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Testimony of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe

House Committee on Natural Resources Subcommittee on Indigenous Peoples of the United States

Legislative Hearing on H.R. 5444, the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act

May 26, 2022

Introduction

Chair Teresa Leger Fernandez, Acting Ranking Member Congressman Jay Obernolte, and Members of the Subcommittee on Indigenous Peoples of the United States, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe appreciates the opportunity to testify on Representative Sharice Davids' bill H.R. 5444, the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act. The Tribe strongly supports H.R. 5444. Consideration of H.R. 5444 by the Subcommittee comes at a critical time in the history of the United States and Indian tribes.

Earlier this month, on May 11, 2022, Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland and Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs Bryan Newland released Volume One of an investigative report called for as a part of the Federal Boarding School Initiative. The Initiative is an important effort to investigate, study and address the impacts and legacy of federal boarding school laws, policies, and practices. Through this investigation the federal government must document its devastating laws and policies promoting assimilation and taking of tribal lands through forced removal of Indian children.

Only by addressing this past can we begin to address the intergenerational trauma that impacts our tribal members and much of Indian Country. Pursuant to federal laws and policies practiced at these schools included renaming our children and youth with English names, cutting the hair of youth, discouraging the use of our languages, religions, and cultural practices, and organizing youth to perform military drills. The Federal Indian Boarding School System also included manual labor as a significant part of school curricula.

This had a deadly impact on our youth. Our relatives who were forcibly removed from their loving homes and families and placed in boarding schools suffered physical, emotional, and psychological abuse. They succumbed to illness, disease, and death due to the policies and conditions of the schools. These children and our Tribe have suffered a loss of our culture and language due to the boarding schools' assimilation efforts. This systemic dispossession needs to be fully investigated in order to establish efforts to address the harmful impact to our people.

**Support for H.R. 5444,
the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act**

H.R. 5444 would build upon the efforts of Secretary Haaland, Assistant Secretary Newland and Interior's Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative. This process will be long and difficult, but we deserve a thorough and complete investigation that documents how many Indian Boarding Schools were established, how many Indian children attended these schools, what tribal nations they came from, and how many died or went missing as a result of these tragic policies. We must work together to uncover this information and begin the healing process by returning our ancestors taken from our families and communities. Only through truth and healing can our Tribe recover from this tragic history and begin to end the effects of the Federal Indian Boarding School System for our people.

H.R. 5444 would establish and empower a federal commission to investigate all federal agencies, church-operated schools, and private enterprises involved in implementing and providing for Indian Boarding Schools. H.R. 5444 would also establish and hold culturally relevant public hearings for survivors, victims, and tribal communities to testify and discuss the impact of the physical, psychological and spiritual violence at the Indian Boarding Schools. We strongly support all of these efforts and ask that Congress pass H.R. 5444.

Accountability for Treatment of Native Children and Historical Trauma

Starting in 1819 with the Indian Civilization Fund Act, the federal government collaborated with and empowered churches and private entities to establish hundreds of Indian Boarding Schools. Then in 1879, the federal government launched an official policy to forcibly remove Indian children from their families and tribal communities and place them in residential boarding schools. The Department of Interior found 408 Federal Indian Boarding Schools were created between 1918 and 1969.¹ In addition over 1,000 other federal and non-federal institutions were established to educate and assimilate Indian children.²

These military-style schools separated Indian children from their families, forced the adoption of Christian religions, values, and customs, and forbade our youth from using native languages and customs with the goal of eradicating their Indian identities. Congress often funded religious institutions or missionary organizations on a per capita basis for Indian children enrolled in their institutions.³ The intent of these measures and supporting federal policies was expressed by U.S. Captain Richard H. Pratt who established the primary model for all off-reservation

¹ Department of Interior's Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative Investigative Report, Volume 1, p. 6.

² *Id.* p. 7.

³ *Id.*

boarding schools. In his writings, Pratt developed and advocated for policies based on his idea of “kill the Indian to save the man.”

