

Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act



WE HAVE A RIGHT TO KNOW THE TRUTH

For over 150 years, hundreds of thousands of Native children were taken or coerced away from their families and Tribes and forced to attend government- and religious-run Indian boarding schools. These schools were tools of colonization, assimilation, and genocide, resulting in the loss of land, language, culture, traditional foods, and the permanent separation of children from their families. Survivors of Indian boarding schools have described physical, sexual, psychological, and spiritual abuse and neglect. Many other children died, went missing, or were murdered while in the custody of these schools, unable to tell their stories.

To date, there has never been an accounting of:

- (1) the number of Native children forced to attend these institutions;
- (2) the number of Native children who were abused, died, or went missing while at these institutions; and
- (3) the long-term impacts on Native children and the families of children forced to attend Indian boarding schools.

Developing a complete picture of the ongoing impacts that Indian boarding schools have had on generations of American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian people is critical. Tribal citizens and Tribal Nations deserve justice for the generations of trauma they have endured because of the Indian boarding school policies era.

“It’s taken a long time to be able to share our stories and we’ve reached a point where the dam of awareness is bursting. The time for healing is now.”

– James LaBelle Sr. (Inupiaq), Boarding School Survivor

WHY A TRUTH AND HEALING COMMISSION IS NEEDED

A Federal Commission is needed to locate and analyze the records from the 521 known Indian boarding schools in the U.S. 408 of which have been directly funded or supported by the federal government. These records are scattered across federal, state, and local governments, hospitals, church archives, private collections, and other unknown repositories, and may take years to fully document. In addition to the search for records, a Commission would also bring together boarding school survivors with a broad cross-section of Tribal representatives and experts in education, health, and children and families to fully express and understand the impacts of this federal policy of Indian child removal.

As we have seen in Canada, the truth will eventually emerge about what is buried on Indian boarding school grounds, though we have a limited amount of time to hear directly from survivors and record their stories. A Congressional Commission will help ensure that accounts of Indian boarding schools—told by survivors, families, and presently undisclosed records—are preserved. It is essential that our children who were forced to attend these schools are not forgotten, and that this assimilative era of U.S. Indian policy is acknowledged so that future generations may understand the impact that this trauma has had in their community. Ultimately, we must know the truth so that we ensure that this never happens again.

Learn more at: boardingschoolhealing.org/truthcommission

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KEY PROVISIONS

A Full Inquiry into the Assimilative Policies of U.S. Indian Boarding Schools

- **Examines the location of children:** The Commission would locate and document all children still buried at or near boarding school facilities.
- **Documents ongoing impacts from boarding schools:** The Commission would compile evidence of the ongoing effects of intergenerational trauma in American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian communities. It would also examine how assimilative policies attempted to destroy Native languages and cultures, as well as the taking of Tribal lands.
- **Locates church and government records:** The Commission would locate and analyze all records on Indian boarding schools. Records of primary importance include those related to attendance, infirmary, deaths, land, and other correspondences. The Commission would have the power to issue subpoenas to produce all records.

Collection of Testimony from Survivors, Tribes, and Subject Matter Experts

- **Culturally appropriate public hearings:** Provides a public forum for survivors, victims, families, communities, Native organizations, and Tribal leaders to provide testimony on the impacts of Indian boarding schools utilizing trauma-informed practices.
- **Institutional knowledge gathering:** Testimony would be taken from those who have documents and institutional knowledge relating to Indian Boarding School Policies, including but not limited to testimony from religious institutions, the federal government, state and local governments, individuals, and organizations.

Creation and Dissemination of Commission Findings and Recommendations

- **Shares findings publicly:** Requires a final report on findings and recommendations to be shared with the public and the U.S. government within 5 years.
- **Provides recommendations:** Requires a list of recommendations for legislation and administrative actions to address the impacts of Federal Indian Boarding School Policies, expanding upon pre-established goals such as: investing in restoration of culture and language, traditional foods, and establishing trauma-informed resources.

Investigates Beyond the Department of the Interior Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative

- **Further understanding of impacts:** Compiles all previous research and brings together partners for a comprehensive review of Federal Indian Boarding School Policies and their impacts, expanding upon the work of the DOI Initiative in order to know the magnitude of loss of human life. The DOI's reach and control over Indian boarding school institutions is limited to those that it directly operated and funded. There exist at least 113 additional known institutions that, regardless of financial connection, directly benefited from the Federal Indian Boarding School Policies that were in effect. This Commission would expand on the DOI's Initiative and be inclusive to all Indian boarding schools that operated in the U.S.