that children understand their place in the world better if they see the world. Artifacts (such as traditional garments and drums and natural objects) make a visual impact and they and the dedicated sense of the world at the mouth of the Kenai River are powerful teachers. But, with such standards come costs that are not readily available with continued restrictions associated with other funding opportunities.

CLASS: In reference to the use of CLASS during the monitoring review process, the Kenaitze Indian Tribe and its early childhood program staff are concerned that the reliability and validity of CLASS has not been tested with AI/AN populations. In addition to the reliability of CLASS, reviewers observing child–teacher interactions and instruction support in Native communities are not considering the cultural differences they may observe, but do not fully understand. For the last 6 years, two of Kenaitze Indian Tribe’s Early Childhood staff have worked with the Tribal Early Childhood Research Center (TRC) as part of a research learning community model specific to the cultural appropriateness of CLASS in Tribal programs and have participated in the 2015 AI/AN FACES Study and the upcoming 2019 AI/AN FACES Study. Kenaitze Early Childhood Center staff continue to support the efforts of TRC with the goal of providing research-based information to guide policy-makers. While seeing the validity of CLASS as a professional development tool for early childhood staff, the use of CLASS as part of the Designation Renewal System (DRS) needs reconsideration

Substance Abuse Epidemic: Alaska, like many states, is in the midst of the heroin, opioid epidemic. Coupled with addiction are the negative impacts of declining personal health, mental illness, homelessness and abject poverty, and child abuse and neglect. To address the consequences of drug addiction, families have limited resources and children have no voice. The Tribe currently puts forth the Dene Philosophy of Care that supports a holistic approach to the care and well-being of families including wellness checks, nutritional assessments, vision and dental assessments, behavioral interventions, and other resources found within our Indian Health Services continuum. Yet gaps remain and do not diminish while resources are limited, funding tenuous, partnerships stretched, and services fragmented. For many children their local Head Start program is a refuge. Children with disabilities or developmental delays find support and care within the Head Start model.

Yet, improvements in gross and fine motor skills, speech, and general wellness occur over extended periods and require highly specialized services.

- Additional funding should be made available to support these unique and necessary services for our most vulnerable children.

Transportation: Until 2009, the Kenaitze Early Childhood Center (ECC) offered daily bus service to and from Head Start programs. Then the service was discontinued because of the high cost of bus maintenance and drivers’ wages and fringe benefits. Grant funding that used to cover these costs is no longer available. However, there is no public transportation system within our service area, and private taxis are an expensive alternative.

The geographic area of our Head Start program includes Kenai, Soldotna, Nikiski, and the Kalifornsky beach area with a population of just over 24,000. The families served by our Head Start program could be traveling 20 to 100 miles round-trip to drop off and pick up their child. Access to affordable and reliable transportation continues to be identified as a primary need in our yearly self-assessments and program Community Needs Assessment. The Kenaitze Tribe continues to support families through limited resources from community partners and developing car-pooling situations. Our Head Start program continues to be one of the most successful in the nation, but still the benefits are not reaching all of our youth.

- The Kenaitze Tribe asks for consideration for increased funding specific to transportation for our most vulnerable families.

OHS Response

Ms. Godfrey asked whether the Tribe had asked for more money in 2009 when funding for transportation stopped; OHS funds transportation on an emergency basis. Teresa Smith said she was not director at the time, but understands that funding for drivers' salaries, bus maintenance, etc. was funded by a different grant. Spending of other funds was already mapped out, and she was not sure that there was a formal request for funding. Ms. Godfrey would like to look into this. It certainly merits more discussion since the need is obvious. Dr. Bergeron reported that OHS steers away from specifically allocating money for things like transportation, although they want to be sensitive to the needs on the ground. This situation is entirely unlike that of an urban environment that offers other options. She concluded that when people have specific issues, lack of solutions may result from incomplete communication. Ms. Godfrey has had conversations about other indirect costs, and she will look again at the indirect cost rate.

Funding: Specific to the Tribe, our Head Start program is funded from sources other than the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), mainly attributed to the restrictive elements of the HHS award with respect to recovering indirect costs. HHS awards cover internet costs.

- The Kenaitze Tribe asks that HHS work with us to share this commitment by supporting a significant reduction in the non-Federal share match requirement. The Tribe further asks that consideration be made as to the hardship the indirect cap places on our program and capacity to fulfill our strategies and operational expenses.

