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# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

## news release

For Release to PMs Monday June 3, 1968

Keynote Address by Robert L. Bennett, Commissioner of Indian Affairs before the BIA-sponsored Education Administrators Workshop Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff Arizona, 9:30 a.m., June 3, 1968

### OUR SCHOOLS AND THE "FORGOTTEN AMERICANS"

In a very real sense, this workshop for education and guidance personnel working with Indian children signifies a new era in Indian education policy.

The beginning of the new era can be pinpointed to March 6, 1968. On that date President Johnson delivered to Congress an unprecedented message outlining the plight of the American Indian minority -- whom he termed "the forgotten Americans." His message called for a program that stresses Indian self-determination and promotes partnership self-help, so that Indians may take full part in the life of modern America.

Concerning educational opportunity for Indians, the President directed the Secretary of the Interior, in cooperation with the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, to establish a "model community school system for Indians." He said:

"These schools will have the finest teachers, familiar with Indian history, culture and language; feature enriched curriculum, special guidance and counseling programs, modern instruction materials, and a sound program to teach English as a second language; and will serve the local Indian population as a community center for activities ranging from adult education classes to social gatherings."

Furthermore, the President urged development of "a concentrated effort in Indian education with State and local agencies," stating that "this is critical if the two-thirds of Indian school children in non-public schools are to get the special help they sorely need."

This broad mandate projects our education responsibilities for Indians into the very vortex of the Nation's future. The President's challenge is directed at each one of you as well as to the Federal administrators in Washington, such as myself. It has brought us together in a new kind of meeting -- Federal, State and local school authorities and Indian leaders, joined in consort to help create model school programs for Indian children with special needs.

How different it all was in the beginning, a century ago, when the sole objective of Federal schools was to "civilize" the Indians by teaching them farming and trades. The expectations for them were limited and the efforts in their behalf were minimal. Charles C. Painter, a Federal investigator, on a tour of Indian schools in the Indian Territory of Oklahoma in 1887, described one of the teachers he saw in this colorful language:

"He looked as if he had gotten out of his grave to find a 'chaw of terbacker' and lost his way and could not find his resting place."

Schools for Indians in earlier days reflected the general tenor of educational opportunity for American children as a whole. The concept of free schooling did not reach far beyond the three R's. Even in my own childhood on the Oneida Reservation in Wisconsin, the work farm school remained as a holdover from the 19th Century.

Then came two men named John who have had a lasting impact on Indian education: first, John Dewey, who revolutionized the public view of education in a democratic society; and, second, John Collier, appointed Commissioner of Indian Affairs in 1933, who endeavored to put into practice some of the convictions he had acquired as a lifelong student of Indian affairs. Federal schools took on the look of modernity. Teachers were recruited from the ranks of the trained educators. Academic studies were introduced as companion offerings to vocational training for Indians. Indian children for the first time were treated as "educables" and were encouraged to look to the far horizons of the professions and public service.

A high water mark in Indian education was reached three decades ago in the Federal schools. Innovations in curricula, experimentation in the classroom, and unorthodox approaches to administration characterized the schools in those days.

Federal schools pioneered in business education and skilled trades. They pioneered in development of primer readers in the Navajo and Sioux languages and in some of the Alaskan native dialects. Wrangell Institute in Alaska pioneered in modern seafaring training -- a program now defunct, but the forerunner of the growing emphasis in public technical schools upon marine studies. Our schools pioneered in organized athletics -- and we have Olympic champions and Hall of Fame sportsmen to prove it.

Above all, BIA pioneered in that very important intangible -- the ability to stimulate a desire for learning. One of the most progressive of all our programs was the community school concept. Using the isolated and socio-economically depressed Pine Ridge Sioux Reservation as the demonstration center, the schools were transformed into centers for adult as well as child education and recreation. Although we didn't use the new slogan "Don't fence me out," it surely was the philosophy behind the Pine Ridge community school program.

In our community school concept of the 1930's education went far beyond the traditional in an effort to relate formal instruction to practical needs. Children were taught in both Siouan and English tongues. Parental involvement was encouraged. Experimental programs were based upon the practical needs of the Indian community -- for example, model breeding herds of cattle and goats, oil drilling practice, and horse ranching were integrated into the total community school education effort.

You are probably wondering: why did such innovations fail to result in an exemplary educational system by the 1960's?

The answer is in the forgotten pages of recent history under the heading "Budget." Economic deprivation is recognized as a cause of student underachievement in the classroom. It might also be said that economic deprivation is the cause of deficiencies in a school system. The budget for Indian education for at least 15 years following World War II was not enough to permit the kind of progress we had in mind. The Indian baby boom created a classroom seating problem which was not adequately corrected until 1965. Teacher salaries remained lower than competitive salaries in the better public school systems. I recall a situation a few years ago in which we obtained funds to build a new elementary school complete with multipurpose room and separate library; but we could not buy books for the library the year the school opened. I also recall, in the early 1960's, when \$15 thousand was all that was set aside annually for our central educational film library -- this amount required to serve the entire Federal school system.