In fact, many Indian youth died as a result of federal Indian boarding school policies and practices. Based on initial investigations, Interior estimates that approximately nineteen Federal Indian Boarding Schools accounted for the death of over 500 American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian youth.⁴ The Department expects the number of recorded deaths to increase as its investigation continues.⁵ As a part of this investigation and to help our communities heal, we need to identify where our youth are buried and we need to bring them home.

Indian Boarding Schools Impacting the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe

Standing Rock Tribal Members were sent to boarding schools across the country. Many of our members attended one of the several boarding schools located in North or South Dakota. The Department of the Interior identified twelve federal Indian boarding schools in North Dakota that operated at fourteen different locations and thirty federal Indian boarding schools in South Dakota.⁶ These schools all received federal support to provide on-site boarding of Indian children for academic, vocational, and religious instruction. Some of these schools were located on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation, including St. Bernard’s Mission School, St. Elizabeth’s School, Grand River Boarding School, and St. Benedict Mission School. Many of these boarding schools in North and South Dakota are still in existence, but now operated by the Bureau of Indian Education or by tribes.

This past year we supported our Oceti Sakowin relatives from the Rosebud Sioux Tribe as they brought home their ancestors who perished at the Carlisle Indian Boarding School. Standing Rock Tribal Members also attended the Carlisle Indian School and may be among the hundreds of children, some of whom are buried in unmarked graves, that lost their lives there due to illness and harsh living conditions. H.R. 5444 would seek to obtain information about our children that attended schools such as Carlisle and assist us in bringing them back home.

While Carlisle Indian School is located on federal lands and subject to the provisions of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), many children who died at boarding schools located on non-federal land will not be provided the same protections and process to allow family members and Tribes to bring them home for a proper burial. The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe hopes that H.R. 5444 will identify a means to address the loopholes currently existing in NAGPRA that prevent us from retrieving our youth so they can be put to rest with honor, remembrance, and ceremony. We need to ensure that the remains of our children who so tragically lost their lives far away from their homes will be protected and returned.

Ability to Obtain Records and Information from Federal and Non-Federal Entities

The Commission on Truth and Healing established by H.R. 5444 would only be effective in achieving its mission if the Commission is provided with the authority to compel non-Federal

⁴ *Id.* p. 9.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*, Appendix A, List of Federal Indian Boarding Schools as of April 1, 2022.

organizations, such as religious organizations and churches, to provide information needed by the Commission. To date, many efforts have been made to investigate and collect information on Indian boarding schools, however little progress has been made due to the inability to compel organizations to release information that may be in their possession. If there is to be any healing, these findings cannot be covered up or ignored on any level. Standing Rock supports providing the Commission with subpoena power or some other means to work with other committees to timely obtain information necessary to uncover the truth of the boarding school history.

Advancement of Native Language Revitalization

In an effort to heal from the trauma created by the boarding school era, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and its programs and agencies have made a commitment to Lakota and Dakota language revitalization. We have a Culture and Language Department located in the Tribal Education Department that supports this effort and a Lakota Dakota Immersion School housed at Sitting Bull College. We hope that H.R. 5444 and Interior's Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative to investigate the legacy of Indian Boarding Schools will help to garner support for the development and expansion of culture and language programs to assist us with healing and restoring our culture and language.

Conclusion

If we are going to have any chance at moving past this dark history, it must start with an awareness and understanding of the harm caused by the federal government, churches, and private groups who advocated for and implemented these disastrous policies. We hope that the parallel efforts H.R. 5444 and Interior's Initiative on Indian Boarding Schools will promote efforts for the streamlined and efficient return of our ancestors to their homes to be buried in a respectful and culturally-appropriate manner. We have all endured more than a century of trauma from this federal family separation policy.

The Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act, H.R. 5444, would provide important additional authority to support Interior's Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative. The Tribe strongly supports expanding Interior's Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative beyond federal boarding schools to include church-operated schools or private enterprises that benefited from Indian children attending these institutions.

All of these efforts are needed to begin the healing process that our Tribe and all of Indian Country desperately needs. Truth and reconciliation are needed for all of these schools to this day. We cannot wait any longer to start the healing process.