

SPECIAL EDUCATION CONSIDERATIONS FOR NATIVE AMERICAN Families in North Carolina

Raising a child with a disability comes with many challenges, but you are not alone. For Native American families in North Carolina, these challenges may feel even greater when navigating systems that may not recognize the impact of historical trauma, the importance of your cultural values, or barriers that prevent access to services. This fact sheet was created to support you, celebrate your resilience, and share helpful information for your journey.

Whether your family lives in a tribal community, on a reservation, or in an urban area – and whether your child attends a North Carolina public school, a Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) school, or a tribal public charter school: **Both you and your child have rights under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).**

Understanding these rights can empower you to advocate for the services and supports your child needs to prepare for further education, employment, and independent living.



You have a voice! Be sure to use it.

As a parent, you have the right to invite a trusted advocate, elder, family member, private provider or community liaison to your child's IEP meeting to support you and help provide relevant

cultural context. The IEP team must consider information from a variety of

sources when it comes to making decisions regarding your child's education. This includes evaluation results, teacher recommendations, observations and your input as a parent. The team must also take into account your child's social and cultural background, and individual strengths and needs.

 **Use ECAC's [IEP Checklist](#) to Help You Prepare for Your Child's Next IEP Meeting**



North Carolina is home to eight statutorily recognized Native American tribes:

*Coharie
Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians
Haliwa-Saponi
Lumbee
Meherrin
Sappony
Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation
Waccamaw Siouan*

Of these, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians is the only tribe in North Carolina with full federal recognition.

Currently, the Lumbee Tribe holds partial federal recognition under the Lumbee Act of 1956, which acknowledges the tribe's existence but denies access to the full range of federal services available to fully recognized tribes.



HONORING CULTURE

and Building Stronger Partnerships

Share What Matters:

Your family's culture and beliefs shape how you view disability and learning - and that's important. Don't hesitate to share your values, traditions, and hopes with your child's IEP team. Your voice helps the team better understand and support your child.

 Use ECAC's *Painting the Big Picture* Resource to Share Important Information About Your Child.

Respecting Identity:

Your child's tribal culture, language, and values should be honored in the classroom. When these are reflected in their education, children feel seen, respected, and more connected, which can lead to better learning outcomes and stronger relationships.

Better Understanding:

Cultural differences can shape how families and schools view disability. When educators take the time to understand your perspective, they're better able to support your child with compassion and clarity.

Rebuilding Trust:

Many Native families carry memories of schools that did not treat them fairly. Cultural awareness helps rebuild trust and can create honest, respectful partnerships between families and schools.

Meaningful Support:

When you share your child's cultural background, this can help the school to better understand their strengths and needs. This allows the IEP team to offer the right support in the right way and provide services provide your child with meaningful educational benefit.

RESOURCES

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

<https://sites.ed.gov/idea/>

Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) Special Education

<https://www.bie.edu/landing-page/special-education>

NC Department of Public Instruction Office of Exceptional Children

<https://www.dpi.nc.gov/districts-schools/classroom-resources/exceptional-children>

Tribal Best Practices for Family Engagement Toolkit

<https://www.nicwa.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Fam-Engagement-Toolkit-2018.pdf>



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Who Makes Sure Schools Follow IDEA?

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a federal law that protects the rights of children with disabilities - and it applies to all public schools, including traditional and charter schools in North Carolina, as well as Cherokee Central Schools.

In North Carolina, the Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) is responsible for making sure public schools follow IDEA.

For Cherokee Central Schools, which are funded by the federal government, the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) oversees how IDEA is carried out.

No matter where your child goes to school, they have rights and you have a voice in their education.