The Tribe joins the Head Start community in its appreciation of Congress' continued commitment to expanding access to high-quality Head Start programming for our most vulnerable children and families. The expansion in infant-toddler access, the strengthening of quality through increased duration of services, and the commitment to keep pace with rapidly rising operating costs is a commitment to a brighter future for children.

In sum, the initial work done with young children is critical to their sense of belonging. The barriers to education begin in early childhood and may continue throughout a Native student's academic experience. These barriers include:

- Language and cultural differences among students, parents, and teaching staff (The Tribe sincerely appreciate the recognition that OHS has placed on language development opportunities in our programs.)
- Ignorance of Alaska Native culture among teachers and other program staff
- Curriculum, learning materials, resources, tools, and teaching styles that do not relate to Alaska Native cultural experiences
- Standardized tests that do not take into account cultural differences of learning and expression
- Distinct differences in learning styles between Alaska Native and non-Native children
- Lack of educational role models, and parents' attitudes toward education
- Problems at home including domestic violence, alcoholism, drug use, and neglect and abuse
- Other factors that affect children including poverty, homelessness, parental indifference, and social isolation.

Fairbanks Native Association (FNA)

Tribal leaders want to see changes from these Tribal Consultations and would like to have feedback and solutions to the concerns that all Alaska Head Start programs face in our unique environment. Alaska is rich with culture and tradition and do our absolute best to incorporate our traditional values in our program, but two issues concern us: Federal poverty guidelines, and teacher qualifications.

Federal Poverty Guidelines:

The Federal poverty guidelines—expressed as a challenge in previous discussions—do not accurately reflect Alaska’s wages and extremely high cost of living. The Federal income guidelines negatively impact families and affect our ability to provide services for their children. Many families in Alaska are “over income” and ineligible for Head Start services, but they earn only minimum wage (\$9.84 per hour). These families are barely getting by and struggle to pay rent and buy food and heating fuel. Due to hardships endured in Alaska, FNA would like assistance in changing these guidelines or making accommodations specifically for Alaska.

- FNA ask OHS to update the income guidelines for Tribal programs to truly reflect the economic climate of Alaska.

Compensation for teaching staff:

FNA struggles to recruit and retain teaching staff that meet Head Start standards. FNA understand and respect the importance of maintaining highly qualified staff, but it is a challenge when FNA is not adequately funded to compensate for the teaching positions. FNA has a very limited pool of applicants from which to hire and it continues to compete with the school district once teachers achieve their qualifications. The result is that FNA Head Start programs are constantly understaffed, which impacts the service delivered to Fairbanks families.

- FNA ask OHS to consider increasing compensation to Tribal programs in order to maintain highly qualified teachers and meet the mandated standards.

Gwich'in Athabaskan

Nevertheless, she stands by the overall goals of OHS and expressed gratitude to OHS, especially for the Fairbanks facility, which has been purchased and renovated. In August the building was dedicated to the late Poldine Carlo, a founding member of FNA. FNA has 303 Head Start students and they support more and more people with education, health, and wellness programs. They have extended service to 6 hours per day, purchased a new 35-passenger bus for the children, and installed keyless locks that will allow quick response in emergencies.

Dr. Stern hopes to continue this partnership with OHS and extend it to additional services for families and she thanked OHS for their assistance in reaching these goals.

- OHS should offer funding for teachers to learn to teach Native languages.

Tlingit & Haida Tribes of Alaska

Mental Health Services: According to Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS Section 1302.40(a): “a program must provide high-quality health, oral health, mental health, and

nutritional services that are developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate and that will support each child's growth and school readiness.... A program must ensure all mental health consultants are licensed or certified mental health professionals." Further [HSPPS Section 1302.91(e)(8)(ii)]: "A program must use mental health consultants with a knowledge of and experience in serving young children and their families, if available in the community...." The standard continues [HSPPS Section 1302.45(b)], "a program must ensure mental health consultants assist: (1) The program to implement strategies to identify and support children with mental health and social and emotional concerns."

Tlingit & Haida serves 262 children across Southeast Alaska. In this region it is difficult to obtain licensed mental health professionals who have experience with young children. Further complicating this endeavor, finding mental health professionals who have experience or training with Tlingit, Haida, or Tsimshian culture is very challenging. Mental health services are both wanted and needed by our families, but the ability to meet this mandate depends on providers being here in the first place, which is not the case.

