



RAMAH NAVAJO SCHOOL BOARD, INC.

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**Congressional Testimony of the Ramah Navajo School Board, Inc.
Regarding the FY 2024 Indian Affairs Budget
To the U.S. House and Senate Appropriations Subcommittees
On Interior, Environment and Related Agencies
March 9, 2023**

Honorable Chair, Ranking and Subcommittee Members, *Yá'át'ééh*. My name is Martha Garcia, President of the Ramah Navajo School Board, Inc. Board of Trustees, joined by Ms. Carolyn Coho, Board member, and Mr. David Nez, Pine Hill School Superintendent. On behalf of the Ramah Navajo people, we are grateful to all the members of the U.S. House and Senate Appropriations Subcommittees on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies for the opportunity to share our testimony. We are here today to respectfully inform you of our most pressing priorities for funding, all of which address our current challenges and are essential for continuing the vital programs and services that will move our community forward. These priorities are:

- **Increased Funds for Our Community Services (BIA, BIE)**
 - BIA Human Services (*Social Services, Welfare Assistance, Housing Program*);
 - BIA Community and Economic Development (*Job Placement and Training*);
 - BIA Tribal Government (*Aid to Tribal Government*);
 - BIE Elementary and Secondary Programs (*Johnson-O'Malley Assistance Grants*); and
 - BIE Post Secondary Programs (*Scholarships & Adult Education*)
- **Increased Funds for Our School Operations (BIE)**
 - BIE Elementary and Secondary Programs Forward Funded (*ISEP Formula Funds, Student Transportation*); and
 - BIE Elementary and Secondary Programs (*Facilities Operations & Maintenance*)
- **Increased Funds for Our Health Services (IHS)**
 - IHS Services (*Hospitals & Health Clinics, Dental Health, Mental Health*)
- **Funds for RNSB Infrastructure Upgrades and New Energy Efficient Buildings**
- **Funds for Ramah Trading Post Renovation**

INCREASED FUNDS FOR OUR COMMUNITY SERVICES (BIA, BIE)

Funding to support the community programs in our two Master Contracts is based on annual Congressional appropriations for key sub-activities in the BIA budget (*Social Services, Welfare Assistance, Housing Program, Job Placement and Training, Aid to Tribal Government*) and the BIE budget (*Johnson-O'Malley Assistance Grants, Scholarships & Adult Education*). Over the years, there have been no substantive increases in these contracts for RNSB. We respectfully request a significant increase in these budget sub-activities so that we can fully develop the programs and services that will help our community thrive. Because the annual funding for these mature contracts has remained static and largely unchanged since the days of federal sequestration several Administrations ago, staff salaries have remained frozen and program costs have not been aligned with the increases that have occurred in inflation and the cost of living.

INCREASED FUNDS FOR OUR SCHOOL OPERATIONS (BIE)

Our core BIE account, **ISEP Formula Funds**, supports our school's operations. ISEP funding increases are vital to enhancing learning opportunities for all of our students through the training, development and retention of excellent teachers. Schools across the nation are facing a significant teacher shortage and that shortage is particularly acute in more remote communities like ours on the Navajo Nation. New Mexico has responded to this nationwide teacher shortage by significantly increasing teacher pay. RNSB does not have the budget to compete with the salaries offered by the public schools in New Mexico. In order to effectively address this problem, we need increases in ISEP funds, paired with **Full Funding for Teacher and Counselor Pay Parity**, and opportunities to expand the benefits package that we offer our teachers and staff, including **the opportunity to participate in the Federal Employee Retirement System (FERS)**. RNSB is also greatly concerned by the increased costs for student transportation and the deteriorating conditions of the roads serving our community. RNSB has been troubled by the BIE's outdated and incomplete student transportation funding formula, which currently underestimates **Student Transportation** needs. Most BIE-funded grant schools on the Navajo Nation exhaust their student transportation allocation by February of each school year. Additionally, **full funding and forward funding for Facilities Operations & Facilities Maintenance (O&M)** are urgently needed to cover the actual costs of repairing and maintaining all our buildings and facilities. Our current O&M funds only take care of 51% of the costs of operating and maintaining our buildings. In addition, that 51% of O&M costs must also include all the utilities costs. So, in the end, once the utilities are paid for, only 30 cents of every dollar needed to keep our buildings functioning properly is left. Further complicating matters, the Facilities Operations & Facilities Maintenance sub-activities are not forward funded, while most of the other accounts we need to operate our school are. This means that, if there are government shutdowns or continuing resolutions, we sometimes do not receive our limited O&M funds until the end of the school year!

INCREASED FUNDS FOR OUR HEALTH SERVICES (IHS)

The Pine Hill Health Center serves three counties in New Mexico and one county in Arizona: Cibola, McKinley, Catron, and Apache. Services are provided to the 19,023 residents of the four counties from the IHS **Hospitals & Health Clinics** budget activity. The Pine Hill Health Center has 6,462 active charts – 5,252 are Native Americans and 1,210 are non-Native Americans. But our current funding, which is for 2,619 Native Americans, is wholly inadequate. With sufficient funding, the Pine Hill Health Center could provide services to 10,000 Native Americans and others, resulting in savings to the federal government. This high quality care is projected to cost \$5,000 per capita, annually. Our Behavioral Health program, funded by the IHS **Mental Health** budget activity needs to double its staff to accommodate a care team panel size of 2,626 clients. Nationwide, 50% of all healthcare patients have mental health issues, and we only have one care team available. In addition, our dental program, funded by the IHS **Dental Health** budget activity, currently has only one dentist on staff and a panel size of 1,600 patients. We need four dentists to accommodate 5,252 patients, and the funds to recruit and hire them.

