

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You are listening to Work in Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor-in-Chief of WorkingNation. Work in Progress explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators and decision-makers, people with solutions to today's workforce challenges.

Native Americans have the highest unemployment rate of any racial or ethnic minority group in the U.S., and lower graduation rates and achievement gaps compared to their white peers. There are many reasons for this, including long-term and systemic disparities.

Recently at South by Southwest EDU, I spoke about some of these issues with Casie Wise. She's the Senior Program Director for the National Indian Education Association. Its mission is to close some of those gaps by improving the education of Native children, while also promoting Native languages and cultures. We cover a wide range of topics, but Wise starts by sharing how the organization began.

Casie Wise, National Indian Education Association:

Organization was founded in 1969, same time as the American Indian Movement picked up, and it was intended to be by Native educators to ensure that there was a voice of advocacy, especially at the federal level, during that time. And so for the last 55 years, we have been advocating for Native education at the federal, state, and tribal level. Within the last 10 years, though we've shifted into program work so that we can look at how policy, implementation on the ground, really impacts our communities, and then also how our communities can impact the policies that we need to either champion for or sunset.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

What kind of policies are you trying to change? Are you trying to get more federal money in? Are you trying to get just more education programs? Explain that part of it.

Casie Wise, National Indian Education Association:

Sure. It actually ranges in all of those areas. I think one of the major portions that our policy team or policy in the past has really focused on is appropriations and the way that funding is disseminated, especially in discretionary and formula grants. And then, also, under the Department of Interior, we have the Bureau of Indian Affairs and then the Bureau of Indian Education. And so that's another, because it's the federal government's trust responsibility to provide education for Native communities and Native nations. We try to ensure that that is as appropriately funded as it could be, while knowing that we always need to advocate for more.

But it's also about ensuring that there's pairing engagement voice ensuring that there's tribal consultation. The same thing at the state level, because while the federal government has waned in support or not support of Native communities, the states have often done the same. And there are some states that are front-runners in how there should be a relationship between Native nations and government. As complex as it sounds, we try to navigate all those spaces to the best that we can.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And so thinking of some states like Utah or New Mexico, Arizona, I would say three, from what I've heard, are some of the bigger ones, Montana, et cetera. How are they working with you to make sure those education programs or that education is appropriate for the community?

Casie Wise, National Indian Education Association:

We may do that in multiple ways, because we are a member-driven education association. We'll either offer resources, we can say things like templates or mediation-type work in order to navigate some of those tribal consultations. Right? Or we have a program called Native Education for All, so in states such as Montana, that has a mandate for Native content to be taught in schools. Arizona has been working towards that. Washington state already has that. So in these states that either have it or are working towards those types of mandates, then we will come in, we can support tribes on how they need to advocate, and kind of be that mediation or that support for them.

But then, also, at the state level, working with Offices of Indian Education, working with state superintendents in order to determine how that legislation should either be passed, how to implement it so that it actually gets into schools. Because so many times there's great legislation that's passed, but it doesn't have a financial push behind it. It's just a suggestion at that point. So how can we navigate those relationships? We really do try to stay in contact with state departments, with Indian Ed Associations that, also, most of those states already have an Indian Education Association. And so between the nonprofits and between the associations and the state, we try to keep those partnerships collaborative.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Is there a different need for the Native American community or the tribal nations in terms of the education? Why is it so important that you exist?

Casie Wise, National Indian Education Association:

That's a great question. Yes. For right now, there are 574 federally recognized tribes. Historically, we know there have been more, but because of removal and relocation and federal policy, that number has shifted over time. But each of those have unique languages, customs, culture, that have been there since before time immemorial. And in order for those young people to feel a sense of belonging and to be able to reclaim that identity and those languages that were lost over time because of policies and removal, they have to, again, by trust responsibility from the federal government, but also in order to restore that connection back to whether it is land or language or what's been lost, they need to have their own school systems, or their own environments, and their own culturally grounded and community driven, tribally controlled, education systems, and that's why we exist.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Do you feel that there's been more support for it or less support? I'm talking, you can say, on a federal level. I mean, do you feel like there's more support for this individual-

Casie Wise, National Indian Education Association:

Localized, community driven.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Yeah.

