

**Written Testimony of Sylvia Largo, Principal of Pinon Community School and
Member of the Dine' Grant Schools Association**

Submitted to the

**United States House and Senate Appropriations Subcommittees on
Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies**

Regarding the FY 2021 Indian Affairs Budget

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The Dine' Grant Schools Association (DGSA) is comprised of the school boards of eight Bureau of Indian Education (BIE)-funded schools which are operated pursuant to the Tribally Controlled Schools Act (Pub. L. 100-297) and located on the Navajo Nation in Arizona and New Mexico. These schools are: Black Mesa Community School; Dzilth-Na-O-Dith-Hle Community Grant School; Hanaadli Community School/Dormitory, Inc.; Na'Neelzhin Olta Community School; Pinon Community School; Ramah Navajo Pine Hill Schools; To'Hajiilee Community School and Wide Ruins Community Schools, Inc.

Success through language, culture, community involvement, and high standards. As tribal school boards, we have both the greater freedom and the tremendous responsibility to ensure that our students receive a quality and culturally relevant education that will help them reach their fullest potential. We believe that successful students know who they are, that they are valued, and that great things are expected of them. Our schools incorporate Navajo language and culture into our curricula. We set rigorous standards that our students must strive to meet and recognize their achievements to affirm their sense of accomplishment.

Our highest funding priorities remain those core line items in the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) budget that keep our lights on, our doors open, our students safe, cared for, and challenged to reach their full potential and that pay the very modest salaries of our talented and dedicated teachers and staff. **ISEP Formula Funds; Student Transportation; Early Childhood Development (FACE); fully funded Tribal Grant Support Costs; Education Program Enhancements; Facilities Operations and Maintenance;** as well as **School Replacement Construction and Facilities Improvement and Repair.**

This year, we would like to highlight three aspects of these priorities and why they matter so much for student outcomes: (1) **BIE Teacher Pay Parity:** the need to fund the currently unfunded statutory requirement that teachers and counselors teaching in the BIE school system be paid the same amount as their counterparts who are teaching overseas in the Department of Defense Education Activity (DODEA) school system; (2) **Helping Schools Spend Less on Insurance:** a no-cost opportunity to help BIE-funded, tribally-controlled schools save money when purchasing health insurance for our teachers and staff; and (3) **Native Language Immersion:** why sustained and increased funding for the **Native Language Immersion** program is so critical.

(1) **BIE Teacher Pay Parity.** Federal law requires that teachers and counselors in the BIE school system are to be paid the same rate as their counterparts serving overseas in the Department of Defense Education Activity (DODEA) school system. 25 U.S.C. § 2012.

While the BIE system schools are required to pay comparable rates to teachers and counselors, Congress is not compelled to appropriate sufficient funds to fulfil this requirement.

Each year, from FY 1999 through FY 2014, the Department of Interior's annual Budget Justification for Indian Affairs requested specific Fixed Costs increases to account for this requirement and cited 25 U.S.C. § 2012 among its authorizing statutes. Please note that for each of the years from FY 1999-FY 2005, the Department of Interior would specify how much of this increase was to be directed to BIE-funded schools operated pursuant to Indian Self-Determination and Education Act (PL 93-638) contracts and Tribally Controlled Schools Act (PL 100-297) grants.

The Department of Interior's annual Budget Justification for Indian Affairs continues to cite 25 U.S.C. § 2012 among its authorizing statutes, but in FY 2015 the Department inexplicably stopped requesting this as a Fixed Costs increase and has failed to make this request each year thereafter.

When the Department of Interior fails to request this required increase as a Fixed Costs increase, these funds are left out when Congress approves "requested fixed costs and related transfers." Then, when these Fixed Costs are not funded, BIE-funded schools must use their core operating and education funds from the Indian School Equalization Program (ISEP) Formula Funds account to make up the difference, thereby reducing the funding for other critical educational needs.

This could not come at a worse time: there is a teacher shortage throughout the Southwest and schools are struggling to compete for teachers. As the BIE has acknowledged, the BIE school system has long struggled to recruit and retain a sufficient number of qualified teachers, often due to factors such as the remote location of many schools and the lack of competitive salaries and adequate employee housing options. Meanwhile, the State of New Mexico is considering increasing teacher pay by five (5) percent for School Year 20-21. As our schools try to match our teachers' salaries with those of the public schools in New Mexico and Arizona in order to retain our staff, we must make sacrifices in other vital areas. For example, one of our member schools was forced to leave its Librarian and Receptionist positions vacant and make other cuts to meet the increases for teachers' salaries.

The Dine Grant Schools Association respectfully asks you to help by calling for the Department of Interior to restore its practice of including in its annual budget request a Fixed Costs increase to cover BIE teacher and counselor pay parity with their DODEA overseas counterparts pursuant to 25 U.S.C. § 2012. We also ask that you insist upon the Department specifying the portion of those Fixed Costs increases that are designated for BIE-funded schools operated under contracts and grants in the Bureau of Indian Education Budget Justification. Alternately, we believe that Congress could simply specifically provide this Fixed Costs increase in appropriations should the Administration fail to request it.

(2) Helping Schools Spend Less ISEP Funds When Purchasing Insurance Coverage for Employees. Tribes carrying out federal programs under the Indian Self-Determination and

Education Assistance Act (PL 93-638) and urban Indian organizations operating health programs under IHCIA Title IV can participate in the Federal Employee Health Benefits program (FEHB) and Federal Employee Group Life Insurance (FEGLI) program to get a better deal purchasing insurance coverage for their employees. Tribes and urban Indian organizations that participate in these two programs cover the full cost of the employer share and their employees cover the employee share, so as a result, the federal government incurs no additional costs when eligible Tribal and urban Indian employers opt into these programs.

Unfortunately, we understand that a clarification is needed to ensure that BIE-funded schools being operated pursuant to the Tribally-Controlled Schools Act (PL 100-297) can participate as well. If BIE-funded, tribally-controlled schools could participate, not only would we get a better deal and spend less of our scarce ISEP funds purchasing insurance coverage for our employees, we would be able to purchase more comprehensive insurance coverage. This would not cost the federal government any money, and would in fact help us spend less of our federally appropriated money on insurance, leaving more ISEP funds for essentials such as classroom materials or giving our dedicated and underpaid teachers a very modest raise and providing benefits competitive with state public school systems.

We would like to thank the Chair and Ranking Member of this Subcommittee, the Administration, Members of Congress on a bipartisan basis, as well as the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI), the National Indian Education Association (NIEA) and many others for supporting this clarification to include tribally-controlled schools. We understand that one school testified before Congress that with this technical fix, they would be able to save nearly \$1 million per year in insurance costs for employees. We note that of the 183 schools in the BIE-funded school system, 130 of them are tribally-controlled and would thus be able to benefit from these cost savings.

(3) Native Language Immersion. We would like to thank the Subcommittees and the Administration for your commitment to increasing funding for **Native Language Immersion** under the **Education Program Enhancements** line item. Our language, history and culture are inextricably linked. Language immersion goes far beyond learning simple words and empowers our students fully embrace their heritage and identity as Dine'. Further, studies and our own observation show that students who have the opportunity to fully embrace their language and identity, perform better in school. Ahé hee', Thank you!