

# **Empowering and Deepening Youth-Led Service**

## **Engaging Indigenous Students in Service-Learning Projects and Civics Education**



Documenting the New York State Education Department's partnership with the  
New York Commission on National and Community Service



**Allstate**  
Foundation



CHARLES STEWART  
MOTT FOUNDATION®



Grants supported by America's Service Commissions' youth-led service initiatives with funding  
provided by the Allstate and Charles Stewart Mott Foundations

# THE UNIVERSITY OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK

## Regents of The University

LESTER W. YOUNG, JR., <i>Chancellor</i> , B.S., M.S., Ed.D. ....	Beechhurst
JUDITH CHIN, <i>Vice Chancellor</i> B.S., M.S. in Ed. ....	Little Neck
ROGER TILLES, B.A., J.D. ....	Manhasset
CHRISTINE D. CEA, B.A., M.A., Ph.D. ....	Staten Island
WADE S. NORWOOD, B.A. ....	Rochester
SUSAN W. MITTLER, B.S., M.S. ....	Ithaca
FRANCES G. WILLS, B.A., M.A., M.Ed., C.A.S., Ph.D. ....	Ossining
ARAMINA VEGA FERRER, B.A., M.S. in Ed., Ph.D. ....	Bronx
SHINO TANIKAWA, B.A., M.S. ....	Manhattan
ROGER P. CATANIA, B.A., M.A., M.S., C.A.S., Ph.D. ....	Saranac Lake
ADRIAN I. HALE, A.S., B.A. ....	Rochester
HASONI L. PRATTS, B.S., M.P.A. ....	Brooklyn
PATRICK A. MANNION, B.A., M.B.A. ....	Fayetteville
SEEMA RIVERA, B.A., M.S., Ph.D. ....	Slingerlands
BRIAN KRIST, B.A., M.A., J.D. ....	New York
KEITH B. WILEY, B.A., M.B.A. ....	Buffalo
FELICIA THOMAS-WILLIAMS, B.A., M.S. ....	Wheatley Heights

## Commissioner of Education and President of The University

BETTY A. ROSA, B.A., M.S. in Ed., M.S. in Ed., M.Ed., Ed.D.

The State Education Department does not discriminate on the basis of race, creed, color, national origin, religion, age, sex, military, marital status, familial status, domestic violence victim status, carrier status, disability, genetic predisposition, sexual orientation and criminal record in its recruitment, educational programs, services, and activities. NYSED has adopted a web accessibility policy, and publications designed for distribution can be made available in an accessible format upon request. Inquiries regarding this policy of nondiscrimination should be directed to the Office of Human Resources Management, Room 528 EB, Education Building, Albany, New York 12234.

## Contents

INTRODUCTION .....	4
BACKGROUND .....	5
EMPOWERING YOUTH-LED SERVICE THROUGH SERVICE-LEARNING PROJECTS.....	8
PARTNERING WITH INDIGENOUS NATIONS .....	10
SERVICE-LEARNING PROJECTS AND CURRICULUM WORK AT THE THREE DISTRICTS .....	11
Silver Creek School District’s Service-Learning Projects .....	12
Niagara-Wheatfield School District’s Service-Learning Projects .....	17
LaFayette School District’s Service-Learning Project.....	23
CURRICULUM RESOURCES .....	26
USE OF MENTORS TO ASSIST WITH SERVICE-LEARNING PROJECTS.....	27
FUTURE-FOCUSED: LESSONS LEARNED .....	28
HOW DISTRICT ADMINISTRATORS CAN ASSIST IN THIS WORK .....	30
CLOSING – WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?.....	31
APPENDIX: CURRICULUM RESOURCES CURATED AND DEVELOPED BY GRANT PARTICIPANTS .....	32
REFERENCES AND RESOURCES.....	33

Image on cover: Tuscarora Elementary School cafeteria mural. Erwin Printup, Jr. (Cayuga, Bear Clan), artist.

THE UNIVERSITY OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK  
THE STATE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT  
OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNIVERSITY  
AND COMMISSIONER OF EDUCATION  
ALBANY, NEW YORK 12234



August, 2025

This report documents a shared commitment to youth service-learning as a powerful pathway for student growth and community well-being. Our goal is clear: to empower students to build strong, respectful relationships with their fellow students, their schools, and their communities. Grounded in the New York State Graduation Measure initiative and the Portrait of a Graduate, youth service-learning helps students become not only academically prepared, but also creative innovators, critical thinkers, effective communicators, global citizens, and reflective, future-focused young adults. These attributes are developed within the State's Culturally Responsive-Sustaining (CR-S) Framework, which honors students' identities and elevates their voices as agents of positive change.

This work is a bold vision for education in New York State. Service-learning is more than volunteering; it is learning by doing—students investigate real needs, design and implement solutions, reflect on results, and communicate their learning. In doing so, they connect coursework to lived experience and to civic purpose, including opportunities to earn the New York State Seal of Civic Readiness. The result is deeper motivation, stronger academic engagement, and meaningful contributions that strengthen schools and communities alike.

A central focus of this pilot has been partnering with Indigenous students, Nations, communities, and the schools they partner with. Applying Indigenous ways of learning—rooted in relationships, reciprocity, language, land, and community leadership—enriched every stage of the projects. We heard directly from students that these experiences helped them connect with their heritage, see themselves in the curriculum, and create clear bridges between academics, future goals, and the world around them. This pilot offers immediate lessons for expansion to all Indigenous students across the State and serves as a guidepost for schools and districts seeking to build culturally grounded, student-led service-learning for every learner.

The pages that follow share practices, curricula resources, and project examples developed through collaboration among students, educators, district leaders, mentors, and Nation partners.

We invite you to explore these models in your local context and to join us in scaling this work.

With appreciation for the students, educators, families, Tribal Nations, and community partners who made this work possible—and with gratitude for support from the Allstate Foundation and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation—we look forward to continuing this effort together so that every student in New York State has the opportunity to learn, serve, and lead.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "D. M. Frank".

David M. Frank  
Assistant Commissioner

# INTRODUCTION

In 2024, the New York State Commission on National and Community Service (NYS Commission) identified an opportunity for the New York State Education Department (NYSED) to apply for two privately funded grants promoting youth-led service. The NYS Commission, one of 52 governor-led service commissions represented by the nonpartisan nonprofit America's Service Commission, is New York's primary entity responsible for networking volunteer resources and fulfilling the state's engagement initiatives. NYS Commission staff members Yenutien Kombian-Konney and Megan Russell worked closely with NYSED Office of Indigenous Education (OIE) associate Laura Hill to develop and implement the grants. The product of this unique partnership between the NYS Commission and NYSED is the focus of this guide.

## **Empowering Youth-Led Service:**

\$40,000 funded by the **Allstate Foundation** to provide youth with monetary resources and empower them to create their own service projects to improve communities.

## **Deepening Youth Service:**

\$30,000 funded by the **Mott Foundation** to build capacity for youth service and/or service-learning.

The OIE's vision for the complementary Youth Service Grants took into account several NYSED and OIE initiatives related to student engagement, community connections, and better preparing students across the state for college, career, and civic readiness.

## **EMPOWERING YOUTH-LED SERVICE:**

The funds from this grant supported the development of youth-led service projects within Indigenous communities and enhanced students' readiness for college, careers, and civic life. Participating students worked with school advisors and mentors from their communities in defining, developing, and implementing a service-learning project to address a need the students identified within their own communities. These projects allowed students the opportunity to earn credit toward the New York State Seal of Civic Readiness (NYSSCR) graduation credential. The grant activities sought to build meaningful connections between students' experiences at school and in their communities. Students used their academic skills and knowledge to understand the needs of their community and then to complete a service-learning project that served the greater good of the community. Additionally, they connected with representatives from their Nation to gain a deeper knowledge of their Nation's governmental structures and systems as well as government and advocacy groups outside of their immediate sphere.

## **DEEPENING YOUTH SERVICE:**

This grant supported the development and expansion of Indigenous youth-led service-learning programs in New York State school districts, emphasizing the enhancement of district civics curricula to reflect the unique histories and cultures of Indigenous communities. Participants from the Empowering grant collaborated with school districts and Tribal Nations to support the development and implementation of student projects in the 2024-25 school year. Grant participants reviewed the districts' curricula as it pertained to civics education and the governmental structures, laws, history, and cultures of Tribal Nations located in New York State and worked towards the development of a more accurate, comprehensive, and customized curriculum to assist Indigenous students in their civics education and related service-learning experiences. Moving forward, through outreach efforts, grant participants and NYSED staff will encourage and support other districts in New York State to increase Indigenous student participation in the coursework and projects needed to earn the NYSSCR by providing guidance and assistance.



This document offers a glimpse into the work that students, staff, administrators, and community members did over the course of the year to make this vision a reality. It provides guidance on best practices for engaging youth in service-learning, developing student leaders, connecting schools to neighboring communities, and reconnecting students with their culture and heritage. Although the focus of our work was Indigenous students and communities, the takeaways are universal.

Videographer Jaiden Mitchell, a member of the St. Regis Mohawk Tribe, visited some of the locations related to the grant work and created a video to document the projects and share participants' views. A link to her video is included in the reference section at the end of this document.



