

**Testimony of Representative Sharice L. Davids (KS-03)**  
**House Natural Resources Committee**  
**Subcommittee on Indigenous Peoples of the United States**  
**May 12, 2022, Hybrid Legislative Hearing**

*In support of H.R. 5444, the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act of 2021*

Thank you, Chairwoman Leger Fernández and Ranking Member Obernolte, for holding this hearing today. I appreciate the opportunity to provide brief remarks in support of my bill, H.R. 5444, the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act of 2021.

I'm a proud member of the Ho-Chunk Nation of Wisconsin. My mother is Crystal Herriage, my grandparents are Ruth Stacy and Lawrence Little George, who are both survivors of Indian Boarding Schools. I'm also honored to be one of the first two Native American women ever elected to Congress. I would not be here today without the resilience of my ancestors and those that came before me.

The policies and assimilation practices of the United States had the sole purpose of culturally assimilating American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian children at residential boarding schools across the country. Children were coerced and many times compelled to attend boarding schools away from their home. Many children did not return to their families or their communities. Those that did return lost generations' worth of cultural knowledge, stories, and traditions; and communities lost their language keepers, cultural practitioners, and future leaders.

As Co-Chair of the Congressional Native American Caucus, I work with the other Native members and our colleagues to ensure that the needs of Tribal Nations and communities are prioritized, and our voices are included in discussions when developing legislation. That is why I worked with Native American Caucus Co-Chair Tom Cole to introduce H.R. 5444 and worked across the aisle to gather bipartisan support.

This legislation will establish a formal commission in the United States to investigate and document the attempted termination of cultures and languages of Indigenous peoples and assimilation practices that occurred against Native people through U.S. Indian boarding school policies.

This investigation will be documented through culturally respectful and meaningful public hearings and the Commission will receive guidance from a Truth and Healing Advisory Board to develop recommendations for the federal government in a final report due no later than five years after enactment.

This legislation builds on the important work being conducted at the Department of Interior. We saw yesterday in Vol. I of their Federal Boarding School Initiative Report that the separation of Native children and families in the name of civilized assimilation caused significant impacts.<sup>1</sup> This bill does not duplicate the efforts of the Department of Interior but rather expands and continues to acknowledge that legacy with the help of survivors, tribal leaders, policy experts, and communities that can help guide this process.

As I am sure you will learn from our witnesses today, the impacts of Boarding School Policies have touched all Native peoples both past and present. I would like to acknowledge how painful or uncomfortable these and future conversations will be. I honor and thank the witnesses and survivors today who are brave enough to inform my colleagues about the impacts Boarding School Policies had on their lives and communities.

There were fourteen federal Indian boarding schools in Kansas.<sup>2,3</sup> One that resides in the Kansas Third District is the Shawnee Indian Manual Labor School. Located in Fairway, Kansas, it is now preserved as the Shawnee Indian Mission State Historic Site. According to the Kansas State Historical Society, the school operated from 1838 to 1862 and at its largest enrolled nearly 200 children.<sup>4</sup>

In Lawrence Kansas, Haskell Indian Industrial Training School was one of the largest early boarding schools in the country. While I was fortunate to attend what is now Haskell Indian Nations University, there still resides a history that must not be forgotten. The campus includes known gravesites of over 100 Native children who died at the school when it was implementing assimilationist practices.<sup>5</sup>

This Commission would build off Secretary Haaland's Federal Boarding School Initiative by collecting documents and testimony outside the federal boarding school system. The Department of Interior's efforts along with the bipartisan support of this bill shows that that the branches of the federal government are ready to work towards fully acknowledging its contribution to this history.

As federal partners, we owe Native children and lost relatives the time and resources to investigate and fully understand how we got here. Establishing a Truth and Healing Commission will bring survivors, experts, federal partners, and tribal leaders to the table to continue this investigation and develop a culturally respectful healing process.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/dup/inline-files/bsi\\_investigative\\_report\\_may\\_2022\\_508.pdf](https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/dup/inline-files/bsi_investigative_report_may_2022_508.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/dup/inline-files/appendix\\_c\\_school\\_maps\\_508.pdf](https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/dup/inline-files/appendix_c_school_maps_508.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/dup/inline-files/appendix\\_a\\_b\\_school\\_listing\\_profiles\\_508.pdf](https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/dup/inline-files/appendix_a_b_school_listing_profiles_508.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.kshs.org/p/indian-mission-schools-collection-1837-1879/13767>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.kansascity.com/news/local/article38114166.html>

If Native children were able to endure and survive the Indian Boarding School era in our nation, then we should be able to find it in ourselves to fully investigate what happened to our relatives and work towards a brighter path for the next seven generations.

I'd like to thank Chairwoman Leger Fernández and Ranking Member Obernolte once again for calling this legislative hearing today and I look forward to working with the Subcommittee in advancing this important legislation.

Thank you and I yield back.