

Rick Robinson testimony

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on **HOUSE Bill HB1** – Appropriating funds for Schools. Specifically I would like to address the component “**Indian Education for All**” and component “**Close American Indian Student Achievement Gap**”

I would like to introduce myself, RR Chief Professional Officer of the B&G Club of the NCN in Lame Deer. I’ve been the founding director 12 years ago. Our Club was the 3rd B&G Club on Indian lands. Now there are over 180 clubs on Indian lands across the United States.

MISSION STATEMENT: The Boys and Girls Club of the Northern Cheyenne Nation is a youth organization dedicated to promoting healthy lifestyles, social, educational, vocational, cultural, character and leadership development. It strives to help young people to improve their lives by building self-esteem and development of values and skills during critical periods of growth. The Club endeavors to achieve its goals through collaborative efforts with other agencies.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

The Boys & Girls Club of the Northern Cheyenne Nation began its first year of operation in June 1993 through the efforts of volunteers, parents, youth and community members. The Northern Cheyenne Tribal Council designated a 15,000 square foot building that had been donated to the tribe by the St. Labre Indian School Association to be used as a Youth Center. An 18 – 24 member Board of Directors was established, several staff members hired, and a state charter was granted in November of 1993. In June of 1994, the Club was granted non-profit status under Section 501 (c) (3). In November of 1997, a second unit was opened in Ashland, Montana on the St. Labre Indian School grounds with the facility provided by the St. Labre Indian Educational Association as a long term lease to the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Northern Cheyenne Nation.

Today, both Clubs combined have a total membership of over 700 children, ages 5-18, with an average of 120 kids daily at the Lame Deer Unit and an average of 45 kids daily at the Ashland Unit. The enrollment figures for the Northern Cheyenne Tribe reflect the youth as one of the largest categories, with approximately 48% ages 0-18. Per population, our youth category ranks the highest percent among all seven Indian reservations in Montana. The total enrollment for the Tribe is 7,423 with 60% of the enrollees residing within reservation boundaries and the other 40% residing adjacent or off-reservation. We serve some of the most at-risk youth in Montana.

Several of our programs are specifically educational-based and we work hand-in-hand with the 4 area schools enhancing learning skills, helping with homework, providing a computer lab and many opportunities for young people to learn.

While most clubs do not have direct implement school curriculum, the clubs have huge impact on students’ education. Several B&G Clubs are school-based such as the Lockwood club in Billings. More clubs are beginning to share school facilities for activities and programming.

Club Statistics: 57% of Club members live in households with an annual income of \$15,000 or less. 53% of Club members are between the ages of 5-11 years old. 14% live with grandparents and 37% live in single parent homes. 6% live in foster homes and that can go up to as high as 10% at times during the year. 12 to 18 kids each year have a parent in prison. With such instability and lack of control in the lives of these little ones, they need to know who and what they can count on. They know the Club is open, the staff will greet them and make them feel like they belong, are important, useful and competent. They know they can eat at the Club and they are safe at the Club.

According to the Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2003 Youth Risk Behavioral Studies (YRBS) for Native American reservation students, encompassing all tribes (including all 3 Northern Cheyenne reservation-based schools) in Montana revealed the following results:

- 32.4% have been offered, sold or given an illegal drug on school property in the past 12 months.
- 31.5% were 12 years old or younger when they had their first drink.
- 48.8% admit to current alcohol use.
- 35.4% were 12 years old or younger when they smoked marijuana.
- In their lifetime: 2.4% have used heroin, 8.0% ecstasy, 15.1% cocaine, 15.8% methamphetamines, 21.3% inhalants.
- 66.2 % have had sexual intercourse, of which 14.5% were under the age of 12 for first sexual intercourse encounter and 8.8% were forced to have sexual relations against their will.
- 15.2% have had their boyfriend/girlfriend hit, slap or physically abuse them on purpose in the last 12 months.
- 17.5% have seriously considered suicide in the last 12 months and 18.5% actually attempted.

Our mission and all Club programming is designed around the Youth Development Strategy of instilling a sense of Competency, Belonging, Usefulness and Influence incorporating the five core youth development areas of the Boys and Girls Club of America. They are:

- **Education and Career Development,**
- **Character and Leadership Development,**
- **Health and Life Skills,**
- **The Arts,**
- **Sports, Fitness & Recreation.**

The Core Areas are implemented during After School Programming, and Teen Night programming. The Club also provides an after school feeding program, a technology center, employment opportunities for teens, and mentoring, and transportation home. I would just like to say, B&G Clubs are significant players in Education for Children and Youth in Montana and this role will grow. I have seen hundreds of Cheyenne youth come to the Boys & Girls Clubs and I know they are at risk. I know their stories. I know their lives, families. Few constants are available in their lives. The schools and the Boys & Girls Clubs are 2 of those

constants. Both need strengthening on the reservations. The Lame Deer Schools have been one of the bottom schools in test scores in the State of Montana. In almost every subject area they are improving yet because of the many risk factors in the community and students' lives – it is extremely challenging to improve scores and overall education.

With HB1 one might ask, “Why do we need Indian Education for All”? Why do we need to not only recognize the cultural heritage of American Indians in the State of Montana but further why do we need non-Indian students to learn of the cultural heritage of Am Indians in MT?

My opinion is that American Indian cultural heritage is Montana cultural heritage. It is something that distinguishes us as Native Americans from the White people and White culture but at the same time, if you are a Montanan – as we all are – American Indian Culture in part of your culture as well.

Good or bad, History and in particular, cultural history has been established and is somewhat fixed. It is only our perception of that history that is still able to be molded. Take for instance – “Comanche, the only living horse from the Battle of the Little Big Horn”. There were over 2 to 3,000 horses that survived – Indian horses.

Lewis & Clark. Great to read the daily excerpts from the newspapers. One paragraph per day they wrote. We as American Indians – the First People – have volumes of our history and yet we read one paragraph per day.

Understanding of our shared history and culture as Montanans is crucial to both the American Indian and White person. Know that there are barriers between our peoples.

Our Community in Lame Deer and our Club hosts over 1,000 visitors each summer from an organization called YouthWorks and others – Penn State, St. Cloud State, U of Washington etc that are from all over the country and even from Montana. I and other enrolled Northern Cheyenne have an opportunity to speak to many of the groups over the years and I have learned that the most important thing I can do is to create understanding – understanding between two distinct races or groups of people and between to distinct cultures. I have also learned that it is imperative to know the history of the races, the people and the interactions between the two groups. Comments from groups said talks created greater, more clear understanding for them

Create Understanding – Club works with FPC of Bozeman and Helena. First Trip to Lame Deer – Rusty's comments.

Story of growing up in Choteau. Sitting Bull running to Canada

Pride of Native American youth has been damaged – perception of not having value or having a history or culture that is of value.

Ask that our state legislators have the courage to enact this bill. Allow us, as Native Americans to have our place with the Montanan perception in the history of our state.