

TESTIMONY
OF
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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON EARLY CHILDHOOD, ELEMENTARY,
AND SECONDARY EDUCATION
COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND THE WORKFORCE
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

FEBRUARY 14, 2018

Good morning Chairman Rokita, Ranking Member Polis, and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the invitation to appear today on behalf of the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) at the Department of the Interior (Department) to update the Subcommittee on the BIE's work.

I am Tony Dearman, a member of the Cherokee Nation, and Director of the BIE. Prior to becoming Director in November 2016, I served as Associate Deputy Director for Bureau-operated schools, overseeing 17 schools, four off-reservation boarding schools (ORBS), and one dormitory. Before that, I served as superintendent of Riverside Indian School located in Anadarko, Oklahoma, and principal of Sequoyah High School in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. During this service, my leadership teams worked to ensure that our students not only received a high-quality education but also had the opportunity to receive the holistic supports needed to thrive.

Today, Sequoyah High School is a school of choice among Indian students. In fact, more than 60 students who attended have received Gates Millennium scholarships over the past 15 years. The competitive scholarship is based on a minimum 3.5 grade point average, community service hours, leadership experience, and written essays. At Riverside Indian School, we effectively served approximately 500 students representing 75 Indian tribes from 23 states. As an ORBS site with residential facilities, most students reside on-site for much of the year. To address the varying needs of our students, such as behavioral and mental health support services, we built partnerships with the Indian Health Service, local emergency medical services, and law enforcement to ensure that students and staff members were in a safe school environment.

My passion has always been supporting our students at the local level, so I am honored to serve them in this capacity, utilizing my knowledge of how our schools function, the issues students face, and the support needed from BIE to create success system-wide. The successes my schools achieved required transparency, collaboration, and dedication. Since I became Director, I have worked to bring that same focus to BIE.

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 as well as two post-secondary institutions, Haskell Indian Nations University and the Southwestern Indian

Polytechnic Institute. Of the 183 schools, the BIE directly operates 53 schools and dormitories while tribes, through local control, operate the remaining 130 schools and dormitories via grants or contracts. In total, BIE-funded schools serve approximately 46,810 K-12 American Indian and Alaska Native students and residential boarders. Approximately 3,400 teachers, professional staff, principals, and school administrators work to support students served by BIE-operated schools.

We recognize that we face unique and urgent challenges in providing a high-quality education to BIE students. With such challenges come tremendous opportunities for improvement in the way we operate on a day-to-day basis. As we work to improve local service delivery, the BIE is focusing its attention on allocating critical resources effectively and efficiently to achieve the agency's core mission while, at the same time, increasing accountability throughout the agency.

GAO High Risk Status

In February 2017, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) listed the BIE on its High-Risk Report (GAO-17-317 High-Risk Series). The GAO highlighted the following persistent weaknesses noted in prior reports that inhibit the agency from efficiently executing its mission to serve Indian students:

- Indian Affairs' (IA) oversight of school safety and construction, as well as how the BIE monitors the way schools use Interior funds;
- The impact of limited workforce planning in several key areas related to BIE schools on service delivery;
- The effects of aging BIE school facilities and equipment and how such facilities contribute to degraded and unsafe conditions for students and staff; and
- How the lack of internal controls and other weaknesses hinder IA's ability to collect complete and accurate information on the physical conditions of BIE schools.

In three separate reports dating back to 2013, the GAO provided several recommendations to improve IA's management of BIE schools. Currently, ten of GAO's recommendations are past due. Progress is being made to address BIE's outstanding recommendations with the BIE closing three recommendations, one as recently as January 2018. In May 2017 GAO issued three additional reports that include several new recommendations, ten of which involve BIE and its IA partners.

As Director, I am committed to addressing these outstanding items. I am working with our senior leadership team within BIE as well as IA, the Secretary's office, and our colleagues at the GAO to ensure that the BIE systematically and comprehensively addresses each outstanding recommendation. Through in-person meetings and follow-up teleconferences, GAO has provided BIE comments and suggestions for closing recommendations in a timely manner, with several additional recommendations expected to be implemented this year.

Reorganization and Hiring

In early 2016, the Department directed the BIE to institute organizational improvements in order to focus services based on the types of schools served. BIE proposes to realign the organization

from a regional basis to a structure based on the types of schools served; namely (1) tribally-controlled schools, (2) BIE-operated schools, and (3) schools serving the Navajo Nation due to its geographical size.

