

**Boys & Girls Clubs of America**

# GREAT THINK

INDIAN COUNTRY

**Aligning Efforts to Support  
Resilient Native Youth**



**BOYS & GIRLS CLUBS  
OF AMERICA**

**NATIVE  
SERVICES**



# Boys & Girls Clubs of America thanks the participants and sponsors who made Great Think Indian Country possible.

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American Diabetes Association

Boys & Girls Club of Aha Macav

Boys & Girls Club of Bay Mills

Boys & Girls Club of Rosebud

Boys & Girls Club of White Mountain Apache Tribe

Boys & Girls Clubs of the Lewis Clark Valley

Bureau of Indian Education

Center for Native American Youth

Centers for Disease Control

Champions for America's Future

Child Trends

Corporation for National Community Service

Council for a Strong America

First Pic

Food Research Action Center

Healthy Weight

Commitment Foundation

Indian Health Service

National 4-H Council

National Congress of American Indians

National Indian Gaming Association

National Indian Health Board

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Education Association

Native Insight

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Outdoor Industry Association

Partnership for a Healthier America

PepsiCo

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Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Tumblr

U.S. Department of Education

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

U.S. Department of Justice

USDA Food and Nutrition Service

Walmart Foundation

## SUPPORTING PARTNERS



## Introduction

There are more than 2.1 million Native youth under the age of 24 living in the United States. While many of them thrive and succeed in life, as a whole, Native youth are among the country's most vulnerable populations, faring worse than their peers in health, education and economic outcomes. The mission of Boys & Girls Clubs of America is to enable all young people, especially those who need us most, to reach their full potential as productive, caring, responsible citizens. Nowhere is that need greater than in Native communities.

To address challenges facing Native youth and their communities, BGCA and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services co-hosted Great Think Indian Country in 2016. BGCA's Great Think series brings together key influencers and stakeholders to examine critical issues affecting youth, with a goal of facilitating innovative public-private collaborations that speak to various concerns regarding young people, especially those who need Clubs most.

The Great Think participants discussed some of the top challenges confronting American Indian/Alaska Native and Hawaiian Native youth today. After careful consideration, they proposed various ways that public, private and nonprofit entities could better help Native youth manage the resulting pressures of their unique circumstances and realize their full potential. Some 100 representatives from government agencies, corporations, nonprofits – including numerous Boys & Girls Clubs – contributed to the daylong event. Also in attendance were several youth representing Native Boys & Girls Clubs.



## What Is Indian Country?

Indian country refers to the many self-governing Native American communities throughout the United States. There are 567 federally recognized tribes, each with their own culture, traditions and language.

Great Think Indian Country focused on five especially critical issues facing Native youth:

- ◇ RESILIENCE
- ◇ MENTAL WELLNESS
- ◇ SUBSTANCE ABUSE
- ◇ EDUCATION
- ◇ PHYSICAL AND NUTRITIONAL HEALTH

Participants made recommendations for how to better support Native youth in regard to these challenges. The most powerful insights came from Club youth, who shared factors that have helped them overcome challenges, and how their experiences could benefit their peers and future generations. They reinforced that while Native youth face more risk factors than most, they also have many assets within themselves and their communities that should be leveraged to their advantage.

When the day-long forum concluded, it was clear that participants had learned a great deal concerning how to effectively promote health and well-being among Native youth, and identified opportunities as to how they could do more on behalf of Native youth.

This white paper summarizes important information gained from Great Think Indian Country, including specific actions that Native communities and their public, private and nonprofit partners can take to improve the lives of American Indian, Alaska Native and Hawaiian youth.

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*"I think stories are such a profound way that we connect with one another. That is a critical piece of resiliency, of health, of connection. It's a true honor to get to hear someone's story."*

Ann Bullock, M.D., Indian Health Service

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## Big Picture: Helping Native Youth Thrive

As participants considered the identified areas for discussion, it became clear that all the areas shared clear commonalities. Based on this upshot, Great Think participants reinforced that, regardless of intended outcome, all efforts to support Native youth should include the below attributes.

