“Kill the Indian, Save the Man:” An Introduction to the History of Boarding Schools

The government of the United States had an “Indian problem.” To address it, they enlisted Christian churches and decided to remove children from our communities and our culture. They attempted to replace Tribal values, languages, and ways of knowing with dominant white Christian values, religion, culture, and language.

By 1926, nearly 83% of Indian school-age children were attending boarding schools. The multigenerational impact of removing children from families and communities cannot be overstated. The U.S. Indian boarding schools are directly responsible for and inextricably linked to loss of Tribal language, loss of Tribal cultural resources, and ongoing intergenerational trauma in Native communities today. In order for us to have justice, we need to begin with the truth.

TRUTH. HEALING. JUSTICE. RECONCILIATION.

Justice in Indian Country cannot be fully realized without a major shift in our national narrative. The United States government must admit and accept responsibility for its boarding school experiment and other white supremacist policies, including removal. Churches have also yet to acknowledge their role in this chapter of cultural genocide in U.S. history. Various church denominations

“Sometimes a little boy would die from loneliness.” How? “They would just stop eating and die in their sleep, we would find them in the mornings.”
Lenny (Ojibwe), Chemawa Boarding School, Oregon

“I was four years old when stolen and taken to Chemawa, Oregon. The matron grabbed me and my sister, stripped off our clothes, laid us in a trough and scrubbed our genitals with lye soap, yelling at us that we were ‘filthy savages, dirty. I had to walk on my tip toes screaming in pain.’
– Elsie (Yakima), Chemawa Boarding School, Oregon

Group of Native American children at Haskell Institute, Lawrence, Kansas, circa 1884-89.

Children as young as four were forcibly removed from their homes, families, and communities during the Boarding School Era. Children were taken to schools far away where they were punished for speaking their Native language; banned from engaging in traditional or cultural practices; and stripped of traditional clothing, hair, personal belongings, and behaviors reflective of their Native culture. They suffered physical, sexual, cultural, and spiritual abuse and neglect and experienced treatment that in many cases constituted torture. Many children never returned home, and the U.S. government has yet to account for their fates.

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Intro to Boarding School History (CONTINUED)

benefited from federal funding (via the Indian Civilization Fund Act), which was used to run the Indian boarding schools across the U.S. It is estimated that half of all Indian boarding schools were run by churches. Most U.S. citizens do not even know of the existence of these genocidal boarding schools, let alone that they have had lasting effects on the health and well-being of Native American communities. We cannot have reconciliation before healing. In order to have healing, we must reveal the truth.

WE MUST TELL THE WHOLE TRUTH

Beginning with the Indian Civilization Fund Act of March 3, 1819, and the Peace Policy of 1869, the United States, in concert with and at the urging of several Christian denominations, adopted a boarding school policy expressly intended to implement Christian genocide through the removal and reprogramming of American Indian and Alaska Native children. The stated purpose of this policy was “Kill the Indian, Save the Man.” The U.S. Boarding School Era emerged from the federal government’s desire to deal with the “Indian problem” by using education as a weapon. At the same time (the end of the 19th century), the U.S. hunted bison for its own recreation and extermination. At the same time (the end of the 19th century), U.S. soldiers, land speculators, and big-game hunters rampaged across the Great Plains, and the U.S. government declared war on the American bison. In 1874, the U.S. Boarding School Era emerged from the federal government’s desire to deal with the “Indian problem” by using education as a weapon. At the same time (the end of the 19th century), the U.S. hunted bison for its own recreation and extermination. At the same time (the end of the 19th century), U.S. soldiers, land speculators, and big-game hunters rampaged across the Great Plains, and the U.S. government declared war on the American bison.

We still do not know how many total children were removed from their homes and families and placed in boarding schools operated by the federal government and Christian churches. However, preliminary statistics tell us that within the first twenty years of the boarding school policy, 20,000 children had already been taken from their families and placed in schools far from their homes. Only twenty-five years later, that number more than tripled, and 60,000 children were in boarding schools by 1925.

