Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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A draft review of Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) off-reservation boarding schools in Phoenix. Arizona and Riverside, California recommends closure of the Phoenix school at the end of the current school year.

The report also recommends consideration of a new facility to provide specialized treatment services within a residential setting in close proximity to the Arizona Indian communities for students with special needs. The report recommends that the Sherman school in Riverside continue operation for its students and those displaced by closure of the· Phoenix facility

In a letter to Arizona and California Indian tribes, whose members attend one of the two schools, Interior Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs Ross Swimmer asked for comments on the 18-page report by December 10. "The tribe's input into this review of Phoenix and Sherman schools is extremely important and I encourage you to participate in the review process." Swimmer said in his letter of November 12. "Your comments and recommendations will assist the Bureau in arriving at a final recommendation regarding the two schools."

The major reason for the recommended closure is declining enrollment at Phoenix because of the September 1986 opening of a new Hopi high school on the Hopi reservation and the anticipated opening of a similar school on the Tohono O'odham reservation south of Phoenix next September. The majority of the student population at Phoenix has been of students from those two Indian tribes. A projected cost of some $5 million to bring the Phoenix facility into full compliance with safety codes was also a factor. In contrast, the Sherman facility in California has undergone major rebuilding programs during the last decade and the report calls it "a completely modern school plant."

At 366 students for the 1986-7 school year -- down from a 1985-6 enrollment of 515 -- Phoenix is utilizing only 58 percent of its dormitory capacity. During the same period. Sherman's enrollment dropped from 642 students to 535 and is utilizing 61 percent of its dormitory capacity. With the expected opening of the Tohono O'odham school next September. Phoenix's student population is projected to fall by another 98 students and Sherman's by 107. With the combined student population at the two schools of only 696 for the 1987-88 school year, both schools would be operating at less than 50 percent of their capacities. Costs of $1.1 million annually to operate the Phoenix facility would be saved with its closure.

In viewing the total needs of the student body, the report says that approximately one-third of the students exhibited problems associated with alcohol or substance abuse (some only one-time offenders) and that neither school was fully equipped to meet the needs of this segment of the student body. Other BIA off-reservation boarding schools have similar student problems. "It is projected that (these) students would have (problems) severe enough to require a facility which would provide specialized treatment services within a residential setting," according to the report. The report said such a specialized school and residential treatment center should be in close proximity to the Arizona Indian communities and should have specific programs for treating the alcohol and substance abuse problems being experienced by the students with extreme behavioral patterns from all Bureau off-reservation boarding schools.

Overall review of the two schools was initiated last March. Both school boards, as well as the affected tribes and parents, were notified of the review. The bureau was assisted in reviewing the needs of several Arizona Indian communities by the Inter Tribal Council of Arizona, Inc.