

Early Childhood Policy Matters – Tribal Sovereignty and Early Childhood Care and Education Systems

Guests: Moushumi Beltangady, Melody Redbird-Post, Tracie Kenney, Tleena Ives

Narrator:

Welcome to Early Childhood Policy Matters, a podcast for early childhood professionals and strategic partners hoping to use research to inform policy and better serve children, families, and their communities.

Today we discuss Tribal sovereignty and its relationship to early childhood care and education systems. Host Mandy Reeve sits down with a panel of state and federal experts to explain Tribal sovereignty and the value of including tribal voices in strategic planning and systems building. They also offer some real world examples and share some lessons learned for stakeholders across the country. That's right now on Early Childhood Policy Matters.

Mandy Reeve:

Hello and welcome to Early Childhood Policy Matters. I'm Mandy Reeve, senior education researcher and TA specialist with SRI Education and the PDG B-5 TA center. Today we're going to be talking about Tribal sovereignty and its impact on governance in state early childhood systems.

Our first two guests are Moushumi Beltangady, the Director of Tribal Early Childhood at the Administration for Children and Families, Office of Early Childhood Development, and the Program Manager for the Tribal Home Visiting Program; and Melody Redbird-Post, Project Director at the Tribal Child Care Capacity Building Center. Thanks so much for joining us today.

Moushumi Beltangady:

Thank you. It's great to be here.

Melody Redbird-Post:

Yeah, I'm excited to be here. Thank you.

Mandy Reeve:

I'd like to start out by talking about sovereignty. Moushumi, can you start us off and talk about what the concept of Tribal sovereignty means?

Moushumi Beltangady:

Sure. Thanks, Mandy. So Tribal sovereignty is basically the idea that tribes are able to govern themselves and determine for themselves how they would like to operate as sovereign nations. And so tribes are seen as sovereign nations that have the same powers as federal and state governments to determine how they want to operate their own internal affairs, with some exceptions. But the concept of Tribal sovereignty is really grounded in the nation-to-nation relationship between tribal nations and the U.S. government, which is part of the Constitution.

And so the U.S. government based on that, is required to deal with tribes as governments and not just special interest groups. And part of that also is this idea of the trust responsibility that the U.S. government has, which says that the U.S. government is responsible for protecting tribal lands and recognizing tribal self-governance and also engaging in activities to protect the health, education, and welfare of tribal communities.

And so really the idea of recognizing Tribal sovereignty means that the government has really a basic respect for the rights of tribes to self-determination, and that plays out in a couple ways. One is that the government is required to consult with tribes on a regular basis on any issues of policy that would impact tribes. And so every federal agency has a requirement to do tribal consultation on a regular basis in order to ensure that any policies that are set affect tribes positively and don't cause any unintended consequences.

The other way that we really show respect for Tribal sovereignty and self-determination is that we acknowledge the rights of tribes to protect their unique cultures, languages, and identities and really do things the way they want to do them and not be constrained by really undue federal requirements.

Mandy Reeve:

That was really helpful, Moushumi. Can you talk now about how Tribal sovereignty relates to the Preschool Development Birth to Five Grant program?

Moushumi Beltangady:

So for PDG, it's a slightly different situation because we're talking about the intergovernmental relationships between state governments and tribal governments as opposed to the direct nation-to-nation relationship between the federal government and tribal governments and that trust responsibility that's there.

That said, it's really critical that states recognize Tribal sovereignty in their interactions with tribal communities, including respecting their rights to protect their languages, culture, and of course their most precious resource, which is their children. And so because the PDG funds are not directly available to tribes, they don't really have an opportunity like states to develop their own early childhood plans and systems and have resources and supports to do that currently.

And so we want to make sure that states are engaging tribes as equal partners in their work to ensure that they are benefiting from the grants and that they're really contributing to the grants so that everything that's done is benefiting children in tribal communities and native children more broadly in the state. And this can really look different in every state and every tribe. And that often has to do with the history of state tribal collaboration and then current relationships between the different individuals and organizations that are involved with early childhood.

So in some states we've seen tribal advisory committees or, and sometimes and including significant tribal representation on PDG birth to five advisory groups. Some of the grantees have provided funds directly to tribes to engage in needs assessment and strategic planning and other grant activities. Some of them have engaged in formal tribal consultations similar to what the federal government does.

But really at the core of this is that there's a mutual respect and commitment to supporting the wellbeing of young children and families regardless of the community they live in, and really ensuring that that is there for all Native American children.