Niagara-Wheatfield students and volunteers assisting community members with yard clean-up.

## BACKGROUND

The Haudenosaunee, “People of the Longhouse,” is a confederation of Nations and peoples that far pre-date the founding of the United States. The confederacy’s traditional homelands encompass much of what is now New York State, and today include the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora nations. According to the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian’s [Haudenosaunee Guide for Educators](#), the Haudenosaunee are “often described as the oldest, participatory democracy on Earth [and] the Haudenosaunee Confederacy’s constitution is believed to be a model for the American Constitution.” Indigenous ways of learning align closely with Haudenosaunee values and emphasize holistic, experiential, and community-based approaches that prioritize oral traditions, learning through observation and imitation, and connecting knowledge to the land and cultural context. They frame learning as a lifelong journey in which individuals construct knowledge within a communal framework. In other words, they encompass what decades of research has shown is effective teaching and learning for all students and the basis for service-learning and the [New York State Portrait of a Graduate](#).

Since at least 1974, NYSED's OIE has allocated state funding and provided technical assistance to public school districts that educate Indigenous children residing on Tribal Nations throughout the state. Additionally, it has administered the New York State Indian Aid program, which provides funding for students with Tribal Nation membership who are attending postsecondary schools. The OIE works with leaders and educators from Tribal Nations and districts across the state to support Indigenous education programs and ensure that all students aided by the office have access to educational and social-emotional programs to support college and career readiness.

In 2023, NYSED provided funding for three new positions in the OIE to bring more expertise and support to contract management and to establish a new focus on increasing Indigenous student outcomes. Since that time, the OIE has made many updates. For our purpose here, we would like to highlight those that have had a direct impact on the development of the Youth Service Grants described in this guide. Since 2023, the OIE has developed annual reports on Indigenous student outcomes in 13 contracting school districts, engaged in conversations about student data and Indigenous education programming with school districts and tribal nations, and convened the Commissioner's Advisory Council on Indigenous Education twice annually. Through its analysis of student and district Indigenous education program data and conversations with various stakeholders, the OIE has determined the need for action in better supporting the academic success of Indigenous students across the state.

From these reviews and discussions, the OIE concluded that to enhance student engagement and educational opportunities for Indigenous students, there needs to be a focus on increasing:

- connections between school and community through more robust Indigenous culture and language offerings;
- accuracy and inclusion of Indigenous content in district curricula;
- community voice and participation in Indigenous education programs;
- the number of Indigenous administrators, faculty, and staff;
- professional development for faculty and staff on educating Indigenous students;
- Indigenous student participation in advanced coursework;
- the number of Indigenous students earning advanced diplomas and credentials.

The OIE developed a plan for the grants that addressed many of the initiatives for increasing Indigenous student outcomes and engagement it had identified. The plan also incorporated best practices to support increased academic and social-emotional outcomes for Indigenous students, as identified in the [2022 Indigenous School Improvement report](#) by the Region 16 Comprehensive Center (one of 20 federally funded technical assistance centers for educational support). The identified practices address the importance of "rooting education in place-based, culturally sustaining learning to connect students to the world around them," the connection between increasing civic education and service-learning to improved outcomes for Indigenous students, and the culturally responsive educational approach acknowledging the high value that Indigenous communities place on interconnected relationships and reciprocity.

*Student engagement in service-learning projects and civics education can be a powerful way to bridge the "two worlds" that many Indigenous students inhabit — their cultural communities and the broader public education system. Service-learning rooted in Indigenous values (such as community care, reciprocity, and stewardship) allows students to apply classroom learning in ways that honor their traditions. When projects are culturally grounded, students don't have to choose between being academically successful and being true to their heritage — they get to do both. Civics education gives students tools to understand systems of power and governance. When Indigenous students engage in civics, they develop agency — learning how to advocate for their communities, challenge injustices, and participate meaningfully in decision-making processes that affect them.*

-Meagan Smith, educator

## NYSED’S PORTRAIT OF A GRADUATE

OIE’s grant work directly aligns with current NYSED initiatives. In 2024, NYSED introduced “New York Inspires,” which outlined its plan to transform education in the state. The guiding framework for this is the [New York State Portrait of a Graduate](#). According to NYS Education Commissioner Betty Rosa:

*The Portrait of a Graduate is a blueprint for future graduates, where academic excellence meets the ever-evolving world outside the classroom. It paints a picture of students who are not just knowledgeable, but also curious, compassionate, and capable of turning challenges into opportunities. It is a testament to the belief that education is not just about learning facts but about becoming the kind of person who can change the world for the better.*

The goal in adopting this new portrait is for all NYS students to graduate with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to succeed in a complex and interconnected world. It acknowledges the diverse, unique needs of students and allows for more flexibility and creativity in educating them. The portrait focuses on six attributes; based on these, each NYS graduate will be:

1. academically prepared
2. a creative innovator
3. a critical thinker
4. an effective communicator
5. a global citizen
6. reflective and future-focused

These six attributes are centered around [NYSED’s Culturally Responsive-Sustaining \(CR-S\) Framework](#), which is student-centered and recognizes multiple expressions of diversity as assets for teaching and learning. The CR-S Framework seeks to elevate historically marginalized voices and to empower students to act as agents of positive social change.

As we witnessed throughout this grant work, student engagement, motivation, and achievement are strengthened when students are provided with the opportunity to engage in learning that is culturally relevant and student driven.

*The [Empowering Youth-Led Service] grant provided a space to teach our students who are all seniors the importance of collaboration, especially since they are all headed off to college in the fall. It allowed for the mentors, advisors, and curriculum builders to encourage our youth to think critically, use their voices, and stand up for what they believe in.*

-Shawna Booth, educator

## NEW YORK STATE SEAL OF CIVIC READINESS

OIE’s focus on civic engagement and service-learning also incorporates the NYSSCR, which is a distinction for high school graduates who demonstrate proficiency in civic knowledge and participation in civics experiences and projects. The NYSSCR recognizes those students who have demonstrated the civic knowledge, skills, mindsets, and experiences that are essential to functioning as an actively engaged citizen. To obtain this credential on their diplomas and transcripts, students must engage in a combination of select coursework, programs, work-based learning, and/or projects. NYS school districts that wish to participate must submit an application for approval to the Commissioner. See [NYSED’s NYSSCR Handbook](#) for more information.



# EMPOWERING YOUTH-LED SERVICE THROUGH SERVICE-LEARNING PROJECTS

The main focus of the Empowering Youth-Led Service grant was to engage Indigenous students from three different school districts that serve students from neighboring Indigenous Nations in service-learning projects within their communities. Service-learning is an inquiry-based approach that combines service to community with learning objectives. It is one of the ways that students can earn credit toward the NYSSCR.

The three school districts and Indigenous Nations that participated in the Empowering Youth-Led Service Grant were:

**Silver Creek School District and Seneca Nation of Indians, Cattaraugus Territory**  
**LaFayette School District and Onondaga Nation**  
**Niagara-Wheatfield School District and Tuscarora Nation**

In partnership with America's Service Commission, the National Youth Leadership Council provided resources and trainings to grant participants to introduce them to the notion of service-learning and educate them on effective ways to incorporate it into their practice. Their guide, *Getting Started in Service-Learning*, discusses the transformational effect of service-learning on students' educational experience:

*Service-learning is an exciting practice for learners of all ages that is all about doing. It is not characterized by a project or specific academic discipline. Instead, it is learning brought alive through the process of inquiry. When students participate in service-learning, they move beyond the classroom into the community and use their knowledge and skills to benefit others. Simply put, they serve and they learn — and, in so doing, they become leaders.*

*The hyphen in service-learning is important; it represents the balance between service activities and learning goals. Service-learning falls under the broader category of experiential learning. In experiential education, students learn by actively engaging in experiences that have benefits and consequences. By reflecting on those experiences, students apply academic content and develop new skills, attitudes, and ways of thinking. Service-learning is a type of experiential education.*

## FIVE STAGES OF SERVICE-LEARNING PROJECTS

Service-learning projects are typically organized into five stages:



In the investigation stage, students conduct research on a problem or need they identify within their community. They then prepare for their project by creating a plan to address the need. The action stage may involve direct service, which involves hands-on, face-to-face interactions; indirect service, which meets a real need but may not be seen by the people who benefit from the service; or advocacy, where students educate others about the issue with the goal of inspiring further action.

Students are asked to complete reflections before, during, and after their service-learning experience. The initial reflections help students anticipate what the experience will entail and reveal what assumptions they are bringing to the situation. Reflections during and after the action phase help

students identify and address the challenges and understand the outcome of their experience in relation to their academic experiences. Finally, students present their projects and reflections to a panel to earn credit toward the NYSSCR.

## **K-12 SERVICE-LEARNING STANDARDS FOR QUALITY PRACTICE**

According to the National Youth Leadership Council, effective service-learning programs:

- Have sufficient duration and intensity to address community needs and meet specified outcomes.
- Are used intentionally as an instructional strategy to meet learning goals and/or content standards.
- Incorporate multiple challenging reflection activities that are ongoing and that prompt deep thinking and analysis about oneself and one's relationship to society.
- Actively engage participants in meaningful and personally relevant service activities.
- Promote understanding of diversity and mutual respect among all participants.
- Are collaborative, mutually beneficial, and address community needs.
- Engage participants in an ongoing process to assess the quality of implementation and progress toward meeting specified goals and use results for improvement and sustainability.
- Provide youth with a strong voice in planning, implementing, and evaluating service-learning experiences with guidance from adults.

