

Senators seek review of Chemawa Indian School policies

By Dean Rhodes

Smoke Signals editor

Oregon Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley asked on Monday, Oct. 25, that the inspector general for the U.S. Department of the Interior answer questions about Chemawa Indian School's accounting practices and update the department's 2015 review of the Salem school's policies to determine whether progress has been made to increase student academic achievement.

Wyden and Merkley's letter noted that the Office of the Inspector General released two reports in July 2015 on academic achievement

and violence prevention policies at Chemawa, concluding then that the school “was not properly assessing the academic needs of its students” and was “unable to effectively prioritize its resources to ensure the successful educational achievement of its student population.”

The 2015 review, the senators wrote, determined the school had made significant progress on violence prevention policies since previous reviews in 2008 and 2014, but also that the school's measures were merely "adequate" to prevent violence against students and teachers at the school.

“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,” the senators wrote to Interior Inspector General Mark Greenblatt. “These allegations have been difficult to evaluate due to the school’s opaque financial practices. Our offices have repeatedly asked school officials for basic financial data. To date, we have not received a satisfactory response to those requests. In response to questions from Oregon Public Broadcasting, the Bureau of Indian Education acknowledged that there is oversight on all the expenditures of school budgets, but not detailed financial audits.”

Wyden and Merkley wrote that those findings about accounting at Chemawa appear consistent with findings from the Government Accountability Office, which determined in 2013 that the Bureau of Indian Education lacks clear procedures for decision-making and that in turn resulted in the bureau acting outside the scope of authority and undermining school officials' ability to assess student performance.

The senators also said that the Government Accountability Office also determined in a 2014 follow-up report that the bureau doesn't adequately monitor school expenditures using written procedures or a risk-based monitoring approach, contrary

to federal internal control standards. Even though the Bureau of Indian Education responded in 2018 with a new financial and program oversight policy, the senators said their offices continue to receive complaints about alleged misuse of financial resources.

“Our congressional delegation has worked in good faith with school officials and BIE to obtain answers on how the school is addressing these issues,” the senators wrote. “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.”

Wyden and Merkley asked Greenblatt to update Interior's 2015 review of the school's policies to determine whether and to what extent any progress has been made to increase academic achievement.

Chemawa, located in Salem, is the oldest of four remaining federally run, off-reservation boarding schools in the country, having opened 1885. It had 337 students enrolled in the 2020-21 school year.

It has also come into renewed focus after new Interior Department Secretary Deb Haaland announced in June that the U.S. government would investigate the deaths of Native American children at government-run boarding schools and assess the lasting societal and cultural consequences of the Indian boarding school policy. ■

Childers worked for the Tribe from 1992 to 2009

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associate degree from Chemeketa Community College and then a bachelor's degree in organizational management from George Fox University in 1999, utilizing the Tribe's educational programs.

Childers worked for the Tribe from 1992 to 2009, beginning as an administrative assistant and ending as the Member Services manager. After taking a year off for personal reasons, she began working for PERS in 2010 as an intake and review manager, managing a staff of 30.

She originally applied for the deferred compensation manager position six years ago, but wasn't selected for the job. When the manager announced he would be retiring earlier this year, Childers talked to him about the position and what it entailed, gaining useful information about the interview process.

"When I was at the Tribe, I really enjoyed working with the membership and my intake job was only interacting with staff," she says. "I really missed interacting with the people I was serving and wanted to do it again."

This time, Childers was selected from several other candidates for the job.

"Debby's experience and leadership skills well suit her for this position," Chief Executive Officer Sam Paris said in an all-employee e-mail. "Please join me in congratulating Debby in this new role."

Childers is enjoying getting to know her employees, clients and advisory board members.

"I am also looking forward to conferences and traveling again, seeing what I can learn from managers of different programs and also getting more participants involved and contributing to their plans," she says. "Trying to reach out to stakeholders and get them involved will be one of my biggest goals."

The deferred compensation manager administers the state's deferred compensation plan for all state employees and employees of local government who choose to participate. Duties include man-

agement of customer services, financial transactions and contractual oversight of the record-keeping services.

Currently, only 43 percent of state employees contribute into the plan, which is similar to an IRA, so one of Childers' main goals will be to increase it by improving education and outreach to all new employees, and encouraging them to participate.

Her biggest challenge so far has been working remotely and not having the opportunity to meet anyone besides fellow staff members.

“Just learning the job while being remote, there is a gap and it makes it harder, but I have a wonderful staff who have helped me learn, and a very supportive boss as well.”

As a young mother, Childers never imagined herself where she is today and credits the Tribe's various programs for much of her success.

“The Tribe’s Education Department is just amazing,” Childers says. “We are so lucky as Tribal members to have this and I am very grateful for the Tribe as a whole. I wouldn’t be where I am without them. It would have been hard to go to school if hadn’t had that support.”

She says the most rewarding part about completing her education and having a career is being a role model for her children, nieces, nephews and grandchildren.

"They see where education has taken me and what it takes to get a good job," Childers says. "I would tell anyone who is struggling not to give up. It's OK to take a little time off, but you got to go back and finish. Think about what you want for your future and not just for today. ... Take advantage of the resources we have as Tribal members."

In her spare time, Childers enjoys “anything crafty” and spending time with family. She is the daughter of Tribal Elder and past Tribal Council member Candy Robertson, and stepfather Jess Robertson; and sister of current Tribal Council member Michael Cherry, past Tribal Council member Angie Blackwell and Diana Robertson. She has four children, Andrea, 36, Jeromey, 32, Raymond, 21, and Edi, 19, as well as seven grandchildren. ■

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