Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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The proposed $31-million decrease in education funds in the FY 1996 Senate Appropriations Bill will result in school closures and will severely curtail school operations in the remaining Bureau of Indian Affairs elementary and secondary schools. Currently the Bureau is responsible for providing educational and residential services to approximately 49,000 Indian students in 187 schools in 23 states.

The Senate is proposing to cut an additional $23.6 million from new construction funds and $10 million from facility improvement and repair projects. Minor improvement and repair projects, roofing projects, and emergency repair projects will also be affected. The Bureau currently has more than $660 million in unfunded facility life/fire safety, handicapped, and educational program work that require completion. "There is simply no justification for placing any Indian child in unsafe facilities," said Dr. John Tippeconnic, Director of the Office of Indian Education Programs.

"For the past five years, our Bureau-funded schools have developed nationally recognized programs that have resulted in increased student performance. The proposed cuts will severely curtail these reform efforts, which resulted in increased student academic performance, reduced dropout rates, increased attendance rates, higher level of accreditation, and improved total quality school programs," Dr. Tippeconnic added.

When students are deprived of educational opportunities, academic development and social activities, there will be an increase in student antisocial behavior, substance abuse, and suicide, he said. School activities are among the few outlets these Indian students and their families have available to develop their academic, creative, and social skills. Some Indian students will drop out of school entirely, be forced to go to boarding schools, or go to overcrowded public schools. Public schools have limited financial resources and no increased tax base for additional school operations.

The proposed education cuts mean schools will lose their state and regional accreditation due to reduced course offerings, increased student/staff ratios resulting in the "warehousing" of students, reduction of student program/activities, and the lack of instructional resources and materials.

Indian and non-Indian communities alike will be devastated by cuts that will eliminate as many as 700 teaching positions. There will be insufficient funds for teacher and support staff salaries. The majority of Bureau-funded school employees are local tribal members, which means these cuts will hurt the economies of surrounding rural communities. "These cuts will strike at the reservation level where unemployment is 46 percent and where the nation's First People face further erosion of what amounts to the poorest quality of life in America," says Assistant Secretary of Indian Affairs Ada Deer.

"The cuts are too deep and too fast. Loss of local employment will result in an increase in child/spouse abuse, domestic violence, and a greater work load for law enforcement," Deer said.

"The non-Indian community will be forced to limit educational services to all students because of unfunded increases in student population. Social services will experience increased needs due to unemployment, student dropouts, diminished family revenues, substance abuse assistance, and

shortages of available counseling services. Increased case loads for law enforcement and an overall decrease in the quality of life at the local level are among the devastating effects American Indians will experience."