

Testimony of Dr. Toni Tsatoke-Mule, Kiowa Tribe, Executive Director, on essential needs and priorities for Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Indian Education for the Kiowa Tribe and the Southern Plains Region

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

March 17, 2026

Esteemed Members of the Committee:

My name is Toni Tsatoke-Mule. I am a citizen of the Kiowa Tribe and currently serve in the role of Executive Director of the Kiowa Education Agency. I am here today, speaking on behalf of the Kiowa Executive Branch, and at the request of our Chairman David Paddlety Sullivan. I am here to be a voice for Kiowa students of all ages and share about our essential needs within the Kiowa Tribe and the Southern Plains Region as a whole. Today's hearing provides a way for tribal nations, no matter how large or small, to exercise tribal sovereignty, reaffirm the Federal Trust Responsibility, and honor the firm foundation of treaty law, as supreme law of the land. Securing and prioritizing funding for the Department of the Interior and all related agencies are not only foundational, but are dollars well-spent that meet some of the greatest needs and dire conditions that exist in our country. These critical funds make a difference to real people like myself and the students that I serve. No resource is better spent than to progress the pursuit of education and improve the quality of life. Throughout our history, we have survived and endured. Today is no different. In these very uncertain and ever-changing times, I sincerely appreciate you all for listening to all of the testimonies given during this hearing.

Today, I am speaking before this body as a product of tribal college education. Haskell Indian Nations University located in Lawrence, Kansas is a six hour drive from Carnegie, Oklahoma. Today, Haskell prepares native students for career paths and leadership roles, but not at the expense of Native cultural identity. In tribal colleges, our identity is a strength, not a weakness or a challenge to hinders academic success. When I entered Haskell, the only educational experiences I carried with me were in mainstream, public schools. That is common for many. By that time, I only knew what it felt like to be unseen, unheard, outnumbered, small and excluded. As a child, I could not articulate the imbalance of power and marginalization that was so evident to me. Our Kiowa Education Agency is located in Anadarko, Oklahoma. That is the home of Riverside Indian School, which provides a safe and quality education for so many students in need. To the people who work and teach there, and for the students that attend there, it is much more than a school. It's a family. Also, in the town of Anadarko is our Kiowa Education Agency. We serve all of our children and youth from our babies that enter Child Care so parents can contribute in the workforce or pursue education. Our JOM and Youth Leadership Program promotes academics and leadership development. We have Kiowa students in schools all across Oklahoma and United States. We celebrate their achievements and create protective factors to support and encourage them. Our Higher Education, Vocational Training, and Job Placement Training helps facilitate self-sufficiency among our Kiowa citizens. Who understands our students' challenges? Many challenges originate from a history marked by land displacement, resource exploitation and war. The implications of our shared history manifest every day in the social problems we all witness and experience in native communities in forms of poverty and violence. Despite all of these things, our students seek knowledge armed with possibility and desire to make a difference for themselves, their families, and the tribal nations that they inherently represent.

American Indian educational programs and institutions have been affected in recent years by drastic propositions and abrupt cuts in funding. Programs that primarily affect Native students have been subject to arbitrary moves, changes, and consolidations with no meaningful tribal consultations to guide these impactful actions. To our Native students, this feels like a direct threat to the future of our young people everywhere. Our students are persistent, hard-working young people who dare to aspire to something greater. Many demonstrate mighty resilience and against all odds, they continue their studies under a constant cloud of insecurity. It is difficult to conceive that education, of any matter, could be a target. We must safeguard the BIA and BIE systems that have the potential to “right” so many “wrongs” in the history of American Indian education, including the boarding school era which separated children from parents, and disrupted our ability to transmit language and cultural knowledge. The only path for tribal self-determination is education. Unfortunately, I don’t sit on the appropriations committee. We must inform others who have the power to protect our students, our teachers, our learning institutions, our pathway forward. Advance appropriations and increased support for BIA and BIE fuels educational opportunity. It is because of these vital programs that I sit here today, fully equipped to confront the educational challenges of our people. The infrastructure needed to sustain and develop the capacity of each Tribal Education Department or Agency (also called a TED or T.E.A.) is crucial in our educational journey. The role of TEDs are to assist and ease navigating the intersections of local, state, and tribal education agencies to remove barriers.

The core values of Persistence, Strength, and Purpose that are instilled through Kiowa wisdom, have guided my steps once again from our Kiowa tribal headquarters on the southern plains, to the front steps of this building in Washington, D.C. Like many of our Kiowa leaders of the past, we make this journey to assert ourselves as the indigenous people of the very land that we stand on. The mission and work of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Bureau of Indian Education are not D.E.I. initiatives. We affirm the government-to-government relationship. We acknowledge that the basic and fundamental provisions of education and health care were of primary importance in binding treaties signed by our ancestors, and which established the federal-American Indian trust responsibility.

So, I present this oral testimony before you today validating educational opportunity afforded through resources appropriated within the Department of the Interior. At times the decisions that we make have impact that we never see in our lifetime. The mission and work of the BIA and the BIE can and does make a real difference in the lives of our Kiowa citizens each and every day. I want to extend my appreciation to this Subcommittee for allowing me to provide testimony in support of program funding that is so critically important to Indian Country. Àhò (Thank you).