# Nothing About Us Without Us: Native Students on Education, Identity, and Belonging

November 5, 2026 AI Summary

Watch the LEVinar recording

In a conversation that placed student voice at the center, Native students from River Ridge High School in North Thurston Public Schools joined educators and community leaders to share a simple but powerful message: if schools want to better serve Native students, they must listen directly to Native students. The webinar, hosted by Arik Korman of the League of Education Voters, was built around that principle. Rather than speaking about Native youth, the discussion allowed Native youth to speak for themselves.

From the start, the students described their Native Studies program as fundamentally different from most of their educational experiences. Again and again, they returned to themes of community, belonging, and authentic learning. Unlike many traditional classrooms where students work independently and compete for grades, Native Studies creates space for collaboration, discussion, and relationship-building. Students emphasized that everyone is encouraged to contribute, listen, and learn from one another. The result is a classroom where students feel known, supported, and connected.

Several students noted that Native Studies focuses not only on history but also on contemporary issues facing Native communities today. They appreciated learning about real-world events, current challenges, and the continuing presence and contributions of Native people. Rather than viewing Native Americans as figures confined to the distant past, students described a curriculum that helps them understand Native communities as vibrant, living cultures.

A recurring theme throughout the discussion was the importance of truth. Students expressed frustration that many textbooks and traditional curricula present incomplete or misleading information about Native history and cultures. Several participants argued that schools often teach a version of history that minimizes Native perspectives, overlooks Native contributions, or perpetuates harmful stereotypes. Students called on

educators to move beyond textbooks, seek out Native voices, and verify information with primary sources and local tribal communities.

When asked what teachers could do immediately to better support Native students, the answers were both practical and profound. Students encouraged educators to learn about the local tribes and communities they serve while remaining respectful of cultural boundaries. They advised teachers to approach Native cultures with humility, understanding that there is always more to learn and that no textbook can fully replace direct relationships with Native people.

At the same time, students cautioned educators against treating Native students as outsiders or representatives of an entire culture. Their message was clear: Native students want recognition and respect, not tokenism. Teachers should get to know Native students as individuals, not assumptions. Building relationships means seeing students first as people and understanding their interests, experiences, and strengths.

Students also highlighted the need for schools to recognize and accommodate cultural responsibilities. Native students may participate in ceremonies, powwows, funerals, and other important cultural events that require travel and extended family involvement. Several students argued that they should not be penalized academically for honoring their cultural obligations and that schools should provide accommodations comparable to those offered for other significant student needs.

Another important conversation focused on how educators can engage appropriately with Native communities. Students welcomed teachers who attend community events such as powwows and canoe journeys, seeing such participation as a sign of respect and commitment. However, they also stressed the importance of understanding boundaries. Respectful engagement means asking questions, listening carefully, and recognizing when certain ceremonies or gatherings are intended for Native community members alone. Being a good guest, they explained, matters as much as showing up.

As the discussion turned toward curriculum and representation, students called for a more honest and complete telling of history. They cited portrayals of Native people as uncivilized, unintelligent, or passive participants in history as examples of persistent misconceptions. Students argued that Native communities possessed sophisticated knowledge systems, governance structures, languages, and educational traditions long before European contact. They urged educators to teach difficult truths about colonization, displacement, and cultural suppression while also highlighting Native resilience, achievements, and contemporary leadership.

Perhaps the most powerful section of the webinar came when students discussed decision-making and policy. Their central argument was that adults routinely create rules for students without asking students how those rules affect them. Students challenged policymakers, administrators, and district leaders to seek input before making decisions. One student suggested two questions should always guide policy: “Does this apply to you?” and “How will this affect you?” These simple questions embody the webinar’s title and philosophy: nothing about students should be decided without students.

Other students echoed that sentiment, calling for schools to regularly gather student feedback, create safer learning environments, and ensure that rules support rather than undermine student success. They emphasized that students possess valuable insight into what works, what causes harm, and what changes are needed.

The webinar concluded with gratitude, but also with a challenge. Students expressed appreciation for having a platform to share their experiences and represent Native voices that are too often unheard. They hoped their insights would lead to meaningful action, broader access to Native Studies programs, and greater awareness among educators and policymakers across Washington. Most of all, they wanted adults to listen. Their message was consistent from beginning to end: authentic relationships, truthful education, cultural respect, and meaningful student voice are not optional components of educational equity. They are the foundation.