

Rough Rock Community Schools

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TESTIMONY OF
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ROUGH ROCK COMMUNITY SCHOOL
NAVAJO NATION, ARIZONA
to the
SENATE COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS
regarding
BUREAU OF INDIAN AFFAIRS SCHOOL FACILITIES CONSTRUCTION

March 6, 2008

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee for the invitation to speak before this Committee. I would like to briefly go over my written testimony and touch on a few points.

My name is Charles Monty Roessel. I am a Navajo from Round Rock, Arizona working as superintendent of Rough Rock Community School. I have held this position for eight years. Rough Rock is a K-12 North Central Association accredited residential school located in the northeast part of Arizona on the Navajo Nation. Our enrollment is around 500 with one-half of the student population staying in an elementary and high school dorm during the week. Our students come from throughout the Navajo Nation. We operate the school under a Tribally Controlled Schools Act grant (P.L. 100-297) from the Bureau of Indian Education.

To say that the Rough Rock Community School is in need of adequate school facilities is an understatement. Rough Rock was originally built in 1965 and opened its doors in 1966, as the Rough Rock Demonstration School, the first Indian community-controlled school in the country. In fact, community control of our school pre-dated the enactment of the Indian Self-Determination Act by nine years.

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BILINGUAL AND BICULTURAL FOCUS

Rough Rock was a leader in bilingual and bicultural education then and continues to be today. The philosophy is simple and it is backed by research. If students know their culture and are proud of who they are, they are more likely to have academic success. Therefore, at the elementary school we have implemented a Navajo language immersion program. And at the high school, in order to graduate a student must take four (4) credits of Navajo history, language and culture. At the time it was a revolutionary idea to think that Indians could control their own education. Well to say the least, we have *demonstrated* and *proven* that Indian people can and are able to control their own education.

Despite the sub-standard condition of our facilities, parents nonetheless continue to enroll their children at Rough Rock because they highly value the benefits of our bilingual/bicultural curriculum and our focus on encouraging our students to be proud to be Navajos.

IMPACT OF FACILITIES ON LEARNING AND ACHIEVEMENT

It would be naïve to say that the quality of school facilities does not matter. Of course it does. At Rough Rock, we lack what most schools all across this country take for granted -- a safe and habitable environment that enables students to enjoy learning and to achieve.

Recent research has confirmed what many educators have always held as common sense — the quality of a school facility has an impact on students' experiences and ultimately on their educational achievement. The research on school building conditions and student outcomes finds a consistent relationship between poor facilities and poor performance: When school facilities are clean, in good repair, and designed to support high academic standards, there will be higher student achievement, independent of student socioeconomic status. (AFT, 2006)

Here are some of the facilities-related hardships we routinely face at Rough Rock:

- Sometimes our students wake up at 4:30 am just so they can take a shower because the pipes under our two dorms have corroded to such a level that sometimes only half of the shower heads work in each dorm wing.

- Our middle and high school students have to share a cafeteria that was originally built for 75 students and today must accommodate more than 300. And, when it rains or snows or when the wind blows as it often does, they have to stand outside and wait for their time to sit and eat.
- Our high school does not have a biology or chemistry laboratory so that students who take these science courses learn only through books; they do not get exposure to hands-on learning. This puts them at a disadvantage if they want to attend college.
- Our students quickly learn that ceiling tiles might fall at any moment because of leaky ceilings and wind damaged roofs.
- Even worse, the quality of water is severely compromised; is high in arsenic because the pipes are old and not compatible with the water filtering system. We must choose between high arsenic or high chlorine levels. Our School must operate its own water system -- which also dates back to 1965.

Yes, there is a great need for safe and adequate facilities.

A study in Tennessee has shown that students “attending school in newer, better facilities score five to seventeen points higher on standardized tests than those attending in substandard buildings” (Young, Green, Roehrich-Patrick, Joseph & Gibson, 2003). Inadequate facilities have the biggest impact on time on task. If a classroom is cold, dark or noisy, students are losing instructional time. At Rough Rock, we have classrooms and dorms that are cold because of outdated mechanical systems, dark because of old lighting systems and no daylight, and noisy from thin walls and deteriorating structures. They were built to code in 1965 but the codes have changed while our buildings have not.

Safe and modern facilities also have a huge impact on the recruitment and retention of highly qualified teachers. A study by Boston College found that the correlation between facility improvement and retention of teachers can be greater than pay increases. (Buckley, Schneider & Shang, 2004)

It is also important to note that because of Rough Rock's location, we must provide housing for our teachers, as there is no off-reservation town with a private housing market within commuting distance. Our campus housing, too, is plagued by safety issues and inadequacies.

Rough Rock School thus has to act in several critical capacities -- as the local educational agency, as the municipality responsible for the water/sewer system, as the landlord for our employees and as the transportation department fixing potholes within our school compound.

REPLACEMENT SCHOOL PRIORITY LIST

In March, 2004, Rough Rock Community School was listed as number eight on the school construction priority list as ranked by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Office of Facilities Maintenance and Construction (OFMC). Our project has four elements: construction of a new high school dormitory (grades 9-12) with cafeteria; construction of an elementary dorm to house students in grades 1-8; construction of a new elementary/middle school (K-8); and renovations to our existing high school building to up-grade its capabilities, repair building systems, and add wings for essential educational spaces such as science labs. We proposed to OFMC that our project -- now estimated at about \$30 million but originally projected at \$16M in 2001 -- be funded and constructed in phases for maximum economy and efficiency. The dorms would be built first; then the elementary/middle school; then we will pursue the high school renovations.

