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# Complaints Filed Against BIA Handling of Reading First

By Kathleen Kennedy Manzo

Two Native American education consultants have complained to federal investigators that the Bureau of Indian Affairs failed to follow “Indian preference” guidelines in federal Reading First contracts.

The consultants claim that guidelines for applying for some of the BIA’s Reading First share of \$27 million excluded the requisite set-aside for American Indian-owned businesses, and that non-Native American consultants and those with little experience working in BIA schools earned the lion’s share of the contracts for working with participating schools.

“We were approved [by the BIA as] Reading First contractors,” said Debra Bryan, a school counselor and education consultant from Tulsa, Okla. She and Nicole Bowman, both Native Americans, applied for numerous contracts under the BIA’s part of the Reading First initiative and were denied all but one relatively small training contract each, she said.

“We have worked almost exclusively with Native American children,” Ms. Bryan said, “and none of the other contractors ever stepped foot on a reservation or in an Indian school.”

The two have sent complaints to the inspector general’s office of the U.S. Department of Education, which is conducting an inquiry into Reading First contracts, Ms. Bowman said. Ms. Bryan and Ms. Bowman say they have been told that their complaints have been passed on to the inspector general of the U.S. Department of the Interior, the parent agency of the BIA.

### Left Off List?

Under the federal Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act, contracts or subcontracts with American Indian organizations or others that benefit Indians require “that, to the greatest extent feasible, preference and opportunities for training and employment in connection with the administration of such contracts” be given to Indian organizations and Indian-owned businesses.

The requirement applies to many BIA programs, but it was not included in the request

for proposals for Reading First, a six-year, \$6 billion provision of the No Child Left Behind Act. Contractors applying for grant money, however, are required to hire Native American subcontractors when possible.

Several unsuccessful attempts have been made in legislative proposals in Congress and in court cases to suspend the requirement in the past few years, and observers say the BIA has tried to limit the set-aside in contracting.

The Education Department has “no comment and no information on the complaint,” Elaine Quesinberry, a spokeswoman, wrote in a Jan. 25 e-mail. A BIA spokeswoman could not determine late last week if the grant was required to indicate “Indian preference.”

### ‘Minimal Work’

Ms. Bryan and Ms. Bowman were among about a dozen consultants certified by the Center for School Improvement, a division of the BIA’s Office of Indian Education Programs in Albuquerque, N.M., to work on the Reading First program. Providers were required to have considerable experience teaching reading to Native American students. Ms. Bowman’s consulting firm, based in Shawano, Wis., won approval to receive up to \$500,000 of the grant money, she said, but ended up with only \$6,000.

“We won through an open bid the right to be on that contract,” Ms. Bowman said. “We received minimal work [in schools] in 2003, minimal work in 2004, and no work in 2005.”

In an Oct. 2004 e-mail to Ms. Bryan, which she shared with *Education Week*, Lynann Barbero, the BIA’s acting Reading First coordinator, wrote that she was unaware that the contractors are Native Americans, and that decisions on contracts were made based on the quality of the proposals received.

A representative of the inspector general’s office at the Education Department would not comment on the issue, and all complaints to the office are deemed confidential.

The inspector general and the Government Accountability Office, the investigative arm of Congress, are both looking into complaints that some contractors and publishers were given unfair advantage in gaining Reading First money. (“**Inspector General to Conduct Broad Audits of Reading First**,” Nov. 9, 2005.)

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#### FROM THE ARCHIVES

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“The Rocky Year of Reading First,” December 14, 2005.

“Inspector General to Conduct Broad Audits of Reading First,” November 9, 2005.

**"Complaint Filed Against Reading Initiative,"** June 22, 2005.

**"States Report Reading First Yielding Gains,"** June 8, 2005.

**"Ga. Officials Admit Mistakes on 'Reading First' Rules,"** May 11, 2005.

For background, previous stories, and Web links, see **Reading**.

## **RESOURCES ON THE WEB**

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Further information on the **Reading First** program is posted by the **U.S. Department of Education**.

Visit the **Bureau of Indian Affairs** to learn more about **Office of Indian Education programs**.

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