

Meeting Notes – AZ ACEs Consortium

Rural & Indigenous Community Committee

Date: July 1, 2025

Time: 1:00–2:00 PM (AZ time)

Facilitator / Chair: Casandra Stouder

Meeting Type: Virtual committee meeting

Focus: Indigenous youth, summer experiences, and transition into the new school year

I. Welcome & Opening

- Casandra opened the meeting at 1:00 pm, welcomed participants, and noted how quickly the summer has gone by.
 - She introduced herself in her Indigenous languages and shared her family lineage and tribal affiliations.
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II. Intention for the Meeting

Casandra outlined the primary focus for this session:

- **Summer experiences of Indigenous youth:**
 - How youth are spending summer (activities, responsibilities, rest, or lack of resources)
 - Barriers such as food insecurity, childcare, and limited access to programs
- **Key focus: Transition back to school:**
 - Shifting from “summer schedule” to “school schedule” (early mornings, structure, homework, transportation, etc.)
 - Mental health and well-being as children:
 - Move into higher grades
 - Transition from elementary to middle school, and middle school to high school
 - Additional stressors:
 - Youth who are repeating a grade or have been held back
 - Youth needing extra work/credit to catch up academically

Casandra emphasized that the goal was to gather reflections, lived experience, and expertise from committee members, especially Indigenous relatives, around how to better support youth and families during this transition period.

III. Opening Prayer & Grounding

- Casandra offered participants the option to participate in a grounding moment.
 - She led a prayer asking the Creator to:
 - Bless the gathering of the Arizona ACEs Rural & Indigenous Community Committee
 - Bring harmony, safety, respect, and honor into the space
 - Support children and families experiencing trauma as well as those in recovery and healing
 - Provide light, wisdom, solutions, and guidance
 - Help participants:
 - Use their voices and spirits to build better bridges to resources
 - Listen deeply to one another and identify supports for individuals and entire communities
 - Bless participants' hearts, minds, bodies, families, and communities
 - The prayer closed with "Amen," and Casandra re-welcomed everyone into the conversation.
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IV. Framing the Discussion

Casandra framed several guiding questions:

- What are you seeing or experiencing for children and families during summer?
- What concerns or strengths do you notice as summer ends and school approaches?
- How do summer schedules affect:
 - Family routines and stress?
 - Food security/nutrition?
 - Children's activities and development?
- What can help support youth's **mental health and wellness** as they:
 - Transition from less structure to more structure
 - Advance to new grades or new school levels
 - Navigate academic struggles (remedial work, being held back)?

She emphasized the importance of **Indigenous voices** and invited Indigenous participants to speak first, with pauses for quiet reflection.

V. Participant Reflections & Discussion

1. Rhonda E. – Perspective as an Aunt and Former Parent of School-Age Children

- Rhonda shared from:

- Past experience raising her own children
- Current observations as an aunt of children being raised by a single mom
- Key points:
 - **Pressure on single parents:**
 - Trying to find **affordable summer activities** that also match work schedules
 - Balancing costs and logistics
 - **Support systems:**
 - Questions about what supports are available locally
 - Whether parents feel comfortable accessing them
 - **Positives of summer:**
 - Relief from morning “rush” and hustle of school days
 - More calmness and time at home
 - In her own neighborhood, children used to get up and play outside regularly
 - **Food resources:**
 - Appreciated the availability of **free summer lunches** and similar programs
 - Recognized their importance in supporting families’ food needs

Casandra responded:

- Noted how intertwined school, work, and family systems are.
- Raised questions about **barriers and accessibility** in food programs:
 - How/when families can sign up
 - Whether programs are accessible for those who most need them
- Shared an example from Prescott area:
 - School-based program where bus drivers deliver meals door-to-door for children enrolled in summer food services
 - Prioritized for low-income families
 - Provides breakfast, snacks, and lunch Monday–Friday (no dinner, no weekends)
 - While meals are small, they are meaningful supports

2. Deborah B. – School-Based Perspective from Hopi

- Deborah introduced herself as a staff person at an elementary school on Hopi.
- She works closely with students who are experiencing challenges in the school system—often those impacted by ACEs.
- Key concerns:
 - **Summer school / enrichment attendance:**
 - Observed a drop in attendance this year, both at her school and in neighboring schools

- Particularly worried about students who are significantly behind but **do not** attend summer programs
- **Well-being over summer:**
 - Strong worry and hope that students are safe, having positive experiences, and getting some structure
 - Acknowledged that, knowing their home situations, this may not always be the case
- **Safety and continuity:**
 - During June summer school, at least:
 - Students are in a safe place
 - Receive two meals a day
 - Staff can monitor their well-being
 - For students not connected to school- or community-based programs, there is more uncertainty
- **Return to school:**
 - Many students do not complete re-enrollment paperwork until the day before or day of school
 - It's a **relief** when staff see them get off the bus—the confirmation that they're back and safe
 - Staff often face significant work at the start of the year to help these students re-adjust socially, emotionally, and academically

