

**Testimony of Lance West, Schurz Elementary School Principal/Pyramid Lake Junior/Senior High School Board of Education Vice-Chairman, before the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs Hearing: Examining the COVID-19 Response in Native Communities: Native Education Systems One Year Later**

Chairman Schatz, Vice-Chair Murkowski, and committee members, thank you for the invitation to testify on behalf of the Agai Dicutta (Walker River Paiute) and Cui-ui Dicutta (Pyramid Lake Paiute). How mu. Nu Lance West me nanea. Nu Cui-ui Dicutta. Nu poenabe tunedooedu. How are all of you. My name is Lance West. I am an enrolled member of the Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe. I am an Elementary School Principal for Schurz Elementary School, a public K-6 school located on the tribal lands of the Walker River Paiute Reservation. I am also an elected school board member for Pyramid Lake Junior/Senior High School, a 6-12 BIE-funded school, located in Nixon, Nevada on the Pyramid Lake Paiute Reservation.

First, Pesa mu. Thank you all for your continued support as members of this important committee. You allow for our voice to be heard and concerns to be presented that can result in policymaking for the benefit of our people. Your work as a committee and with Senatorial colleagues to advocate for all of Indian children, including the seventy Schurz Elementary Students and one-hundred fifty Pyramid Lake students that I get the privilege and honor to serve every day is recognized every day is greatly appreciated. Pesa mu.

My experiences as a public school administrator and BIE school board member serving in high native student communities during the past year will provide you with a full perspective of how this pandemic has impacted Indian Education in Nevada. My perspective will focus on strengths found, areas of improvements, and realistic solutions moving forward which I believe each of you need to be aware

I am currently in my third year as Principal and sixteen months into my role as a Pyramid Lake Schools Board of Education member.

I am a realist. Realism is the philosophy I have lived and worked by in my profession the last nineteen years. This approach has received criticism at times that my outlook is viewed as pessimistic, where my focus is that on the negative. Improvements to Indian Education requires one to acknowledge the conditions found in educational systems today in order for progress to be made. Those conditions include acknowledging and addressing systemic racism, inequities for students of color, and the deficit mindset. One personal goal that I strived for since my acceptance into the University of Nevada Reno's College of Education's Teacher Program all those years ago is this: Improving education for the young Native people in my community.

The opportunity, or achievement gap, between students of color and their white counterparts, has widened, make no mistake, due to the Pandemic. Despite improvements to tribal Internet connectivity and access to technology for students, the Digital Divide remains. Once the funds

associated with the pandemic are long gone, Indian Education continues. My schools, along with all other high Native student population schools in Nevada and throughout the country, will continue with the business of preparing students for college and/or careers after high school. The current education system in place, before the pandemic, has yet to build capacity for success for our Native American children will continue, business as usual. The achievement gap has widened, make no mistake. Additional funding for interventions, mental health, Native teacher recruitment and retention pre- and post-service programming, and culturally relevant pedagogy should become the priority of this committee.

The Pandemic and the murder of George Floyd are defining moments for me and many of my fellow Indigenous educators the past year. A group of us Indigenous educators and community activists realized that rather than wait around for the help from the state's department of education to provide solutions to Indian Education in Nevada to problems that have existed for far too long, that we organize and become the voice of Native communities in our state. Our organization, Indigenous Educators Empowerment, regularly collaborates with NDE's Indian Education Department, the Nevada Indian Commission, universities/community colleges, and school districts. This collaboration discusses all the issues and concerns that we have seen in Indian Education locally for years. We have solutions, but we cannot do it alone.

I look forward to answering any and all questions you may ask of me. Pesa mu.

### **Strengths - Student Access to Technology**

PLHS staff early in the pandemic recognized the need for technology and didn't hesitate to request funding for purchase. Same with the Internet for students at home. In collaboration with PLPT, full time distance learners were provided with devices for Internet access. At Schurz Elementary, WRPT had developed a relationship with a local Internet provider and utilized COVID CARES funding to pay for installation and funds toward monthly payment of Internet services. The provider, Preferred Internet, provided enough bandwidth to support live streaming video for students learning from home. At MCSD, getting technology into the hands of our Schurz students was not an issue. Schurz Elementary was at a 1 to 1 student/Chromebook ratio and with the support of MCSD district office, were able to provide our JH/HS students attending Hawthorne the technology. Food services for both communities was well coordinated by all staff.

Veteran staff as well, not accustomed to technology in their normal teaching schedule, were hesitant as well and struggled with the transition to the blended learning model. The lesson was learned, but it took an entire semester to figure out a revised approach, at semester, there was a push to bring struggling students back in person. This approach was very helpful and continues to be the right decision.

