

SEPARATE AND UNEQUAL

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Crossroads Elementary School in Quantico, Va., will open its doors in the spring.

THIS IS HOW IT'S DONE

While Bureau of Indian Education facilities languish,
another set of federally run schools is upgrading
to the state of the art.

MARINE CORPS BASE QUANTICO, VA. If federal officials need inspiration and a model for fixing broken-down American Indian schools, they should get out of their Washington, D.C., offices and head a few miles down the road to this military installation in northern Virginia.

Nestled in a quiet, wooded spot on the Marine Corps base is the squat, 62-year-old Russell Elementary. Like many aging schools in the federal government's two separate K-12 school systems — serving the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) and the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) — Russell's worn-out structure and mechanicals have pushed the building past its expiration date.

But while funding for BIE replacement schools has faltered due to bureaucratic neglect and congressional indifference, most students in DOD schools will soon attend classes in new buildings.

The agency is in the midst of a decadelong, \$5 billion push to rebuild 134 of its 181 schools. Next spring, students from Russell will move just across the road into the stunning new \$47

million Crossroads Elementary.

Among the 129,577-square-foot building's features: flexible "learning neighborhoods" instead of standard classrooms; a soaring, two-story media center; geothermal heating; an abundance of natural lighting, and a rooftop garden that will serve as both patio and environmental science laboratory. This is what state-of-the-art school design looks like, which is why education officials from around the nation have traveled here to tour Crossroads.

The question is why one federal school system is adequately funded while the other is not. Students both on military bases and on remote Indian reservations deserve modern schools that maximize learning opportunities. But without more focus from the Obama administration, BIE schools will continue to be left behind.

"The old approach did not allow education to prepare kids for the 21st century," said Mike Smiley, an Air Force veteran who is chief of facilities for the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) office. "Where we're going is the future. It's a student-centered future that focuses on what do students need to succeed."

A painful contrast

The Minnesota kids who attend class in the pole barn serving as the Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig High School on the Leech Lake Indian Reservation would no doubt agree that a new approach to school buildings is needed.

The Bug school is one of 63 BIE facilities — about one-third of the system's total schools — rated in poor condition, meaning they need to be replaced or extensively renovated. So little progress replacing failing BIE school buildings has been made over the past decade that a 2011 report — one that urged federal officials to launch a massive school rebuilding effort like the DOD's — estimated that it would take six decades to work through the construction backlog. BIE schools serve about 50,000 students.

No American should begrudge the progress being made at Crossroads and the other DOD schools. For families with loved ones on the front lines, state-of-the-art schools offer peace of mind that kids at home are getting a top-notch education. In addition, DOD schools serve as critical community hubs for families living in foreign countries, with the system serving 76,559 students worldwide in the United States, Europe, Cuba, Japan and other Asian-Pacific locations.

Smiley and the rest of his smart, energetic team at the DoDEA inspire confidence that the investment in DOD schools will pay off. In an era marked by widespread cynicism about government, the agency's modestly named "21st century education initiative" is farsighted and well-executed.

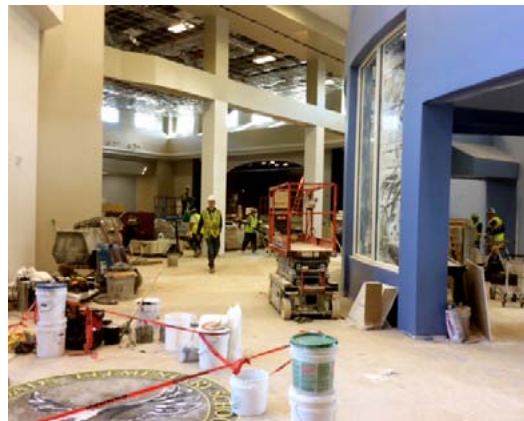
Renderings of schools being built or planned are displayed in an alcove outside Smiley's office at DoDEA headquarters in Alexandria, Va., giving it the appearance of a school construction war room. Since the initiative launched in 2011, 17 schools have been completed, construction is underway on 23 and another 37 are in the design process. In contrast, only 11 BIE schools put on a priority replacement list in 2004 have been completed, and 63 must be rebuilt or upgraded.

Education "is a huge quality-of-life issue. We have challenges that other folks don't, with deployed parents and frequent moves for families, remote locations. That makes resourcing the education of our family members a high priority," said Robert M. Brady, a Marine Corps veteran who is the DoDEA's associate director for financial and business operations.

State-of-the-art design

It takes just a few minutes of listening to Smiley during a tour of Crossroads to realize that the DoDEA team didn't just set out to rebuild or renovate schools. The aim was to maximize academic achievement by turning buildings themselves into teaching tools. In doing so, the team is setting a new national standard for school design.

Smiley's passion for education and the new facility's potential to serve students show in his delight over what seem like mundane details. A few steps into the building, in a corridor on the way to the student commons, he stops and stabs a finger at the drywall.