THE FORMATION OF THE BOARDING SCHOOL HEALING COALITION

The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition (NABS) was formed because of public outcry about the lasting effects of the boarding school era. Our mission is to tell the truth about the history of the U.S. boarding school policy and the involvement of many church denominations. We seek truth, action, and justice to support community-led healing for boarding school survivors and their descendants.

Our work and formation was encouraged by the precedent set by Canada, which formed the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 2010 using settlement funds from a class-action lawsuit against the Canadian government for boarding school abuses. The TRC was a five-year commission resulting in a seven-volume report and 94 Calls to Action. Following the example set by Canada’s First Nations, Native leaders participating in a 2011 symposium in the U.S. called for the formation of the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition.

Through its Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Canada is the most recent country to denounce policies that were designed to “Kill all that is Indian” in its students to “Save the Man.” In doing so, they shed light on the harm that this policy and the way it was carried out caused. Until now, the truth has largely been swept under the rug, ignored by the public, and left out of textbooks about U.S. history. But the impacts of intergenerational trauma have continued to fester and compound in Native American and Alaskan Native communities. By bringing the harms of the past and their continued effects out into the light, we can begin to create healing for all who were, and continue to be, impacted.

DO THE U.S. BOARDING SCHOOL EXPERIMENT ACCOMPLISH ITS GOALS?

Native peoples are, for the most part, assimilated into modern English-speaking contemporary culture. However, it failed to completely erase our heritage, our cultures, and our rights as Indigenous persons. We are still here, but we live with the lasting legacies of cultural genocide.

Many believe the boarding schools are repeatedly high, it should be noted that not all experiences were negative. Many met their spouses at boarding school or learned a craft that provided for their families. Yet, at what cost? What did they give up in order to go to boarding school and gain a new lease on life through Western education?

While the rates of physical and sexual abuse at American Indian boarding schools were reportedly high, it should be noted that not all experiences were negative. Many met their spouses at boarding school or learned a craft that provided for their families. Yet, at what cost? What did they give up in order to go to boarding school and gain a new lease on life through Western education? We could hear the cries of the girls being molested at night. When my little sister got sick and was sent to the infirmary, I held for three days and nights under her bed to make sure no one got to her.

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Racism in the Native American and Alaska Native experience is deeply connected to genocide, literal and cultural, as well as loss of land through forced removal and coercion. The groundwork for this was laid by three papal documents, known collectively as the “Doctrine of Discovery.” The first of these papal bulls, Dum Diversarum, was issued in 1452 by Pope Nicholas V to the Portuguese monarch, King Alfonso V, providing sanctuary and protection for the invasion and colonization of land inhabited by non-Christians. The pope instructed the king to “capture, vanquish, and subdue the pagans, pagans, and other enemies of Christ,” to “put them into perpetual slavery” and “take all their possessions and property.”

This doctrine also refers to a part of U.S. law, using the papal bulls and also several additional rulings particular to the U.S. One of the lasting legacies of this ethnocentric doctrine is the legal and cultural belief that Indigenous people do not have the rights to our own lands, religions, cultures, economies, governance, or even how we raise and educate our own children.

WE HAVE A RIGHT TO KNOW THE TRUTH

In 2000, the Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BLA) at the time, Kevin Gover (Pawnee), acknowledged boarding schools’ historic emotional, psychological, physical, and spiritual abuse of children. Gover recognized this history at the Ceremony Acknowledging the 200th Anniversary of the Establishment of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which took part in carrying out the boarding school policies:

“This agency [the Bureau of Indian Affairs] forbade the speaking of Indian languages, prohibited the conduct of traditional religious ceremonies, outlawed traditional government, and made Indian people ashamed of who they were. Worse of all, the Bureau of Indian Affairs committed these acts against the children entrusted to its schools, brutalizing them emotionally, psychologically, physically, and spiritually. Even in this era of self-determination, when the Bureau of Indian Affairs is at long last serving as an advocate for Indian people in an atmosphere of mutual respect, the legacy of these misdeeds haunts us. The trauma of shame, fear and anger has passed from one generation to the next, and manifests itself in the rampant alcoholism, drug abuse, and domestic violence that plague Indian country.