## **Area of Improvement: Addressing the Widening Opportunity (Achievement) Gap**

Academic achievement for Native students in grades 3-12 is lower than their white counterparts. Nevada has a Nevada School Performance Framework (NSPF) that rates schools on a number of factors from state assessment results to chronic absenteeism. This rating is based on a scale from 0-100 and one to five stars. Schurz Elementary School has been rated a Rising Star (one star) school for all three years. Last year (2019-2020 SY), no testing took place so we were rated based on the 2018-2019 data. The majority of high Native student population schools in Nevada have a similar rating. This was before the pandemic. Now, with the gap widening due to learning from home and/or hybrid learning. We have interventions in place, but have had no time to implement due to the reopening plan requirements such as social distance. For us this meant to create two sessions, one AM and the other PM. All of our in-person learners at Schurz Elementary School are on campus for no more than 3 hours each day. That is just enough time to eat lunch or breakfast (depending on your session) and 90 min of Reading and Math blocks. There is no time for Intervention. Another requirement of our reopening does not allow our classes to interact. Typical Intervention programming allows a student, below grade level, to interact with students with the same skill level. So a 3rd grader, behind academically in Reading, would be allowed to work in a small group with 2nd graders during our Intervention Block (30-40 minutes).

There are distance learners' parent/guardians who have not allowed them to take their quarterly MAP assessments in Reading, Math, Science, and Language Usage because of their own concerns, despite the protocols in place. We respect their concerns and allow them not to test. However, without a baseline, our teachers are in the dark in this area. There are other data points of course, such as grades, attendance, unit test scores, and projects to determine any re-teaching to those students.

We are currently in the middle of completing our state SBAC testing. Now, our distance learners will return to test this week, we can only hope for the best.

Next year, we will need to maximize Intervention blocks to a level never seen before. With my small staff, that will not be possible without more feet on the ground. This means hiring more teacher aides, an Interventionist, a Literacy Strategist, a PD Coach, a Student/Parent Involvement Coordinator, a Counselor, etc. I need these positions.

## **Strengths - BIE funding to Address Additional Staffing Needs**

Pyramid Lake Schools have a large budget for being a smaller school. School administration has been hiring additional staff to support our students during their return to hybrid learning second semester. As a board member, we will continue to monitor student data points and identify areas of need with the confidence that hiring qualified staff to support student achievement is a top priority.

### **Strengths - Strict Tribal Community Lockdowns**

Tribal leadership in both communities and lockdown of the reservation with curfews and restrictions for visitors helped keep overall COVID numbers and deaths down.

Each of the two community's tribal governments early on took immediate action to protect our people such as enacting strict lockdowns and curfews. This approach, in hindsight, reduced the number of infections and loss of life. This approach could not be ignored by both schools. As board member, no decision by the board was made without thorough discussion regarding the impact it would have on our vulnerable populations. As Principal, all matters were shared with Walker River Paiute tribal leadership. Over the summer both schools designed and implemented reopenings plans in collaboration with tribal leadership and emergency response teams. During planning, My Superintendent would always remind district leadership to keep in mind the tribe's pandemic policies and to be respectful, always, of their decisions.

### **Strengths - Upgraded Internet Connectivity/Infrastructure**

Another strength was Internet connectivity. Historically, the town of Schurz, located on the Walker River Paiute Reservation, had poor Internet access. Nationwide cellular network or satellite Internet were the primary and reliable options. Of course, there would be an Internet provider business that would pass through the town, but would eventually move on. As an educator, the thought of assigning any work that required home Internet access, was out of the question. For years, the digital divide was evident in the community. Our children were not prepared for a 21st Century education. You might be asking yourself, "If the community had poor Internet access, what about the school's?" Schurz Elementary School's current building is 21 years old. Until late Spring 2020, the school had a network infrastructure that fell way below the standard of all academic institutions. The Internet was delivered to the school via a satellite dish that was aimed directly at another satellite installed on top of the El Capitan Casino in Hawthorne. It was horrible. So, yes, generations of students were not receiving a 21st Century education with adequate Internet access. Thanks to a collaborative effort between the school district and the Walker River Paiute Tribe, MCSD applied for an E-Rate grant. It was approved and CC Communications was awarded the contract. As of Spring 2020, our school was outfitted with one gigabyte of Internet. Fiber optic lines were run and connected up to the school. The final quarter of the school year, like all other schools in the state, we sent home paper packets. Over the summer, we were directed by NDE to provide distance learners using an acceptable and proven LMS (Learning Management System). We were allowed to choose a platform. We selected Google Classroom, rather than Canvas.

