

**STATEMENT OF  
DEB HAALAND  
SECRETARY OF THE UNITED STATES  
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
BEFORE THE  
SENATE COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS**

**June 22, 2022**

Hello and good afternoon, Chairman Schatz, Vice Chairman Murkowski, and members of the Committee. My name is Deb Haaland, and I serve as the Secretary of the Interior. It is an honor and privilege for me to be here with you today to represent the Department of the Interior (Department) and our tens of thousands of dedicated professionals. It is deeply meaningful for me to speak to you from the ancestral homelands of the Anacostan and Piscataway people. Thank you for the opportunity to present the Department's testimony at this important oversight hearing on the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative and S. 2907, a bill to establish the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies in the United States.

The Biden-Harris administration is determined to make a lasting positive difference in response to the trauma that these policies have caused, not just in the past but for current generations. I would also like to thank Senator Warren and the Co-chairs of the Congressional Native American Caucus, Representatives Sharice Davids and Tom Cole, for prioritizing legislation to address the federal Indian boarding school policies for the first time in United States history and find solutions to further shed light on its ongoing impacts on Native American and Native Hawaiian people.

Starting in 1819, and lasting for over a century and a half, the federal government, including the Department of the Interior, forcibly removed and assimilated tens of thousands of American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian children from tribal communities across the United States. Many children who entered the boarding schools were involuntarily removed from their communities and never returned home. This intentional targeting and removal of American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian children to achieve the goal of forced assimilation of Native people was both traumatic and violent.

The consequences of federal Indian boarding school policies—including the intergenerational trauma caused by forced family separation and cultural eradication—were inflicted on generations of children as young as 4 years old and are heartbreaking and undeniable. As the head of the Department of the Interior and as the first Native American cabinet secretary, I am in a unique position to address the lasting impacts of these policies. I now have direct oversight over the very Department that operated and oversaw the implementation of the federal Indian boarding school system.

Like all Native people, I am a product of these horrific assimilation era policies, as my grandparents were removed from their families to federal Indian boarding schools when they were only 8 years old and forced to live away from their parents, culture, and Pueblos until they were 13 years old. My family's story is similar to many Indigenous families' stories in this country,

which is why, on June 22, 2021, I announced the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative, a comprehensive effort to address the troubled legacy of federal Indian boarding school policies. On that same date, through a memorandum, I directed the Assistant Secretary – Indian Affairs to lead the first-ever departmental investigation into the federal Indian boarding school system.

I am incredibly proud of the work that Assistant Secretary Newland and his entire team did on the first volume of this report. I particularly want to acknowledge the staff at the Bureau of Trust Funds Administration, which is managing the document collection, review, and records management of this Initiative. The vast majority of the work being released today was done by Indigenous staff in this department who worked through their own trauma and pain.

The Department released Volume 1 of the investigative report on May 11, 2022. This report lays the groundwork for the continued efforts of the Department to address the intergenerational trauma created by historical federal policy. It marks the first time in over two hundred years, since the Indian boarding school policies were implemented, that the United States has formally reviewed or acknowledged the extensive scope and breadth of these policies. The Department welcomes Congress' and this Committee's engagement in this important and continuing effort.

The Department's investigation focuses on the historical Indian boarding school system, which was implemented to further cultural assimilation and removal policies. The Department fully recognizes that unlike the federal Indian boarding school system we are investigating, contemporary Native residential schools are vital to advancing modern, culturally sensitive education.

Some key highlights of Volume 1 of the Department's investigation of our federal records include evidence that the United States targeted American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian children through forced removal to Indian boarding schools in furtherance of territorial dispossession of Indigenous lands in the United States. The initial investigation shows that, between 1819 and 1969, the federal Indian boarding school system consisted of 408 federal Indian boarding schools across 37 states or then-territories, including 21 schools in Alaska and 7 schools in Hawai'i.<sup>1</sup>

Additionally, the Department's initial investigation results show that approximately 50 percent of federal Indian boarding schools may have received support or involvement from a religious institution or organization, including funding,<sup>2</sup> infrastructure, and personnel. Further, the federal government at times paid religious institutions and organizations for Native children to enter federal Indian boarding schools that these institutions and organizations operated.

Another important finding published in Volume 1 identifies approximately 53 different schools that contain marked or unmarked burial sites. While this report lays the groundwork for the efforts of the Department to address the full scope of the federal Indian boarding school policies and the intergenerational trauma endured by Indigenous peoples in this country, the Department is moving

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<sup>1</sup> Some individual federal Indian boarding schools accounted for multiple sites. The 408 federal Indian boarding schools includes 431 separate sites.

