Media Contact: Nedra Darling, OPA-IA Phone: 202-219-4152
For Immediate Release: July 24, 2001
Print PDF

Thank you, Neal. Last Wednesday, Neal made his first appearance at the Senate Indian Affairs Committee since he was confirmed as Assistant Secretary.

Neal talked with Senators about tribal governance practices, economic development and education. That was expected – that's his job.

It's what happened after his testimony that took Washington by surprise. He could have driven back to his BIA office – and returned phone calls and other tasks.

But, instead, Neal took a seat in the audience … and listened. He heard tribal leaders tell success stories. He listened to others contribute their ideas.

According to the web-site, Indianz.com, Democratic Committee Chairman Inouye said:

> "In all my years of sitting on this committee, this is the first time I've seen an Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs sitting through testimony of tribal leaders."

Applause is rarely given in the ornate – and some would say stuffy – Capitol Hill committee rooms. But that afternoon, the visitors attending the hearing applauded Neal McCaleb.

It's his commitment to listening and learning about Indian people's needs and concerns that'll make him a great Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs.

I'm honored that he agreed to move from Oklahoma to Washington to work with me for the good of Indian country.

I'm here this morning to listen, as well. I want this to be a conversation – not a speech.

The setting I would like to create this morning is that of a local school board meeting, where we talk about our ideas and express our concerns, our hopes and our dreams.

Improving schools in Indian Country won't be easy. I can't look any of you in the eye and say when schools begin this fall, they will dramatically improve. But over the next years, we can be successful. We can make Indian schools the paragon of excellence. Schools where any parent in America would want to send their children.

In January, at our Indian Education meeting, we set forth five specific goals to improve education in Indian country.

We agreed:

- All children should read independently by the third grade.

- 70 percent of students should be proficient or advanced in reading and math.
- The student attendance rate should be 90 percent or higher.
- Students should demonstrate knowledge of their language and culture.
- We must increase retention, placement and graduation rates at the post-secondary level.

We can achieve and surpass these goals.

A week ago Monday, I visited the Tiospa Zina (T-Oats-spa) School in South Dakota. I learned from School Superintendent Roger Bourdaux (Bore-Doe) that the school was already moving forward on many of these goals.

I learned a lot from the people at Agency Village. I listened to stories about how the bureaucracy in Washington sometimes gets in the way of progress.

I learned how the school brought together teachers, students, parents and tribal elders to incorporate a varied curriculum. Students learn about our global culture, with instruction in math, science, geography and other subjects. They are also taught about their tribal history and the culture that is so important to the tribe's heritage.

There's good accountability at the school. Every few years, students are interviewed with their parents to make sure the students learned what they were supposed to.

I saw the gym that was built just two years ago, where basketball and native festivals take place. I saw the heavy machinery breaking ground on the spot where a new dining room, kitchen and kindergarten through fifth grade classrooms will soon be.

Ten years ago the graduation rate at Tiospa Zina was 25 percent. Today it is 65 percent.

More importantly, I felt a real excitement in the community, and a real enthusiasm for the future.

When President Bush says "No child will be left behind" he's talking about children in Indian country.

President Bush's education plan has four major themes:

- To Increase accountability for student performance.
- Focus on what works using education research and proven education models.
- Reduce bureaucracy and increase flexibility.
- Empower parents.

The President's major education policies are embodied in legislation now pending in Congress.

In the legislation:

- BIA-funded schools are allowed to get state or regional accreditation rather than meeting BIA's federally imposed education standards.
- Tribes are allowed to improve and expand education programs at schools using their own resources.
- Indian parents are allowed to choose which BIA school their children will attend.
- Tribes are given greater say in repair and maintenance priorities, and Tribes and local school boards have more flexibility in making school staffing decisions.

- BIA inspectors are required to get a second opinion from an independent source – with Tribal input – before fully closing a BIA school for health and safety violations.
- BIA is required to spend all maintenance money at school sites, rather than diverting it to fund administrative activities.

BIA has been working with the Senate and the House to ensure the Bureau's education system is included in the legislation. The Bureau commented on the substantive parts that impact BIA education programs.

President Bush's budget includes $161.6 million to address critical health and safety concerns at existing education facilities – an increase of $13.6 million over last year.

This year, President Bush is committed to investing $292.5 million in BIA School Construction – an increase from last year.

The Santa Fe Indian School was built in 1889. It currently serves more than 550 students from reservations in Arizona and New Mexico.