*I am so proud of the students and the connections they have made to help them achieve their goals and also help them get ready for college. I believe the connections they make with outside mentors/community members can help them pursue further projects after high school. The seal of civics has so many opportunities for them to explore their indigenous backgrounds. There is always room for improvement in every aspect of life. Whether it is a local nation that could use an updated project or event or another local school. I hope that nearby districts notice the work we are doing here with the seal of civics, and they add it to their schools as well.*

*-Samantha Scanlan, educator*

Throughout this guide, you will find examples of how the participants worked thoughtfully and intentionally to make the projects and overall process more effective. Amanda Austin, an educator from the Silver Creek School District, described some of the successful strategies she used in engaging her students throughout the service-learning process:

*We worked together to engage students throughout the service-learning process. Students were able to have learning experiences that applied to their projects, in multiple classrooms. I engaged students throughout the service-learning process by having meaningful conversations, allowing students to ask questions and encouraging them in their next steps. I think the strategies that seemed to have the best results have been things such as allowing the students to truly be the leaders in their own projects. Also, having students lead meetings with mentors and community members has helped us to see so much growth in their abilities. They are more comfortable having conversations with adults, and I see a new confidence in them when asking questions or making requests. We have prepared for each meeting by having the students discuss talking points, and sharing their opinions, thoughts, and ideas. This has led to them feeling more confident and comfortable.*

# PARTNERING WITH INDIGENOUS NATIONS

When partnering with Indigenous nations, it is important to do so in a thoughtful and meaningful way. Tribal Nations are sovereign nations with their own governance systems and leaders. According to the Native Governance Center, a Native-led nonprofit, you should start by learning about the Nation when building a relationship: Who are the leaders? Who is the appropriate point of contact? What are the Nation's priorities, accomplishments, and challenges? What is the Nation's history and how has that impacted and informed the present? What history does the school have with the Nation?

*These are the generations we survived for. They're doing the work, so the world knows we are still here.*

-Elder, Seneca Nation

Throughout the partnership, it's important to maintain the right mindset and attitude. When you approach the situation with humility, you acknowledge that you are not the expert in knowing about a community which is not your own. If you lead with a sense of openness, curiosity, and flexibility, you will be able to learn and adjust your efforts if it turns out that your ideas do not fit with the nation's priorities or structures or if they turn out to be duplicative of programs that already exist. Building a relationship involves building trust and that may take time. You should be prepared to work at the speed of the community and be patient as the process unfolds.

Finally, approach the situation with an asset-based mentality. Learn from the community what their strengths and successes are and seek to build from there. Leverage the talent and skills that already exist within the community, and keep in mind the notion of reciprocity, which emphasizes the importance of giving back to the community and environment for that which is received.

Meagan Smith, an educator at the LaFayette School District and Onondaga community member, provided the following advice to educators who are looking to encourage more Indigenous students to take part in their district's NYSSCR program:

*Listen First: Begin by building trust with Indigenous students, families, and community leaders. Understand their unique histories, concerns, and values. Civic education must be rooted in respect.*

*Partner with Tribal Elders and Leaders: Invite community members to co-create and support projects. Their voices lend authenticity and relevance.*

*Representation Matters: Having Indigenous educators, mentors, or role models involved in the program helps students feel seen and supported.*

*Participating in the Indigenous Civic Readiness project has been a powerful and eye-opening experience for me. As an Indigenous student, I often feel like I walk in two worlds—one rooted in my culture, language, and traditions, and the other shaped by the systems of education and government that weren't built with Indigenous people in mind. This project gave me a chance to bridge those worlds in a way that felt meaningful and respectful. Our civic readiness work focused on identifying a need in our community and using our voices and skills to create real change. Through research, discussions with elders, and teamwork with other Indigenous youth, I learned that civic engagement doesn't have to mean politics as usual. It can mean protecting sacred land, creating awareness about historical trauma, uplifting Native languages, or advocating for youth spaces in our schools.*

-Ellyse Thompson, student

# SERVICE-LEARNING PROJECTS AND CURRICULUM WORK AT THE THREE DISTRICTS

The following pages showcase the work that each of the three districts accomplished through their participation with the Youth Service Grants. Anne Tahamont, an educator at the Silver Creek School District, explained how student engagement in service-learning projects and civics education is an effective way to bridge the “two worlds” that Indigenous students often inhabit. As you learn about each project and read the participants’ reflections that we have included throughout, you will get a glimpse of the “third space” that this work manifests. Anne wrote:

*Bridging the "two worlds" for Indigenous students is about creating a third space—an educational environment where both identities can coexist and enrich each other. Service-learning and civics education are key components, but real impact comes from a holistic, culturally anchored, and community-driven approach across all areas of education.*

1. **Cultural Relevance and Empowerment:** Service-learning projects that are rooted in Indigenous community needs allow students to see their culture, history, and values reflected in their education. These projects validate Indigenous knowledge systems and promote pride in identity, helping students reconcile their cultural heritage with academic life.
2. **Active Citizenship and Voice:** Civics education teaches students how governments, laws, and civic structures operate—important for Indigenous students who may need to advocate for their communities. It empowers them to become agents of change, particularly around issues like land rights, language preservation, and environmental justice.
3. **Connection to Community:** These experiences encourage students to build relationships with elders, leaders, and community members, reinforcing cultural ties. They also allow students to apply classroom learning in real-world contexts that benefit their own people.
4. **Bridging Knowledge Systems:** Projects that integrate traditional Indigenous knowledge with academic disciplines foster mutual respect between Indigenous and Western ways of knowing.
5. **Mentorship and Leadership Development:** Programs that pair Indigenous students with mentors from their communities (especially professionals or elders) build confidence and purpose.



Niagara-Wheatfield students planting sweetgrass.



## Silver Creek School District's Service-Learning Projects

"Honoring the Past, Acknowledging the Present, Planning for the Future"



Silver Creek students and educators meet with the Seneca Nation Council for a luncheon and formal meeting to discuss their project.

### Grant Participants for Silver Creek School District's Projects:

#### Advisors

Amanda Austin - Native American Program Coordinator

Samantha Scanlon - Native American Mentor and Tutor/Native American Liaison

#### Administrators

Dr. Katie Ralston - Superintendent

Michelle Helmer - Director of Curriculum & Instruction

Shannon Matson - Director of Positive Interventions & Family Connectedness

#### Content Specialist

Anne Tahamont - Seneca Language Teacher, Grades 9-12 and Seal of Biliteracy Coordinator

#### Mentors

Robert Brown - Cultural Advisor, Oneida Nation

Irene Wheeler - Supervisor, Family Support Services Seneca Nation Health & Wellness

*I do believe that student engagement in service-learning projects and civics education is an effective way to bridge the "two worlds," that Indigenous students inhabit. These types of projects and learning help students make connections with community members both on and off territory. It also helps students to find their place within both of their communities. Students are seeing that they can spread awareness through education and make real change happen for everyone. I think for many students, it feels as if they are finding their identities through this work.*

-Amanda Austin, educator



## Every Child Matters Remembrance Walk and Flag Raising

Student project leaders: Skly'a Gates, Hailie Rybij, and Amirya Warrior

The 2024-25 school year was the second year that the Silver Creek school district offered students the opportunity to earn the NYSSCR. Through the support of the grants, the district's administrators and teachers were able to focus more time and energy on enhancing the program's outreach to and support for Indigenous students interested in engaging in service-learning and earning the Seal. Three of the four students from the district who completed service-learning projects were in their junior year. Their home, the Cattaraugus Indian Reservation, is the site of the Thomas Indian School, a residential boarding school for Native American children that was owned and operated by New York State from 1875 to 1957. At this and other such schools across the United States and Canada, Indigenous children were kept isolated from their families and deprived of all aspects of their culture, including their language. They also suffered horrific abuse, sometimes resulting in death. One of the students' advisors, Amanda Austin, explained how this connection impacted the students' work:

*This school left a great deal of trauma and pain upon our ancestors, and even our immediate families as we navigate the effects of the trauma even today. ... A Remembrance Walk was started a few years ago by a community member and takes place on territory. The girls wanted to bring that to our school, in order to better educate staff, students, and community. They also wanted to give a voice to those who did not survive. The group talks often about education being empowering. Holding this event during the school day lends to educating everyone in our district.*

The students spent the spring of 2025 preparing for the Remembrance Walk, scheduled for the upcoming October. They worked with the school's art teacher to create a logo for the orange t-shirts that they ordered over the summer. School district staff had the opportunity to purchase t-shirts, the proceeds of which will be donated to a cause of the students' choosing. All students will be given a t-shirt prior to September 30th, which is Orange Shirt Day, a day of observance in Canada officially known as the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation which recognizes the atrocities and multigenerational effects that residential boarding schools have had on Native populations.

