



“Ensure Excellence in Education and Respect to the Local Culture”

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SENATE COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS
Oversight Hearing

**“Examining the COVID-19 Response in Native Communities:
Native Education Systems One Year Later.”**

April 28, 2021

Chairman Schatz, Vice Chairwoman Murkowski, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of Indian Country in regard to the COVID-19 response. My name is Dr. Michelle Thomas. I am a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa. I was born and raised on our reservation, and my school and professional career has been centered on Native education systems. I have been an educator for 26 years: a teacher for ten, a BIE administrator for fifteen, and a School District Superintendent for one (I started my current position one week before the pandemic). Today, I will share my experiences, as well as others within our community, as to how the pandemic impacted our efforts to educate our Native American students.

COVID-19 Impact on Native Education Systems

When the pandemic hit the United States in March 2020, all schools across the country were forced to rethink pedagogy to reach students without face-to-face instruction. This became an even bigger challenge in Indian Country, where the poverty level became a huge obstacle for delivery of effective instruction in a virtual environment. Hunger, mental health issues, student safety and internet/technology for instruction were only a few disparities our schools were faced with. Now, more than ever, support was needed for technology, highly qualified staff, and mental/behavioral support for both students and staff.

Data continuously points to the fact that Native American students in Bureau Operated Schools (BOS) have been significantly behind in Reading and Math.¹ Federal, state and local governments have endlessly searched for solutions to remedy this tragic failure. Historical implications continue to impact current educational issues in Indian Country. The same problems have been identified for over a century, but a solution has yet to be discovered.

Since the onset of COVID-19, the achievement gaps for Native American students have increased at an even higher and rapid rate, although not unexpected. Educators and administrators scrambled to continue education with the limited resources they had available while waiting for the necessary support from

¹ National Indian Education Study (NIES). Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/studies/pdf/2017161.pdf>



“Ensure Excellence in Education and Respect to the Local Culture”

Tribal, State and Federal Government. The entire world became reactive to the pandemic, resulting in delayed and/or weak educational services to students. This is detrimental to our Native Youth.

The experiences I’m about to share with you were always educational obstacles in Indian Country. The COVID-19 Pandemic only magnified these disparities. I urge you to consider the following priorities:

1. Technology Equipment
2. Internet Connectivity
3. Learning Management Systems
4. Background Checks
5. BIE Assessments
6. Teacher and Student Mental/Behavioral Health Support

Technology Equipment

As schools closed down across the country, the shift to remote learning was immediate, and educators were faced with unanticipated challenges requiring flexibility and grace to the students they served. Due to the high and immediate demand for technology, many schools were faced with a delayed delivery of devices for students. However, Indian Country incurred even longer delays due to a late allocation of ESSER funds from the Bureau of Indian Education. Funds were not released until June of 2020, and the process required to order the laptops delayed the delivery until October and November for most schools, and December 2020 in some cases. Many schools were forced to resort to paper and pencil instruction for up to six months of SY 20-21 due to lack of laptops.

Unfortunately, once the laptops were received (approximately in November 2020), federal requirements to set up the laptops were cumbersome and time limited, meaning the setup process for an individual device had to be completed within a 24 hour window, or it would have to be repeated. Adding to this conundrum was the lack of Information Technology staff at the respective schools to image each computer. The expectation of immediate delivery to students upon receipt of the laptops was unrealistic and frustrated the efforts of many school administrators who desperately wanted to deploy a functioning remote learning environment for Native American students.

Laptops that were received from the Federal Government have quickly become defective (such as overheating, camera failure, systems failure), resulting in wasted funds and time. Tribal and State Government assisted in the purchase of chromebooks to provide devices in a quick and efficient manner.

Internet Connectivity

Indian Country is amongst those who struggle most to access broadband due to rural locations. A study in 2016 by the U.S. Government Accountability Office revealed that 7 of 10 tribal residents lack access to broadband. Reasons include inability to access high speed internet connection due to rural location, affordability, and/or lack of knowledge in internet capabilities.²

² Broadband Internet: FCC’s Data Overstate Access on Tribal Lands. Retrieved from: <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-18-630>



“Ensure Excellence in Education and Respect to the Local Culture”

The effort to provide mobile hotspots for students without connectivity proved to be a struggle as well. There are very few carriers in Indian Country, and the data connection is very limited, resulting in little to no connectivity in many households.

Again, on behalf of our schools in Turtle Mountain, Tribal and State Government stepped in and provided internet broadband support through their ESSER funds, which provided a more level playing field for our Native American students in a remote learning environment.

Learning Management Systems

Learning management systems (LMS) in education allow schools to more effectively manage participation, ensure completion of assignments, and monitor student progress (or lack of it). There are many worthwhile LMS to choose from, and many schools in Indian Country quickly navigated towards specific LMS's to structure online learning in the most productive way possible. I have great respect for all Tribal Nations, and acknowledge that student learning needs differ from tribe to tribe, resulting in different LMS selections. Because of this, a grave concern of mine and others is that the BIE will determine ONE system for all. My hope is that BIE will give consideration to current LMS's that individual schools have already embraced and become fluent in before and during COVID-19.

