Written by **Michael Tennant** on November 30, 2015

Indian Schools Prove Uncle Sam Should Be Expelled From Education

For at least the last half-century, progressives have championed and achieved greater federal spending on and involvement in education; and during that entire time, public-school educational outcomes have steadily worsened. No one should be surprised by the outcomes, for as *Politico* reported recently, the one domestic school system run entirely by the federal government "remains arguably the worst school system in the United States, a disgrace the government has known about for eight decades and never successfully reformed."

The school system in question is the one operated by the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), a division of the Department of the Interior. BIE's network consists of 183 schools for Native American children across reservations in 23 states.

"The 48,000 students unfortunate enough to attend BIE schools," writes Maggie Severns, "have some of the lowest test scores and graduation rates in the country — even as the education they're getting is among the nation's most expensive: At $15,000 per pupil, the system costs 56 percent more than the national average."

In 2013, for instance, just five percent of BIE students were able to perform mathematics at grade level. Only 53 percent of BIE students graduate from high school; the national public-school graduation rate is 81 percent. "In 2011, when the latest national assessment was taken for which BIE data is available, BIE students performed worse than every major urban district in the country except Detroit," notes Severns.

Much of this can be laid at the feet of socialism, which never succeeds in providing high-quality goods and services at low prices regardless of how often it is supposedly reformed. Some is the result of politics and bureaucratic infighting. The rest is attributable to the federal government's legacy of mistreatment of the American Indians.

Severns traces the history of the Indian schools from the post-Civil War era to the present, and the facts she presents are not pretty.

Early schools, established as the feds were alternately exterminating the natives and forcing them onto reservations, were used to strip Indian children of their heritage. "Some progressive educators," Severns observes, "saw an opportunity to remake Indian children in their own image."

At the first such institution, former U.S. Army Captain Richard Henry Pratt's Carlisle Indian Industrial School, founded in Pennsylvania in 1879, "students were banned from speaking their Native languages, dressed to look like white students and were even given new names," says Severns.

As economist Ludwig von Mises observed in his book *Liberalism*, this is a common problem where government-run schools exist and one reason to abolish them: "The school can alienate children from the nationality to which their parents belong and can be used as a means of oppressing whole nationalities. Whoever controls the schools has the power to injure other nationalities and to benefit his own."

Pratt's approach apparently pleased Congress, which began funding similar schools across the country. "When families balked at sending their children thousands of miles from home so that they could be taught to reject their own culture," Severns recounts, "Congress authorized the secretary of the interior, who was in charge of all matters relating to the tribes, to withhold food from any family that didn't turn over their children."

By 1928, this approach had fallen out of favor, and so Washington began replacing the boarding schools with on-reservation schools. That was hardly the end of some officials' attempts to remake Indian children, however. During World War II, while Adolf Hitler was busily slaughtering Jews, a House Select Committee on Indian Affairs actually proposed "a final solution of the Indian problem," which would essentially have resurrected the earlier tactics.

Since then, there have been various government reports on the woeful state of the BIE schools and a few halfhearted attempts to reform them. Aside from devolving some authority to tribes and school boards, very little has changed.

There are a number of reasons for this.

First, because the BIE doesn't have sole authority over the Indian schools — other offices in the Bureau of Indian Affairs have some say in the schools' physical and human resources — there is a significant amount of bureaucratic infighting, especially since the schools account for 35 percent of the Indian Affairs budget.

Second, turnover among BIE and local school leadership has been extremely high, with tenure largely dependent on political acumen. John Tippeconnic, who managed to put in three years (1992-1995) as BIE director, told Severns, "If you want to stay in a position like [BIE director], you've got to support the agenda of the day," which, Severns adds, "rarely favored Indian schools."

Third, "government investigations have found numerous examples of embezzlement and misspent money" at BIE, writes Severns. Also, two recent acting directors were found to have violated the department's ethics rules.

Fourth, Indians have relatively little political power. Few representatives and senators come from districts with significant Indian populations, and the natives themselves are usually poor and unable to afford high-powered lobbyists to press their case. Meanwhile, their opponents, which include government employees' labor unions, are well-funded and organized.

Fifth, as a socialist system, BIE schools are doomed to expense, waste, bureaucracy, and poor results. The school facilities are dilapidated and in some cases unusable. Recruiting and keeping teachers is a struggle despite the fact that the average starting salary for some BIE teachers is higher than that of some rural public-school teachers.

There are still those who think such programs can be reformed, and President Barack Obama, naturally, is one of them. After a visit to an Indian reservation in 2014, Obama got on board a BIE reform proposal from Interior Secretary Sally Jewell. According to Severns, Jewell proposed "restructuring" the BIE and

substituting “education specialists” for “ineffective bureaucrats,” replacing old schools, and giving “teachers extensive professional development” and “tribes more control.”

The plan is meeting resistance from all quarters. BIE employees and their union representatives are worried about lost jobs. The Senate seems unlikely to grant the administration’s request for significantly more funds for BIE schools, although some congressmen would like to do so. Indians are, quite properly, skeptical that the reforms, if they are even enacted, will make much difference; some worry that they will exacerbate existing problems and possibly even create new ones, such as forcing one school to merge with another, distant one.

Reforming a socialist system is impossible. The BIE needs to be shuttered, not given a new coat of paint.

Real education doesn’t require millions of taxpayer dollars and oversight from distant bureaucrats, as homeschoolers and private schools prove every day. Indian parents surely want to see their children escape the grinding poverty of the reservation while not forgetting their heritage, and they can do so by investing time and effort in their kids’ education. Already there are a number of Native American homeschooling organizations, and an Internet connection alone — assuming tribes have access to the web — can provide everything needed to get a high-quality education at very little cost.

BIE may be a flop when it comes to educating Indians, but it is instructive nonetheless as further evidence that federal involvement in education is both costly and counterproductive. For the sake of the Indians and all other Americans, let’s expel Uncle Sam from the schools altogether.