

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 25, 2021

Mark Greenblatt
Inspector General
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW - Mail Stop 4428
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Inspector General Greenblatt:

In July 2015, the Office of Inspector General for the U.S. Department of the Interior released two reports on academic achievement and violence prevention policies at the Chemawa Indian School, located in Salem, Oregon. The review of academic achievement policies determined that “the Chemawa Indian School was not properly assessing the academic needs of its students,” and that the school was “unable to effectively prioritize its resources to ensure the successful educational achievement of its student population.”¹ The review of violence prevention policies noted that the school had made significant progress on those policies since the DOI IG’s prior reviews in 2008 and 2014 but also determined the school’s measures were merely “adequate” to prevent violence against both students and teachers at the school.²

In the six years that have passed since your office’s review, we have continued to receive complaints about alleged financial mismanagement at the school. These allegations have been difficult to evaluate due to the school’s opaque financial practices.³ Our offices have repeatedly asked school officials for basic financial data.⁴ To date, we have not received a satisfactory response to those requests. In response to questions from OPB, the Bureau of Indian Education acknowledged that there is oversight on all the expenditures of school budgets but not detailed financial audits.⁵

While shocking, this admission appears to be consistent with findings from the Government Accountability Office, which determined in 2013, “BIE lacks clear procedures for decision-making, which has resulted in it acting outside the scope of its authority, undermining school

¹ [Office of Inspector General, U.S. department of the Interior, Review of Academic Achievement at the Chemawa Indian School, July 10, 2015, C-IS-BIE-0026-2014](#)

² [Office of Inspector General, U.S. department of the Interior, Review of Violence Prevention at the Chemawa Indian School, July 26, 2015, C-IS-BIE-0025-2014](#)

³ [Rob Manning and Tony Schick, "Behind The Fence: Chemawa's Culture Of Secrecy," OPB, Nov. 27, 2017](#)

⁴ [Rob Manning, "To Chart Improvements At Chemawa, Oregon Congressional Reps Call for Map," OPB, July 28, 2019](#)

⁵ [Rob Manning and Tony Schick, "Behind The Fence: Chemawa's Culture Of Secrecy," OPB, Nov. 27, 2017](#)

officials' ability to assess student performance under ESEA and potentially affecting their compliance with federal regulations.”⁶ In a follow up 2014 report, GAO further determined, “that BIE does not adequately monitor school expenditures using written procedures or a risk-based monitoring approach, contrary to federal internal control standards.”⁷ We understand that in response to the 2013 GAO report, BIE announced in 2018 a new Strategic Direction that included implementation of a new financial and program oversight policy.⁸ However, our offices have continued to receive complaints about alleged misuse of financial resources at the school.

Our Congressional delegation has worked in good faith with school officials and BIE to obtain answers on how the school is addressing these issues. However, after several years, we remain deeply concerned that we cannot receive satisfactory answers to the most basic questions related to the school's accounting practices. We are therefore requesting that your office update its 2015 review of the school's policies to determine whether and to what extent any progress has been made to increase academic achievement and to answer the following additional questions:

1. According to BIE's 2018 Strategic Direction, the Bureau has implemented a new financial and program oversight policy to identify high risk schools, conduct monitoring visits of and provide technical assistance to those high risk schools, and to conduct quarterly financial reviews of current school year financials for each school:
 - a. Has BIE implemented its new financial and program oversight policy?
 - b. Has BIE identified Chemawa as a high risk school that requires additional BIE monitoring?
 - c. For each fiscal year from 2018 to 2021, to what extent has BIE audited the Chemawa school's annual budget or conducted quarterly financial reviews?
 - d. If no audits have been conducted, what financial oversight has BIE conducted?

2. BIE has previously confirmed that Chemawa's school board plays an important role in conducting financial oversight of the school's administration.⁹ However, multiple former board members have complained that their attempts to conduct oversight were outright ignored by school staff.¹⁰ The school has also failed to answer basic questions about the board's current composition and responsibilities and has not made school board meeting minutes public for several years.¹¹ BIE recently confirmed to Senator Wyden's office that the Chemawa school board has two active board members and is in the process of

⁶ [GAO-13-774—INDIAN AFFAIRS: Better Management and Accountability Needed to Improve Indian Education, September 2013](#)

⁷ [GAO-15-539T—INDIAN AFFAIRS: Further Actions on GAO Recommendations Needed to Address Systemic Management Challenges with Indian Education, April 2015](#)

⁸ [Bureau of Indian Education, Strategic Direction 2018-2023, Aug. 16, 2018](#)

⁹ [Rob Manning and Tony Schick, "Behind The Fence: Chemawa's Culture Of Secrecy," OPB, Nov. 27, 2017](#)

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ [Chemawa School Board Minutes, accessed Oct. 12, 2021](#)

making several replacement appointments but claimed it could not disclose the names of those individuals.¹²

- a. Does Chemawa currently have a functioning school board?
- b. What is its composition and what role does it play in conducting financial oversight of the school's administration?

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter. If you have any questions about this request, please contact Bobby Ahern in Senator Wyden's office at Bobby_Ahern@wyden.senate.gov.

Sincerely,



Ron Wyden
United States Senator



Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator

¹² BIE email to Wyden staff, Oct. 8, 2021