Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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WASHINGTON – As part of President Obama's commitment to empowering Indian nations, Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan today announced that their Departments will begin tribal consultations on a draft agreement to help expand educational opportunities and improve academic achievement for American Indian and Alaska Native students.

The draft Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) would frame a partnership to implement the White House Initiative on American Indian and Alaska Native Education which seeks to close the achievement gap between Indian students and non-Indian students; decrease the alarmingly high dropout rates of all American Indian and Alaska Native students; and help preserve and revitalize Native languages, histories and cultures. The initiative commits federal agencies to work closely with tribal governments and use the full range of their education expertise, resources and facilities to achieve the initiative's goals.

"Education is key to the fabric of healthy communities," said Secretary Salazar, who co-chairs the President's initiative. "But we need to do better when it comes to meeting the academic and cultural needs of our American Indian and Alaska Native students across the nation. These tribal consultations will be critical in developing the most effective framework to raise the bar for Indian Country education."

Education Secretary Duncan said, "The strength of tribes and our nation's future prosperity are inextricably tied, and together we can dramatically improve the lives of our Native students. These consultations will be invaluable and will continue our efforts to listen to, and learn from, the tribal leaders who know these communities best."

The President's initiative, established by Executive Order on December 2, 2011, addresses the Federal Government's trust responsibility to protect the unique rights and promote the well-being of the Nation's tribes, while respecting their sovereignty. One of the specific outcomes called for in the Initiative is the establishment of an MOU to provide a means for the Departments of the Interior and Education to work together with tribal leaders, as well as continue a framework for transferring statutory education grant funds from Education to Interior.

The Department of Education has substantial expertise and resources to help improve Indian education, specific experience with federally funded programs and a responsibility to work with Interior's Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) school system to ensure excellence in education. The Bureau of Indian Education, which directly operates or provides grants to tribes to operate an extensive primary, secondary, and college level school system, has an interest in enhancing access to federal funding programs and expertise.

The education initiative addresses critical issues and unique challenges affecting the quality of instruction, student achievement, high dropout rates and tribal languages on the verge of extinction. The expected educational outcomes would help preserve and revitalize native languages, ensuring

students the opportunity to learn their languages, cultures and histories, while receiving complete and competitive educations that prepare them for higher education and fulfilling careers.

Among the strategies proposed to achieve these outcomes are capacity building for tribal educational agencies, enhanced teacher training and recruitment, pilot demonstration projects, effective reforms, improved accountability, partnerships with public, private and philanthropic groups, and national networks to share best practices. The initiative would improve educational opportunities for all American Indian and Alaska Native students, including those attending schools operated and funded by BIE, those attending public schools in cities and in rural areas, and those attending postsecondary institutions, including tribal colleges and universities.

The upcoming tribal consultations build upon four recent roundtable discussions with federal officials, tribal leaders and Indian educators on best practices to improve Indian education.

To view the draft MOU, click here. The President's Executive Order is available here. For more information on the Department's tribal consultation policies please visit: http://www.doi.gov/tribes/Tribal-Consultation-Policy.cfm and www.edtribalconsultations.org.

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