

Testimony of Sandra White Hawk

President, Board of Directors for the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition (NABS)

Oversight Hearing on "Volume 1 of the Department of the Interior's Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative Investigative Report" & Legislative Hearing on S. 2907

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Good afternoon, Chairman Schatz, Vice Chairman Murkowski, and members of the Committee. My name is Sandra White Hawk, citizen of the Sicangu Lakota Nation from the Rosebud Reservation. I serve as President of the Board of Directors of the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition (NABS). It is an honor for provide testimony today. I am here to express my unequivocal support for S. 2907, the "Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act."

As the members of this Committee well know, the history of the United States and its relations with Native Peoples is a troubled one. The 150 years that the federal government either directly forced or coerced Native families into boarding schools, or outsourced Indian boarding schools to religious institutions, caused enormous loss to Native communities. The United States targeted tribal languages and tribal cultures for extermination to carry out a federal policy of assimilation and tribal land dispossession. As a consequence of these policies and actions, Native children suffered physical and sexual abuse, cultural reprogramming, and even death. Today, our Tribal Nations and communities continue to fight our way back from this era of genocide.

Sadly, neither the federal government nor Indian country really know what happened at the boarding schools during this era. We have bits and pieces of information collected from some elders who survived their boarding schools. We now have the important Volume I of the Department of the Interior Report. We commend Secretary Haaland, Assistant Secretary Newland, and the team at the Department of the Interior for this important work. But there is so much more to learn. So much information that has not been gathered. So many stories of living people that have not been told.

S. 2907, the Trust and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act, is the right way to gather information, learn, and begin to heal from a century-and-a-half of harmful policies and conduct. The bill would create a Commission with authority to gather information from state, private, and religious institutions that possess information about the boarding schools but have not opened their doors to allow access to that information. The Commissioners and the Advisory Committee would represent a broad array of tribal people, experts, and institutional authorities. This Commission would have a singular mission of gathering and interpreting information with a five-year lifespan to carry out this important work.

This bill is the culmination of years of work, relying on lessons learned from the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission that studied the residential schools that similarly forced First Nations children into its doors. We know that this Commission had elements that worked and did not work. This bill considers those lessons with the expectation of creating an efficient, effective Commission. As a result of this Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission's work, the Pope has apologized for the role of the Catholic Church in implementing Canada's genocidal policies on First Nation's children. In July, the Pope will be traveling to First Nations territory for further dialogue and hopefully action on his apology.

We are often asked why we want to bill enacted to create a Truth and Healing Commission when the Department of the Interior has started this work. The answer to us is simple. First, the Interior work has a limited scope. Interior officials have many obligations to carry out its trust obligations to Tribal Nations. If properly constituted, a Commission that is closest to the people and is of the people has the best chance to earn the credibility of the people. While we certainly applaud the work of Secretary Haaland and the Department of the Interior, another federal inquiry with limited powers is far less likely to gain the trust of the boarding school survivors and their descendants that hold the stories of this horrific era in American history. A Commission of Native people, with the imprimatur of the United States Congress, has a far more likely chance of achieving knowledge and healing.

NABS, an organization that I am honored to Chair, has worked in this area for over ten years. We were formed as a non-profit in 2011 following public outcry about the lasting impacts of the boarding school era. Shortly after Canada launched the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission, leaders from the United States and Canada came together to discuss the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the need for such a process in the United States.

The vision of NABS is to lead in the pursuit of understanding and addressing the ongoing trauma created by the U.S. Indian Boarding School policy. In practice, NABS is a coalition of people who support the healing of boarding school survivors and descendants by using our network to advocate, engage in research, and offer healing resources. NABS uses its voice to educate about the truth, the full scope of the federal Indian boarding school policies and the lasting legacy felt in Indian Country and throughout the nation. The experiences of our relatives are still with us, and the U.S. government has never meaningfully addressed these impacts. This is why we stand before you today.

Our recent collaborative work with the US Department of the Interior has identified 408 federally-funded and supported U.S. Indian boarding schools, as well as 89 additional boarding schools that received no federal funding at all. Over nearly two centuries, these 497 boarding schools operated as a broad system with a singular goal aimed at our children.

Between the 1800s and the 1970s, the federal government removed thousands of American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian children from our homes and families, and placed them in assimilative institutions designed to strip us of our languages, identities, and cultures—these lifeways that have connected us to the land since time immemorial. The stated purpose of the U.S. Indian Boarding School policy was to destroy Indian culture by using education as a

weapon. This purpose was expounded upon by the likes of General Richard Henry Pratt, who stated:

A great general has said that the only good Indian is a dead one, and that high sanction of his destruction has been an enormous factor in promoting Indian massacres. In a sense, I agree with the sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man.

In fierce commitment to an agenda of assimilation, Pratt's motto to "Kill the Indian in him, and save the man", became a standard for the operation of these institutions. Nearly 500 U.S. Indian boarding schools carried out this ideology. They sought to destroy Indian language, culture, and ultimately to dismantle Indian nations, enabling the federal government to acquire more Indian land. To achieve this end, Indian children were forcibly abducted and sent to schools often hundreds of miles away, under the pretense that replacing the child's home and cultural influences through boarding school would be the most effective means to "civilize" Native people and to dispossess them of their lands.

