

Remarks by Congresswoman Betty McCollum (MN-04) National Indian Education Association Conference

February 14, 2006

Welcome to Washington! I would like to extend a special welcome to all of my friends from the great state of Minnesota. At home in Minnesota, I count on the school board members, administrators and educators for their expertise. They are among the most dedicated public servants and professionals I know.

I know them as experts — like Elona Street-Stewart—Chair of the St. Paul School Board, and, Peggy Flanagan—from the Minneapolis school board. Both of these women are strong leaders for the Native American community, for our state and for our children. All of your commitment and hard work is both appreciated and respected. The work you do improves educational opportunities and resources for all tribes—from Alaska to Hawaii and all across North America.

Thank you for all that you do to strengthen the cultural and social foundation of our communities. It is a pleasure to be here with you today. One year has passed since we last visited. And unfortunately, Washington's commitment to our children and our youth—and to strengthening our communities continues to dangerously decline.

Unfortunately, much of the work you do -- to advocate for our children, to advocate for our elders and communities, to advocate for strong schools, to advocate for equity--has been met with strong resistance here in Washington. Those in leadership, those in charge, those who set America's priorities, those who allocate resources that could strengthen our schools and communities--instead continue to abandon their commitments.

This one party leadership has gutted health care programs for the most vulnerable, including our elders. They have slashed and underfunded critical education funding for our children all at a time when this Administration still plans to give permanent tax cuts to the nation's wealthiest.

It just makes no sense. Republicans want to provide tax giveaways at a time when America's sons and daughters are bravely fighting two wars abroad. The President's budget should represent a commitment to the service, the sacrifice and for some families—the ultimate sacrifice—being made. For the first time in our nation's history we are telling the wealthiest Americans that they don't need to sacrifice during a time of war.

At the same time, the most vulnerable are seeing the safety net ripped out from under them. Americans will always be asked to make sacrifices, but our sacrifices should reflect our priorities. Our children, our elders, the disabled, the most vulnerable should not be bearing the biggest burden in this

mismanaged budget. It is my strong belief that the Republican choices have made our children more vulnerable. The ruling party has done little to strengthen our schools, to make health care more affordable, to ensure a better quality of life for all Americans.

In order for our nation to be secure, it is paramount that our schools are successful. In order for our democracy to flourish, every child should have access to a free, quality public education.

I've given you my opinion, now here are the facts:

http://www.house.gov/apps/list/press/ed31_democrats/rel2606.html

The President's Fiscal Year 2007 budget:

- Freezes Head Start--- Half of the eligible children already go unserved due to constant underfunding.
- Freezes Impact Aid- which provides funding for the education of Native Indian children on Tribal lands.
- Eliminates TRIO programs that help low income students and students who are the first in their families to attend college—to go to college.
- Slashes Strengthening Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian-serving Institutions by more than 31 percent.
- Title VII funds for culturally relevant education is cut.
- School construction for Native Indian schools would be cut by \$49 million.

Indian Education has experienced real cuts over the past four years and this budget doesn't provide any new money. This budget is full of empty promises, despite the rhetoric-- there are no new dollars for math and science education and school districts continue to be affected by tricky changes to funding formulas for kids who qualify for free and reduced lunches. Kids are successful when we make new investments in them, when we give them opportunities--not when we play shell games with their school funding.

With the President's Fiscal Year 2007 budget proposal, *No Child Left Behind* will be underfunded by **\$55 billion**. Just four years after signing into law, this Administration has abandoned its commitment to leave no child behind by underfunding our schools. And, again, the President has proposed to eliminate Safe and Drug Free Schools and Communities State Grants.

Last spring a very troubled young man took the lives of nine people on the Red Lake Reservation and then took his own life. In my own state of Minnesota, we know-- the Tribes know-- how valuable these grants are. This violent act devastated the Red Lake community and once again tragically demonstrated to all America how violence by children against other children and educators can happen anywhere, at anytime.

