

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-597T](#), a testimony before the Committee on Indian Affairs, U.S. Senate

## Why GAO Did This Study

BIE is responsible for providing quality education opportunities to Indian students. It currently oversees 185 schools, serving about 41,000 students on or near Indian reservations. Poor student outcomes raise questions about how well BIE is achieving its mission. In September 2013, GAO reported that BIE student performance has been consistently below that of Indian students in public schools.

This testimony discusses Indian Affairs' management challenges in improving Indian education, including (1) its administration of schools, (2) staff capacity to address schools' needs, and (3) accountability for managing school construction and monitoring school spending.

This testimony is based on GAO reports issued in September 2013 and November 2014, as well as GAO's February 2015 testimony, which presents preliminary results from its ongoing review of BIE school facilities. A full report on school facilities will be issued later this year. GAO reviewed relevant federal laws and regulations; analyzed agency data; and conducted site visits to schools, which were selected based on their geographic diversity and other factors.

GAO has made several recommendations in its earlier reports; it is not making any new recommendations in this statement.

View [GAO-15-597T](#). For more information, contact Melissa Emrey-Arras at (617) 788-0534 or [emreyarrasm@gao.gov](mailto:emreyarrasm@gao.gov)

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## INDIAN AFFAIRS

### Further Actions on GAO Recommendations Needed to Address Systemic Management Challenges with Indian Education

## What GAO Found

GAO has reported for several years on how systemic management challenges within the Department of the Interior's Office of the Assistant Secretary—Indian Affairs (Indian Affairs) continue to hamper efforts to improve Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) schools. Over the past 10 years, Indian Affairs has undergone several organizational realignments, resulting in multiple offices across different units being responsible for BIE schools' education and administrative functions. Indian Affairs' fragmented organization has been compounded by frequent turnover in its leadership over a 13-year period and its lack of a strategic plan for BIE. Further, fragmentation and poor communication among Indian Affairs offices has led to confusion among schools about whom to contact about problems, as well as delays in the delivery of key educational services and supplies, such as textbooks. Key practices for organizational change suggest that agencies develop a results-oriented framework, such as a strategic plan, to clearly establish and communicate performance goals and measure their progress toward them. In 2013, GAO recommended that Interior develop a strategic plan for BIE and a strategy for communicating with schools, among other recommendations. Indian Affairs agreed with and reported taking some steps to address the two recommendations. However, it has not fully implemented them.

Limited staff capacity poses another challenge to addressing BIE school needs. According to key principles for effective workforce planning, the appropriate deployment of employees enables organizations to have the right people, with the right skills, in the right places. However, Indian Affairs data indicate that about 40 percent of its regional facility positions, such as architects and engineers, are vacant. Similarly, in 2014 GAO reported that BIE had many vacancies in positions to oversee school spending. Further, remaining staff had limited financial expertise and training. Without adequate staff and training, Indian Affairs will continue to struggle in monitoring and supporting schools. GAO recommended that Interior revise its workforce plan so that employees are placed in the appropriate offices and have the requisite knowledge and skills to better support schools. Although Indian Affairs agreed with this recommendation, it has not yet implemented it.

Inconsistent accountability hampers management of BIE school construction and monitoring of school spending. Specifically, GAO has found that Indian Affairs did not consistently oversee some construction projects. For example, at one school GAO visited, Indian Affairs spent \$3.5 million to replace multiple roofs in 2010. The new roofs have leaked since their installation, causing mold and ceiling damage, and Indian Affairs has not yet adequately addressed the problems, resulting in continued leaks and damage to the structure. Inconsistent accountability also impairs BIE's monitoring of school spending. In 2014 GAO found that BIE does not adequately monitor school expenditures using written procedures or a risk-based monitoring approach, contrary to federal internal control standards. As a result, BIE failed to provide effective oversight of schools when they misspent millions of dollars in federal funds. GAO recommended that the agency develop written procedures and a risk-based approach to improve its monitoring. Indian Affairs agreed but has yet to implement these recommendations.