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Secretarial Order to transform Bureau of Indian Education implements recommendations of American Indian Education Study Group's "Blueprint for Reform;" BIE redesign will promote tribal self-determination and improve delivery of services to BIE-funded schools

WASHINGTON, D.C. – As part of the Obama Administration's historic commitment to working with tribal leaders to address the challenges facing Indian Country, Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell today announced a plan to transform the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) and to ensure that all students attending BIE-funded schools receive a world-class education that is delivered to them by tribes.

The announcement came today as President Obama visited the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe of North and South Dakota and implements recommendations from the American Indian Education Study Group's "Blueprint for Reform." Secretary Jewell and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan convened the Study Group in 2013 to diagnose the systemic issues within BIE-funded schools, one of the lowest performing set of schools in the country.

Based on extensive listening sessions and consultations with tribal leaders, educators and community members across Indian country, and analysis of a wide range of primary and secondary data, Secretary Jewell issued a Secretarial Order that will redesign the BIE from a direct provider of education into an innovative organization that will serve as a capacity-builder and service-provider to tribes with BIE-funded schools.

"The future of Indian Country rests on ensuring American Indian children receive a world-class education that honors their cultures, languages and identities as Indian people," said Secretary Jewell, who chairs the White House Council on Native American Affairs. "The redesign of the BIE reflects President Obama's commitment to promoting tribal self-governance and self-determination, enabling the BIE to more effectively support tribal educators who best understand the unique needs of their communities."

"This underlines the importance of ensuring that American Indian and Alaska Native children are prepared for college and careers, while also giving them an education that will honor their heritage," U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said. "The path to fulfillment and success is paved with a quality education, and these changes are designed to give tribal communities a stronger voice in policy decisions that will affect their students' educational future."

The BIE faces significant challenges in providing quality education, including attracting effective teachers to BIE schools located in remote locations, complying with academic standards in 23 different states, resource restraints and institutional fragmentation. The Study Group found that only one out of four BIE-funded schools met the state-defined proficiency standards. Students in BIE schools consistently perform below American Indian students in public schools on national and state assessments. In one study of 4th graders, BIE students on average scored 22 points lower for reading and 14 points lower for math than Indian students attending public schools.

Federal American Indian education has been handed over to tribes in approximately two-thirds of BIE schools; however, the BIE has not been adequately restructured to recognize its new primary role in supporting tribal programs, rather than being the primary provider. The Study Group concluded that significant organizational changes are necessary to provide tribal communities the resources and support needed to directly operate high-performing schools and to remove institutional obstacles that hamper student achievement.

“Every child can learn, and every school can succeed,” said Bureau of Indian Education Director Monty Roessel. “We have a moral obligation to ensure that we are providing Indian children with the quality education that they deserve. This redesign is a critical step in supporting each Tribe’s capacity to educate future generations of students who are prepared for college and a career and know and value their heritage.”

The Secretarial Order outlines a two-phase process to restructure and redesign the BIE over the 2014-15 and 2015-2016 school years. The first phase will improve responsiveness of BIE operational support to schools, including establishing a School Operations Division that will focus on teacher and principal recruitment, acquisition and grants, school facilities and educational technology. An Office of Sovereignty and Indian Education will be established to support tribal sovereignty by building the capacity of tribes to operate high performing schools and allowing tribes to shape what their children learn about their tribes, language and culture.

The second phase will focus on improving performance of individual schools through School Support Solutions Teams. The teams will work with individual schools and tribes to help maximize school performance, including “cradle to the classroom” assistance with services such as prenatal care, early literacy, children’s health care and counseling.

The Study Group drafted a framework for reform based on several listening sessions last fall with tribal leaders, Indian educators and others throughout Indian Country on how to facilitate tribal sovereignty in American Indian education and how to improve educational outcomes for students at BIE-funded schools. Overall, the Study Group met with nearly 400 individuals and received nearly 200 comments that helped it prepare the draft framework for educational reform that became the subject of four tribal consultation sessions held in April and May. The Study Group incorporated feedback it received from tribal leaders and other BIE stakeholders into the final Blueprint for Reform released today.

The BIE oversees 183 elementary and secondary schools, located on 64 reservations in 23 states, serving more than 48,000 students. Of these, 59 are BIE-operated and 124 are tribally-operated under Indian Self Determination and Education Assistance Act contracts or the Tribally Controlled Schools Act grants. BIE also funds or operates off-reservation boarding schools and peripheral dormitories near reservations for students attending public schools.

In addition to its elementary and secondary schools, the BIE provides post-secondary education opportunities to American Indians and Alaska Natives by offering higher education scholarships, providing operational support funding to 26 tribal colleges and universities and two tribal technical colleges, and by directly operating two institutions of higher learning: Haskell Indian Nations University and the Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute. More information about the American Indian Education Study Group’s work is available here.