

Highlights of [GAO-13-342T](#), a report to the Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies, Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

In 2011, the federal government provided over \$800 million to BIE schools that serve about 41,000 Indian students living on or near reservations. Within the Department of Interior, BIE is part of Indian Affairs, and BIE's director is responsible for the management of all education functions. BIE's mission is to provide quality education opportunities to Indian students. However, poor student outcomes raise questions about how well BIE is achieving its mission.

This testimony reports on ongoing GAO work about the Department of Interior's management of BIE schools. A full report will be issued later this year. Based on preliminary findings, today's testimony will focus on: (1) the key management challenges affecting BIE and (2) BIE's governance of schools.

For this work, GAO reviewed agency documents and relevant federal laws and regulations; interviewed agency officials; and conducted site visits to public and BIE schools.

View [GAO-13-342T](#). For more information, contact George A. Scott at (202) 512-7215 or scottg@gao.gov

INDIAN AFFAIRS

Management Challenges Continue to Hinder Efforts to Improve Indian Education

What GAO Found

Management challenges within the Department of Interior's Office of the Assistant Secretary – Indian Affairs (Indian Affairs), such as fragmented administrative structures and frequent turnover in leadership, continue to hamper efforts to improve Indian education. For example, incompatible procedures and lack of clear roles for the Bureau of Indian Education and the Indian Affairs' Deputy Assistant Secretary for Management (DAS-M), which provides administrative functions to BIE, such as human resources and acquisitions, contribute to delays in schools acquiring needed materials and resources. According to BIE officials, some DAS-M staff are not aware of the necessary procedures and timelines to meet schools' needs. For instance, delays in contracting have occasionally affected BIE's ability to provide services for students with disabilities in a timely manner. A study commissioned by Indian Affairs to evaluate the administrative support structure for BIE and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA)—also under Indian Affairs—concluded that organizations within Indian Affairs, including DAS-M, BIA, and BIE, do not coordinate effectively and communication among them is poor. Similarly, preliminary results from GAO's work suggest that lack of consistent leadership within DAS-M and BIE hinders collaboration between the two offices.

Two Indian Affairs Offices Support BIE Schools



Source: GAO analysis of Department of the Interior documents.

Although BIE's responsibilities to operate Indian schools are in some respects similar to those of state educational agencies (SEAs), BIE's influence is limited because most schools are tribally-operated. Like an SEA, BIE administers, monitors, and provides technical support for a number of programs funded by the Department of Education. Yet, in contrast to states that can impose a range of reforms on schools, in most BIE schools tribes retain authority over key policies. For example, BIE cannot require most schools to adopt or develop their own teacher and principal evaluation systems. Further complicating reform efforts, many small individual BIE schools function as their own school districts. We have previously reported that smaller school districts may face challenges acquiring special education services or providers because they lack the same capacity, resources, knowledge, or experience necessary to provide those services as larger-sized school districts.