



# Reading Nation Waterfall: Building Book Ecosystems and Improving Inclusive Access to Libraries for Native American Children and Families

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## CORE QUESTION

Based on findings from investigations of literacy on Native American reservations, Reading Nation Waterfall (RNW) focuses on addressing the challenges associated with limited access to literature, particularly culturally relevant materials. The initiative provides funding and support for the distributions of free books at three Little Free Library (LFL) locations in each of five partner tribal communities:

- **Yurok Tribe in Northern California**
- **Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians in North Carolina**
- **Lumbee Tribe in North Carolina**
- **Northern Cheyenne Tribe in Montana**
- **Santo Domingo Pueblo in New Mexico**

The program seeks to confirm the relationship between access to books and children's literacy.

## CONTEXT

The RNW project draws inspiration from the image of books flowing endlessly like a cascading waterfall. Through strategic partnerships with organizations like Unite for Literacy and the Kiwanis, our initiative is dedicated to expanding sustainable book access and fostering a love for reading within families. In partnership with the Little Free Library Association, we established **three** culturally enriched mini-libraries in our partner communities.

In collaboration with the five tribal communities mentioned, RNW and our partners employ a **three-legged approach for our book distribution program**. Head Start, school libraries, and tribal/public libraries are the focal points of our collaboration, forming the foundation of a robust book ecosystem. We prioritize fostering relationships among these organizations to establish a sustainable environment that champions children's literacy.

## READING NATION WATERFALL BOOK ECOSYSTEMS



## RESEARCH

Numerous studies highlight the **critical importance of reading for children ages 0-5** as well as for those entering fourth grade, which aligns with the objectives of our program. Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress reveals a concerning trend: while fourth grade reading scores have risen for all racial groups since 1992, American Indian/Alaskan Native (AI/AN) children's scores have decreased by 3% and remain 16 points below the national average as of 2019. Moreover, Native high school students exhibit the highest dropout rates (10.1% in 2017) and the lowest graduation rates (72.4%) compared to other racial/ethnic groups, with the lowest post-high school education pursuit percentages (NAEP, 2019).

## OUTCOMES & SUSTAINABILITY

Two National Indian Education Studies (NIES) conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics in 2015 and 2019 found that high performing AI/AN fourth grade readers have **25+ books** at home and access to a school library with culturally relevant resources, services, and programming. RNW has sought to foster these conditions in five tribal communities. To date, RNW has distributed **45,000+ books** to tribal children and supported literacy initiatives, such as establishing makerspaces/technology hubs in tribal communities, and implementing fun Reading Log challenges. Further, each tribe was supported to self-publish books for their permanent library collections and facilitate cultural programming to carry forth tribal traditions such as ribbon-skirt making and doll-making. To enhance sustainability, we've fostered connections between tribal communities and literacy organizations. RNW also initiated a Fill-the-Box campaign, featuring an Amazon Wishlist for direct book donations to Little Free Libraries.



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