

A Place to Be Together: Nakia Academy Indigenous Educator Cohort 2 Launches at Muckleshoot Tribal College

On September 26, Indigenous educators gathered at Muckleshoot Tribal College to launch the second year of the Nakia Academy Indigenous Educator Cohort. The gathering marked the beginning of several months of learning, mentoring, relationship building, and community.



Cohort 2 gathering at Muckleshoot Tribal College

Nakia Academy is a professional learning community by and for BIPOC educators, offered through a partnership among the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) Beginning Educator Support Team (BEST), Office of Native Education (ONE), Washington Education Association (WEA), and Washington School Counselor Association (WSCA). The Indigenous Educator Cohort creates dedicated time and place for Indigenous educators to strengthen mentoring practice, build relationships, and learn together in ways that honor identity, culture, community, sovereignty, and Indigenous Ways of Knowing. Through intentional professional learning, coaching, and hands-on practice, participants develop skills and tools they can carry back to their schools and districts to support, mentor, and coach fellow educators.

The cohort also builds leadership capacity by preparing participants to serve as coaches and mentors within their school communities and districts, while creating pathways to future mentoring opportunities, including the potential to serve as BEST mentors. In this way, the cohort invests not only in individual educator growth, but also in developing a stronger network of Indigenous educators equipped to support and uplift other educators, students, families, and communities across Washington.



Indigenous Excellence at Muckleshoot Tribal College

Our gathering also offered an opportunity to learn more about the Indigenous scholarship and leadership growing through Muckleshoot Tribal College. We invite you to meet the 2026 Muckleshoot doctoral graduates and learn more about their work.

2026 Muckleshoot Doctoral Graduates

Beginning with Story and Relationship



This year, we are honored to welcome **Dr. Sonia Barry (Alutiiq/Unanga̓)** back to the Nakia circle as a facilitator of the Indigenous Educator Cohort. Dr. Barry is one of the original content creators who helped shape Nakia Academy when it began in 2021. An educator of nearly three decades, artist, author, mother, auntie, daughter, and wife, Dr. Barry brings a long relationship with Nakia and a wealth of experience in education. Her return as a facilitator brings that history full circle.



Joining her is **Ms. Yolanda Gallegos (Mescalero Apache/Spanish)**, a Washington State licensed administrator and educator with more than 25 years of experience in education. She has served as a teacher, principal, assistant principal, instructional coach, and advocate for students, families, and communities, with a strong commitment to educational equity, culturally responsive leadership, and Indigenous education.

Ms. Gallegos is a proud alumna of the inaugural Nakia Indigenous Educator Cohort and returns this year as a co-facilitator for Cohort 2. She was also recently selected for the Native Action Network's Legacy of Leadership Program, 7th Cohort. Her work is grounded in relationships, culture, community, and the roles she carries as a mother, grandmother, daughter, auntie, sister, youth advocate, and community social justice advocate.

Together, Dr. Barry and Ms. Gallegos were intentional about beginning Cohort 2 with relationship, story, identity, and the knowledge each person carries. They modeled that invitation themselves, bringing their own stories together through a collaborative "We Are From" poem. Their words weave together homelands and waters, Alutiiq, Unanga̓ and Mescalero Apache lineages, family teachings, foods, ancestors, and the places that continue to shape who they are.

We Are From

Dr. Sonia Barry and Ms. Yolanda Gallegos

We are from the Bering Sea,

Rio Grande River, and the forever in my heart Ichiwana.

From the resilient lineage of Alutiiq, Unangax,
and the Mescalero Apache people is where we are from.
Carrying the names of Lestenkof, Pestrikoff,
De La Luna, Gallegos, Wells, and Carriaga, Kuthla, and Abuelita,
is where we are from.

We are from sacred instruction:

*Respect your elders, ancestors,
and pray on it my girl - and find the teaching.
The land and the sea is where we are from.
For generations to come.*

We are from the rich taste of smoked salmon, warm Perok,
that "Indian Gold" dried fish, pinons, and most delicious homemade
sopapillas is where we are from.

We are from the rugged, life-giving shorelines,
to the hot desert lands and high red and orange stained cliffs of
New Mexico to our beloved fish camp at the scaffolds.

We are from where the water and land remember the names of our ancestors.

