Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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American Indian schools, fortified with a recent $9 million grant from the U.S. Office of Education, are trying out new ways to overcome the communications gap between Indian customs and conventional school methods.

The $9 million was made available to the Bureau of Indian Affairs during the fiscal year which ended last June 30, under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. It has enabled BIA to initiate projects it could not have funded otherwise, even though about 65 percent of its regular budget goes for education. Title I money generally is intended for innovative and exploratory projects in the education field.

BIA, an agency of the Department of the Interior, maintains nearly 250 schools for some 55,000 Indian elementary and secondary students. The largest has more than 1,000 enrolled; the smallest, only about 30. Some are boarding schools serving Indian youngsters who live in areas too remote to permit daily attendance at schools close to home; others are day schools in places where the States and local communities cannot effectively serve Indian needs.

Problems vary widely. In certain regions, Indians want specialized training. It will help their children land good jobs in the United States economic mainstream. In others, the schools seem to many Indians too formal, too unrelated to the realities of reservation life. There is a widespread concern that Indian culture and identity may be overwhelmed by conventional teaching.

Because of this diversity of problems, the money has been put to work in a wide variety of ways. Some are long-range, others are aimed at immediate effect.

So that Indians will feel a part of these programs, some of the money is used to involve students and parents in developing a course of study that is Indian-oriented.

These long-range research projects include a detailed study to check on which areas of education Indian students and their parents consider most vital; one which sets out along innovative lines to find just where Indian students stand, scholastically, in various subject areas; and others for development of new social studies curricula which recognize the beauty and worth of native culture and provide refinements in the teaching of English to Indian children who have spoken only their native language.

Other research is being devoted to development of intelligence and achievement tests especially for Indians.

Immediate improvement in Indian education is the aim of programs involving both university and in-school workshops for teachers to update them on latest teaching methods The main uses of the money, though, were for special projects in local Indian schools, most of which are designed to persQna1ize the environment of the schools for ultimate benefit of the student. Examples:

--Rock Point residential school in Chinle, Ariz., which has about 200 students –

from beginners through fourth grade -- living and studying there during the school year, Indian adults into the dormitories and classrooms to speak to children in their doubles. All this is done in an attempt to eliminate homesickness among the students and to alleviate their lonesomeness.

--Five residential schools near Tuba City, Ariz., have each set up a homemaking center to teach their upper elementary students -- and some Indian adults from the surrounding area -- such things as sewing, nutrition, child care, sanitation, grooming and other useful but non-academic subjects.

--Sequoyah residential high school, Tahlequah, Okla., houses its 400 students in small residential units, instead of a large dormitory, to help students avoid the impersonality of a large dormitory and to find a small community or family of their own.

--Wingate residential high school at Fort Wingate, N.M., is using a flexible scheduling system within which each of its 1,000 students can find more independence and freedom to study what he needs. Wingate also has an intensified course in English as a second language.

--Pima Central school at Sacaton, Ariz., an elementary day school for 300 students, has begun a series of planned field trips to improve the motivation of its children. Intensive study precedes each trip, so students already have a good idea of what they will see and can refine their observations when they get there. A journey to a nearby canyon, for example, comes only after the students learn about the rock and rock layers visible there.

--Chemawa residential high school, Salem, Ore., this summer sent teams of five six teachers to visit students and their parents at their homes. Most of the Chemawa students come from Alaska. Purpose of the visits was to see how the children live, meet their parents, describe the school and its program, and thus help alleviate parental worry at sending their children away to school. Chemawa also provides a wide vocational education program, including a special course to train Eskimo students to become bush pilots.

--The Institute of American Indian Arts, a residential high school and post-high school at Santa Fe, N.M., this summer sent its drama and dance and music ensembles to centers of Indian concentration in Oregon and Washington, where they gave performances and help workshops to increase Indian pride and skill in their native arts.