

Testimony in Support of HB2224: *recognize and fund the emergency in mental health and wellness for Oregon's school children*

My name is *Ageya Achili Diglihi*. I am the mother of *Ga-lo Nutley Skildigado*. My settler name is Rebecca Whetstine. I am here to offer support to HB2224, with a call to recognize and fund the emergency in the mental health of our children, and, in particular, indigenous children. You have heard the sobering report from Ga-lo Vann. I want to follow up with a short rendering of what our life has been like.

First, I want you to know that I believe in education, in school. It is one of my Sacred. School saved my life when I was growing up in a deeply problematic, fragmented family that has not improved to this day. Every year at least one teacher took particular notice and allowed me to bond with them. Unlike the schools of today, I was able to plunge myself into art, music, athletics, theater, science, writing and more. Our schools were not rich, lacked basic science infrastructure for instance, but they were funded. Upon returning to Oregon, I was unable to comprehend through my years of raising my son without family or community, unable to comprehend that sports must be separately purchased via leagues; tutoring is largely lacking; the arts depend on kids running on tracks for family dollar donations. And: we are invisible to the community.

I raised my gentle, willing-hearted, charismatic and bright little boy alone. We came back to Oregon from a largely-native context. Our schoolbooks and media had nobody like us, but the streets and shops were filled with people who could understand us. I had community all around me and raised my baby in my community work. In Oregon, it is required to go find the community in certain spaces at certain times. For a single mother working 2-3 jobs, this can be difficult.

In Oregon and Oklahoma, I had no family backup as they were unhealthy and bedeviled by their own challenges. I fled OK when he was three, as his father was my batterer, became my stalker. Despite that, my son was deeply bonded to his father and his father to him. His father who adored him, has completely abandoned him. To be abandoned by his father devastated my beautiful son. He wept daily and at length with a broken heart. I could only hold him, take his anguish inside me, and reassure him I would not abandon him in this process only he could do. This deep wisdom of profound loss was my son's at age three. And still he remained gentle, kind, and willing-hearted.

I've worked two and three jobs all of my years raising him. I did not have much time to make friends, nor the space to solve my own character defects and traumas, to get hooked up to the diaspora-style Portland community. During the nineties, schools were being stripped of art, music, sports and all other identity- and peer-building programming that allowed me to survive my own childhood. In the nineties, parents purchased lessons, activity groups, sports leagues, tutoring and more. Parents of means did, anyway.

Interventions other than an interested teacher have been few and far between. In first grade, my boy was in a poorly-run "divorced kids support group" at school. I trusted the counselor, who cared about us. This untrained school counselor did not notice that my kid was the only one whose father had abandoned him. The group made him more salient,

more-lonely, less-than. In addition, he was the only indigenous kid. I had no idea this was happening, as my son is a kind and uncomplaining person. The next year I was able to get an Indian Education mentor for him. I had to fight for it. Portland Public Schools sought to deny my child this stabilizing influence because he was not "*one full academic year behind his peers*". I lobbied fiercely on the need to stabilize him culturally within his identity so that he could continue to function despite the traumatic sequelae of fleeing domestic violence followed by absolute poverty. It worked. For one academic year a mixed-race mentor worked with him. He remembers her name to this day.

My child was in a school system that insists upon pilgrims and paper headresses to celebrate lies about the murderous rampage of settlers upon an unarmed native band. An institution that tells children from sovereign nations and continued broken promises to pledge allegiance. A place where common childhood games require the Indian to die. My child was in a school system that teaches lies, myths and covertly anti-Indian text if we are mentioned at all. He attended schools lacking any meaningful cultural programming, nor competent mental health support despite there being excellent programming, tested cultural and psychological curriculae and vitally dedicated community organizations available. I was repeatedly and actively denied these Federally-required assets each time I arrived bringing the free and competent resources. I have a question for you: if my friend James Hanson is able to successfully bring Dialectical Behavioral Therapy into the schools, how is it we are still unable to bring proven curriculae such as Discovering Our Story for Schools in as well? Both deal with the depths of human adaption and identity. This simply is not an impossible task.

As the parent of a native child I have had to fight ceaselessly and mostly unsuccessfully for any of the psychological supports for my son that come labeled as cultural programming. I located free, high quality mentoring sources and was denied all through grade and middle school in Beaverton. The Indian Ed resources at Beaverton High School proved to be a malignancy. The leaders were poorly-vetted people who practiced boundary violations, open and angry racism against non-native parents, misuse of program funds for their own desires and who were not fulfilling the core deliverable of academic support to the student participants. There was no accountability structure for a parent to work without feeling the threat of social shunning for one's child and oneself. The staff liaison was not competent to understand the situation nor to manage any of it. At the district level, there were absolutely no contacts published out and no safe way to get them.

Realizing at long last that Oregon schools did not care enough to acquire competence, I turned to a community organization. Seeking help at NARA, I found them to also be incompetent for my son's needs at the time. He was paired with an inexperienced, incompetent CADCI when he should have had a male psychologist. This necessitated me leaving work, my son spending hours on buses to get to the location, and a failure that inculcated him against seeking treatment later when he needed it.

Despite the wonderful people I have met through these years and the many good memories, my experiences overall as a native family in the Oregon schools have been a

disaster. Had I not been forced to continually fight for the smallest traction in my son's basic cultural needs, what would our life have looked like? He'd have had a happier, more peaceful childhood? Had we had access to competent, invested, well-supervised psychological supports, I wonder how much progress we might have made on our trauma and balance, manifesting even more of our gifts freely for school and community at large?

I thank you for your time. I appreciate your understanding. I trust you will make a decision to support the kids.

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