

SEPARATE AND UNEQUAL

A STAR TRIBUNE EDITORIAL SERIES | PART ONE OF FOUR



Senior Irvin Kingbird sought rest and warmth before classes in a corner of the resource room.

INDIAN SCHOOLS: A NATION'S NEGLECT

Better futures aren't built by indifference, but that's how the federal government treats dilapidated tribal schools to which owes resources. The results are tangible.

LEECH LAKE INDIAN RESERVATION, MINN. "Watch. This is the coolest moment of my day," science teacher Allison Barta says, unlocking the door to her classroom at the Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig High School.

Inside, a freshwater aquarium takes up much of the back wall, providing the only light in the windowless space. For a moment, the room resembles an environmental science lab. Then Barta flips on the lights.

This is what years of federal neglect look like at schools such as Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig — part of the 183-school federal Bureau of Indian Education system (BIE).

Barta's classroom is housed in a rodent-infested building with a shockingly long list of problems: a roof that caves in under heavy snowfall, a failing heating system that has many students wearing coats and blankets in class as soon as the weather turns and a sewer system that backs up during extreme cold — all adding to the discomforts and indignities of an

aging, metal “pole barn” that has to be evacuated when wind gusts top 40 miles per hour.

In an era when educators emphasize science, technology, engineering and mathematics as keys to students’ future success, Barta’s science room has no lab tables and few microscopes, and no storage for hazardous materials needed for basic lessons. The ventilation and electrical systems are antiquated.

At Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig in northern Minnesota — and on reservations across the country — the educational promises this nation made to tribes are being broken. It is a policy of disgraceful indifference, leaving generation after generation of American Indian children struggling to build better lives.

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The decrepit conditions at Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig are not unusual in the BIE system, which sprawls over 23 states and 64 reservations. Many of the schools serve some of the nation’s poorest and most remote communities. Test scores for the system’s 49,079 students lag those of both Indians and non-Indians in public schools. Yet the estimated \$1.3 billion needed to put all BIE schools into good condition has long failed to materialize.

For more than a decade, school officials and leaders of the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe have tried to convince federal officials that Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig needs to be rebuilt. Plans for a project with a price now estimated at \$27 million were completed four years ago. Hopes rose across the reservation in August when U.S. Interior Secretary Sally Jewell toured the school. Jewell, whose Department of the Interior is the parent agency for the BIE and the Bureau of Indian Affairs, came just two months after President Obama traveled to North Dakota’s Standing Rock Reservation and repeatedly underscored his commitment to tribal relations and education.

But at Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig, the cold reality for the 100 students is that no date has been set — or likely is close to being set — for replacing the school building. Nor does it appear that improvements will come soon enough to spare another generation from having to endure the 62 other BIE schools rated in poor condition.

They are not the only schools in America in disrepair — about 3 percent of public school facilities are in similarly poor condition, according to the National Center on Education Statistics — but a far greater share of BIE schools has been ignored.

Funding for replacement schools, improvements and repairs to BIE schools has fallen by 76 percent over the past decade. Despite its rhetoric about various tribal relations initiatives, the Obama administration has ignored the system’s fundamental need for safe, functional schools. Even more frustrating, the administration is standing by while BIE learning environments fall drastically behind those of the other federal K-12 system: Department of Defense (DOD) schools serving children of military families and civilian employees.

The DOD launched a \$5 billion construction surge in 2010 to renovate or replace 134 of its 181 schools by 2021. Seventeen new schools have been completed, 23 are under construction and 37 are in the design phase.

In contrast, the Interior Department has requested just \$3.2 million in replacement school construction funding for one Indian school in 2015. Funding for new BIE schools over the past four years totaled \$39 million — less than the cost of one large DOD elementary school that will open next year in Virginia.

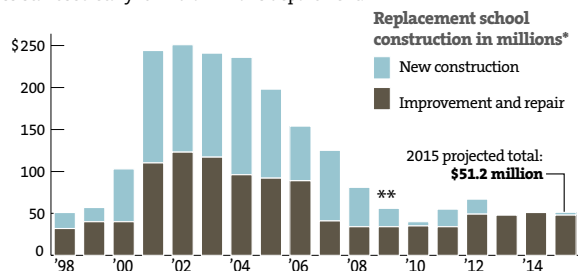
The Interior Department also zeroed out its budget requests for BIE school replacement construction in 2013 and 2014 — more evidence that the agency and the Obama administration’s Office of Management and Budget view the BIE system as nothing more than a place to find savings.