Background Checks

Background checks adhering to the Department of Interior regulations is a process I support, as it only serves to protect our Native American students. However, the length of time required to complete a background check has become a huge obstacle for attaining the highest level of educators. Principals have consistently shared the frustration of losing very valuable (and often hard to fill position) applicants due to the length and complexity of the background check process. Although I applaud the movement to the electronic process for the background check process, the lack of internet connectivity, incompetency of technology skills of applicants, and short timeframe for responses to continue the electronic process without personal support has resulted in postponement and/or termination of numerous background checks of highly qualified applicants.

Training local professionals could assist the BIE's centralized office in a more efficient, yet just as effective, background clearance process. Providing onsite support would ensure a thorough submission of required documents of the highly qualified staff selected for the position, ultimately moving towards a quicker appointment process. This support would ultimately benefit our students, where obtaining highly qualified staff in Indian Country is an issue in itself.

BIE Assessments

There is a lack of any Memorandum of Agreement between the BIE and States, causing double testing in cooperative school locations. This limited understanding for the need of a triangular relationship many BIE schools must operate within (BIE, State and Tribal) puts strenuous and repetitive expectations on our Native Students.



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SY20-21 is the inaugural year for the BIE Spring Assessment, but little is known about it at the local level. We need resources and tools to better understand what the test comprises, which ELA and mathematics standards it focuses on per grade level, and the weight different kinds of questions carry for student scoring. Providing the fundamental understanding of the creation of the BIE Spring assessment could perhaps bring stronger support of it.

Finally, the importance of timely feedback from the Federal Government from standardized testing causes great concern for Indian Country. The results of these assessments serve no purpose to school improvement, as they are often delivered months, sometimes years later. In an ever changing school environment based on current research, many educators and administrators view this additional assessment as another obstacle to accelerated student learning.

Considering double testing of many Native American students, limited information about the BIE Spring Assessment, and the delayed delivery of feedback regarding standardized assessments, my recommendation would be to provide a waiver for states to determine which assessment(s) best serve their student population (State or Federal).

Teacher/Student Burnout/Mental Health Support

The COVID-19 Pandemic forced teachers to work in a technological environment that they had little training or professional development for and zero preparation time. The stress of being an effective and responsive professional while training to maintain personal health and safety has pushed many school staff members closer to their professional, physiological, emotional and psychological breaking points and faster than ever before. Local retirements and resignations are at an all time high resulting from the pandemic.

As Native Americans, we are still trying to recover from more than 100 years of historical trauma and educational malpractice by the dominant culture. Now, during the COVID-19 Pandemic we are quite literally witnessing the loss of language, culture, history and heritage with the passing of tribal elders and community leaders. This emotional toll has drained our school staff to the point where there is not much more that they can give.

Indian Country has been underserved in many health areas, but particularly in the area of mental health. BIE Director Tony Dearman himself cited this significant challenge in testimony provided before the Committee on Indian Affairs in May 2018. Indian Health Service (IHS) providers have always been limited in regard to access to resources, isolated locations of Tribal Nations, and the struggle to recruit and retain qualified personnel to address behavioral needs of our schools, let alone our communities. Now, coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic, IHS service providers have been pushed to their limits as well.

As a result, we are pushing our educational staff to provide the mental health support to their students, when they too have experienced historical trauma and current loss due to COVID-19. Our staff have been trained to be professionals in education, not in health services. The mental health concerns of our Native



“Ensure Excellence in Education and Respect to the Local Culture”

youth have exponentially increased during COVID-19. Direct counseling to BIE students and staff is imperative to the survival of our school systems, as the lack of support in this area is an epidemic itself.

Conclusion

In closing, I must stress that it is important to take what works from the past and bring forth to the present moment. COVID-19 did not allow us to be proactive, but rather reactive as we navigated into uncharted waters in education. However, it is crucial to examine what worked for different Tribes on many reservations throughout the United States, and respect the time and effort each respective school took to provide the best education possible during one of the most difficult pandemics in history.

During a pandemic that prevented educators from reaching students personally, it also pushed them to find creative and innovative ways to deliver instruction. I humbly ask that this is considered and that each school initiative be respected when considering government-wide mandates. Allowing the many different tribes the autonomy to determine the most effective platform to deliver instruction empowers educators and students to work on the achievement gaps of Native American students. Whether Chippewa, Sioux, Navajo, Cherokee, etc., those of us working in BIE school systems have witnessed firsthand what works and what doesn't work for our students. This is what we as educators practice--we differentiate based on the individual needs of our students. We ask that the same courtesy apply to us in BIE funded schools--to allow and support us in determining best practices for the unique needs of our students at each respective school.

Thank you again for the opportunity to present this testimony. I appreciate your continued dedication to our Native American students and look forward to working with you to ensure that BIE funded students educated on Tribal lands are provided with the opportunity to achieve academic success in a functional, safe and secure learning environment. I would be honored to answer any questions you may have.