



**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES**

**TESTIMONY OF LAURIE D. HARPER, BOARD PRESIDENT,  
TRIBAL EDUCATION DEPARTMENTS NATIONAL ASSEMBLY  
REGARDING FY 2024 FUNDING FOR TRIBAL EDUCATION DEPARTMENTS**

March 3, 2023

Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Laurie D. Harper, and I am the President of the Board of the Tribal Education Departments National Assembly (TEDNA), a national non-profit membership organization for Tribal Education Departments/Agencies (TEDs/TEAs). Thank you for the opportunity to speak today about funding through the U.S. Department of the Interior for TEDs. First and foremost, our sincerest gratitude for appropriating funds continually since FY 2015 to support TEDs through Title 25, United States Code, Section 2020, also known as "Section 2020 grants." This Subcommittee clearly values the crucial role of TEDs in education for tribal students. To quote the Subcommittee from its 2016 report, "TEDs are instrumental in helping tribes build the capacity to oversee the high quality and culturally appropriate education of tribal members."

Thanks to Interior Department funding, over a dozen tribal governments with TEDs today are making great needed progress in directing and coordinating education, thereby fulfilling Congress' intent after decades of a lack of direct federal fiscal support. For continued and increased funding, TEDNA respectfully requests \$10 million to support TEDs in the Department of the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies appropriations bill for Fiscal-Year 2024 so that we can continue to serve and serve better our students whose lifelong educational experiences include Bureau of Indian (BIE)-funded schools.

**AUTHORIZATION FOR FUNDING**

Federal funding for TEDs through the Interior Department has been authorized by Congress since 1988 and currently is codified at 25 U.S.C. § 2020.

## JUSTIFICATION FOR FUNDING

Tribes have educated their citizens from time immemorial, and education continues to be a tribal sovereign right, a trust obligation, an issue of local control, and a sacred responsibility of tribal and non-tribal governments. That we have entrusted – as memorialized in treaties and other official sovereign and inter-sovereign acts - a part of the formal education of our students to the federal government via BIE-funded schools and to states via public schools, speaks to our expectation of the federal and state governments to honor their end of the bargains and promises made.

And we all should be concerned. Educational attainment rates for tribal students in the United States today are not good. Recent federal reports show that our students have the lowest high school graduation rates of any group for whom numbers are maintained. While the high school graduation rates of Whites, Asians, Blacks, and Hispanics are at 80% or higher, one in four of our students will not graduate from high school.<sup>1</sup> This has direct and dire consequences for tribes, states, and the Nation.

Federal funding precipitates the abilities of TEDs to help address this. TEDs are in a unique position to direct and coordinate the resources, management, and provision of education for tribal students vertically and horizontally. The vertical direction and coordination involves families and community engagement, early childhood programs, elementary and secondary schools and programs, higher education, and vocational and adult education. The horizontal direction and coordination involves schools and programs run by various providers (state, federal, and tribal), as well as numerous health care and juvenile justice facilities, services, and programs. The vertical and horizontal direction and coordination occurs because tribes, through Section 2020 grants, can operate TEDs, develop and enact tribal education codes, and negotiate and enter into inter-governmental agreements and other collaborative arrangements, all pertaining to the myriad of components of formal education and tailored to the specific needs at local levels regarding curriculum, staff, students, facilities, training, policies, programs, and initiatives.

For example, I serve as the Director of Education for the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe in Minnesota, a Section 2020 grantee and a TEDNA Member. The Tribe is developing a program under Section 2020 to address our inherent authority over all areas of education. I served as the Board Chairwoman for the tribally operated Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig BIE-funded school. I am the Director of the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe's Tribal Education Department, which administers Johnson O'Malley funds for public schools on and near our Reservation. With Section 2020 grant funds, we have taken a community-based approach to improving education, utilizing community and youth input to shape

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<sup>1</sup> <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/coi/high-school-graduation-rates>

priorities that will be developed into a tribal education code and a comprehensive education plan that will be culturally specific to our Tribe. We also realize the importance of data sovereignty and have recently partnered with the Minnesota Department of Education on a data sharing agreement regarding a longitudinal early childhood study. Through this agreement, we can both identify our students in early childhood settings and track them throughout their educational journey within the State of Minnesota. The Section 2020 grant has been a catalyst for Leech Lake's involvement in areas beyond its grant and is making sovereignty in education a reality.

Although unfunded for 27 years, it was through the commitment of this Subcommittee that Section 2020 funding finally began in FY 2015, and 16 tribes are currently receiving Section 2020 grants. But many more tribes serve the 183 BIE-funded elementary and secondary schools, and dormitories located across this country. They need TED funding but not at the expense of current Section 2020 funded tribes or any other BIE funding for schools or programs. Rather, TED appropriations should be increased to serve more tribes and more students.

With increased Section 2020 funding, tribes like the Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe in Nevada, for example, could develop a TED to support Pyramid Lake Junior Senior High School, a tribal secondary school in Nixon, Nevada on the Pyramid Lake Indian Reservation. With increased Section 2020 funding, tribes like the Navajo Nation, where many BIE-funded schools are located, could train new school board members when the schools convert from being BIE operated to being tribally controlled. With increased Section 2020 funding, additional tribes could decrease their dropout rates, like the Rosebud Sioux Tribe in South Dakota did with its Truancy Intervention Program administered by the Rosebud TED.

Moreover, while Section 2020 funding goes directly to TEDs, TEDNA continues to play an important role in providing technical assistance to TEDs. TEDNA's role is one that this Subcommittee understands and has long acknowledged, and we respectfully request that it be memorialized in this year's report issued by this Subcommittee.

## **REQUEST**

Sustained and increased investment in TEDs is sound federal policy. It efficiently and effectively helps focus and maximize scarce resources for a historically underserved population. TED direction and coordination in formal education is consistent with basic important federal policies: tribal self-determination and local control of education. By continuing and increasing TED Interior Department appropriations, this Subcommittee can increase tribal involvement, leverage the expertise of TEDs, and help generations of students who are tribal, state, and national citizens get quality and culturally appropriate education.

TEDNA respectfully requests sustained funding of \$5,889,000 plus additional funding, for a total of \$10 million for TEDs in the Department of the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies appropriations bill for Fiscal-Year 2024 to continue the vital and excellent work being done through the Section 2020 grants. Miigwich (Thank you).