In addition to planning and implementing the Remembrance Walk, the students have been working with the district to install the Haudenosaunee flag and Seneca Nation of Indians flag at different locations in and around the school. They plan to have the flag-raising ceremony in conjunction with the Remembrance Walk. Amanda indicated that the student project leaders' hope was that "the Native American students would see those flags and feel a sense of comfort and pride." She also noted that:



Silver Creek Seneca students, along with their advisors and mentor, attend the formal apology for New York State's role in the operation of the Thomas Indian School.

*The students have really come a long way with their public speaking skills. I saw them be put in different situations that normally would've made them uncomfortable and deal with them with poise and ease.*

-Anne Tahamont, educator

*Raising the Haudenosaunee flag is something that has sat on the minds of these young ladies since they were in middle school. Amirya has noted several times that, as athletes, they have always wanted to see a flag representing them hanging in our gymnasiums, our classrooms, and outside of our school. Their goal is to raise enough funds to install a brand-new flagpole and have both the Haudenosaunee flag and the Seneca Nation flag proudly flying for all to see.*

The students and advisors met with the district superintendent, Katie Ralston, in March to present their proposal, seek guidance on specific areas, answer questions, and obtain feedback. Following the meeting, students worked to solidify their timeline and make important decisions.

The students not only had the support of their teachers and administrators, but also received valuable guidance from a mentor, Irene Wheeler, who has organized similar walks for the community. Irene met with the students on multiple occasions. They discussed various aspects of planning for the walk, such as fine-tuning the timing and creating a letter to explain the intent and importance of attendance for community leadership and members. Irene also took time with the students to teach them in more depth about the Thomas Indian School.



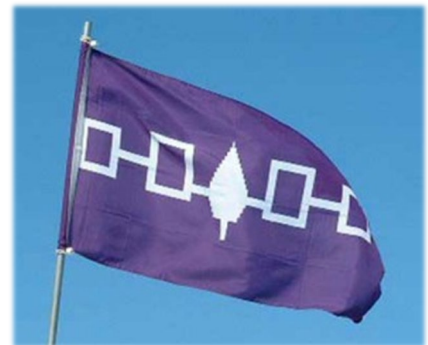
Silver Creek students and their advisors meet with the district superintendent to discuss their project.

Over the course of the project, the students spent time talking with elders who are residential school survivors, including their own grandparents. On May 20<sup>th</sup>, students and adults participating in the project attended the state's formal apology to the Seneca Nation and the survivors and descendants from all Nations who attended the Thomas Indian School. This event not only coincided with the students' project but was meaningful to their lives as well.

In June, the students were invited by Seneca Nation Councilmember John Williams, a graduate of Silver Creek, to speak to the entire council about their project. The council offered the Nation's financial support and encouragement for the students' work. Council members shared their gratitude and admiration for the students' accomplishments and noted that they "possess the leadership qualities needed for great change."

*This is what it is about - seeing these beautiful young ladies, the next generation, taking steps and actions to create opportunities to bring awareness to others, to have courage and to be the ones to do something no one else has done...this is how change happens, and it only takes one - now there are three...and they are going to be amazing future leaders for our next seven generations.*

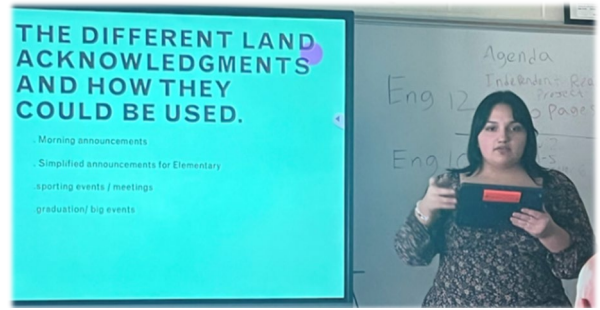
-Irene Wheeler, mentor



# Land Acknowledgments

Student project leader: Ella Austin

Ella Austin learned about the NYSSCR during her senior year at the Silver Creek High School. She knew that she wanted to create something that would impact students at her school for generations. The creation of culturally relevant and accurate land acknowledgements allowed her to advocate for her people by educating others.



Ella Austin presenting her project to school and district administrators.

Ella's project reflection speaks to the larger themes of identity, connection, recognition, and gratitude that impacted her work:

*As an Indigenous student I know how invisible we can feel at times. We know our connection to the land and our spiritual connection our ancestors had with it, but we don't usually hear the recognition. Our community has a profound history, in both good and awful ways, the atrocities that our people have faced are still felt in our communities today. Trickle-down trauma is prevalent. It's incredibly important to recognize the deep connection our people had/have to this land that was stripped away from us along with many of our other basic human rights. Our ancestors were very keen on giving thanks to the land and giving thanks in general. Land acknowledgements serve as a thank you to the land and as a "hey, I see you and appreciate you" to the Indigenous communities surrounding the establishment.*

Once Ella drafted her acknowledgements, she met with the building principals; the athletic director; the director of curriculum, instruction, and technology; and the Native American program coordinator to explain to them what a land acknowledgement is, why it is important, and how people can incorporate it into their daily lives. Once receiving their approval, Ella met first with the district superintendent and then with the district's board of education to share her work. She was awarded the NYSSCR upon graduation in June.

Superintendent Katie Ralston, who supported Ella throughout the process, explained the significance of the student's achievement:

*Since her presentation, we have revised our Board Policy regarding Opening Ceremonies to include the Land Acknowledgement. For the first time in Silver Creek history, the Land Acknowledgement will be read as an opening event, just as the Pledge of Allegiance has always been done. That is credit to the work these students have done as part of their service-learning projects, and it shows the lasting impact of their work.*

Ella developed four different land acknowledgements to accommodate the different audiences and occasions at which her words would be read, such as school announcements, sporting events, concerts, staff events, and graduation ceremonies. As a result of her achievement, the New York State Education Department commissioned Ella to create a land acknowledgement for the agency's use, allowing the voice and representation she has harnessed to extend far beyond her school community.

## ELLA'S LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

### Elementary School Announcements

Good morning, Silver Creek Elementary. Before we start our day let's take a moment to think about the land we are on. Our school is on the land of the Seneca Nation of Indians, which is also a part of the traditional home of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. We honor their culture and history on this land. We also honor the contributions the indigenous people make to our community. Let's keep this in mind as we move forward with respect and thanks.

### **Middle/High School Announcements**

Good morning, Silver Creek High/Middle School. Before we begin, we would like to take a moment to acknowledge the land on which we reside today. We recognize that we are located on the ancestral land of the Seneca Nation of Indians and that this land is a part of the traditional homeland of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. We honor the deep connection to this land and the history along with their contributions to our community. Let us reflect on this as we move forward with our day with gratitude and respect.

### **Short Version for Meetings/Sporting Events**

We acknowledge that Silver Creek Central School is located on the ancestral land of the Seneca Nation of Indians, who have inhabited this land for centuries. We also recognize that this land is a part of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy territory, whose nations- Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora- have long and enduring histories on this land. We honor and respect the deep connection to this land and indigenous contributions to our community. As we work, learn, and grow on this land we commit to recognizing, honoring, and respecting the history of the Seneca Nation and Indigenous community.



### **Long Version for Opening Day or Graduation**

Before today's event, we would like to take a moment and honor the land on which we gather. Silver Creek School District was founded on the ancestral land of the Seneca Nation of Indians, a proud and resilient people who have inhabited this region for thousands of years. The Seneca nation, known as the "Keepers of the Western Door," are part of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, which also includes the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Tuscarora Nations. This confederacy is one of the oldest living democracies in the world, and the teachings, values, and cultural practices of the Haudenosaunee continue to have a profound impact on this land and its people. We acknowledge that the Seneca Nation and the Haudenosaunee Confederacy have deep ties to this land, not only as a home but as a place of spiritual significance, cultural heritage, and history. These lands were, and continue to be, a source of community, and resilience for the Indigenous community. As we gather today, we recognize that we are on land that was stewarded by Indigenous peoples long before the founding of this school, and we honor their continued presence in the community. At Silver Creek High School, we are committed to understanding and respecting the history of this land and the Indigenous peoples who call it home. Let this acknowledgment serve as a reminder of our shared responsibility to honor the past, support Indigenous communities, and work towards a more inclusive and fair future. Thank you.

### **New York State Land Acknowledgment**

The New York State Board of Education and the Board of Regents acknowledge that the State of New York is situated on the ancestral homelands of the Six Nations of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy—the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora Nations- as well as the Shinnecock Nation and the Unkechaug Nation (Poospatuck).

The Haudenosaunee Confederacy, often referred to as the "People of the Longhouse," is one of the world's oldest continuous democracies, with governance, teachings, and cultural traditions that have guided its people for centuries. The Shinnecock and Unkechaug Nations, whose homelands are on the eastern end of Long Island, have maintained deep and enduring connections to their lands, waters, and ways of life since time immemorial.

We recognize that these lands were, and remain, places of gathering, community, and cultural sustenance for Indigenous peoples. We honor their sovereignty, resilience, and continuing presence, and we acknowledge the ongoing contributions they make to the life of this state and those who inhabit it.

This acknowledgment affirms our shared responsibility to understand and recognize these histories, to uphold and respect the sovereignty of New York State's First Peoples, and to foster a future rooted in equity, justice, and mutual respect.



## Niagara-Wheatfield School District's Service-Learning Projects

The Niagara-Wheatfield team completed a total of four service-learning projects, two led by individual students and two led by multiple students working together in shared class space.