In January 2018, the Department held meetings in Washington, D.C. with senior agency officials to discuss a Department-wide reorganization. BIE was included in this meeting to ensure a focus remains on the varying needs of Indian students. IA has initiated discussions with Indian Country and will continue with formal tribal consultations regarding any proposed adjustments to the regional field organizations serving tribes. The BIE continues to hire staff; however, filling vacancies in the Great Plains region is on hold until pending litigation is resolved.

Strategic Plan and Improved Management

As highlighted by GAO, a lack of consistent leadership – evidenced by the BIE’s more than 37 directors since 1979 – and the absence of regular and consistent strategic planning have limited the BIE’s ability to improve its core service delivery. In response, the BIE prepared a Draft Strategic Plan Proposal and on October 17, 2017, published a notice in the Federal Register to initiate tribal consultation on the Proposal. The BIE completed five tribal consultation sessions across Indian Country and hosted three listening sessions throughout the fall of 2017 to gather substantive input from tribes and Indian education stakeholders. The BIE is currently analyzing feedback and will publish a report with regards to the consultations in early 2018.

To ensure that the strategic plan is effective, the BIE has consulted with external subject matter expert organizations, including WestED, the South Central Comprehensive Center, the Building State Capacity and Productivity Center, and the Council of Chief State School Officers. These organizations have provided BIE with technical expertise throughout the process and shared best practices in developing an effective, long-term strategic plan that guides the work of the organization for the next five years. Additionally, BIE will continue to solicit advice to assist us as we transition from strategic planning to strategic performance management.

ESSA State Plan and Student Data

On September 14, 2017, the BIE announced the establishment of a Standards, Assessments, and Accountability System Negotiated Rulemaking Committee. The Committee will be tasked with developing proposed regulations for defining standards, assessments, and an accountability system under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). At the close of the announcement on October 16, 2017, BIE received 30 nominations from Indian Country for members of the Committee. As of January 2018, the Administration is reviewing nominations. As soon as those nominations are accepted, and the Committee established, the BIE will work to schedule meetings to develop and implement the new system as expeditiously as possible.

To support this work, the BIE has worked during the last year to improve data collection in order to better illustrate the needs and successes of our students. The BIE is hiring staff focused on data systems, data collection training, and the use of key data metrics critical to supporting the needs of BIE students. BIE is also working locally with schools to train and assist school leaders regarding the input of key data sets, such as graduation rates.

FY 2019 President's Budget Request

The President's FY 2019 budget request proposes a \$742 million investment in Indian education that works to focus attention on core mission service delivery. The BIE will work to utilize the resources Congress provides as effectively and efficiently as possible. Through this funding, the BIE will provide local technical assistance to support tribal school choice by strengthening self-determination and working to meet the local needs of our schools and Indian tribes. For example, BIE is on schedule to convert the BIE-operated Sky City Community School located in the Pueblo of Acoma to a tribally-controlled school – Haak'u Community Academy – this year, with the official conversion taking place in July.

The BIE is also focused on improving support at the local school level, such as reducing bureaucratic constraints for schools by allowing teacher hiring to reflect accreditation standards utilized by the state in which the BIE school is located.

Additionally, the BIE will increase our focus on professional development to ensure that school personnel have the training and support necessary to address the various needs of our students. The BIE is also focusing on the safety of our students. Last month, the BIE's Safety Office coordinated with IA to formalize guidance regarding the establishment of School Safety Committees, and we continue to partner across IA to ensure that 100 percent of school safety inspections are completed annually.

The President's budget also includes a legislative proposal to create a Public Lands Infrastructure Fund, which would help pay for repairs and improvements in national parks, national wildlife refuges, and BIE schools. As the Department works to expand its energy program on Federal lands and waters, this initiative has the potential to generate much-needed infrastructure and maintenance funding. We strongly support this proposal and look forward to working with the Administration and Congress to advance this legislation.

Conclusion

Chairman Rokita, Ranking Member Polis, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony today and provide you an update regarding our recent work. We appreciate your focus on all of our students—including college students such as those attending the BIE's Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute, who won the grand prize last year in the 2nd Annual NASA National Swarmathon Robotics Competition. SIPI's students are the only participants to place both years. Our students can achieve anything and the BIE is committed to improving service delivery to help them reach their goals. The BIE looks forward to partnering with you as we work to improve. Thank you for your time, and I would be honored to answer any questions you may have.