Returning to the inconsistent community Internet access, a company began marketing high speed Internet, six months before the Pandemic, it was much better and reliable. It could stream! The community began replacing their bulky satellite dishes with smaller dishes. There were still way too many families without Internet. Thanks to the COVID-19 relief CARES Act, the tribe used the funding to pay for installation and months of Internet access. By the start of the school year, 95% of our families were connected from home. Eventually, every family had high speed and reliable Internet. A lesson, however, was going to be learned. Limited Teacher Technology Literacy.

Pyramid Lake Schools also had a combination of nationwide cellular network and Internet access.

### **Strength - In Person and Distance Learner Curricular Alignment**

Pyramid Lake School teacher expectation was to provide live instruction via Google Classroom and Google Meet at the start of the school year. The roll out of distance learning, like all other schools, was shaky. Nonetheless, the PL teachers persisted. Professional Development was provided with weekly meetings to address concerns with shifting their curriculum to accommodate distance learners. The first nine weeks of the school year, all students were distance learning. In hindsight, this forced teaching staff no other option for providing instruction except with Google Classroom. This, in my opinion, was a good thing. As any school reopening plan will mention, should there be an exposure of students by someone who tests positive for COVID, the class, or depending on contact tracing, the entire school, may shut down for two weeks at a time. Transitioning their curriculum and fine tuning it the first nine weeks was of great benefit to students; with administration providing feedback and support.

Fast forward to the end of March. I was conducting class walkthroughs with the PL school principal. In every classroom I observed the teachers were easily alternating between the in-person learners and distance learners seamlessly. Back at Mineral County School District, you would not see such a thing, particularly at their junior high/high school.

My expectation as principal was the same at Schurz Elementary School. Live instruction, every day. You provide distance learners the same content as in person learners. Equity.

### **Area of Improvement- In-Person and Distance Learner Curricular Inequities**

How would you feel, if your child was at home learning, with no real, formal way to communicate with any of their seven teachers? It took months for the school to enact something in the way of teacher contact information. How would you feel if your child was at least two years below grade level in ELA? Yet, the curriculum content was at grade level? Your child would struggle.

Lessons learned specific to academics for our distance learners was rolling out distance education without time to test and create a system that could accommodate all learners. Both community's teachers frantically changed and revised curriculum to meet the needs of distance learners with only a few days of professional training. Professional learning was real time. What didn't work was dropped and replaced on a whim. In the meantime, our students below grade level or working from home was not an optimal situation and struggled while our teachers figured out a best approach. The emphasis of using online credit recovery programs such as Edgenuity did more damage as our learners below grade level struggled with at-grade level content.

A large majority of the WRPT 7-12 students attending MCSD were full time distance learners. Elementary and Secondary teachers and leadership took two different approaches when it came to providing instruction for distance learners. Elementary emphasized daily live instruction via Google Meet and Classroom, while Secondary educators decided against daily live instruction. Instead, secondary educators in MCSD chose an online credit recovery program called Edgenuity. Rather than daily live interactions between student and teacher, all 7-12 Walker River students would complete activities using this program. Direct communication was found in the program's built-in email system. When a student encountered issues with their progress, failed quizzes, exams, or missing required files, they emailed teachers. Now, the teachers also were responsible for their in-person learners as well as their distance learners. But, the instruction, when comparing the two groups, were completely different. Student issues and questions were answered immediately by in-person learners, while distance learners waited days on end for a response or "unlocking" of the next content area within the Edgenuity software. Every one of our Walker River students experienced this. They would contact me at the elementary school to ask me to follow up. Or, I would hear about their lack of progress and inquire directly with the high school administrator and teachers.

The entire first semester was a waste due to poor communication, on-grade level content for students below grade level, and inequities between distance learner and in-person curriculum. Our parents and guardians accepted and acknowledged they were the "last in line". That the teachers would "get to us, when they get to us." An acknowledgement that was painful to hear because they were accepting that there were not important enough to have their concerns addressed. The educational system, in the middle of the pandemic, failed our Walker River Paiute 7-12 students attending Mineral County School District during the Fall Semester of 2020.

As I reflect on the past year, a pattern of behavior among our student's parents and guardians emerged that was concerning.

