



Oral Testimony of the National Indian Education Association
Before the United States House of Representatives
Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
April 5, 2022

INTRODUCTION

Chair Pingree, Ranking Member Joyce, and members of the Subcommittee thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of the National Indian Education Association. My name is Jason Dropik and I am the President of NIEA.

NIEA is the most inclusive national Native organization advocating for culture-based educational opportunities for American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians. Each day, our organization equips tribal leaders, educators, and advocates to prepare the over 700,000 Native students across the nation for success in the classroom and beyond.

Native education is a bipartisan effort rooted in the federal trust responsibility to tribal nations and their citizens. NIEA thanks the Subcommittee for its ongoing commitment to fulfilling this constitutional responsibility by advancing Native education programs and services in the Fiscal Year 2023. In particular, we appreciate the Subcommittee's oversight of Bureau of Indian Education programs and services to Native students.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the national education landscape has shifted dramatically. The spread of COVID-19 throughout tribal communities highlighted and exacerbated existing education inequities for Native students. Tribal nations acted quickly to save lives, shuttering school buildings to limit community transmission.

Fully funding Native education within the Bureau of Indian Education in Fiscal Year 2023 is essential to ensuring that Native students have access to resources to recover and thrive after the pandemic.

FISCAL YEAR 2023 RECOMMENDATIONS

As the Subcommittee considers funding levels for the coming fiscal year, NIEA urges Congress to consider the full scope of need for education programs in the Department of Interior through the Bureau of Indian Education and Bureau of Indian Affairs. Congress must continue to invest in and oversee education programs central to the cultural and academic progress of Native students. Such measures are critical to ensure that Native students have access to the resources necessary to thrive. From competitive salaries for highly effective, culturally competent educators through the Indian Schools Equalization Program to the infrastructure of a modern classroom to Native language and culture-based programs, federal appropriations are vital to ensuring equity for the only students to which the federal government has a direct responsibility - Native students.

At this time, I would like to highlight several of NIEA's key appropriations priorities for the Fiscal Year 2023:

- **Bureau-funded schools must be appropriated at least \$440 million for urgent school construction and repair.** NIEA appreciates recent steps to address immediate infrastructure, especially in light of the more than two-year pandemic. However, funding continues to fall far short of the total need. In 2016, the Office of the Inspector General at the Department of Interior found that it would cost \$430 million to address immediate facilities repairs in the BIE. Our request is modest when taking into account inflation since 2016. The President's Budget Request for FY 2023 is only \$420 million, far short of what is critically needed.
- **The Indian School Equalization Program (ISEP) should be fully funded at \$500.7 million for Fiscal Year 2023, per the FY 2023 President's Budget Request.** ISEP funds the core budget account for BIE elementary and secondary schools. Through this program, schools receive funding to pay teachers and other personnel salaries. While ISEP is funded at approximately \$2 million per school, each public school across the country receives, on average, \$6 million for salaries, wages, and employee benefits.

Each year, schools are forced to stretch limited ISEP funds further to fulfill regulations that require educators to be paid salaries comparable to those at the only other federal school system – the Department of Defense Education Activity (DODEA). This requirement is meant to support parity in access. However, federal appropriations have failed to account for increases in competitive salaries at DODEA and in states where BIE schools are located. Increased investment is required to ensure access to highly qualified, culturally competent educators at all schools.

When funding is cut in other areas of the BIE budget, ISEP funds are often used to make up the difference. A flood, broken heater, or leaky roof can force a BIE school to lay off a special education teacher, student counselor, or school security officer halfway through the school year. Congress must ensure that ISEP is allocated adequate funding to fulfill all program needs.

In addition, NIEA supports requests to fully fund and support Tribal Colleges and Universities through Fiscal Year 2023 recommendations provided by the American Indian Higher Education Consortium.

CONCLUSION

Healthy education systems are vital to thriving tribal nations and communities. Though tribal leaders and legislators juggle several priorities, education cannot be forgotten. Appropriations have the potential to promote equity and ensure access to excellent education options which prepare Native students to thrive in the classroom and beyond. NIEA urges Congress to uphold the federal trust responsibility for all Native students by fully funding critical programs that support effective and culturally appropriate Native education. Our students, including the 48,000 students in Bureau-funded schools, deserve nothing less. Thank you.