



**Testimony of  
Ben Barnes  
Chief of the Shawnee Tribe  
Before the  
House Subcommittee for the Indigenous Peoples of the United States  
Hearing on "The Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies  
in the U.S. Act" (H.R. 5444)**

**howesi kiiseki (good day)**, Madam Chair, and thank you for the opportunity to address this committee regarding H.R. 5444, "The Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies in the U.S. Act." My name is Ben Barnes, and I am proud to serve as the Chief of the Shawnee Tribe headquartered in Miami, Oklahoma. It is an honor to be here today. I honor, respect, and admire the bravery and perseverance of my fellow panelists who survived boarding schools.

At its core, Washington, D.C. is a city of remembrance. From the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial, Washington, D.C. embraces our past and honors those that helped shape its future. Tragedies and acts of genocide are also memorialized lest they be repeated.

Monuments often point to events, but society draws meaning and deep understanding from the stories of individual people. That is why the Holocaust Museum is filled with testimonies from survivors and remembrances of victims. That is also why more than 58,000 names have been carefully engraved upon the Vietnam Memorial. These people and their stories matter.

For over a century, it was the policy of the United States government to tear Native American children away from their families, communities, and culture to "civilize" them by erasing any vestige of Native identity. And yet, relatively little is known about

the tens of thousands of kids who suffered at these institutions. What were their names? What did they experience? How many of them died? Where were they buried? These children's stories have been cast aside, forgotten, or lost—as if this tragedy never happened. These children matter. Their stories matter.

As Chief of the Shawnee Tribe, the issue of Indian boarding schools is extremely personal for me. Over 150 years ago, Shawnee children were sent to the Shawnee Indian Manual Labor Boarding School in what is now Fairway, Kansas.

In many ways, that school, which still stands today, is a memorial to the struggles and perseverance of the Shawnee people. But like other sites, its history remains incomplete. We know that the residents there were malnourished and mistreated. We can still see the carvings left in the windowless attic where children were forced to sleep in hot summers and cold winters. We know the school was closed in 1862 due to abuse and mismanagement. But we don't know the full extent of what went on because, in large part, we don't know the stories of the kids that went there, including the names of those that died or the locations of their burial sites.

Finding answers and honoring these children's stories is important to the Shawnee Tribe. We have engaged historians and researchers to assemble all available information regarding the Shawnee Indian Manual Labor Boarding School. We have found that some records are seemingly lost forever. We have also discovered that crucial parts of the story are inaccessible within government archives or exist within the private collections of the religious institutions that operated some of these schools.

As time continues to pass, we will lose the testimonies of survivors and more documents will become misplaced. That is the importance of H.R. 5444. Creating a mandated commission empowered to locate every available record and ensure this history is preserved and made available for examination.

Finding answers to long-asked questions will not be without consequences. Understanding the stories of our children will cause mourning among our people. The discovery of unmarked graves will provoke difficult conversations about how best to honor those children. But amidst the pain, a burden will be lifted. Acceptance, healing, and growth will follow.



So, this commission's purpose is not to point fingers, lay blame, or evoke guilt in people who are generations removed from these atrocities. It will simply help American Indian communities find information that would otherwise be unattainable and bring an opportunity for some semblance of closure.

We cannot go back and change the past. But we can and must hold ourselves accountable for doing the right thing *today*.

The stories of human suffering at these institutions can no longer be hidden from view or ignored. It is time that they take their place in the public conscience. For this reason, I, as the elected leader of the sovereign Shawnee Tribe as well as a grandchild of a boarding school survivor, respectfully urge passage of H.R. 5444.

**nekocaaye, hiini leeki (that is all)**



Ben Barnes, Chief  
Shawnee Tribe