These experiences and interactions with our 7-12 students and parents/guardians reminded me of a response to trauma. The awful feeling of accepting that you may not matter nor be valued. It reminds me of our Native people visiting our local Indian Health Clinic, with genuine health concerns and an optimism that our IHS resident doctor will do everything he/she can to let us know everything will be ok. Hoping that their every ounce of expertise will be dedicated to us. Then, to find out the reality that the doctor dismisses or invalidates your concern or your

community tells you how horrible the doctor is. You try not to believe it. You hold judgement and remain optimistic. You make excuses such as, "He was busy" or "Maybe I'm not as sick as I think I am."

Over time, perhaps your interactions continue to be similar and the advice and affirmation that the doctor does not care about you or the community sinks in. "I don't have insurance, just IHS, how am I going to afford to see another doctor?" You are stuck with the same health care system, the clinic. These realities present themselves and maybe, you resign yourself to the notion that our health care is not acceptable, but the only one I have, so the sooner you accept and acknowledge that you will be given poor health care for the rest of your life.

This is the attitude I have seen with our parents/guardians here the past three years. They believe they have no power or control of the quality of education their child receives. They have accepted the fact that their child will receive a poor to modest education. What reality checks did they encounter to validate their resignation? Cycling through school principals yearly, continued rumors about Schurz Elementary School closing, low quality teacher hirings, and non-existent teacher communication have all contributed to this reality to name a few.

Our parents/guardians feel marginalized in this school system in which I work as elementary school principal.

I see it, I feel it and it fuels the fire inside me. I acknowledge the resignation. I know this feeling all too well as a person of color. I respond to this equity with solutions.

### **Area of Improvement - Limited Educator Technological Capacity**

An area of improvement discovered was the teacher's technological capacity. In a school culture where limited Internet service was the norm for generations and lack of emphasis in digital curriculum, high quality and consistent professional learning for teachers must be a priority.

### **Strengths - Organized MCSD Reopening Committee**

Mineral County School District created a reopening committee composed of staff, parents, and administrators. Multiple meetings were held.

Summer reopening meetings were often, with plenty of backtracking and re-interpretation of CDC guidelines. Eventually, Schurz Elementary Reopening Team had a reopening plan that was approved by the school board, Nevada Department of Education, and tribal emergency management leadership.

## **Area of Improvement - Limited Stakeholder Input in PLHS Reopening Planning**

PLHS Reopening Plan was an agenda item for every board meeting held in late Spring leading up to September 2020. PLHS Administration reopening presentations were met with the typical concerns and questions referencing social distancing, cleaning and sanitation protocols, daily screenings, COVID indirect/direct contact protocol, and distance learning planning.

We hired a new administration team early summer. In the meantime, staff developed what would become the reopening plan. Most of our reference and reopening template focused on nearby district state submissions. School administration confirmed what I had noticed in board meetings with reopening plans on the agenda. There was very little from BIE. There was no direction from BIE. The school board and I looked to the administration for direction, the administration should be able to look to BIE, but without induction and some training, all of us were left with addressing the reopening based on NDE and nearby school district plans. There were missing stakeholders whose input was extremely valuable. Parents, Tribal Leadership, and BIE were noticeably absent from the planning. Annual school improvement plans require input and sign off by all stakeholders. Same with high school accreditation. How could there not be a planning committee for reopening? The absence of parents, tribal leadership, and most importantly BIE, was concerning. There was no listed deadline and/or approval of the school's reopening. If there was, I was not made aware of it, nor was the school's leadership team.

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## **My Asks**

Provide federal support for statewide frameworks for data sharing resources that tribal governments can use to effectively support and maintain K-12 and higher ed student achievement. No defined structure exists for tribal education departments to quickly acquire vital short and long term achievement data including grades, discipline, attendance, and state and national test results (SBAC, MAP, ACT).

Once a system is established, the tribes, to flex their educational sovereignty rights, will require effective professional development to understand how to interpret and implement services that must include all stakeholders.

Our Native students must see more of themselves represented in the classroom. Recruitment and retention of highly qualified, culturally responsive Native teachers and administrators programming must be implemented. Office of Indian Education has a grant CFDA 84.299B, the Indian Professional Development Program. This highly valuable program should be expanded. The capacity exists in Nevada where this programming can finally become reality like the



University of Idaho's IKEEP program.<sup>1</sup> This program is a Teacher Pre-service program. Here in Nevada, I propose a Higher Education Institution offer both a Teacher and Administrator pre-service program. I formally mentor Natives students from their IKEEP (Indigenous Knowledge for Effective Education Program). Due to this relationship, I have been able to successfully recruit a Native teacher who is now working for Mineral County High School as their new PE teacher. The federal government should encourage the importance of "Grow Your Own" teacher preparation programs in tribal communities.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.uidaho.edu/ed/resources/student/ikeep>