



# Native American Heritage

*By Melody Staebner, Indian Education Program Coordinator*

## **Hmmm... What should I call Native Americans, I mean Indigenous People, I mean American Indians?**

A frequent wondering is the respectful term for the original people of America. I appreciate the conversation as it signals that collegial learning is happening. It also points to the glorious fact that we all could use more cultural competency and deeper understanding about the diversity of nations that make up our amazing school district.

A best practice approach would be to honor our students' identities and create environments that welcome and include all cultures. Research informs educators that all cultures perform better when the adults that work in the schools intentionally make cultural inclusion their practice. I have witnessed our district grow on this over the last 18 years that I have served our district.

I think American Indian, Indigenous people, and Native American are all acceptable terms and could probably be used in the same paragraph to respectfully describe our people, but I would highly recommend that you recognize how the people themselves would like to be called because it would mean the world to us if you went this deep. In general terms, I honestly switch between Native American, American Indian, and Indigenous when I talk about the Native population. A good rule of thumb is to let Native Americans call themselves Indians, but many do not appreciate being called Indian by non-Indians. It is what it is.

We are in the midst of Native American Heritage month, making it important that we also take some time to wrap our minds around learning more about Native American people. Unfortunately, our people have been poorly depicted in textbooks, mainstream media, and Hollywood.

Here is something: Native American was selected as the official title of our state Native American curriculum, appropriately called, the North Dakota Native American Essential Understandings. All five nations of North Dakota are represented and contributed to building this FREE, ONLINE content located at [teachingsofourelders.org](http://teachingsofourelders.org).

Another important fact is that our languages use the original name for their people. For example, you probably won't hear the word Sioux or Native American when a Dakota person is speaking in the Dakota language, because they would describe their people as Dakota. Ojibwe people would likely use Ojibwe and Anishinabe when describing their people.



## *Native American Heritage, cont.*

Circling back, I am thrilled that the conversation is happening. This is music to my ears. So, I would say this: have this discussion out loud with your students and colleagues, and then move forward with the guidance in this friendly note with the greatest respect and kind regards for the original peoples of this land.

If you are looking for more information on Native content for North Dakota, please check out <https://teachingsofourelders.org/>. This is a great resource from which every student and teacher in North Dakota can benefit. The content is authentic and endorsed by Superintendent of Education in North Dakota, Kirsten Baesler. There are many options to search for specific content, and that website was designed by its founders so you can relate it to any content that you are teaching, thus being inclusive to your Native American/Indigenous/American Indian students.