Each project was unique, student-driven, and meaningful for all involved: student leaders, peers, school administrators and staff, and Tuscarora community members. The following pages provide a description of each project.



Students educate their peers on the issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women.

### Grant Participants for Niagara-Wheatfield School District's Projects:

#### Advisors

Patricia Pineda – Tuscarora Language Teacher  
Beth Pyskaty – Retired Social Studies Teacher

#### Administrators

Jennifer Golias – Director of Curriculum, Instruction, and Technology  
Kelli Stopa – Teacher on Special Assignment for Curriculum, Instruction, and Technology

#### Content Specialist

Lori Lachowski – Social Studies Teacher

#### Mentors

Jamie Gilbert – Native American Coordinator, Niagara-Wheatfield CSD  
Taylor Hummel – Archeologist and Information Science Professional  
Luanne Patterson – Family Nurse Practitioner  
Rene Rickard – Director, Tuscarora Environment Program

*I think the biggest success was a sense of community among the students and adults that were a part of the grant. The students really began to take agency in their desire to educate and celebrate their culture with students and community members.*  
-Kelli Stopa, administrator



# Youth/Elder Dinner and Game Night

Student project leader: Haylie Hill

Beth Pyskaty had just retired from teaching at Niagara-Wheatfield when she agreed to participate in the grant work. She had some experience with guiding students through service-learning projects and knew an effective way to start out was having students engage in community mapping. She provided student volunteers with a questionnaire that prompted them to reflect on their community's assets and needs, any potential changes they would like to see, and their preferred area of focus. Two students, Haylie and Kember, worked with Beth to make their project ideas a reality.

Haylie's goal was to establish a regularly occurring event to connect elders and youth from the community. As you can see below, her first reflection shares the vision she had for her project during the initial planning phase. Student reflections are a key component to the service-learning process, allowing students to think deeply about themselves, their relationship to society, and their projects' connections to class content. When done throughout the process, students can use reflections to help them stay focused on their goals, identify challenges that may require changes to the original plan, and recognize the growth and development that is occurring in their own abilities.

*I identified the topic of game night for elders for the focus of my project because a lot of the elders and youth are isolated. Having the youth helping out with game night will give them an opportunity to respect and get to know the older community members. I feel that it's important to spend time with the people in an Indigenous community because it connects us and shines a light into both the elders' and youths' lives.*

*This project will make a positive impact on the Tuscarora Nation by offering fun and meals to those who might not have it. Making them play games and eating with each other can help them create friendships to build a stronger community. Besides having some people sitting at home alone which can make an increased chance of mental illnesses set in like depression, anxiety, and negative impacts of their physical health. This could make room to have fun, improve mood, and lower stress levels.*

*My greatest challenge during this process is finding people to help me out because it is hard for me to talk to others... One day as I was sitting in an office built to provide a safe place for Indigenous students and others, I was pressed with the conviction to strike a conversation. After we talked I brought up the idea of the project and that I needed help with serving and handing out prizes, they were happy to help out. And they soon asked their friends and now I have more people coming to help me with this project.*

Although Haylie's first game night was a success, she realized that her busy senior-year schedule could not accommodate more events. In her final reflection, she noted that she was most proud of being able to "step outside of her comfort zone" and was happy to reconnect with peers over a meaningful activity.



*I loved that the project focused around bringing generations together. Having students work with elders was important and I believe the support the district was able to give demonstrated our commitment to supporting all members of our school family.*  
-Beth Pyskaty, educator

*The intended outcome of this project was to get our youth and elders to interact with each other. I know it doesn't sound like a lot, but most times people are cut off from each other from a lack of motivation and funding. Being able to have fun and converse with people you live around can create a foundation to a strong community. I believe that I met the outcome of this project because being able to see the elders and youth have fun for the time that we had was excellent.*

*Life is fleeting, our human connections are precious. Elders are a lot like teenagers. Some are lonely and live in social isolation. Both are searching for meaning and relevance.*

-Jamie Gilbert, mentor



## **Yard Beautification**

Student project leader: Kember Hill

The second individual student project completed at Niagara-Wheatfield with the support of the grants was led by Kember, a sophomore. Her goal was to assist elders with yard clean-up: raking leaves, picking up sticks, mowing the lawn, weeding flower beds, and leaving the elders with clean, well-manicured lawns. She hoped to “bring people together, build a community within a community where everybody can be welcomed without having to worry about anything negative happening.” She also wanted her community “to be able to help other people, along with the Earth that we came from.” After Kember identified her focus area, Beth asked her to create an action plan where she clearly defined the goal and outcome for the project, outlined the steps needed to complete the work, and listed the individuals and materials needed.



With the help of her mentor, Rene Rickard, Kember created a schedule, identified candidates for the project, and came up with the idea of gifting a tree to the homeowners “as a token of appreciation for being a participant.” One challenge that Kember encountered as she moved further along the planning stage was finding volunteers. She did not know how to advertise the project and, when she did find people that were willing to help, she encountered difficulty finding a date and time that fit with people’s work and school schedules. With Rene’s help, they created a flyer and posted it on Facebook. Kember also put the flyer up in a classroom so students could learn about and sign up to help with the project.

Kember organized two successful yard beautification projects, one in May and the other in June. For the first one, 16 students and several adults showed up to help. They cut grass, raked, and weeded. Rene’s husband was able to fix the family’s lawnmower so they could get back on track with keeping up their yard. For the second house, they had a smaller crew, but larger equipment. This house had over half an acre that needed to be cut. They rented a brush hog and cleared .35 acres, removed garbage and tree branches, and cut grass and weeds along the house. They worked four hours that day with the hope of returning soon to finish the work. The families were both very appreciative.

In her final reflection, Kember shares her appreciation for what they were able to accomplish through this project and reflects on what she learned:

*As I reflect on the project, I am most proud of completing the project, because in my opinion [it] took a lot of time planning, along with many meetings with my mentor... I am also most proud of all the work everybody has contributed to the project, since I have never done a project on this scale before and everybody’s help and encouragement meant a lot to me. ...I am also proud of everybody that has helped with the project and volunteered their time to help with the beautification process. I am proud of this because it shows the community cares for each other along with the community being willing to help one another. ...*

*During this project, I have learned a lot about myself and my community. I have learned that when I am able to help people, it makes me extremely happy and makes me feel good about myself. I have also learned that my community will be very eager and willing in order to help another community member with tasks.*



Before (top) and after (bottom) images from Kember’s second yard clean-up.

*Students love to help make their community a better place. Giving them guidance on how to help goes a long way. After the projects are finished, they are very proud of their work, and it gives them the intrinsic motivation to want to do more. I am looking forward to future projects and where the students will take them. Let the students lead the project, it might not be what you have in mind, but they are more invested if their thoughts are heard and acted on.*

*- Patricia Pineda, educator*



## Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women

Project leaders: Brooke Becker, Aiden Bradfield-MacKenzie, Annabella Dowdy, Trey Dubuc, Kayl Fauzey, Laila Ferguson, Sheldon Fischer, Tristan Fox, Isaak Franklin, Savino Geracci, Kia Richards, Peter Sheehan, Elenora Spina, Patience Szynkowski

Teachers Lori Lachowski and Patricia Pineda collaborated on two interdisciplinary service-learning projects. The first involved students in Lori's Indigenous Contemporary Issues class and Patricia's Tuscarora Language class coming together to educate their school community on the issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW). Lori's class researched the topic and created a detailed presentation outlining the problem, origins of the MMIW movement, symbolism such as the red handprint, statistics, and a call to action.

One of the students from the Indigenous Contemporary Issues class, Aiden Bradfield-MacKenzie, explained the significance of the subject matter:

*This topic is profoundly personal. As a Native American, the MMIW crisis is not an abstract issue but a direct threat to my community and my loved ones. The fear and grief associated with this reality are ever-present. Knowing that Indigenous women are far more likely to experience violence than women of other ethnicities creates a sense of vulnerability and anger. Addressing MMIW requires not only legislative and policy changes but also a fundamental shift in societal attitudes and a commitment to honoring and protecting Indigenous lives.*

The students decided to give the presentation at a social and incorporate traditional clothing, songs, and dancing. The presentation was given twice, during two different class periods. The students from Patricia's class were responsible for emceeing the event and explaining the origin stories for the songs and dances in the Tuscarora language. They brought in Randy Greene, a Tuscarora Nation artist, singer, dancer, and entrepreneur, to help with the presentation.

Other partners that were enlisted to help with the event were the Nęyękwawęta'ŋkwáhshek Tuscarora Language Program and the Niagara-Wheatfield district's principals and custodians. When asked by students to reflect on what they might do differently for future events, Principal Marissa Vuich suggested that they partner with physical education teachers to maximize student engagement by demonstrating and teaching some of the traditional dances in physical education classes prior to the event. According to Patricia, the students are eager to continue and build upon this work in the coming years:

*After presenting to the school, students asked to do it again next year. I would have thought the students would have been so shy they would have not wanted to do it again. So [we] said they can pick four different big topics and rotate them each year and make this a new tradition!*

WHY ARE PEOPLE PAINTING  
RED HANDPRINTS ON  
THEIR FACES?  
WHAT DOES MMIW MEAN?



