

April 2, 2025

Dear Committee on Indian Affairs

Good Afternoon, my name is Sydna Yellowfish. I am an enrolled tribal member of the Otoe- Missouri tribe and descendent of the Osage, Sac-Fox and Pawnee tribes. Thank you for this opportunity. I am humbled to share my testimony based on thirty-nine years of memories as the Coordinator for the Title VI Indian Education (formerly known as Title IV, Title V, and Title VII) and our Johnson O'Malley (JOM) program at Edmond Public Schools in Edmond Oklahoma, a suburb of the Oklahoma City metropolitan area.

Education has always been a core value for our Native communities. This commitment is rooted in many treaties Tribal Nations made with the U.S. Government, which confirmed the foundation of government to government relationships. For example, the 1825 treaty with the Osage Nation established funding to support schools for Osage children. Similarly, the 1833 Treaty with the Oto and Missouri (Otoe-Missouria) included funds for the purposes of education. Programs like Title VI and JOM are modern extensions of these treaty commitments, continuing the legacy of education for Native students.

I stand before you because of the strength of generations before me. My parents, grandparents and great grandparents attended boarding schools such as Carlisle, Pawnee Boarding School, and Haskell Institute. Institutions that were shaped by federal education policies established by Congress for Native youth. We know these historical education policies led to traumatic outcomes. However, we also know that when policies align with the passion of the people, we witness the determination and resilience of our ancestors for our current and future generations. I am a JOM program recipient. I attended the University of Oklahoma as a first generation student and received educational assistance from the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), Pawnee Agency benefiting from the same legacy of support that the treaties promised generations ago. These opportunities were critical in my life long career as an educator which has enabled me to give back to our community and work with Indian students, families, tribes.

Title VI Indian Education

Title VI was originally enacted in 1965 as a part of Public Law 89-10. It has been amended providing financial resources to public schools for Indian students and their educational and culturally related needs. This is vital for Oklahoma, which according to the Department of Education has the largest number of Title VI grantees with 401 school districts receiving direct funding from this grant, affecting 128,401 Native American students. As a state, Oklahoma has the largest Indian student populations attending public schools. Oklahoma counties and Tribes share jurisdictional land boundaries, creating challenges and opportunities such as partnership in educational endeavors for native youth. Due to the shared jurisdictional land base the majority of our Indian students attend public schools. Within my school district there are 1950 Indian students from 56 diverse tribes across Oklahoma and Nations that we work with. Within the Oklahoma City metro area there are 11,000 Title VI students as determined by our recent tribal consultation. These numbers show the impact this program provides for.

Indian students and families that attend Edmond and metro public schools reside away from their tribal jurisdiction areas and Indian communities, limiting access and eligibility to services and support that may be offered through their tribe. Title VI funds for public school students provide much needed services directly related to their educational and cultural needs, a primary reason why Title VI should remain intact. The program allows our staff to support Indian students in broad ways as well as individually tailored which keeps them from falling behind.

Key Impacts

One highlight has been creating and implementing a high school class that teaches our tribe's history and culture, including tribal government, sovereignty, art, leaders, music and current issues. This class was established twenty six years ago as a high school credit and is supported by our parent committee. Textbooks are not available about tribes and oftentimes resources lack accurate information. A semester course had to be developed in a creative way that included cultural consultants, tribal representatives, Native artists and the partnerships made with several tribes to assist with teaching resources. The class models respect for tribal teachings through intentional engagement with tribes and community partners. Teaching resources, tribal guides, tribal video series, and lessons for this one of a

kind class are provided for student learning. Students have expressed the value of learning from history and Native people in the contemporary context, learning first hand knowledge from guest speakers, and building confidence in their own identity, culture, and language. Also, this class benefits all students by fostering respectful understanding of cultural differences, critical thinking and cultivating a deep appreciation for our society today.

It is also important to acknowledge the school district's commitment and trust in the Indian Education programs certified teaching staff which has resulted in sustainability of the class and overall outcomes. In addition, professional development learning for teachers in district, state wide and on the national level are a regular occurrence. The consistent presence of the class, resources, professional development and learning tools are only possible with the support of Title VI.

In addition to cultural learning, academic achievement and graduation for our students is also a significant outcome.

Most recently due to unforeseen life circumstances, our program worked extensively with a student displaced from home during the final nine weeks of their senior year. Title VI was the connection for this student. For this unique situation, the staff was able to help this student transition to virtual Edmond, secure the device, supplies and broadband needed to continue their learning. Administration and staff worked tirelessly to make sure this student graduated on time.

