

Districts, Schools and Educators

Dream Catcher Project

When deciding whether a student should get special education, schools have to rule out cultural or linguistic differences as the primary cause of a student's problems in school. Oftentimes, there is no one on the intervention and problem-solving team who represents the cultural or ethnic community of the student. The Dream Catcher Project acts with intentionality to ensure full participation of Indian Home School Liaisons (IHSLs) or cultural staff in this process.

The Dream Catcher Project trains IHSLs or cultural staff to work with special educators to observe students' behavior. This helps schools make better evaluations and include cultural perspectives in decisions they make about students. The Dream Catcher Project began in 2015 with a small number of pilot sites and has grown, with five to eight new districts joining each year.

Minnesota's Dakota and Ojibwe communities both recognize dream catchers. Dream catchers filter messages, catching in the web the messages meant to scare and confuse, then allowing the guidance in dreams to come through the web. The Dream Catcher Project works like a real dream catcher. Schools trained in this project become like dream catchers to youth, filtering through information to see what is meant and guiding youth to a successful future.

The Dream Catcher Project started in the American Indian communities of Minnesota because a higher proportion of American Indian students receive special education than any other group, especially in the category of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBD). The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) and the IHSL program also enjoy a long-standing partnership. IHSLs help Minnesota schools and districts communicate better with families of American Indian students that have disabilities or that schools are evaluating for special education. For over 30 years, MDE has provided professional development and support to the IHSL group. Significant portions of IHSL funding come from special education funding sources. The Dream Catcher project model has potential benefits for and has expanded to other marginalized groups of students, including students of African heritage.

The MDE Special Education Division sponsors the program with the assistance of two project consultants. The Dream Catcher Project is one of the recommended strategies in the guidelines, "Promoting Fair Special Education Evaluations for American Indian and African American Students." [View the guidelines on the University of Wisconsin-River Falls website](https://www.uwrf.edu/CSP/ReducingBias.cfm) (<https://www.uwrf.edu/CSP/ReducingBias.cfm>). Participation in the Dream Catcher Project is free and voluntary.

What is Provided

- Initial training for Indian Education, cultural staff, special education and administrative leadership, beginning with a fall kick-off orientation and workshop.
- Ongoing coaching and professional development through virtual meetings, localized team-building activities, on-site visits and workshops. Coaching will focus on practicing observational skills, communication and collaboration between special and Indian education and establishing a sustainable implementation model. Workshops can be customized based on individual district goals.
- Information gathering to evaluate the impact of the Dream Catcher Project and to identify ways to better incorporate culturally significant strategies into interventions and special education evaluations.

How to Get Started in the Dream Catcher Project

- [Complete an application for your district](#). Returning districts will complete an expedited application for continuation. MDE staff will review your application.

- Identify at least one special educator and at least one Indian Education or cultural staff member in each school to form a project team.
- Attend the fall kick-off training and participate in virtual support meetings and webinars held regularly.
- Initial implementation steps include planning of annual goals, collaborate on reviewing district procedures and policies, and enact a system for equitable representation during problem solving meetings, special education evaluations and team meetings.
- Following the kick-off meeting, Indian or cultural liaisons will begin conducting observations that are part of initial EBD evaluations, re-evaluations, development of behavior plans or as part of tiered interventions. Liaisons will conduct at least five observations during the school year. Liaisons will also share the information that they gather and be a part of the decision-making process.
- Additional district or co-op level professional development training and workshops can be arranged surrounding the unique implementation goals of the school, district, or co-op.

Feedback

- All of the pilot sites recommended this program to other schools.
- Dream Catcher partners:
 - Appreciate the ongoing support, team building and coaching.
 - Recognize the creation and strengthening of collaborations between special education and Indian Education or cultural staff.
 - Report an increase in consideration of cultural background and issues such as trauma when planning interventions.
 - Report an increase in participation and meaningful involvement of American Indian Education and cultural staff in the intervention process, the Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings and in decision making.
- In 2016, the Dream Catchers program expanded to include technology training and opportunities for shared learning across school districts throughout Minnesota. A reliance on virtual formats increased in March 2020 when schools first shut down during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on feedback, many of these virtual connection points will continue as a way to increase access, share updates and strategies, problem solve, share resources and build community.

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