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GAO
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Highlights

Highlights of GAO-08-679, a report to congressional requesters.

BUREAU OF INDIAN EDUCATION SCHOOLS

Improving Interior's Assistance Would Help Some Tribal Groups Implement Academic Accountability Systems

Why GAO Did This Study

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLBA) requires states and the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) to define and determine whether schools are making adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward meeting the goal of 100 percent academic proficiency. To address tribes' needs for cultural preservation, NCLBA allows tribal groups to waive all or part of BIE's definition of AYP and propose an alternative, with technical assistance from BIE and the Department of Education, if requested. GAO is providing information on the extent of (1) BIE schools' adoption of BIE's definition of AYP; (2) tribal groups' pursuit of alternatives and their reasons as well as reasons other tribal groups have not done so; and (3) federal assistance to tribal groups developing alternatives. To obtain this information, GAO interviewed tribal groups, federal officials, and state education officials; conducted site visits to BIE schools; and reviewed laws, regulations, and other relevant documents.

What GAO Recommends

GAO made several recommendations to the Secretary of Interior aimed at increasing support, including improved assistance, guidance, training, and communication for tribal groups in their implementation of the provision for developing alternatives. Interior agreed with GAO's recommendations. GAO also received technical comments from both Interior and Education.

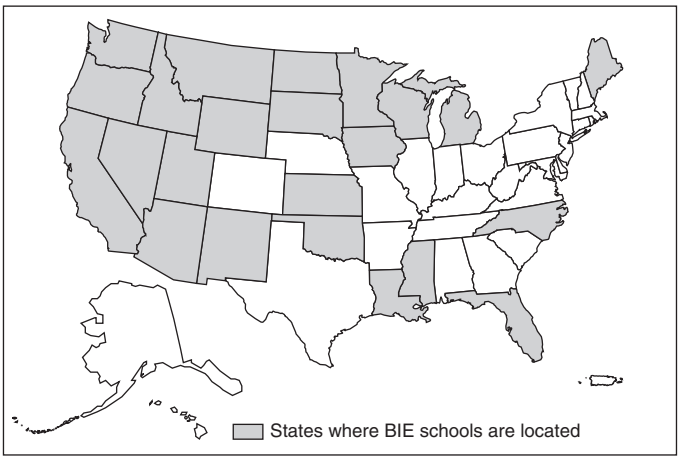
To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on GAO-08-679. For more information, contact Cornelia Ashby at (202) 512-7215 or ashbyc@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

Although almost all of the 174 BIE schools have officially adopted BIE's definition of AYP—the definition of AYP of the state where the school is located—BIE had not yet completed memoranda of understanding (MOU) to delineate BIE and state responsibilities concerning BIE schools' access to the states' assessment systems for 12 of the 23 states with BIE schools. Without MOUs, states could change their policies regarding BIE schools' access to assessments and scoring services.

Officials from the Navajo Nation, the Oceti Sakowin Education Consortium, and the Miccosukee Tribe have begun to develop alternatives to state AYP definitions, in part to make standards and assessments reflect their culture, while officials of other tribal groups have cited various reasons for not developing alternatives. The three tribal groups developing alternatives, representing about 44 percent of the 48,000 BIE students, have requested technical assistance in developing their alternatives. Other tribal officials cited a desire to maintain compatibility with public schools and/or cited challenges, such as a lack of expertise, as reasons not to pursue alternatives.

BIE Schools Are Located in the 23 Shaded States



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The three tribal groups pursuing alternatives reported a lack of federal guidance and communication, although they have recently received some initial technical assistance from BIE and Education officials. These tribal groups reported receiving little guidance from BIE and difficulties in communicating with BIE because the Bureau did not always have internal response timelines or meet the ones it had. Moreover, BIE education line officers—the primary points of contact for information on the alternative provision—generally indicated that they had received no guidance or training on the provision. During the course of this review, BIE and Education officials began offering technical assistance to the tribal groups working to develop alternatives.