**Cultural relevance.** A key strength of Native communities is a strong connection to tribe, nation and culture. A growing body of research shows that making cultural adaptations to programs can improve youth outcomes, including academic results. Research also indicates that Native youth who did well after an adverse experience reported feeling grounded in and connected to their tribal culture.<sup>1</sup>

**Tribe-directed.** Traditionally, tribal elders or tribal council members are consulted on all matters related to their community. Their perspectives are greatly respected, and their decisions are binding. To operate successfully in Native communities, organizations must engage and partner with tribal leadership. Their buy-in is vital to create ownership within the tribe and ensure the program, service or intervention is culturally relevant to a particular tribe and their culture.

**Collaborative.** To maximize resources and impact, it is necessary for tribal, public and private entities to collaborate. Native communities and their partners need time and support to engage in collaborative planning to determine existing services, discuss how to best address any gaps, and identify connections and partnerships that can better serve Native youth.

**Holistic.** Native tribes do not separate physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual aspects of their lives. Rather, they see the world and their lives within it holistically. Programs, services or interventions that are fragmented or disconnected from the whole do not fit well within that worldview. Even when a targeted intervention is needed, it is critical to engage tribal leadership and the Native community to consider how it will connect with and complement further efforts.

<sup>1</sup> Strand, J., Peacock, D. (2004) Nurturing Resilience and School Success in American Indian and Alaska Native Students. ERIC Digests.

**Grounded in positive youth development.** A positive youth development approach means engaging youth in a productive and constructive manner. Traditionally, elders in Native communities cultivate leadership from the next generation, engaging younger members in ceremonies, traditions and storytelling. Programs, services or interventions with Native youth must build on this important history and find ways for young people to participate in advisory councils, raise their voices and perspectives, and determine which services and supports are most needed.

**Sustainable.** Even the best effort is not successful if the outcome it achieves is unsustainable. Building the capacity of tribal leaders to address sustainability is critical. Partners can provide training and tools that support and improve local sustainability planning, grant writing and grants management. Flexibility in funding streams can also support sustainability. When funding is used creatively to fill local service gaps, make connections, and build on or enhance existing programs, it is more likely that changes will be viable and youth outcomes attained over the long-term.

**Evidence-informed and data-driven.** It is imperative that programs, services or interventions for Native youth achieve their intended outcomes. An evidence-based program or practice proven to be effective with Native youth is ideal. Due to a lack of research in this area, however, evidence-based interventions are limited. Nevertheless, all efforts can be evidence-informed, as well as collect the process and outcome data necessary to demonstrate outcome achievements.



Micah B. of the Nez Perce Tribe and Boys & Girls Clubs of the Lewis Clark Valley performs a cultural dance.

*"I am particularly interested in how we can work together in communities so that our services are comprehensive across the board. This is a true collaborative opportunity, and we can build off what youth are saying. We have the opportunity as program and policy folks, and as funders, to make changes and make sure good things happen."*

**Beverly Cotton**, Indian Health Service

### Clubs in Indian Country

BGCA opened the first Boys & Girls Club on Native lands in 1992. Today, nearly 200 Clubs in 27 states serve over 86,000 Native youth from more than 100 American Indian, Alaska Native and Hawaiian communities. In 2013, this partnership was reinforced with the creation of the Native Services Unit. This enhanced BGCA's ability to:

- Build and sustain collaborations with tribal leaders and stakeholders
- Provide professional development and networking specifically for Native Clubs
- Strengthen Native youth's cultural identity through specialized programming

BGCA has been intentional that people of Native extraction lead the Native Services Unit, and provide direction and strategy for Native Clubs and youth. This is an important point culturally and politically to Native people and their relationship with BGCA.

