

# FORUM

## JOHNSON O'MALLEY ACT PROMOTES NATIVE AMERICAN EDUCATION

**Darrell Watchman, Navajo Division of Education**

Forum v17 n6, Fall 1994

The Johnson-O'Malley (JOM) Act of April 16, 1934, was a basic federal aid program specifically designed to provide funds to local off-reservation communities and other Indian-owned, tax exempt land areas where Indian tribal life was largely broken up and Indians were mixed with the general population. Funds were primarily earmarked for education but could be used for other purposes such as education, medical attention, agricultural assistance, and social welfare. In 1958, when P.L. 81-874 was amended to include assistance for educating Indian children, the JOM program became a supplemental aid program.

### ***Bureau of Indian Affairs, Office of Indian Education Programs(BIA-OIEP)***

The BIA-OIEP Branch of Elementary and Secondary Education administers the JOM program through contracts with tribes, tribal organizations, school districts, and state education agencies (SEAs). Indian students from age 3 through twelfth grade, except those enrolled in BIA or sectarian schools, are eligible for benefits under the JOM contract if they are 1/4 or more Indian blood.

In FY 94, the BIA funded 324 JOM contracts in 32 states, including Alaska, and serving 259,037 students nationwide. In FY 94, the Navajo Nation JOM program provided supplemental funding to meet the unique and special education needs of 51,108 eligible Indian students in preschool and grades K-12 in the states of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. This was pursuant to P.L. 93-638 Prime Contract which the Navajo Nation subcontracts with 26 public school districts, five Indian corporations, and one tribal organization (Head Start).

### ***Indian Education Committee***

The Indian Education Committee (IEC) is elected from among the parents (including persons acting *in loco parentis*) of eligible Indian students enrolled in schools served by a JOM [sub]contract. When the governing board of a district, organization, or Indian corporation is composed of a majority of Indians, it may also serve as the IEC.

The IEC conducts an annual needs assessment; the results are used to develop education plans in cooperation with the subcontractors. Education plans "contain educational goals and objectives which adequately address the educational needs of the Indian students served by the [sub]contract."

The IEC is unique among federal aid programs because it is vested with the authority by the U.S. Congress to "participate fully in the planning, development, implementation, and evaluation of all programs." As such, the IEC's role ranges from recommending curricula, to approving budgets and employment criteria.

### ***The "511" Navajo Language and Culture Program***

A recent study of Head Start children by Paul Platero, Navajo Nation JOM program director, indicated a huge loss of Navajo language skills among three- to five-year-olds-only 18 percent of the children studied spoke Navajo. Because the Navajo language and culture are inseparable, this study led the nation to initiate Navajo language maintenance efforts.

In 1992, the Navajo Nation JOM program initiated the "511" program to sensitize its subcontractors to the Navajo (and other Native American) language and cultural needs of children served by their programs. The "511" program provided schools with funding and technical assistance to develop and implement supplementary Navajo language, culture, and history programs. The Navajo Nation JOM program is studying ways for schools to teach cultural concepts without infringing on sacred cultural and social practices. As such, educators are seeking to define "culture" for classroom use.

### ***Personnel Programs***

Research has shown that Navajo children taught in their native language at an early age have greater academic success in later school years than their peers who are immersed in English language programs from an early age. Some children are caught between competing languages, neither speaking nor fully understanding either (i.e., they do not have an identifiable dominant or first language when they enter school). As a result, many are identified as learning disabled and inappropriately placed in special education classes.

JOM-supported personnel programs are designed to recruit and train bilingual teacher aides, tutors, and tutorial aides to assist students in developing their dominant, first language skills. By reinforcing students' native language skills, the program seeks to prepare students to succeed academically and to ensure their maintenance of Navajo language skills.

### ***The Home-School Liaison Program***

In the vast and remote school districts of the Navajo reservation, regular attendance can often be difficult for students. As a result, many Navajo Nation JOM subcontractors direct a large portion of their JOM funding to the Home-School Liaison Program. The home-school liaison works directly under the supervision of the school principal. Principals interviewed throughout the district overwhelmingly agree that home-school liaisons have become invaluable staff members, providing a vital communication link between the school, the home, and the community. They are: employed to perform duties related to absenteeism, community involvement, parental cost needs, emergency needs, and students with problems, and providing data and information required by schools for services provided on behalf of Indian students...(San Juan County School District, Utah).

### ***Other JOM-funded Programs***

Navajo Nation JOM subcontractors conduct regular needs assessments and develop supplementary education plans to address the unique needs of the Navajo people, from substance abuse counseling and parent cost/educational support to after school and bus activities and career counseling.

### ***Conclusion***

Over the past 60 years, the Johnson-O'Malley Act has supported education programs for Indian tribes nationwide. There is a need for these programs to survive and continue at least another sixty years. In a recent statement, Marilyn Oshie-Dorr, Minnesota Chippewa Tribe JOM coordinator, aptly described the program:

The Johnson-O'Malley program allows us to provide our eligible students with optimum educational opportunities, practical knowledge, and skills that emphasize the cultural balance needed to provide a better tomorrow for our tribal members. This will further embrace our sovereign rights that enable us to prosper as a people today and for future generations.