FUNDS FOR RNSB INFRASTRUCTURE UPGRADES AND NEW ENERGY EFFICIENT BUILDINGS

In order to provide quality services and programs, we must have high quality, modern infrastructure in place to support what we do. We need good roads, as well as upgraded and expanded water and wastewater systems, electrical lines, utilities lines and access to broadband. We also need new buildings for our programs. Most of RNSB infrastructure was built in the 1970s and early 1980s. Through natural wear and tear and despite having done due diligence in operations and maintenance, much of our infrastructure is in dire need of repair or replacement. The federal funds we receive are primarily for providing direct services to the community and not for infrastructure repairs and replacement.

Thanks to recent infusions of federal infrastructure and safety funding -- some of which was from the CARES Act and American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), we have successfully upgraded our dilapidated and dangerous high-voltage electrical system at Pine Hill. Additionally, we are in the planning phase with the BIA Division of Facilities Management and Construction for a new gymnasium and the renovation of our school buildings. While it has been both challenging and rewarding to be able to modernize some of our critical infrastructure with recent funding, much more needs to be done, which is described below.

Energy Transition ~ Strategic Planning for RNSB and Ramah Navajo Community

Energy costs continue to climb higher and higher for our old buildings and much of the infrastructure in these buildings, such as the HVAC systems, are inefficient or are no longer repairable. Looking towards the necessity of living in a changing climate and world, we want our buildings and work spaces to be safe and healthy, as well as climate-resilient and self-reliant. With designs that incorporate into these buildings our Diné teachings and Indigenous knowledge and technologies, we will be contributing to addressing the issues of climate change, such as the extreme weather and drought conditions that we face today, in a forward-looking manner. Key to this would be the development of a comprehensive strategic plan for energy transition as a first step. Such a plan would serve as a blueprint, outlining the goals for energy use, transition and resilience; completing energy audits at RNSB and in-community for all sectors of energy use (i.e., RNSB and community facilities, water/wastewater, residential housing, transportation, communications, safety, etc.); exploring the feasibility of retrofitting current RNSB and community facilities and energy usage sectors for energy production and efficiency, as well as opportunities for designing and creating new, sustainable and resilient energy-efficient systems (e.g., solar electricity, heat pumps, micro-grids) for RNSB facilities and in-community, thereby reducing greenhouse gas emissions and the overall costs of energy usage over time while increasing local energy sovereignty and resilience; and determining priorities for on-the-ground energy transition projects, their financing and timeframe. In order to initiate and complete this energy transition strategic plan, RNSB will need additional funding to hire experienced and highly qualified staff and consultants to assist in this critically important undertaking. ***We need Congress to consider these systemic challenges and opportunities that we face and to appropriate funding accordingly.***

New Energy Efficient RNSB Facilities Needed ~ Plan • Design • Build

A number of our federally funded programs at RNSB, such as administrative services, finance, social services, adult/continuing education and RNSB archives, are housed in temporary portable BIA buildings that date back almost a half century. Other programs, like KTDB community radio station, are in facilities that have been damaged by moisture and mold, which have compromised the integrity of the space as well as the health of our staff, or have outgrown their space, such as the Pine Hill Health Center and Behavioral Health program. All of these buildings are now beyond routine maintenance and repair and are in desperate need of replacement with permanent facilities. These new facilities are envisioned to be 21st century work spaces, equipped with state-of-the-art energy-efficient and water conservation systems, while integrating design elements that reflect Ramah Navajo history, culture and lifeways. Ensuring that our staff have culturally-sensitive, safe, healthy and inviting work environments that are also accessible to the public will require additional funding to begin the process of planning – designing – building these urgently needed new, permanent facilities. ***Unfortunately, there appears to be no budget line item to fund the replacement of the very buildings that we use to operate and carry out these vital, federally-funded programs. We need Congress to change this.***

FUNDS FOR RAMAH TRADING POST RENOVATION

The Ramah Trading Post served as an economic and social hub for Ramah Navajo families up until the 1980s. Not only does the trading post mark a particular historical and economic period for the Ramah Navajo people, its greatest significance comes from its location on Ramah Navajo ancestral lands, not far from the original ancestral home of our people in the Zuni Mountains. Funds are needed to plan for the usage and restoration of this historic trading post and the adjacent structures and land surrounding it (7 acres). And, once given a new Indigenous life, it is envisioned that the Ramah Trading Post will be more than just a place of memories and stories, but a place where the rich and complex history of the Ramah Navajo people resonates – a history that underscores our enduring strength and resilience through periods of encroachment, terror and imprisonment during the Long Walk, settler colonialism and the return to self-determination—a place that will evolve to serve our people and the global community in new and vibrant ways into the future.

In closing, we appreciate your kind consideration and support of these priorities and look forward to working closely with you and your staff to address these priorities. *Ahéhee'* ~ thank you!