



May 17, 2022

Dear House Natural Resource Committee:

My name is Farina King. I am an associate professor of history and affiliate of Cherokee and Indigenous Studies at Northeastern State University in Tahlequah, which is the homelands of the Cherokee Nation and United Keetoowah Band of Cherokees. I am a Diné (Navajo) historian who has shared and written about the Indian boarding school experiences of my father and relatives in various publications and sources. I write and testify in support of H.R. 5444 the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act.

Shí éí Bilagáanaa nishł́ dóó Kinyaa'áanii báshíshchíín. Bilagáanaa dashicheii dóó Tsinaajinii dashinálí. I just introduced myself by my clans, acknowledging my ancestors and kin as a woman of white English-American settler descent born for the Towering House and Black-Streaked Woods People of the Diné. I am a citizen of the Navajo Nation and the daughter of a boarding school survivor. I grew up with the stories of Indian boarding schools from my father and paternal relatives. Their stories have drawn me to understand Diné and diverse Indigenous experiences in boarding schools over generations.

I exist, because my father survived boarding school; and his mother before him survived boarding school; and her father before her survived boarding school; and his parents before him survived the Long Walk—the forced removal and concentration of Diné at Hwééłdi, “Land of the Suffering.” My father was only five years old when his parents dropped him off, without warning, at the Fort Wingate Indian Boarding School sometime around 1954. Because of my



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ancestors' perseverance and survival, my children and I have the opportunity to thrive as Diné. These thoughts really hit me recently, as I ponder how you are considering the passage of H.R. 5444 and the U.S. government is finally launching a Federal Indian Boarding School Truth Initiative with Secretary of Interior Deb Haaland.

In my first book, *The Earth Memory Compass: Diné Landscapes and Education in the Twentieth Century* (2018), I share the story of how my father ran away from a Ramah Indian school dormitory. I woke up one morning crying, rethinking about my father's story of running away, because it dawned on me that my father almost did not survive boarding school. He almost froze to death, when he ran away with another boy in the winter. I asked him if I could share this story again, and he consented to it. He told me how bullies at the school led him to run away, and he asked friends if they wanted to run away with him. Another boy decided to come with him because he wanted to go home too. On their way, they got caught in a canyon during a snow drift that almost killed them. But they were fortunately found by a rancher who saved their lives. I thought of all the stories of boarding school runaways and how some children died that same way that my father almost did—freezing to death in their attempt to return home. When I asked him why he ran away, he told me that he “did not run away from the education.”

Think of all the daughters, sons, brothers, sisters, who are family, and they never returned home or they passed away soon after getting home. Think of their posterity that could have been. My father should have never had to face such struggles and hardships. This history lives on in him, me, and my children. Diné and many Native Americans and Indigenous peoples continue to fight every day for basic human rights such as access to clean water, shelter, food, healthcare,



and schooling for and by their own people. The Navajo Nation is still fighting to reclaim Diné education.

My father may have survived the boarding school, but he suffered many injuries—and not just physical ones. He will never say these things, because he does not live his life as a victim. He is an active agent who has persevered through many tragedies but has also lived in joy and peace. Yet, my father never taught me and my siblings Diné bizaad, so I fear that the seed of the Navajo language that he has carried may not survive. There is much that we still must do to pursue healing. And it is important to recognize that healing is not a check box to be marked off. Healing is a cyclical, ongoing journey through generations and time.

Indigenous kinship, community networks, and protocols are essential to understanding Indian boarding schools and to the ongoing journeys of healing and reconciliation. There are many different tribal nations and Indigenous communities, including some that are intertribal in urban settings. Every specific context and Indigenous community and kinship networks must be connected hand-in-hand with these initiatives to address the impacts of Indian boarding schools. The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition and so many others have been paving the way for this truth, healing, and reconciliation. My friends Marsha Small and Dr. Preston McBride have been working on finding and accounting for the lost boarding schoolchildren, including those in unmarked mass graves, that did not survive Indian boarding schools. We have collaborated on providing guides to Indigenous protocols based on our experiences and work.



We need to support one another in these efforts to acknowledge and learn of the truths, perspectives, and experiences of Indian boarding schools; to stop the boarding school legacy of genocidal practices and approaches that seek to eradicate Indigeneity; and to embrace and support Indigenous sovereignties, ways of knowing, and education. Value Indigenous stories, histories, and lives. Actions reveal these values. We can return the lost boarding schoolchildren home by finding them, learning about them, and supporting and connecting with their families and Indigenous communities which include boarding school survivors.

My recent book about one of the largest federal Indian boarding schools, the Intermountain Indian School, that I co-authored with Drs. Mike Taylor and James Swensen is titled *Returning Home* (2021) because of such interconnections of healing and reconciling Indian boarding school pasts with Indigenous communities today and their futures. You can listen to more Indian boarding school testimonies through my work such as some of the episodes of my podcast, [Native Circles](#), about Native American histories and lived experiences that I co-host with Alaska Native scholar Sarah Newcomb. Please continue the languages that the children were punished for speaking; be sure the sick, hungry, and homeless of Indigenous communities can receive care and support; teach all about Indigenous histories from Indigenous perspectives and voices; and listen to Indigenous communities, following their directions and guidance towards healing. These are only some beginning steps, but we all need to begin somewhere step by step. Boarding School history matters because Native American families have paid far too great a price to educate their children, and they continue to this day to pay that price.



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I ask you to please support the passage of H.R. 5444 the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act. Thank you to the Natural Resources Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States. Please let me know if I can provide any additional information and testimonial for your consideration.

Respectfully,

Farina King, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of History, Northeastern State University

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Website: <https://farinaking.com/>

Native Circles podcast: <https://nativecirclespodcast.com/>