

# Rough Rock Community Schools

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Testimony submitted to the House and the Senate Appropriations Subcommittees  
on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies

Regarding FY 2015 Bureau of Indian Affairs / Bureau of Indian Education Budget

April 3, 2014

The requests of the Rough Rock Community Schools for the FY 2015 Bureau of Indian Affairs / Bureau of Indian Education (BIA/BIE) budget are as follows:

- Parity of School Construction and Improvement with Department of Defense Schools at the level of \$5 billion or five years, as well as a doubling of BIE facilities' operations and maintenance to meet the current need.
- Directed funding to improve roads our buses travel to bring students to school so we may grade and gravel roads that are currently bare dirt tracks.
- Full funding of Tribal Grants Support Costs to protect funding so we are not forced to sacrifice educational resources to take care of overhead.
- Funding for Native language programs, which increase the performance of our students in all subjects.
- Increased funding for the Indian School Equalization Program.

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Rough Rock Community School, Inc.(RRCS) brings students, staff and the community together to carry out educational programs based on rigorous academic standards and Navajo language and culture – programs that excite students about learning and advance student academic achievement. Our school—located in Chinle, Arizona—has been in continuous service since its founding in 1966, operates a K-12 education program, and a dormitory program for students in grades 1-12; it is the oldest tribally operated school in the U.S. Our sacred Navajo philosophy teaches us to set high standards and to challenge ourselves. RRCS's education program integrates a unique Horsemanship program and Diné Studies with modern day technology. These life and career learning enhancements are provided so that our children are motivated and have the discipline for success in any society, and whether they choose college or vocational school, by knowing and practicing their sacred uniqueness as Navajo individuals. RRCS operates pursuant to the Tribally Controlled Schools Act, and under the authority of the

Governing School Board Members

Mae-Gilene Begay

Rena Mann

Ronald Gishey, Sr.

Kimberly Sam

All-Navajo School Board. RRCS is primarily funded through appropriations received from the Bureau of Indian Education.

### ***Parity for Our School Facilities***

School is meant to be a welcoming, safe, and healthy place to learn. Indian Schools and the Rough Rock Community School should be no different, but the reality is that our schools are older, more worn down, and less safe than any other schools in the nation. According to a GAO Report in 2001, 65 percent of BIA schools and 76 percent of BIA dormitories suffer from “less-than-adequate condition,” a problem that affects less than a quarter of all public schools. Further, the other federally run education system—Department of Defense schools—report only 32 percent of facilities in the same condition. That same report showed an immense maintenance and repair backlog of over \$900 million for Indian schools, including more than \$127 million in deficiencies related to safety *alone*. See U.S. GOV’T ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE, GAO-01-934, BIA AND DOD SCHOOLS: STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT AND OTHER CHARACTERISTICS OFTEN DIFFER FROM PUBLIC SCHOOLS’ (2001). This report is thirteen years old, and conditions have not improved.

Sadly that 13 year-old report paints an accurate picture of Rough Rock and other BIE schools today. Our Administration building was built in the early 1900s, and is not currently safe for staff—though they have no other place to work. While Rough Rock is pleased it was able to replace many of its academic and dormitory facilities in 2011, further improvements, replacements, and even maintenance of the new building are out of our reach due to very low funding. Despite the overwhelming data on BIE school facility construction and renovation needs, and numerous recommendations submitted by tribes and the School Facilities and Construction Negotiated Rulemaking Committee, the BIE has yet to make meaningful changes or initiate a deliberative approach in resolving the issues. Congress has already directed the BIE to reopen the school construction priority process, but it has yet to do so. Further, the Administration proposes to reduce this funding by \$2 million this year compared to last year’s level—which is already underfunded. *We note that Congress provided a five year, \$5 billion special funding package for Department of Defense-funded school repair or replacement. RRCS respectfully suggests that policy fairness demands the same substantial investment in improvements to BIE school facilities.*

Particularly important to RRCS is increased funding facilities operations (like electricity, heating, custodial services, and water and sewer services) and facilities maintenance (for the upkeep of our buildings and improvements). These budget categories are severely underfunded, and we currently estimate that they only provide 46% of need. *We request that you double the amount of funding in BIE’s appropriations for facilities operations and maintenance so we can prevent our buildings from falling into further disrepair.*

While the DOD schools received a \$5 billion supplemental funding package, the BIE school construction budget is slated for further cuts. It is clear that we need more resources if we are to improve our children’s education and ability to learn. We are asking students and staff to live, work, and learn at schools that no parent or administrator in Phoenix, Tucson, or Flagstaff would ever dream of sending their students to. This disparity cannot be allowed to continue.