Many of our people lives are marked by violence, tragedy and despair. Our communities are divided and torn. We suffer today in Indian country result from the failures of this agency: Poverty, ignorance, and disease have been the product of this agency’s work.”

Graves marked "Unknow[n]" at Carlisle Indian Boarding School cemetery.

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Timeline of U.S. Indian Policy—Layers of Historical Trauma

Six Phases of Historical Unresolved Grief: Traumatic Events “inflict a wounding on the soul” that lasts through generations (Soul Wound) 10

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Boarding School Generations

As Brenda Child writes about in “Boarding School Seasons,” assimilation was not the true purpose of the boarding schools. If so, why segregate American Indians and Alaskan Natives?

First Generation
- Post Civil War through World War I
- End of the Indian Wars
- Military-style schools, uniforms, haircuts
- Forced assimilation
- Prohibition of Native languages and cultures

Second Generation
- Great Depression Era through World War II
- Students bilingual
- Boarding school becomes an escape route from poverty
- Natives get the right to vote (1924)

Third Generation
- Post War Era through the Civil Rights Era
- Boarding schools scaled back in favor of public schools
- Students confront racism and discrimination for their mixed heritage
- Boarding schools begin to include vocational training

Fourth Generation
- Post Civil Rights Era to present day
- Some 73 schools that began under the historical boarding school era, such as Sherman, Haskell, Santa Fe, Chemawa, are still in operation today
- Native language and culture is often promoted instead of prohibited
- Despite Tribal involvement in schools, legacies of the historical boarding school era still impact communities today

From Contact to Present Day

1646 Henry John Hope杳他的 first sermon as an Indian audience. Hailed the missionaries as Indians' saviors. (1646-1697)
1675 U.S. colonists steal Native American’s land and start the Treaty Trail. (1675-1790)
1775 U.S. declares itself an independent nation. (1775-1880)
1830 Indian Removal Act Androcles signed a treaty to remove tribes from their lands. (1830-1860)
1851 Second Treaty of Brattin’s Indian Appropriation Act The Indians of Wisconsin. (1851-1880)
1879 First Indian boarding school opened Over 10,000 children from tribes all over the U.S. and Alaska boarding schools. (1879-1930)
1928 Morant Report A government report cites maltreatment, poor living conditions, cruel treatment, and corporal punishment as having disastrous effects on mental health in Indian boarding schools.
1969 U.S. Senate Report “Indian Education: A National Tragedy, A National Challenge,” also known as the Kennedy Report,忠实everything schools a Failure and Tragedy.”
1969 Indian Self Determination and Education Assistance Act Gives Tribal governments the power to enter into contracts with the U.S. Department of Education for the purposes of tribal education.
2001 No Child Left Behind Act
2001 Indian Self Determination and Education Assistance Act
2018 Boarding School Changes

Indian Land Cessions

How the U.S. dealt with the “Indian problem” to make way for westward expansion, boarding schools, relocation, and adoption—all of which were used to break apart Tribal communities

Pre-Colonization
All current U.S. land was originally Native American land, known as Turtle Island.

by the time the gold rush hit, the U.S. had broken the treaty agreements and made new laws to gain more land—Tribal Nations had already been pushed west of the Mississippi River, after being promised that the U.S. would respect their territory according to the treaties.

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Indian Boarding Schools: The First Indian

A SYSTEM OF DOMINATION

In 1958, as Indian boarding schools were starting to wane, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) created the Indian Adoption Project.

Both the U.S. Indian Boarding School and the Indian Adoption policies were intentionally designed to force assimilation and erode Native cultures and family systems.

