

Testimony of Celeste Karzon

House Natural Resources Committee

Subcommittee for the Indigenous Peoples of the United States

May 16, 2019

Subcommittee Chairman Gallego and Ranking Member Cook, thank you for inviting me to testify before you this afternoon. My name is Celeste Karzon and I am a member of the Bay Mills Indian Community in Brimley, Michigan. I worked as a teacher at Chemawa Indian School, a Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) boarding school located in Salem, Oregon, for almost six years. This school is one of four boarding schools that is run by the BIE and not by a Tribe or Tribal organization. Chemawa educates and houses approximately 280 students from at least 13 tribes.

From the moment I was offered a position at Chemawa there were red flags that it was not a healthy, functioning school. On the first day of school I was still waiting to learn about my teaching load and schedule. I had no roster and no teaching materials. Students wandered the building without direction. The first day of that first year was a signal of things to come.

As a teacher, typically you're given a schedule and guidance on coursework so you can develop a curriculum over the summer months. Yet each year at Chemawa the other teachers and I didn't know what we were teaching until the first day of school or sometimes later. That meant there was absolutely no time to prep our curricula. The first weeks of school were always chaotic.

I felt particular concern for the well-being of students at Chemawa. They suffered from depression, isolation, loneliness, and homesickness on a regular basis. Though the school had access to behavioral health services from the Indian Health Service which was on our campus, students were limited in their ability to request and receive help. Sadly, one student who was actively suicidal was discharged from school rather than given wraparound services. When she returned home, she was successful in her suicide attempt.

Supervisors at the school focused on liability rather than high-quality instruction and a healthy learning environment. They seemed to operate based on fear of BIE sanctions rather than on what was best for creating a healthy school climate. High-level supervisors were based in Albuquerque and were detached from the students and faculty they were supposed to oversee. It broke the line of communication and hampered authentic supervisions. The result was a loss of the human element that is so critical to effective and impactful education.

Despite these and other warning signs, I was fully committed to my teaching position and frankly, honored to be teaching Native students, which is deeply personal to me. This is what I set out to do, and it was what kept me at Chemawa.

I always received exemplary teaching reviews- my teaching practice was never under scrutiny. I was a high performing teacher with documented accolades and glowing reviews from supervisors for student academic growth and helping students achieve years of advancement. In fact, I was a teacher whose classroom was showcased when high-profile visitors such as our supervisors from Albuquerque would come in.

But I was personally unsettled and uncomfortable with the school.

I was particularly disturbed by how little student well-being and safety was emphasized- school culture was broken or absent. For example, students were filming fights in the dorms and posting them on YouTube without consequence. I was very concerned about their safety and raised this with my supervisor. Rather than address the fighting, the response was an emphasis on the division between the dorms and academics- teachers, including me, were told to stay out of the dorm life. This was a typical response to any concern- a bureaucratic division of responsibilities and strict chain of command prevented us from reaching any solutions to any problem, no matter the size.

Dorm safety in particular was a siloed issue that teachers were not to speak about. If we tried to, it was interpreted as calling into question the professionalism and training of the dorm staff. The issue of student safety in the dorm was never discussed in faculty meetings or openly. In fact, my supervisor directed all staff to refrain from sending emails or otherwise trying to start a conversation about student safety.

I was highly concerned with the lack of ethics at the school. In one instance, I came under pressure to change a 9th grade English student's grade from an F to a D. When I requested to meet with the family rather than change the grade, a guidance counselor sat in on the meeting with the student's transcript. I saw that not only had he passed my class on the transcript, but he was getting credit for two additional classes that he did not take.

On another occasion, I was harassed when I refused to sign documents saying I was in special education meetings that I never attended. My refusal to partake in unethical and illegal behavior regarding students with disabilities turned me into a target of the special education department. My complaints to my supervisor, my first contact in a strict chain of command, went unanswered despite repeated follow ups.

Whether it was in regards to harassment from a hostile coworker or concerns about troubled students, or major infrastructure issues such as a leaky roof and freezing classroom in the winter, I followed the chain of command with as much fidelity as possible. I first went to my supervisor and then to her direct supervisor, the superintendent. He informed me that he was not allowed to communicate with or provide supervision to my supervisor, and therefore his hands were tied. Our area director was never available and schoolboard meetings were closed to faculty.

With no other place to turn, I decided to send an e-mail to the deputy director of the BIE, describing these and other very serious issues at Chemawa. In response, I got a letter of reprimand on Department of Interior letterhead for breaking the chain of command. This is when the retaliation began.

My direct supervisor stopped speaking to me. This was three years into my six-year tenure. My classroom was moved to the only room at the school without windows. No other teachers were moved. School staff started rumors about my mental health status and I heard through the grapevine that staff were also discussing behind my back that I should quit.

After the reprimand letter, I had no voice. I was forced into professional isolation from other faculty because I was afraid that if I complained about anything, I would have further

disciplinary measures taken against me. What was worse, all the underlying problems at Chemawa that I had raised were completely ignored. Students still fought in the dorms, staff still made unethical decisions about students and the buildings were falling apart.

Three years later, I was offered a one-year position with Portland Public Schools- an opportunity to transition out of Chemawa in what was a tight job market. I sought and received my supervisor's approval to take the position in October of 2014. I was hesitant about a mid-year departure and suggested that staying at Chemawa was an option, too. She encouraged me to leave.

I then received a letter from the Teacher Standards and Practices Commission, the governing body of teacher licensure for the state of Oregon, in January of 2015. It was filed by my former superintendent and I was subsequently investigated for my mid-year departure and the amount of notice I gave Chemawa. I was questioned in the spring of 2015, just as I began looking for a permanent teaching position for the 2015-16 school year.

Each application asked about the status of my teaching license, and mine was under investigation. It prevented me from getting a job for the 2015-2016 school year. My former supervisor admitted in her interview that she had assured me I could take the position without any repercussions. Ultimately, the investigation was resolved in my favor but not before hurting my career. I believe Chemawa employees filed the complaint in retaliation to prevent me from getting a new job.

I am now teaching high school at a charter school in Washington, DC and it is going really well, but because of retaliation, I have endured some very significant personal and professional hardships.

Stepping away from my personal experience, one of the biggest problems with Chemawa in my opinion is that oversight is too far removed from the local needs of the school. We, the teachers at the school, were trying to run a school with real students but were hampered by layers of bureaucracy and disconnect.

If I could make a few recommendations to improve conditions at Chemawa, I would start with the following: ensure that the supervisory chain of command has more physical proximity to the location of the schools; that supervisors are more involved in the day-to-day operations of the schools; that those in administrative positions contribute to the daily operations of the school. Our chain of command was so far removed from the school that the concerns teachers and staff raised were not experienced, observed or felt by our leadership. Furthermore, the closer links on the chain of command spent a tremendous amount of energy trying to shield leadership from some very serious issues, to the detriment and harm of students.

I would also recommend the integration of teaching faculty, dorm staff, behavioral health staff and others who can provide a better safety net to students, many of whom we know are in trouble. We must ensure that the students who are entrusted to us get the most exemplary integrative services that can be provided, including academic, behavioral, medical and any other kinds of services and supports they need.

These boarding schools were founded to “kill the Indian and save the child.” While much has changed, unfortunately, at some of these schools, we are not even saving the child. Institutions of learning for Native American youth should nurture the minds, bodies, and souls of its students. We can and must do better for our students.

Thank you for providing me with the opportunity to share my experience today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.