FIND OUT ON  
**MAY 5**  
IN THE GYM • PERIODS 4-5  
OPEN DURING LUNCHES  
CLASSES ENCOURAGED TO COME • ASK  
PERMISSION TO ATTEND INDIVIDUALLY

*I think the student engagement really allowed students to see that their voice and ideas have impact. I also think it is important to allow students a chance to break away from their comfort zone knowing that they are a part of a community full of support, if they are willing to be confident in asking for help.*

-Kelli Stopa, administrator



## Planting Sweetgrass

Student project leaders: James Bissell, Aiden Bradfield-MacKenzie, Arden Chew, Ashton Dixon, Annabella Dowdy, Vahleya Drury-Greene, Trey Dubuc, Lucas Edwards, Kayl Fauzey, Isaak Franklin, Savino Geracci, Aiyana Printup, Harley Printup, Kia Richards, Paige Schiffert, Elenora Spina, Patience Szykowski

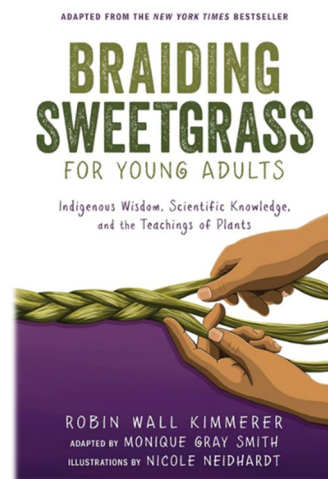
The second interdisciplinary service-learning project at Niagara-Wheatfield incorporated students from Lori's Indigenous Studies course and Patricia's Tuscarora Language class. The students started out by reading Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass for Young Adults*. Kimmerer is a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation and is a SUNY Distinguished Teaching Professor of Environmental Biology as well as the founder and director of the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment in Syracuse, NY. Her book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, (and its YA companion) blends scientific and Indigenous perspectives to illustrate the interconnectedness of humans and the natural world and emphasizes reciprocity, gratitude, and respect.

The goal of the project was to plant sweetgrass by the high school's walking path, restoring natural vegetation and medicine to the local area. The students and teachers met with representatives of the Niagara-Wheatfield Eco-Campus Revitalization Project to secure the location for planting. The Eco-Campus project is a community-based engagement activity that fosters environmental improvement, learning opportunities, and recreational benefits by updating and maintaining a 1.8-mile trail surrounding the high school and middle school campus.

Two community members with knowledge of the properties, spiritual and medicinal benefits, and proper cultivation of sweetgrass were identified as mentors and visited the students' classroom to present. Using their knowledge of the honorable harvest and sweetgrass from the book and presentations, students were able to better understand what Indigenous-informed medicinal agriculture looks like in practice. They germinated the seeds and planted 16 shoots of sweetgrass along the walking path. Once harvested, the students plan to braid the sweetgrass and present bundles to elders in the Tuscarora community.

The students partnered with various groups and individuals to accomplish their goals, including the Nęyękwawęta'ŋkwáhshek Tuscarora Language Program, the Tuscarora Environmental Program, the Eco-Campus project, mentors Taylor Hummel and Luanne Patterson, district principals, and custodians.

As with the MMIW project, the social studies and Tuscarora language teachers worked together to create a deeper, more holistic understanding of the topic. They hope to continue this project in the future, either using sweetgrass or choosing other indigenous plants, such as strawberries, to plant around the school grounds and the Tuscarora community.



*My biggest successes were watching my Native students take ownership over their learning experiences and collaborating with their peers to create our MMIW Social and Sweetgrass Planting Projects. They took such initiative in designing these projects, reaching out to community members to support them, and organizing the details of these projects so they could attain their desired outcome. It was amazing to sit back and mentor students as they took control over their own learning.*

*-Lori Lachowski, educator*





## ***LaFayette School District's Service-Learning Project***

### **"Funding the Onondaga Nation School"**



Onondaga Nation School

### **Grant Participants for LaFayette School District's Projects:**

#### **Advisors**

Shawna Booth - Native American Liaison

Meagan Smith - Native American My Brother's Keeper Coordinator

#### **Administrators**

Jeremy Belfield - Superintendent

Jennifer Blossey - Director of Curriculum, Instruction, and Technology

John Gizzi – Onondaga Nation School Principal

#### **Content Specialists**

Ethan Caughey – Advisor/Social Studies Teacher at Big Picture Learning

Tim Baker – Social Studies Teacher

#### **Mentor**

Cassandra Miner – Senior Strategist, New York Civil Liberties Union's Racial Justice Center

*Undoubtedly, the greatest success I witnessed was supporting a group of seniors who had little experience with civic advocacy conduct passion-based research, engage with the community, organize data, and professionally present their case, drawing attention to the structural issues of the Onondaga Nation School, raising awareness to the issues and laying the foundation for the next class of students to continue their legacy project. A project that not only will have a massive community impact once completed, but along the way will promote civic engagement in every student that continues the initiative in the coming years.*

*-Ethan Caughey, educator*

# Onondaga Nation School Building Repair Project

Student Project Leaders: Shayla Benedict, Chylure Bucktooth, Kaidence Cronin, Lexani Johnson, Aubrie Jones, and Ellyse Thompson

Students at the LaFayette School District chose to focus their project on advocacy work. They felt that one important need within their community was to “secure a well-funded and safe environment for the next seven generations” to attend school. They wanted to initiate a legacy project to help future students in the district be active participants in helping to ensure the Onondaga Nation School (ONS) is well maintained. ONS, which serves students in kindergarten through Grade 8, is one of three Nation Schools in New York State whose maintenance and operations are funded by NYSED. It serves many students from the Onondaga Nation and provides an array of courses, events, and programming that celebrates and educates students and community members on the language, culture, and history of the Onondaga. All of the students engaged in the project had attended ONS at some point in their early education.



For their mentor, the students chose Cassandra Miner, an Onondaga community member who is a Senior Strategist with the New York Civil Liberties Union and has spoken out about the hurdles inherent in the funding structure of ONS. The students learned about the systems and processes in place for distributing these funds and thought about ways to improve the funding stream and transparency and communication among those involved: NYSED, the LaFayette Central School District, and the Onondaga community. Cassandra emphasized the importance of having Onondaga community members be active representatives in discussions about the buildings and funding allocations.

The students interviewed the district superintendent and a former ONS administrator to understand the history of the building and the experience of those who have dealt with the budgetary system and building upkeep. They also spoke with maintenance and operations team members for ONS and the school district to learn about the condition of the building. They identified several areas in need of improvement, such as roof repair, window replacement, and HVAC unit upgrades. Those interviewed also noted that as the problems continue to get worse, with time, they will become more expensive to fix.

*Service-learning and civics education are both rooted in idea of taking action because of what you value and believe in. Relevancy is the key to getting students engaged and eager to understand. By using service-learning projects and civics education, if done right, you are affording indigenous students the opportunity to intertwine their values and culture into the traditional civics processes of the nation.*  
-Ethan Caughey, educator



Kaidence Cronin, one of the student project leaders at LaFayette, reflected on the power inherent in education, advocacy, and coming together to work for change:

*At first, getting started on the Indigenous Civic Readiness project was a struggle. I wasn't sure what direction to take, and it felt overwhelming trying to figure out how to connect civic engagement with something meaningful to me and my community. I had questions like: Where do I even begin? and Will my voice really make a difference? But once we started digging into the research and having real conversations, something shifted. The more I learned the more invested I became. It was actually exciting to realize that the issues we were exploring like land rights, education, and cultural preservation weren't just things we read about in history books. They were happening now, and we had the chance to do something about them. Working with other Indigenous students and talking to community members helped me see the power we have when we come together. This project gave me confidence. I learned how to research policies, ask questions, and present my ideas clearly. It also reminded me that civic readiness doesn't mean giving up our identity—it means using it as our strength. I'm proud of what we accomplished, and I hope this becomes a tradition for other Native students who want to make a difference.*

At the culmination of the project, the students attended the Commissioner's Advisory Council for Indigenous Education at the end of the school year to present their findings to Tribal Nation leaders and NYSED staff. For the meeting, they traveled with family members and district administrators and staff to Clarkson University in Potsdam, NY. A videographer was also present, documenting the presentation. The students were well-prepared and spoke clearly and confidently on the topic. They acknowledged, "This will all be a long process but over time, hopefully, the funding pathway for ONS will change. With our bringing awareness and advocacy, we are hopeful the next upcoming students can continue the process."

Shawna Booth, one of the students' advisors, explained the importance of projects like this one to students who come from communities such as the Onondaga Nation:

*[Service-learning projects are a] very effective way to bridge "two worlds." Especially for a community such as ours in Onondaga, we do not have an elective system. Our government is still in place from thousands of years ago, so decision making looks very different amongst traditional governments and [Bureau of Indian Affairs] BIA governments. It was helpful for our students to see how bureaucracy works and affects our indigenous communities.*

LaFayette was the only district that participated in the grant work that had not previously offered the NYSSCR. In order for the student project leaders to be awarded the Seal upon graduation, the district had to apply to NYSED for its program's approval, which it successfully did prior to the students' graduation.



LaFayette students present their findings to the Commissioner's Advisory Council for Indigenous Education.