“This was not an accident of history, it was a government program designed to save the government money and dismantle Tribal Nations. All under the guise of integrating Native children more fully into American society,” said Melissa Olson (Ojibwe) in a documentary she produced exploring the cultural and historical impacts of forced adoption.12

When the BIA started the project it enlisted social workers to visit reservations and convince parents to sign away their rights. It was a way to assimilate these children into "civilization," Olson said. The government believed adoption was the best option for dealing with the perennial "Indian problem."13

“When you removed a child and put them in a non-Indian family, they wouldn’t be getting to know other Indian people as they would in a boarding school, they would hopefully be raised in a middle-class family. And so the idea was that they would be fully assimilated and at no cost to the government,” said Margaret Jacobs, non-Native author of “A Generation Removed,” a book on forced Indian adoption.14

Jacobs believed adoption was the best option for "civilization," Olson said. The government produced exploring the cultural and historical impact of Indian Adoption policies were intentionally.

How Many Boarding Schools, How Many Children?

The records of Indian boarding schools are scattered in public archives and private collections across the country. As a result, we still do not know how many total children were actually removed from their families and placed in boarding schools. This is what we do know:

By 1926, the Indian Office estimated that nearly 83% of Indian school-age children were attending boarding schools18

Native children are still placed in foster care at higher rates per capita than any other ethnic group and these placements often still lead to adoption with non-Native families despite ICWA.

In 1969, the Senate convened a Special Subcommittee on Indian Education to investigate the challenges facing Native students. The resulting report, titled "Indian Education: A National Tragedy, A National Challenge," informally known as the "Kennedy Report," delivered a scathing indictment of the federal government’s Indian education policies.16 It concluded that the "dominant policy...of coerced assimilation" has had "disastrous effects on the education of Indian children." The Subcommittee detailed 60 recommendations for overhauling the system, all of which centered on "increased Indian participation and control of their own education programs." Congress also moved to enhance the role of Native nations in education, with the Indian Education Act of 1972, the landmark Indian Self-determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975, the Tribally Controlled Community College Assistance Act of 1978, and the Tribally Controlled Schools Act of 1988. These laws provided tribal governments, communities, and families with unprecedented opportunities to influence the direction of their children’s future. Indian education has made much progress in the self-determination era, but acknowledgement and awareness of the boarding school legacy is needed to create a paradigm change.
### American Indian Boarding Schools by State

**Alabama**
- Aruba Manual Labor School and Mission

**Arizona**
- Navajo Mountain
- Navajo Training School
- Low Mountain
- Leupp
- Kinlichee Indian School
- Keams Canyon
- Kaibeto Indian School
- Greasewood Springs Community School
- Globe New Jerusalem
- Fort Defiance
- Fort Apache (Theodore Roosevelt)
- Dilcon Community School
- Colorado River
- Chinle

**Arkansas**
- Haskell Indian Nations University

**California**
- Arizona (51)
- Alaska (33)
- Nevada (3)
- Colorado (10)
- Idaho (9)
- Iowa (3)
- New Mexico (26)
- Nevada (29 States)
- Oregon (5)
- Montana (17)
- Nevada (17)
- Oregon (11)
- South Dakota (25)

