





# THE FIRST STEPS FORWARD

One district's focused effort to provide Native students with an equitable education

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**Introduction**

*Michael S. Smith, Assistant Principal,  
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Like many school leaders across Washington state, my knowledge of the local Native community was minimal. I certainly didn't have a deep understanding of their treaty rights or sovereignty, how their structures of governance differ, their educational mission, or how their successes/struggles have impacted their independent nation. However, as an educator, I was aware our Native students struggled to meet public educational milestones; that they were less likely to come to school, are referred more frequently for discipline, and have lower rates of high school graduation. Like many school administrators, I was guilty of lacking tools to help this population of students due to a general uncomfortableness with communication, and a severe lack of cultural awareness.

**A STARTING POINT**

I'm inspired to admit my shortcomings because I was fortunate to meet Willie Frank III, a member of the Nisqually Tribal Council. Willie's niece attended River Ridge High School, and over several weeks, Willie and I connected on a personal level. We met for coffee, talked about Native student success in schools, basketball, being kids in the 90's, and most fascinatingly, Native treaties and sovereignty. Willie shared his experiences of his family as they have historically interacted with local government, seeking to protect his peoples' rights. These conversations sparked an interest to learn more about my local tribe and indigenous education in general. However, like so many administrators, I was unsure of where to start.

Jerad Koeppe, North Thurston Public Schools' Native Student Program Specialist, has worked in our district for eight years. His knowledge of

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general Native history and specific knowledge of the Nisqually people is impressively vast. As a starting point, I invited Jerad to meet and asked him, somewhat clumsily, to give me a “crash course” on local and global indigenous education, and what education means to this specific culture. He highlighted historical documents such as the “Meriam Report” and John F. Kennedy’s 1969 report, “The State of Indian Education in the United States.” The context Jerad provided gave me much more meaningful insight to the current trends in educational data, and with this context came an intense passion to learn as much as possible about the current state of Native education, and more specifically the state of Native education from the perspective of indigenous leaders.

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Native scholars provide insight on how hundreds of years of colonial rule — and subsequent institutional racism — place barriers between indigenous communities and public-school leadership in seeking educational reform. While some public school officials perceive trust between indigenous communities and school systems as positive, tribal perspectives of relational trust between entities is less than desirable. Indigenous scholars contend this is due to a lack of outreach by school officials into the Native communities to create authentic relationships for collaboration and reform.

## CHANGING THE NARRATIVE

As school leaders, it is our responsibility to change this narrative. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how effective partnerships between indigenous communities and public schools can be achieved. The beginning of this process relies heavily on school districts implementing progressive measures: equity policy and resolutions, public-school leaders engaging in authentic, meaningful partnerships with local tribal leaders, and the development of programs to support Native youth success in public schools.

### Creating Policies and Practices Focused on Equity

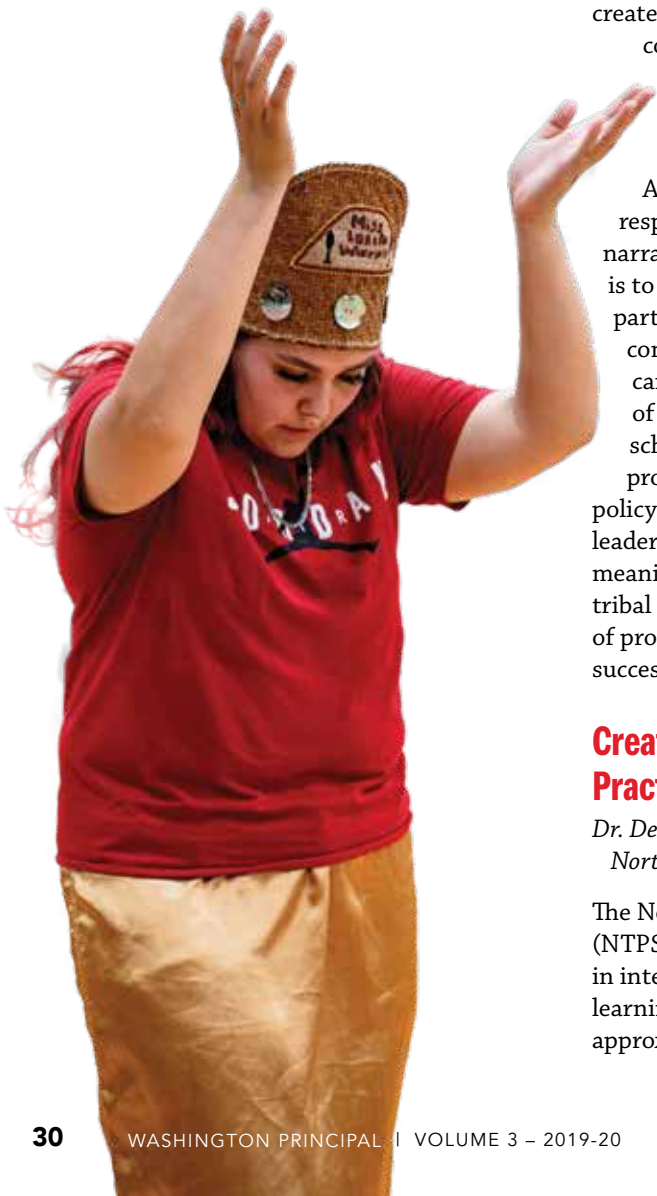
*Dr. Debra Clemens, Superintendent,  
North Thurston PS*