Mandy Reeve:

Thanks so much. Melody, in your work focusing on supporting states and tribes in system administration related to the Child Care Development Fund, or CCDF, is there anything else you would like to add?

Melody Redbird-Post:

Sure. Thank you Mandy. So first of all, there are 263 tribal CCDF grantees across the United States that share boundaries with state CCDF lead agencies. And our team here at the Tribal Child Care Capacity

Building Center provides training and technical assistance to tribal lead agencies. And we work with the other Office of Child Care funded national centers to support state TA requests around state tribal coordination and collaboration.

So thinking about CCDF specifically, there are some differences in the way that the CCDF regulations are applied to tribes versus states. So for instance, tribes are required to meet the CCDF regulations through a tiered approach that corresponds to their funding level. And tribal lead agencies are split into three different tiers of funding, tribes who receive small, medium or large CCDF funding allocations. And so in many cases, tribes and states are actually serving the same children and same families.

And one thing to keep in mind is that tribal children and tribal families are dually eligible for CCDF services. And that means that tribal families can apply for and receive CCDF assistance from either the state lead agency or a tribal lead agency. And dual eligibility provides tribes and states with this opportunity to coordinate services to increase the availability of CCDF services to tribal children and families.

And there's some resources out there for state lead agencies who might be interested in exploring their current systems around state tribal coordination and collaboration, such as there's a specific policy interpretation question document on the Office of Child Care website that we like referring to that has some really specific guidance for states who want to coordinate more intentionally with tribal lead agencies. And there's also a state tribal collaboration resource page available on the Child Care Technical Assistance Network website also.

And also, I just wanted to mention that states are actually required to consult, collaborate, and coordinate with tribes and tribal organizations in their state regarding the development of the state's CCDF plan, and that is at the option of the tribe or the tribal organization. And so this consultation must be timely and proactive and be described in the state CCDF plan. So a lot of times our team is brought in to support state lead agencies who are really thinking about ways to be intentional and build meaningful consultation opportunities with tribal nations in their state.

And also states also need to ensure that required training and professional development is accessible to tribal CCDF child care providers and that it's appropriate for tribal children as much as possible. So just to kind of reiterate, it's really important to take the time to build relationships with the right people and the right programs, as well as really investing time to establish lines of communication between the state lead agency, state early childhood programs, and relevant tribal lead agencies or tribal organizations who are interested in collaborating.

Mandy Reeve:

Thank you, Melody. So between Melody and Moushumi, I think what I heard was the word collaboration, relationship, consultation, children and families said many times. And so now I'm excited to introduce our next guests, Tracie Kenney and Tleena Ives from the state of Washington so that we can hear about how these concepts play out in the state.

So Tracie is the PDG B-5 project director at the Washington State Department of Children, Youth and Families. Her team manages the technical aspects of the PDG B-5 grant as well as cultivating the integration and coordination of the 12 bodies of work funded by the PDG B-5 and leading two of those projects. Tleena is the director of tribal relations also at the Washington Department of Children, Youth and Families. Hi, Tracie and Tleena.

Tracie Kenney:

Thanks for having us. It's great to be here.

Tleena Ives:

I'm really happy to be here today.

Mandy Reeve:

So I'm excited to learn more about the partnership between the tribal nations and the state of Washington and the great work you have been doing with the PDG B-5 grant. Can you tell us about the relationship between the state and the tribes and how they work together in partnership at the state level to support early care and education?

Tracie Kenney:

Yes, I would like to build on what Moushumi and Melody were sharing too, speaking on sovereignty and just like to share that issues that have anything to do with children and family are the very core of Tribal sovereignty. So anything that the states or feds do has connections to Tribal sovereignty. And for us in Washington State, we're really careful and thoughtful about making sure to recognize that this is inherent, that these are inherent rights that tribes possess to protect the health, the safety, and the welfare of their tribal citizens, most especially as it relates to their most sacred resource, their children.

Washington State has a strong relationship with tribal sovereign nations. There are state laws that ensure we are upholding government-to-government relationships supported by RCW 43.376. This RCW requires state agencies to hire a tribal liaison who reports directly to the head of the agency. I hold that role with DCYF as the director of tribal relations.

This law also requires Washington State agencies to have a consultation process. DCYF developed its consultation policy in partnership, in collaboration, coordination and consultation with the 29 federally recognized tribes in Washington State. We call this our 10-03 policy. It's our government-to-government policy.

