

To; The House Natural Resource Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples

Re: Statement in support for H.R. 5444 the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act

My name is Mary Baechler, and I am the former Planner for Yakama Nation, Office of Economic Development, from 2017, to July 2020. I am writing as a private citizen informed by years of working for the people of Yakama Nation. I am not a tribal member, but I was honored to be part of the Yakama Reservation Wellness Coalition for 8 years.

I am writing to support H.R. 5444 the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act. In my years of being part of the Yakama Wellness Coalition, and in working for the Tribe, I personally witnessed the sorrow; the grief, that overtook tribal members as they described the effects on their families and on their own lives. In one case, a brilliant woman was just overcome, and could not speak any further about her childhood, The boarding school that caused so much pain for the Yakama people is the Fort Simcoe school, in White Swan, WA. It was in attending years of the meetings of the Yakama Reservation Wellness Coalition that I learned about multi-generational trauma; aways from personal stories that went back to when families were ripped apart and the children forced to attend this school.

Another story of the boarding schools; a Yakama friend mentioned that her grandmother had a defective leg, but was still strong enough to gut a large salmon. Later she told me more; that her grandmother had been a little girl at one of boarding schools near the Columbia River; one more morning she got up early, and went to play on the playground at the school, which was only for the white children. Some white girls found her, and threw her down and beat her. She was never taken to a doctor; and her leg never recovered, and was deformed and much weaker.

As Planner for Yakama Nation, I learned that the numbers tell the story of this multi-generational trauma that goes in a straight line to the boarding schools. In researching for grant applications, I learned that the per capita income for AIAN on the Reservation was about \$12,700; compared to about \$49,000 in Seattle, \$40,000 in Richland, Wa. For the Mount Adams School District serving the Yakama Reservation area; in 2019; 12% of students qualified as homeless; only 3% of high school students could meet the state math standard, compared to 82% in nearby Zillah, WA., a wealthier, largely white enclave.

When I was writing that grant, to promote financial literacy in schools on the Yakama Reservation; it became so clear to me that the trauma of the great-grandparents, the grandparents and the parents, was being passed down in a way that systematically broke family structures. I support H.R. 5444 the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act as it is a first step in acknowledging that the prosperity of the Yakima Valley, including for white families like mine, was built on the cruel separation of Yakama Indian families. This system enriched the white settlers, while breaking the traditions and family ties that made the Yakama people so strong. To take the children away; can we imagine anything worse to happen to a family? The work of this Commission is a start on healing, and I hope reparations are made, while knowing that they do not undo the pain we caused.

Thank you to the Natural Resources Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States, for accepting my testimony,

Mary Baechler
Seattle, WA

