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Officially known as the Zuni Tribe of the Zuni Indian Reservation

February 2, 2022

New Mexico Senate
Senate Finance Committee
490 Old Santa Fe Trail
Santa Fe, NM 87501

Honorable Members of the Senate Finance Committee:

As the Governor of Zuni and on behalf of our students and community, I write to express our full support for Senate Bill 140, the Opportunity Scholarship Act. This legislation will support Native American students in seeking the career pathways that will provide family sustaining incomes and strengthen Tribal workforce and communities.

Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham's executive budget recommendation invests \$85.5 million for a comprehensive free college package, only one percent of the state budget. This crucial financial aid program will not only benefit recent high school graduates, but first-generation and non-traditional adult learners who may not be eligible for other scholarships. There are 11,408 Native American students enrolled in public higher education institutions and Tribal colleges in New Mexico. The Opportunity Scholarship Act would simplify the financial aid process and support up to 35,000 students, and in turn, thousands of Native American students across New Mexico.

The six-credit hour minimum will create greater access to state financial aid for students that are working, have family and cultural responsibilities, and will meet the diverse needs of New Mexico students. This credit hour reduction is critical to increasing access for students who previously had to decide between higher education and their personal circumstances and responsibilities. Now, they will no longer have to choose. It is this access that is beneficial for our Native American students, whether they are enrolling immediately after high school or returning as an adult learner.

We applaud Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham for her leadership and forward-thinking decision to invest in New Mexico's Tribal students and communities, and we look forward to opening more doors for students to succeed.

Thank you for your ongoing commitment to New Mexico students. We appreciate your time and consideration of this important initiative impacting Native American students, families, and Tribal communities that can bring positive impacts for generations to come.

Sincerely,

Val R. Panteah, Sr.

Val R. Panteah
Governor

cc: Senator George Munoz, Chair
Senator Nancy Rodriguez, Vice Chair
Senator William Sharer, Ranking Member
Senator William Burt
Senator Pete Campos
Senator Crystal Diamond
Senator Bobby Gonzales
Senator Siah Correa Hemphill
Senator Michael Padilla
Senator Jeff Steinborn
Senator Pat Woods