



United States Department of the Interior
Office of Inspector General
Washington, DC 20240

March 7, 2008

The Honorable Pete V. Domenici
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510-3101

Dear Senator Domenici:

In response to your November 16, 2007 letter, we reviewed allegations that the Navajo Nation misused federal funds by sending 362 representatives to a National Indian Education Association (NIEA) conference in Hawaii during October 2007. Based on attendance, funding, and conference information obtained from the NIEA, the Navajo Nation, and the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), we concluded that the Navajo Nation's number and background of representatives at the conference were not unreasonable when compared to the attendance per capita levels of other Indian tribes and that the conference content met a wide-range of training needs.

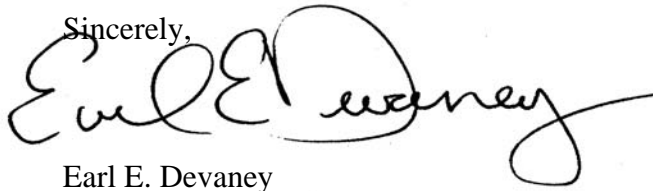
The conference agenda was extensive and geared toward a wide range of individuals — ranging from tribal officials, school administrators, and educators, to students. The conference also featured various keynote speakers and over 200 workshops. In addition, the conference was promoted by both U.S. Senator Daniel K. Akaka and Congressman Neil Abercrombie. NIEA's goal was to bring in the highest attendance ever, and about 3,000 people attended, compared to about 2,000 at the prior year's conference in Alaska. Other than the host Native Hawaiians, the Navajo Nation had the largest number of representatives in attendance. However, when we compared attendance to tribal enrollment numbers, other tribes had a larger percentage of attendees per capita. As a result, we concluded that the Navajo Nation's representation was, in fact, not among the top 10 tribes in attendees per capita.

In his response to our request for information, the Navajo Nation's President stated that the Nation had sent 61 government employees and elected officials to the conference and had used federal funds to pay only for 15 Head Start employees to attend. Costs for the remaining government employees and elected officials to attend the conference were paid using general (or tribal) funds. The Navajo Nation has the authority to use its own funds as it deems appropriate, and it is the responsibility of the tribal members to ascertain the appropriateness of tribal fund expenditures. As part of a follow-up review of the Navajo Nation's Head Start program deficiencies, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Office of Head Start interviewed the Head Start employees about their attendance at the conference and concluded that there were no problems with these employees attending the conference. Although the monies involved were HHS's and not the U.S. Department of the Interior's, we reviewed a sample of travel documents provided by the Office of Head Start and found nothing of concern.

According to BIE officials, the Bureau is responsible for 65 Navajo schools. Of these schools, 19 schools indicated they did not send anyone to the conference and 14 schools indicated they sent an average of two to three individuals to the conference. Of the 14 schools, 5 indicated they used federal funds. Overall, the number and type of individual attendees and costs appeared to be reasonable. About 195 public schools also provide educational opportunities to Navajo students. BIE officials told us that these public schools receive federal funding and traditionally represent the largest participation at NIEA conferences. However, because the Navajo Nation has no jurisdiction over the public schools and the 32 other schools governed by elected boards, we would have had to contact each school directly to request information, an exercise which proved unnecessary once we evaluated the NIEA attendance and conference information.

If you have any questions regarding this matter, please do not hesitate to contact me directly, or you may contact Ms. Katie Balestra, our Congressional Liaison, at (202) 208-5745.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Earl E. Devaney". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized "E" at the beginning and a long, sweeping tail that extends to the right.

Earl E. Devaney
Inspector General