

Testimony to the United States House of Representatives Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples
T. Joy O'Renck
May 16, 2019

I have heard it said that institutions get the exact results they are organized to get. Nothing could be more true of Chemawa Indian School, an off-reservation boarding school for Native American students in Salem, Oregon. In many ways, Chemawa's boarding school status gives it the ideal situation to ensure outstanding education and opportunity for Native American youth. Unlike many schools, Chemawa doesn't face the challenge of educating students who go home to traumatic or unstable home environments each night. That is not to understate the difficulties that many Chemawa students bring with them to school, including chemical dependency, lack of previous education, family trauma, and legal troubles. Despite these complex circumstances, Chemawa truly can and should be a refuge for students where they can focus on creating opportunities for themselves through education. However, the low expectations and inconsistency of school administration and a murky accountability system have created an organization at Chemawa that repeatedly sets students up to fail - or worse.

Students often come to Chemawa with drug and alcohol dependency. Many of my students shared with me that they had been in treatment multiple times before 9th grade. Because of this reality for students, it is the administration's responsibility to plan for needs by investing in counseling, medical support, and consistent supervision. None of these exist for Chemawa students, and administration sites lack of funding as the reason, though they spend freely on less urgent expenses. Instead of receiving needed support, students are expected to simply detox on campus, sometimes from years of daily use, and any behaviors that accompany this process can be used as strikes against them toward expulsion. Additionally, chemically dependent students are poorly supervised and faced with ever-changing rules, setting them up to fail and (often) to seek relief through accessing drugs or alcohol on campus. Even prescription medications, including for significant psychiatric and physical needs, go unfilled for weeks at a time each fall, endangering students and those around them. Ironically, though the administration refuses to support students in recovering from addiction, drug use is often the grounds used to send students home once the school receives a full year's funding for them on "count day" in late winter.

Although Chemawa exists to provide a high quality education and "home away from home" for Native American students, few students who start the year at Chemawa remain until May. In 2009, 36% of students were sent home before the end of the school year. In 2011, one of my English classes went from 28 students to 6 students between "count day" and year's end. I find it difficult to imagine the backlash most public schools would receive if they expelled 36% of their students in one year. This begs the question -why is such a result acceptable at a Native school? Students are sent home for reasons that are unclear to students and staff, and without due process. In January of 2011, one of my most promising students, Flint Tall, was sent home for arguing with the school counselor. This was despite his incredible gains in academics and behavior, and a recent nomination into Honors English. I and other staff advocated for Flint, but the administration ignored our pleas, and those of his mother. A few weeks later, we received word that Flint had been killed in a car accident. Later, I learned that he had not been allowed back in school at Pine Ridge, and had spent weeks aimless and intoxicated, until he finally lost his life in a drunk driving accident at 15. The response from many staff members: get used to it - this happens all the time.

Students who experience harm while under Chemawa's care are treated with indifference. In my first two months at Chemawa, one of my Special Education students arrived to my class sobbing. When we spoke in the hall, she told me that she had been raped on campus the night before. Not only that, her attacker was the boy sitting directly behind her in my classroom. I later learned that she had reported her attack to the Chemawa administration the night before. Admin had not provided her counseling or medical treatment, had not separated her from her alleged attacker, and stated that they weren't giving credibility to her report because she was SpEd and probably confused. Amanda Ward and Ryan Cox (principal and counselor) quickly put her and her alleged attacker on planes back to their respective reservations rather than investigating or supporting the students, denying the young lady nearly a year of education because she had reported being assaulted, and ensuring that the young man faced no accountability if he had raped her.

These examples of student harm are merely two among countless. Chemawa's violations of Special Education law under IDEA have been so numerous that a former SpED teacher was eventually fired as a troublemaker for reporting them (he won a wrongful termination suit and was paid restitution), and students with special needs haven't historically received federally-mandated services. It is my understanding from current staff that such violations continue today.

Although Chemawa sits on several hundred acres that have been long rented out for various commercial uses, Chemawa's leadership has repeatedly refused to disclose where the money is going, despite requests from staff, the media, and the school board. Not long after I left, I received information that Chemawa had been audited by the IRS and significant issues around misuse of student funding were found.

One of the greatest barriers to accountability and proper oversight for schools like Chemawa is the lack of clarity regarding jurisdiction. Chemawa is federally-funded, Oregon state-licensed, and loosely supervised by a faraway line office in New Mexico. In my many attempts to report serious concerns, I was frequently unable to find out who was responsible for which area of accountability. I believe this is where the greatest opportunity for harm takes place: because no one knows who is in charge of oversight at Chemawa, there is no meaningful oversight at Chemawa, and unscrupulous or negligent behavior is never curbed.

In my nearly 15 years as an educator, I have rarely met students as resilient, thoughtful, creative, and capable as the students I had the privilege to teach at Chemawa. The current state of Chemawa is robbing these incredible youths of their promise, and sometimes even their lives. Bold changes must be made so that a Chemawa run by ethical, culturally responsive educators focused on student good create excellence in education, and begin to reverse the opportunity gap that currently exists for Native American students. Chemawa is uniquely positioned to prepare the next generation of Native leaders, ensuring that highly-qualified Native professionals are available to staff schools, medical clinics, and other high-leverage occupations in their communities and the nation at large. This Chemawa is possible, and with your support and oversight, I have great hope that it will finally exist at last.