Casie Wise, National Indian Education Association:

My first response would be, yes, I do think it depends on states. Right? I know right now in this current political context, we have a lot of challenges with education right now. I think there's that space of when people talk about school choice, it should be a parent's choice, it should be localized to the community,

and all of that. We say, "Well, yes, it should," because our communities should be able to lead and implement their own education systems.

I mean, I think there are a lot of people nationally who still don't understand sovereignty and still don't understand the political relationship with the government. But I think on a surface level, most people, especially after the boarding school story has emerged, I think a lot of educators who have woken up to that story and said, "How could that have been a part of our education system?" Right? They would agree that tribes should be able to reclaim that right and educate their own children. So I don't think there would be as much negative response to that. Most people would say, "Well, yes," but then what does that look like? Because it becomes more complicated when you start looking at funding and state mandates and space and infrastructure for students. Right?

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Why don't you define sovereignty? Explain sovereignty for those who don't understand it.

Casie Wise, National Indian Education Association:

Well, I can only explain sovereignty from a non-Native perspective of being in this organization. Every tribe is going to define sovereignty on their own, but it really is the inherent right of tribes to govern themselves, to have their own language and their own economic systems, and be able to sustain themselves. I would say that's the true definition of sovereignty. Obviously, education fits into that, because a tribe wants to be able to sustain themselves for generations, and sovereignty is the inherent right to be able to do that and determine their own future and their own government.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

People living on tribal lands is diminishing. There's a lot more Native Americans, indigenous peoples who live in other communities now. Is there a way to spread that education and make sure that they get a part of that, as well?

Casie Wise, National Indian Education Association:

I think that's one of the other reasons that we exist. I mean, if you look at the statistics, I can say over 90%, it's probably closer to 95% of Native students are attending public schools. Now, some of those public schools may still be on reservation land, but the majority of students, like you said, are not attending school in a tribal community. And so we exist to be able to support the balance of both, right? So while we champion for tribal sovereignty and tribally-controlled schools, we recognize that we also have to impact the public education system, because that's where the majority for, again, relocation and for other reasons, a lot of our students and families live in, it could be urban centers or rural centers, but they live away from their, what maybe they would call their homelands or their reservation.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

A lot of the work that we talk about at WorkingNation is the idea that access to education is access to economic mobility. What are your thoughts on that?

Casie Wise, National Indian Education Association:

Yes. I say we believe the same.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That was very succinct.

Casie Wise, National Indian Education Association:

That is a yes. Economic mobility just goes back into that same space of, like I said, self-determination and sustainability. If we even just wanted to look at it in the scope of a reservation system, those reservations were set up a long time ago in order to either relocate or push Native people into a space that was, in many ways, unwanted. It may not have even been traditional homelands for these people, right? In a lot of cases, communities are trying to rebuild an economic system either in lands that were not traditionally theirs, or in a space where many resources were cut off. And so economic mobility is highly dependent on education, because many times in these communities, the education system is also the highest employer. In the school, they offer maybe the most resources, they could even be a health center for the community. Whether public or tribally controlled, the school is a critical base in the community, not just as an employer, but also as, hopefully, the producer of a workforce in order to grow the economy.

But there are so many other layers to that, because the education system, if it doesn't have the infrastructure to grow, we have a community right now that's like we have no master plumbers and no master electricians, period. We have to outsource. We don't even have the program. We don't even have an instructor in our local school to be able to produce those, right? So then how do you have economic mobility if you can't produce that workforce? So they are directly tied. There are just so many other factors in that narrative.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Do you work on the higher ed side of it, too, or is it all K-12?

Casie Wise, National Indian Education Association:

Both. Our goal is, some people used to say "cradle to career". We would say "birth to grave". Basically, we hope to impact all of those levels. We know that K-12 can sometimes be, I don't like the word "easy", but the most accessible to get into. But, right now, even with the program that we're working on for Career Pathways, it starts in middle school and runs all the way through to tribal college. We really want to ensure that there is not just an alignment, but really, truly a path, whether it's college or career or some tribal leadership, we want students to be successful in that, what seems to be right now, a gap between the K-12 and the higher ed system.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

We've talked a lot about policy. Are there any programs or initiatives that you feel that have worked in different communities, different states, that you'd like to see scaled up?

