

**TESTIMONY OF SHAWNA ALLISON BECENTI AND SHERRICK ROANHORSE
BEFORE THE HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR,
ENVIRONMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES
May 8, 2024**

Yá'át'ééh Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree, and members of the House Subcommittee.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding FY 2025 appropriations for Indian Country. My name is Shawna Allison Becenti, and I am the Head of School for Navajo Preparatory School (Navajo Prep) and a proud alumna of Navajo Prep. My clans are Zuni, and Red Streak Running into Water. With me is Sherrick Roanhorse, who is the Vice-President of Navajo Prep's Governing Board of Trustees as well as an alumnus of Navajo Prep. As the Head of School, my responsibilities include advocating for state, federal, and tribal funding.

Navajo Prep is a Tribally Controlled School funded by the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) as per the Tribally Controlled Schools Act (PL 100-297). Navajo Prep is located in Farmington, New Mexico. Navajo Prep is an example of Indian self-determination based on the Public Law 93-638 Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act. As an International Baccalaureate World School, Navajo Prep serves 285 students in grades 9-12 and allows students to compete for a competitive international diploma. Students come from across the United States including Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, and Utah and represent different tribal nations. Sixty-five percent of our students live on campus in our residential facilities.

College education of our Navajo Youth is an expectation for Navajo parents and our Navajo leaders¹. Navajo Prep's achievements are substantial, with 98% of our 2023 graduates being accepted into four-year institutions and a remarkable 73% college graduation rate within six years, significantly surpassing both the national and state levels for Native students.

Navajo Prep's success is represented by the alumni of the school, who fulfill the mission and vision Yideeskáággóó Naat'áanii, meaning "Leaders Now and Into the Future." Since Navajo Prep was founded in 1991, we have graduated 1,262 alumni. Navajo Prep alumni continue to become leaders in their fields—many of our alumni continue to become athletes, scientists, engineers, and teachers who graduate from colleges such as Yale, Stanford, Brown, NYU, Columbia, University of New Mexico, and Diné College. Navajo Nation leaders look to our school to be an institution that prepares Diné leaders for the nation-building of tomorrow.

A critical priority is sustaining the Diné language and culture to strengthen the identity of our students as our language and culture is in a state of emergency. It is estimated only 51% of Navajo people spoke our Diné language in 2010. By 2040, it is estimated that less than 5% of

¹ Pedro Vallejo and Vincent Werito, *Transforming Diné Education: Innovations in Pedagogy and Practice* (University of Arizona Press, 2022); Wendy S. Greyeyes, *Disentangling Our Sovereign Body: A History of Navajo Education* (University of Arizona Press, 2022).

Diné people will speak our language.² Schools serving Indigenous communities have an obligation to address this language loss crisis. Navajo Prep’s pedagogy roots our students in language and culture and supports the development of their identity as Indigenous peoples and global citizens. Federal funding has allowed our school to develop innovative solutions that work to address critical language loss for all 110 Chapter communities of the Navajo Nation.

To provide innovative opportunities for our students, Navajo Prep has sought competitive grants to supplement our Indian School Equalization Program (ISEP) funds. The process of securing additional supplemental funding requires additional staffing, time, and resources to apply, manage, and successfully complete competitive grant-funded projects. These funds are essential to Navajo Prep’s ability to address critical priorities relating to student achievement and Diné language and culture acquisition. Navajo Prep has received the following examples of competitive federal grants:

- \$2.6 million dollars from the U.S. Department of Education Demonstration Grants for Indian Children (2017-2022). These funds allowed Navajo Prep to transform and align our curriculum academic framework with the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program, Diné culture and language, and the Common Core standards.
- \$686,370 from the U.S. Department of Education to support Native American Language (2020-2027). These projects helped to create leadership positions and assessments to embed Diné language and culture more deeply within our school.
- \$949,650 from the U.S. Department of Education’s Accessing Choice in Education (ACE) Program (2020-2023). These funds promoted community partnerships and direct student services to support academic achievement and college and career preparation.
- \$236,669 from the BIE through the competitive Stronger Connections Competitive Grant (2023). This award supported safety and security initiatives campus-wide.
- \$587,911 from the BIE through the Language Immersion Grant (2020-2023). This grant is being used to create exhibits to display the history of our language and culture on campus and be the owners of our own history.

