Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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PREWITT, N. M. - Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton and Acting Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs Aurene M. Martin today joined students and community members celebrating the opening of Baca/Dlo'ay azhi Community School, a K-6 facility serving approximately 390 students from the Prewitt and Thoreau communities on the eastern portion of the Navajo Nation reservation in New Mexico.

"'Back-to-school' will have a special meaning here this year because this school is not only a model of sustainable environmental design and 21st century technology but also embodies the elements sacred to the Navajo culture," said Interior Secretary Norton. "The Baca Dlo'ay Azhi School is one of 20 new Indian schools funded as part of President Bush's promise that 'no child will be left behind.' We are committed to ensuring that the 48,000 Indian students attending schools funded by the Bureau of Indian Affairs receive quality education."

The BIA operates 185 schools in 23 states, either directly or through tribal grants and contracts. The opening today marks a milestone in BIA efforts to replace all of its aging schools with modern structures that are safe, comfortable, ecologically friendly and equipped with the most modern technology.

"This new facility will allow Baca Community School parents to focus on their children's education," said Martin. "We remain committed to the goal of replacing debilitated BIA schools to provide our students and teachers with a physical environment best conducive to learning."

Baca/Dlo'ay azhi Community School replaces two aging BIA schools - Baca Day School and Thoreau Boarding School - with a modern structure whose design combines Navajo culture with a 21st century learning environment. It is located adjacent to the historic Baca Day School site that was established in the 1930's. The firm of local architect Dyron Murphy, a Navajo Nation tribal member, designed the new structure

The school is also a landmark achievement in culturally sensitive and environmentally conscious construction. Its aesthetic design incorporates several elements of Navajo culture. The school's main entrance, for example, faces east to greet the morning sun--thereby symbolizing the beginning of life--and four wings, representing the four directions of the Navajo universe and painted in sacred colors appropriate to each direction.

The facility also incorporates the latest in computer technology and environmentally sustainable design features, including an optimized heating and air conditioning system and the use of recycled steel. In fact, this new facility is in position to become New Mexico's first building and the nation's first BIA-funded school to be certified by the United States Green Building Council for its "Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design" award. The Bureau of Indian Affairs, an agency of the Department of the Interior, has 10,500 employees nationwide and is responsible for providing services to approximately 1.4 million individual American Indians and Alaska Natives from the federally recognized tribes.

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