**Colorado**
- Colorado River Indian School (now Fort Lewis College)
- Good Shepherd Indian School

**Connecticut**
- Massachusetts (14)
- Rhode Island (8)
- New York (7)
- Pennsylvania (7)

**Delaware**
- Pennsylvania (12)

**District of Columbia**
- National Capital Region (12)

**Florida**
- Hialeah

**Georgia**
- Georgia (17)

**Indiana**
- Indiana (18)

**Iowa**
- Iowa (14)

**Kansas**
- Haskell Indian Training School (now Haskell Indian Nations University)

**Kentucky**
- Kentucky (19)

**Louisiana**
- Louisiana (21)

**Maine**
- Maine (3)

**Maryland**
- Maryland (13)

**Massachusetts**
- Massachusetts (14)

**Michigan**
- Michigan (6)

**Minnesota**
- Minnesota (15)

**Mississippi**
- Mississippi (1)

**Missouri**
- Missouri (20)

**Montana**
- Montana (17)

**Nebraska**
- Nebraska (7)

**Nevada**
- Nevada (3)

**New Brunswick**
- New Jersey (10)

**New Mexico**
- New Mexico (26)

**New York**
- New York (7)

**North Carolina**
- North Carolina (10)

**North Dakota**
- North Dakota (12)

**Ohio**
- Ohio (1)

**Oklahoma**
- Oklahoma (13)

**Oregon**
- Oregon (5)

**Pennsylvania**
- Pennsylvania (7)

**Rhode Island**
- Rhode Island (8)

**South Dakota**
- South Dakota (25)

**Wyoming**
- Wyoming (5)

**Utah**
- Utah (4)

**Virginia**
- Virginia (2)

**Washington**
- Washington (13)

**Wisconsin**
- Wisconsin (12)

**West Virginia**
- West Virginia (4)

**Wisconsin**
- Wisconsin (12)

**Wyoming**
- Wyoming (5)

**9
denominations**

**Catholic (80)**
- Presbyterian (21)
- Baptist (4)
- Dutch Reformed (2)
- Evangelical (2)
- Mennonite (4)
- Anglican (2)
- Unitarian (1)

Originaly compiled by Dr. Denise Lajimodiere for the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition (NABS), this list also includes considerable contributions from Dr. Rasa Mirin, Dr. Samuel B. Torres, and Ellie Heaton. This list may not be complete.
The legacy of the boarding schools is loss of familial ties and structures, loss of language, cultural decimation, and other violations of familial ties and structures, loss of language, and experiences with trauma that have gone unrecognized and unresolved, and affect their children’s development. The trauma the children suffered has gone unrecognized and unresolved, and is passed on to each subsequent generation where it continues to work in, undermine, and devastate. Native American individuals, families, and communities.

The science of epigenetics (the study of changes in gene activity) is beginning to uncover evidence that intergenerational trauma is real, and historical trauma contributes to the development of illnesses such as PTSD, depression, and Type 2 Diabetes. High rates of addiction, suicide, mental illness, and sexual violence may in part also be influenced by historical trauma.

“Trauma leaves a mark on DNA of some victims: Gene-environment interaction causes dysregulation of the stress hormone system. As a result, those affected find themselves less able to cope with stressful situations throughout their lives, frequently leading to depression, post-traumatic stress disorder or anxiety disorders in adulthood. Doctors and scientists hope these discoveries will yield new treatment strategies tailored to individual patients, as well as increased public awareness of the importance of protecting children from trauma and its consequences.”

Dr. Rachel Yehuda, Director of the Mount Sinai School of Medicine’s Traumatic Stress Studies Division, noticed an epigenetic change, a chemical change in a marker attached to the gene itself. Yehuda and her team studied survivors of the Holocaust and found that direct survivors experience an adaptation or response to a horrendous environmental event. However, they also found that the descendants of Holocaust survivors respond to this parental trauma indicating that the children of Holocaust survivors could be more likely to develop stress or anxiety disorders.  

“American Indian and Alaskan Native children experience posttraumatic stress disorder at the same rate as veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan and triple the rate of the general population.”

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DNA is passed from parent to child. Yehuda’s research suggests parental life experiences can modify their body chemistry and those modifications can be transmitted to children as well.

Dr. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, defines historical trauma as…

“…the cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over one’s lifetime and from generation to generation following loss of lives, land and vital aspects of culture.”

EPIGENETICS: A study that focused on children of Holocaust survivors found that trauma effects may linger in the body chemistry of the next generation. These children:

“could be more likely to develop stress or anxiety disorders.”

In addition to trauma being passed on in our DNA, the CDC has also found that Adverse Childhood Experiences can directly affect rates of “future violence victimization and perpetration and lifelong health and opportunity.”

The experiences of boarding school survivors directly influence their experiences as adults and the experiences of their descendants and family members.

According to a 1997 study by the CDC and Kaiser Permanente, exposure to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) is linked to chronic diseases and higher rates of mortality.

In some Indigenous cultures, storytelling is an art with cultural protocols surrounding how and when to tell stories because the stories have lives of their own and must be cared for, respected, and honored. NABS seeks to be respectful of these traditions, engaging in cross-sector collaboration with academics, educators, advocates, legal experts, counselors, and healers in its work toward surfacing stories and healing trauma. Some may call the boarding school stories “research” or “interviews” while others may call them “testimony” or “cases.” Regardless, these stories must be treated with the utmost care, both in the collection so as to not trigger trauma responses and in the sharing so as to respect the giver and spirit of the story.