Cassandra reflected:

- Validated the reality of last-minute enrollment as common in many communities.
- Named the **challenges of transition** for working and growing families.
- Introduced **historical context**:
 - Intergenerational experiences of:
 - Genocide
 - Forced removal from land
 - Boarding schools and institutionalization
 - Considered whether **epigenetic / historical trauma** could show up as:
 - Hesitancy or delay in engaging with schools
 - Emotional and nervous system responses to institutional structures
- Invited discussion on:
 - How historical trauma may still live in families' bodies and behaviors
 - What the work group can do to acknowledge and address this in a healing way, particularly across summer and into school transitions.

3. Marlo M. – Grandparent & Advocate, First Things First

- Marlo shared both as a grandmother and as a staff member with First Things First.
- As a grandmother:

- Has two grandchildren; thinks about how they prepare for each new school year.
- Worries about their adjustment to:
 - New teachers
 - New classmates
 - New classrooms and environments
- Hopes:
 - They feel welcomed and happy
 - They maintain curiosity and enjoyment in learning
- Summer routine:
 - Their mother keeps them active with **sports and other activities**.
 - Marlo encourages **reading**:
 - Visits to the local library in Window Rock
 - Encouraging them to read at home
 - Acknowledged it can be hard to keep them engaged in reading.
- Language and culture:
 - Deeply committed to them:
 - Knowing who they are
 - Speaking their language
 - Learning teachings and values passed to her in childhood
- Access challenges on the Navajo Nation:
 - Many families, especially in **rural areas**, lack:
 - Accessible summer programs
 - Safe public spaces for play
 - Example: school playgrounds often closed to children not enrolled at that school
 - Creates a barrier for young children (especially under age 5) who need outdoor play and socialization
 - Doing advocacy through First Things First:
 - Working with chapters and Navajo Nation leadership to open more resources and spaces
- Food and nutrition:
 - Noted children's preference for fast food (pizza, McDonald's).
 - She models healthier eating and:
 - Sometimes prepares homemade pizza
 - Offers fruits, vegetables, yogurt, etc.
 - Finds it challenging to shift preferences but continues trying.

Cassandra:

- Affirmed the importance of **playgrounds and open space** for well-being.
- Suggested **community education and advocacy** with school boards and local leadership to:
 - Reconsider policies closing playgrounds to community children
 - Acknowledge that safe play is part of children's health, not a luxury.
- Highlighted the importance of cultural and language teachings in identity and resilience.

4. Nanmathi M. – Trauma-Informed Education Support

- Nanmathi shared from the perspective of working with:
 - School districts
 - States
 - Tribal-serving organizations (including in Alaska) on trauma-informed care.
- Key insights:
 - **Trauma lives in the body and can be genetically transmitted:**
 - Historical and intergenerational trauma can shape how children respond to school environments, sometimes without conscious awareness.
 - **Systems change is slow:**
 - Policy, training, and culture shifts in schools take time.
 - **Adapting evidence-based programs:**
 - Some success has come from:
 - Taking evidence-based curricula and **tailoring** them to specific communities (e.g., Native communities, migrant families)
 - Recognizing that “evidence-based” often reflects research on other populations.
 - **Educating educators:**
 - Helping teachers understand that:
 - Student behaviors are often trauma responses, not personal rejections.
 - They must avoid taking behaviors personally.
 - **Youth as educators:**
 - Encouraging Native youth to view themselves as **knowledge holders**:
 - Positioning themselves as educating others who “don’t know”
 - Framing themselves as strong and resourceful rather than deficient.

Casandra:

- Appreciated the validation around **epigenetic trauma** and how it can influence school engagement.
- Noted that some bodies/nervous systems are more sensitive due to family history and can become overtaxed by institutional environments.
- Suggested:
 - Long summers may provide needed rest for some children’s nervous systems.
 - The re-entry into school may reactivate stress rooted both in personal experience and ancestral history.
- Lifted up an Indigenous teaching:
 - Children are **holy beings** and also **teachers**.
 - Many tribes recognize unborn babies as very close to the ancestors, carrying their medicine and qualities.

- Emphasized the importance of educators and adults **getting to know the child first**—their story and strengths—before focusing solely on academics.
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5. Additional Reflections: Safety, Supervision, and Diverse Summer Experiences

Deborah (second contribution):

- Raised concerns about:
 - **Unsupervised time** during summer:
 - Many children have long periods with minimal adult oversight.
 - Risk that **unsafe environments** (e.g., neighbor's home) can become places where children experience new ACEs.
- As a parent:
 - She had strict boundaries about activities like sleepovers due to safety concerns.
 - Later discussed with her now-adult sons why they had fewer such experiences:
 - Her primary concern was always their safety.
- Emphasized:
 - The need to **teach children self-protection** and awareness of their surroundings.
 - Balancing children's need for social connection with proactive safety planning.