No American should begrudge the investment in DOD schools: Our military families deserve the best. But under the watch of Obama, Jewell and Education Secretary Arne Duncan, the BIE system has increasingly and inexcusably become what advocates for Indian schools and U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum, D-Minn., have described as “separate and unequal.”

On South Dakota’s Pine Ridge

CONSTRUCTION FUNDING FALTERS

Replacement school construction funding for schools in the Bureau of Indian Education system has dropped sharply over the past decade. Funding for construction is handled by the deputy assistant secretary for management in the assistant secretary for Indian Affairs department.



*Does not include employee housing funds.

**2009 figures exclude federal stimulus dollars for school replacement.

Source: Department of the Interior

MARK BOSWELL • Star Tribune



Terrance White propelled himself through the marshy Mud Lake as part of an Ojibwe culture class.

Indian Reservation, which has four deteriorating BIE schools, former tribal President Cecilia Fire Thunder summed up what many tribal students, educators and leaders are wondering about federal officials: “Why aren’t they fighting for us?”

Culture in education

The BIE school system enrolls about 10 percent of Indian students nationally — with the remainder generally attending local public schools. But the slender enrollment figures belie the essential role these schools play in Indian education. Because of the remote locations of reservations, BIE schools are the only hope for many students. Indian languages and history also typically play a more central role in BIE school curricula, helping to preserve valued traditions nearly eradicated by decades of misguided U.S. government policies.

The culture-at-the-core approach is critical for students like Charles Raisch, 17, who felt out of place at the sports-focused public high school near his home in Deer River, Minn. So Raisch, who hopes to become a car mechanic, transferred to Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig, where a school day that includes tanning hides, learning to speak Ojibwe or harvesting wild rice helps him make friends and focus on his regular classwork.

The smaller school — named for Chief Hole-In-The-Day — and the focus on Raisch’s culture has helped him deal with stress and has made him appreciate his heritage. He now often starts his day by walking into the woods near his home to offer tobacco, a sacred plant, to the Creator. He also likes working with younger kids during cultural activities. On a recent trip to nearby Mud Lake to harvest wild rice, Raisch was one of the older boys helping elementary school students in and out of canoes.

Knowing that the younger kids look up to him inspires Raisch to work harder at school. At what is affectionately known as the Bug school, he said, “I feel better and more positive overall.”

Indian leaders believe a culture-rich education can help combat social ills plaguing their communities, such as high rates of drug and alcohol use, crime and suicide.

“By going back to our ceremonies and sweat and purification lodges and moving back to the reservation, many people are finding balance again,” Pine Ridge’s Fire Thunder said. “Our culture is what grounds us, and this is what is going to save us.”

A national disgrace

Federal neglect is handicapping learning at BIE schools nationwide, according to a 2014 report commissioned by Jewell and Duncan. But students in the Upper Midwest and the Southwest may be suffering the most.

Those two regions have the nation’s largest clusters of BIE schools — the legacy of be-

ing home to large, influential Indian nations that ceded land and signed treaties with the U.S. government as settlers pushed west in the mid-1800s. The federal government assumed educational obligations as part of this exchange for tribes' ancestral lands. The government's ongoing trust responsibilities are recognized in modern law and unchanged by the advent of tribal casinos. In any case, there aren't enough profitable casinos to fund the BIE system's construction needs.

As deplorable as the conditions are at Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig, Minnesota is fortunate that it's the only one of the state's four BIE schools currently in poor condition. The others are in Onamia, Cloquet and White Earth.

Twenty-eight of Arizona's 54 BIE schools are listed in poor condition, and two — Cove Day School and Little Singer Community School — have been on the BIE's priority replacement list for a decade. BIE officials who oversee the Arizona schools say there's little they can do.

"They keep telling us that Congress doesn't have the money," said Deborah Belone, who oversees Cove as well as Red Rock Day School, another school in such disrepair that it needs replacement. In addition to mold, a faulty roof, a failing cooling system, asbestos and an inadequate number of classrooms for a growing student body, Red Rock's dated electrical system is so overloaded that teachers can't use their classroom "smartboards," the modern equivalent of a chalkboard, all at the same time.



Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig is housed in a pole shed intended to be an auto mechanic school and garage.

Schools without books

Ten of South Dakota's 22 BIE facilities, and four of North Dakota's 11 schools, are also considered in poor condition, generally meaning that the backlog of needed repairs or renovations is so extensive that it's more economical to put up a new structure.