Even beyond the scholastic support, the staff was able to intervene when the student was confronted with a barrier from a new teacher representative on graduation day. There was a misunderstanding concerning the beaded cap being worn. Without Title VI staff present to rectify this situation and avoid another possible obstacle or humiliating moment, this student's commencement experience could have gone from being one of the happiest days to the worst days. Furthermore it spared a potentially disastrous experience for the school and a stain on the district. As the staff witnessed this student reach this major milestone to walk at graduation with joyful tears in our eyes, we know why Title VI is needed in the lives of Native American students throughout the Nation.

This program is about the future of our Indian children who we all desire to become productive citizens of our society. Prioritizing areas of academic achievement, college and career readiness, cultural knowledge, tribal languages, dropout prevention, and the social emotional well-being of our students is critical for student success. These priorities have been implemented in multiple ways with little increase in funding from year to year.

While we focus on the positive impact that Title VI can provide for our Native students, we must also acknowledge challenges that some students face. Such as suicide, substance misuse, bullying, homelessness, foster care, sexual assault, missing Indigenous children and the struggle to meet basic needs. For our program, these challenges are not just statistics we look at, they are the lived experience of many students. Although these challenges may not always be fully resolved, and outcomes may not always align with what our families hope for, the Title VI program helps make each situation more manageable. Our staff directly works with families to do whatever we can to support them, we are the main place Native families in our school feel comfortable. Without Title VI, our students are at risk of continuing to be left behind.

The 401 school districts receiving Title VI programs throughout Oklahoma provide significant support. Without Title VI, we are not able to reach the estimated 90% of Indian students attending public schools this program was created for. However, to support the success of thousands of Native students it is critical that these programs continue and direct funding to school districts continues without interruption.

These are just some of the ways our Title VI program impacts our students:

- Grades, attendance and behavior monitoring showing student progress.
- Connecting students on IEPs, 504s, Alternative Education, Virtual programs, Concurrent classes and other school services.
- Parent Committee Involvement for the direction of the program and their willingness to volunteer, make program suggestions and provide feedback for the betterment of the program.
- Developing and implementing a high school Native Expressions class for twenty-six years, engaging and connecting all students to tribal learning.

- Partnering with tribes on tribal languages and history from their perspective with cultural learning opportunities.
- Working with the homeless and assisting with basic needs so that students can attend school and look toward the goal of graduating.
- Providing weekly after school tutoring and remedial sessions for students.
- Ensuring students have specific needs met with technology, child nutrition, and counseling.
- Collaborating with universities for College and Career events for over thirty years. (Indian Youth Career Day)
- Creating dropout prevention strategies (Broncho Bound)
- Recognition of 3.9 GPA students for the Oklahoma Indian Student Honor Society.
- Cultural student programs designed to assist students with their participation in the Oklahoma Native Language Fair, Oklahoma Indian Student Challenge Bowl, Red Earth Festival, and traditional hand game tournaments.
- Collaborating with tribes on services for their citizens who attend public schools outside of their tribal jurisdiction area.
- Providing Professional Development for staff and teachers so that accurate teaching resources are made available for the teaching of our tribal nations.
- Establishing community partnerships with local, state, tribal and national organizations to increase student involvement and opportunities.
(DAR/OKCIC/FAM/NIEA/OCIE)

Johnson O'Malley

The JOM program for the metro public schools under the BIE Oklahoma Area office is extremely important for those schools who do not reside in a tribal jurisdiction area, in many cases, Title VI and JOM programs work side by side to support our students in public schools. JOM which was first authorized in 1934 and has been in the Edmond Schools since 1988 provides separate guidelines and services for students enrolled in a federally recognized tribe attending public

schools. However, the program budget was frozen in 1994, and has not increased to reflect the current reality. When the funding was frozen our program's student count was 211 students. Thirty-one years later in 2025, our JOM student count is 1,624, increasing by approximately 669.7%. Today, funds average out to \$26.42 per student. This is based on our most recent student JOM count submitted. This funding needs to be lifted to align with today's student count. It is imperative that school districts not under a tribe be afforded the mechanism to keep and maintain their JOM program as is.

I urge you to hear our words and our stories from those that work directly with students on the ground, day in and day out, on behalf of thousands of Indian children. Thank you for this opportunity to share with you. We carry the determination of our ancestors, we honor the strength and promise within the eyes of today's youth, and we embrace hope for future generations.