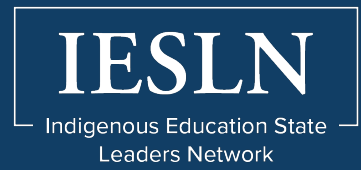


A Scan of State American Indian Education Essential Understandings



Emily Agopian, AIR; Johanna Jones, AIR

Overview

This brief looks at American Indian¹ education essential understandings across the country. Essential understandings are overarching concepts that set a baseline of shared understanding for teaching American Indian history, culture, values, and perspectives. They are developed collaboratively, carefully reviewed, and, in some cases, adopted by state education agencies as a key component of state standards. These frameworks outline several key areas including, but not limited to:

- the **diversity** of American Indian tribes, cultures, and languages;
- the complexity of American Indian **identity**;
- the strong connection to **land** shared by American Indian people and communities;
- tribal **sovereignty and governance** structures;
- the **federal policy** eras that have permanently altered and irreparably damaged tribal nations;
- **Indigenous contributions** across sectors that enrich individual states and the nation;
- the **beliefs and values** that are at the center of American Indian culture; and
- how the story of **history** is told and shaped by the narrator.

Purpose & Objectives

Why Essential Understandings Matter

Education plays an important role in the continued growth, sustainability, and well-being of Indigenous communities. States have created essential understandings to make sure that American Indian history, culture, and perspectives are integrated into K–12 schools in appropriate ways. Essential

¹ The most respectful terminology to use is the specific name of a tribal nation. For the purpose of this document, the term American Indian is used interchangeably with similar terms such as Indigenous and Native, all of which are in common usage across one or more of the states in question.

understandings establish a shared set of core underlying knowledge while reflecting differences among tribal communities within a given state and across the country.

Shared Goals of Essential Understandings

These principles vary by state but share common goals:

- teach students about Indigenous cultures and histories;
- increase student engagement;
- support fair and effective teaching for Indigenous students;
- give all students a broader learning experience; and
- create coherence throughout American Indian-focused curricula.

What is the Difference Between State Standards and Essential Understandings?

- **State standards** are clearly defined learning goals for K–12 students in a state’s public schools. Education standards describe what students should know and be able to do by the end of each grade, in each of the major academic subjects. Each state sets its own education standards and reviews its standards regularly.² State standards aim to serve as coherent guidance across a state’s classrooms, ensuring that all students receive consistent, high-quality instruction.
- **Essential understandings** are overarching concepts that set a baseline of shared understanding for teaching American Indian history, culture, values, and perspectives. Essential understandings provide a foundation of key knowledge for educators to build on. Essential understandings are generally conceptually based statements used as a guiding light to design curriculum and instruction that meet state standards.³

