



NATIONAL CONGRESS OF AMERICAN INDIANS

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources Subcommittee on Indigenous Peoples
Oversight Hearing: Examining the Bureau of Indian Education’s School
Reopening Guidance During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Questions for the Record

Questions from Rep. Ruben Gallego for the Honorable Joe Garcia:

1. In an ideal world, what would BIE’s decision-making process about the upcoming school year have looked like?

Response:

The Bureau of Indian Education’s (BIE’s) decision-making process regarding the 2020-2021 school year should have centered around the safety and well being of students, staff, and the community. Rather than taking risks in reopening schools, the BIE and Department of the Interior (Interior) should have deferred to all tribal nations, their elected leaders, and their local educational advisors on how to reopen schools safely.

In an ideal world these discussions with BIE, Interior, and tribal leaders would have occurred in May of 2020 rather than in July, which would have provided more time for tribal communities to prepare for various situations. Doing so would have allowed for better collaboration and planning between tribal authorities, local and state health authorities, and the BIE, in order to develop health and safety plans alongside community members.

2. The Broken Promises report by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights found that remote areas in Indian Country lack telecommunications infrastructure and broadband access.

- a) How has the lack of infrastructure and broadband access affected Native students during this pandemic?**
- b) How will this affect achievement gaps?**

Response:

According to a Government Accountability Office report, only 65 percent of individuals living on tribal lands had access to fixed broadband in contrast to the access rate of 92 percent for all Americans. Further, 34 percent of Native students

nationwide do not have internet access in their homes, compared to 24 percent of students nationwide.¹

Not being able to connect to the internet hinders a student's ability to get assistance or engage in active lesson plans. Further, not being able to communicate with an instructor or ask questions when unsure of a program or topic discourages students and furthers the achievement gap. Finally, if a teacher is not able to engage with their students and provide formative assessments, their learning progression can be hindered, which can result in students not achieving the educational outcomes and goals for the day. Four months of this or more will widen the achievement gap and have a negative effect on our students and their futures.

3. The CARES Act provided \$153 million for BIE schools. Is this funding enough to meet the needs of Native students?

Response:

Simply put, no. A significant investment in emergency funding is needed for the BIE system. On July 24, 2020, 21 national and regional tribal organizations requested at least \$1.5 billion in direct funding to BIE funded schools to meet the health, safety, and educational needs of students due to the impacts of COVID-19. This funding would go towards purchasing education technology hardware, software, and connectivity; prevention and response efforts related to COVID; providing mental health services and services specific to the unique needs of AI/AN students; hiring additional IT staff; increased transportation to allow students to social distance on buses; and cleaning and sanitizing school facilities. This does not include the cost of maintenance and repair to BIE school facilities that would allow students and staff to abide by CDC guidance

Questions from Rep. Raúl Grijalva for the Honorable Joe Garcia:

1. We have reviewed reporting by the GAO and Department of Interior's Office of Inspector General indicating that BIE facilities are currently in subpar conditions and do not meet health and safety standards.

a. Can you share your concerns about BIE school facilities, in subpar conditions, meeting the CDC's guidelines to safely reopen schools?

Response:

Prior to the pandemic, the Department of the Interior recently identified \$629 million in deferred maintenance for BIE funded education facilities and \$86 million in deferred maintenance for BIE educational quarters. These maintenance needs include utility systems such as portable water wells, water treatment plans, and water storage tanks. It is impossible for AI/AN students to abide by CDC's sanitation and hygiene standards in response to COVID-19 without the necessary water and sanitation

¹ Alliance for Excellent Education, Future Ready Schools, Students of Color Caught in the Homework Gap, <https://futureready.org/homework-gap/>

infrastructure at our BIE schools. Due to the large amount of deferred maintenance, Indian Country has concerns on BIE schools meeting CDC's guidelines to reopen schools safely.

Additionally, before the pandemic, it was common for BIE classrooms to have to close for up to 2 weeks due to the presence of dangerous mold, unsafe roofs, and HVAC system failures, which all resulted in pre-pandemic lost instruction during the academic year. Kindergarten students alone have been displaced from their regular classrooms for three years at some schools.