

TESTIMONY
OF
TONY L. DEARMAN
DIRECTOR – BUREAU OF INDIAN EDUCATION
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
ON
“PREPARING TO HEAD BACK TO CLASS: ADDRESSING HOW TO
SAFELY REOPEN BUREAU OF INDIAN EDUCATION SCHOOLS”
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS
U.S. SENATE

JULY 29, 2020

Good afternoon Chairman Hoeven, Vice Chairman Udall, and Members of the Committee. Thank you for the invitation to appear again on behalf of the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE). This is a challenging time for schools and students across the country and BIE schools face additional hurdles due to their geographically isolated locations, aging infrastructure and well documented systemic challenges. As such, I am glad to be here today to discuss safely reopening BIE schools.

Introduction

As an educator and former BIE school administrator, spring is normally a time for celebration where we collectively join to honor the academic successes of our students through award ceremonies and graduations. Unfortunately, this year has been different for so many Indian students and families across the country.

As a father, I virtually watched my daughter, a senior and co-valedictorian at Riverside Indian School – an off-reservation BIE boarding school, deliver her graduation speech remotely. The moment she worked so hard to achieve went from being held among her peers to being a telecast by video. Our personal situation is nothing compared to those students and families who have lost loved ones during this pandemic, but my daughter’s graduation is similar to so many experienced by students across the country.

It’s important to understand that Indian Affairs and BIE leadership, career and school staff across the country understand the hardships caused by Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) and are dedicating ourselves each day to ensure students have as normal a scholastic environment as possible when schools reopen this fall. However, as you know, there is nothing normal about these times. BIE staff across the organization are actively working with their schools, communities, states and tribal leaders to better understand school level needs.

BIE School Site Closures

As the COVID-19 pandemic spread, BIE and Indian Affairs worked directly with tribes and school leaders to close all BIE school sites as expeditiously and safely as possible. Overnight BIE worked to ensure students were provided academic services via distance learning options and ensured critical services, such as school lunches, were provided in a safe environment. When

tribes requested additional support like at Navajo Nation, BIE worked with its partners across Indian Affairs to directly provide specific guidance that addressed the requests of the tribe and needs of the local communities. We did this collectively to protect our students, educators, staff and communities during the quickly changing COVID-19 environment.

As part of the site closure work in the spring, BIE used its emergency management (EM) team and its dedicated roles and responsibilities to ensure support to schools and that any mitigation needs were addressed. Utilizing the BIE chain of command, the EM team and support staff from BIE's School Operations Division provided dedicated support to schools and is prepared to continue such support in the fall. BIE leadership communicated specific points of contact for the field to improve BIE support to schools, such as providing additional personal protective equipment or mitigation services for a possible case of COVID-19.

Funding to Support BIE Schools

In addition to the work described, Congress appropriated approximately \$69 million in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) to the BIE (DOI CARES funding). Within the \$69 million, \$22.9 million was identified for direct distribution to Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) and the remaining \$46.1 million was distributed to BIE schools in accordance with a comprehensive spending plan. The BIE was also separately apportioned approximately \$153.75 million from the Department of Education's Education Stabilization Fund (ED CARES funding).

As BIE-funded schools prepare to safely reopen across the country, DOI CARES funding has targeted immediate student needs related to mental health and safety, staff training, and information technology (IT) investments. The identified goals of the \$69 million in DOI CARES funding are distinct but complimentary to the \$153.75 million in ED CARES funding.

Specifically, the DOI CARES funding equips individual schools with the necessary resources to provide customized solutions to locality-specific reopening challenges. For example, in locations where a school has been affected by COVID-19 related deaths, the DOI CARES funding will equip school leaders with the ability to provide returning students critical mental health support through contract services. In contrast, based on the acceptable use of funds, the ED CARES funding has been designated to provide schools the ability to plan for and address mid-to-long-term challenges in providing continuation of instruction, such as gaps in IT infrastructure.

Because each BIE-funded school faces unique COVID-19 related challenges, and pursuant to current ED guidelines for ED CARES funding, specific percentages of expenditure in each of the categories outlined below will vary by school location. Providing schools with this flexibility to match funding to the immediate reopening needs of each school is critical in ensuring schools expedite a return to normal operations.

After jointly conducting tribal listening sessions with the Department of Education, BIE developed an allocation plan for the ED CARES funds. As per the allocation plan, funds have been distributed to the local level. Specifically, this allocation plan provided \$107,625,000 directly to BIE funded K-12 schools and dormitories, \$30,750,000 to TCUs, and BIE retained ten

percent or \$15,375,000 for system-wide allocations to help the immediate needs of field staff and BIE-funded school officials.

