

TESTIMONY OF KASEY VELASQUEZ  
CHAIRMAN OF THE WHITE MOUNTAIN APACHE TRIBE  
BEFORE THE U.S. HOUSE NATURAL RESOURCES SUBCOMMITTEE ON  
OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS

Leaving Indian Children Behind: Reviewing The State Of BIE Schools

February 12, 2025

Good afternoon, Chairman Gosar and Ranking Member Dexter. Thank you for inviting me to testify on behalf of the White Mountain Apache Tribe in Eastern Arizona. I am Chairman Kasey Velasquez, a former teacher, school counselor, principal, a dean of students, and the former executive director of early childhood development, and an ardent supporter of education for White Mountain Apache youth and all Native American students. I am here today to address the critical need for additional funding to support the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) schools on the Fort Apache Indian Reservation. Funding is needed to address the dilapidated state of BIE schools, including for maintenance and repairs, teacher housing, school security measures, critical technology upgrades to comport with today's standards, and desperately needed improvements to student dormitories.

Our schools continue to do what they can with what they have, but outdated infrastructure and technology, coupled with inadequate housing and resources for staff, have resulted in high turnover and a lack of continuity in operations at our schools. Our students need and deserve better. These youth represent the future of the United States of America, and I hope you will help us deliver on the tremendous promise these young people possess.

### **THE CURRENT SITUATION**

**Dilapidated Infrastructure:** The BIE schools on the Fort Apache Reservation are operating in buildings with failing infrastructure, including leaky roofs, broken heating systems, and outdated electrical wiring, which pose safety hazards and disrupt the learning environment. We have regular outages due to the load on our outdated electrical systems, which results in spoiled food, lack of computers, limited use and access to broadband, and days without heating in the winter, forcing the schools to occasionally close. One of our schools is located within a historic building, which requires special approvals to implement infrastructure upgrades and even to install ADA-compliant doors and ramps. Historic structures are costly to maintain, and our buildings are failing.

**Inadequate Housing Supply:** Staff housing on the Fort Apache Indian Reservation is very limited, and suffers the same issues with deferred maintenance as the school buildings. Lack of adequate and affordable housing for teachers has made it difficult to attract and retain qualified teachers. Due to our remote location, teachers often have to travel great distances from towns outside the Reservation, with housing costs that far exceed what BIE is able to pay them. Lack of housing and resources for teachers has resulted in very high attrition and lack of continuity in the educational environment at our BIE schools.

**Security Concerns:** Unlike most public schools in the United States, our schools have open campuses, meaning anyone can walk onto school grounds and enter the buildings. Insufficient security systems, inadequate lighting, and a lack of trained personnel leave students and staff vulnerable to safety threats. Our school buses and grounds have been vandalized repeatedly, requiring costly repairs, because we do not have security personnel or cameras to catch and deter offenders.

**Technology Gap:** In tandem with our ancient and overloaded electrical systems, outdated technology infrastructure prevent BIE students on Fort Apache from accessing modern educational tools, which are necessary to succeed in today's world. Students must learn to use technology efficiently to perform on par with other students, and without those tools we are failing them.

**Outdated Dormitories:** White Mountain Apache Tribe hosts many residential students at BIE schools. Often these students have nowhere else to go, and the dorms offer safety and security they might not have at home. Yet, student dormitories are at capacity despite being understaffed and lacking essential amenities, impacting student well-being and academic performance.

These issues impact the educational achievement of students in our BIE schools, hindering their ability to reach their full academic potential. Old and dilapidated facilities, inadequate teacher and student housing, lack of access to modern technology, and security concerns have fostered a learning environment that is not conducive to academic success. We need to do better collectively for our youth, and ensure that they know the United States cares about their success.

## **FUNDING PRIORITIES**

**Maintenance and Repairs:** Immediate funding is needed to address critical maintenance and repair issues in the BIE schools on the Fort Apache Reservation.

**Teacher Housing:** We request that the United States invest in quality teacher housing on our Reservation to attract and retain qualified teachers.

**School Security:** We request funding to provide adequate security measures, including outside lighting, security cameras, and trained personnel, to protect student safety.

**Technology:** We request funding for modern technology infrastructure and devices to provide students with access to digital learning opportunities and the ability to compete with their peers.

**Dormitory Improvements:** We request funding to renovate and expand residential dormitories to provide safe, comfortable living spaces for at-risk students.

## **CONCLUSION**

The BIE schools play a vital role in the education of children on the Fort Apache Reservation, but their current condition does not foster academic or personal success. By providing necessary funding for maintenance, teacher housing, security, technology, and student dormitories, we can ensure that our students have access to a quality education and can grow up to lead successful, independent lives. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Kasey Velasquez, Chairman  
White Mountain Apache Tribe