Navajo Prep commends the Subcommittee for its past support of BIE funding and respectfully urges you to address historical underfunding by substantially increasing the FY 2025 Interior Appropriations bill. Specifically, Navajo Prep advocates for an allocation of the following:

<u>Tribal Education Program Requests for FY2025:</u>	
Indian Schools Equalization Program:	\$951.5 Million
Education Facilities Operation:	\$109 Million (move to forward funding)
Education Facilities Maintenance:	\$100 Million (move to forward funding)
Student Transportation:	\$75.5 Million
Tribal Grant Support Costs:	\$115 Million (move to forward funding)

² Denetclaw, P. (2017, November 16). *Data shows huge reduction in Diné Speakers*. Navajo Times. <https://navajotimes.com/reznews/data-shows-huge-reduction-in-dine-speakers/>

BIE School Construction:	\$400 million
BIE School Resource Officers	\$93 million
Johnson O'Malley Assistance Grants (TPA) \$28.3 million	

The BIE funds Tribally Controlled Schools and operates Bureau-funded schools. The BIE funds 129 Tribally Controlled Schools across the United States. These schools are located both on and off Tribal Nations. There are many funding constraints for tribally controlled schools. Tribally Controlled Schools cannot draw on the local tax base. They cannot issue bonds. They primarily rely upon federal funding, which is a federal trust and treaty responsibility. Navajo Prep has to be creative to supplement for safety, security, food service staffing, technology infrastructure, equipment, and management as it is not included in ISEP calculations. Furthermore, ISEP calculations do not allow for pay parity within the individual state. For example, the State of New Mexico increased teacher pay for state-funded schools, and to remain competitive, Navajo Prep had to increase staff salaries with no increase in ISEP funding.

According to the BIE, in FY 2023, the federal government funded American Indian and Alaskan Native (AI/AN) students at roughly half, \$6,910, of the average state per-pupil funding of \$16,080. AI/AN student funding is grossly inadequate compared to the only other fully funded federal education system. For example, the Department of Defense Education Agency is funded at \$25,000 per student. BIE schools need at least a 50% increase in ISEP funding to bring AI/AN students' education funding to parity with the national average.

Furthermore, Navajo Prep supports BIE's initiative to transition Contract Support Costs and 105(l) lease payments to mandatory funding. This change will ensure excellent fiscal stability and continuous improvement in educational services for our students.

Conclusion

As representatives of Navajo Prep, we extend our sincere gratitude for your continued support of the BIE funding. We appreciate your support to improving educational opportunities for AI/AN students and urge your attention to critical funding priorities in the FY 2025 appropriations bill. It is imperative to recognize the federal government's trust, treaty, and statutory obligations to provide eligible AI/AN students with a quality, culturally responsive education. The BIE plays a pivotal role in fulfilling this responsibility by funding BIE-operated schools and supporting Tribally controlled schools. However, chronic underfunding has jeopardized the delivery of essential educational services, leading to critical shortfalls in teacher pay parity, infrastructure maintenance, and administrative support. In the current funding structure, there is a clear monetary disadvantage to being a federally funded school in New Mexico.

The United States has a trust, treaty, and statutory responsibility to provide American Indian students with a quality and culturally responsive education, including providing funding, policies, and structures for educational programming and services; and appropriate, safe educational facilities.

The President's FY 2025 proposed budget and the BIE's funding request will continue to result in a shortfall in BIE funding. We respectfully urge the Subcommittee to increase BIE funding. These resources are vital for us to upgrade our facilities, expand our curriculum, and continue our mission of cultivating knowledgeable, skilled graduates who are prepared to lead and innovate for the benefit of their communities, Tribal Nations, and the world at large.

We urge you to uphold the federal trust responsibilities for which our ancestors have fought for. We are not asking for more funding. We are asking for what was promised within our federal-Indian treaties.