The system-wide allocations include:

- \$5 million to upgrade five schools to 100Mbps internet speed. The five schools identified for this funding are the remaining BIE-funded schools on the Education Native American Network that do not currently possess the Federal Communications Commission's recommended 100Mbps speed. Any unspent funds will be used to procure hotspots and other IT infrastructure to enhance students' access to broadband;
- \$8 million for direct mental and behavioral health support for BIE-funded schools; and
- \$2.3 million to address unforeseen health and safety challenges over the course of the 2020-2021 school year.

2020-2021 School Year Reopening Planning

As BIE supports school site reopening, we will utilize the protocols and processes implemented from lessons learned in the spring to ensure timely and effective services to schools this fall. BIE leadership has also instituted a School Reopening Task Force (Task Force) comprised of members from BIE's Associate Deputy Directors divisions, Division for Performance and Accountability, and is led by the Chief Academic Office. The Task Force is working through the consultation process this summer to inform stakeholders and gather recommendations for reopening and will work with schools to help them develop individual school reopening plans to prepare for the 2020-2021 school year.

Through BIE school reopening consultations held on July 9, 10, and 14, 2020, with tribal leaders and education stakeholders, BIE is actively working with Indian Country to garner input to strengthen formal guidance for assisting schools as they work to reopen safely.

Further, BIE is partnering with states with high Native populations through our ED-funded comprehensive center to exchange best practices for school reopening. BIE's reopen guidance also utilizes guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to provide high-level recommendations to our schools while highlighting the continued need for our schools to coordinate and consult with their local Indian tribes and communities they serve, public health officials, and the states in which they are located prior to reopening.

Trauma and Student Mental Health Needs

BIE is dedicated to ensuring that returning students and staff are supported during these difficult times. The mission of the BIE prioritizes the creation of positive, safe, and culturally relevant learning environments where students gain the knowledge, skills, and behaviors necessary for physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Due to the importance of our students' mental health needs, BIE established a goal under its five-year Strategic Direction that specifically focuses on the areas of wellness, behavioral health, and physical health and safety for all students in bureau-funded schools. This goal includes several action items recommended through tribal consultation

that specifically focuses on bolstering trauma-informed teaching practices, curricula, and professional development.

Additionally, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, BIE worked quickly to provide professional development opportunities for our diverse staff across the country. Through a partnership with the National Indian Education Association, BIE staff collaborated on a webinar series designed for teachers, residential staff, and school administrators that focused on the principles of self-care and wellness. The course also recognized the impacts of trauma and stress and offered participants skills in learning how to use various tools and coping strategies.

Further, BIE has certified more than 300 staff members in Youth Mental Health First Aid (YMHFA) to improve local support. YMHFA is an eight hour public education program that introduces participants to the unique risk factors and warning signs of mental health problems in adolescents, builds understanding of the importance of early intervention, and teaches individuals how to help an adolescent in crisis or experiencing a mental health challenge. YMHFA uses role-playing and simulations to demonstrate how to assess a mental health crisis; select interventions and provide initial help; and connect young people to professional, peer, social, and self-help care.

IT Infrastructure

One innovative approach BIE is taking to increase internet access is through a pilot program to turn school buses into mobile hot spots for our students and communities' needs. At the direction of the Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs, BIE identified the 25 longest bus routes for initial installation under a pilot program. During this unique time, leadership anticipates parking the Wi-Fi enabled buses within tribal housing communities to serve as hotspots that can improve localized internet access for students and families. This project is scalable, and BIE hopes to expand the pilot to improve Wi-Fi accessibility for more students and tribal communities in the future.

Finally, DOI and ED CARES funding spend plans have been requested from Tribally controlled schools by July 31 to assist with ensuring the effective use of funds locally. Schools will submit individual spend plans in the BIE Native Star System, which is a BIE school's document repository system. This process will allow the BIE School Operations Division to monitor CARES Act funding expenditures at the school level to ensure schools have the funds they need to effectively support their students. The current situation means that just like public schools, BIE faces the ever-changing reality that learning will likely rotate between on-site and distance learning models if COVID-19 spikes develop. So, BIE is working collectively with our schools to maximize purchasing power in government contracts to ensure they have the IT equipment necessary to help their students achieve academically during this unprecedented time.

Conclusion

Chairman Hoeven, Vice Chairman Udall, and Members of the Committee, thank you again for the invitation to appear today. As you can imagine, COVID-19 infection and recovery rates change daily for BIE schools, which span 23 states. We are doing everything possible to ensure a

safe return to schools for our students and staff. It is BIE's firm belief that students succeed when at school. Students learn and grow while attending school during in-person academic instruction. BIE is also better able to ensure student academic services and enrichment occurs, when students are present at school. Student safety, wellbeing and social-emotional support is provided daily by dedicated teachers and staff. Any further delay in resuming classroom instruction widens the academic achievement gap and further widens the already disparate gaps BIE Native American and Alaska Native students already face. I look forward to answering your questions and the continued partnership in improving services to Indian students as we plan for the 2020-2021 school year. As always, thank you for your continued support of our students and schools.