Building on a proven youth development model that has evolved over 150 years, the Native Service Unit is committed to addressing challenges and issues unique to Native lands, including providing more learning opportunities that are culturally relevant and meaningful.

BGCA continues to advance its efforts to support and reach more Native youth. A Native Advisory Committee, for example, delivers leadership and insights on Native history, traditions, values and helps assure Native young people gain the best possible benefits from Club services. Additionally, a preliminary Native Services Unit strategic growth plan foresees significant focus on the U.S. Pacific-West region, a nine-state expanse that is home to over 240 federally-recognized tribes and more than 40 percent of the country's Native American population.

The support of numerous partners allows the Native Services Unit to provide thousands of youth with high-quality youth development programming each year. These partners include:

- Department of Health and Human Services
- Indian Health Service
- American Indian College Fund
- AmeriCorps VISTA
- Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation
- Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention
- National Congress of American Indians
- National Recreation Foundation
- Red Nose Day
- Verizon
- The Walmart Foundation

## RESILIENCY



### The Need

- **32.4%** of Native youth live in **poverty**.
- **11.6 per 1,000** victimization rate among Native youth is third-highest among all children.

*"I have a good strong family who supports me. My culture is important to me. I attended a warrior camp where I practiced language, teaching and ceremonies. I sing on the traditional drum. The men teach me respect and skills to live a good life. From all this, I have learned to be brave, to stand up for myself, to be myself."*

**Native Youth Panelist and Club Member**

### Discussion

Resiliency is a capacity to recover from difficulties quickly. Once considered an inherent trait – one was naturally resilient or was not – research has shown a person is more likely to be resilient when certain protective factors are in place. These include caring and supportive relationships, encouragement of high expectations, and meaningful opportunities to participate.<sup>2</sup>

More than most young people, Native youth need the ability to overcome, and recover from, challenging life circumstances.

<sup>2</sup>Marshall, K. (2004). Resilience research and practice: National Resilience Resource Center bridging the gap. In H. C. Waxman, Y. N. Padron and J. Gray (Eds.). Educational Resiliency: Student, Teacher, and School Perspectives. Greenwich, CN: Information Age Publishing.

Great Think youth participants shared how caring adults, such as mentors, helped them overcome adversity, noting that the key to resiliency is to build more protective factors into communities. Connections to extended family, clan, tribe and nation are a significant part of Native cultural value systems. Participants, including young people, shared that traditional culture connects youth with adults, and provides young people with a strong identity, sense of belonging, and an ability to be resilient.

### Recommendations

**Support and train adults who work and live with youth every day.** Adults in Native communities need to understand the important role they play in encouraging young people's capacity to be resilient. Adults must also learn simple, everyday skills to use when interacting with youth.

**Provide high-quality mentoring programs.** Meaningful mentoring relationships expand the number of caring adults in a young person's life. This, in turn, provides youth with a greater support network and increases their ability to be resilient. Mentoring underserved and under-represented youth is an effective, low-cost method to provide positive role models, increase self-esteem, and discourage anti-social behaviors.

**Provide opportunities to engage and empower youth.** Native youth are eager to step into leadership roles. Engaging youth in meaningful ways instills self-confidence and builds resiliency. There are many examples of Native youth improving communities across the country. Nonetheless, more opportunities at local, state and national levels are needed.

### Resources

**Aspen Center for Native American Youth: Champions for Change.** This youth leadership initiative highlights positive stories from Indian Country and develops young Native leaders through experience-based learning. A Champions for Change toolkit is available to help communities recognize and support young Native American leaders who are creating positive change.

**Reaching Teens: Strength-Based Communication Strategies to Build Resilience and Support Healthy Adolescent Development.** This American Academy of Pediatrics resource combines text and video to show how expert-tested, strength-based communication approaches can work with youth. It includes contributions from leading practitioners and firsthand perspectives from teens.