# CURRICULUM RESOURCES

Each district chose one or more teachers to participate in the grant work as content specialists. Their job was to review and update the district curriculum pertaining to Indigenous studies as it relates to civics education. When attempting to engage more Indigenous students in the coursework and projects needed to earn the NYSSCR, it is important that the history, culture, and governmental structures of the Nations to which they belong are included. Lori Lachowski took on the role of content specialist for the Niagara-Wheatfield School District. In her reflection, she noted how the addition of Indigenous influences in the study of American history led to more meaningful, relevant content for her students:

*My students were fascinated to learn that the Haudenosaunee played a vital role in the American Revolution since this has not been taught to them in their previous courses on American History. They were also surprised to learn that American democracy was influenced by the Great Law of Peace and enjoyed making connections and comparisons between the Great Law and the US Constitution.*

Sharlee Thomas, an education leader and consultant who is a member of the St. Regis Mohawk Tribe, assisted the OIE and school districts with the grant activities, with a special focus on curriculum. She worked with the content specialists from the participating school districts, sharing resources to enhance Indigenous content in civics coursework. **Links for the resource guide that she created as well as instructional resources developed by the content specialists are included in the Appendix of this guide.**

Sharlee also worked in collaboration with Belouga, an online platform for educational content, to create a series of instructional videos to support classroom learning. The series, an image of which is shown at the bottom right, features an interview with Mr. Richard Mitchell, a knowledge holder from the St. Regis Mohawk Tribe, sharing insights related to The Great Law. The content, titled *The Great Law Video Series*, can be accessed for free by registering at [www.belouga.org](http://www.belouga.org).

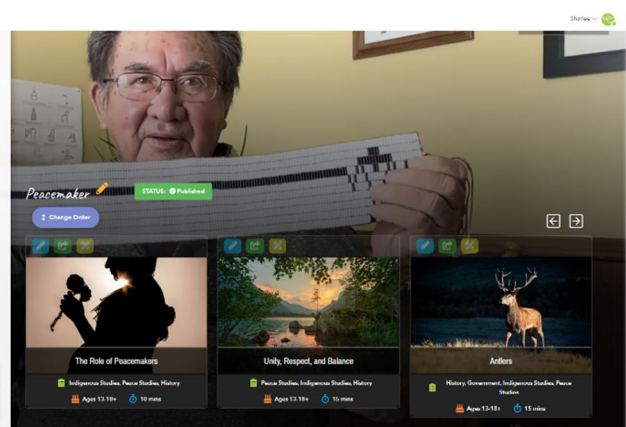
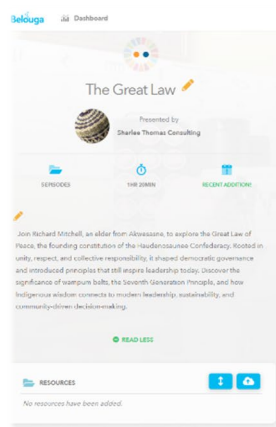
The review, curation, and development of Indigenous curricular resources facilitated by the grant work is a prelude to the upcoming efforts NYSED will engage in to support the creation of Indigenous instructional resources for all of New York State to utilize.

*I believe that normalizing the incorporation of service-learning projects and including Indigenous history into Social Studies curriculum will help Indigenous students to feel better seen and represented within their educational experiences. I know that for me it would've been incredibly impactful to see myself within the context of my Social Studies curriculum and would have helped me to sooner recognize that this is an option to build a career from. This would also be beneficial for science courses to incorporate Indigenous environmental stewardship and traditional ecological knowledge into coursework, especially since in recent years the scientific community is recognizing and validating the importance of Indigenous knowledge in this sector.*

- Lori Lachowski, educator

## Deepening Indigenous Youth Service Grants 2024-2025

### Educator Resource Guide





# USE OF MENTORS TO ASSIST WITH SERVICE-LEARNING PROJECTS

Each district was encouraged to work with students to identify individuals from the Indigenous communities who could act as mentors to the students. Mentors shared their time and expertise with students. They came to the classroom to teach students about topics, such as how to cultivate sweetgrass or the history of residential boarding schools. They helped students better understand the workings of government and identify effective means for advocacy. They worked with students to develop realistic action plans and connect students with resources needed to get projects done. They were on site for project work, assisting with yard clean-up and planting sweetgrass.



Mentor Taylor Hummel teaches students at Niagara-Wheatfield about cultivating Sweetgrass.

The experience of working with mentors also allowed students to engage in meaningful collaboration with adults, enhancing their communication, organization, and analytical skills and strengthening their confidence. It inspired students to learn more and opened up new potential paths for their future. It also provided a bridge between the school and community and introduced new partnerships for the districts to explore.

Patricia Pineda, an educator from the Niagara-Wheatfield School District, summarized the benefits of bringing mentors in to work with students:

*The community loved coming in and working with the students and the students appreciated working with knowledgeable people. Working with local people also means they can see themselves coming back to work with students in the future as they become the people with the knowledge. The community members loved seeing what is being taught in the schools and loved being involved with their family members.*

**NYCLU**



SENECA NATION  
HEALTH SYSTEM



*The community mentor was a blessing, she is a younger community member who is strong, confident, and secure as an indigenous woman. Our meeting with her gave the students courage to use their voice and not be afraid to speak their truth. The students were able to ask questions, and the community mentor had good advice and information that encouraged the students to dig deeper into the project.*

-Shawna Booth, educator



## FUTURE-FOCUSED: LESSONS LEARNED

As shown in each of the project descriptions, there are many promising practices that emerged from the work that grant participants produced. These practices relate both to youth-led service-learning in general and engaging Indigenous students in particular. The following two pages include a sampling of lessons that grant participants learned as a result of their work:

- Begin preparing *all* students for the opportunity to engage in service-learning and other experiences related to earning the NYSSCR before high school. Host an assembly for students to prepare them for upcoming seals and accomplishments they can achieve. Make sure parents are aware of these opportunities also so they can encourage students to participate and plan effectively.
- As students move through high school, make sure they are on track to earning the credits they will need to be awarded the NYSSCR.
- Provide outreach and opportunities for leadership experiences to all students, not just those who volunteer or already appear confident. We need future leaders who are thoughtful, compassionate, innovative, and insightful. Self-confidence and communication skills can be developed in any student who is given the chance to nurture them.
- This is the first time many of the students are taking on a leadership role. As Beth Pyskaty, a retired educator from the Niagara-Wheatfield School District, observed, “[The students] learned by trial and error that the details are very important.” Help students develop a timeline and break tasks into manageable chunks. Obstacles and challenges will occur, but preparation and flexibility are key to working through them.
- Be aware of students’ other obligations and commitments. Work with them to plan ahead so that they can achieve balance and avoid overextending themselves as project activities advance.
- Encourage students to reach out to various school administrators and staff as they plan and implement their projects; these could include art and music teachers, technology coordinators, maintenance and facilities staff, principals, social workers, etc. There is a community of support within each district.
- Identify various organizations and individuals in the students’ community with which the district can partner. Seek out and leverage the talent and skills that already exist. Students, their families, Native American districts liaisons, and community centers can help you begin your search. Indigenous communities have flourishing centers for government, health services,

*The advice I have to encourage more Indigenous students to take part in their districts' Seal of Civic Readiness programs is that we have to show them that we believe in them. Show them other students and other projects, have ideas ready for them. Let them know they will have time to see real change or see the difference that they can make. The Seal is a way of making lasting, positive changes in and for our communities. It lets students feel their voices are being heard and empowers them to make change in society.*

-Amanda Austin, educator



Staff from NYSED and the NYS Commission on National and Community Service visit the Silver Creek School District to support the grant work.

education, cultural study, and the arts. Making the connections will open up new doors, create lasting partnerships, and provide the opportunity for more meaningful connections between students' school and home experiences.

- Take an interdisciplinary approach. Service-learning projects are a natural fit for cross-disciplinary learning. By integrating knowledge and perspectives from different fields of study, students can develop a deeper, more holistic understanding of the issues and potential solutions they are investigating. This approach also provides more opportunities for communication and collaboration for students and teachers alike.
- Connect with other districts to learn about their experiences and ideas. Kelli Stopa, an administrator at the Niagara-Wheatfield School District, noted:

*There is nothing more valuable than the support of those who have participated in years past. Get in contact with other districts. Reach out and actually talk to their leaders and even students to support you in the process. It is overwhelming when you feel unsure of an outcome.*

Anne Tahamont, an educator from the Silver Creek School District, described the various ways that districts can more meaningfully engage Indigenous students in learning:

*The possibilities are endless on how we can incorporate [Indigenous studies] into our classrooms. We can go beyond this history classroom. We can do this through:*

**Land-Based Education:** *Teaching through the land (outdoor classrooms, traditional hunting/fishing, ecological knowledge) connects students to ancestral knowledge and values. It integrates science, sustainability, and Indigenous epistemologies in a meaningful way.*

**Language Revitalization Programs:** *Language is a carrier of worldview. Offering Indigenous language instruction supports identity and intergenerational connection.*

**Culturally Responsive Curriculum:**  
*Embedding Indigenous histories, perspectives, and authors into all subjects (history, literature, art, etc.) promotes belonging and relevance.*

**Mentorship and Leadership Development:**  
*Programs that pair Indigenous students with mentors from their communities (especially professionals or elders) build confidence and purpose.*

**STEM with Indigenous Contexts:** *Teaching science, technology, engineering, and math in ways that include Indigenous innovation (e.g., engineering in canoe building, astronomy in Indigenous star knowledge) makes these subjects more accessible and culturally grounded.*



NYSED representatives visit Silver Creek School District to meet with students and educators to learn about the impact of youth service learning on them, their school, and community.

