

**Statement
Of
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Before the
Committee on Indian Affairs
United States Senate
On
S.2711, The Native American Education Opportunity Act
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Thank you, Chairman Barrasso, Vice Chairman Tester and members of the Committee on Indian Affairs. Good afternoon and thank you for inviting me and giving me this opportunity to testify today regarding one of our Nation's most underserved student populations: American Indian and Alaska Native students. I will also talk today about S.2711 "*Native American Education Opportunity Act*" and how this Act will provide additional education options in certain states for Native American students served by schools funded by the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE).

By the way of introduction my name is Carlyle W. Begay, State Senator for Legislative District 7 in the Great State of Arizona. Arizona has a rich Native American history that spans centuries and today is home to 22 federally recognized Native American tribes with the third largest population of Native Americans in the United States. More specifically, Arizona has the second largest Native American student population in the United States.

Before I talk about the "*Native American Education Opportunity Act*" it is important to point out that for so many of us in this room today this work in Indian education is very personal. In fact, when I was younger I attended a BIE boarding school in Kayenta, Arizona on the Navajo Nation. At that time, attending boarding school was the norm for Navajo students, not just in 1860 or the early 1900's, but also all the way up to 1985 and beyond. I attended this boarding school over a hundred years after the first Native American students began attending Carlisle Indian School, the first boarding school off-the reservation for Native American students. I remember not understanding why I had to attend that school or why I had to stay there. However, my parents, like many other Tribal parents, believed this school was the best option because it was the system that the federal government established for educating American Indians. My experience, and the many others like mine, is the perfect example as to why America should not focus on the systems of education, but rather ensuring access to educational opportunities that children need and parents want.

Today, the United States is working to replace failed assimilation policies, including education policies, by promoting tribal self-determination and self-governance.

Empowering Native American families to make crucial education decisions for their children is the true essence of self-determination and self-empowerment.

The importance of maintaining the United States' trust and treaty obligations is more important than ever, but those obligations were penned more than 150 years ago, nothing should stay the same for 150 years. We by no means dissolve that obligation, instead it's imperative that we build upon that obligation. The achievement gap for Native American students in Arizona and across this country is very real and the solutions are multi-dimensional and complex. They include a lack of both community and parental involvement and, in some cases, a general belief that education is not important in many tribal communities. It's no wonder that tribal parents never embraced the government's system of education because it was never the true Native American system of education.

After 150 years we cannot solve all the needs and priorities of entire school systems, including BIE, overnight but we can create opportunities now for Native American families through policies like the Native American Education Opportunity Act.

There's no doubt my elders and ancestors made great sacrifices to get us to where we are today. I was born and raised on the Navajo Nation, one of eight tribal communities that I represent as an Arizona State Senator. My people's history and traditions have taught me cultural relevancy and the importance of working together to continue the advancement and purpose of those I serve.

We must give thanks to the leaders that served before us – like the great Navajo Chief Manuelito – who led the Navajo people home from the brink of extinction. Hwéeldi or The Long Walk, which was much like the Cherokee's Trail of Tears, was a harsh experience for the Navajo people. Two thousand of my Navajo ancestors perished during Hwéeldi as they were starved into submission and forced to surrender. They were then marched to a confined area so that the Spanish settlers could have the finest grazing land and mineral-rich areas in Arizona.

The education being provided to students at tribal schools is akin to modern day Hwéeldi. While our ancestors suffered and were forced off their lands, the reverse effect has taken hold – our students suffer while remaining on our lands as they are required to attend low performing schools, resulting in poor educational outcomes and limited opportunities.

I recently spoke to a high school class within a Arizona tribal community. I will never forget the response of a student when I asked, "What are your goals and aspirations in your life? What are your plans after high school?" The student said, "Why does it matter? Why do you care? No one cares about me or my people so what does it matter what I want to do or what I end up doing?"

As disheartening as it is, this student represents perhaps the feelings of many of our Native American children living on reservations. He feels invisible, unimportant and

alienated. This teen carries the burden of hopelessness so common in modern day reservation life.

That exchange forced me to take a deeper look at how we can better educate our Native American kids. The sad reality is that in Arizona, we as Native people are dead last in both math and reading proficiency scores [according to the latest Annual Report on Indian Education released by the Arizona Department of Education](#).

Across America, Native Americans have the lowest graduation rate of all other ethnicities at 67 percent. Arizona fares even worse with a graduation rate of 64 percent, the lowest in the state. These statistics make one thing clear – at least in the area of education, the Federal Government has failed to live up to its responsibilities to Indian children. This is why I was inspired to help expand school choice on tribal lands and offer new educational options to our students. Empowering tribal parents' with the ability to customize their child's education or obtain access to new quality options is one way to build up Native American communities through education.

I encourage all Native American parents, educators and tribal leaders across the nation to begin shaping our own future on our terms. We are in a time where we can raise our children to find their passion to be a doctor, an engineer, a lawyer or the next Navajo Code Talker. In order to do this, we need to draw in the nation's best schools in partnership with our tribal communities, to create cutting-edge schools, schools that incorporate our culture and languages, schools who employ the best teachers and the best administrators.

No stone should be left unturned in our efforts to improve educational outcomes so that our kids are prepared for jobs of today and jobs of tomorrow.

Last year a new school choice law went into effect in Arizona opening up the Empowerment Scholarship Account program universally to Native American families living on any of the state's 22 reservations. There was so much interest, that we fast tracked the bill implementation and hundreds of families applied within a matter of weeks. Unfortunately, some of the families who hoped to be on the program did not qualify because their children were in BIE funded schools. Why should this opportunity be limited to families attending state public schools and not be afforded to those attending federally funded schools? Sen. McCain understood the plight of these BIE families and immediately offered to fight for them.

The availability of Empowerment Scholarship Accounts gives parents the power to choose the education that best fits their child's needs. The Native American Education Opportunity Act would give the parents of students attending BIE schools and living within tribal communities in Arizona and in three other states where ESA programs are currently implemented the option to take their child out of that school and use any of the ESA choices available to them in their home state. ESA choices may include attending a private school, online curriculum, tutors, home school and other education opportunities. Right now ESAs would provide options to parents

like on-line private school programs or they would be able to attend the few private schools that are already open on the reservations. Allow students to enroll in online learning programs or enroll in designated educational therapies or services (especially for kids with special needs or learning disabilities). Or to seek tutoring services.

This Act would allow Native American families to tailor their child's education because one size does not fit all.

There are 185 BIE schools in the nation. Nearly 5 out of 10 students attending these schools will not graduate high school. What if we could give ESAs to those students who would not have made it to graduation otherwise?

This is not saying that we need to do everything we can to support and improve our BIE or public schools. In fact, many of our public and BIE schools across Arizona are doing the best they can with the limited resources they have.

On the reservation, we don't have the luxury of fighting over educational systems vs. school choice options. We are in an on-going crisis when it comes to educating our kids and we welcome any option when it comes to educating our kids.

I don't expect ESAs to be the whole solution to fixing education on or off tribal lands, but myself and other tribal leaders do believe programs like this can spark change. We must build a better future for our Native American families and I believe empowering these parents is a crucial first step.

I ask you today for your help in sending a positive message to tribal leaders, reservation communities and that student who asked, "Why do I matter?" Let's work together to say, "We will end this modern day Hwéeldi. We will learn from our past mistakes. We will act today to do whatever it takes to rescue our Native American students in crisis because they DO matter."