



May 26, 2022

House National Resource Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples  
US House of Representatives  
1324 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515  
RE: Written Testimony Rapid City Indian Boarding School Project

Dear Assistant Secretary Newland,

Please accept these written comments as part of the testimony in support of H.R.5444, the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies in the US Act. We represent the Rapid City Indian Boarding School Lands Project (RCIBSL Project), located in Rapid City, South Dakota. We thank your committee for seeking to identify and disseminate the enrollment records of former and current boarding schools throughout the United States. After our years of research and experience, however, we strongly recommend also identifying and disseminating the original real estate, deeds, maps, and boundaries of the boarding schools as a required tool in finding the children.

After nearly a decade of volunteer research, we can attest to the enormous expenditure of time, effort, and resources necessary to uncover and untangle the complicated stories of Indigenous boarding schools. We (think) we were able to find the location of our children's unmarked graves.

But others may never be so fortunate. It has taken a decade and dozens of volunteers. For the us to fully understand the story of the boarding schools, the children who attended them, and the land and money allocated for the schools' operation, the Department of Interior must empower descendants and their supporters with all the records, including those held by the churches.

The RCIBSL Project is an Indigenous-led volunteer initiative focused on telling the story of the Rapid City Indian School, a federal boarding school that operated here in Rapid City, South Dakota from 1898 to 1933. Our work combines research, education, outreach, advocacy, and memorialization and interpretation for a broad audience of residents and stakeholders in the Rapid City area.

Our project began in 2013, when a group of Lakota unciis (grandmothers) asked our team to find the unmarked graves of Native American children who died at the Rapid City Indian School. The children were buried somewhere on the original campus, but the exact location was

undocumented and almost lost to history. In many cases, the school failed to inform the families of their children's deaths, but they lived in the memories of the local Native community.

To locate the children our team scoured historical newspapers and enrollment records held at the National Archives and Records Administration facility in Kansas City, Missouri and copied boxes of records saved by community members. Most importantly, however, we had to have the original deeds and boundaries. The children were not located on the main campus as many might have thought, and the location was not immediately intuitive. Many boarding schools were hundreds of acres large as the children were responsible for raising and growing their own food. Most of that acreage is no longer part of existing campuses. Unless families and communities know the full extent of the original boundaries within which they need to look, they are unlikely to find the unmarked graves.

So far, we have identified over 50 Native children who died at the Rapid City Indian School. We know there are so many more. The school did not formally track the deaths of our children. The school simply wrote "died" in the margins of enrollment records, or physician's logs would list the number of students who had died the previous year with no names or identifying information. We found short mentions of their deaths in newspaper articles, we collected oral histories, and we found heartbreaking letters from families looking for their children who never returned home. In addition, the school's records for the first decade of the school - and likely that with the highest mortality rate - had been destroyed.

To find the graves, our team began a plot-by-plot review of the boarding school's land deeds. This was challenging, laborious work, as the original 1,400+ acres of the boarding school campus had since been divided up into hundreds of individual deeds in a series of transactions over several decades. We found the likely location of many of these children's graves, and along the way, discovered another challenging piece of our community's history: In May 1948 Congress authorized the DOI to grant this land to various public and private entities and it was allocated in less than equitable and less than ethical ways.

Despite being specifically named as eligible in the 1948 Act, and despite decades of requests by the Native community for land to support housing, economic development, and a variety of cultural initiatives, the Native community never received any of the Indian boarding school property. In fact, in 1954, the DOI, the City, and the School District conspired to sell (contrary to the statute) portions of the boarding school property to raise money to dismantle an inconveniently located Native neighborhood and relocate it two miles away from town as to rid themselves of the "Indian Problem." The relocated Native families lived in this new location, "Sioux Addition," without municipal water, sewer, and sanitation services for over 15 years.

These decisions did more than deny the Native community resources outlined in the 1948 Act. They segregated Rapid City along racial lines, and dramatically redistributed wealth within Rapid City. Since this move in the 1950s, most of the Native American community has remained segregated in Sioux Addition or nearby neighborhoods, where they have historically faced disproportionately high rates of socioeconomic disadvantage in our community.

What began as an effort to find the children's graves has expanded into an ongoing project dedicated to researching, understanding, and interpreting the many strands of this story. The research led to extensive community outreach to educate and raise awareness about these issues and continuous work with Rapid City leaders to leverage this history to build a stronger future for our community.

We would like to submit our hard found research on the Rapid City Indian Boarding School to your committee so that they may be preserved in perpetuity:

- Enrollment Records: [www.rememberingthechildren.org/historical-enrollment-records](http://www.rememberingthechildren.org/historical-enrollment-records)
- Correspondence: [www.rememberingthechildren.org/\\_files/ugd/d039dc\\_a53a4cea049948e689db7af0782eb68d.pdf](http://www.rememberingthechildren.org/_files/ugd/d039dc_a53a4cea049948e689db7af0782eb68d.pdf)
- Children's Deaths: <https://www.rememberingthechildren.org/deaths>

We would be happy to speak with a member of your staff about our work and to elaborate on the recommendations outlined above. We can be reached at [rcislandsproject@gmail.com](mailto:rcislandsproject@gmail.com).

Thank you for your time and attention and for undertaking this important work.

Sincerely,

The Rapid City Indian Boarding School Lands Project