

Maintenance of Federally Funded Tribal Schools

The federal government supports Native American students across the country, either directly through the Interior Department’s Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) schools — which serve about 48,000 elementary and secondary students in 23 states — or indirectly through assistance to public schools from the Department of Education and other agencies. While BIE schools serve a small share of Native American students, they focus on members of tribes that tend to be geographically isolated and face various challenges, including poverty. Many BIE-funded tribal schools are outdated, and construction funding remains insufficient to address current maintenance backlogs.

As a Congressional Research Service report explains: “For at least 20 years, BIE school facilities have been characterized by a very large number of old facilities with a high rate of deficiencies.”⁶⁵ Roughly one-quarter of BIE schools were reported to be more than 40 years old in 2011, and some were much older. A Montana tribe, for example, expressed concerns about its school, which was 100 years old in 2014.⁶⁶

Construction funding for BIE schools has generally fallen since 2001, the major exception being additional Recovery Act funding provided in 2009 (see Figure 15). At \$133 million, funding in 2017 is 67 percent below the 2001 level but 5 percent above the 2010 level, after adjusting for inflation.

Despite some improvement and temporary relief, BIE schools lack adequate funding for construction to address documented needs. At the end of 2015, BIE school buildings had almost \$400 million in deferred maintenance, with 55 elementary and secondary schools (30 percent of all BIE schools) in poor condition. The total backlog, including both schools and employee housing, was about \$600 million.⁶⁷

Old and unsafe facilities reduce educational opportunities for BIE students, who are already struggling. Their average reading and math scores in 2015 were 6 to 7 percent lower than those for other Native American students in public schools; the gaps compared to students in other ethnic groups were even wider.⁶⁸ Lack of decent employee housing presents a special challenge to BIE schools, which already find recruiting staff difficult. Moreover, failure to address backlogs can place funding pressure on other construction and maintenance projects to ensure a clean and energy-efficient environment for students and staff.

⁶⁵ Congressional Research Service, “Indian Elementary-Secondary Education: Programs, Background, and Issues,” August 18, 2015, p.41.

⁶⁶ Tribal representatives and Federal representatives, “Broken Promises, Broken Schools: Report of the No Child Left Behind School Facilities and Construction Negotiated Rulemaking Committee,” December 2011, <https://www.bia.gov/cs/groups/xraca/documents/document/idc1-025523.pdf>; “Findings and Recommendations Prepared by the Bureau of Indian Education Study Group Submitted to the Secretaries of the Departments of the Interior and Education,” June 27, 2014, <https://bie.edu/cs/groups/xbie/documents/document/idc1-031629.pdf>.

⁶⁷ Bureau of Indian Affairs, “Budget Justifications, Fiscal Year 2017,” p. IA-CON-ED-5 and IA-CON-ED-8, https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/uploads/FY2017_IA_Budget_Justification.pdf.

⁶⁸ National Center for Education Statistics, “National Indian Education Study 2015,” March 2017, <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/studies/pdf/2017161.pdf>.

FIGURE 15

Funding for Repair and Construction of Bureau of Indian Education Schools Has Generally Fallen Over Time

In 2017 dollars, fiscal years



Note: Includes temporary funding from the 2009 Recovery Act.

Source: CBPP based on U.S. Department of Interior and enacted appropriations

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Policymakers have recognized the federal government’s responsibility to support tribal education on several occasions, such as through the Native American Education Improvement Act of 2001. Making the needed investments in these schools will require additional resources.