



Testimony before the U.S. House Committee on Education and the Workforce  
Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education

“Examining the Challenges Facing Native American Schools”

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Chairman Rokita, Ranking Member Fudge, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for your sincere interest in American Indian education and for the chance to testify today on a national crisis: the shameful condition of school buildings in the federal Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) system.

My name is Jill Burcum. I am an editorial writer with the Star Tribune newspaper based in Minneapolis, Minn. Our Upper Midwest coverage region is home to many large tribal nations. I went on the road in 2014 on the road with photographer David Joles to document safety and structural failures of the facilities in which some of our nation’s most disadvantaged learners attend class. The results were published in a series of editorials at the end of the year called “Separate and Unequal.” The editorials drew an outraged response from across the nation.

Many readers felt the same way I did. As a mom, I thought many times that I would not be comfortable sending my children to school in these buildings. I believe that committee members would feel similarly about sending their children, grandchildren, nieces or nephews to schools with roofs that leak, have rotten subflooring, dangerously inadequate electrical systems, sewers that back up and have classrooms that are so cold that mittens, coats and hats must be worn in class. Unfortunately, mothers of BIE students don’t have a choice, which is why action is required.

When we first began digging into this issue, we focused on the plight of the Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig High School on the Leech Lake Indian Reservation in northern Minnesota. Conditions were far worse than we had feared. This is a school housed in something Midwesterners call a “pole barn.” These are metal sheds widely used on farms and by businesses. The Bug school, named after Chief Hole in the Day, is not even in a nice pole barn. It’s more than 30 years old. The metal walls don’t keep out the extreme winters. The foundation and roof leak. Electrical cables and pipes line the walls and teachers can’t even turn on all the electrical equipment at the same time. The science classroom lacks safety equipment needed for hands-on learning and

experiments. The heating system that has been repaired more times than anyone can remember failed again one day when I was there. The repairmen just shook their heads when I asked them how long they could keep resuscitating it.

It quickly became clear that the Bug school was a symptom of a broken BIE system, something we realized during additional reporting and by combing through BIE documents, federal reports and budget requests. There are 183 BIE schools with about 49,000 students. Sixty-four of them are in poor condition, many for a decade or more. Here's what that inaction means in the real world:

On the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota, I stood on the rotted wooden floor in one of the main hallways at Crazy Horse High School and felt the floor frighteningly bend underneath me. The Wounded Knee elementary school at the western end of the Pine Ridge reservation should be a safe, secure place that offers hope to the students it serves. Instead, this badly-aged and underequipped building mirrors the conditions in a nearby drug- and crime-ridden neighborhood called a "prairie ghetto."

In Arizona, a school administrator became emotional when I called. One of the two remote schools she oversees had been slated for replacement for over a decade. She had been told by BIE officials that nothing could be done despite a failing structure and failing electrical system. Her reaction when a newspaper from Minnesota called: "Thank God!" She was simply glad someone cared and was trying to help.

You'd think that conditions like this would inspire urgency at the federal agencies that oversee these schools. They haven't. Replacement school construction has shrunk dramatically over the past decade. Incredibly, it was zeroed out in the Obama administration's 2013 and 2014 budget requests.

My interviews and exchanges with Interior Secretary Sally Jewell and BIE director Charles Roessel did not inspire confidence. I believe they both personally care deeply about American Indian students. But there's a longstanding defeatism within Interior about improving conditions at BIE schools and an entrenched, spread-out bureaucracy too often focused on red tape for red tape's sake and not on progress.

One story I was told by American Horse school staff in South Dakota is that they spent days working on a grant application only to be told multiple times they had submitted it on the wrong colored paper. Yet no one at the BIA/BIE western administrative headquarters in Albuquerque could tell them what color was the right one. The reason for the grant – improving education – was not the focus. A ridiculous bureaucratic detail became the all-consuming issue, wasting hours of the American Horse staff's time. In the meantime, no one was doing anything about a school replacement list that was over a decade old and still not complete. Where are these agency's priorities? Where is the urgency?

The burden for Secretary Jewell and Director Roessel is changing that culture and, more specifically, figuring out ways to get funding for new schools in a political environment in which that is difficult. It can be done. The Department of Defense sought a billion-dollar overhaul of its aging schools at the end of the last decade. Yes, DOD is a bigger and more politically influential agency. But DOD officials realized that in order to maintain a world-class educational system, they had to have facilities that matched expectations. The foundation to the DOD's success was a detailed plan that inspired confidence that these funds would be well spent.

I have yet to hear when the Department of Interior will have that same type of plan to overhaul its schools. I've asked repeatedly. What I'm told is that they recently released a blueprint report to reorganize administrative layers overseeing BIE schools. My interpretation is that this will move bureaucratic chairs around while school buildings potentially wait years for leadership's attention and, more importantly, action.

My sympathies go to the hardworking BIE school officials that must deal with the bureaucracy in Washington, D.C. and Albuquerque, New Mexico. There are also regional offices. As a journalist, figuring out where the Bureau of Indian Affairs' authority ends and where the Bureau of Indian Education's authority begins was a major challenge. Is the person I need to talk to in New Mexico? Washington, D.C.? Minneapolis? Which office has the documents I'm looking for? Imagine how hard it is for someone at a school like American Horse, on the Pine Ridge reservation. It's not just a matter of which colored paper on which to send in a grant application. Who, for example, do you call or email when the one-size-fits-all operations funding formula does not accommodate extra heating costs when a harsh winter sets in on the Upper Great Plains? That happened in the winter of 2013-14. While bureaucrats were cozy and warm in their offices, school officials in Pine Ridge were shuffling funds and scrambling to pay the soaring heating costs. The rigid bureaucracy above them did little to help them.

That's a point anyone reading this "blueprint" should keep in mind. It's not a blueprint. It's about 25 pages of very broadly written language about organizational reform. I can't tell after reading it if the changes will provide the flexibility that is clearly needed to build new schools quickly and to accommodate the varying needs of a system that serves American Indian communities across a wide number of states and climate conditions. Congress needs to closely monitor this reform as details become clear to make sure real-world improvement is made. Congress also needs to push for reforms that give these communities and states much more flexibility to grapple with their many challenges. For example, the Minnesota legislature is pioneering an approach that would allow for public-private partnerships to rapidly rebuild the Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig High School. The BIE/BIA/Interior bureaucracy needs to encourage solutions like this going forward and make sure that efforts like this are rewarded. Right now, this state effort is in limbo because there's no bureaucratic framework or culture that allows such innovation, much less encourages it. That has to change.

There are many challenges facing American Indian education. Discussions about educational disparities often leave out this important group of students, who have the lowest high school graduation rate of any minority group. Improving BIE schools buildings is not a cure-all, but it is

a start. Safe, modern buildings would help attract and keep talented teachers. They would help address absenteeism. They would allow students to learn in classrooms with the science equipment needed to prepare them for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Failing to honor the federal government's commitment to American Indian education is not an option. Congress should demand action from the Department of Interior. The agency needs to overhaul its confusing, rigid bureaucracy. Congress also needs to give this agency a deadline to come up with a plan to modernize these school facilities.

Thank you for your time and consideration.