

**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES**

**TESTIMONY OF DR. TONI TSATOKE-MULE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
KIOWA EDUCATION AGENCY**

**ESSENTIAL RESOURCES FOR BUREAU OF INDIAN AFFAIRS AND  
BUREAU OF INDIAN EDUCATION**

February 27, 2025

Esteemed Members of the Committee:

My name is Toni Tsatoke-Mule. I am the Executive Director of the Kiowa Education Agency representing the Kiowa Tribe, and speaking on behalf of the Kiowa Executive Branch, and Chairman Lawrence SpottedBird. I am here to address the critical issue of essential resources needed within the BIA and BIE. This support is recognition of tribal sovereignty, and the Federal Trust Responsibility, and honors treaty law, as supreme law of the land. Essential resources support indigenous tribal nations like ours in the pursuit of education and improved quality of life in these very uncertain times. I want to thank you all for this opportunity to provide testimony.

I am speaking before this body today as a true example of how tribal colleges prepare Indigenous students for career paths and leadership roles, but not at the expense of Native cultural identity. In tribal colleges, our identity is a strength, as opposed to being regarded as a hinderance to academic achievement. I attended Haskell Indian Nations University, located in Lawrence, Kansas. I entered Haskell with mainstream and public school experiences that are common for many, if not most native students. By that time, I knew what it felt like to be unseen and unheard...to feel small and excluded. As a child, I could not articulate the imbalance of power and marginalization that was so evident to me. It was the reality of growing from a child to an adult as a minority, in every school, in every classroom. Stepping foot onto a campus with an entire student body with similar experiences is life-changing. So often, it is the first or only time that a native student will have the privilege of a native teacher or professor or to enroll in a native language course or any course inclusive of Native American perspectives.

As a college student and for the first time in my life, everyone around me understood my challenges, especially the challenges that have resulted from a history marked by war, exploitation of resources and land displacement. That shared history manifests today in many social problems in native communities in forms of poverty and violence, however students seek knowledge armed with a degree and desire to make a difference for themselves, their families, and the tribal nations that they inherently represent.

Haskell Indian Nations University and other educational institutions have been affected by recent, drastic, and abrupt cuts in funding, which occurred in February, in the middle of a Spring semester, three months before graduation. This places a direct threat to the future of our young people everywhere. These tribal college students are persistent, hard-working young people who dare to aspire to something greater. Many have already shown great resilience and against all odds, pursue their studies. It is difficult to conceive that education, of any matter, could be a target. We must safeguard the BIA and BIE systems that have the potential to “right” so many “wrongs” in the history of American Indian education, including the boarding school era which separated children from parents, and disrupted our ability to transmit language cultural knowledge. The only path for tribal self-determination is education. We rely on others who have the power to protect our students, our teachers, our learning institutions. We rely on you.

Sustained support for BIA and BIE fuels educational opportunity. Through BIA Educational Assistance programs, I went on to eventually earn a terminal degree in my field. It is because of these vital programs that I sit here today, fully equipped to confront the educational challenges of our people. The growing capacity of

each Tribal Education Department or Agency (also called a TED or T.E.A.) is crucial in our educational journey. The role of TEDs is to assist and ease navigating the intersections of local, state, and tribal education agencies to improve barriers to success.

The core values of Persistence, Strength, and Purpose that are instilled through Kiowa wisdom, have guided my steps all the way from our Kiowa tribal headquarters on the southern plains, in a small rural town known today as Carnegie, Oklahoma to the front steps of this building in Washington, D.C. Like many of our Kiowa leaders of the past, we make this journey to assert ourselves as the indigenous people of the very land that we stand on. The mission and work of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Bureau of Indian Education are not D.E.I. initiatives. We affirm the government-to-government relationship. We acknowledge that the basic and fundamental provisions of education and health care were of primary importance in binding treaties signed by our ancestors, and which established the federal-American Indian trust responsibility.

So, I present this oral testimony before you today validating educational opportunity afforded through resources appropriated to the Bureau of Indian Affairs. At times the decisions that we make have impact that we never see in our lifetime. The mission and work of the BIA and the BIE can and does make a real difference in the lives of our Kiowa citizens each and every day.

I want to extend my appreciation to this Subcommittee for allowing me to provide testimony in support of program funding that is so critically important to Indian Country. Àhò (thank you).