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Tribal leaders and educators meet with U.S. Education Secretary Miguel Cardona



Tohono O'odham Nation Chairman Ned Norris Jr. welcomes U.S. Education Secretary Miguel Cardona during a round-table discussion July 15 at Tohono O'odham Community College's main campus. Norris and Cardona were joined by U.S. Congressman Raúl Grijalva. The men briefly removed their facemasks when they spoke. The Runner photo.

Sells, AZ- An official visit by the country's highest ranking education official has raised optimism by local tribal educators that more federal support could be on the way for a range of education-related programs, from pre-school to tribal community colleges

U.S. Education Secretary Miguel Cardona and U.S. Congressman Raúl Grijalva, met with Tohono O'odham Nation leaders and Tohono O'odham Community College administrators and students on July 15 during a tour of the tribal college.

During the tour Cardona and Grijalva headed a round-table discussion where they heard from TOCC President Dr. Paul Robertson and a handful of students about the benefits the tribal college offers the community, and how it can be enhanced.

That enhancement, ostensibly, could be done through President Biden's proposed American Families Plan, which is a broad-sweeping approach to bolster education, child care, and paid family leave through a \$1.8 trillion federal investment.

Biden's plan affects many

segments of the U.S. society, but it includes components that directly address American Indian tribes.

TOCC's Robertson said to his knowledge, the Nation's college is the only one out of 35 tribal colleges throughout the U.S. that Cardona visited, and the tour appears to have been arranged by Congressman Grijalva.

During the roundtable discussion Robertson informed Cardona about TOCC's history, and its current role in the Tohono O'odham community.

Several current and former TOCC students talked about their experiences at the college, and about the foundation it laid for their pursuit of bachelor's degrees, master's degrees, and doctorate degrees.

Tohono O'odham Nation Chairman Ned Norris Jr. welcomed the education secretary and informed him about the geographical history of the Tohono O'odham. He also expressed the benefits of tribal members working to achieve higher education.

Robertson said the American Families Plan at this point is a proposed plan, and it must go through the congressional funding process, the same

as Biden's other spending plans that have seen much adversarial maneuvering by Democrats and Republicans in the U.S. Congress.

He said it appears that Congress is first tackling an infrastructure bill that will impact the aging infrastructure in the U.S., and then it may move on to Biden's human infrastructure bill that is the American Families Plan.

A fact sheet for the American Families Plan outlines the impact it can have on Native American communities.

In an effort to create opportunities for Native Americans the plan proposes free community college tuition for first-time students, increased limit on Pell Grants for Native students, and two years of subsidized tuition for low-income students attending a four-year tribal university. The plan also provides for tribal teacher education and help to earn teaching credentials.

And, Biden's plan calls for free, high-quality, accessible, and inclusive preschool for all three- and four-year-old children.

Tribe joins BUSD effort to revitalize tribal language

Sells, AZ- The Tohono O'odham Nation's government and the local public school district have joined to do what tribal families have struggled to do—pass on the O'odham language to their children.

The Tohono O'odham Legislative Council, at a July 14 meeting, agreed to fund a pilot project in Baboquivari Unified School District 40 that will take on the task of providing O'odham culture and language instruction to its students.

BUSD submitted its Tohono O'odham Culture and Language Program proposal to the Legislative Council as part of the school district's overall effort to revitalize the Tohono O'odham language.

The council, in its resolution addressing the proposal, includes some revealing information: "Despite the fact that over a period of several decades the Tohono O'odham Nation and members and entities of the Nation have taken steps to support the O'odham language, including documentation of O'odham speech and historical records, establishment of the Himdag Ki:, development of an O'odham dictionary, adoption of a standard orthography (Hale-Alvarez), design and implementation of a certification process for O'odham language teaching, creation of curriculum, and delivery of O'odham language courses in the K-12 system, those important efforts have not been sufficient to revitalize the O'odham language."

The resolution also notes that Tohono O'odham families are not passing the O'odham language from generation to generation, and the tribal language is now listed as an endangered language by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization.

For its part, BUSD says in its proposal that its annual enrollment averages about 1,200 students in grades kindergarten through 12th grade, and 99.7 percent are Tohono O'odham.

The Nation agreed to fund the BUSD proposal in two phases, the first of which is a pilot year at a cost of \$261,787.50. This includes the hiring of two certified Tohono O'odham language teachers and a program director.

If that effort proves successful, the Nation says it will proceed to a second phase, which involves the school district taking on the salaries of the two teachers and the program director, and the tribe's government providing \$421,200 to hire six more Tohono O'odham language teachers.

Tohono O'odham Community College is on board

Tohono O'odham Community College announced in August 2020 that it was moving ahead with plans to establish a Tohono O'odham Language Center, which it says will promote activities and programs designed to strengthen and spread the Tohono O'odham language.

The announcement of the language center by TOCC notes that while many adults on the Nation speak O'odham, few young people are growing up speaking the language fluently, and it calls the trend a "critical state," adding that the center's mission is to address this critical situation by preserving and revitalizing the O'odham language.

At the time of the announcement Ron Geronimo and Leslie Luna were named co-directors. They said the center is the culmination of years of hard work and collaboration by numerous people on the Tohono O'odham Nation. Though the new Center is hosted by Tohono O'odham Community College, they emphasized that the O'odham Language Center belongs to all on the Nation and will serve the greater O'odham community.

TOCC President Paul Robertson acknowledged that the college is grateful to the Tohono O'odham Legislative Council for the funds that it appropriated for the Language Center's operations.