Construction crews were putting the finishing touches on the commons area this fall in the \$47 million Crossroads Elementary in Quantico, Va.



There are plans, but no funding, to expand the Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig school.

Its presence here is significant. Crossroads' design has kept interior load-bearing walls to a minimum. If Crossroads needs to reconfigure space in the future — for more classrooms or bigger spaces, for example — wallboard is easy to tear down and reinstall. Older schools with more traditional block construction don't have this flexibility.

"We don't know what the future is going to bring," Smiley said.

Just down the hall is what Smiley calls the school's "focal point." It's a commons area bordered by the two-story media center, a large stage and the school's spacious new kitchen, which is outfitted with equipment to serve and store more fresh foods.

Kids will eat lunch here, and their families will gather in this same space to watch band concerts and plays. The graceful, curved stairs following the entire width of the stage's front make it easy to access for little ones and give the space a theatrical flair. About 750 students from Russell and two other aging elementary schools will attend Crossroads.

Still, it's the school's learning "neighborhoods" and the rooftop garden that really showcase how the building itself enhances learning.

The garden, a spacious "green roof" or "vegetative roof," has hardy plants that will catch rainfall and provide a cooler roofing surface. It will be a place for hands-on learning. The role that "learning neighborhoods" will play takes more explanation from Smiley, who is as well-versed in education research as any academic.

Most adults went to school in buildings with corridors lined on either side by classrooms with permanent walls. At Crossroads, students of similar grade levels are grouped together in large, open spaces called "neighborhoods." These spaces can easily be partitioned according to the students' or activities' needs. This accommodates different learning speeds or different styles of learning — some students learn better with hands-on activities, for example, while some learn better by listening to instruction.

"This is providing variably sized spaces that fit the variable needs of the kids," Smiley said.

The approach encourages collaboration between students and among teachers. It also familiarizes students with the type of space they'll spend time in as adults. The neighborhood spaces "mirror what they will see in an office environment, with people working together or in small breakout groups," Smiley said.

Another feature that will enhance learning is an "energy dashboard" that gives readouts on the school's energy and water use. That will help students become wiser stewards of resources and give them a chance to apply critical math and science skills to real-time data gleaned from the building around them.

A growing gap

While the school's price tag may seem daunting to other schools looking to emulate this philosophy, DOD school costs reflect higher foreign land costs and the need for heightened security after 9/11. The price tag would be more reasonable for public schools that want to

embrace this design philosophy. “The focus is now on the student. How do we enhance student performance? How can the facility better complement what education needs to do to optimize performance for each and every kid?” Smiley said.

The lack of concurrent progress in the BIE system is especially frustrating because Crossroads Elementary and the DoDEA team are right down the road from the White House, Congress and the office buildings that house federal officials with oversight of BIE schools.

The growing evidence of the chasm between the two federally funded school systems makes inaction by the U.S. Department of the Interior inexcusable. Interior is the parent agency for the BIE and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Funding for BIE schools also flows through the U.S. Department of Education.

The BIE system should be in the midst of a rebuilding effort like the DOD’s. Instead, officials at BIE and its parent agencies continue to drag their feet. A BIE study group report issued this year argued that the BIE system should replicate the DOD school construction initiative.

The Interior Department has hired Marilee Fitzgerald, former director of the DoDEA, as an adviser. But in response to an editorial writer’s questions, Interior Secretary Sally Jewell would not say when a similar effort for BIE schools might begin, leaving in limbo schools like Minnesota’s Bug school and the four schools rated in poor condition on South Dakota’s Pine Ridge Indian Reservation.

Rallying support for the BIE

The DOD is a much bigger agency than Jewell’s Interior Department. It also has more allies in the newly Republican-controlled Congress. The keys to its success, however, appear to have been strong leadership by former Defense Secretary Robert Gates and a detailed construction plan that gave Congress confidence that money appropriated for schools would be well-spent. No such plan exists for BIE schools.

Many members of the Republican majorities in the U.S. House and Senate are from the Great Plains and Southwestern states where there are large clusters of BIE schools in poor condition.

Jewell and her department need to rally bipartisan support for a funding initiative for BIE schools. Having a detailed construction plan is doubly important for her agency, which must overcome its backwater reputation and doubts in Congress about its ability to manage a major initiative like this.

Far from Washington, tribal communities have monitored the DOD school rebuilding boom. Their reaction is generally one of admiration for the new schools and the work that DOD officials such as Smiley are doing. Many Indian communities have young people serving in the military — pictures of current and former service members are often on display at schools — and there’s an understanding that DOD schools should provide a top-notch education for the children of those serving this nation.

At the same time, there’s disappointment over federal indifference that has left so many BIE schools lagging. Said Imogene Roy, a grandmother on the Pine Ridge reservation: “They need to invest in us, too.”