In the four years since achieving our priority list ranking we inched our way up to the planning phase. Within seven months after receiving planning funds, we had that phase completed, including the identification of acreage for construction of the new buildings. Now we are poised to begin the design phase next month -- April 2008.

However, our school was notified that funds for the construction phase will not be requested until, at the earliest, the budget request for Fiscal Year 2011. Even if this expectation is met and Congress appropriates the requested funds, it means from the time BIA approved the priority ranking list it will have taken 7 years before a shovel hits the ground -- just for the *first* phase of our construction. Completion of that first phase will take about two years before students can occupy. The next phases will follow after that. Thus, it will be 12 or 13 years, if all goes well, before our full project is completed. Inaction has a cost. In 2001, our project was

originally projected to cost \$16M, today it is projected to be around \$30M. At this rate, our project might cost \$40M in 2011. This is unacceptable. Our Indian children deserve better.

REPAIRS ON EXISTING FACILITIES HAVE CEASED

Some might think that being placed on the priority ranking list for new school construction is a good thing. It is. But, it comes at a heavy price. Because we are now slated for a new school, many of the safety repairs I mentioned that need to be addressed are declined by the OFMC. For example, some buildings -- such as our high school gymnasium and vocational education classrooms -- do not have fire alarm systems installed. The dorm plumbing problems cannot be fixed because the pipes have asbestos. In both cases, we are told to wait for new construction.

In other words, our students and parents and staff are told to endure these unsafe conditions based on the promise of being number 8 on a priority ranking list. Every night we pray that nothing happens. Every time I hear the fire alarm go off, my heart skips a beat. I cannot believe that parents in Scottsdale or Boston would allow such safety hazards to persist. And yet, this is business as usual in Bureau-funded schools. I understand the logic; why would you put money into something that you are going to tear down? But, is it right? No. We are tired of band aid solutions and alarmed at the hazards to which our children are exposed.

POOR FACILITIES THWART NCLBA MANDATES

Our school is being held accountable under the No Child Left Behind Act, but who is holding the BIA accountable to provide the facilities to adequately provide an education for our students? Every year new standards of accountability seem to be imposed but we must make do with the same old tools we always have had. Our accreditation is mandated by the Bureau of Indian Education and yet, our facilities do not allow us to offer the full academic programs required of us.

We all know the answer is more money. I understand that money is scarce but rather than look at our facilities as an expenditure we need to look at them as a *investments* --

investments in our future and in our children. Without a commitment to our future we will never have the willpower to ensure that every Indian child has the same opportunity as any other child in this country. At the very least, this is an issue of fairness and at the very most it is a moral issue.

Our staff is getting very adept at making do with less. It would be nice if we didn't have to. About a week ago, after ceiling tiles crashed to the floor (thankfully no child was injured), I was inspecting the facility with our maintenance director. When I peered through the hole I was appalled. My maintenance director just chuckled and said "old Indian trick." He was referring to pipes being held together with duct tape and bailing wire. It is sad to think that this is not the exception but the norm in Indian Country. By the Bureau's own criteria only 39% of its school facilities are acceptable.

Since our elementary school was constructed 1965, a revolution has taken place in education: Computers have replaced/supplemented books; the Internet has replaced the encyclopedia. What was adequate 40 years ago is not today. These old buildings were built when there were no computers and as such, their electrical systems can not handle computers in classrooms and computer labs in classrooms. Plus, adding cabling to these old buildings runs the risk of disturbing the asbestos that infests them.

Sometimes you just can't wait for your name and number to come up on the school construction priority list. This January, Rough Rock opened the doors to our new high school library. I want to thank OFMC and Congress for providing us with this much needed educational facility. They recognized the drastic need for our high school students and somehow found the money to build this essential education facility. We no longer are one of the few, if not only, high schools that did not have a library. It makes me very sad to think of how many high school students have passed through Rough Rock School over the past 42 years without the benefit of a library -- a very basic educational support tool.

In Arizona, the public school system has invested millions upon millions to improve the state of their facilities. All around Rough Rock, public schools are building two story schools with gymnasiums bigger than those at many colleges. And yet, parents still choose to send their child to Rough Rock because they want their child to receive the type of educational program we offer. It is time that we offer our students the best facilities possible – not the largest gymnasiums – but the most up to date classrooms that are safe, dependable and adequate to ensure that no Bureau-funded school student is left behind.

MY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Streamline the process so from start to finish it takes 3 years and not 8 years or more just to get funding appropriated, and ten years before a facility can be constructed and occupied. Ten years means ten graduating classes!
- In order to speed up the process and reduce the backlog, I believe it would be beneficial to allow schools that are ready – such as Rough Rock – to move ahead of schools that are not. This would be an incentive for schools to move rapidly to complete a project in a timely manner, and also enable a school which *is* ready to benefit its students sooner rather than make them wait for a project higher on the priority list but slower on the progress scale.
- Encourage the use of standardized designs to speed up the construction process and more economically use the funds that are available. For example, we plan to use standardized plans for our dorm construction -- with some "tweaking" to accommodate our local needs. Not only do we believe this is a sensible way to save money on design costs, it will also enable us to get the dorms built and occupied more quickly.
- Create the capacity for bureau-funded school to utilize bonding to build new facilities.
- Encourage that high-cost projects be funded in more than one phase – like Rough Rock is proposing in order to proceed at a faster rate.

CONCLUSION

On behalf of all Indian students, I thank you for looking into these troublesome construction backlog matters. I am happy to answer any questions the Committee has.