Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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Rising enrollment at Bureau of Indian Affairs schools and a decline in federal funds per student mean that American Indian children will experience such serious problems as fewer teachers and less time in the classroom next fall.

"American Indian children deserve a decent education in accredited classrooms and safe, uncrowded dormitories to prepare them for the challenges of the 21st Century. These outrageous cuts are especially egregious because our schools already are drastically underfunded; says Assistant Secretary of Indian Affairs Ada Deer.

In FY 1996 Congress did not fund the Indian education increase requested by the BIA to meet the needs of an anticipated five-percent increase in student enrollment in School Year 1996-97. The impact of the FY 1996 cuts on the 187 BIA schools has been delayed until now because this is the time when the schools begin to make staffing decisions for the forthcoming school year. Basically, schools will not have sufficient funds to maintain an adequate teaching staff for the 50,000) Indian children attending BIA schools.

Initial cost-cutting measures include laying off 293 teachers and other school personnel at 16 of the schools the BIA operates in Arizona, New Mexico, South Dakota, and Utah. The Bureau operates 89 schools and funds 98 others that are operated by tribes. "I'm extremely concerned that schools will have to make additional staff cuts as the school year draws closer," Deer said. "Any unanticipated increase in enrollment will cause more cutbacks. For many of our students who live on remote, isolated reservations with no access to public schools, there is no escape from this disgraceful situation." Other initial cutbacks necessitated by the FY 1996 budget are:

1996-97 School Year Cutbacks for BIA Schools and Dormitories;

- Three schools, including one of the larger high schools, have changed the school hours from eight to six.
- Some schools have shortened their school year from 180 days to 175 days.
- A few schools have indicated that they will have to accommodate new students by combining grades so that students in two grades must share one room with one teacher.
- The Bureau is concerned that it will not be able to provide aides to supervise students in dormitories, especially during the night. The potential for serious safety problems to arise is very great.
- Students may not be able to return home on weekends from dormitories and boarding schools because of the schools' lack of transportation money.
- Evening snacks for dormitory students also will be curtailed.
- Rising gasoline costs and increased lease rates for school buses will be passed on to the schools. The transportation funds will not be sufficient to cover the proposed 10.4-percent increase in lease rates or the 61 percent increase in repairs and maintenance.
- As a result, students and parents may have to drive or walk to more distant bus pickup points, which raises safety concerns. Additionally, student extracurricular activities will be curtailed

because of the cost of after-school transportation.

Higher Education and Scholarships

- The Higher Education Scholarship program received a 10 percent reduction in its annual federal funding. This program is on the Tribal Priority Allocation budget line item. More than 1,000 deserving students will lose their only opportunity for higher education.
- The American Indian Graduate Center, which receives the Special Higher Education Grant Funds, was reduced by 50 percent. The Center funded 350 students who were continuing in a degree program. More than 900 students applied for graduate assistance. With the current drastic cut in funding, the center was unable to assist new students and estimates its unmet need at $8 million.

1997 BIA Education Budget

"These cutbacks are attacks on the future of American Indian students," says Assistant Secretary Deer. "Adequate federal funding for their education is of the utmost importance. We must invest in our young people. President Clinton's FY 1997 Budget supports the Bureau of Indian Affairs' schools." The 1997 President's budget requests an increase of $43.S million in order to accommodate increasing enrollment.

BIA schools provide one of the primary avenues for reducing future unemployment on reservations. However, it appears that recent Congressional action on next year's budget may put Indian children in even greater jeopardy. Just this week, the House Appropriations Committee made decisions on the FY 1997 spending limits for government-wide programs. The House Committee reduced the allocation for the programs funded in the Interior bill by $900 million, or 7.5 percent below the already reduced 1996 level. A reduction of this size means that it is very unlikely that dollars can be found to fund needed increases for Indian schools. Despite an anticipated 2,000 student increase, reductions below the 1996 level seem likely.