

Written Testimony
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**House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related
Agencies**
American Indian and Alaska Native Public Witness Hearing

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The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma respectfully submits this written testimony for the Fiscal Year 2027 American Indian and Alaska Native public witness hearing before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies.

At the outset, we want to sincerely thank Chairman Simpson and Chairman Cole and all the Members of the Committee for your steady leadership during what has been an extraordinarily challenging fiscal environment. Over the past year, the Committee faced significant budgetary constraints and competing national priorities. Despite these pressures, you worked diligently to protect and maintain funding for critical Indian programs. Your efforts provided essential stability for Tribal communities and demonstrated a continued commitment to the United States' trust and treaty responsibilities. We are deeply grateful for that leadership.

As you develop the FY 2027 Interior appropriations bill, we respectfully urge the Subcommittee to at a minimum maintain—and where possible increase—funding for Tribal education and workforce development programs. These programs are not ancillary services; they are foundational to Tribal self-governance, economic independence, and the long-term vitality of rural communities across Indian Country.

For the Choctaw Nation, education is not merely a policy priority. It is a core cultural value and a solemn federal obligation. Following our removal to Indian Territory, one of our ancestors' first acts was to re-establish schools for our children. They understood that education would determine whether future generations could thrive.

This year, the Choctaw Nation is investing \$47 million in a diverse set of education and workforce development programs. Federal support is essential to the success and sustainability of these efforts. That support also reflects the United States' trust and treaty responsibilities and the importance of respectful, government-to-government partnerships between Tribes and federal agencies.

The Choctaw Nation partners closely with public school districts across southeastern Oklahoma to strengthen educational outcomes for both Native and non-Native students. Through our School of Choctaw Language, we provide instruction to approximately 790 students across the Reservation in 38 public school districts, preserving our language while strengthening student identity, engagement, and academic success. Since 2019, the Choctaw Nation's Teach 2 Reach federal grant, funded through the U.S. Department of Education, has successfully supported the recruitment and retention of

Native educators in Oklahoma's public schools. The program helped place 63 Native teachers into classrooms across the state, strengthening culturally responsive education and addressing teacher workforce needs. Through targeted pre- and post-graduation professional development and the support of experienced mentors, Teach 2 Reach has ensured new educators are prepared and supported as they enter and remain in the profession. With a total investment of approximately \$1,1 million, the program continues to build a sustainable pipeline of Native teachers while contributing to improved educational outcomes for students in Oklahoma.

Our Choctaw Nation Head Start program currently serves 378 children annually, of whom approximately 77.9% percent are Choctaw and 7.4% are other tribal affiliation for a total of 85.3% Native American. Head Start provides comprehensive early childhood education, health screenings, nutritional services, and family support that lay the groundwork for long-term academic success. We also embed Head Start classrooms within public school facilities, ensuring that at-risk children and low-income families receive early intervention services before kindergarten. These partnerships strengthen entire school systems and communities.

However, federal funding has not kept pace with rising operational costs, staffing needs, and inflation. The Choctaw Nation supplements these programs with significant tribal funds to prevent reductions in service. Without stable or increased funding in FY 2027, Tribes will continue to face difficult choices about sustaining early childhood capacity.

Jones Academy, our Bureau of Indian Education residential school founded in 1891, continues to serve Native students experiencing family hardship. The Academy currently serves 150 students representing 25 Tribes from 12 different states. For the past 3 years, 100% percent of graduating seniors have enrolled in college, trade school, or the military. These outcomes reflect both student resilience and dedicated staff.

Yet federal funding levels have consistently fallen short of fully supporting facilities, staffing, and programming needs. Deferred maintenance, recruitment challenges, and rising costs place pressure on operations. The Choctaw Nation has invested substantial tribal resources to ensure safe housing, quality instruction, and comprehensive student support services. Strong and stable FY 2027 appropriations are essential to sustaining these gains and ensuring that BIE-funded schools can operate safely and effectively. Choctaw Nation invests \$1,470,221 annually to assist with competitive staff wages, behavioral health, and extra-curricular activities for students.