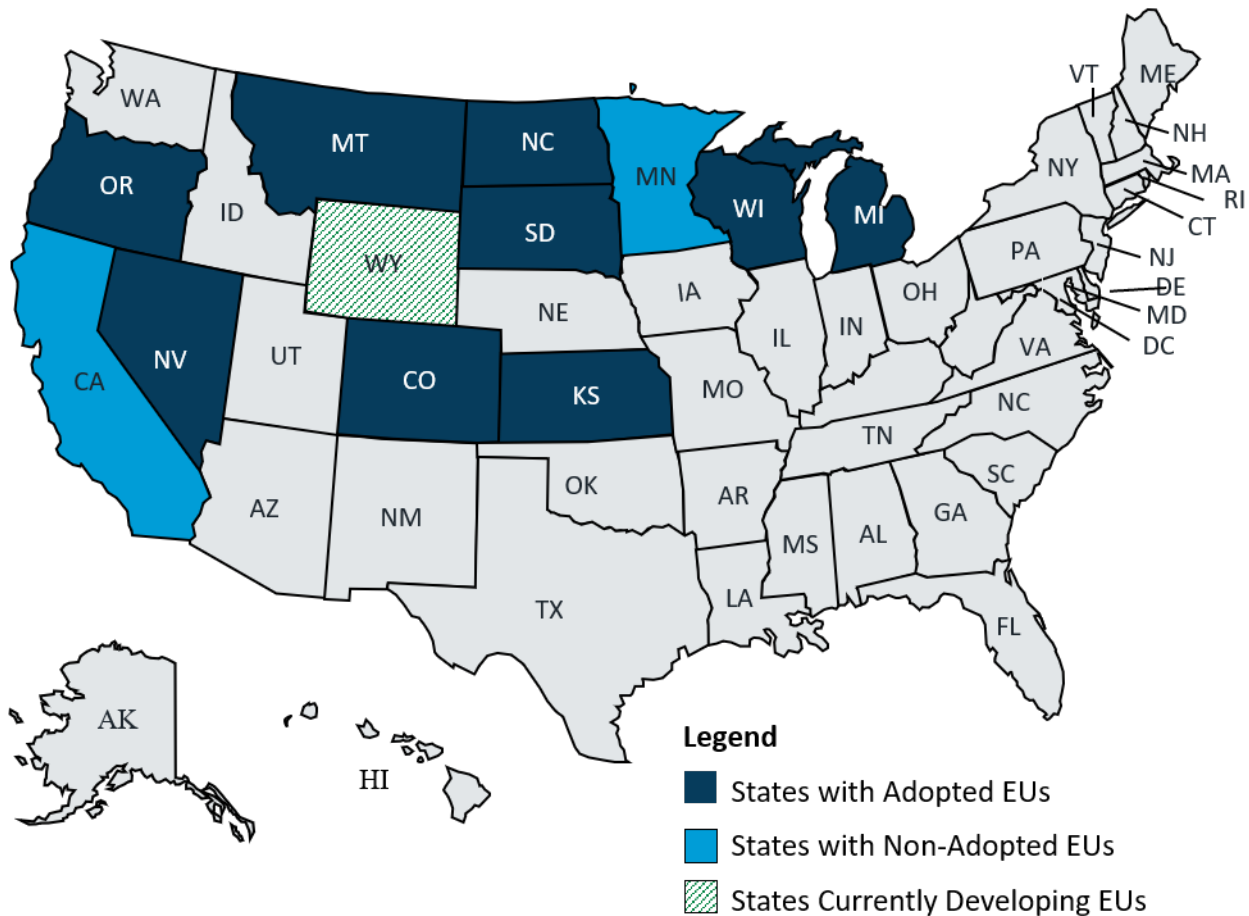
² U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, Regional Educational Laboratory Southeast. (2020, September). *Deciphering state education standards*.

https://ies.ed.gov/sites/default/files/migrated/rel/infographics/pdf/REL_SE_Deciphering_State_Education_Standards.pdf

³ Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian. (n.d.). *Native knowledge 360° framework for essential understandings about American Indians*. <https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/pdf/NMAI-Essential-Understandings.pdf>

Key Findings

Figure 1. Essential Understandings National Map



- **Most essential understandings were developed collaboratively** by a mix of state education agencies, local education agencies, tribal nations, and academic institutions.
- **Six out of 11 states** with essential understandings have **released or updated** their essential understandings **within the past 5 years**.
- **Nine out of 11 states** with essential understandings have **had their frameworks adopted** by the state education agency or legislature.
- States range from having **6–15 understandings**, with the average being eight understandings and, most frequently, seven understandings.
- **Each set of principles reflects the unique local context** of the tribes within that state.
 - Even with these differences, there is strong consistency in the core concepts across all states' essential understandings.
 - Major themes are highlighted in **Figure 2**.

