



Disability
Rights
Oregon

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COVID-19: Native American students not receiving an education during school closure

Native students with disabilities are at great risk of falling behind their peers

Portland, Oregon—Disability Rights Oregon joined the Native American Disability Law Center in the four corners area of the Southwest and other advocates around the country in urging the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) to immediately issue guidance to schools across the country on distance learning during the COVID-19 closure. The BIE oversees the Chemawa Indian School in Salem, Oregon, which is closed due to COVID-19.

BIE has not issued any guidance to its schools on how to continue serving students. This inaction is depriving thousands of Native American students of valuable educational time and causing irreparable harm to students with disabilities who rely on school-based services to meet their needs.

“The BIE must continue to deliver educational opportunities to all students, including those with disabilities, while its schools are closed. Schools need clear directives that they must continue to work individually with students to plan ways to safely offer special education and related services during the school closure so they do not find themselves further behind when schools re-open,” the advocates wrote in the letter.

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act will channel more than \$153 million dollars to the BIE to support its schools. Advocates urge the BIE to publicize its distribution plan for these federal education dollars.

“Every student across Oregon should have access to learning during the COVID-19 public health crisis. That’s why we need leadership at the BIE to make clear that Native American students must be provided education during the COVID crisis, including vital special education services and remote learning. Without swift action, the BIE will be perpetuating historic inequities and expanding the achievement gap between Native American students and their peers,” said Jake Cornett, Executive Director of Disability Rights Oregon.

In serving as the State Educational Agency (SEA) to 183 schools across the U.S., including the Chemawa Indian School in Salem, Oregon, the BIE is responsible for enforcing the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and other federal education laws. Like school districts across the U.S., BIE schools are closed for the remainder of the school year due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

SEAs across the country have directed local school districts closed due to COVID-19 to develop learning plans so that students can continue to access educational services. Guidance has also been issued by both the U.S. Department of Education concerning the need to continue implementing Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Resources

- U.S. Department of Education: [Supplemental Fact Sheet Addressing the Risk of COVID-19 in Preschool, Elementary and Secondary Schools While Serving Children with Disabilities](#) (March 21, 2020)
- Oregon Department of Education: [Distance Learning for All](#)
- [Letter from Advocates to the Bureau of Indian Education](#) (April 21, 2020)
- COVID-19 Letter from the BIE to BIE School Leaders: [Guidance and Communications Protocols](#) (March 14, 2020)

About Disability Rights Oregon

Disability Rights Oregon upholds the civil rights of people with disabilities to live, work, and engage in the community. The nonprofit works to transform systems, policies, and practices to give more people the opportunity to reach their full potential. For more than 40 years, the organization has served as Oregon’s Protection & Advocacy system.

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