**Strengthening Native Community Commitment through Mentoring Guidebook.** Developed for the Department of Housing and Urban Development, this guidebook addresses the elements of resilience, and the need for mentoring programs in Native American communities, associated facts and challenges, and research. It specifically provides enrichment materials to assist Native Americans in establishing mentoring programs for their communities, which could also help create and build youth programs based on ancient tradition and cultures.



Ernie Stevens, chairman of the National Indian Gaming Association and a Club alum, addresses participants.

## Mentoring Native Youth

Since 2008, grant support from the Department of Justice has allowed BGCA to strengthen, expand and enhance mentoring programs and experiences for more than 62,000 Native youth served by Boys & Girls Clubs.

To further enhance the Boys & Girls Club Indian Country network's ability to support youth resiliency, BGCA's Native Services Unit recently began collaborating with national experts and indigenous leaders to adapt the American Academy of Pediatrics' resource, "Reaching Teens: Strength-based Communication Strategies to Build Resilience and Support Health Adolescent Development," for Native young people. The adaptation will incorporate indigenous wisdom and stories, and provide culturally-appropriate strategies. Indigenous leaders will disseminate resource- and resiliency-building strategies throughout the Boys & Girls Club Indian Country network through train-the-trainer and professional development sessions.

## MENTAL WELLNESS



### The Need

- **Suicide** is the second leading cause of death for AI/AN youth ages 15 to 24 (SAMHSA) – and **2½ times the national rate.**
- In the United States each year, between **1 in 5 and 1 in 9** AI/AN youth report they've **attempted suicide** (Suicide Prevention Resource Center).
- Native Americans experience serious **psychological distress 1.5 times more often**, and PTSD more than twice as often, as the general population.

*"Many factors helped solve my depression. The biggest one? The Boys & Girls Club making me feel like I was safe. I could go to staff there because I trusted them."*

**Native Youth Panelist and Club Member**

### Discussion

Mental wellness is when an individual is able to use his or her cognitive and emotional capabilities, function in society, and meet the ordinary demands of everyday life.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, many Native youth do not experience mental wellness. Instead, many experience psychological distress and mental illness in their daily lives. Great Think participants shared that Native Americans have many different interpretations about how and why mental illness occurs. In general, the Native worldview includes notions of connectedness, reciprocity, balance and completeness that influence their views of health and well-being. For example, physical complaints and psychological concerns are not always distinguished as separate. Also, Native Americans may express emotional distress in ways inconsistent with standard diagnostic categories, heightening the need to take Native youth's cultural context into consideration.

Native youth and their families also face barriers when trying to access mental health services. The rural, isolated location of many Native communities makes accessing services very challenging. Most Indian Health Service clinics and hospitals are found on reservations, yet most Native Americans now reside off reservation. Even when mental health treatment is available, high levels of poverty often prevent youth from getting the care they need. Further compounding the issue

<sup>3</sup>Mental wellness. (n.d.) The American Heritage® Medical Dictionary. (2007). Retrieved March 10, 2017, from [medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/Mental+wellness](http://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/Mental+wellness)

is the fact that community-based mental health programs, such as suicide prevention, often do not exist on Native lands, which eventually leads to more youth needing acute mental health services.

### Recommendations

Partnerships among local health programs, youth-serving organizations, and state and federal entities can provide a wide variety of mental health services. Such partnerships can, for example, relocate behavioral health providers to places where youth spend their time.

**Train adults to effectively identify and respond to mental and behavioral health issues.** In communities that lack mental health providers, training can be provided to adults who regularly interact with youth, such as teachers, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, out-of-school program staff and health professionals. This can provide adults with the skills to offer initial help and support to a youth who may be developing a mental health or substance use problem, or having a crisis.

**Promote healing and break the cycle of trauma.** Native communities often suffer from historical trauma, which can negatively affect family and community systems. It is important to provide training about historical trauma, as well as how to offer culturally-relevant, trauma-informed services and support. Breaking a cycle of trauma means future generations of Native youth may not have to face the same challenges.

