Bureau of Indian Education to implement nine weeks of distance learning for continuity of education

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WASHINGTON – Assistant Secretary – Indian Affairs (AS-IA) Tara *Katuk* Sweeney recently announced that the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) schools operating on the Navajo Nation will open for students via distance learning for the first nine weeks of the 2020-21 school year. The BIE operates 32 schools within the Navajo Nation and has worked closely with tribal leaders to find the best way to implement the Return To Learn! plan. Under the plan, BIE schools have the flexibility to implement how it works for their specific needs and community conditions.

"Our number one priority is the academic instruction of our students, but we must do that in a manner that also protects their health and safety," **said Assistant Secretary Sweeney**. "We created the Return to Learn plan to give BIE schools the flexibility to consider the specific health and safety conditions in their communities. In-person instruction is always the preferred method of instructional delivery, however, when on-the-ground pandemic conditions dictate moving cautiously, we work with our schools and tribal leadership to provide the resources to support those needs."

"We thank Assistant Secretary Sweeney and BIE Director Tony Dearman for discussing these issues with us on a regular basis and for their support for online learning to begin the school year," **said Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez**. "The Navajo Nation Board of Education approved a resolution supporting online learning for the entire first semester and we are open to discussing this option with our federal partners as we move forward. Our COVID-19 cases on the Navajo Nation have been on a consistent decline, but there remains substantial risk to all of our citizens due to high numbers in regions and cities near the Navajo Nation. Our number one priority continues to be the health and well-being of our Navajo people, especially our students, teachers, and school administrators."

Indian Affairs and the Navajo Nation have been engaged in a series of discussions on how best to open schools on the Navajo reservation. The BIE is helping with the transition by providing computer hardware, including over 10,000 laptops, 1,000 iPads, software, and over 6,000 mobile hotspots to students and teachers. BIE has also launched a pilot program to put Wi-Fi hotspots on buses for 25 of the longest bus routes across the school system.

For more information on the Return to Learn! plan, visit https://returntolearn.bie.edu/return-to-learn-plan.

The AS-IA advises the Secretary of the Interior on Indian Affairs policy issues, communicates policy to and oversees the programs of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the BIE, provides leadership in consultations with tribes and serves as the DOI official for intra- and inter-departmental coordination on Indian matters.

The BIE implements federal Indian education programs and funds 183 elementary schools, secondary schools and dormitories (of which over two-thirds are tribally operated) located on 64 reservations in 23 states serving an estimated 46,000 individual students. The BIE also operates two post-secondary schools and administers grants for 29 tribally controlled colleges and universities and two tribal technical colleges.

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