



RAMAH NAVAJO SCHOOL BOARD, INC.

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**Congressional Testimony of Ramah Navajo School Board, Inc. (RNSB)
Regarding the FY 2025 Indian Affairs and Indian Health Service Budgets
To the U.S. House and Senate Appropriations Subcommittees
On Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies**

Filed April 29, 2024

Ramah Navajo School Board, Inc. (RNSB) operates a complex of Head Start, Elementary, Junior High and High Schools, as well as the Pine Hill Health Center and Behavioral Health and Social Services programs on the Ramah Navajo Reservation in New Mexico. In 1970, RNSB, Inc. established the Ramah Navajo High School, the first Indian community school governed by an all-Indian, locally controlled school board. Our efforts were a model for the groundbreaking 1975 Indian Self-Determination and Educational Assistance Act, PL 93-638 (ISDEAA). In 1978, we established health services under the ISDEAA. Today, RNSB, Inc. provides quality services and programs to address our community's needs and uplift their economic conditions.

RNSB Inc. would like to express deep appreciation to Representative Gabe Vasquez for introducing bipartisan legislation to extend Federal Employee Retirement System (FERS) benefits to teachers and staff in Tribally Controlled Schools (H.R. 5669). We would also like to express deep appreciation for the Replacement Facilities Construction funding that has been allocated to replace some of our most dilapidated school buildings. RNSB, Inc.'s priority budget concerns include line items in the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), Bureau Indian Affairs (BIA), and Indian Health Service (IHS) budgets. We also have significant facility and infrastructure challenges that must be addressed to be able to deliver our programs and services safely and without disruptions.

RNSB, Inc.'s Education priorities for the BIE and BIA budgets are:

- **\$950 million for ISEP Formula Funds (BIE) to provide equitable per student funding, and ensure full funding for Teacher Pay Parity (BIE);**
- **Ensure that all the employees of BIE-funded schools receive Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS) benefits (BIE);**
- **Increases for Student Transportation (BIE) and Road Maintenance for School Bus Routes (BIA);**
- **Full and Forward funding for Facilities Operations and Facilities Maintenance (BIE);**
- **Significant improvements to Maximo, the Facilities Management System; and**
- **Education Construction (BIE).**

RNSB, Inc.'s Health priorities for the IHS budget are:

- **\$54 billion for full and mandatory funding for the Indian Health Service;**
- **Provide Tribal Communities with supplemental resources to recover from the effects of COVID, protect against the next pandemic, and address the opioid epidemic;**
- **Increased support for emergency response capabilities; and**
- **Funding for Staff Housing and Administrative Complex Replacement.**

Education

ISEP Formula Funds is the core BIE account, which funds our school's operations, but it is severely underfunded. Underfunding ISEP means that RNSB, Inc. does not have the budget to compete with the teacher salaries and benefits being offered by public schools here in New Mexico, or with any other jurisdiction for that matter. Without equitable funding, we will continue to struggle to attract and retain quality teachers. Without quality teachers, we cannot offer our students a quality education – it is as simple as that. We ask the Subcommittees to equitably fund ISEP Formula Funds and we ask that the Subcommittees to continue to hold the BIE accountable for ensuring that the amounts requested for teacher and counselor pay parity are sufficient to match the increases provided by the Defense Department schools and are clearly calculated and identified for each school. Further, given the significant salary increases for public school teachers in New Mexico, RNSB, Inc. also encourages consideration for pay rate increases that would keep pace with either the Defense Department schools, or the rate of nearby public schools, whichever of these rates is higher.

Ensuring that all the employees of BIE-funded schools receive Federal Employees Retirement System Benefits (FERS) is critical. Representative Vasquez's Parity for Tribal Educators Act (H.R. 5669) is urgently needed. RNSB, Inc. observes that while Tribally Controlled Schools and BIE-operated schools are both part of the BIE-funded school system, it only the teachers and staff in BIE-operated schools who are eligible to receive FERS benefits. This disparity puts Tribally Controlled Schools like ours at a significant disadvantage and has the effect of undermining the intent of Congress in the Indian Self-Determination and Educational Assistance Act and the Tribally Controlled Schools Act, P.L. 100-297. As stated in Senate Report 118-83, accompanying the FY 2024 Consolidated Appropriations Act, "Any policy denying Federal benefits to employees carrying out a Federal trust responsibility is incompatible with the Federal policy of self-determination."

Increases for Student Transportation in the BIE Budget and Road Maintenance Funding for School Bus Routes in the BIA Budget are of particular importance to RNSB, Inc. Our experience is consistent with what the Government Accountability Office (GAO) reported in 2017: poor road conditions on school bus routes present safety concerns and pose obstacles to student attendance. Our school is in a high-elevation high desert mountainous region where we receive abundant snowfall in the wintertime and when the snow melts the dirt roads become a sea of mud. Many of our students travel long distances on unpaved (gravel) and unimproved earth roads. A strong rain or snowstorm can render our school bus routes impassible and disrupt learning for days. Also, as the GAO pointed out, our geographically dispersed locations and poor road conditions result in increased transportation costs for fuel, additional vehicle maintenance, and the increased bus driver pay associated with our rural and isolated routes. RNSB, Inc. is greatly concerned by the increased costs for Student Transportation and the continued deteriorating conditions of the roads serving our communities. Most Tribally Controlled Schools on the Navajo Nation exhaust their student transportation funds by *February* of each school year.

Full and Forward funding for Facilities Operations and Facilities Maintenance is long overdue. The amount of funding that is provided for our school Facilities Operations and Facilities Maintenance accounts is at 51%. Additionally, appropriations for these accounts have been funded in bits and pieces via numerous Continuing Resolutions for the last several decades.

