



Office of the President

Press Release

Anthony Reider, President

FLANDREAU, SD March 31, 2023 In response to Governor Noem's comments made on March 13th in Mitchell, SD, regarding the education of Native children in the state's public school system.

Let me first state that we do share the Governor's concern and are pleased to see her take an interest in the education of Native American children within the state's public school system.

If we may quote the South Dakota Department of Education's website, our district, as of the 2022-2023 school year, had an attendance rate of 86% and a chronic absenteeism rate of 25%, of which, Native American students accounted for 43%. We all understand that during the period in which the governor referenced her comments; three of those years fell under the pandemic era which, as we all are aware, had a devastating effect on all students, regardless of race.

We are not oblivious to the educational needs of our children and it should please the governor to know that when we examined the issue of attendance and the driving force behind chronic absenteeism; one of the issues challenging our parents was transportation. We address this issue with our local school district by providing more school bus pickup points around the community including tribal lands, benefitting all students. Although useful to many families, it did little to change our outcome and warranted further examination.

It is important to understand the mistrust and apprehension of our parents to any education system within the United States; many of whom are not that far removed from the historic abuse and trauma inflicted on our people by the federal boarding schools and religious schools in your state and throughout the United States.

Can you and your citizens, for a moment, imagine what it would be like to have a foreign government official, come to your home, in a foreign language, order you to give up your children and take them sometime hundreds of miles away from home; never knowing if you would ever see them again? Unfortunately, to many of our Native American families, that was the harsh reality of education. A system as it relates to our people, designed to force the assimilation policies of the federal government and the destruction of our language and cultural identity, all under the guise of education. Even though these policies appear to be slowly and quietly ushered towards the shadows of history, we agree with you governor that, "There is work to do." On both sides.

Our education department continues to struggle with our local school district and are met with uncooperative school administrators, who actively and disrespectfully dismiss our concerns. Viewing our community as something to tolerate, while accepting state and federal funds designed to teach those they label as disadvantaged. Most recently, one of our struggling students was encouraged to drop out and pursue a GED. In a system where Native American students account for less than 10.42% of the state wide student body, one could see how a group of students can be marginalized.

According to the state's Department of Education, our schools and their ability to meet the needs of the student body reflect an overall score of 48% for our elementary school, 49% for our middle school and 64% for our high school. If we applied the same grading scale to the schools as we do to our students, our elementary and middle schools would receive an F and our high school would receive a D. Every one of our schools in our district are labeled "Targeted Support" on the South Dakota Department of Education website. We encourage all families across the state to examine how well the state feels your schools are meeting the educational needs of your children.

Furthermore, many local families feel that our teachers have lost control over their classrooms, which affects the learning capabilities of all students. Our district reports that 31.36% of the teachers have three or fewer years of teaching experience. Perhaps attracting teachers with years of experience and accredited degrees as well as necessary training in diversity and inclusion should be one of the many focuses of any future discussions on education.

Lastly we are happy to announce an exciting opportunity for the children and families of the community. We are exploring the opportunity of partnering with the Boys & Girl Club and the City of Flandreau to open a facility that would not only provide child care services but focus on early education, which we feel is an important undertaking in propelling all children in our community to the highest levels of education. As one of collaborators stated, this opportunity had not been possible in our community's past and hoped that this partnership could be a future model for communities across the state and beyond.

In closing, we are also pleased to hear of Joe Graves, the Secretary of Education, mention of supporting alternative education. This is an option we would be most interested in pursuing to truly assisting all the "labeled" students in our district.