

July 22, 2024

Virginia Foxx  
Chairwoman  
House Committee on Education and the Workforce

Bruce Westerman  
Chairman  
House Committee on Natural Resources

Burgess Owens  
Chairman  
Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Development

Paul A. Gosar, D.D.S.  
Chairman  
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations  
House Committee on Natural Resources

Honorable Committee Members:

My name is Lexie Follette, I am a veteran who served in the United States Marine Corps and the Army. I am also the widow of a Navy veteran and mother of four children.

I am an enrolled member of the Ft. Peck Assiniboiné and Sioux Tribes of Montana and my late husband is an enrolled member of the Sisseton Wahpeton Sioux Tribe of South Dakota. All my children are enrolled tribal members.

I am submitting this letter to the record of the 23 July 2024, Congressional hearing investigating the conduct and actions of the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) following numerous complaints from students and employees at the Haskell Indian Nations University located in Lawrence, KS. This submission is to inform the committee that the BIE also did not respond adequately, ensure student safety, uphold policies or prevent whistleblower retaliation from school leadership at the Flandreau Indian Boarding School in South Dakota.

In the 2022-2023 school year, my daughter attended her senior year at the Flandreau Indian School, in honor of her father and I as we are both graduated alumni of this school. During this time, my daughter and multiple students made me aware of alarming conduct and inappropriate behaviors of employees in leadership positions. I submitted numerous complaints on their behalf which resulted in an investigation which did not improve the environment or the behaviors from the school leadership. By the end of the year, I learned nearly every student who contacted me had been diagnosed and medicated for depression and anxiety while attending the school.

October 17, 2023, I submitted a 98 paged complaint to the Department of the Interior Office of the Inspector General on behalf of the students from the previous school year, former students, current employees and former employees. I sent a courtesy copy to Madame Secretary Deb Haaland and recently sent a copy to Mr. Tony Dearman.

The complaint cited many issues, but the most concerning safety issue were the depression and anxiety diagnosis and treatments of minors without notifying the parents or obtaining their consent to chemically alter their child's brain chemistry. Furthermore, students were not monitored for side effects or changes in behaviors or received monthly follow ups while on these medications. This is why parental consent and involvement is crucial because they know their child best and would notice changes that rotating staff would not. Instead, students were written up if they refused to take the medications and there was no consideration was given in disciplinary actions, suspensions or expulsions as to how these medications may have contributed. The school also failed to respond to parents requesting 504 plans and failed to provide the medically prescribed ACL surgeries for two students injured at the school. One of these students had an obvious limp because of this injury, however, the school failed to provide her accommodations.

Another student's family doctor had taken the student off the depression and anxiety medications once she returned home. The doctor mentioned this was the second situation she had encountered regarding the same medications, from the same place where the parents were neither notified nor consented. When the student returned the following school year, the parent informed the school they did not want their student on these medications but shortly thereafter, the student reported to the parent that the school had put the student back onto the medications and were threatening a "health and safety violation" write up for refusing to take the medicines.

The BIE recently launched a mental health hotline similar to the VA's suicide prevention crisis hotline, however this places the well-being and mental health of the students the BIE is entrusted with into the hands of the student to call and does not mention if the policy if an employee is identified by a student as the source of their mental distress.

The DOI OIG's response to the 98 paged complaint (Case OI-HQ-23-0867-R) stated it would be best addressed by the BIE and referred the complaint to the BIE for review and action deemed appropriate giving the BIE 90 days to provide the OIG with a response of their findings.

When the BIE's HR conducted this investigation, students reported several concerns with the generalities of the questioning leaving many students confused by the investigation, namely first year students who had no knowledge of the previous year and many others were under the impression the investigation was about bullying by other students. General questions warranting a yes or no answer such as do you feel safe here is providing inaccurate data. I sent a letter to Mr. Dearman regarding the students and parents' concerns, which he forwarded to the HR Director Jackie Shamblin to respond. When he did not respond I forwarded the email chain to the DOI Special Agent and cc'd Mr. Shamblin that I wanted the no response and email thread added to the DOI OIG case file.

These complaints and the complaints from the Haskell University are not due to a lack of policies, rather they are stemming from the lack of holding employees in school leadership positions accountable when they are reported repeatedly for policy violations. The BIE also must be held accountable for not ensuring school leadership are meeting the standards and for not addressing the repeated reports of many BIE schools reporting toxic work environments and red flags of leadership issues.

Last school year, Vice Principal Sheryl Burkhart and Home Living Director, Jamerson Ferrell at the Flandreau Indian School went against their first line officer's directive to not take away cell phones by changing the student handbook. Vice Principal Burkhart abused this rule by confiscating cell phones overnight and suspending students who did not put their phone in their lockers during school hours. These are the type of red flag behaviors that are inadequately addressed by the BIE, which only encourages other questionable behaviors, such as Mr. Ferrell appointing the school's boiler operator as a deciding panel member of a student's expulsion appeal. The question remains of many other students has the boiler operator decided on the fate of their education.

Making more policies will not solve any issues if employees are not held accountable for disregarding previous BIE policies, procedures and directives.

The complaints from the Haskell Indian Nations University, Chemawa, Riverside, St. Stephens and more, now including the Flandreau Indian School are a result of the same source; poor leadership allowed to benefit regardless because of poor oversights, failure to follow through and follow up once complaints have been identified and inadequate accountability.

*"When a problem occurs once it is an incident, when it occurs twice it becomes a coincident, but when the same problem occurs more than three times, now it's on purpose."*

*CW4 S. Ryan, Army Retired*

I thank the committee members for your time and attention on this most important matter.

Respectfully,

Lexie Follette  
USMC/Army