Too many youth are in crisis and are unable to find the help they need either from their families or their communities. As policy makers, we have a responsibility to wisely invest resources and attention to the lives of our young people and their families – before despair sets in causing a tragedy to occur. I applaud the Red Lake Band of Chippewa for their strength as a community, their courage and honor as a people. But, this administration has decided to eliminate the very help that address these kinds of tragedies before they happen. Why do we have to fight for this funding every year?

In addition, there has been more rhetoric from the Administration about supporting and meeting the unique cultural and social needs of Native children so that they can succeed academically. **Leaving no child behind means leaving no child behind- both inside and outside the classroom.** Native children have for far too long been left on the sidelines in the traditional education system. Graduation rates for Native students have lagged too far behind the national average- in some areas nearly twice that of their peers. This is unacceptable. We need to see real investments in efforts that help students graduate. These efforts need to be a combination of inside and outside the classroom initiatives.

We tell our children that we want them to graduate, that we expect them to graduate, but instead the President has proposed to eliminate funding for School Dropout Prevention. What message does this send to our youth? Our actions must match our words. And we must instill trust in our youth that we care and will invest in them. We can do better and more must be done. It is critical that we ensure our children are a priority and that they are an important and visible part of the national agenda -- not just with words- but with real, ongoing commitments to make these words a reality.

We must ensure that Native education is a priority—and that Native children are a part of the national education agenda. This should not be a battle every year. When high school drop out rates are high, college attendance will be low. When college attendance is low, the presence of Native people's voices in business, in science, in medicine, in education, and in government is diminished.

At a time when America needs to be more competitive, we cannot afford to leave any person, any child behind. We need to reaffirm a partnership at the tribal, federal, state, and school board levels. As leaders, we have a responsibility to review what the Administration puts forward as education reform as part of their budget. The same people telling you how to manage your schools-have mismanaged the war, Katrina, and the largest deficit in the history of this country. We face many real emergencies right here at home, in our communities and in our schools: schools in need of repair, families in need of health care, and children in need of quality teachers.

For our children, we have a responsibility to do our job to the best of our ability. And, as far as *No Child Left Behind* is concerned – we need to fully fund it and we need to fix it. The overwhelming majority of education leaders and parents feel the same way—I know this from listening to you --and that's why I've authored a bill—the Student Achievement and Successful Schools Act- which would allow states to opt out of the law's requirements as long as Congress continues to underfund its commitment.

We all want our children to succeed. While some focus on talking about not leaving children behind, I want our schools to focus on moving all children ahead. Moving all children ahead means ensuring that academic programs are culturally relevant for all children. We cannot continue to ignore and neglect the values of first Americans—whose history is rich in tradition and culture.

Students who want to learn their Native language, to embrace their tradition deserve to have that as part of their education. Leaving no child behind means that tests are not culturally biased. All children – means kids with special needs and gifted and talented students including children who want to play sports and students who want to excel in music or art or drama. All children deserve the opportunity to succeed in school– and all schools deserve the support and resources to meet the needs of our children.

For those of us who are supportive of the goals of *No Child Left Behind* we must ensure that the implementation– does not continue to be haphazard and flawed and damaging to education. Being open to change and innovation will help our students succeed. It is my belief that you – locally elected school board members, teachers, parents, taxpayers – are in the best position to make decisions about how to ensure success for our students.

You don't need bureaucrats in the Department of Education or administrators in the Bureau of Indian Affairs – thousands miles away—creating new mandates that divert resources and attention away from your children in ways that you know are harmful. You've already been working on reforms at the state and local levels.

Once upon a time I was a public school student in St. Paul who lived in a community that valued public education, respected teachers and our elders—who held us accountable in ways that made us better citizens. And, that's why I believe in public education and – without a doubt in my mind – the opportunities I have had to serve on my local city council, in the Minnesota Legislature and, now, in Congress, all starts with the foundation my grandparents and parents provide and a public education.

Friends, you are here to fight for your children—and all of America's children – to once again make a quality education in America a priority for every Member of Congress. Let me tell you now, you don't need to lobby me – I am standing with you shoulder to shoulder because our children and our schools come first.

I want to thank you for your leadership. And, I want to thank you for your hand in partnership in working with my office and others in Congress. Together we will make America a nation filled with liberty and a respect for all.

Thank you!