
**OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN BEN NIGHTHORSE CAMPBELL
OVERSIGHT HEARING ON BIA SCHOOL CONSTRUCTION
WEDNESDAY, JUNE 10, 1998**

Good morning. The purpose of this morning's hearing is to receive testimony regarding the current condition of BIA schools, review the BIA's selection process for building and repairing these schools, and discuss innovative methods of financing BIA schools.

“We will receive testimony which states that Indian children are not being provided with school facilities that are safe, healthy, or conducive to a quality education. We will hear from other parents, tribal leaders and school board members that their children must attend classes in over-crowded classrooms and live in dilapidated dorms. Sadly, we will hear one more time how the Federal Government is failing to meet its obligations to Indian children. We must address the backlog of new school construction requests and the related school facility maintenance improvement and repair problems, which will repeatedly be identified by the various witnesses today.”

What I just read, those aren't my words, they're the words of Senator DeConcini, a past member of this Committee, who chaired a hearing more than seven years ago on this same topic. These same words, unedited, ring true today. I hope we don't waste the time and money that we did seven years ago. Instead, today I hope that we can actually form a productive solution to help Indian children, so that their education won't have to suffer for another seven years.

Last week, this Committee discussed the reported “public safety crisis” in Indian country. The crime rate is soaring in every Indian jurisdiction across this nation. The majority of criminals leading this charge are juveniles. Children that should be obtaining an education, but for the reasons we're about to discuss can't attend school, because of the conditions that exist.

I understand that the Interior Department will soon implement new Department-wide procedures for addressing facilities construction, and the BIA is developing a new method for attacking the school construction backlog. I look forward to hearing details of these ideas, and responses from tribal leaders.

The Senate-passed Budget for Fiscal Year 1999 allocates \$166 million to BIA school construction. This amount, if appropriated would place a significant dent in the \$754 million backlog in BIA school construction, and would fund all remaining school construction projects on the “Priority List”. The Budget also contained a Resolution, introduced by Senators Domenici and Johnson, to eliminate this backlog within five years. These are federal buildings, and the government is liable for injuries caused by their decay, so I hope Congress can live up to this promise.

However, the constraints imposed by last year's Balanced Budget agreement won't permit us to address all of the problems facing Indian country. So I also look forward to our discussion on alternative methods of financing, and the Administration's improved method of maintaining and repairing these schools. Thank you all for attending.