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Secretary of Ed visits with Tohono O'odham education leaders and students

- [Danyelle Khmara](#)
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United States Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona, left, along with Rep. Raúl Grijalva, visited Tohono O'odham Community College in Sells to discuss President Joe Biden's Build Back Better agenda, which would provide students with pathways to affordable higher education.

- Rebecca Sasnett, Arizona Daily Star



United States Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona listens to Ned Norris Jr., left, chairman of the Tohono O'odham Nation, during a round table discussion.

- Rebecca Sasnett, Arizona Daily Star

Danyelle Khmara

Improving educational opportunities was at the forefront of a visit by U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona to Tohono O'odham Community College, where he heard from students and education leaders and spoke about federal agendas that would invest in all students as well as tribal colleges and universities.

“We know the pandemic has made worse gaps that existed and challenges that existed across our country,” said Cardona, who was joined by Rep. Raúl M. Grijalva on July 15. “And we have more work

ahead to not only address those issues but to do right by our students and give them more opportunity than ever before.”

The Build Back Better agenda includes three parts, only one of which has been passed so far. The American Rescue Plan passed by Congress in March was the first part. That \$1.9 trillion economic stimulus bill included up to \$1,400 checks for individuals and \$250 to \$300 monthly child tax credits that started going out to eligible families today.

Significant help vowed for tribes

The other two parts of the plan focus funding on infrastructure, jobs, education, health care and child care.

The plan includes measures to support working families and youth and will also have a significant impact on tribal nations, Cardona says, including:

- \$200 billion for universal free high-quality preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds, benefiting 5 million children;
- \$9 billion to strengthen teacher pipelines and address shortages;
- free community college, which will benefit about 5.5 million students;
- increasing the maximum Pell grant by about \$1,400 and allowing Dreamers to access the funding;
- \$39 billion for two years of subsidized tuition for students from families earning less than \$125,000 who are enrolled in a four-year historically Black colleges or universities, tribal colleges or universities and other minority-serving institutions;
- and \$62 billion to strengthen completion and retention rates at community colleges and institutions that serve students from disadvantaged communities.

Cardona thinks the other \$2 trillion and \$1.8 trillion spending measures will pass because they make fiscal sense, supporting workforce development, higher education resulting in higher income, and early childhood education, which helps parents work and also leads to higher income and prosperity in individuals who attend quality preschool, studies show.

Early childhood education a goal

“It makes fiscal sense to invest now,” Cardona said. “We learn from the Indian Nations that family is the hearth, so for me, this Build Back Better agenda and the American Families Plan is really an investment in the original infrastructure of family.”

Tohono O’odham Community College President Paul Robertson said more funding would go a long way. He said he’d like to see the increase in the Pell Grant be much higher than proposed to cover the entire cost of attendance for students at the college.

Cardona also highlighted a new effort, which he says would further equity, meaningful consultation and relief for tribal nations. The American Indian Resilience in Education grant program would fund culturally relevant projects in pre-K-12, such as early childhood education, bilingual or bicultural education, nutritional services, skill development and cultural programs that incorporate traditional leadership.

Webinar to cover grants process

The Office of Indian Education will host a pre-application webinar on July 28 for educational institutions to learn more about applying for the grants. For more information go to [ed.gov](https://www.ed.gov).

Tribal colleges are in the unique position of making up for generations of Native American children being forced into schools that erased their culture, Robertson said.

“Tribal college has a dual mission, not only to carry out what every college sees as very important, and that is to provide solid education, but it is also to help reclaim those things that have been taken away ... and tribal colleges are a partial answer to that,” he said.

Contact reporter Danyelle Khmara at dkhmara@tucson.com or [573-4223](tel:573-4223). On Twitter: [@DanyelleKhmara](https://twitter.com/DanyelleKhmara)