

**TESTIMONY
OF
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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF THE UNITED STATES**

MAY 16, 2019

Good afternoon Chairman Gallego, Ranking Member Cook, and Members of the subcommittee. Thank you for the invitation to appear today on behalf of Indian Affairs to discuss our off-reservation boarding schools.

I am Mark Cruz, a member of the Klamath Tribes in Oregon and Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy and Economic Development for Indian Affairs at the Department of the Interior.

The Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) directly operates four off-reservation boarding schools in four states: Riverside Indian School in Anadarko, Oklahoma; Sherman Indian High School in Riverside, California; Chemawa Indian School in Salem, Oregon; and Flandreau Indian School in Flandreau, South Dakota. Additionally, there are three tribally-controlled boarding schools: Sequoyah Schools in Tahlequah, Oklahoma; the Pierre Indian Learning Center in Pierre, South Dakota; and the Circle of Nations School in Wahpeton, North Dakota.

The BIE's directly operated off-reservation boarding schools were founded between 1871 and 1892. At the time, the primary goal of Indian education was assimilation of Indian children. Students were forbidden from speaking their languages and were not allowed to engage in their traditional cultural practices. However, the role of these and other BIE-funded schools was transformed with the passage of the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 (ISDEAA).

Following the passage of ISDEAA, BIE's off-reservation boarding schools were no longer in the business of assimilation; rather, their purpose was transformed to support and respect tribal self-determination and sovereignty. Today, the mission of our off-reservation boarding schools is to provide Indian children with a high-quality, culturally-relevant education and, to build within our students the knowledge, skills, and character needed to address and overcome the challenges of adulthood, while giving them the educational foundation to pursue their dreams. The BIE endeavors to provide students the necessary tools to be healthy and successful in their individual goals and life ambitions. Ultimately, we hope our students grow into positive, contributing civic members of their tribal communities and future leaders of their sovereign nations. To that end, the BIE's boarding schools focus on the foundations of quality grade school education and preparing students for college and careers in a safe and culturally-relevant setting.

Admission to each of BIE's directly operated boarding schools is open to members of federally recognized tribes. Interested families and students submit an application to enroll and, upon admission, are provided free education, including room and board, as well as travel to and from campus at the beginning and end of each school year and at winter break. Students at our schools come from many different tribes. Oftentimes they travel hundreds of miles just to attend. The reasons for attending are as diverse as the students themselves – some attend because they want a school that is culturally responsive to Indian students, others may attend to avoid difficult environments and to find a safe learning space.

In the past, the purpose of off-reservation board schools and their treatment of native students was simply inexcusable. However, those prior policies could not be more antithetical to our goals for our children today. We still face complex issues, as any institution striving to provide the best-quality education will. But, the complexities we face should not detract from our ultimate goal, which is to give our students the tools they need for success.

I would also be remiss if I did not mention the stalwart commitment of our teachers and school administrators. I know them firsthand based on my own service, as I taught at Saint Francis Indian School in South Dakota. Every day my colleagues and I gave our best efforts to provide the highest quality education with the resources available. We did everything we could to ensure students had access to the holistic support necessary to develop positive and healthy lifestyles. We built partnerships with the Indian Health Service and local first responders to ensure students had immediate access to behavioral and mental health support services should they be necessary.

Our focus at Indian Affairs is no different, we strive to support our students at all our schools. The issues native students face inevitably require direct response. I believe the best work we can do in DC for our students is to empower our teachers and administrators to address student needs as quickly as possible.

Conclusion

Chairman Gallego, Ranking Member Cook, and Members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. I look forward to working with BIE leadership as we continue to provide opportunities for Native American students. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.