



DEPARTMENT OF DINÉ EDUCATION THE NAVAJO NATION

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Chairman Calvert, ranking member McCollum, and honorable members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the Department of Diné Education. My name is Dr. Tommy Lewis, and I am the Superintendent of Schools of the Navajo Nation Department of Diné Education. My testimony will focus on challenges the Navajo Nation has encountered as a result of inadequate funding of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and Bureau of Indian Education (BIE). Overall, the president's proposed 2017 federal budget request represents a significant step forward and commitment from the federal government to improve Indian education, especially when compared to the fiscal 2016 enacted budget and historical appropriations for Indian education.

The Navajo Nation has been a proactive stakeholder in the education of our children. Through the Navajo Sovereignty in Education Act of 2005, the Navajo Nation created the Department of Diné Education (DODE) and the Navajo Nation Board of Education to directly "exercise its responsibility to the Navajo People for their education." We have developed five key content standards: Diné History, Culture, Language, Government and Character; in order to ensure our survival as Navajo People. Over the past nine years, the Department of Diné Education has spent significant tribal resources to develop the Navajo Nation Accountability Workbook to ensure students attending tribally controlled schools receive an education supplemented with Diné standards. In order to implement these standards, we must receive approval from the Bureau of Indian Education and U.S. Department of Education. It is our hope that Navajo Nation Accountability Workbook will be finalized in the near future.

The Department of Diné Education has been working to build a high caliber, unified education system and to progressively seek recognition as a "State Education Agency." In order to achieve this goal we need sufficient funding to meet the minimum standards and challenges faced by our schools. Today, we highlight proposed budget increases within the president's fiscal 2017 budget request that will begin to address deficiencies affecting our classrooms.

Navajo Nation Schools and Student Enrollment

The Navajo Nation school system operates in 17 school districts on the Navajo Nation located within three states: Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. Currently, 244 schools serve Navajo students on and off the reservation. Of these schools, 32 are BIE-operated schools, 33 are Public Law 100-297 tribally-controlled grant schools and 1 is a Public Law 93-638 contract school. The remaining schools are state public schools or charter schools.

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According to SY 2014-2015 enrollment reports, we have a combined total of 36,661 Navajo students attending schools on the Navajo Nation. BIE operated and tribally controlled grant/contract schools collectively serve 14,410 Navajo students, which is 39.3 percent of all Navajo students residing on the Navajo Nation and, of those students, 21.9 percent attending BIE-operated schools and 17.4 percent attending grant/contract schools.

Based on the same data 22,172 Navajo students attend state public schools on the Navajo Nation, which comprises 60 percent of all students. The other 48,309 Navajo students attend public schools located off the Navajo Nation.

Facilities Construction, Repair & Replacement

DODE was pleased to see the \$63.7 million increase in education construction in the 2016 budget, which allowed the replacement of two Navajo schools, the Cove Day School and Little Singer Community School. Although it has been 12 years since the schools were placed on the Replacement School Construction List, we are pleased the construction process can be started. I should note however, today on the Navajo Nation, an additional 31 BIE-funded schools are listed as in “poor” condition. Our students and teachers have no choice but to continue using dilapidated facilities. We support the request for \$138.3 million to repair and replace school facilities in poor condition, however more funding is needed to address the longstanding list of facilities concerns.

Transportation

DODE supports the president’s 2017 request of \$57.3 million, which is an increase of \$4.1 million to fund essential school transportation and urges Congress to continue to invest in the improvement of school bus routes. Students on the Navajo Nation endure long distances simply to get to school. In fact, it is not uncommon for a child to spend several hours a day traveling and most of that time is spent on marginally maintained dirt roads. Approximately 90 percent of the Nation’s roads are unimproved and unpaved. In the Northern Navajo Agency alone, there are 832 miles of unimproved school bus roads. As a result, the cost to maintain our essential school bus fleet is significantly high due to the accelerated wear and tear on vehicles. Without reliable school buses and improved road conditions, our students are forced to miss critical classroom hours.

