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October 7, 2015

The Honorable Ken Calvert
Chairman
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment,
and Related Agencies
B-308 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Betty McCollum
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment,
and Related Agencies
1016 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Calvert and Ranking Member McCollum:

The federal government has made a commitment to Native American students and families to provide education opportunities in a manner that preserves their cultures, languages, and traditions. In recent months, the American people have learned a great deal about the deplorable conditions affecting Native American schools. A crisis has been festering for decades, and thanks in large part to the investigative work of the Minneapolis Star Tribune and others, this crisis is finally receiving the national attention it deserves.

The Education and the Workforce Committee has held two oversight hearings this year on this important issue. At these hearings, members learned in stark detail how a bungling bureaucracy is undermining the health and safety of these Native American students, as well as their education. The nonpartisan Government Accountability Office (GAO) noted a disorganized bureaucracy and poor communication at the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) make it difficult – if not impossible – for schools to receive the services and support they need. GAO also warned if these issues are not addressed, “it will be difficult for Indian Affairs to ensure the long-term success of a generation of students.” BIE Director Charles Roessel in his testimony before the Committee shared his intent to improve support for Native American schools through a reorganization of the agency.

We have since learned the long anticipated reorganization request has been submitted to your Committee. We are encouraged the proposal addresses some of the concerns raised by GAO and other witnesses at our hearings. The identification of a point of contact for school operations at the BIE, who will work with the Deputy Assistant Secretary-Management’s office, will help ensure schools’ operations, maintenance, and staffing needs are met in a timely and efficient manner. Additionally, the proposed changes to the education field offices, including a new

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emphasis on providing technical assistance and services directly to schools in their geographic regions, appears promising. Strong accountability is necessary for any successful operation, and we are encouraged BIE has proposed streamlining and better aligning reporting requirements to help provide greater accountability within the Native American education system.

Despite the positive changes that have been proposed, no proposal is perfect. We would be remiss if we failed to mention some of the concerns that have been raised about this reorganization. Our goal is to ensure any reorganization results in a more efficient and effective government agency that empower tribes and schools with the resources they need to better serve their students in a timely manner. However, the reorganization proposal would add new employees to the agency without an examination of its current workforce or assurance there will not be any duplication or overlap of agency staff. Simply adding more employees without a thorough examination of the agency's staffing needs will only add to the confusing maze of bureaucracy.

Furthermore, the BIE must carefully consider from where it would take funding to pay for these new government positions and implement these proposed reforms. Taking money away from direct education services or instruction to pay the salaries of additional government workers will be harmful to these vulnerable students. Additionally, the BIE should seek to ensure any reorganization abides by the boundaries of federal law, including the *Tribally Controlled Schools Act*. Any effort that would run afoul of the letter and spirit of the law would undermine an important effort to improve support and educational services for Native American children.

Reforming and reorganizing a government bureaucracy is extremely complicated and difficult. However, with proper due diligence and openness to collaboration and public feedback, we are hopeful this reorganization will improve a broken system for all parties involved. Ultimately, our desire is to see every child in every classroom have the opportunity to receive an excellent education. Achieving that goal requires determination and hard work. Thank you for your continued commitment to this effort, and we look forward to continuing to work with you and your staff on this important endeavor.

Sincerely,



JOHN KLINE
Chairman
Committee on Education and the Workforce



TODD ROKITA
Chairman
Subcommittee on Early Childhood,
Elementary, and Secondary Education