At the Department of Children, Youth and Families, we have several tribal specialists who are embedded as content experts in several different areas of early learning programs. This includes a tribal specialist in our ECEAP, which is our state funded preschool, ESIT, our early support for infant and toddlers. Licensing, that role supports both our child care licensing and our foster care licensing as well as early learning QRIS program, which has a dedicated tribal specialist. And we recently have hired a tribal home visiting specialist. I'm proud of the work that Washington State is doing.

The agency that I work for really values the work of supporting staff dedicated to working with tribes, most of whom are tribal and/or have worked in tribal communities, who really understand tribal needs and how to uphold the government-to-government process. They understand Tribal sovereignty and they're also supporting DCYF staff to be able to understand that as well.

Through the work of the PDG, we were also able to hire a tribal child welfare early learning navigator. Also in my office we have a tribal early learning liaison who helps facilitate our Indian Policy for Early Learning, which is known as IPEL. IPEL was established in 2013 and represents membership from the 29 federally recognized tribes in Washington State and recognized American Indian organizations, also known as Urban Indian programs, to guide DCYF in policy and program development, to assure quality and comprehensive service delivery to all American Indians and Alaskan natives in Washington State.

Through our strong relationships with tribes from IPEL, we made sure to include tribal representation on the PDG statewide advisory group. IPEL guided us in working with a tribal contractor to assist in the strategic planning, and an outcome of this also included a transitional kindergarten survey that was led by tribes as the trusted messengers in their communities.

Mandy Reeve:

Tleena, can you tell us a little bit more about the Tribal Child Welfare Early Learning Navigator position and how this relates to the goals of PDG B-5?

Tleena Ives:

Sure, definitely. We used the PDG-5 funds to help support a tribal Child Welfare Early Learning Navigator position. The Child Welfare Early Learning Navigator positions were started with PDG funds and when we realized we had the opportunity to reapply for some additional funds, we requested that one of those be dedicated to supporting tribes. And we definitely have seen the benefit of how it can connect in the work that this position does to consult with the case carrying staff, social workers who are working in the child welfare system to help identify families early learning and family support needs, and determining the appropriate available resources that best meets those needs.

They are doing some great work in connecting families to identified services. This particular position we have is focused on helping support those that are Indian child welfare cases and/or cases where we have reason to know that the child may be tribal or have tribal heritage or connected and affiliated with a tribe.

Mandy Reeve:

Tracie, I'd like to talk more specifically about how PDG B-5 was used to build and enhance the relationships between tribal nations and the state and what impact this will have on your system going forward.

Tracie Kenney:

Yeah, thanks Mandy. It's one of my favorite topics. The Preschool Development Grant Birth To Five resources have given us the opportunity to build many partnerships and relationships and really do a lot of learning. The opportunity to do some systems building in places and ways that other funding streams are more restrictive has really built the relationship here in Washington and I've heard in other states as well and we are very appreciative of that.

I think one of the things that we learned right off the bat as is that relationship building takes time. And as obvious as that sounds, when you are on a grant timeline, then you feel that clock ticking. Something I like to say is that time is the killer of equity. And so I'm that PDG grantee that's always pushing back a little bit and saying, I need some more time, I need some more time. And it has really paid off.

We start with the commitment to listen and learn and the only way to really build trust is to prove that you are doing that every time. So we have worked closely with Tleena and our advisory groups at the Department of Children, Youth and Families to find ways to build that relationship respectfully. And we are also very thoughtful about our positionality and who we contracted with through the PDG.

We partner with Tleena. She has a staff person who is specifically dedicated to early learning. And so that person has been our partner through all of this. And really what we do is we provide the resources and then let the tribes design with their own tribes the way that they will approach things. We were surprised when they decided to integrate their tribal specific goals and strategies with the general community based ones because PDG is a grant that is made to elevate tribal voices and the voices of children and families of color who are often not in decision-making conversations. And that really spoke to them being tired of being called out as lacking or needing to be saved and really about their story fatigue.

Melody Redbird-Post:

I would be curious, Tracie, if you have any lessons learned that you'd like to share with other states who are engaging with tribal nations in building relationships and building trust?

Tracie Kenney:

So our work with Tleena's office and our agency's two advisory bodies, the Indian Policy Advisory Committee and then the early childhood focused Indian Policy Early Learning Committee that Tleena spoke of, IPEL, was pretty extensive. We started by meeting with IPEL to explain that we were conducting Washington's first statewide needs assessment and that we knew that the data available doesn't accurately portray the experiences of tribal children and families.