**Implement culturally relevant and evidence-informed prevention programs.** To ensure programs achieve intended outcomes, it is critical that programs be grounded in Native culture and informed by evidence and data collection.

### Resources

**Administration for Children and Families: Trauma-Informed Resources for American Indian/Alaskan Native Communities.** Provides an extensive list of trauma-informed resources specifically for Native communities, including presentations and resources on historical trauma and examples of adapted trauma interventions for Native communities.

**Native Connections Grant Program.** A five-year grant program from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration to help American Indian and Alaskan Native communities identify and address behavioral health needs among Native youth. Native Connections' publications, resources and webinars are available to the public at [Samhsa.gov/native-connections](http://Samhsa.gov/native-connections).

**To Live to See the Great Day that Dawns: Preventing Suicide by American Indian and Alaska Native Youth and Young Adults.** This guide from the Suicide Prevention Resource Center is designed to help AI/AN communities, and those who serve them, develop effective, culturally appropriate suicide prevention plans.

## IHS, BGCA Partner for Healthier Youth

The socio-emotional well-being of members is promoted through Boys & Girls Club programs. Similarly, the Native Services Unit and Indian Health Service recently formed a partnership to increase Clubs' ability to support young people's health and well-being. One aspect of the partnership is that mental health providers will informally visit Native Clubs at least once a week. This will allow youth to interact and build rapport with these professionals without feeling stigmatized. For Native Clubs that lack access to mental health providers, BGCA will work with Indian Health Service to provide all Club staff with Mental Health First Aid training, an eight-hour course that teaches adults to identify, understand and respond to signs of mental illness and substance use.



At left is Chloe T. from the Nez Perce Tribe and Boys & Girls Clubs of the Lewis Clark Valley.

# SUBSTANCE ABUSE



## The Need

- The alcoholism mortality rate of Native youth is **514% higher** than that of the general population.
- Native youth have the **highest rate of methamphetamine use** in the United States.

*“Our community faces incredibly high rates of alcoholism and drug abuse, as well as poverty, unemployment and mental health issues. Most Native teens face an unfortunate battle with peer pressure to do drugs and alcohol.”*

**Native Youth Panelist and Club Member**

## Discussion

Alcohol and substance abuse can be devastating to one's physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health. In Native communities, drug and alcohol abuse often co-exist with depression, cultural shame, low self-pride and lack of belonging. When traditional Native values clash with those of the dominant society, cultural conflict can result. Native youth, already dealing with the normal challenges of adolescence, can easily be entangled in this turmoil, heightening their vulnerability to drug and alcohol abuse.

Great Think participants suggested that Native youth could make better life choices by taking a more active role in their culture, which can result in more positive self-esteem and positive identification as a Native American. Both of these factors can help protect youth from the risks of drug and alcohol abuse.

Participants stressed that confronting substance abuse requires a comprehensive focus on prevention, intervention, treatment and recovery. Single interventions, delivered in a vacuum and unconnected to broader efforts, do not work. They also spoke to the importance of communities joining together – across sectors, agencies and programs – to develop integrated plans and messaging that address substance abuse.

## Recommendations

**Support comprehensive planning to prevent and treat substance abuse.** Prevention, intervention, treatment and recovery must each be addressed for youth to thrive and live healthy, productive lives. For young people, it is critical that substance abuse be addressed within the context of family, and include aspects such as home visits and support for parents.

**Implement culturally-relevant and evidence-informed substance abuse prevention programs.** Such programs that are grounded in youth culture and create a sense of pride and belonging are particularly appealing to young people.

**Develop integrated messaging with Clubs, schools and parents about the positive impact of resisting drugs and alcohol.** Whole tribal communities must be consistent messengers about the positive outcomes for young people who resist drugs and alcohol. Schools, out-of-school programs, health providers, tribal leadership and even early childhood programs need to be involved and engaged in the effort.