Adrian (former teacher):

- Reflected on:
 - How **different** the return to school can feel for each child:
 - Some dread returning because:
 - School has been painful or unsafe
 - Past experiences include bullying, academic failure, or conflict
 - Others eagerly anticipate:
 - Social connections
 - Structure and predictable routines
 - The challenge for teachers:
 - Being sensitive to each child's unique history in systems that often lack time and resources for individualized care.

Cassandra:

- Reiterated the importance of **specialized training** on trauma and cultural context for educators and school staff.
- Noted that child development is **continuous and cyclical** in Indigenous worldviews:
 - There is no "off season" for growth.
 - Summers should be seen as a different **season of development**, not a developmental pause.
- Highlighted potential for:

- **Cultural/seasonal programming** (e.g., rites of passage for young men, hunts, time with safe adult mentors, storytelling, land-based teachings) that align with Indigenous cycles and teachings.
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VI. Ideas for Solutions and Improved Supports

The group collaboratively surfaced several ideas and directions:

1. Greater Collaboration Across Local Systems

- **Deborah** suggested:
 - Schools, behavioral health programs, tribal departments, libraries, and cultural organizations need to **coordinate**, not work in silos.
 - Example from her community:
 - Recent meeting between the **tribal library** and her school to:
 - Partner on promoting literacy
 - Plan joint offerings for children and families
 - She and the librarian were energized by brainstorming and plan to collaborate more.
 - Deborah offered to return to this committee and report back on progress and outcomes.
- **Casandra**:
 - Celebrated this as a concrete “win” and a model of what local collaboration can look like.
 - Emphasized the importance of simply **talking to each other**, sharing what each entity offers, and building from there.

2. Chapter- and Tribe-Led Cultural & Educational Programming

- **Marlo** proposed:
 - Schools, chapters, tribal departments, and community programs:
 - Work together to offer **language camps** and **cultural activities**, especially in underserved and rural areas.
 - Examples:
 - Navajo language camps
 - Weaving classes
 - Storytelling
 - Traditional food and healthy cooking classes for children **and** parents
 - Noted that:
 - Some programs exist at sites like the Window Rock Library
 - Many **rural communities still lack access**
 - Advocated for:

- Chapters to examine what they are offering for children, especially birth to five
 - Opening school gyms and playgrounds for youth use during the summer
- Stressed that it is:
 - **Everyone's responsibility** to help communities grow and support children.
- Casandra:
 - Shared a vision of chapters being inter-connected:
 - Possibly rotating responsibility for different themes or aspects of child wellness
 - Offering a continuous cycle of culturally grounded opportunities across the year.

3. Trauma-Informed, Culturally Responsive Training & Policy

- Across multiple comments (Nanmathi, Casandra, Deborah, Adrian), the group named the need for:
 - **Trauma-informed training** that is:
 - Specific to Indigenous historical and contemporary realities
 - Inclusive of epigenetic trauma and its impact on the nervous system and learning
 - **Policy advocacy** to:
 - Open playgrounds outside school hours where safe
 - Protect children's access to food in summer months
 - Recognize children as knowledge holders and relational beings, not just academic performers
 - Ongoing **education of educators and staff**:
 - To see children in context rather than labeling them as "defiant," "rude," or "unmotivated."
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VII. Next Steps & Closing

- Casandra reminded participants:
 - The Rural & Indigenous Community Committee is a **work group**:
 - Its role is to lift up recommendations, lived experiences, and ideas around trauma, prevention, and healing for Indigenous children and families.
 - Findings and insights are shared with the **Arizona ACEs Consortium** to inform broader strategies.
- Plans and follow-ups:
 - Deborah will:
 - Move forward with the partnership between her school and the tribal library.

- Return to a future meeting to report on how the collaboration is going and what impacts they see.
 - Marlo and others will:
 - Continue advocacy with chapters, schools, and tribal departments to:
 - Open playgrounds/gyms
 - Develop early childhood and cultural programming
- Casandra:
 - Thanked everyone for their wisdom, lived experience, and commitment to youth and families.
 - Acknowledged that this work is long-term and meaningful, rooted in love for children and community.
 - Noted that although this particular meeting was not successfully recorded, she would capture and share notes from the rich discussion.

Next Meeting:

- **Date:** Wednesday, August 5, 2025
- **Time:** 1:00 PM (AZ time)
- **Format:** Virtual
- Participants are invited to:
 - Email Casandra with additional ideas or afterthoughts, especially regarding:
 - Summer-to-school transitions
 - Cultural programming
 - Cross-organizational partnerships
 - These will be incorporated into upcoming agendas and notes.

Casandra closed by wishing everyone a good remainder of the summer and strength for the coming back-to-school season, and the meeting adjourned around 2:00 pm.