So after observing the group before us on the agenda frustrate IPEL members because they wanted reactions and input to things that have already been created and things that were going to be done to the tribe, my colleague and I looked at each other and slid our notes in our presentation back into our bags because we recognized we needed to take a different approach. So instead of the typical stakeholder presentation we were planning, we started with the question, What would it look like for your input to be meaningful in this needs assessment?

And then we followed their lead. Tleena and her team were instrumental in guiding us and we had several conversations in person with the groups. In the end, IPEL developed a four question survey that answered a few questions that they were curious about, and one question from us. They emphasized that the survey should be short, strength-based, and not rooted in what's not working. Even the name needs assessment caused concern among the members.

IPEL members distributed the survey directly to their parents and staff in their early learning programs. But honestly, we had less than 30 people complete the survey. We learned much more by being with the committees and listening deeply. And I tell this to anyone trying to learn from tribes, sit down and listen. When it was time to develop goals and strategies for the strategic plan, in Washington we call this our early learning coordination plan, we wanted to have those conversations again, but this time we needed more voices.

So we asked the committees again, What would it look like for your input to be meaningful in this plan? We had already designed an approach with diverse communities that would include a neutral facilitator to guide the design team conversations and Tleena's team recommended trusted tribal facilitators to do the same. We had a planning meeting and shared the liberatory design approach that we would be using with the general design teams and then gave them the space to adapt it.

IPEL then invited people from their tribes to a meeting. We kept the government presence minimal while providing support and resources. And honestly, I don't think I have learned so much in one meeting in my life. I definitely learned more that day about the history of tribal nations than I ever did in school. It was truly transformational.

Something that we found interesting and was totally unexpected was their decision not to have separate goals and strategies for tribal children and families, but instead to be integrated with what community design teams created. As a body of work, the PDG is focused on elevating the voices of tribal families and providers and children and families of color that have been left out of these decision-making conversations. So we definitely weren't expecting that. This really speaks to their story fatigue and how tired they are of being called out as lacking, struggling, and needing to be saved.

That learning guides everything we do and I shout it from the rooftops whenever I get the chance. So I just want to say it again. Okay? This speaks to the story fatigue. We ask them all the time what they need and then we don't follow through, right? And how tired they are of being called out as lacking,

struggling, and needing to be saved. We believe that we must understand and respect not just Tribal sovereignty, but also the role that government has played in the historical trauma experience by tribes.

We need to do our part in healing that because we are uniquely situated with the power and the opportunity to strengthen how we talk about tribal nations, for example, in our presentations, our publications, our projects. Are they treated as stakeholders or special interest groups? Or another government made up of strong, loving, resilient, intelligent people who have been governing themselves for centuries? I believe this is our responsibility.

Melody Redbird-Post:

Wow. That was powerful. I just have to say, can we just play this for everyone to hear because that message is, I mean it was so moving, so empowering.

Tleena Ives:

Yeah, thank you. That was wonderful.

Melody Redbird-Post:

I just thought it was beautiful because like Moushumi and Tleena, like we talked about building relationships and building trust as key components and then specifically focusing on Washington's story, that's just so powerful to call out that specific, here's our lesson learned.

Moushumi Beltangady:

Yeah, I would just say that it's amazing work and it's exactly what we hope to see with every state and tribal community. That there is this relationship, that there is this partnership and that everyone has a chance to do the work that's meaningful for them and their community, and that everyone plays a role in improving the early childhood system for children and families.

Mandy Reeve:

I want to give one last thanks to Tracie, Tleena, Moushumi, Melody for joining us today. I think this was an excellent conversation into a really important topic and will provide other states with information that they can use to build and create relationships between their states and tribal nations. So thanks again to everyone.

Tracie Kenney:

Thanks for having us. It was an honor to be here with you all.

Tleena Ives:

Thank you for the invitation to be a part of this great discussion. It's inspiring. Thank you.

Melody Redbird-Post:

So thank you so much Tleena and Tracy for sharing your story. I think it's an amazing opportunity to be able to share all of your lessons learned with other states as they kind of undergo thinking through building relationships with tribal nations that they share boundaries with. And I'm just very excited to have been able to be a part of this opportunity and to hear your story. So thank you for sharing.

Moushumi Beltangady:

Yes, thank you for having us and letting us be part of the conversation.

Narrator:

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