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Congress Presses BIE Director For Answers On Chemawa, Native Education

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Oregon's federal boarding school for Native Americans drew further scrutiny Wednesday at a hearing on Capitol Hill.

Bureau of Indian Education Director Tony Dearman appeared before the House Committee on Education and the Workforce to answer questions about Chemawa Indian School, budget cuts and his agency's efforts to reform long-ailing programs for Native education across the country.

Oregon Democratic Congresswoman Suzanne Bonamici pressed Dearman on Chemawa.

"Parents are worried about the safety of the school," she said. "Local tribes are worried that students are not meeting academic standards and that teachers and support staff are not prepared to support students affected by trauma."

In November, Bonamici and fellow members of the Oregon delegation sent a list of questions to the Bureau of Indian Affairs following an OPB investigation (<https://www.opb.org/news/series/chemawa/>) that revealed health and safety shortcomings, questionable diplomas and a culture of secrecy and retaliation at the Salem boarding school.

“I’m deeply concerned that Chemawa’s students continue to be subjected to significant risk factors that threaten their safety, well-being and ability to learn and be successful,” Bonamici said.

“We need to know that the Bureau of Indian Education is taking this issue seriously, and what is being done to support Chemawa.”

Dearman said responses are coming to the Oregon delegation’s questions. He also announced plans for a meeting at Chemawa this month to address known problems at off-reservation boarding schools.

FULL COVERAGE



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Chemawa Indian School (</news/series/chemawa/>)

Chemawa is supposed to offer an academic home preparing students for college or careers in a safe and stable place. But an OPB investigation found the school is breaking its promise.

Bureau of Indian Education.

“Expulsions, treatment, there’s a lot of things that are on the agenda, that we’re going to cover,” Dearman said. “As a system what we’ve done in the past, and again, we’re really starting to work on this, we hire principals and leaders and we give them a key and say ‘go make great changes, good luck.’ But there’s no support.”

The BIE is currently in the midst of a nationwide reorganization.

The bureau’s 183 schools post lower reading and math scores than public schools by double digits. Their graduation rate is 53 percent — almost 30 points below the national average. The Government Accountability Office has found numerous problems in management of the BIE, and recently placed it and other tribal programs on its “high risk list,” which focuses on government programs especially vulnerable to fraud, waste, abuse and mismanagement.

Meanwhile, the Trump administration has plans for drastic cuts to Native education and other services for tribal communities. Trump’s proposed 2019 budget would cut \$462 million out of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and





Trump’s budget does call for an increase in infrastructure spending and an additional \$400 million for Indian Health Services to help combat opioid addiction.

“We’re excited about the president’s budget, and I’ll tell you why: the condition of our schools,” BIE Director Dearman told the committee. “In the budget, infrastructure is a critical piece, and that’s something we need across our school system.”

“Now, you’re excited about the budget. My understanding is the budget cuts BIE funding \$143 million, about 16 percent. Is that right?” asked Rep. Bobby Scott, D-Virginia.

“I’d have to review the numbers,” Dearman said, acknowledging it sounded right.

“Would you have been more excited about an increase rather than a decrease?” Scott asked.

“Congressman, we’ve all had to make a lot of tough decisions throughout the Department of Interior,” Dearman said.

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