At the Little Wound K-12 school in Kyle, S.D., part of the elementary school still in use was built in 1939. The nurse's office for a school serving about 800 kids is on an auditorium stage; there's no other place for it.

The middle school is housed in two structures, one of which is a pole barn that was supposed to be temporary but is now 21 years old. To get to classes in the barn, eighth-graders like Shadow Red Owl, George Killsback and Ryder Tobacco pass through a covered walkway frequented by bats and draped with hanging electrical cables. School officials aren't sure if a nearby portable classroom — which has boarded-up windows, a rotted foundation and an obscenity spray-painted on it — has been condemned yet.

But elementary Principal Ardis Iron Cloud doesn't dream of a fancy new facility or high-tech computer labs. She simply wants her students to have access to books. "If you want to raise reading scores," Iron Cloud said, "you have to have a library."

Blaming Congress

Asked how the inaction on BIE school construction squares with the Obama administration's commitment to Indian education, Interior Secretary Jewell blamed Congress.

"I will not promise what I cannot deliver, and tribal leaders and educators have heard me say this, because I've had conversations with them about the budget atmosphere in which we work in Washington, D.C.," Jewell said. "We have a huge problem on our hands, a problem that is not easily solved. But I want to do what I can administratively, and that means I will continue working with my colleagues in the Cabinet and working with leaders and tribes to see what we can do with the hand that we're dealt right now to begin to make a real difference for Indian children."

Jewell's frustration with Congress is fair. Interior belongs to the part of the federal budget

BUREAU OF INDIAN EDUCATION SCHOOLS

Total number: 183

Locations: 23 states and 64 reservations, with schools clustered in the Southwest and Upper Midwest

National enrollment: 49,079

Number in poor condition: 63

Minnesota enrollment: Four schools, with a total of 879 students, in Bena, Onamia, Cloquet and White Earth

South Dakota: 22 schools, with 6,479 students

North Dakota: 11 schools; 3,386 students

Wisconsin: Three schools; 806 students

Age of school buildings: 83 schools are 30 years or older; 17 are 50 years or older

hit hard by automatic spending reductions made as part of Washington's 2011 debt ceiling deal. In 2013, these cuts to BIE totaled \$58 million.

Congress funded BIE school replacement construction at more robust levels during the administration of former President George W. Bush — hitting a high-water mark of \$140 million in 2004.

Minnesota's Democratic U.S. Sen. Al Franken, who has held field hearings on BIE schools' plight, has publicly urged Jewell to ask for additional funding in fiscal 2016, the budgetary details of which are being worked out right now and are not yet public. Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont., chairman of the U.S. Senate Committee on Native Affairs, has held hearings on deteriorating schools. That Jewell hasn't been before the committee in 18 months, while her agency is tardy in replies to inquiries from members, has been noticed.

Tester's message to Jewell couldn't be clearer: Get going and give us a plan. "The BIE must work with tribes to develop a comprehensive long-term plan to address the education needs of Native students. The infrastructure needs at BIE schools are incredibly serious, and it is critical that the BIE's next budget proposal include a plan to address the dismal state of so many BIE schools across Indian Country," he said.

'A better future'

Even with a plan, getting funding approved is a daunting challenge, which is why Jewell needs to personally sell it once it's developed. She'll need help from Education Secretary Duncan, whose agency is larger and more influential. The two also need to forcefully advocate for other funding solutions, including one devised by a Minneapolis banker that has already been partly passed by Congress. It would allow tribes to tap into private financing to replace school buildings.

If Duncan is serious about addressing educational disparities, which has been a focus of his, he can't be absent without leave on the buildings in which some of the nation's most disadvantaged students are trying to learn.

It isn't just Indian nations that have placed their trust in Jewell's agency. States that are home to large Indian populations, like Minnesota with its seven reservations and four Indian communities, are depending on BIE schools to educate a new generation of citizens and workers with skills critical for the future.

Kids shivering in thin-walled classrooms or studying under leaky roofs year after year aren't getting the education they need or deserve. With the larger community's visible neglect all around them, they receive the wrong message about the value of education.

During his June visit to North Dakota, Obama inspired the crowd when he said, "We can break old cycles. We can give our children a better future." Providing BIE students with adequate schools is the place to start.



Student Terrance White and his Silver Eagles teammates didn't yet have pads or uniforms, but that didn't stop them from participating in an intense first day of football practice.