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BEFORE THE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS
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Good morning, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today about school safety in Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) funded schools. As you know, in February of this year, the Office of Inspector General issued an evaluation of school violence prevention measures. We conducted this review to determine the quality of school safety measures in preventing violence against both students and staff, from both internal and external threats.

Overall, our evaluation revealed many indicators of potential violence, deficiencies in school policies aimed at preventing violence, and substantial deficiencies in preventative and emergency safety procedures. As a result, many schools are dangerously unprepared to prevent violence and ensure the safety of students and staff.

In March of 2005, a 16-year-old student shot and killed himself and seven others at Red Lake High School, a public school on the Red Lake Indian reservation, indicating that school violence also threatens Indian Country.

Perhaps one of the most critical methods of deterring on-campus violence lies in the overall awareness, understanding and ability to detect indicators of violence by school staff and administrators. In May of 2002, the U.S. Secret Service issued a report analyzing 37 school-based attacks, and found that most attackers display indicators of violence in advance of an incident. The Red Lake shooter was known to have created animation depicting extremely violent acts of death and elaborate drawings of people being shot or hanged.

During our visit to Chemawa Indian School in Oregon, we saw similarly violent drawings inside a student's dormitory room. A portion of one wall was covered with depictions of a beheading, stabbing, and a body hanging from a tree. Chemawa school officials were unaware of the violent depictions until we brought this to their attention. A school official said the student should have been referred for counseling, and that dormitory checks were not being adequately performed or the artwork would already have been removed.

Indicators of violence, such as the Chemawa graphic drawings, are reminders that deadly acts of violence can strike even seemingly peaceful schools. Teachers, administrators and other staff should be trained to understand and address all indicators of violence. We found, however, that

training in basic violence prevention such as anger management, bully prevention, and gang awareness was not provided at many of the schools we visited. Additionally, staff members at some schools stated they were not trained on how to recognize gang indicators.

Tracking violence and/or violent trends within Indian schools is particularly problematic because no functional, comprehensive reporting or tracking system exists. While we found few statistics on violence indicators at Indian schools, we found a wealth of supporting anecdotal evidence during our visits. For example, we found confiscated weapons, signs of gang activity, and substance abuse.

Weapons end up on campuses as a result of numerous inadequate physical security features. For example, almost all of Sherman Indian School's 360 students live on campus, and many take air transportation to get there. School officials said that they rely on airport security to find dangerous items in students' luggage and do not conduct contraband searches upon their arrival. Airport security, however, allows items in checked baggage that the school would not want on campus. Only one of the schools we visited used a walk-through metal detector.

Given the fact that Indian communities suffer from high violent crime rates, maintaining a secure campus is as important as keeping weapons off campus. We identified an array of physical security deficiencies in areas such as security fencing, camera surveillance systems, visitor procedures, and security guards.

More than 80 percent of the schools we visited did not have adequate fencing, allowing for the potential of unauthorized individuals to enter the campuses. At White Shield School in rural North Dakota, there is no fencing or even a security guard. In March of 2008, the school locked down for a possible student with a gun; police took 30 minutes to arrive after they were called. Fortunately, the situation was resolved peacefully.

Almost all the schools had operable surveillance cameras, but many of the systems had flaws. Most schools, for instance, did not operate their systems in real time, missing out on the possibility of using this valuable tool to prevent or diffuse incidents of violence. Instead, the cameras were only used to review past footage and identify the instigators of suspicious activities or violence.

We found that every school we visited had a designated visitor entrance. But a large number of schools did not require visitors to sign in or show identification. More than half did not require visitors to wear identifying badges. At one school, we purposely bypassed the designated visitor entrance, wandered the school grounds, and were able to approach several classrooms without being stopped or questioned by staff.

The presence of gang indicators in Indian schools we visited was undeniable. Gang letters and figures were scrawled on the exterior walls, bathroom stalls, and inside the dormitories of almost half of the schools we visited. One official at a school in Arizona estimated that 75 percent of the school's students were in gangs. Other schools expressed concern over students whose parents were active gang members. School officials at a school near Seattle, Washington said that community gang

activity had led to the deaths of four or five former students and the incarceration of several more for gang-related drive-by shootings.

Many schools acknowledged the need to be diligent in recognizing and eliminating gang indicators on campus, and have done so using a variety of available gang prevention programs, such as The GREAT Program, Gang Resistance Education and Training, an in-class curriculum taught by a law enforcement officers aimed at preventing school delinquency, violence, and gang involvement.

Drugs and alcohol also cause significant problems in Indian Country. Alcohol abuse is the “single biggest challenge” facing Indian communities and police departments, according to a 2001 National Institute of Justice report. Child abuse, domestic violence, assault, driving under the influence, sale of alcohol to minors, and neglect tend to be byproducts of substance abuse.

Site visits revealed that even though drug and alcohol abuse may not run rampant inside school walls, they are community issues that affect students at school. Local law enforcement and school officials confirmed that drug dealers live within a half mile of three different schools we visited. One school official told us that students could easily access drugs and acknowledged many entry points for drugs to reach campus.

Finally, most of these schools are simply not prepared for an emergency. We reviewed emergency plans at almost all schools visited. We requested that each school run the emergency drills according to plan to identify any weaknesses. We noted numerous deficiencies in schools’ abilities to run the drills due to high staff turnover, ineffective intercom systems, and inadequate classroom security. Lockdown drills we observed revealed that most schools had classroom doors that could only be locked from the outside. As a result, staff needed to go outside to lock doors with keys, exposing staff and students to potential danger.

These are some of the issues we uncovered in our visits to schools throughout Indian Country. Our February report on school violence was preceded by a report in August 2008 addressing preparedness to address violence in BIE operated schools. Our findings were not surprisingly similar.

Mr. Chairman, that concludes my testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions the committee might have. Thank you for the opportunity to appear here today.