## Resources

### ***Preventing Drug Abuse among Children and Adolescents.***

This guide from the National Institute on Drug Abuse describes how to take a community-wide, comprehensive approach to substance abuse prevention. Topics include risk and protective factors, incorporating best practices, adapting to meet local needs and culture, and creating a consistent approach among community leaders, organizations, schools and parents.

***I Strengthen My Nation.*** A media campaign created by Native youth, for Native youth, I Strengthen My Nation encourages Native communities to address teen and young adult substance abuse by empowering youth to resist drugs and alcohol, and motivating parents to talk openly with their children. It is part of an Indian Health Service series of public awareness campaigns.

***Tribal Training and Technical Assistance Center.*** The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration provides online resources, training and technical assistance on a wide variety of substance abuse prevention and treatment programs shown to be effective with tribal communities.



## ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

### The Need

- National high school **graduation rate** for AI/AN students: around **50%**; the rate for white students: over 75%.
- Just **13.3%** of AI/AN have **undergraduate degrees**, versus 24.4% of general population (NIEA).

*“We need teachers who teach culturally, not just about the culture. Native Americans are story tellers and off-reservation schools try to change that. On the reservation, I feel valid in my storytelling.”*

**Native Youth Panelist and Club Member**

### Discussion

Academic achievement is one of the main predictors of long-term success and well-being. Beyond common educational challenges that youth from low-economic communities confront, Native youth also face another unique challenge.

Great Think participants shared how storytelling is a cultural tradition that Native Americans use as a teaching tool. Hearing and re-telling stories often play a key role to educate Native youth. This is very different from how education is approached within the dominant culture.

At the off-reservation schools most Native youth attend, education is approached very differently. For Native youth who excel academically, access to high-level or advanced placement classes can be difficult or non-existent. There is also little exposure or guidance to employment and career paths.

Club members shared that out-of-school programs fill many educational gaps and offer opportunities for additional learning. For the many Native youth who do not attend Bureau of Indian Affairs schools, out-of-school programming can provide them with educational activities grounded in their culture, helping to build a foundation from which other learning can proceed. Out-of-school programming is also where Native students are often introduced to and encouraged to pursue a post-secondary education or a particular trade.

### **Methamphetamine and Suicide Prevention Initiative.**

This nationally coordinated Indian Health Service program focuses on providing Indian Country with much-needed resources for methamphetamine intervention and suicide prevention. The program promotes the development and use of evidence-based and practice-based models that represent culturally-appropriate prevention and treatment approaches to methamphetamine abuse and suicide prevention from a community-driven context.

## IHS, BGCA Partner for Healthier Youth

Boys & Girls Clubs encourage youth to make good decisions, and reinforce their positive efforts and progress. The prevention program SMART Moves (Skills Mastery and Resistance Training) specifically addresses drug and alcohol use and premature sexual activity. Designated a promising practice by the National Institute of Justice, SMART Moves engages young people in discussion and role-playing, resistance and refusal skill training, assertiveness development, exercises to strengthen decision-making skills, and media and peer influence analysis.

In 2003, SMART Moves was adapted for Native Clubs. An advisory group of experts familiar with the program and its target population identified revisions to make the curriculum more reflective of Native American culture. The program is now used in every Native Club. Because of SMART Moves' flexible nature, Clubs can create unique activities and supplemental materials that best reflect local tribal culture and traditions. The adaptation was made possible through a partnership of BGCA, the Center of Substance Abuse Prevention, and the Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Native American Programs.



Youth panelists Maria W., left, of the White Mountain Apache Boys & Girls Club and Kaeliana S. of the Akwesasne Boys & Girls Club.

## Recommendations

**Provide cultural training for teachers who serve Native youth.** It is vital that Native cultures, languages and traditions be incorporated into American Indian education and the public schools that serve Native youth. Providing professional training to teachers will help foster learning, sustain the heritage of tribal communities, and offer educational opportunities that Native youth deserve.