The buildings have deteriorated to a point where critical components like electricity, plumbing, heating, air conditioning, ventilation, and fire and safety systems don't meet the very minimum requirements.

On the Turtle Mountain Reservation in Belcourt, North Dakota, 80 percent of the students attend classes in portable buildings located on a steep slope that creates dangerous winter time hazards. The pipes routinely freeze and the students shiver.

With help from Congress, this Administration will rebuild the Sante Fe and Belcourt schools and four others next year.

With those six schools built, 2,900 children will go to classes in new schools. After the first four years of the Bush Administration, one out of five Indian students will attend school in a new building.

We're also announcing today that people can log onto the Internet – at www.buildaschool.bia.edu – and see photos of each of the schools being built. We'll update the photos, from the first day of excavation to the final ribbon cutting ceremony, We'll share the experience and the joy of building a new school. And everyone can watch it happen.

We're building six schools, but I'm not satisfied with those numbers. I have asked Neal to look for creative ways and work in a bipartisan manner we can improve the bonding and financing for new schools and build them even faster.

We also know that it takes more than bricks and mortar to build a student's mind. And we know that many of the solutions are not in Washington, they are in each Tribe, each community and each family.

The most influential teacher any child will ever have is a parent who loves them. The Family and Child Education Program – called the FACE program – is a unique literacy program that connects parents in a very personal way to our schools.

The program empowers parents to work with their children from birth through third grade with early childhood education, parenting skills, and adult education and training.

Research was done to test the program's effectiveness. The result is for every dollar invested in FACE, six dollars were saved on remediation, welfare and teen pregnancy.

Beyond the numbers, the real life success stories are compelling. Michelle Lorenzo is a FACE parent whose children attend the Pine Hill School in New Mexico. She composed a winning essay this spring and wrote:

> "The program has changed my life forever. Now, everyday I have something to look forward to. ... I am working to complete my GED. I know now what I want in life, and I have discovered I can do so many things. Things I couldn't imagine before FACE of what I can do – like working at a computer, solving math problems and writing this essay!"

There are over 15,000 FACE success stories like Michelle's across Indian country. I'm happy to announce that beginning this school year, we'll expand this program to ten more schools – for a total of 32.

We must also re-intensify the amazing Indian spirit that dominates Indian life. Scientists say the Indian population was at one time 10 to 20 million strong. Indian people lived off the land, fought extreme hardship and persevered through tough times. Indian people were – as they are today – smart, tenacious and resourceful.

We can take that same spirit into our classrooms, and reignite our teaching of math, science, communication skills and Indian languages and culture. In doing so, we can achieve great things. We don't need to travel far to find examples. If you attended a BIA school, please stand up. ... You are our proof. You are our success stories. And you are an inspiration to each child and each life you touch. To each of you, I applaud you. Today, five Indian schools are not connected to the Internet. It's my honor to announce today, that by the start of the new school year every BIA school will be connected to the Internet. But that's just the beginning. We are ensuring that teachers have the knowledge, training and resources to utilize this technology.

This summer, 50 teachers from Bureau schools are being trained at the Pueblo of Laguna through the Intel-Teach to the Future program. Each of these teachers will return to their schools and train ten of their co-workers how to connect technology with instruction. By the end of next year, we will have more than 500 teachers employing technology in their classrooms.

To ensure teachers have a user-friendly place on the Internet, the Office of Indian Education will provide culturally relevant lesson plans, Internet content standards, a student publishing center where students can display there work, and discussion pages where teachers can exchange ideas across the country. Finally, roadblocks for Indian children on the information Superhighway will come down – once and for all. Neal and I need your help to improve Indian schools. We want to hear your ideas, your concerns – and even your criticisms. I've promised to listen to people from all over this country, to involve them in our decisions, to tap their experience, and their wisdom, and their creativity. It is an inclusive approach, and that's what I can hope we can all follow. As I've said repeatedly since January, I am practicing a way of communicating called the Four C's. That's consultation, cooperation, communication, and all in the service of conservation.

As Interior Secretary, I'm entrusted with protecting our the nation's greatest treasures. The

Department watches over the magnificent blasts of Yellowstone’s Old Faithful, the amazing sculptures of Mount Rushmore and the majesty of the mighty California Sequoias. But the true treasures of this Department are the 50,000 children who attend BIA Schools. It’s their hopes, their dreams and their futures that I cherish most. Working together, with a common mission and an open heart, we can help each of their dreams become a reality.

Thank you.