Higher Education Scholarships

DODE supports the president’s 2017 requested increase of \$6.6 million for scholarships and adult education. These federal funds for higher education are used to provide scholarships to undergraduate Navajo students and are administered by the Office of Navajo Nation Scholarship and Financial Aid (ONNSFA) through a Public Law 93-638 contract. Last year (calendar year 2014), ONNSFA received scholarship applications from 10,069 students, however only 6,035 Navajo students received funding. Due to insufficient funding levels, over 40 percent of eligible Navajo students were not awarded scholarships. The Navajo Nation needs increased funding in order to award scholarships to all eligible students pursuing a college degree.

In addition to inadequate funding, each time the federal government operates under a continuing resolution, scholarship funding is severely delayed which is problematic for students who depend on these scholarship funds to pay for tuition, books, room and board. The Navajo Nation respectfully requests that Congress forward fund scholarship, similar to the forward funding of Tribally Controlled schools and Universities.

Johnson O’Malley Assistance Grants

DODE supports the president’s fiscal 2017 request of \$18.5 million, which is an increase of \$3.6 million. The Navajo Nation operates a Johnson O’Malley (JOM) program through a P.L. 93-638 contract to serve Navajo students attending public schools on or in close proximity to the Navajo Nation. The JOM program provides supplementary financial assistance to public schools to meet the unique and specialized educational needs of American Indian students. JOM funding is used to provide a range of services such as Navajo language courses, tutoring, and school supplies to Navajo students in public schools. Currently, the Navajo Nation

subcontracts with 27 sites to provide services to 41,627 Navajo students attending public schools at a formula funding rate of \$66.28 per student. The JOM program has seen an increase in student count and sites. An increase in funding is essential to address the unmet needs of the increasing number of Navajo students attending public schools.

Tribal Grant Support Costs

DODE supports the president's request to fully fund 100 percent of the Tribal Grant Support Costs. In previous years, the funding appropriated for TGSC met less than 60 percent of need. As a result, schools were required to reduce staff to dangerously low levels and/or are forced to divert funds from other educational programs (i.e. Special Education, Title I, Student Transportation, ISEP, etc.) to meet their statutorily mandated administrative requirements. We encourage the subcommittee to continue to support tribal sovereignty through full funding of Tribal Grant Support Costs.

Indian School Equalization Program

DODE supports the president's request to increase the Indian School Equalization Program (ISEP) by \$6.5 million. The Indian School Equalization Program is the core budget account for educational and residential programs of the BIE elementary and secondary schools and dormitories. These funds are used for instructional programs at BIE-funded schools and residential programs at dormitories, and include salaries of teachers, teacher aides, principals, and other school-level program administration, food service, and dormitory staff.

Education IT (Broadband)

DODE supports the president's request of \$25 million, which is an increase of \$16.8 million to increase bandwidth at 54 BIE schools. These critical investments in improved educational IT broadband access will increase access to online resources for our Navajo schools, students, and teachers. These improvements will also assist schools in meeting bandwidth and technological requirements needed for the next generation student assessments.

Early Childhood Development

DODE supports the president's fiscal 2017 requested increase of \$4 million for Early Childhood Development such as the Family and Child Education program, otherwise known as FACE. The FACE and BabyFACE programs have demonstrated to be effective in preparing students with the skills needed to be successful upon entering the school setting. The Navajo Nation currently has 23 FACE Programs and 9 BabyFACE programs in operation.

Education Program Enhancements and Tribal Education Departments

DODE supports the president's 2017 increase for Education Program Enhancements and Tribal Education Departments funding. The Navajo Nation has been a recipient of the Sovereignty in Indian Education Grant and Tribal Education Department Grant, both of which support the Navajo Nation's goal of building a high quality education system. This type of funding is essential for tribes seeking to implement education reform initiatives.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as stated in the Navajo Sovereignty in Education Act of 2015, "It is the educational mission of the Navajo Nation to promote and foster lifelong learning for the Navajo people, and to protect the culture integrity and sovereignty of the Navajo people." The Navajo Nation through the Department of Diné Education, Navajo Nation Board of Education, and its partners, will continue to move forward with achieving this goal. We appreciate this opportunity to highlight the budgetary deficiencies affecting our classrooms. Thank you.