The North Thurston Public Schools’ (NTPS) Board of Directors engaged in intentional, focused professional learning on the topic of equity approximately three years ago.

Their journey began when a few board members and I attended a session at the annual WSSDA conference presented by the Tukwila School District. Shortly after that experience, several members of the board and my cabinet joined a regional learning community of school directors and superintendents to attend a series of workshops facilitated by ESD 113 in partnership with WSSDA. The board and cabinet engaged in professional readings and attended several other equity conferences over the next two years.

Meanwhile, I had the opportunity to restructure the responsibilities of a district-level administrative position and chose to narrow the responsibilities to focus on equity and languages. We hired Kate Frazier as our new Director of Equity and Languages and created a comprehensive equity plan. The plan provided for professional learning for all district administrators (principals and classified administrators) in the 2018-19 school year prior to rolling out an equity series of professional learning for all certified staff members in the district in 2019-20. It was our plan to train all principals first, so they were well prepared to engage in equity conversations with their staff.

Critical to our success, the equity plan was developed to support the implementation of the district’s strategic plan which has thoughtfully identified outcomes monitored regularly. The outcomes focus on both social emotional and academic learning and include an equity lens. Kate worked closely with our NTPS Equity Advisory Council to provide input to the Equity Resolution, which was adopted by the Board of Directors in August of 2019.





The first collaboration meeting between North Thurston Public Schools and Tribal leadership took place in February at the Nisqually Tribal Council Office.

NTPS is a policy governance school district; therefore, many of the sample equity policies written by other districts in Washington state were not structured in a way that would be suitable for adoption by the NTPS Board of Directors. However, the Bellingham School District adopted an equity policy and they are also a policy governance school district. I worked with Kate to revise Bellingham’s equity policy to be inclusive of the key elements of the newly adopted equity resolution.

The NTPS Race and Equity Policy provides clear expectations and parameters to me for leading the equity work in NTPS. It includes

everything from expectations regarding the racial characteristics of the workforce hired by the district to the expectations for incorporating student voice in the decision-making process. Further, it includes an expectation to provide professional development in race and equity for all staff. We worked with several local trainers to provide professional learning for all staff—office professionals, paraeducators, teachers, and administrators. We also scheduled several community cafés to reach the broader community to engage in thoughtful conversations about race. The Race and Equity Policy and the Equity Resolution provided

the foundation for the work that aligned with the collaborative work taking place with the Nisqually Tribe.

The result of all this work led to a meeting in October of 2019 between District Administrative Leadership and Tribal Council members to discuss the process for establishing a Land Acknowledgment and the display of Tribal Flags. Our NTPS Board of Directors approved the recommendations of the administration at their November 5, 2019 Board meeting. We also scheduled two joint work sessions between the Nisqually Tribe and the School District Board of Directors to be held each year.

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School projects about salmon on display in the gymnasium on Billy Frank Jr. Day in March.



## Nisqually Indian Community and North Thurston Public Schools Partnership: Equity in Action

Michael S. Smith, Assistant Principal, River Ridge High, North Thurston PS

Over the past two years, Nisqually Indian Community and NTPS have implemented collaborative projects, highlighting the values of equity, inclusion, and community. Below is a list of collaborative projects undertaken in partnership with our local tribe to better serve our indigenous students, families, staff, and community.

1. Professional development on local indigenous tribes, treaties, and knowledges: Reaching out to your community's local Native leadership to learn about the culture and history is an essential first step. Consider inviting your local tribal leaders to discuss their viewpoint, as it is truly the foundation of future change. These important conversations will guide staff professional development and are deeply important to creating



Left to Right: Bill Kallappa, Willie Frank III, Jerad Koepp, Mike Smith, and Hanford McCloud.

a plan together toward student achievement.

