

Tribal Education Departments National Assembly



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House Committee on Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies

Testimony Requesting FY 2015 Funding for Tribal Education Departments April 3, 2014

Chairman Calvert, Ranking Member Moran and Members of the Committee, my name is Quinton Roman Nose and I am the Executive Director of the Tribal Education Departments National Assembly (“TEDNA”). TEDNA is a national non-profit membership organization for Tribal education agencies/departments (“TEAs”), which are executive branch agencies of American Indian and Alaska Native tribal governments responsible for Tribal education matters. There are an estimated 200 TEAs, located in 32 states, serving over 700,000 American Indian and Alaska Native (“Native American”) students. TEDNA respectfully requests \$2 million to support TEAs in the Department of the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies appropriations bill for Fiscal-Year 2015 to conduct much needed Indian education activities. Further, TEDNA supports the President’s request through his Opportunity, Growth and Security Initiative for \$3million to be directed toward incentives for Bureau of Indian Education grant-funded schools, capacity-building and Tribal control of those schools.

AUTHORIZATION FOR FUNDING

Federal funding for TEAs is authorized in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, Title X, Section 1140 (25 U.S.C. § 2020).

JUSTIFICATION FOR FUNDING

Federal education policy is failing Native American students. Native American students drop out of high school at a higher rate and score lower on achievement tests than any other student group. The national dropout rate of Native American students is double that of their non-Indian peers. Likewise, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights (“OCR”) Data

Collection: Data Snapshot (March 21, 2014) recently recognized that Native American elementary and secondary students in public schools are disproportionately suspended and expelled. OCR also found that Native American kindergarten students are among those held back a year at nearly twice the rate of white kindergarten students, and that 9% of Native American ninth grade students repeat ninth grade.

In achievement, Native American 8th grade students are 18% more likely to read or perform in mathematics at a “below basic” level. Only a quarter of Native American high school graduates taking the ACT score at the “college-ready” level in math and only about one-third score at the “college-ready” level in reading. A 2013 report issued by the Education Trust pointed out:

Unlike achievement results for every other major ethnic group in the United States, those for Native [American] students have remained nearly flat in recent years, and the gaps separating these students from their white peers have actually widened.¹

At the same time, Tribal government involvement in the education of Native American students is severely restricted. Since 1988, Congress has authorized funding specifically to build Tribal capacity to directly serve Native students in Bureau of Indian Education (“BIE”) schools. However, funds have never been appropriated to fulfill this crucial need. A similar authorization for tribal capacity building aimed at *public schools* on Indian reservations has been funded since FY 2012, resulting in the Department of Education’s pioneering State-Tribal Education Partnership Program (“STEP”). Though very important, STEP only addresses one aspect of the existing need. While the corresponding funding opportunity for BIE schools has gone unutilized, our Native American students in BIE schools have continued to be underserved.

TEAs are in a unique position to halt and reverse the negative outcomes for Native students. TEAs have already proven that they are capable of improving Native American student outcomes. For example, the Chickasaw Nation of Oklahoma, one of the STEP grantees, has a science, technology, and math program, among many other education programs, that serves approximately 250 Chickasaw students. Ninety percent of senior students participating in the program enroll in college. Through the STEP grant, Chickasaw has already put in place the framework to improve student outcomes and attendance. For example, before the co-governance model was in place, several Native American students were falling through the cracks and being expelled. Now, the Chickasaw Nation has stepped in to move expelled students into other alternative high school programs. Through this process, Local Education Agencies (“LEAs”) now understand that this is exactly the type of situation that the Chickasaw Nation TEA can address before the expulsion stage so intervention services can be provided, such as counseling, to students that are at risk. Thus, the STEP Program put in place a process allowing the TEAs and LEAs to proactively flag at risk students and provide the necessary intervention services.

The work of the Nez Perce Tribe’s TEA is another good example. The most current research indicates that Native American academic achievement must include effective teaching strategies. Also, researchers studying the achievement of Native American students have found a

¹ The Education Trust, *The State of Education for Native American Students at 3* (August 2013), available at: http://www.edtrust.org/sites/edtrust.org/files/NativeStudentBrief_0.pdf

connection between low achievement and low cultural relevance. The Nez Perce Tribe, another STEP grantee, has made a large in-road to providing teacher training on the integration of cultural pedagogy, tribal education standards, and common core standards. In addition, technical assistance is provided by the Nez Perce TEA to their partner LEA's on use of the Native Star Culture and Language Indicators which address culturally-responsive school leadership, community engagement, and infusion of culture and language into the school's curriculum and instruction.