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### ***Improvements to our Bus Routes***

RRCS is located in Chinle, in Northeastern Arizona. Our community is remote, but our school serves students from the surrounding area—almost all of whom need to travel long distances on the bus to attend school. RRCS has six bus routes that cover 878 miles every day transporting our students. In a typical 180-day school year, we travel enough miles on our buses to circle the Earth six and a half times. Fully a quarter of the roads our students must travel are “unimproved”—which means they are not even gravel roads, but are just bare dirt. Any rain or snow makes it nearly impossible to drive on these roads, as reliable and skilled as our bus drivers may be.

When it rains, a quarter of our students can’t make it to school. While our attendance at RRCS is growing every year, our school is judged on our Adequate Yearly Progress which takes into account daily attendance. Our school is being left behind due to the weather, and it’s a problem we can solve with gravel and a road grader. What other students in America must miss school when it rains because their bus can’t pick them up?

The fact of living in a remote area does increase the cost of transportation—not only in fuel and wear and tear on our vehicles—but the fact the closest repair shop for our buses is more than two-hours away. Just as with the other program shortages, RRCS has employed cost cutting measures to help with transportation underfunding. Nonetheless, *funding shortfalls for Student Transportation services will continue to adversely impact classroom programs*. This year, the Administration is only requesting \$158,000 more for road maintenance, for a total of \$24.4 million, for all tribes in the nation. That is not enough funding for this critical need.

RRCS cannot continue to use our scarce education program dollars to subsidize the transportation costs. The total transportation funds allocated to our school last year—\$460,400 (based on the critically low rate of \$2.44 per mile)—only covered a portion of the need, and have fallen from 2013 levels of \$575,450. Increases in funding for road improvement and maintenance are vital for educational achievement. We are not blind to this cost factor, but ask that Congress recognize the country’s obligation to ensure Indian students receive the education they were promised. *We urge Congress adopt measures that specifically direct transportation funding toward rural school bus routes on the Navajo Reservation to help our children get to school safely.*

### ***Tribal Grants Support Costs (TGSC).***

TGSC are provided for the same purposes and under the same policy rationale as Contract Support Cost (CSC) funds are provided under the Indian Self-Determination Act. These funds are used for essential services such as contract/grant administration, program planning and development, human resources, insurance, procurement, property management, required annual audits, recordkeeping, and legal, security and other overhead services. Just as with CSC funding, TSGC appropriations have not been sufficient to provide 100% of the level of need. Even BIE has recognized the TGCS is meeting only 45% of need, which leaves schools with no options but to use instructional program funding to meet federally-mandated

administrative requirements. For RRCS, TGSC funding has been reduced by 20% over the past four years (from \$653,500 to \$559,000). Like other BIE schools, we have had to face unconscionable choices that sacrifice essential materials, staff or student services in order to fit within these reduced budgets. *Full funding of TGSC is essential to our effectiveness in delivering quality educational services to Navajo students.*

### ***Native Language and Cultural Immersion Education Program***

A critical tenet for education at RRCS is immersion in the Diné language and culture. We wholeheartedly support Congressman Cole’s “Native Language Immersion Student Achievement Act” (HR 4214) and its Senate companion (S. 1948). This legislation supports something that RRCS has found to be the best way to ensure students excel at all subjects throughout their education—early and continuing immersion in Native languages. RRCS has been running an immersion program in the Navajo language in its elementary school for many years, and consistently find that the students in the program perform better in all of their core, non-language classes like science, math, and reading. The language program not only provides our students with a vital link to their heritage and culture, but learning in Navajo enables them to succeed in their education overall.

We support Congressman Cole’s bill, which would provide a grant program to expand Native language and immersion programs, but we also request that the Committees increase funding in the BIE budget to fund ongoing language programs. Language programs are proving to be a fundamental part of improving Indian education overall. Programs like ours have proven to be great stepping stones to help our student succeed in STEM subjects and related areas, even after language instruction has ended. *We urge the Committee to increase funding in language programs so we may continue improving the educational outcomes for our students.*

### ***Increase Funding for the Indian School Equalization Program (ISEP)***

The annual ISEP allocation is the core budget account for BIE schools and dormitories. ISEP provides funding for instructional programs, residential programs, and salaries for teachers, teachers aides, principals and staff. Each school’s annual ISEP allocation is set by a statutorily-mandated formula established by regulation. ISEP funds to RRCS have been reduced from \$4.32 million in 2011 to \$3.72 million in 2014—a reduction in funding per student from \$5,312 to \$5,059. The President’s budget intends to keep level funding this year. *We ask that Congress ensure adequate funding for RRCS and all BIE schools—the poorest schools in the country—and provide increased funding for ISEP.*

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Thank you for your consideration of our requests to address the chronic underfunding of programs in Indian schools, particularly school construction and maintenance, improvements to our roads and bus routes, funding tribal grants support costs, and expanding the use of Native languages in our curriculum. RRGC will be glad to provide any additional information the Committees may request.

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