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Cuts in federal funding for Indian education programs cannot be allowed to affect the quality of education being provided to young people, Kenneth L. Smith, Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs, said today.

Addressing the National Indian Education Association conference in Portland, Oregon, Smith said budget reductions are coming and Indian education would have to shoulder its share.

"But it is my hope and belief that diminished federal funding does not mean the quality of the education we provide our children must also suffer," he said. "Good education primarily depends on people. Honey helps, but people who care make the difference."

Smith told the educators that forthcoming budget cuts would be "deep and substantial" and added that some programs must be sacrificed in order to save others more central to the mission of the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

"Expensive post-secondary specialty schools, such as the Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute in Albuquerque, may have to be closed," Smith said. "Boarding schools may be consolidated as those with small student populations are shut down."

However, Smith said he felt confident that Indian education could meet the challenge of the 1980s by continuing the progress established in the past decade.

"The progress of the American Indian community in education in the 1970s was fantastic," he said. "The most obvious evidence of this can be found on college and university campuses where more than 40,000 Indians are now enrolled. It is up to us to continue the work that has begun so well. "

Smith said specific objectives in BIA education programs would include the reduction of overhead and administrative costs, the reduction of the ratio of administrative personnel to teachers, and a paring back of bureaucratic layers even further than already accomplished.

"Above all, I want to work to build up tribal governments so they can more effectively and ably direct the education programs their people," he said.

The Assistant Secretary said that since taking office he has stressed the point that the federal government's role is auxiliary and that tribal governments have the primary responsibility for the social and economic well being of Indians on reservations.

"I think it is very important that the Indian community accepts and recognizes this primary responsibility for the education of Indian children," he said. "The federal government has an important helping role, and the states also have a clear responsibility, but the Indian community must make the decisions, provide the leadership, and shape the education your children receive."

Smith did point out, however, that the federal government would not abdicate its responsibility for

providing education to Indian young people.

"There is a long history of federal law that specifically sets out the responsibility of the U.S. government for Indian education, he said.” I do not intend to abridge those laws or diminish that responsibility."

Smith said in spite of the fact that he was not a professional educator he had a strong commitment to Indian education.

"I am not a professional educator, but I am a professional manager and good management is needed in schools as well as in factories and offices," Smith said. "I am convinced we can improve the use of our educational resources through improved management.

"Even with reductions in federal funding, we can -- and we will - have improved schools and education programs for Indian students," he added.