Here are some stories that were collected by Dr. Denise Lajimodiere and Christine Diindiisi McCleave, M.A., during interviews with boarding school survivors for separate research. These stories highlight the injustice that was experienced by these students, to validate the trauma they’ve carried all these years. It’s time to Break the Silence, Begin the Healing⁶⁸. The names have been changed to protect the identities of the students. Claire is now an elder and tells about boarding school experiences at two different Catholic Indian boarding schools in the 1960s. When she was just a little girl in first grade she experienced corporal punishment and shaming tactics from a nun.

“I was locked in a closet by a nun for discipline. It was pitch black, they used a skeleton key to lock the door. I had to pee and banged on the door for hours, crying. When they opened the door and saw I had peed my pants, I was whipped with a short belt, doubled.”
STORIES OF BOARDING SCHOOL TRAUMA

A Pipe Carrier told us that he was threatened by a Christian who told him, “You better open your life to Jesus or God will get you. You Natives are always practicing hocus pocus, it’s all devil-worshipping stuff.”

Another boarding school survivor told us how the religious leaders of the school treated him, saying “I was working in the mail room with a priest. A kid came in and wanted his mail. I handed a letter to him. The priest took a board and whacked me in the head. I got knocked out and woke up on the floor by myself because all mail had to be opened by the priest first, and he blackened out certain things before giving to students.” The older added, “I don’t understand why they didn’t feel that we knew about God, you know? Why did they think that we didn’t have a God? That we understood.” And he said, “Didn’t the Bible say that there’s only one God? And I believe that there’s only one God, it’s just that we have different ways to express worship towards that one God.”

Despite abuses by religious leaders, many Native Americans are still practicing Christians today. A Native American woman who still identifies as Christian admitted that “We’ve probably had the worst holocaust in the history of the human community happen here in America because of the death of so many Indian people. We had the government and the church that came in to destroy the culture of Indian people and to take over the lands of Indian people. Some of those practices have continued on, that have touched our generations, when you look at what boarding schools have done to Indian people where they literally kidnapped children out of their Indian homes—to take a child off to somewhere else and punish them for speaking their language or trying to practice their religion or punishing them because they were going to run away and go back home. So we were the victims of horrible atrocities and some of that has been done by the church, but that was the cultural church, not the theology of the church—in other words, it was man, it was not God.”

However, for some, there is still no explaining the treatment of our children in Indian boarding schools under the guise of Christ’s love. Claire told us,

“If you went to communion you got to eat, if not, you did not eat. And they fed us pure slop, but if you didn’t eat it, you got whipped with a wide leather belt with handles on it. I was only eight years old and sometimes I would eat a younger girl’s food so she didn’t get beaten.”

Elly, a boarding school survivor, shared “I was four years old when I was stolen and taken to Chemawa, Oregon.” As if being ripped from her family wasn’t enough, the abuse continued when she got to school. “The matron grabbed me and my sister, stripped off our clothes, laid us in a trough and scrubbed our genitals with lye soap, yelling at us that we were ‘filthy savages, dirty’. I had to walk on my tiptoes screaming in pain.” Others were made to kneel on a broomstick for 15-minute increments as punishment for bad behavior. “We had to stick our noses against the wall at the same time. If we moved our nose it was another 15 minutes extra” she added.

Untold stories of sexual abuse are carried throughout Nātivé communities as well. Adela, another survivor, said, “We could hear the cries of the girls being molested at night. When my little sister got sick and was sent to the infirmary, I had for three days and nights under her bed to make sure no one got to her.” Many are haunted by nightmares of the abuse. They suffer symptoms of post-traumatic stress and sometimes don’t know why. Mike shared some difficult memories from his time at boarding school. He was raped by older boys—other students. “How do you tell your wife or children that?” he asked. Mike recalled the events and said “I would be screaming into my pillow. It happened hundreds of times. It still have physical problems.”

