



OPENING STATEMENT

House Committee on Education and Labor

Chairman Robert C. "Bobby" Scott

Opening Statement of Chair Sablan (NMI-At Large)

Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education

Examining the Policies and Priorities of the Bureau of Indian Education

Zoom

Tuesday, June 28, 2022 | 11:00 a.m.

Today, we are meeting to examine the role of the Bureau of Indian Education in serving American Indian and Alaskan Native students.

The federal government has a trust responsibility to Indian tribes bound by both the U.S. Constitution and moral responsibility. Education is a core part of this obligation. Unfortunately, our commitment to faithfully educate and support American Indian and Alaskan Native, or A-I-A-N, students has been marred by generations of abuse and neglect.

A report released last month from the Department of Interior on federal Indian boarding schools from 1820 to 1969 found:

- A history of low-quality education,
- Militarized strategies to erase the identity of A-I-A-N students, and
- Physical, sexual, and emotional abuse.

Tragically, these actions, carried out by the people entrusted to educate our children, likely contributed to the deaths of at least 500 American Indian and Alaskan Native students.

Today, the Bureau of Indian Education, or the B-I-E, has a key role to play in fulfilling the federal government's commitment to providing a high-quality education to A-I-A-N students.

B-I-E schools honor ancestors and sustain traditions, signaling to students that they belong in school. Research shows that students from underrepresented backgrounds—including A-I-A-N students—have higher achievement rates when cultural-specific elements were incorporated into their curriculum.

Despite the importance of B-I-E schools, American Indian and Alaskan Native students are still in need of educational resources and support.

A 2021 study showed that B-I-E students performed more than two grade levels below the national average. Even when compared to A-I-A-N public school students, B-I-E students were still roughly one-third of a grade level behind. And research confirms that A-I-A-N students experience higher than average rates of depression and suicide.

Unfortunately, the pandemic only compounded the consequences of our multigenerational neglect of A-I-A-N students. During the pandemic, Native Americans lost their lives at higher rates compared to other demographics in the U.S.; student achievement declined; and mental health challenges worsened. The loss of tribal members inflicted an immeasurable loss to Native Americans' traditions and languages.

Now more than ever, the education and future of American Indian and Alaskan Native students and communities fall on the strength of B-I-E funded schools.

To that end, over the past two years, Congressional Democrats have secured historic investments in education, including \$990 million in dedicated funding to help A-I-A-N students get back on track. B-I-E schools can use these funds to protect the health and safety of students and staff, address learning loss, and support students' social and emotional needs.

However, we know these investments, alone, will not solve the underlying issues that B-I-E schools face.

According to studies conducted by the Government Accountability Office, core management and accountability challenges have prevented B-I-E from repairing dilapidated school facilities, fully serving students with disabilities, and meeting student's academic and mental health needs.

Today, we have an opportunity to examine the steps B-I-E is taking to fulfill its responsibility to students. I am committed to securing sustained and strategic investments to ensure B-I-E can improve its operations and address the urgent challenges facing A-I-A-N students. For example, President Biden's budget proposal for Fiscal Year 2023 called for \$1.6 billion for the B-I-E, a \$500 million increase above FY 2022 enacted level, including more than \$890 million for K-12 education

These investments are not only critical to the education of our nation's students, but to the future of American Indian and Alaska Native communities and our Constitutional commitment to them.

So, thank you, again, Director Dearman, for your service to A-I-A-N students, and I look forward to our discussion alongside Ms. Sirois of the Government Accountability Office.