- Tlingit & Haida requests that OHS formally acknowledge this unique challenge and, on that basis, work with us to develop a system to help programs locate and secure mental health providers, even if travel is required. The ongoing opioid epidemic only exacerbates our families' needs for these services.

OHS's assistance and leverage to locate mental health providers is paramount as to continuing Head Start's holistic work. Tlingit & Haida is OHS's partner in that endeavor and is committed to improving the services to families.

- Tlingit & Haida requests that OHS review HSPPS standard 1302 in relation to the geographic- and transportation-related challenges our service area presents.
- As a consequence of the geographic location of this service area, Tlingit & Haida respectfully requests additional support to ensure that the Tribe can meet the mental health requirements outlined in the HSPPS.

OHS Response

Dr. Bergeron saw remote villages on her recent visit and she saw that some people are doing a great job. But anything that requires a specialist is especially difficult to solve under these conditions. One site she visited was using telehealth to make up for the absence of a physician. Admitting that this is a very embryonic conversation, she thinks tele-mental health services should be discussed. Although the person in need could not actually be treated, it might help staff address how they deal with the afflicted person.

The Family First Act is administered at the State level, and Dr. Bergeron suggested that there are funds at that level to address the opioid issue which might be tapped into to fund resources for mental health.

Ms. Godfrey announced that OHS will present four opioid training sessions and educational opportunities next year, which will be added to the agenda for the National Indian Head Start Directors Association (NIHSDA) meeting in Arizona next year. OHS is trying to gather this information and distribute it to Head Start programs. OHS's primary role in the past has been to provide access to resources.

Dr. Bergeron encouraged Head Start providers to look for the NIHSDA information. Most important is that staff be prepared so they can be effective and so they don't suffer burn-out.

The 15% limit for indirect costs is also a problem. Tlingit & Haida want to spend the money, but must comply with layers of limits and ratios. Often administrative costs are higher in Alaska,

e.g., children can't walk to school; they need a bus. That sort of thing skews everything else—Tlingit & Haida needs a waiver to get around these things.

Being able to obtain 100% of eligible children for the program is nearly impossible. The structure of the Tribal Head Start programs varies in their ability to reach those children. The children are not in clear view but in nooks and crannies of their landscape.

Cook Inlet Native Head Start (CINHS)

CINHS thanked OHS for allowing CINHS to expand their services to a Birth-to-5 Program. They identified challenges: teacher qualification and assessment of best practices.

Teacher Qualifications: Culturally appropriate teacher qualifications are an issue statewide, even for urban teachers. CINHS seems to have the most speakers with education degrees, but even for them these teachers are hard to find. CINHS needs to allow use of a culture teacher who is not an educator. Moreover, it is difficult to find regular classroom teachers. This is a challenge even in Anchorage. But waivers are no longer allowed, so CINHS is forced to shut down classrooms.

- CINHS is asking OHS to issue waivers for people who know their language and who are working on their education degrees.

OHS Response

Dr. Bergeron said closing down a classroom because a teacher is not certified should not happen and if it does, OHS needs to know about it. OHS definitely does not want to see classrooms closed. They want a system that is flexible and has high standards.

CLASS: Assessment of best practices is a bit inflexible for working with Native populations. The assessment gives a Western view of child–teacher interactions. Lower scores result from cultural differences (e.g., not making eye contact) and not from inadequate interaction. Those who score lowest go into the Designated Renewal System (DRS), which seems punitive and counterproductive.

OHS Response

Dr. Bergeron said that before a CLASS review the reviewer and the teacher should have a conversation to make the cultural difference very clear from the beginning, e.g., raised eyebrows to indicate affirmation. Every reviewer will not be adept at reviewing native cultures, but they can describe what they see. Monitoring should be a growth experience, not a punitive measure. She reiterated that OHS wants programs to work and that she and Ms. Godfrey are here to support the Tribes' programs.

Dr. Bergeron noted that OHS has only a couple of Birth-to-5 Programs and she will watch them closely. Ms. Godfrey thanked the people of CINHS for their work. It is not easy to get a Birth-to-5 Program up and running. It takes a lot of work to understand how to do it and then meet the requirements. Being able to report on services is important to OHS.

The meeting adjourned at 2:10 p.m.

OHS Tribal Consultation - Anchorage

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