

**Written Testimony for the
U.S. House of Representative's Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
American Indian and Alaska Native Public Witness Hearing**

Presented by

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INTRODUCTION

Halito, sv hohchifo yvt Stacy Shepherd. Greetings. My name is Stacy Shepherd, and I serve as the executive officer of member services for the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. My testimony will focus on our education programs, which are a very high priority for our Tribe and a crucial pathway to prosperity and empowerment for our members.

The Choctaw Nation is the third largest federally recognized Tribe in America, with approximately 225,000 tribal members, and our Reservation is the second largest in America, spanning close to 11,000 square miles in southeastern Oklahoma.

We cherish our rich history and our deep commitment to the success of our people. We prioritize education as a vital tool for empowering future generations, strengthening our communities, and preserving our cultural heritage. Access to quality education, especially in rural areas, remains a critical need for our students, as they often face unique challenges such as limited resources, geographic barriers, and disparities in funding.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify on the fiscal year 2026 funding for education in rural schools and to advocate for the necessary investments that will help bridge these gaps. By supporting equitable education opportunities, we ensure that our students have the foundation they need to thrive academically, professionally, and culturally, ultimately contributing to the continued success of the Choctaw Nation and the rest of America.

FISCAL YEAR 2026 REQUESTS

We recognize public schools are the heart of rural communities, which is why our School of Choctaw Language partners with local school districts across the Choctaw Nation Reservation to preserve our native language. Through these partnerships, we provide Choctaw language courses to 1100 students, both Native and non-Native.

Our Choctaw Nation Head Start program provides early childhood education and support to hundreds of students, laying a strong foundation for lifelong learning. About two-thirds of our students are Choctaw tribal members, ensuring that a majority of our youngest learners receive

culturally enriched, high-quality education. This program plays a vital role in preparing children for academic success by fostering cognitive, social, and emotional development. Additionally, we collaborate with public schools to offer Head Start services within their facilities, ensuring our youngest at-risk learners receive early intervention and wraparound family support, a crucial step in preparing low-income families for school readiness. By investing in early education, Head Start helps strengthen families and communities while preserving Choctaw traditions and values for future generations. The Choctaw Nation substantially supplements the limited federal funding available for Head Start.

Education has always been a cornerstone of our Tribe's values. After our removal and resettlement in Oklahoma, one of the first priorities of our ancestors was to establish schools and churches. Decades later, Jones Academy, our Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) residential school, was founded in 1891 and continues to serve as a beacon of opportunity for Native children dealing with family hardships. Today, it provides education and support to 147 students from 28 different tribes and was one of few BIE residential schools to remain open during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Remarkably, for two consecutive years, 90% of Jones Academy graduating seniors have enrolled in college, trade school, or the military, with a 70% continuation rate. Jones Academy middle and high school students attend Hartshorne Public School, where they continue to excel. Notably, the Class of 2024 salutatorian was a Jones Academy resident since the first grade and is now pursuing a bachelor's degree in social work at Haskell Indian Nations University. Because the federal funding of Jones Academy has been so inadequate, the Choctaw Nation has substantially supplemented that funding in recent years.

The Johnson-O'Malley (JOM) program serves a total of 13,453 students, providing vital educational support and resources such as school supplies, tutoring and cultural enrichment. This funding plays a vital role in bridging gaps in resources, ensuring that Native students have access to the tools necessary for academic success. Since inflation has substantially eroded the value of federal JOM funding over the years, the Choctaw Nation has felt compelled to provide additional tribal funding to support our elementary and secondary school students.

Our Vocational Rehabilitation program has assisted 148 Native students with tuition and job placement, providing crucial support to help them achieve their educational and career goals. Among these, 39 individuals have successfully secured employment, highlighting the program's effectiveness in creating real opportunities for students with disabilities. One remarkable participant earned her Doctor of Pharmacy through the support of these services, exemplifying the transformative impact of this program. With a modest annual funding amount of \$211,000, Vocational Rehabilitation continues to remove barriers to education and employment, empowering Native students to reach their full potential and contribute meaningfully to their communities.

The Choctaw Nation annually allocates substantial amounts of our tribal funds for education services, demonstrating our strong commitment to enhancing the educational opportunities for our tribal and community members. These funds are directed toward a variety of initiatives including partnerships with public schools, higher education support, supplemental funds for Jones Academy and Head Start, and specialized programs designed to improve academic outcomes for Native and non-Native students. We make these funding decisions to make up for the fact that the United States is failing to meet its trust obligations to provide this funding for education. We urge you, now more than ever, to redouble this Subcommittee's efforts to protect and increase federal funding for Indian education.

Tribally-funded programs such as Choctaw Nation Partnership of Summer School Education (POSSE) collaborate with local school districts on our Reservation to offer a 23-day summer learning program. This program supports qualifying kindergarten through 3rd grade students identified through an approved Oklahoma Reading Sufficiency Act assessment as needing intervention. With a strong track record of success, POSSE has helped improve literacy rates, as demonstrated by the increasing percentage of third graders testing on grade level in their post-assessments. Approximately 33,000 students have participated in POSSE since its inception in 2015.

Career Development has provided 6,640 tribal members with career and technical training to help individuals gain the skills, knowledge, and resources needed to advance in their careers, ultimately contributing to a stronger, more skilled workforce. By focusing on career development, we ensure that people have the tools they need to succeed, which in turn benefits the broader community and economy.

CONCLUSION

As we look ahead, continued federal investment in Indian education is essential to ensuring that Native American students have a fair shot at the American dream. Strong education systems are critical for healthy tribal nations and rural communities. While the Subcommittee is facing many competing priorities and challenges, funding support for education should not be sacrificed for the sake of other goals. The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma is requesting the Congress honor its federal trust responsibility to increase its funding and support for rural and Indian education efforts like JOM, vocational rehabilitation, BIE-funded schools like Jones Academy, and the efforts of tribes to work with local public school districts to increase the quality of educational opportunities.