

# ***BIA education given new life***

*(Editor's Note: Mr. Fred Bigjim, a member of the National Advisory Council on Indian Education, has submitted the following interpretation of HR 15, a law enacted by Congress intended to upgrade the quality of education provided by the Bureau of Indian Affairs to American Indians and Alaska Natives.)*

**By FRED BIGJIM**

Throughout its history, the Bureau of Indian Affairs has been strongly criticized for the quality of education it has delivered to the Native Americans. While not always justified, this criticism has always been identified with the BIA.

While the accomplishments of BIA workers in the field have been recognized as being highly constructive and even progressive, the BIA leadership, on the other hand, has been noted for being simply out of date. Much of this is due to their civil service status which does not encourage change but rather guarantees a successful retirement.

A new law, HR 15, enacted this year by Congress, gives the BIA a second chance to give quality education to Native peoples. This bill requires the BIA to establish and implement a basic academic program suited to the needs of Native students and following the recommendations of the local Native authorities. The law gives the BIA 15 months to develop these new standards and publish them in the Federal Register. The Native authorities then must all be notified of any subsequent revisions of these standards.

The BIA is required to conduct a study of boarding schools and costs to aid in the development of national standards for these schools. It is also required to bring all Bureau and contract schools up to the applicable Federal, State, and local Native authority health and safety standards. The Bureau then must present to Congress detailed reports and plans concerning execution of the new program.

The Director of the BIA Office of Indian Education Programs will have direct authority in Washington, D.C., over all education personnel and programs. The purpose of this new provision is to allow the program authorities to override possible resistance on the part of the Area Directors and Administrators have been autonomous and have been known to frustrate changes at the local level.

The new law stipulates that all policy, procedural and monitoring responsibilities will be centralized in the Office Indian Education Programs. The other day-to-day functions such as budget, program, and personnel decisions will be carried out at the local level by school personnel or the local school board. To insure implementation, the law gives the Interior Assistant Secretary of Indian Affairs the responsibility of carrying out these provisions. His authority may not be considered as interference with the BIA Office of Indian Education.

To finance the new program, a formula will take into account a number of special features such as the size and physical location of the school, distance, staff, transportation, type of school-day, boarding or contract-and isolation.

An important feature of the new law directly involves local school officials and the school board in developing programs within the allotted school budget. A special budget account will be maintained in the Central Office to meet local educational emergencies.

The law now requires Native input at the local level. Although the intent is to encourage more local control by Native parents, this does not mean that parents should be forced to accept any responsibilities they do not want. The law will enable parents, through local school boards to exercise authority over budget, program, and personnel matters at the schools.

The most remarkable aspect of the legislation is that lo-

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cal BIA education personnel will be hired locally, subject to national standards, and they will be exempted from Civil Service competitive hiring requirements. This new provision will help provide personnel more in tune with the local environment and Native culture. No present personnel will be forced into the new system. New personnel will be hired under contract as in public schools but will retain all Civil Service benefits.

Local school boards are now given authority over hiring policy. The Indian preference hiring policy can be waived on a case-by-case basis by the local native authorities. This new emphasis on local control of hiring and hiring policies comes as revolution against a background of control by absentee federal Civil Service bureaucrats.

Leaders of Native groups across the country have welcomed HR 15 as a new beginning for Native education, and hope that more reforms will be developed to upgrade the quality of Native education.