2. Land recognition: Indigenous tribes have occupied these lands for 10,000 years and will remain here for 10,000 years to come. Formally recognizing that our schools sit on historic lands once occupied by Native peoples will assist in developing further conversation. It is essential this is a collaborative process. It is a living document that should be reviewed, updated, and changed over time. North Thurston Public Schools' land acknowledgment reads:

“We acknowledge that North Thurston Public Schools resides on the traditional lands of the

Nisqually people. The Nisqually have lived on and cared for this land and these waterways since time immemorial. We make this acknowledgement to open a space of recognition, inclusion, and respect for our sovereign Tribal partners and all indigenous students, families, and staff in our community.”

3. Visual representations: Starting this year, North Thurston Public Schools will fly a Nisqually Tribal flag at every building owned and operated in the district. This serves as a daily, visual representation to students, families, and the community about the importance of our Native community.



Nisqually tribe members celebrate Billy Frank Jr.'s life and legacy at Nisqually Middle School during the second annual Billy Frank Jr. Day.

“ While these are the most recent projects, there are many more to come.”

4. Implementation of culturally diverse curriculum: This year, River Ridge High launched its first de-colonized history course in the fall of the 2019-2020 school year. This course, “U.S. History through the Native Perspective,” seeks to provide the narrative of indigenous peoples from pre-contact through present day. This course counts as a U.S. history credit.

While these are the most recent projects, there are many more to come. The success of these projects is the result of the collaborative relationship between our organizations, fostered by the support of our district’s Native Student Liaison, exceptional teachers, tribal leaders, and policies and practices aimed at bringing equity to the forefront of our educational responsibilities.



Native Student Program enrollment booth during Billy Frank Jr. Day at Nisqually Middle School.

## Reflections on Impact and Influence: A Guide Forward

*Jerad Koepp, Native Student Program Specialist, North Thurston PS*

Title VI is a valuable cultural and professional resource that exists in many districts across the country. It is a federally funded Native education program available to any interested district meeting a minimum Native student population. They are typically small in size and staffed with, though not exclusively, Native American classified or sometimes certificated educators.

Those of us in Title VI committed our careers to Native education and serving and advocating for our Native

students and supporting and training district staff. Your Title VI program should be your starting point. Your Native education program is there to partner with you and facilitate your project or idea. They are your primary liaison and gatekeeper, having spent years developing and fostering meaningful relationships with various tribal leaders, families, and communities. Based on your plan, they can introduce you to relevant community partners, educate you on proper cultural protocols and history, and help establish government to government relationships.

Beginning such a relationship starts with serious self-reflection on your institution. Administrators need to be able to communicate openly, jargon-free, and honestly about how their school or district serves or underserves their Native community. This includes reviewing your district policies. Cultural protocols are key to bridging our two worlds meaningfully and for long term success. Partnering with Native communities is a journey of learning, listening, building trust, earning respect, and healing. It involves addressing the past to improve the future with systemic changes to education built with meaningful consultation and collaboration with our Native communities. Successful and sustainable partnerships will improve not only educational outcomes, the cultural awareness of your district, but also ultimately help you approach education in a more decolonized way.

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Students explore different animal skins and furs.

## Reflections from A Native Leadership Perspective: The Value of Government-to-Government Relationships

Willie Frank III, Tribal Council, Nisqually Indian Community

I am excited about the relationship between the Nisqually Tribe and NTPS. Many of our Nisqually and Native youth attend River Ridge High. As we can educate all students within NTPS about Nisqually



Bill Kallappa (far left) and Principal Mike Smith (second from left) talk during the first collaboration meeting between North Thurston Public Schools and Nisqually Tribal leadership.

“ There are 29 federally recognized tribes in the state of Washington. Tribes are spread in every part of Washington and our schools should be reaching out and trying to educate kids about their local tribes.”

history, the Boldt Decision, and tribal treaty rights, I believe it will help this relationship continue to grow stronger to the benefit of all students.

I grew up attending NTPS schools and always wondered why we were not taught about tribal treaty rights and Native culture. We live in a state, and area, with a rich tribal history, and it should be taught in every history and world studies class throughout the state of Washington.

There are 29 federally recognized tribes in the state of Washington.

Tribes are spread in every part of Washington and our schools should be reaching out and trying to educate kids about their local tribes. Our tribes aren't going anywhere; we will always be here. I hope people read this and want to become better

educated about tribes and treaty rights.

I want to thank the leadership in North Thurston Public Schools for making this a priority to get more involved with the Nisqually Tribe. This is just the beginning. We have much more to do to make sure the right history is taught to all our future leaders of this great state of Washington. ■

### Where to Begin?

One place to start is at Nisqually's website at <http://www.nisqually-nsn.gov>. For a general overview of the western Washington treaty tribes, [www.nwtreatytribes.org](http://www.nwtreatytribes.org) and [www.salmondefense.org](http://www.salmondefense.org) are great resources as well. In addition, most tribes have their own website with information about history, culture and the actions that each tribe is doing to move forward and contribute to both their own, and larger, community.

