



**Written Testimony of the National Indian Education Association**

**Tiyana Casey**

**House Committee on Natural Resources**

**Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States**

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Chair Gallego, Ranking Member Hern and members of the subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to speak to you today. Niix pachwai t'aawxma. Inash wanisha Tiyana Richelle Casey. Kush wash nash Shitaiktnei. Kwała matash wiyawawi chna ku yiktsha Inmi snwitki. Good afternoon everyone. My name is Tiyana Richelle Casey. I am from Warm Springs. Ancestors through my father, they were light skin people from a far away land – meaning I am also of German and Irish descent. The language I am speaking is the Ichiskiin dialect of Sahaptin; a traditional language of my people.

Today, I speak on behalf of the National Indian Education Association, the most inclusive national organization advocating for culturally relevant educational opportunities for American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians. Through my testimony this afternoon, I seek to share my experiences working with Native students at Chemawa Indian School and urge Congress to address ongoing risks impacting students at federally operated boarding schools like Chemawa.

Native education is a bipartisan effort rooted in the federal trust responsibility to tribal governments. Congress must uphold this trust responsibility to ensure the development and

maintenance of safe and healthy learning environments. Economic growth has placed pressure on educational systems to produce graduates who are competitive in global markets. However, many schools serving Native students on and near reservations or rural and isolated areas continue to fall short of fulfilling the obligation promised to our tribal citizens decades ago. Nowhere is this duty more critical than at federally operated boarding schools that disproportionately serve vulnerable Native students, including low income and foster care students, many of which suffer in silence. Students who attend such schools are looking for a safe, secure, and education opportunity rich experience protected from uncertain environments in their home communities.

From August 2016 – February 2017, I had the honor of teaching an IHS funded suicide prevention class called “Community Leadership,” which was provided through a joint community partnership with my employer at Chemawa Indian School. With curricula focused on culturally specific trauma-informed care, historic trauma, healthy relationships, outdoor science, traditions and culture, and experiential learning, our new class offered the only culture-based education option available during school hours. Through this program, our students were working with elders and community members to address historic and ongoing trauma with the vision of reestablishing the historic Chemawa talking circle, which was forcibly removed when the school was established. Unfortunately, my students never had the opportunity to see this historic circle reestablished.

In February 2017, our program suffered unexpected budget cuts to our IHS funded grant. At the time, I was not adequate time to say goodbye to all of my students and was forced to vacate the premises within three business days notice. In the following days, countless students reached out to me with confusion and concern regarding the loss of the program. As the only

class utilizing culturally relevant trauma-informed care to address student needs, the loss of this class disproportionately impacted vulnerable students.

In preparation for my testimony today, I spoke with a number of my former students to gather their thoughts regarding their education at Chemawa. All students felt Chemawa failed to prepare them for postsecondary success and exposed them to ongoing trauma that ultimately contributed to low self-confidence and mental health issues. In light of these experiences and conversations, I would like to offer the following recommendations to improve the health and safety of students at the school:

- **Provide Guidance Regarding Student Discipline and Expulsion**

I had the unique opportunity to teach most students in the school since each student was required to take my class unless they were receiving services through IHS or were under strict disciplinary action. I usually only had up to 300 of the 350 total students in attendance during a given week. When a student was unexpectedly not present, this typically indicated that they were to be expelled within the coming week, an occurrence that became frequent enough that it caused anxiety. Harsh policies often resulted in students being sent home to unsafe home environments for minor infractions, such as skipping class. Zero tolerance policies for student pregnancies or mental health crises, including suicidal ideations and attempts, exacerbated expulsion rates and resulted in students hiding physical and mental health needs in order to continue their education. Such policies have resulted in terrible consequences, including the death of multiple students when they returned home after being expelled prematurely and even after graduation. Congressional oversight and guidance regarding these policies is critical to ensuring that Native students have access to the health care they need without severe consequences.

- **Ensure Culturally Responsive Trauma-Informed Student Care and Educator Training**

Educators and staff at Chemawa remain ill-equipped to address the historical trauma and unique cultural and academic needs of Native students. Due to low numbers of Native educators, very few teachers, staff, and administrators have the relevant cultural knowledge or background to support students, who do not see themselves reflected in their teachers or in their classrooms. From education models that prioritize Eurocentric interpretations of pan-indigeneity to teachers that impose Christian religious judgements on Native spiritual traditions, students feel alienated and misunderstood in the classroom. This practice was exemplified by the “One Chemawa” speech provided the administrative leadership each day. Administrators banned certain regalia and bandanas with designs from particular tribes on the basis they had connections to gang symbolism. One student I spoke with recalled a reflection paper on body image in which they wrote that they would feel more self-confident if they saw more of their indigenous identity in the classroom. At the time, this student was told “the school is not going to change that just for you.” This is unacceptable. Native students must have access to Native teachers and educators that have the cultural training and tools to support their unique needs in the classroom and beyond.

- **Form Community and Student Advisory Boards**

Student engagement in their own education has the potential to support students as they define and achieve holistic, academic, and community success. During my time at Chemawa, many students often felt voiceless regarding the school culture, programs, and services. Those that did speak out often came to fear retaliation from the administration. Students feared sharing personal details or concerns with faculty members, as this often resulted in a public call over the intercom to the office and disciplinary action. This contributed to an

environment that discouraged students from being open or trusting and resulted in many feeling criminalized for their unique cultures, challenges, and stories. In particular, many students felt a keen lack of support from administrators that threatened severe consequences for students who walked out in support of family members during protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline. Though administrators did not act on these threats and instead rewarded students that remained silent during the student walkouts, staff members told students that they did not have constitutional rights to free speech because Chemawa is a federally operated school. From voicing concerns regarding their families to school policies and procedures, our students have powerful voices that highlight critical challenges and opportunities to improve school services and support. By instituting a community, and student advisory board, Chemawa would support student agency to build a school community that reflects the students served.

In closing, I would like to once again thank the Subcommittee for this opportunity to provide testimony and urge Congress to take appropriate steps to address ongoing challenges to student safety, health, and success at federal boarding schools. A fundamental cultural and social shift in the nature of Chemawa has the potential to create an environment where Native students can thrive. Our students deserve no less. For questions regarding this testimony, please email or call Diana Cournoyer, NIEA Interim Executive Director, at [dcournoyer@niea.org](mailto:dcournoyer@niea.org) or 202-544-7290.