They then invited participants into the same process through Our Stories, an activity they created to build connection through identity, culture, origins, and the people and places that have shaped us. Participants reflected on their roots, people, anchors, and joy before moving from "I am from" to "We are from," bringing individual stories together into a collective story.

The day also included the wisdom of Elder Elaine Grinnell, whose teaching about changing the course of the river invited participants to think about healing, change, responsibility, and what we carry forward.

A Place to Be Together

Indigenous educators have always been here, carrying knowledge, relationships, culture, and responsibility within their schools and communities. What is not always available is dedicated time and place to be together as Indigenous educators.

That need came through clearly in feedback following the kickoff. When participants were asked what was most valuable or meaningful about their experience, Nakia participants wrote:

"I feel like I am in a space where I belong."

"Being in a safe space to share our stories and be 'seen'."

"It was a nice opportunity to network and be in a space where I am welcomed."

"Connections! Loved being among our community on Indigenous Land."

"The sense of community is very encouraging for me."

One participant described the value of being with people who have "similar experiences." Another simply wrote, "I already feel supported!"

"I feel like I am in a space where I belong."

Their responses point to something deeper than satisfaction with a professional learning experience. Participants consistently described the value of being together, feeling welcomed and seen, connecting through shared experiences, and developing a sense of belonging and support.

Nakia does not create the community, knowledge, or relationships. It creates intentional time and place for that community to come together.

From Belonging to What We Carry Forward

Participants were also asked what they were thinking about or carrying forward after the gathering. Their responses show how quickly the experience began connecting to their own identities, practice, students, and communities.

One educator wrote, "Emboldened me to be me." Another described leaving with a "renewed sense of resilience and empowerment" to continue creating space for Native students and educators at their school.



Pictured left to right: Denise Bill, Sonia Barry, Yolanda Gallegos, Bawaajigekwe Boulley



Others were thinking about healing, storytelling, mentoring, speaking up, supporting students and colleagues, strengthening inclusion, and bringing Indigenous resources into their classrooms. One participant reflected on "The importance of showing up in spaces that are Indigenous and putting myself out there." Another left asking, "Who else can I connect with..."

The leadership of Dr. Barry and Ms. Gallegos mattered, too. When reflecting on what

made the gathering meaningful, one participant expressed the significance plainly:

"Kind, Indigenous women running it! This is rare in Education in general and feels amazing."

These reflections help tell the story of why dedicated learning opportunities for Indigenous educators matter. Belonging and professional learning are not separate. Relationships can strengthen practice. Feeling seen can make room for courage. Being together can remind educators that they do not carry their responsibilities to students and communities alone.

This Is Only the Beginning

Cohort 2 will continue learning together throughout the school year, with virtual gatherings from October through January and a final in-person celebration at WEA Headquarters in February.

The cohort will explore attending fully and listening with grace, turning inward and attending to the mentor, mentoring in white spaces, building mentoring relationships, and the importance of conversations in mentoring practice. Their final gathering, Celebrate! Show Them Who You Are, will bring the cohort back together in person on February 27.

We want the Indigenous educators who make up this community to tell the story of Nakia Academy.

Over the coming months, ONE will continue featuring voices from Cohort 2, inviting participants to share who they are, what brought them to Nakia, what they are learning, what community



means to them, and what they are carrying back to their students, schools, Tribes, families, and communities.

The September gathering marks our beginning. There is much more to come.

Try Our Stories With Your Community

Dr. Barry and Ms. Gallegos would also like to share the Our Stories activity they created for Cohort 2 with ONE newsletter readers.

The reflection begins with “I am...” and “I am from...,” inviting participants to consider their roots, the people who have shaped them, what grounds them, and what brings them joy. Participants can then bring their individual reflections together to create a collective “We are from...” story.

It is a simple invitation to recognize what each person carries and what becomes possible when we make intentional time to bring our stories together.

This activity was adapted from and inspired by George Ella Lyon’s “Where I’m From” poem and work. The original framework has been reimagined through an Indigenous lens to center relationships to land, ancestors, culture, community, identity, sovereignty, and Indigenous Ways of Knowing.

Our Stories Activity

In community spirit and healing,

Dr. Sonia Barry and Ms. Yolanda Gallegos