Upon arrival, our children had their hair chopped, their clothes stripped, and their names were replaced with English ones or often, just a number. Children frequently received corporal punishment for speaking their language, practicing traditional songs and ceremonies, and resisting contradictory instructions that their languages and cultures were wrong. Methods of punishment included: solitary confinement, flogging, whipping, slapping, cuffing, and devising methods to engage children to administer punishments to each other, such as the gauntlet or the strap line. Other methods of dehumanization routinely observed were forced labor, neglect, malnourishment, and physical and sexual abuse. Children were beaten to death. This happened routinely enough to compel school operators to have cemeteries on the school grounds, often in unmarked graves.

Indian Boarding School methods are rooted in the Doctrine of Discovery and Manifest Destiny—all of which meant genocide for Native American, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian peoples. The Doctrine of Discovery, specifically, provided sanction and justification for the invasion and colonization of land inhabited by non-Christians. One of the lasting legacies of this doctrine is the legal and cultural belief that Indigenous people do not have the right to our own cultures, lands, practices, and even how we raise our own children. The Boarding School Era, seen as an effective alternative to extermination, was ushered in by the U.S. "Education for Assimilation" Policy. Beginning with the Indian Civilization Act Fund of 1819, the U.S. authorized and financed religious missions to weaponize education as a "civilizing process". This policy was further enacted through the creation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) in 1824, created under the War Department, primarily to administer these monies to churches. This would also be seen in President Grant's Peace Policy, lasting from 1868 to 1881, which endeavored to replace corrupt "Federal Agents" with Christian missionaries.

The effects of Colonialism and the Federal boarding school policies are clear. They are measured in stolen land, stolen lives, and widespread denial of sovereignty; through the systemic delegitimization of Indigenous ways of living, knowing, and being; through the destruction of

language, culture, and knowledge. In sum, the effects are seen as Indigenous erasure, rooted in the boarding school policy era.

The trauma of family and community separation, as well as the violently assimilative strategies of boarding schools and adoption, affected hundreds of thousands of children, their families, and their communities so deeply that these effects of trauma can be seen intergenerationally. In light of this, NABS, First Nations Repatriation Institute, and the University of Minnesota are conducting a research study to learn more about experiences and impacts of child removal related to the United States' federal Indian boarding school policy. The survey has seen 900 respondents to date, including 211 boarding school survivors and 791 descendants of boarding school survivors. Of the respondents, nearly half reported being diagnosed with a mental health condition; 77 percent reported struggling with depression; approximately one third of respondents reported symptoms of PTSD; 75 percent of respondents reported having attempted suicide. Additionally, 87 percent of respondents believed their experience affected their parenting, 81 percent believe they still need to heal from their experiences, and 73 percent have sought therapy or counseling.

The intergenerational trauma of Indian Boarding Schools continues to be particularly harsh among Native youth. The 2014 White House Report on Native youth found major disparities in health and education, with more than one in three American Indian and Alaska Native children living in poverty and a graduation rate of 67 percent—the lowest of any racial/ethnic demographic group across all schools. Those students who survived their boarding school experience, suffered traumatic alienation when they returned home, finding themselves unable to connect with their families and communities. The report also established a state of emergency regarding Native youth suicide—the second leading cause of death for Native youth in the 15- to 24-year-old age group—and PTSD, with rates three times the general public—the same rate as Iraqi war veterans.

Given nearly 500 boarding schools throughout a timespan of nearly two centuries, it is essential to recognize that boarding school experiences cannot be seen as monolithic. There are nuanced histories that need to be understood and examined further. US boarding schools provoked deep traumas and unresolved grief, while also accompanying a complex history of resistance and resilience. Many individuals found solace in friendships and relationships that would sustain them throughout their lifetimes. Some resolved to learn settler ways in order to better prepare their Tribes to negotiate with an expanding American society. What cannot go ignored is that the spectrum of boarding school history and experiences are unequivocally and inescapably tied to the legacy of forced removal; dispossession of land; physical, psychological and sexual abuse; mass deaths and unmarked graves; and the extermination of Native ways of living, knowing, and genocide.

NABS is not alone in recognizing the cultural genocide carried out through Indian Boarding Schools. In 2007, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which holds that “Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.” The United States government responded that UNDRIP advanced “a new and distinct international

concept of self-determination specific to Indigenous peoples,” which is not the same as the existing concept in international law. The statement also interprets free, prior, and informed consent, "which the United States understands to call for a process of meaningful consultation with tribal leaders.”

Today, NABS is focused on hope, healing, and resiliency. Our goal is to provide this through the five-year Truth Commission, which aims to examine the location of children, document ongoing impacts from boarding schools, locate church and government records, hold culturally-appropriate public hearings to collect testimony from survivors and descendants, gather institutional knowledge from subject matter experts, share findings publicly, and provide a final report with a list of recommendations for justice and healing.

It has taken generations for us to get to this point of public truth and accountability;
For the voices of those that never had the chance to return home;
for those that were forever changed by this extreme cruelty;
for those that were chained to basement radiators, prison cells, and dark closets;
For those that were sexually abused, told to wash up, and to return to their marching lines; For
those that were told that they and their families would be forgotten;

We have not forgotten.
We ask you to hear their voices.

The time for action is now. We must pass, S. 2907, the Truth and Healing Commission Bill on Indian Boarding School Policies Act.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak.