BIA's Access Native America Project Successfully Completed

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(CHICHILTAH, N.M.) – With the click of a mouse by Interior Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs Neal A. McCaleb, the Chichiltah/Jones Ranch Community School, a Bureau of Indian Affairs facility located in Chichiltah, N.M., today officially opened its portal to the Internet. His action also successfully completed the BIA's four-year effort to bring all of its schools online.

"This is a tremendous moment in the history of the BIA and Chichiltah Community School," said McCaleb. "Now, Chichiltah's students and teachers have access to online information resources that have long been available to their peers in schools across America." Chichiltah/Jones Ranch Community School is a K-8 boarding and day school serving 206 students and is located on the Navajo reservation in northwestern New Mexico.

Assistant Secretary McCaleb was accompanied by William A. Mehojah, Jr., director of the Office of Indian Education Programs, which administers the Bureau's 185-school system, and school principal Jenny Jimenez. Chichiltah students, parents and teachers were also present to witness the occasion along with community elders and Navajo Nation tribal officials.

Chichiltah/Jones Ranch Community School is the last Bureau school to gain Internet access. It did so through the Access Native America project, a program started by OIEP in 1997 to connect BIA schools to the Internet and provide connectivity for the communities where the schools are located.

"Connectivity gives our children an important learning tool: the Internet," McCaleb said. "But, through the Access Native America project, a telecommunications infrastructure can begin to be developed in Indian Country. As I see it, connectivity will be vitally important for tribes to deliver government services and build their economies, and in developing the work force to support both, now and in the future."

The Access Native America project started with the Tiospa Zina Tribal School on the Sisseton-Wahpeton Reservation in South Dakota. Since then, OIEP has cabled classrooms, dormitories, administrative offices and libraries in schools serving 48,693 elementary and secondary American Indian students located on 63 reservations in 23 states, some in the remotest areas of the nation, such as the Havasupai School at the bottom of the Grand Canyon. Sixty-seven schools utilize satellite technology to access the Internet due to the lack of a telecommunications infrastructure on their reservations.

"As a result of these efforts, our students can now experience a learning channel of boundless limits that provide a full connection to the outside world," said Mehojah. "The beauty of this project is that it can reveal the creative intent and scope which strongly reflects the culture, values and traditions of Indian people progressing in step with the information superhighway."

The Bureau partnered with the ProjectNeat Foundation and the Microsoft and Intel corporations for

hardware and software support to the schools, the Universities of Kansas and Texas for education content and teacher training on integrating technology with curriculum, the U.S. Geological Survey for network-engineering services, and the Laguna Pueblo Tribal Education Department for additional training opportunities.

“By joining forces to foster community solutions,” Mehojah said, “the BIA, academia and private industry organizations have worked together to set the foundation to prepare our schools and students for a 21st century education.”

Chichiltah is also the last of four remaining facilities to be connected. The three immediately prior to Chichiltah are: Baca Community School, Prewitt, N.M.; Jicarilla Dormitory, Dulce, N.M., and Winslow Dormitory, Winslow, Ariz. The Bureau wired and connected approximately 45 schools last year.

The BIA provides services to and carries out the federal government’s trust responsibility for the 558 federally recognized Tribal governments and approximately 1.4 million American Indians and Alaska Natives nationwide.

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