Because these two core operating accounts are not forward funded like the rest of our core school operations accounts, we constantly have to move money from our forward accounts to cover things like our monthly utility bills and our ongoing maintenance needs. The funds we do receive are sent to Pine Hill Schools randomly and at different intervals throughout the fiscal year. This makes it very difficult to operate our school and complete our annual reports.

Significant improvements to Maximo, the Facilities Management System, and are needed. All the schools in the BIE-funded school system are expected to upload our facilities management deficiencies into the Maximo system. The Maximo system poses a barrier in reporting deficiencies and funding for projects needed at the school. The system is far more complex than most users are capable of. The awarding of funds and the approval process in Maximo also takes far too long. The awarding officials at the Indian Affairs Division of Facilities Management and Construction (DFMC) do not approve or provide feedback in a timely manner and in the meantime, the quotes we receive expire. This makes it extremely difficult to find contractors who will work with us. We have found that the only way to receive timely responses from the DFMC is if we travel to Washington, DC to request meetings with federal officials or if we involve our Congressional delegation in the process. Further, the projects we pay for out of our ISEP funds are not reimbursed. The Pine Hill Schools have paid for numerous deficiencies dating back to 2004 that have never been reimbursed, and now we are now hearing that the DFMC is considering limiting reimbursements to only two years back! Finally, the DFMC now requires schools to pay for items under \$10,000, when the threshold used to be \$2,500. We need a computer system that is user-friendly or funds to pay the salaries of trained IT personnel to manage Maximo at each school, a quick response to our inquiries and requests for funding, to be reimbursed for all the projects we have previously paid for with our ISEP funds, and we need adequate facilities funding.

Education Construction. RNSB, Inc. deeply appreciates being approved for Replacement Facilities Construction funding to address severe deficiencies in many of our school buildings. We are concerned; however, about the timing and the scope of this funding. Specifically, we operate our various education and health programs with a unified administration and support staff housed all in one administration building. As part of the planning for the Replacement Facility Construction process, were informed that the new administration building could only be built large enough to accommodate staff who work on Education, not Health. Because these programs share administration and support staff, this would create tremendous complications and inefficiencies for us.

Health

Full, Mandatory funding for the Indian Health Service. The IHS and its Tribal partners under the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act strive to provide Tribal people with access to high quality and comprehensive medical services, in line with the federal government's trust and treaty obligations. Unfortunately, the inadequate funding levels appropriated to the IHS year after year have translated to average per capita spending on health care several times less than average per capita health care spending for the general population. This chronic and systemic funding disparity has real, detrimental impacts on our communities. Native people are disproportionately affected by obesity, diabetes, heart disease, cancer, substance-use disorder and other largely preventable conditions. RNSB, Inc. therefore urges the Subcommittees to work

towards full funding for the IHS, in line with the IHS Tribal Budget Formulation Workgroup's recommendation of \$54 billion. Further, this funding should be reclassified as mandatory and thus not subject to the variability of the yearly appropriations process.

Supplemental resources to recover from the effects of COVID, protect against the next pandemic, and address the opioid epidemic. Because of chronic underfunding for public health infrastructure, overcrowded and underfunded housing, and a lack of access to the type of basic utilities most communities take for granted, our Tribal communities were far less equipped to respond to the COVID pandemic. This resulted in much higher rates of disease incidence and mortality than the general population. We are also similarly ill-equipped to care for community members suffering from the effects of long COVID—a little understood, but often debilitating aspect of the disease. Another issue that the COVID pandemic revealed is the lack of mental health services for domestic violence victims and the profound trauma they are grappling with. As the pandemic recedes, many people want to simply move forward, but we are still mourning lost family members in our small, tight-knit community and trying to secure the resources to assist children who lost their primary caregivers. We are concerned that if another pandemic occurs, none of these things will have changed. We are also similarly ill-equipped to address the rapidly worsening opioid epidemic – a national problem with devastating local impacts. RNSB, Inc. therefore urges significant supplemental funding to support impacted families, address long COVID, improve our public health infrastructure, address the opioid epidemic, and address the multifaceted trauma in our Tribal communities.

Increased support for emergency response capabilities. The growth of the population in our rural emergency response region is increasing and we are the only emergency medical service provider in the western part of Cibola County. We need to expand our EMS, by building another EMS station and helicopter landing pads for faster transport to urban trauma centers for life-threatening injuries or illnesses. Disasters like the recent train derailment in northwest New Mexico diverted Interstate 40 traffic onto rural narrow two-lane roads, making it dangerous to travel on with semi-tractor-trailers. There were many stories of near missed traffic accidents with semi-trucks. We need to be better prepared to respond to these emergencies and have the capability to transport patients within the “Golden Hour” of accessing life-saving health centers.

Staff Housing. RNSB, Inc. has not provided a separate designated housing for its health clinic employees and it now necessary to address this need which requires additional funding, due to the remote and isolated location of the community it is essential to provide necessary staff housing. Pine Hill Clinic employs 90 specialized staff in health such as doctors, nurses, pharmacists, psychologists, and dentists and assistants, which are from outside the community and require appropriate and adequate housing accommodations. In addition, many are on rotating schedules for short periods and require available housing.

Administration Complex Building. While the existing building that houses the comprehensive administration services comprising of administrative, financial, human resources and health and administrative service to provide the essential core functions of the RNSB, Inc. operations has been determined to be demolished due to its designated useful life and normal wear and tear. A replacement for this building for 40 employees is a dire need. A more modern building with state-of-the-art technology and appropriate equipment upgrades and infrastructures is overdue.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide appropriations testimony about our priorities.