Casie Wise, National Indian Education Association:

Yes. I would say right now, any type of programming that is connecting or reconnecting students to cultural practice and language, we have found to be the most effective. A lot of times when you start talking about culture and education, different people will take that in many ways. We talk about like culture and climate in a building, but in this case, it literally is when either a program or a school commits to incorporating and respecting ceremony, incorporating things like beading, fishing, hunting. Whether it's the school or the community says, "We're going to work to reclaim our language and ensure that our young people have that," and then the school or the education system is supportive,

then that's when we see our students thrive. A lot of language immersion or early childhood language programs, schools that ensure that students have culture and language courses.

We have one school, one district, in Washington that actually are, and there are other districts doing this, but we keep up with them closely. They have created elective, credit-bearing courses that students can take in order to connect culturally, but also receive credit so that they're not having to take additional courses. So those things are very successful.

One of the other things we've been working on, we have two programs right now that we implement that have been effective, and one is a career pathway. We have a partnership between Bowler Schools and the College of Menominee Nation that starts in middle school with career exploration and virtual reality, but as they get into high school, they can choose, even without having to say they want to take construction as a future career, they can join in their CTE program. They can do dual enrollment through the tribal college. They can, actually, we call it triple enrollment, because they can take industry credentials through NCCER, which is a construction organization.

All of that is done in partnership with the instructors at the tribal college and at the school district. And so there's this really relationship-based program that allows students to start early in exploring, and then earn credit and earn credentials as they really think about becoming construction trade, either job-ready or moving on to the tribal college. Because that community, Menominee Nation, Menominee Tribal Enterprises actually oversees massive forest. They have a huge lumber industry, but their workforce in construction has been low and limited. And so there's kind of an imbalance of what the tribe has as a resource, and then what the local community has, especially the tribal community has, in relation to like contracting services. So we saw that need, the tribal college and the tribe have agreements in order to create workforce pathways, and so the construction trade is just one of those avenues to ensure that the tribe has the workforce that it needs. So that's one.

The other is, we have a tribal Communities and Schools program. We are licensed partners with Communities and Schools, if you're familiar with that national organization. And so, with our school partners, we place student support coordinators who understand directly the needs of Native students. They're there for all students, but they're really focused on Native students, and creating community relationships, and working with tribes, and working with parents in order to ensure that those students have services that they need, but are, also, if the school says, "Hey, attendance is our biggest problem," then that person does everything that they can. We don't like to say case manage, but it may sound like that in a social services-type world to make sure that that student is well, feels a sense of belonging, and is also coming to school.

I would say, for us at NIA, those are the two key programs right now that are community-based and driven that are being successful. The role of education and economic mobility and stability for Native nations is really about ensuring that our Native young people can remain and thrive in their community. Education is not only an employer or workforce development space for tribes, but it's also a way to ensure that young people feel a sense of belonging, and then have an identity in where they live. The stronger the education system, then students are able to stay. They're able to participate and engage in their culture. They're able to take care of their families and have a sustainable wage. And then the tribe itself is able to grow, not just economically, but also culturally and through relationship. And so any community would want to see their young people stay, and that's really the key to a strong education system and impacting the workforce and economics in Native nations.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

What's at stake if we don't support this community, and we don't give them the funding they need, the education they need? I ask that of a lot of people, because I think it's very important to understand that.

Casie Wise, National Indian Education Association:

I think we could go through some of the typical answers that we would for anyone, but I think that we have a lot of narrative around No Child Left Behind, Success for All. Even as America may seem very individualized, we have this collective idea of greatness in America. If that greatness and that success and sustainability and wellness, if that doesn't include the people who were here on this land longer than anybody else, then we aren't living up to what we say we are and want to be.

I grew up in a spiritual, a church-based household, and this may sound off, but now my father was always talking about the least of these. If you can't help, if you can't serve, if you can't care for people who are in difficult situations or people who have been wronged, our Native nations have been for centuries wronged by our nation, essentially. So if we can't correct that and all move forward together, then we're not doing what we claim we are. If we're going to live by that idea that every child can be successful and every child can thrive, then those children deserve to thrive just as much as any others.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That was my interview with Casie Wise, Senior Program Director for the National Indian Education Association. We spoke at South by Southwest EDU. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor-in-Chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.