# HOW DISTRICT ADMINISTRATORS CAN ASSIST IN THIS WORK

## Service-learning projects:

- Show the students and staff who are guiding them that you support their work: meet with them regularly, listen to their ideas, and provide feedback.
- Facilitate collaboration and communication among staff members. Build time into the day/school year for intentional and meaningful collaboration. This work takes a great deal of time and effort.
- Make sure teachers are supported from the beginning by providing a list of ideas and resources they can use to jumpstart the work.
- Have teachers and counselors at the middle school level begin preparing students for the possibility of engaging in service-learning and earning the NYSSCR. Make sure all students and parents are included in this outreach.
- Honor the students' work by finding ways to incorporate and build upon it in subsequent years.
- Help students find ways to fund projects – set aside a small pot of money to support the work and/or identify other sources of potential funding for projects.

*Our school, and our administrators are incredibly supportive of these endeavors. They have been there for advice, support, last minute bus arrangements, and everything in between. Our Superintendent likes to have meetings with the students about their projects to ensure that they know they have her support. She has been very helpful in the process when the students have moments where they may be unsure of next steps in school policy.*  
-Amanda Austin, educator



## Civics curriculum:

- Create an initiative to include more instruction on Indigenous culture and history in the district's civics curriculum. Allow/encourage teachers with the background and knowledge in this to assist their colleagues in developing and implementing Indigenous studies. If everyone knows it is a priority, they can work together to make it a reality.
- Allocate extra funding to compensate teachers for the time and effort it takes to enhance the district's curricula through research, collaboration, and content development.
- Schedule regular check-ins with civics teachers to assess progress and discuss how Indigenous topics are being integrated into the curricula (in both Indigenous-themed and general courses).
- Reach out to the leaders and educators of local Tribal Nations to receive their input and guidance on Indigenous-related topics.
- Invite Tribal leaders, storytellers, historians, artists, etc. to come to your schools and work with students. Alternately, bring students to Native American museums and cultural centers to gain first-hand knowledge.

*Administrators could offer funding opportunities for place-based learning via field trips to Haudenosaunee museums and historical sites to deepen student understanding of the content and give them personal experiences interacting and learning in these spaces. Funds allotted for teacher research and content development would be beneficial as well.*  
-Lori Lachowski, educator

## CLOSING – WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

NYSED is extremely grateful to the Allstate Foundation and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation for providing the funding for this work. We would also like to share our gratitude for the support and encouragement that America's Service Commission and the New York Commission on National and Community Service provided throughout the grant process.

We thank our three participating districts – administrators, educators, and students – for their courage, innovation, persistence, patience, and flexibility throughout this work. They didn't fully know what they were getting into when they signed up but were willing to try. What they ended up achieving was truly inspiring.

Nyawēñhah to the leaders and community members of the Onondaga, Seneca, and Tuscarora Nations as well as our consultant, Sharlee Thomas and our videographer, Jaiden Mitchell. Their collaboration and support were invaluable.

As NYSED implements the Graduation Measures initiative, a project to deepen and expand what it means to obtain a diploma in New York State and what that diploma should signify to ensure educational excellence and equity for all students, we have benefitted greatly from learning from students, educators, and Indigenous Nations. This experience will help us expand opportunities like those described here to Indigenous and non-Indigenous students as we continue to explore additional ways we can partner with school districts and Tribal Nations.

Building upon the momentum, inspiration, and collaboration of this work, we are excited to enter into our next project: the development of curriculum-aligned, research-based educational resources that center Indigenous perspectives, histories, languages, and cultures. For this work, which will support culturally responsive teaching across New York State, we will partner with Indigenous educators, knowledge holders, artists, scholars, and students representing each of the nine nations that have a government-to-government relationship with New York State.

With each project, the possibilities for learning, sharing, and transforming are expanded. We hope this guide will inspire new ideas and opportunities for collaboration and encourage further funding to support work that is meaningful and impactful to students. Please reach out to the OIE with your questions and thoughts or just to connect. We'd love to hear from you.



Niagara-Wheatfield student leads beautification project.



*Being able to reach others' minds ... and getting the word out, it'll eventually linger and fly to the right pair of ears. [This] is much more than I could dream of for communities struggling.*

-Brooke Becker, student

*This work had pushed our district into new heights of excitement and achievement. I cannot wait to see what else our students achieve and how we can help them accomplish it along the way. It has truly inspired me as an educator to want to do more and create new classes to teach that would help with Seal work and community issues.*

-Amanda Austin, educator

Students dance at Niagara-Wheatfield's MMIW presentation and social.





## APPENDIX: CURRICULUM RESOURCES CURATED AND DEVELOPED BY GRANT PARTICIPANTS

Content specialists from each of the three districts reviewed their districts' civics curriculum to assess how well the Indigenous communities' cultures, histories, and governments were represented. They all found that much more was needed if students from the neighboring Tuscarora, Seneca, and Onondaga Nations were going to be able to have learning experiences reflective of their communities. To access unit and lesson plans created by the content specialists in conjunction with the grant work as well as Sharlee Thomas' *Deepening Indigenous Youth Service Grants Educator Resource Guide*, visit the Teacher Resources page of the OIE's website:

<https://www.nysed.gov/indigenous-education/teacher-resources>

### **Niagara-Wheatfield School District content specialist Lori Lachowski:**

Units:

The Great Law of Peace

Wampum and Haudenosaunee Influence on U.S. Government

Haudenosaunee and the American Revolution

### **Silver Creek School District content specialist Anne Tahamont:**

Unit: The Haudenosaunee Great Law of Peace and U.S. Government Comparison

In addition to the content above, Anne created a video of Chief Robert Brown of the Oneida Nation and member of the Great Law panel sharing the first part of the Peacemakers Journey as he knows it to be. In order to have access to this video you will need to contact Anne at [atahamont@silvercreekschools.org](mailto:atahamont@silvercreekschools.org). This is sensitive content, and permission is required for access.

## **Deepening Indigenous Youth Service Grants Educator Resource Guide**

**Created by Sharlee Thomas**

Topics:

Haudenosaunee in the American Revolution

The Great Law and the Role of the Haudenosaunee: Influences on American Democracy

Treaties Between Europeans and Haudenosaunee

The Role of Haudenosaunee Women in Informing the Women's Suffrage Movement in the United States

Deepening Indigenous Youth  
Service Grants  
2024-2025

Educator Resource Guide



# REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

## CONTACT US:

[IndigenousEducation@nysed.gov](mailto:IndigenousEducation@nysed.gov)

Office of Indigenous Education  
89 Washington Avenue, 2M West  
Albany, NY 12234  
(518) 474-0537

## YOUTH SERVICE GRANTS VIDEO: Created by Jaiden Mitchell

A link to the video can be found on the Teacher Resources page of the OIE's website:

<https://www.nysed.gov/indigenous-education/teacher-resources>

## REFERENCES:

National Youth Leadership Council. (2021). Getting Started in Service-Learning.

<https://nylc.org/resource-library/>

Native Governance Center. Partnering with Native Nations in a Good Way Guide.

<https://nativegov.org/resources/partnering-with-native-nations-guide/>

New York State Education Department. (2024). The New York State Seal of Civic Readiness Handbook.

<https://www.nysed.gov/sites/default/files/programs/standards-instruction/civic-readiness-manual.pdf>

Region 16 Comprehensive Center. (2022). Indigenous School Improvement Research Findings.

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED660046.pdf>

Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian. (2009). Haudenosaunee Guide for Educators.

<https://americanindian.si.edu/sites/1/files/pdf/education/haudenosauneeguide.pdf>

## WEBSITES:

America's Service Commissions: <https://www.statecommissions.org/>

Belouga Education: <https://app.belouga.org/>

LaFayette Central School District: <https://www.lafayetteschools.org/>

National Youth Leadership Council: <https://nylc.org/>

New York State Commission on National and Community Service: <https://newyorkersvolunteer.ny.gov/>

New York State Education Department: <https://www.nysed.gov/>

Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework:

<https://www.nysed.gov/sites/default/files/programs/crs/culturally-responsive-sustaining-education-framework.pdf>

New York State Portrait of a Graduate: <https://www.nysed.gov/news/2025/state-education-department-presents-new-york-state-portrait-graduate>

Office of Indigenous Education: <https://www.nysed.gov/indigenous-education>

Niagara-Wheatfield Central School District: <https://www.nwcsd.org/>

Onondaga Nation: <https://www.onondaganation.org/>

Seneca Nation of Indians: <https://sni.org/>

Silver Creek Central School District: <https://www.silvercreekschools.org/>

The Haudenosaunee Confederacy: <https://www.haudenosauneeconfederacy.com/>

Tuscarora Nation: <http://www.tuscaroras.com/>