With such inadequacies, the Federal schools could do little more than maintain the pre-war level. They were unable to move with the new thrust in science, language studies and related enrichment programs that marked the post-war trend in all good public schools.

The quality of education for Indians did not slip backward. It simply did not rush forward to keep pace with the swiftly changing demands of the times. The best we could do was adhere to minimum State standards, because there was no financial leeway to implement standards of higher excellence.

Public schools in rural areas were often in a similar predicament. Indian children, who frequently need special attention because of their English language handicap, received no special aid in public schools except as it may have been modestly financed under the BIA's long-standing Johnson-O'Malley Act. This source of funding, too, was far short of needs.

When I was area director of Indian affairs in Alaska in the early 1960's I witnessed time and again the frustration of hopes and plans on the education front. It was a repetition of my earlier experiences in the area office at South Dakota. I saw dedicated school teachers and creative administrators deprived of the financial wherewithal to put their best talents forward. I saw miracles of accomplishment, nevertheless -- but the highest goals always had to be compromised in the face of budget limitations.

Thanks to the generosity of the 89th and 90th Congresses -- and, thanks to our new Assistant Commissioner for Education, Chuck Zellers -- our heads are above water and we are floating toward a new high mark in quality education and equality of educational opportunity for Indians.

Mr. Zellers is our watchdog on Federal education aid. He and his staff have been largely instrumental in obtaining increased financial help for education of Indians under many of the grant programs administered by the U.S. Office of Education. For more than a decade, public schools serving a concentration of Indian students have been eligible for help under the "impact" laws -- which provide school aid for Federally impacted areas. Now both Federal schools and public schools are benefiting under the expansive Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965.

Other legislation providing aid for research, teacher training and programs for the handicapped have also been made applicable to Indians. Legislation is now before Congress which would make Federal schools for Indians eligible for aid under Title III of the National Defense Education Act, which funds equipment and materials for science and language studies. The 1966 Education Professions Development Act and the new Bi-Lingual Education Act and vocational aid laws are also under scrutiny for revision to benefit Indian schools. Restrictions have also been lifted against BIA's providing higher education aid for students in sectarian colleges.



After years of exclusion, Indian children are now being recognized as an integral part of the American school population and are sharing in the opportunity for quality programs.

Now the challenge is to put these funds to most effective uses. I trust that this meeting will help all of us to visualize how our efforts and resources can be pooled for the greatest benefit of our Indian children.

Schools are more than bricks and mortar and glass. Schools are the first point of contact children have with the world beyond their homes. Schools are teachers and administrators. Particularly for Indian children, schools are the making or breaking point in their lives.

The heart of the challenge lies in our being able to create an environment that will motivate children who are culturally apart from the middle-class norm. Cultural differences can be used as a source of strength for the whole community, rather than continuing as a source of divisiveness.

Indians in particular have a cultural heritage that often puts them out of step with the rest of our society. Yet this heritage is an asset, because it gives them inner support for their confrontations with the dominant society. This asset can be used to advantage in the classroom. If the child's background is respected and made the subject of serious study, then the entire group benefits.

This is the responsibility of the teachers and administrators of Indian education programs, whether they be in Federal schools or in public schools. The classroom must be made not only a physically comfortable place but a comforting place, as well -- a place where conflicting cultures synthesize rather than polarize.

It is necessary, therefore, that teachers and administrators cultivate within themselves a measure of empathy for their Indian students, as the first step toward breaking down the culture barriers. Too often we demand that the child adjust and adapt, yet we do not try to meet him even half way. The time has come to adjust the programs and the teachers to the needs of the students, rather than trying to fit children into the pre-conceived molds of their middle-class-oriented mentors. Indian aides and more Indian teachers in the school system could help in this respect.

This is not to say that Indian children should not learn to appreciate the mores of the dominant society. They will have to survive in daily contact with that society, so therefore they must acquire an appreciation of its purposes. But we can't continue asking them to cast off their ties with the past. The past is their prologue, just as your past is yours -- so help them to build upon it, not apart from it.

We must be willing and ready to make room for individual differences and to recognize the fundamental fact that motivation in a democratic society is an individual matter, not a group response.

We must think in terms of flexible scheduling and individual instruction to meet individual needs.

We must focus on the use of Indian languages as the starting point for teaching fluent English.

We must give the Indian child in the classroom a sense of belonging and a sense of achievement.

We must help the child and his parents relate his formal education to his family life, and thereby bring some family life into the classroom. The school should not shut its doors against the community outside, for when it does it erects a barrier between the child's world and the teacher's world.

The task of the teacher of culturally different children becomes one of selectively mixing old ideas and new in rich proportions to sweeten the taste of transition. It requires that you proceed creatively rather than with strict adherence to orthodox methods, because usually there is no successful methodology upon which to draw.

But it is at least possible to draw upon the generic meaning of the word "education" -- to lead each child by his own special light to the threshold of intellectual and practical understanding of himself and the world around him. With this kind of foundation, the disciplines of formal learning can be woven into the child's total personality rather than stitched in haphazard patches upon it.