

**STATEMENT  
OF  
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BEFORE THE  
SENATE COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS  
U.S. SENATE  
ON  
INDIAN EDUCATION SERIES:  
ENSURING THE BUREAU OF INDIAN EDUCATION HAS  
THE TOOLS NECESSARY TO IMPROVE**

**May 21, 2014**

Good afternoon Chairman Tester, Vice Chairman Barrasso, and Members of the Committee. Thank you for the invitation to appear today.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify and provide the Department of the Interior's ("Department") vision for Indian education in schools operated or funded by the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE). This is an exciting time for the BIE. We have made a lot of progress during the past year and we are hopeful that we have reached a turning point in the BIE's history. This Administration is committed to providing high-quality educational opportunities for students educated in BIE-funded elementary and secondary schools throughout Indian Country.

**The Bureau of Indian Education**

The BIE supports education programs and residential facilities for Indian students from federally recognized tribes at 183 elementary and secondary schools and dormitories. Currently, the BIE directly operates 57 schools and dormitories and tribes operate the remaining 126 schools and dormitories through grants or contracts with the BIE. During the 2013-2014 school year, BIE-funded schools served approximately 48,000 individual K-12 American Indian and Alaska Native students and residential boarders. Approximately 3,800 teachers, professional staff, principals, and school administrators work within the 57 BIE-operated schools. In addition, approximately twice that number work within the 126 tribally-operated schools.

The BIE has the responsibilities of a state educational agency for purposes of administering federal grant programs for education. BIE responsibilities include providing instruction that is aligned to the applicable State academic standards set forth in the regulations; working with the Department of Education to administer education grants; and providing oversight and accountability for school and student success. BIE is also responsible for ensuring compliance with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), among other federal laws pertaining to educating students.

The BIE faces unique and urgent challenges in providing a high-quality education. These challenges include: difficulty attracting effective teachers to BIE-funded schools (which are most

often located in remote locations), the current Interior regulatory requirement that BIE-funded schools comply with the (23 different) states' academic standards in which they are located, resource constraints, and organizational and budgetary fragmentation. A lack of consistent leadership -- evidenced by the BIE's 33 directors since 1979 -- and strategic planning have also limited the BIE's ability to improve its services. Furthermore, over the years, federal American Indian education has been contracted or granted to tribes in approximately two-thirds of the BIE school system, but the BIE's management structure and budget have not evolved to match the BIE's long-term trajectory of increased tribal control over the daily operation of schools. Currently, the Department is funding approximately 67 percent of the need for contract support costs for tribally-controlled schools. Each of these challenges has contributed to poor outcomes for BIE students.

### **A New Vision for the BIE**

The challenges before us are daunting; however, we must have the courage to do what is morally right. The Department and the Obama administration are fully committed to improving American Indian education. In fact, in September 2013, Secretary Jewell and Education Secretary Duncan appointed a set of experts to identify the challenges and problems faced by the BIE-funded schools, and to develop and propose recommendations that will help promote tribal control while ensuring that all BIE students are ready for college and career. The team combines management, legal, education, and tribal expertise, ensuring that the recommendations are grounded in a comprehensive understanding of the federal government's trust responsibility as well as the elements of effective teaching and learning.

The team immediately went to work and conducted extensive listening sessions with tribal leaders, educators, and community members across Indian Country, and analyzed a wide range of primary and secondary data. Based on those discussions and that analysis, the team began work on a proposal to redesign BIE that reflects the BIE's gradual evolution from a direct provider of education to a provider of customized support to meet the unique needs of each school and tribe. The BIE redesign would re-prioritize existing staff positions and resources to meet capacity-building needs in a timely manner, particularly in the areas of hiring effective teachers and leaders, strategic and financial management, and instructional improvement.

In April, the team issued draft recommendations for purposes of tribal consultation that discuss the systemic challenges facing the BIE and how to resolve them. The proposed recommendations aim to provide an agile organization that is focused on three core areas:

- **Sovereignty and Indian Education:** Building the capacity of tribes to operate high-performing schools and shape what children are learning about their tribes, language, and culture in schools.
- **School Improvement:** Providing targeted, highly customized technical assistance to schools through School Improvement Solutions Teams that are embedded in the regions and in close proximity to schools.

- **Responsive Business Operations:** Focusing on teacher and principal recruitment, acquisition and grants, facilities, educational technology, and communications under the direction of the Director, BIE, to ensure that the educational requirements in these business lines are addressed appropriately.

We conducted four tribal consultations regarding the preliminary recommendations at BIE-funded schools in Arizona, South Dakota, Washington, and Oklahoma. The consultations provided valuable insight and comment on the team's draft report and recommendations. The final report will incorporate feedback from tribal leaders and other BIE stakeholders. Although much work needs to be done, we have taken an important first step -- the BIE and tribes have agreed on a general path forward for the BIE.

### **Outline of the Proposed Recommendations**

Based on internal discussions and tribal consultation, the proposed redesign of the BIE focuses on the following four pillars of reform:

- **Highly Effective Teachers and Principals** -- We would identify, recruit, retain and empower diverse, highly effective teachers and principals to maximize the highest achievement for every student in all BIE-funded schools.
- **Agile Organizational Environment** -- We would develop a responsive organization that provides the resources, direction and services to tribes so that they can help their students attain high-levels of student achievement.
- **Budget that Supports Capacity Building Mission** -- We would develop a budget that is aligned with and supports BIE's new mission of tribal capacity building and scaling up best practices.
- **Comprehensive Supports through Partnerships** -- We would foster parental, community, and organizational partnerships to provide the emotional and social supports that BIE students need in order to be ready to learn.

By focusing relentlessly on the four pillars identified above, the proposed redesign would allow us to achieve our ultimate goal: world-class instruction for all BIE students delivered by tribes and the BIE.

This effort will focus especially on supporting and building the capacity of the tribally-controlled grants schools to improve educational outcomes. Tribally-controlled schools face numerous challenges in administering programs. DOI and the BIE will work with tribally-controlled schools to support implementation of improvements initiated from within tribal communities.

The BIE faces numerous infrastructure challenges. Of the 183 BIE schools, 34 percent (63 schools) are in poor condition, and 27 percent are over 40 years old. These substandard conditions are not conducive to educational achievement, and impact learning opportunities for students. As part of the transformation strategy we will develop a six-year plan aimed at

improving school facility conditions, similar to the six-year strategy used by the Department of Defense Education Agency to successfully replace and upgrade 70 percent of its schools in poor condition.

Information Technology (IT) infrastructure is another major challenge. The current lack of broadband access in the majority of the BIE school system presents enormous challenges for the BIE. Many BIE-funded schools are located in the most remote locations in the country. Most schools have only a T-1 level of connectivity -- entirely inadequate to meet the demands of 21st century teaching and learning. By helping connect teachers to students and parents--and helping schools share classes, curricula, and other resources--broadband-enabled teaching and learning has expanded educational opportunities for many students. Broadband access is particularly important for schools in remote locations because it can mitigate the devastating impact that geographic isolation can have on student achievement. It is especially critical for the BIE to effectively implement the Common Core State Standards as well as a 21<sup>st</sup> century, computer-based online assessment aligned to these new standards. Less than 30 percent of BIE-funded schools have the bandwidth and computers necessary to administer these assessments. Through this transformation, we will be looking at ways to improve broadband access.

### **Conclusion**

This collective vision for BIE – a vision rooted in the belief that all children can learn and that all tribes can operate high-achieving schools – would allow the BIE to achieve improved results in the form of higher student scores, improved school operations, and increased tribal control over schools.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I would be happy to answer any questions the Committee may have.