



NATIONAL INDIAN HEAD START DIRECTORS ASSOCIATION
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SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS FOR THE OBAMA TRANSITION

Introduction. The National Indian Head Start Directors Association (NIHSDA) has submitted detailed comments to the Obama Transition on the American Indian/Alaska Native (AIAN) Head Start program. However, in light of the excellent conversation that the Transition held with early childhood education advocates on December 5, 2008, NIHSDA thought it would be valuable to provide this summary, which also addresses key elements of the discussion held that day.

Overview of AIAN Head Start Program. Indian Head Start is the most important and successful Federal program focused on the dire circumstances faced by all too many Native children, principally by addressing health, education, family and community needs in a holistic manner that is akin to traditional Native learning styles and cultural practices. Indeed, Indian Head Start is on the frontline in the preservation of Native language and culture, which have proven to be key elements in Native student confidence and success in later years. Only about 16% of the age-eligible Indian child population is enrolled in Indian Head Start. Of the approximately 562 federally recognized Tribes, only 188 have Head Start programs funded through 154 grantees in 27 states. That means 374 Tribes do not have Head Start available for their age-eligible children. In addressing AIAN needs, it is important to note that:

- **Indian reservations suffer from depression-era economics, with terrible crime and health statistics to match.** The Indian reservation poverty rate is 31.2%, nearly three times the national average of 11.6%. The Indian reservation unemployment rate is approximately 50%, ten times the national unemployment rate (and on some reservations the rate is 80-90%).
- **Most Indian communities are remotely located.** There are generally no other resources besides Head Start to address the special needs of young Indian children who, on a daily basis, must deal with the conditions described above.
- **The Federal Government has a Trust Responsibility to Indian Peoples, especially in the Education and Health Care Areas.** The Constitution of the United States, treaties, federal statutes, executive orders, Supreme Court doctrine and other agreements define the Federal government's trust obligation to protect the interests of Indian peoples, especially in the education and health care areas.
- **Native Language and Culture.** When it came to Native issues, the Federal government historically has displayed a keen understanding of the central importance of our ancient ways, beliefs, culture and language to tribal unity and strength and for years made every effort to destroy those beliefs. This effort to kill our minds and our spirits failed, but not without first doing great damage. Indian languages are in retreat. Native students perform far below their potential. Federal paternalism has created a crippling mentality for some in Indian country that is founded on poor self-esteem. Extraordinarily, the Native spirit has endured and, in recent years, grown stronger. Much of the harm



inflicted upon Native peoples is being undone, to the extent it can be undone, by Native people themselves. *And yet the resources needed to complete this great task can only be found with the originator of the harm – the Federal Government.*

AIAN Head Start Generally Supports Initiatives Proposed by Other Early Childhood Advocates. As a general matter, AIAN is supportive of the initiatives proposed at the December 5th meeting with the Transition. NIHSDA would emphasize that:

- **AIAN programs have unique needs.** For example, proposals that focus on involving the local business community, although effective in urban settings, are largely irrelevant to most AIAN programs that are rurally situated, with little local economy, aside from government programs. Additionally, the emphasis on research-based approaches, although laudable, is problematic for AIAN programs because so little research has been done on them. AIAN staff do have solid experiential knowledge of “what works” and, until proper research is completed to supplement that knowledge, this local knowledge should be accorded great respect.
- **Expansion of Pre-K should be conducted in a way that strengthens AIAN programs.** All of us want to see more needy children served. The Head Start model, with its holistic approach, has been extraordinarily effective on Indian reservations. NIHSDA asks that expansion of Pre-K be done through that model.
- **Funding Increases need to exceed substantially the rate of inflation.** For the last several years, Head Start has essentially been flat-funded. Once one factors in the effects of inflation, Head Start has had a purchase power cut of 12 – 15% since 2002, inflicting substantial damage on the program. For AIAN programs, there have been additional cuts because of HHS’ practice in recent years of diverting funds slated for Indian and other priority programs and using them for non-priority base funding. Congress provided for special expansion funds for Indian programs in order to redress HHS’ conduct, but these funds only become available if there is sufficient new funding in the overall Head Start programs. It is critically important that any new funding be dedicated to quality improvement, as well as expansion
- **HHS is currently drafting new regulations.** NIHSDA asks that Indian Country concerns, such as assuring flexibility in the make-up of each Head Start program’s governing body, are fully addressed. Separately, we have submitted detailed comments on proposed regulations.

Conclusion. NIHSDA looks forward to working closely with the Obama Administration. We share your commitment to making improvements in the Head Start and Early Head Start programs. Due to the many unique needs of Indian country, and in the context of the Federal trust responsibility, we ask that you work closely with NIHSDA in implementation of new Head Start policies and regulations and the development of a sensible Head Start budget.