The State of Idaho's State Education Agency ("SEA") acknowledged that it does not have the expertise to provide training or technical assistance in meeting the unique educational and cultural needs of Native American students. Nez Perce's STEP grant has provided a platform for the Tribe's TEA and the local LEAs and SEA to work together to improve Native American student performance in this manner vis-à-vis the three federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act programs (Title I, Part A; Title II, Part A; and School Improvement Grants). Nez Perce also has a family engagement piece to their STEP grant that recognizes the role of the family as the first educator and organizes the parents and school staff to work together to assess parent involvement programs, policies, and practices. The end goal is to improve the educational experience and college/career readiness of the students.

A final example is The Hoopa Valley Tribe of California, which operates a learning center that works with at risk students. The Hoopa Valley TED identifies K-12 students at risk, pairs the students with mentors, and develops student-learning plans. Students are tutored in target academic areas and coached in life skills. This program alone has improved student academic performance by two letter grades in core academic areas.

These examples of success from the STEP pilot program grantees demonstrate the positive impact Tribal involvement has on Native American students. This type of successful Tribal involvement in the education of Native American students should be expanded and replicated in BIE schools. Congress has identified in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act several areas of focus in meeting this worthy objective. If appropriated by this Subcommittee, these funds would be used to facilitate tribal control in all matters relating to Native American education on reservations. More specifically, there are three areas of particular focus. First, TEAs can use this funding to support early education initiatives and develop culturally relevant curriculum and assessments. Second, increased tribal participation will include TEAs providing coordination, administrative support services and technical assistance to schools and education programs on Indian reservations. This would include maintaining and sharing electronic data regarding Native American students, and implementing programs to increase graduation rates and post-secondary school readiness. This would foster much-needed cooperation and coordination with entities carrying out education on Indian reservations. Third, this appropriation would fund the development and enforcement of tribal educational codes, including tribal educational policies and tribal standards applicable to curriculum, personnel, students, facilities, and support programs. As Congress has already recognized, these three areas are core educational functions that are most appropriately left to Tribes.

We applaud President Obama's request in his Opportunity, Growth and Security Initiative that Congress invest in "incentivizing schools funded through the Bureau of Indian Education to

introduce reforms that improve student outcomes.” TEDNA supports the President’s approach to provide incentives to tribally controlled schools so that they voluntarily adopt certain research-based reforms rather impose mandates and sanctions. Further, TEDNA suggests that this funding be modeled on the discretionary grants used by the U.S. Department Education to foster competition among applicants and build tribal capacity, particularly the capacity of tribal educational agencies, to operate schools. At a low cost to taxpayers, such a competition would bring disruptive reform to many of the tribally controlled schools in the BIE-funded system, one of the lowest-achieving school systems in the nation.

Moreover, Tribal governments, acting through their TEAs, should have a central role in a reformed BIE school system. Therefore, the President’s initiative should restructure the administration of BIE schools and have TEAs act as school boards for BIE grant schools. This is the type of administrative and governance reform TEDNA has encouraged for many years. We believe that TEDNA’s request today for the appropriation of capacity-building dollars complement the President’s initiative well.

Investment in TEAs is sound federal policy. Direct Tribal involvement in education eliminates undue bureaucratic barriers and streamlines administration. Moreover, encouraging and supporting Tribal control in education begins to implement the policy of Tribal self-determination in education and further the United States’ trust responsibility to Native American students. Thus, this Subcommittee is presented with a unique opportunity to increase tribal involvement and leverage the expertise of TEAs in educating Native students.

REQUEST

TEDNA respectfully requests \$2 million TEAs in the Department of the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies appropriations bill for Fiscal-Year 2015. TEDNA also supports the President’s request in the Opportunity, Growth and Security Initiative to foster competition in tribally controlled grant schools funded by the BIE and we urge Congress to appropriate \$3million for Fiscal-Year 2015 for that purpose.