**Expand out-of-school programs for Native youth.** Students do much better in school when they spend out-of-school hours engaged in fun, academically beneficial activities. Like other vulnerable youth populations, Native young people benefit greatly from out-of-school programs, particularly when activities reinforce tribal history, culture, traditions and help youth build relationships with adults and tribal elders.

**Create opportunities for youth to learn about career opportunities.** Native youth need to learn about a variety of careers, including those they may not typically see in their communities, such as becoming a scientist, researcher or computer programmer.

## Resources

**Bureau of Indian Education.** BIE's mission is to provide quality education opportunities from early childhood through life in accordance with a tribe's needs for cultural and economic well-being, in keeping with the wide diversity of Indian tribes and Alaska Native villages as distinct cultural and governmental entities. BIE manifests consideration of the whole person by taking into account the spiritual, mental, physical and cultural aspects of the individual within his or her family and tribal or village context. Learn more at [BIE.edu](http://BIE.edu).

**Teach for America: Native Alliance Initiative.** Originally launched as the Native Achievement Initiative in 2009, the Native Alliance Initiative works with Native students and leaders in Hawaii, New Mexico, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Minnesota and Washington and is creating examples of culturally responsive teaching.

**Sapsik<sup>w</sup>atá (Teacher) Education Program.** Created by the University Of Oregon College Of Education in partnership with the nine federally recognized tribes of the state of Oregon, this program's goal is to prepare American Indians and Alaska Natives as teachers with the knowledge, skills and cultural sensitivity to generate long-term, much-needed improvements in the elementary, middle and high school educational experiences of AI/AN youth.



Sylvia Mary Mathews Burwell, U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services under President Barack Obama.

## Curriculums to Reflect Native Culture

Boys & Girls Clubs of America is a national leader in providing out-of-school programming, with confirmed results for improving youth academic performance.

Many Clubs use Project Learn, for example, BGCA's academic enhancement strategy found to be highly effective by an evidence-based evaluation. Through Project Learn, all Club areas and programs are used to create opportunities for high-yield learning activities, such as leisure reading, writing activities, homework help and games that develop cognitive skills. BGCA has adapted Project Learn to be more reflective of Native culture.

DIY STEM, an activity-based curriculum that connects youth to science themes they regularly encounter, has also been adapted. To increase youth interest in activities and career aspirations, the DIY STEM adaptation features history, achievements and STEM news that relate to Native culture.

To support and encourage Native youth to aspire to higher education, BGCA and the American Indian College Fund recently partnered on an initiative that will award \$100,000 in scholarships over five years to qualified Club teens to attend tribal colleges and universities. In an effort to establish more such partnerships, the Native Services Unit is actively presenting this scholarship model to numerous post-secondary institutions.

# PHYSICAL AND NUTRITIONAL HEALTH



## The Need

- Native American youth have disproportionately **high rates of obesity and diabetes** relative to U.S. populations.
- Type-2 diabetes among AI/AN youth is nearly **3 times the national rate**

*“My younger brother, at age 11, was borderline diabetic. This really hurt me. I had to learn to cook healthy because I was raising him. But the Club was there. They provided healthy food for us, and that helped him develop a habit of eating healthy. And every day we go out and play for at least 60 minutes.”*

**Native Youth Panelist and Club Member**

## Discussion

Many factors have led to a decline in physical activity and an increase in poor nutrition habits across Native lands and American society at large. Recent generations are more sedentary and reside in a “fast-food” culture that dominates eating habits. Too often, the most accessible food lacks nutritional value. In addition, safe, secure places where youth can play and be active are limited, with too many youth occupied outside school with activities such as video games and television.

Like all young people, Native youth need daily access to healthy, nutritious meals and opportunities to be physically active. However, Great Think participants noted that programs and approaches proven effective with the general population will not necessarily resonate with Native youth. They went on to state how important it is for Native youth to help design and implement these programs: they know the physical activities and healthy food they and their peers will respond to and remain engaged with over time. As long as kids are moving and eating a healthy diet, tribal communities, with youth in the lead, need to decide what works best for them.

