



## White Earth Reservation Tribal Council

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Testimony  
Chairwoman Erma Vizenor  
Committee on Indian Affairs  
U.S. Senate  
September 11, 2010

Chairman Dorgan and Senator Franken:

My thanks to both of you for coming to the White Earth Tribal Nation today. Chairman Dorgan, we welcome you to your neighboring State of Minnesota for this important hearing and our thanks for allowing this hearing by the Committee today.

Senator Franken, we want to especially thank you for asking to serve on this committee. Indian Country in Minnesota has needed a voice on this important committee for many years, and we are so pleased you requested this seat even before you were officially a member of the United States Senate. I want to thank you on behalf of our entire population in the State of Minnesota.

As you know we are the largest Tribe in Minnesota and most proud of our progress and people. I believe there is not another reservation in the nation where you can learn more about the problems of school construction than here on the White Earth Indian Reservation.

Prior to being Chairwoman of White Earth, I was an educator. I know how important education is to the progress of any people, not just in Indian Country. Facilities are a major factor for successful education. Indian Country has lacked proper facilities in almost all areas of the nation and we certainly have not had proper facilities in this region in many locations for many years.

In 1999, the Circle of Life School was condemned. As you know, this facility was built in 1939 and was the main school for our reservation for many years. The Tribal leadership began immediately to work with the BIA to provide for a new school. Road block after road block was put in our path, while our children continued to try to be educated in a facility that was not safe or healthy.

I became Chair of the White Earth Nation in 2004. On my first trip to Washington, D.C. as the Chairwoman I requested a meeting with the person designated at the Department of Interior to work on this issue. We were told from the very beginning this was a long process. I told him we needed to move faster. Children were getting sick and even worse—quitting school because the facility was in such poor condition.


Two issues were at the very heart of the matter: projected student population at the new school and the “list” of schools needing new construction at the BIA. I pleaded with anyone I could speak with about this issue that our school was condemned!! We were unlike other schools on the list that simply wanted to expand or upgrade their facilities. As the Circle of Life School continued to deteriorate, students continued to enroll in neighboring local schools or even worse—dropping out. I considered this issue an emergency and spent many hours and days on the phone or in meetings with Washington, D.C. officials and BIA officials in Albuquerque. Eventually we were able to move up on the list but continued to not receive funding due to budget cutbacks.

A major problem with the BIA was the projected school population. The Circle of Life School had deteriorated so badly, the student population dropped to the lowest levels I had seen at this school. We knew once a new facility was available, these students would return. The BIA told us their projection for the school was about 95 students—we believed the number was actually double that amount.

As the Committee looks at the problems of school construction in Indian Country, I would advise you to consider the following:

- 1) The current template for school population by BIA for a new facility needs to be updated – it simply does not account for the desire of students to want to attend a facility closer to their home that is in good condition.
- 2) A better system by BIA needs to be employed when a school is in an emergency status as was the Circle of Life school—by being condemned. It should not have to compete with schools that simply need expansion or updating—a new category needs to be developed for these types of situations.
- 3) The nation needs to realize the best means to keep Indian students in school and becoming successful members of the community is to have good schools on the reservations with up to date facilities. Research has shown drop out rates are lower if students can attend schools near their home on the reservation that provide education equal to the schools in the surrounding locales.
- 4) The BIA should consider providing unused federal property on reservations for Charter schools. The White Earth Nation bought a building, at one time a BIA school, to begin a Charter School which we believe will improve student performance and graduation rates in the future.
- 5) Education on the White Earth Reservation does not stop at high school. Beyond high school we educate many people, a majority non-traditional students at our White Earth Tribal and Community College (WETCC) which was established in 1997. Our tribal college is in dire need of campus construction, a cost of \$20 million to adequately meet the needs of our growing post secondary student population. The 2010 enrollment for fall semester is 114 of which 98 are Native students and 16 are non-native students. WETCC is a fully accredited institution.

Again, me-qwitch (thank you) for coming to the White Earth Reservation and giving us the opportunity to address the concerns and barriers to BIA school construction. Due to the time constraint for my testimony, I request the additional written testimony to be accepted by the Committee. I look forward to your questions.

  
Erma J. Vizenor, Chairwoman  
White Earth Nation of Ojibwe Indians