

**TESTIMONY of
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BEFORE THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE
ON NATURAL RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INDIGENOUS PEOPLES
OF THE UNITED STATES
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CONCERNING "INVESTIGATING THE HEALTH AND SAFETY RISKS OF
NATIVE CHILDREN AT BIE BOARDING SCHOOLS."**

Thank you for this opportunity to speak about the serious challenges facing BIE boarding schools. I will focus my testimony on the Chemawa Boarding School in Oregon, which is the oldest continuously operating off-reservation Indian boarding school in the United States.

I am an education specialist for the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians, and am an enrolled tribal member with Siletz. Chemawa is a special place for me. Although I did not attend school there, many of my family members have worked at Chemawa – including my mother’s employment there for 30 years. I am the immediate past chair of the Chemawa School Board, serving in that position from 2015-2018. This year, my position on the school board was not renewed.

I want to thank the Subcommittee for holding this oversight hearing. It is time for an honest discussion of the school’s failures and, more importantly, how we can set Chemawa and its students on a course to success. I am not here to place blame on a political party, one Administration or another, or any individual. The problems at Chemawa are decades old and many of them are endemic in the BIE system. But all of us here – Congressmen, Administration officials, parents and friends – we bear the responsibility to make a change.

I am here because I care about the Indian children who *have* and *will* attend Chemawa.

My Tribe and the Lummi Tribe of Washington State worked together to build twin totems, carved of cedar logs from Siletz’ ancestral lands. One was to be placed in the Chemawa cemetery – where students from 100 years ago are buried, having never returned home. The other totem was to be placed at the school. The two were to face each other connecting the past and the present.

But these totems have sat in a storage garage since last Fall because the school is operated by BIE and the cemetery is owned by BIA. BIA has yet to approve the placement of the totems. The school has stopped mowing the grass because it’s BIA’s cemetery, not BIE’s. The cemetery is just one example of the total dysfunction at Chemawa. Indian Children as young as six years old are buried in the Cemetery that were brought to Chemawa to be educated. They should not be caught in the power struggle between BIA and BIE. They died alone with no family while in

the care of the Department of the Interior and their final resting place deserves to be treated with compassion and respect.

As for the living, the situation is not much better. My time on the Chemawa School Board proved that Chemawa has serious cultural problems that negatively impact students, their education and their lives. Even as chair of the board, the only tour of the school offered was of the grounds, not the school or classrooms themselves. The board was presented carefully worded Powerpoint presentations. We were not allowed to speak with students generally. Administrators occasionally hand-picked students to speak to us. But we later learned these children were given strict talking points and instructed not to deviate from them. All other students are forbidden from speaking with visitors, whether they are tribal leaders or Members of Congress.

Employees at Chemawa are there because their heart is there. But they are not respected. Unlike teachers in the public school system, those at Chemawa are employed in single, 9-month contracts – reviewed, renewed or terminated every year. This makes it easier for the Administration to fire staff. Of course, it's not even called “firing” – the technical term is “non-renewal” of their contract.

The school board is asked to approve these “non-renewals” but we were given no information about job performance and reasons for termination. This practice is highly suspect and led me to seek legal counsel from my own tribe's attorney. I refused to fire staff without reviewing the cause, at which point my own service on the school board was not renewed.

Assimilative practices continue with the current “One Chemawa” campaign. Staff are required to wear “One Chemawa” T-Shirts. Repeated complaints were met with administrative staff wearing buttons that read “No Whining”. This sends a message to staff and students that their opinions do not matter.

Despite the mandatory propaganda, staff were forbidden from wearing any form of tribal regalia at graduation. However, this policy has been changed after questioning by school board and the union. This attempt at prohibition would never have been allowed in public schools, but yet it was strictly enforced at Oregon's only all-Indian school.

The residential staff form close friendships with Chemawa's students and help the hardship of being thousands of miles away from family. Graduation is a time for dorm staff to meet the families of the students. Yet if staff wanted to attend graduation they had to take leave or check out for their half hour lunch break. Additional time to attend graduation must be taken from their vacation allotment.

Children attend Chemawa to embrace and find strength in Native beliefs and traditions. Yet cultural leaders are being asked to provide written manuals and “proper” procedure for cultural

practices such as sweats proper procedure. Yet different tribes and practitioners conduct sweats differently and it is culturally inappropriate to write this down in a manual in any way.

These are just a few of specific examples of dysfunction I have seen at Chemawa. At a higher altitude, the school struggles within a larger system that is clearly broken. Neither the BIA nor BIE have been able to provide attention, fill positions, and support the students and staff that Chemawa deserves.

It took years to fill the Education Director's position in Central Office. It took years to fill the Regional Director's job in Seattle, and even the Chemawa Superintendent's position previously sat vacant for over a year. Various individuals have been named as interim fill-ins for the positions listed above; however, these people maintained full time jobs elsewhere in BIE. They did not have the time, and in some cases the expertise, to administer in that capacity. A school without true leadership cannot continue to function. Moreover, there is no administrative review of staff on a regular basis.

There appears to be little or no oversight of Chemawa by BIE. The prior school superintendent, for example, overspent the school's budget. He was terminated from his position, but the school staff and students paid the price. Students were sent home early, staff was laid off, and then graduating students were brought back to Chemawa months later for graduation ceremonies -- with no staff.

Of course, the most serious challenge is that of student safety. Indian children have died there because of negligence, others from accidents. Suicide remains a serious risk to many there as well.

Any way you look at Chemawa – it is in total crisis. How many more media stories need to be written to raise our awareness? Do we need another GAO or Inspector General report? More letters and more responses to those letters?

I believe what we need is compassion for the students. We need respect for the teachers. Care for the land and those buried there. I ask the Congress and the Administration to work together to find a path forward. Respectfully, I offer some first steps along that path:

- BIE needs to provide staff and students a venue to register concerns about the school without fear of retaliation;
- The school board needs to be empowered to independently review the administration of Chemawa;
- Additional resources should be allocated for 24-hour mental health services to meet the needs of the students;
- More culturally-based training on historical and trauma-informed care for the students and staff should be made available;

- BIE needs to conduct oversight visits to speak confidentially with students, academic, residential and support staff on what is working at Chemawa and where improvements can be made. These staff work on a daily basis with students and understand the needs of the students.

I hope these suggestions are helpful. Even though I am no longer on the school board, I stand ready to help in any way to set Chemawa back on track. Thank you for inviting me here to speak today.