

**Testimony for HB2224 Relating to the Emergency in Student Wellness in Oregon:  
*directing Department of Education to distribute grants to improve social,  
emotional and health needs of Oregon students***

My name is *Ga lo Nutley Skildigado*. I am born for the Wild Potato Clan of Cherokee Nation of Eastern Oklahoma. My settler name is Joshua James Vann. I am offering testimony for HB2224, the need to fund the mental and behavioral health of Oregon's school children. I am living the consequences of how Oregon has chosen to defund or underfund nearly every service that provides support, healing and stability to children's identities. This is an emergency that is stunting and destroying young lives. I support passage of this bill.

Identity is an issue of paramount consequence when participating in a cooperative society. I am in an environment populated by men who have struggled our entire lives with our own identities and place in community. Oregon's prisons are largely populated with Oregon's impoverished sons. Men who, as children, suffered the symptoms of poverty. Parents working only to stay poor, domestic violence, substance abuse, sexual violence, and an absence of positive role modeling are ubiquitous in our personal childhood testimonies. I live with many non-violent men who should not be in prison.

Minors are the worlds' most oppressed population. They are exclusively subjected to the terms and influences of whatever adult is in closest physical proximity. This poses salient problems when communities lose this awareness or do not regulate youth accessibility to safe adult role models. As adults we cannot always bring our best selves into the sacred space of youth stewardship. It is necessary to place focused resources on serving the emotional needs of young people in order that they develop self-affirming identities.

In American government we measure effort, care, and importance in dollars. Educators who teach adults in higher education institutions make the most money. High school educators make less. Educators who work with the most vulnerable students make the least. This is a resounding message that children are the least important people among us. This is what happens when intentions are valued more than outcomes. We know children are important in our thoughts. We treat ourselves as more important in our actions. This simple truth contributes to social messaging to all youth that they are not worth our best.

Parents of means mitigate this messaging by purchasing opportunities for their children. Their kids are able to develop healthy sense of self through social, educational and other opportunities. Impoverished families cannot do this. Key supports such as counseling and mentoring are out of reach to those of modest means. Competent behavioral health services in Oregon's schools represent a literal lifeline. Yet: mental health imbalances are most often left unaddressed until they manifest in externally harmful ways.

In Oregon's schools, youth of color who fall out of balance are far more likely to end up where I am. The ACLU of Oregon's "*School to Prison Pipeline*" report shows native youth are more likely than white youth to be suspended or expelled for the same behaviors. Oregon is an especially hostile state for Native Americans. Our children live in homes experiencing poverty rates triple that of whites, incomes half of whites, unemployment 70% higher than whites, victimization by violent crime 250% higher than whites, and 20% of all natives in Oregon face hunger, rather "food instability", on a regular basis. Competent, third party monitored behavioral and mental health services must be built into every child's school experience. Student-centric

advocate/navigators need to be present. When students manifest uncooperative social behaviors, a student's behavioral health advocate who is imbued with the insolence to chart the path forward, should determine administrative responses armed with community relationships and resources.

From behind bars I have documented the willfully inaccurate reporting of American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) Adult in Custody (AIC) population demographics on part of the Oregon Department of Corrections (ODOC) by using law enforcement data system (LEDS) statistics. LEDS information is collected by county sheriff's deputies at jail booking. Adults detained are not asked their race at booking. Sheriff's deputies guess detainee race after looking at them. Although AI/AN students, who are documented as the most harshly-treated in Oregon schools, show the strongest correlation to criminal justice system involvement, population proportions based on our incarcerated community counts strongly suggest the problem is 2-4 times more severe than the ACLU's report reflects.

In the criminal justice system nationally, 82% of juvenile cases filed in adult court involved youth of color. In adult facilities youth of color are sexually assaulted five times more often, commit suicide eight times more often, and become victims of weapon-involved assaults 50% more than youth held in juvenile facilities. In Oregon, Native youth are 3.1 times more likely to be charged by police for an illegal behavior than white youth. In Multnomah County in 2007, 5% of white youth were charged by police for illegal behaviors, while 8.4% of Native youth were charged. In 2008 3.5% of youth were charged, while 8.5% of native youth were charged. In 2009 2.9% of white youth were charged while 9% of native youth were being charged. Also, in 2009, Native American youth were charged by police at 4.6% nationally, showing that it is worse to be a NA youth in Oregon. As charges for white youth drop, charges for our youth rise and more of our children become vulnerable to institutional racism, placing them in facilities to be raped, assaulted and to attempt suicide.

We would not do this to your children, but you are doing this to ours. I now live with the men who were once those children and now we are imprisoned together trying to reclaim positive identities. We seek a justice that heals, not one that creates an industry justified by caging the bodies of brown boys and girls. My elders taught me that I am responsible for the safety of every child I come into contact with. I pray that you learn this message too.

Signed,

Ga lo Vann  
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Enrolled member of Cherokee Nation of Eastern Oklahoma  
*Transcribed by Rebecca Whetstine, Project WIT*  
*Nothing added nor taken away*