

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-13-774](#), a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies, Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

In 2012, the federal government provided over \$850 million to 185 BIE schools that serve about 41,000 Indian students living on or near reservations. BIE is part of Indian Affairs within the Department of the Interior, and BIE's director is responsible for managing education functions at all BIE schools. BIE's mission is to provide quality education opportunities to Indian students.

GAO was asked to study the extent to which BIE is achieving its mission. GAO examined (1) how student performance at BIE schools compares to that of public school students; (2) what challenges, if any, BIE schools face assessing student performance; and (3) what management challenges, if any, affect BIE and its mission.

For this work, GAO reviewed agency documents and relevant federal laws and regulations; analyzed student assessment data from 2005-2011; and conducted site visits to BIE schools and nearby public schools in four states based on location, school and tribal size, and other factors.

## What GAO Recommends

Among other things, GAO recommends that Indian Affairs develop and implement decision-making procedures and a communications protocol to ensure that BIE has effective management controls and comports with federal laws and regulations. To improve BIE's management of its schools, GAO also recommends that Indian Affairs develop a strategic plan that includes goals and measures for BIE and a revised strategic workforce plan. Interior concurred with all of our recommendations.

View [GAO-13-774](#). For more information, contact George A. Scott at (202) 512-7215 or [scottg@gao.gov](mailto:scottg@gao.gov).

## INDIAN AFFAIRS

### Better Management and Accountability Needed to Improve Indian Education

#### What GAO Found

Students in Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) schools perform consistently below Indian students in public schools on national and state assessments. For example, based on estimates from a 2011 study using national assessment data, in 4th grade, BIE students on average scored 22 points lower for reading and 14 points lower for math than Indian students attending public schools. The gap in scores is even wider when the average for BIE students is compared to the national average for non-Indian students. Additionally, the high school graduation rate for BIE students in 2011 was 61 percent, placing BIE in the bottom half among graduation rates for Indian students attending public schools in states where BIE schools are located.

BIE's administrative weaknesses have resulted in it experiencing difficulty assessing the academic progress of its students and adequate yearly progress (AYP) for its schools as required by federal law. Department of the Interior (Interior) regulations generally require BIE schools to administer the same academic assessments used by the 23 respective states where the schools are located. However, in the 2011-12 school year, at the direction of BIE officials, 21 schools did not administer their state assessment. These schools administered an alternative assessment that had not been approved for assessing AYP. BIE made this critical decision without the appropriate level of review at Interior or the Department of Education (Education) because it does not have procedures specifying who should be involved in making key decisions. Further, BIE did not provide its schools their AYP status for the 2011-12 school year prior to the start of the next school year, hindering school officials' ability to develop appropriate strategies to improve student performance. Unless BIE provides schools information that affects student instruction in a timely and consistent manner, it will be difficult for BIE to be well-positioned to improve student academic performance in the future.

Fragmented administrative services and a lack of clear roles for BIE and Indian Affairs' Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Management (DAS-M)—that until July 2013 was responsible for BIE's administrative functions—contributed to delays in schools acquiring needed materials, such as textbooks. In July, Indian Affairs underwent a realignment, which assigned another office in Indian Affairs the responsibility for most of BIE's administrative functions. The realignment is intended to improve efficiency in delivering services to Indian Affairs stakeholders, including BIE schools. However, it is unclear to what extent, if at all, the changes will result in improved services for BIE schools. For example, Indian Affairs had not conducted a recent analysis before implementing the realignment to determine if it has the right people in place with the right skills doing the right jobs. Such workforce planning is critical given Indian Affairs' recent realignment and employee buy-out and early-out initiatives. Similarly, Indian Affairs has not developed a strategic plan with specific goals and measures for itself or BIE, or a strategy for communicating with stakeholders. Such a strategic workforce plan and performance measures could help improve operations and align the organization's human capital program with its current and emerging mission and programmatic goals.