

Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies in the U.S. Act

U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.)

The Indian Boarding School Policies were assimilation policies and practices inflicted on American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian children, as young as 3 years old, by the federal government and U.S. missionaries intended to terminate the cultures, religions, and languages of Indigenous peoples in the United States. For generations, the federal government has failed to reckon with this history, or its legacy and ongoing historical and intergenerational trauma. *The Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies in the United States Act* is an attempt to address this disgraceful chapter in history and begin healing for Native communities.

Background.

From 1819 and into the 1960s, the federal government funded schools aimed to “kill the Indian in him, and save the man,” as infamously stated by Gen. Richard Henry Pratt, founder of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania, where more than 10,000 American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) children were enrolled. It is estimated that by 1926, nearly 83 percent of AI/AN children were enrolled in one of at least 367 currently known Indian boarding schools across 30 states. Additionally, beginning in 1820, missionaries from the United States arrived in Hawaii, establishing day schools and boarding schools that followed models first imposed on tribal nations on the East Coast of the United States.

These schools were designed to assimilate American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian children into non-Native culture by stripping them of their cultural identities. Children were forcibly removed from their homes and experienced harrowing human rights violations including physical, sexual, psychological, industrial, and spiritual abuse, neglect, and trauma. Many of the children who were taken to boarding schools did not survive, and of those who did survive, many never returned to their parents or communities. Some unmarked graves and off-campus cemeteries have been discovered, but due to inaccurate, scattered, and missing records, many families have never been able to locate their loved ones. Currently, less than 38 percent of boarding school records have been located, from only 142 of the at least 367 known boarding schools.

The full effects of the Indian Boarding School Policies have never been appropriately addressed, and the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights’ [2018 Broken Promises Report](#) found that Indigenous communities continue to experience historical and intergenerational trauma related to these policies and practices. As a result, Native communities face cycles of violence and trauma, including disappearance, health disparities, substance abuse, premature deaths, and physical, sexual, psychological, industrial, and spiritual abuse and neglect. Residual impacts of the termination efforts of the Indian Boarding School Policies are also evident in the lack of education and inaccurate representation of Indigenous peoples, history, and contributions. The absence of this awareness signals the overdue need for an investigative commission to document and expose the Indian Boarding School Policies and their longstanding ramifications. This bill will build on steps that Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland has taken to address this need. On June 22, 2021, she announced that the Department of Interior would begin an initial investigation of these policies and their consequences, marking the start of the federal government’s reckoning with this painful legacy.

The Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act.

The Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies in the United States Act will establish a formal commission to investigate and document these policies. This includes the federal government’s attempted termination of cultures, religions, and languages of Indigenous peoples, assimilation practices, and human rights violations that occurred through the Indian Boarding School Policies. The commission is intended to develop recommendations for the federal government to acknowledge and heal the ongoing historical and intergenerational trauma passed down in Native families and communities and provide a forum for survivors to speak about these human rights violations.

Specifically, the bill:

- Establishes a Commission with representation from diverse experiences and backgrounds, including tribal and Native representatives and experts; and establishes an advisory committee and survivors subcommittee.
- Requires the commission to formally investigate and document the attempted termination of cultures, religions, and languages of Indigenous peoples, assimilation practices, and human rights violations that occurred against American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians.
- Requires the commission to formally investigate and document the impacts and ongoing effects of historical and intergenerational trauma in Native communities.
- Requires the commission to hold culturally respectful and meaningful public hearings for victims, survivors, and other community members to testify and discuss the impacts of these policies.
- Requires the commission to develop recommendations for the federal government to acknowledge and heal the historical and intergenerational trauma related to the Indian Boarding School Policies, including recommendations:
 - for resources and assistance the federal government should provide to aid in the healing of ongoing trauma caused by the Indian Boarding School Policies;
 - to establish a nationwide hotline for survivors, family members, or other community members affected by the Indian Boarding School Policies; and
 - to prevent the continued removal of Native children from their families and tribal communities under modern-day assimilation practices carried out by state social service departments, foster care agencies, and adoption services.