Figure 2. Major Themes in Essential Understandings

Themes	Definitions	Example
Diversity	- Tribes across the United States are highly diverse in their cultures, communities, languages, and practices. - Tribes are not a monolith and should not be treated as one group; they represent a wide spectrum of experiences, teachings, and histories.	“There is great diversity within and across each Indigenous community. They have their own unique cultural identity that interweaves with those of other Indigenous communities and those of non-Anishinaabek people who have come to live on these lands in more recent history.” -Michigan
Identity	Identity among American Indian tribes is a complex, multifaceted concept rooted in community connection, cultural participation, and sovereignty rather than just biology or appearance. It is primarily defined by tribal citizenship or enrollment (legal status), cultural affiliation, ancestry, and community recognition.	“Individual and communal identity is defined and supported by shared Native languages, kinship systems, Tiospaye, Clan structures, traditional teachings, values, sacred laws and ceremonies. A continuum of tribal identity, unique to each individual, ranges from assimilated to traditional lifestyle. There is no ‘generic American Indian.’” - North Dakota
Land	- Tribes and Indigenous people have a deep connection to the land and environment that has existed from time immemorial until present day. - Tribes have cared for and honored their homelands for thousands of years.	“The original land base and natural resources of the Oceti Sakowin [oh-CHEH-tee shaw-KOH-we] were under communal stewardship prior to immigrant settlement. Oceti Sakowin have a distinct and unique interrelationship with the environment that is essential to South Dakota.” - South Dakota
Sovereignty and Governance	- Tribal sovereignty is the innate right of tribes to self-determination through governance. - Tribal governments are sovereign nations with the authority to create and enforce laws and policies for their citizens and land.	“Sovereignty describes the inherent right of Native American Nations to exercise self-governance. This tribal sovereignty predates the existence of the U.S. government and the state of Oregon. Tribal governments are separate and unique sovereign nations with powers to protect the health, safety, and welfare of their citizens and to govern their lands, air and waters.” - Oregon
Federal Policy	Across American history, many federal and state policies have been implemented that permanently altered and irreparably damaged Indian people, communities, and nations.	“The relationship between Tribal Nations and the U.S. government is a complicated story, which varies greatly from Nation to Nation. A variety of political, economic, legal, military, and social policies were used by European nations and the United States in removal, land seizure, termination, relocation, destruction of culture, and

Themes	Definitions	Example
	Periods of American Indian history since colonization can be understood through major federal policy eras.	genocide of American Indian Nations and people. U.S. policies regarding American Indians were the result of major national debate. Many of these policies had devastating impacts and effects on established American Indian governing principles and systems. Other policies sought to strengthen and restore tribal self-government.” - Wisconsin
Indigenous Contributions	- American Indian people have made important contributions across many fields, strengthening their communities and enriching states and the nation. - Through Indigenous knowledge and cultural values, tribal nations continue to advance innovation, education, and community well-being.	“Today, the Ute People in Colorado continue to play a significant role in many aspects of political, legal, cultural, environmental, and economic issues. The ideals, principles, and practices of citizenship have always been a part of Ute Indian society. The rights and responsibilities of Ute individuals have been defined by the values, morals, and beliefs common to their culture.” - Colorado
Beliefs and Values	- Indigenous traditional beliefs continue to shape the practices and ideals of Indigenous people and groups today. - These values appear in traditions of generosity, shared responsibility, humor, and community that guide both individual and collective behavior.	“The ideologies of Native traditional beliefs and spirituality persist into modern day life as tribal cultures, traditions, and languages are still practiced by many American Indian people and are incorporated into how tribes govern and manage their affairs.” - Nevada
History	- History is shaped by the perspective of the person telling it. - Understanding Indigenous peoples requires centering Indigenous voices and narratives, which often challenge mainstream historical perspectives.	“History is a story most often related through the subjective experience of the teller. With the inclusion of more and varied voices, histories are being rediscovered and revised. History told from American Indian perspectives frequently conflicts with the stories mainstream historians tell.” -Montana

Analysis/Context

States are making increasing efforts to advance Indigenous education for all students. In addition to the essential understandings analyzed here, many states and tribes have created Indigenous educational frameworks, standards, and curricula.

Montana's Role

- Montana was the first state to implement essential understandings, releasing the original version in 1999 and most recently updating it in 2024.
- *The Seven Essential Understandings Regarding Montana Indians* is a key means of implementing Montana's Indian Education for All (IEFA) policy which establishes that "every Montanan, whether Indian or non-Indian, be encouraged to learn about the distinct and unique heritage of American Indians in a culturally responsive manner; and . . . every educational agency and all educational personnel will work cooperatively with Montana tribes . . . when providing instruction and implementing an educational goal."⁴
- Montana's model set a precedent for how essential understandings can be replicated and implemented in other states. Nevada, South Dakota, Wisconsin, California, and Minnesota's essential understandings cite Montana as being a key influence in developing their own frameworks.

