



Native American Youth and Family Center

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**Testimony in support of SB 2052
Submitted February 2, 2021
Tamara Henderson**

Chair Alonso Leon, members of the Committee, my name is Tamara Henderson, I am a member of the Laguna Pueblo tribe, and I am the Director of the Youth and Education Services Department at the Native American Youth and Family Center (NAYA). Thank you for the opportunity to address you today. For those that are not aware, Portland is home to one of the largest Urban Indian communities in the country. NAYA serves more than 2000 youth from more than 380 tribes in any given year. All NAYA services are provided through the Relational Worldview Model, a traditional model that strives to ensure all four quadrants of a person are in balance; the four quadrants are mind, body, spirit, and context.

Much of our work as an organization is to ensure our community gets to and through high school with a plan to pursue and complete some form of education and/or training beyond high school so they can find living wage careers and give back to their community, our community, at the highest level possible. Much of this work is done through providing youth and their families with NAYA's comprehensive wraparound supports which include programming such as youth advocacy, college and career services, a homeownership program, homeless youth services, gang prevention, energy and rental assistance, early childhood education and programming, foster care supports, and much, much more.

Our organization has helped several youth and their families work with their school's administration to allow students to display cultural items of significant at their own graduation. I have supported several students and their parents in their endeavors to gain the right to wear their traditional regalia, eagle feathers, or other items of cultural significance to their people. In my experience as an educator and advocate for Native youth, I have heard administrators say that their reasoning for not allowing Native youth to display items displaying their heritage and cultural practices because on this one day, "we are all the same as graduates of this high school."

Honorable legislators, I am here to tell you, we are not all the same. We do not have the same positive experiences with education as our peers. Native youth experience disproportionate discipline rates, lower graduation rates than their peers, and lower rates of post-secondary participation and completion. Given our communities trauma with the institution of education after the forcible removal of many our ancestors including some of grandparents and even parents into boarding schools, we have a number of barriers to overcome to obtain a high school diploma, despite being the original inhabitants of this land.

We are not all the same. Native youth overcome a host of obstacles to get to the point where they can proudly walk across the stage, honoring their ancestors and all those that came before



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them and who stand behind them as they obtain their diploma. And those youth deserve to honor their ancestors through the cultural practices and traditions of their people.

You might think that a letter from Superintendent Colt Gill would be enough to encourage administrators to allow such practices as deemed as important by the original people of this land, however I am here to tell you that a letter is not enough. I have had administrators make it clear they have seen the letter, but they still do not wish nor plan to allow for any student to display their cultural heritage at graduation. The principles of equity remind us that we do not all start from the same place; we are all different and we all come from different backgrounds and experiences with different obstacles to overcome and strengths to offer. Therefore, I urge you to pass HB 2052 to create a more equitable experience that honor's Oregon's Native students for their accomplishments, despite past experiences with systemic oppression.

On behalf of the Native American/Alaskan Native youth and families served by NAYA, I urge you to support SB 2052 to allow youth and their families to honor their cultural traditions, practices, and rites of passage they worked so hard to obtain. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,

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