## Recommendations

**Focus on creating a healthy environment for the entire community.** To impact youth, healthy food and fitness opportunities must be available to the entire Native community, creating an overall environment in which youth can learn healthy habits.

**Provide fitness, health and nutrition programs that include culturally-relevant activities.** It is important to provide programming that incorporates tribal-focused, non-traditional sports, such as cultural dance, canoeing and archery. Nutrition programs should integrate local, cultural foods and culinary customs.

## Resources

**Health Promotion and Disease Prevention.** Collaborating with key stakeholders and building on individual, family and community strengths and assets, this Indian Health Service program offers a plethora of effective health promotion and chronic disease prevention programs. Its online clearinghouse contains best and promising practices/local efforts, resources, training tools and community assessment tools for health promotion and disease prevention. Learn more at [IHS.gov/hpdp](http://IHS.gov/hpdp).

**Seeds of Native Health: A Campaign for Indigenous Nutrition.** This multifaceted national campaign to improve Native American nutrition is supported by the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community. The effort includes grant-making, sharing of best practices, capacity building, sponsored research and educational initiatives.

**Special Diabetes Program for Indians.** This Indian Health Service program develops diabetes programs and increases access to quality diabetes care. It includes toolkits communities can use to implement their own strategies to reduce diabetes and related cardiovascular disease.

**We R Native.** A comprehensive health resource developed by and for Native youth that promotes holistic health and positive growth.

## Health and Wellness

BGCA's vision is for Clubs to be models of wellness that improve nutrition and health choices for youth in some of our nation's most impoverished communities. Boys & Girls Clubs on Native Lands are achieving that goal in many ways. The BGCA program Healthy Habits includes lessons on dietary guidelines, understanding food labels, identifying food groups, strategies to increase fruit and vegetable consumption, and healthy meal and snack cooking demonstrations. The program was adapted for Native Clubs to deliver information in a way that is culturally sensitive and age appropriate.

Additionally, BGCA, Indian Health Service, the National Congress of American Indians, FirstPic Inc., and Nike partnered to create On the T.R.A.I.L. (Together Raising Awareness for Indian Life) to Diabetes Prevention, an innovative combination of physical, educational and nutritional activities that promote healthy lifestyles. Since 2003, T.R.A.I.L. has served more than 14,000 Native youth, ages 7 to 11, in 86 tribal communities.



Fransico W. of the Fort Mojave Indian Tribe and the Boys & Girls Club of Aha Macav.



Heidi Christensen, associate director for community engagement, Department of Health and Human Services.

## Conclusion

Great Think Indian Country was convened to spur innovative approaches and collaborations that will improve the lives of Native youth. It also produced new collaborations among Boys & Girls Clubs of America, the Indian Health Service and American Indian College Fund that will expand opportunities and resources for Native youth. To meet the overwhelming need for quality youth services throughout Indian Country, BGCA also set an ambitious goal to partner with more tribes and Native organizations.

But work remains to be done. Boys & Girls Clubs must strive to achieve the recommendations of Great Think participants. BGCA will work to expand and deepen this vital work with Native youth and continue to seek contributions from participants. Great Think Indian Country was just the beginning. Native youth are resilient, insightful and ready to realize their full potential. It is time for us to do our part.

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*"Little and simple things can help so many kids in so many ways. I believe the change I speak of starts here with all of you."*

**Native Youth Panelist and Club Member**

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**Boys & Girls Clubs of America**

# GREAT THINK

INDIAN COUNTRY

**GREAT FUTURES START HERE.**



**BOYS & GIRLS CLUBS  
OF AMERICA**

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Visit [bgca.org/greatthink](http://bgca.org/greatthink) to download the white paper and learn more.