The Johnson-O'Malley program currently serves 13,433 students within the Choctaw Nation. JOM provides tutoring, school supplies, cultural programming, and academic enrichment services that directly enhance student achievement and engagement. Although recent reforms have modernized enrollment calculations, inflation has significantly eroded the purchasing power of JOM funding. As enrollment grows and costs increase, flat funding effectively results in a reduction in services. Increasing JOM funding in FY 2027 is critical to ensuring Native students receive equitable support.

Workforce development programs are equally essential to long-term stability. Through our Vocational Rehabilitation program, 150 participants received tuition assistance, counseling, and employment services during the past year. Of those, 19 individuals secured employment. With annual federal funding of approximately \$175,297, this program delivers measurable, life-changing outcomes for Native individuals with disabilities.

In addition, Choctaw Nation career development initiatives have provided training and employment services to 5,000 tribal members with a tribal budget of \$8,492,371, strengthening families and contributing to the regional workforce. These programs represent one of the most direct pathways from education to economic independence. Maintaining and strengthening funding in FY 2027 will ensure continued progress.

We would also like to respectfully address the Administration's proposal to transfer certain Tribal education programs from the U.S. Department of Education to the Bureau of Indian Education, and to move workforce-related programs to the Department of Labor.

While we recognize that administrative realignment may be intended to improve coordination, we are concerned about the absence of a clearly articulated, phased, and transparent transition strategy. In discussions with agency officials, it has become clear that both the Bureau of Indian Education and the Department of Labor are currently operating with significant staffing shortages and capacity constraints. BIE, in particular, faces high vacancy rates and longstanding recruitment challenges. Absorbing additional programs without first rebuilding staffing levels, strengthening administrative infrastructure, and ensuring adequate funding poses a real risk of service disruption.

Our primary concern is continuity. Delays in grant announcements, interruptions in on-going awards, or confusion regarding oversight authority could directly impact students, families, and individuals with disabilities. Even temporary funding gaps would have serious consequences.

We believe the transition presents an important opportunity to expand the use of Tribal self-determination contracting and 638 compacting authority as well as 477 Tribal administrative authority. Increased utilization of 638 compacting of BIE would allow Tribes to design, administer, and manage education and workforce programs in ways that are better aligned with local needs and labor markets. It would streamline decision-making for Tribal governments, reduce administrative and management burdens on the BIE, and promote more efficient program delivery. Likewise, it would be very useful for the Committee to include express language directing that any workforce program and funding transfers be accompanied by a requirement that the Department of Labor encourage and facilitate Tribal assumptions of authority under Public Law 102-477 as amended. Expanding 638 and 477 authorities while transitioning Department of Education authority to the Department of Labor and Bureau of Indian Education would represent a meaningful affirmation of Tribal sovereignty and demonstrate the federal government's commitment to meeting its trust obligations through practical, results-driven governance.

We respectfully encourage the Committee to ensure that BIE and the Department of Labor are rebuilt with sufficient human capital and institutional capacity before any program transfers occur. Adequate appropriations, hiring authorities, and operational support will be necessary to stabilize these agencies and allow them to manage programs effectively. Strong congressional oversight will also be essential throughout any transition process, including careful consideration of opportunities to increase Tribal control through self-determination mechanisms.

The Choctaw Nation invests substantial tribal funds each year to supplement federal education and workforce programs because we believe deeply in the transformative power of education and opportunity. However, Tribal governments cannot and should not bear sole responsibility for fulfilling federal obligations.

As you prepare the FY 2027 Interior appropriations bill, we respectfully request that you strengthen funding for BIE schools, Johnson–O'Malley, Vocational Rehabilitation, and Tribal workforce initiatives; ensure continued support for early childhood education; and provide careful oversight to ensure that federal agencies responsible for these programs are fully staffed, prepared, and capable of managing them successfully.

Strong Tribal education and workforce systems strengthen not only Indian Country, but rural America as a whole. Continued federal investment is both a legal obligation and a sound national policy choice.

We thank the Subcommittee for the opportunity to submit this testimony and for your continued commitment to Tribal Nations.