<sup>2</sup> As the U.S. Senate has recognized, funds from the 1819 Civilization Fund "were apportioned among those societies and individuals—usually missionary organizations—that had been prominent in the effort to 'civilize' the Indians."

forward to develop Volume 2 to further expand on these preliminary report findings. As the investigation continues, we expect the number of identified burial sites to increase, along with the potential expansion or more definite numbers of identified Indian boarding school sites, children, and operating dates of facilities.

As we add to the list of burial sites, the Department, working with relevant sister federal agencies, will expand our collaborative work, including increasing Tribal communities' access to mental health resources. These healing actions will help strengthen Native communities in a manner that I hope will be pursuant to each of the various traditional and religious protocols and beliefs. This effort may include disinterment, repatriation, documentation, and memorial efforts, where appropriate, in consultation with Indian Tribes, Alaska Native Villages, and the Native Hawaiian Community.

The Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative constitutes the first time the federal government has reviewed the scope of these policies. This is an important step for intergenerational healing from the ongoing effects these policies caused, and we will take an all-of-government approach. I believe that our obligations to Native communities mean that federal policies should fully support and revitalize Native health care, education, Native languages, and cultural practices that prior federal Indian policies, like those supporting Indian boarding schools, sought to destroy. We can heal from the harm and violence caused by Indian assimilation by effecting government-wide policies of revitalization for the Indigenous people of our country.

I recently announced that we will embark on the "Road to Healing," a tour throughout the nation to hear directly from survivors of federal Indian boarding schools and their descendants about their experiences. A necessary part of this journey will be to connect survivors and their families with mental health support, and to create a permanent collection of oral histories. We know this won't be easy, but it is a history that we must learn from if we are to heal from this tragic era in our country.

As part of the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative, I look forward to continuing our work alongside sister federal agencies that administer the sites of former Indian boarding schools or possess or control records pertaining to the federal Indian boarding school system and those that currently provide medical and mental health services for Native communities. I am confident that, together, we can support the individuals and communities that have been shaped by detrimental federal Indian boarding school policies.

I am proud of the work the Department is accomplishing to confront its role in these assimilation policies through education and am deeply grateful to Congress for its support as well. In particular, the Department appreciates the \$7 million in funding provided for this work in Fiscal Year 2022, and we look forward to working with Congress on our Fiscal Year 2023 request of an additional \$7 million. These funds are crucial in order for this work to be thorough and effective, in particular the labor-intensive work of gathering and examining records and identifying and characterizing various sites.

This funding will enable the Department to help expand existing school profiles following Volume 1 of the report, including detailing the number of children that attended federal Indian boarding

schools; identifying marked and unmarked burial sites; identifying interred children, where possible; and detailing the amount of federal support for the system including support to non-federal entities.

### **S. 2907 – A Bill to Establish the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies in the United States**

I am grateful for the Committee's leadership in also considering S. 2907 as part of this hearing. This legislation, which I led with my colleagues when I served in the U.S. House of Representatives, would establish a Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies in the United States. The Commission would be required to investigate the impacts and ongoing effects of the Indian Boarding School Policies where Native children were forcibly removed from their homes. The Commission would be directed to develop recommendations on: (1) how to protect unmarked graves and accompanying land protections; (2) support repatriation and identify the Tribal Nations from which children were taken; and (3) to prevent the continued removal of American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian children from their families and Native communities under modern-day assimilation practices carried out by State social service departments, foster care agencies, and adoption services.

The Administration strongly supports this legislation, especially the development of national survivor resources to address intergenerational trauma, and the inclusion of the Commission's formal investigation and documentation practices. In addition to our support, we would welcome an opportunity to work with the Committee, especially on access to records pertaining to the federal Indian boarding school system under the control of non-federal entities as set forth in the legislation to supplement the Department's Initiative.

### **Conclusion**

Some of the most influential decisions by the Department on the lives of American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian children involve those related to federal Indian boarding schools. That is part of America's story that we must tell. While we cannot change that history, I believe that our nation will benefit from a full understanding of the truth of what took place and a focus on healing the wounds of the past.

I am grateful for your work to help address the atrocities that Indian boarding school survivors and families have endured for decades.

Thank you again for your focus on the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative and consideration of S. 2907. I am confident that, together, we can start to help Tribal communities to heal and strengthen Indian Country and the Native Hawaiian Community now and for future generations.