Practical Applications

- In South Dakota, the Oceti Sakowin Essential Understandings have been adopted as part of the state's overall standards review and revision cycle, alongside integrated resources and materials for implementation. Author Dottie LeBeau said, "This isn't just for our Native young people, it's for all of us. It's for Native people to learn about themselves and others to learn about their neighbors."⁵
- Colorado⁶ and Nevada⁷ have both embedded their essential understandings within state curriculum supporting the teaching of the history, culture, and present lives of the states' tribal nations and people.

⁴ Montana Legislature. (2025). 20-1-501. *Recognition of American Indian cultural heritage—Legislative intent*. Montana Code Annotated. https://mca.legmt.gov/bills/mca/title_0200/chapter_0010/part_0050/section_0010/0200-0010-0050-0010.html

⁵ South Dakota Department of Tribal Relations. (n.d.). *Oceti Sakowin essential understandings (OSEU): Instructional resources*. <https://sdtribalrelations.sd.gov/indian-education/OSEU.aspx>

⁶ Colorado Department of Education. (2023, April). *Nuu-ciu strong: A Colorado fourth grade resource guide—Lessons about the Ute people of Colorado*. https://www.cde.state.co.us/sites/default/files/docs/cde_english/Nuu-Ciu_Strong_2023.pdf

⁷ Nevada Department of Education. (2012, October). *History and contemporary lifestyles of the Northern Paiute, Southern Paiute, Washoe and Western Shoshone: Curriculum guide*. Nevada State Board of Education. <https://dnaa.nv.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Curriculum-Guide-FINAL-2012.pdf>

- In 2025, Michigan implemented its own essential understandings, which were written and developed collaboratively by the Confederation of Michigan Tribal Education Departments and Michigan Department of Education’s Indigenous Education Initiative.⁸

Other Non-Adopted Essential Understandings

- The California Indian Culture and Sovereignty Center co-developed “California Indian Essential Understandings” in 2017 for use at the California Indian Museum and Cultural Center, but the understandings have not been adopted at the state level.⁹
- “Minnesota Native American Essential Understandings for Educators” was developed in 2022 following, and as a recommendation of, “Restoring Our Place,” a groundbreaking report commissioned and published by the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community’s (SMSC) Understand Native Minnesota campaign.¹⁰ In 2025, the Minnesota Department of Education released “Essential Understandings About Native Arts in Minnesota,” which supports the development of a Minnesota arts standards-aligned curriculum that authentically and appropriately supports student learning about Dakota and/or Ojibwe arts.¹¹
- As a part of its Native Knowledge 360° initiative, the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian developed a national overview of essential understandings in “Framework for Essential Understandings about American Indians.”¹²
- As of early 2026, the Wyoming Department of Education is in the process of developing essential understandings.

⁸ Indigenous Education Initiative. (2025). *Essential understandings for Michigan*. <https://ieimi.org/learning-resources/essential-understandings-for-michigan-2/>

⁹ California Indian Museum and Cultural Center. (2017). *7 Essential Understandings for California Indian History and Culture*. <https://cimcc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/7-Essential-Support-Booklet-Final.pdf>

¹⁰ Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community. (2024). *Minnesota Native American Essential Understandings for Educators*. https://www.understandnativemn.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/2024_MN_Native_American_Essential_Understandings.pdf

¹¹ Minnesota Department of Education. (2025). *Essential understandings about Native arts in Minnesota*. https://education.mn.gov/mdeprod/idcplg?IdcService=GET_FILE&dDocName=PROD085801&RevisionSelectionMethod=latestReleased&Rendition=primary

¹² Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian. (n.d.). *Native knowledge 360° framework for essential understandings about American Indians*. <https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/pdf/NMAI-Essential-Understandings.pdf>

Methodology

This scan was developed by the Indigenous Education State Leaders Network (IESLN) and the Indigenous Student Identification Project at the American Institutes for Research®. States with essential understandings were identified by a 2023 IESLN survey of state education agencies' American Indian education staffing, curricula, and programs.¹³ Essential understandings were collected, qualitatively coded, and analyzed by year created, authoring institutions and partners, adoption status, overarching themes, and other key factors.

Conclusion

Creating and adopting state essential understandings is important for establishing a baseline of shared knowledge among both individual educators and state education systems at large. These understandings serve as a foundational resource for developing further standards, curriculum, and learning materials consistent with the outlined values and themes.

State-adopted essential understandings should be created in partnership with the state, local education agencies, and local tribes. By implementing instruction based in these understandings, states reflect a set of guiding principles that bring together the voices of multiple tribes and varying perspectives. This allows for direct tribal input in a way that the wider and often more politically volatile standards process does not.

Essential understandings can be developed and used without the involvement of the state as well, as is the case in California and Minnesota. There is then an opportunity for the understandings to be adapted or adopted for general use, which has happened in Wisconsin and Michigan, or as state standards, as is the case in South Dakota.

Essential understandings have become a key part of implementing Indigenous education mandates and policies in states across the country. By centering these core ideas, educators and instruction can better focus on important priorities in American Indian education. As more states adopt essential understandings, they also provide a model for others that have not yet developed their own. In addition to supporting educators, essential understandings help strengthen tribal partnerships, promote vetted curriculum and resources, and support professional development on high-quality implementation.

¹³ Spang, M., Smoker-Broaddus, M., Nayar, N., & Agopian, E. (2025, January). *A scan of state education agency staffing for Indigenous education*. American Institutes for Research & Education Northwest. <https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/2025-01/Scan-of-State-Education-Agency-Staffing-Indigenous-Education-January-2025.pdf>

Appendix

Figure 3. Essential Understandings by State

Column Key:

Year = Year released or last updated

No. = Number of essential understandings

Ad = Adopted by the state

Div. = Diversity

Id. = Identity

Land = Land

Sov. = Sovereignty

Fed. = Federal policy

Con. = Indigenous contributions

BV = Beliefs and values

His. = History

State & link	Funder/convenor	Year	No.	Ad.	Div.	Id.	Land	Sov.	Fed.	Con.	BV	His.
<u>California</u>	California Indian Museum & Cultural Center	2017	7	No	X	X	X	X	X	—	X	X
<u>Colorado</u>	Colorado Commission on Indian Affairs	2023	5	Yes	X	X	X	—	—	X	—	X
<u>Kansas</u>	Kansas Advisory Council for Indigenous Education	2025	9	Yes	—	—	X	X	—	X	—	X
<u>Michigan</u>	Michigan Indigenous Education Initiative, Confederation of Michigan Tribal Education Departments	2025	15	Yes	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
<u>Minnesota</u>	Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux, Understanding Native Minnesota	2024	7	No	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
<u>Montana</u>	Montana Office of Public Instruction	1999, 2024	7	Yes	X	X	—	X	X	—	X	X
<u>Nevada</u>	Nevada State Board of Education	2012	7	Yes	X	X	X	X	X	—	—	X

State & Link	Funder/ Convener	Year	No.	Ad.	Div.	Id.	Land	Sov.	Fed.	Con.	BV	His.
<u>North Dakota</u>	North Dakota Department of Public Instruction	2015	7	Yes	—	X	—	X	—	X	X	—
<u>Oregon</u>	Oregon Department of Education	2019, 2020	9	Yes	—	X	—	X	X	—	X	X
<u>South Dakota</u>	South Dakota Department of Education	2011	6	Yes	X	X	X	X	—	X	X	X
<u>Wisconsin</u>	Wisconsin Historical Society, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction	2013, 2025	12	Yes	X	X	—	X	X	—	—	X



Established in 1946, the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) is a nonpartisan, not-for-profit institution that conducts behavioral and social science research and delivers technical assistance both domestically and internationally in the areas of education, health, and the workforce. With headquarters in Arlington, Virginia, AIR has offices across the U.S. and abroad. For more information, visit [AIR.ORG](https://www.air.org).

Copyright © 2026 American Institutes for Research®. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, website display, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the American Institutes for Research. For permission requests, please use the Contact Us form on [AIR.ORG](https://www.air.org).

Notice of Trademark: "American Institutes for Research" and "AIR" are registered trademarks. All other brand, product, or company names are trademarks or registered trademarks of their respective owners.

30606_06/26