

Rooted in Culture and Community

Voyd St. Pierre | Superintendent, Rocky Boy School District, 87J-L (MT)

About the District

Rocky Boy School District serves children residing on the Rocky Boy Indian Reservation in north-central Montana, the smallest of the state's seven Indian reservations and home of the Chippewa-Cree Tribe. We are both an elementary and a high school district located on one main campus, housed in three buildings. We serve approximately 580 K-12 students.

Rocky Boy was one of the first school districts in the U.S. controlled by an all-Indian board of trustees. Our Elders and community fought for many years to create our own school districts, run by our own people. Culture and language have always been prioritized, as evidenced by our extensive curriculum developed in the 1970s. Our school philosophy, created by Elders in the same era, has never been modified and remains central to daily instruction and operations.

"Disadvantaged students should have the same opportunities as any other student. Impact Aid is one avenue to make that happen."

Driven by Students

I was inspired to pursue education after seeing firsthand the disparities in educational opportunities. What keeps me motivated? Students, students, students! Interacting with students every day—especially the younger ones who gravitate to you whether on the playground, in the lunchroom, or in the classroom—puts a smile on my face. Teaching is the only profession that makes all other professions possible.



St. Pierre (second from right) with Montana advocates on the Hill

When I became superintendent in 2006, I wanted to learn all about Impact Aid. Understanding the program, completing applications, and participating in annual NAFIS meetings gave me a sound base for my work on the NAFIS Board, which allows me to connect with and advocate for roughly 1,100 districts across the country, ensure the Indian lands voice is heard, and educate Congress on the program and its effects on kids.

The Importance of Impact Aid

With an annual budget of \$10.1 million, Impact Aid makes up 55% of our revenue. We have seen an increased reliance on Impact Aid dollars the past five years to offset minimal increases in state aid.

The majority of our Impact Aid flows directly into student programs in the areas of personnel [paraprofessionals], transportation, extracurriculars, food services, building operations and maintenance, mental health counseling, special education, IT infrastructure, and culture and language. Increased Impact Aid funding would allow us to make much-needed updates and repairs to outdated facilities, which are becoming a safety issue. We would also like to invest in personnel and implement a grow-your-own teacher pathway. Teacher housing is a top priority for the district and a huge recruiting tool for rural schools; we want to invest in teacher housing to attract new teachers.

Cuts to Impact Aid would force us to eliminate some of the services mentioned above. Larger class sizes, fewer paraprofessionals, and cuts to after school tutoring and extracurricular transportation services would be immediate impacts.



What Policymakers Need to Know

The reservation is 100% trust property, and our local taxable valuation is only \$201,986. We do not have the luxury of proposing annual school bonds to fund projects like our surrounding districts can. This reality means we rely heavily upon Impact Aid to operate our schools each year.

Without additional revenues to offset inflationary costs, it becomes difficult for school leaders to propose annual budgets to our boards. Drastic cuts to student programs and even school closures remain realistic topics of discussion each year for many districts. ♦

