



## WHAT IS COMMUNITY LED DESIGN IN SCHOOLS?

Native communities and families know and care about what's best for their children. It is through intentional community led innovations that hold Indigenous core values as the foundation of educational experiences, that we will build a movement around Indigenous education to reaffirm the inherent sovereignty of our Native people. The fundamental characteristic of community-led schools is that members of the community play an active role in making decisions about the educational experience they want their students to have. It is a process by which you connect the community to resources, build capacity of local leaders, and promote community ownership, while acknowledging the resources that already exist at a local level. These schools are, by definition, not a one-size-fits-all model.

## LEARNING FROM NACA'S EXPERIENCE

The early planning of NACA focused on engaging and capitalizing on the strengths and assets of the community with a small start-up team. NACA was designed in collaboration with 150 community members to establish a school that reflects their values/priorities including personal wellness, cultural identity, and academic preparation. NACA has created significant connections and collaborations in the community to provide success for students. The following strategies were deemed highly effective strategies in engaging the community in designing NACA:

### Initial Planning & Team Development

- At least a full year of intensive planning prior to school launch by Founder/ Principal & small start-up team
- Having a mentor school for technical assistance and as liaison
- Mapping out and capitalizing assets of organizations/ leaders with common vision
  - Spend significant time researching, gathering inputs from, and building partnerships with organizations doing quality work in Native education, with local businesses, and with leaders in government

### Community Engagement

- Community Advisory Council
  - Each group had a specific areas of expertise to participate in planning and development of the school's curriculum and programs: Wellness Philosophy, Curriculum Development, Governance Council, Family Outreach, Out of School Time /Community Partnerships.
- Having **forums and focus groups** led by a full-time outreach organizer / facilitator to engage the community and parents and garner their support

### Governance & Leadership

- Integrating the community in school leadership and organization
  - NACA 's leadership and organization structure explicitly integrates the community into school's ongoing program development and activities (e.g., Governing Council, Tribal Relations Dean, Director of Enrollment and Community Relations, Student Support Program Director, Director of OST, External Partnerships)
- School serving as the leader in convening the community with active communication, programs, and events
  - NACA hosts, among other events, an annual Pow-wow and Feast Day drawing over one thousand individuals to the campus on a twice-yearly basis.

Current NISN fellows express that smaller meetings (perhaps due to rural locations) have proved invaluable at gathering more information than perhaps larger group sessions where one person could potentially dominate a conversation.



## Curriculum

- **Integrated-curriculum combining culture, community, and wellness philosophy with rigorous academics**
- Curriculum Advisory Teams along critical elements of curriculum focus
- **Advisory Program** providing every student with an Advisor who is an advocate for the student and allows the students to develop a “positive relationship with an adult”
- “Wellness Wheel” as a framework/ tool for ensuring students’ holistic wellness and growth

## Program & Services

- School as a hub for robust community partnerships for success of students and families
  - NACA works with many community partners through various programs supporting students, families and neighborhood community with some partners co-located or having the staff based within NACA campus
- All programs clearly aligned with NACA’s mission and wellness philosophy

Research has shown that in rural areas, schools typically act as the hub of community events and a focal point for sharing community values.

## NISN’S COMMITMENT TO COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATION

All NISN schools are created from the collective vision of community members, families, educators, the business sector, experts in Indigenous education, students, and local leaders. Each community is unified by a desire for its students to be academically prepared for college, secure in their identity, and healthy. By drawing upon the strengths of the community and developing a common mission, vision, and goals, students engage in a high-quality, culturally relevant education from adolescence to adulthood, setting set them on a path toward leadership and success in life. Indigenous perspectives are integrated throughout the curriculum and school model, ensuring a high level of consonance and meaning. Increasing the number of Native American students who are healthy, self-assured, and prepared for college strengthens Indigenous communities.

Following NACA’s example, NISN affiliated schools, Dream Diné and DEAP engaged their respective communities in the development of their schools and they continue to strengthen partnerships as well as to create new ones in their rural areas.

Fellows are guided by commitments:

- **Connection to historical context** – Fellows deeply understand and can effectively articulate the NISN philosophy, its connection to the history and continuum of indigenous education and how it informs their rationale and approach to school design and student success
- **Stakeholder Engagement** – Fellows build a strong, diverse and committed set of stakeholders, including board members, advisors and champions who are willing and able to contribute to the informal and formal support, direction and governance of the school
- **Educational context** – Fellows understand the educational landscape in New Mexico, its recent history, current status, trends, areas of progress and challenge by grade, subject, demographics, and the role of state and local and tribal authorities in shaping districts, schools and charters