Many believe that healing historical trauma from boarding schools occurs when we empower our communities by engaging in our cultural traditions and speaking our language.

THE PHYSICAL AND SEXUAL ABUSE THAT NO ONE TALKS ABOUT

So many of our Tribal communities are dealing with the ongoing impacts of violence and sexual abuse that started in the boarding schools.

Not only were children subjected to sexual violence, but they were forced by staff to witness or participate in physical and mental abuse towards each other. If they refused, they were punished. Lenny, now 77 years old, shared that when he was 10,

“They laid me over my bed and two boys held my hands and two others my feet. Each boy had to hit me with a studded belt. If anyone let up he had to take my place. I passed out and woke up in the infirmary. I was there for two weeks—I had to sleep on my stomach. I still have the scars. They called it the ‘gauntlet’.”

Lenny shared many stories of abuse from his time at Chemawa Boarding School, including being the witness of a murder, “They killed a Blackfeet boy using a gauntlet beating—ruptured his kidneys. They shipped his body home with a note saying he died bravely.” Lenny explained how the boys at the school had to build the coffins for students who died there. Sometimes the children from their tribe would say a secret burial prayer for them. These stories remind us just how traumatizing boarding schools were for many children. While no child should ever have to experience abuse, it is especially troubling that these experiences happened after children were ripped away from their parents and into state custody. Many of our relatives are still dealing with the impacts of abuses they endured in boarding school. Some are not ready to tell their stories, and even those who are ready may not be able to bring their cases to court. Statutes of limitations in many states prevent survivors from bringing forth newer cases. While some find healing in other ways, those who want to tell their stories and hold their abusers responsible should have the ability to do so in a court of law. We must continue to push for survivors’ voices to be heard.
In a 2016 survey by NABS, respondents said Native peoples need acknowledgement from the federal government and churches for perpetrating the boarding school harms on our Tribal nations.

Healing Begins with the Truth

Previous attempts by individual government officials to make apology or acknowledge the ongoing impacts of the Boarding School Era have fallen short of Native American and Alaskan Native community standards. Our Coalition members and relatives want the truth about what happened in U.S. boarding schools. Alissa Ackerman describes restorative justice as, “concerned with violations of people and relationships, not statute definitions and sentencing guidelines. It acknowledges the harm caused to victims, their families and friends, and their communities. A key component of restorative justice frameworks is that offenders must accept responsibility for their actions. Equally important is the survivor’s narrative, as much of the healing process stems from telling one’s story and being heard. The process allows victims to be heard, to seek the acknowledgment of culpability they need, and for perpetrators to hear, firsthand, the personal narrative of suffering they have caused that permeates, like a ripple effect, across time and relationships.”

In Canada, the federal government and church denominations brought forth all their boarding school records for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In the U.S. we are still seeking records that identify all the details about the schools and the fate of Native American students taken into federal custody for boarding school attendance. It’s time the U.S. Government fully acknowledges the American students taken into federal custody.

Boarding School Healing Coalition also wants the U.S. to acknowledge that the prime ministers of both Australia and Canada apologized to aboriginal people for the devastating impact the schools have had on the social fabric of aboriginal communities and it’s time for the U.S. to do the same.

In Canada, they have called for the government to interrupt the cycle of passing that trauma on to yet another generation.

Documentation of the effects of the policy on individuals, families, and communities is that offenders must accept responsibility for their actions.


NABS is petitioning the U.S. Federal Government to tell the American people the truth about the U.S. Indian Boarding School policy. NABS and our Tribal allies call for the commission of a comprehensive national study of the history of the U.S. Boarding School policy to include:

- Complete documentation of all schools, how many students attended, and the events that took place at each of the schools
- Testimony from those who suffered from abuse, neglect, or other trauma
- Documentation of the effects of the policy on individuals, families, and communities

This study is necessary to support recommendations by and to Tribal Nations concerning inter-generational trauma and potential paradigms for healing and reconciliation.

“Honoring Our Pain: Dedicating time and attention to honoring our pain ensures space for grief, outrage, and sorrow. This caring derives from our interconnectedness with all of life.”

- Stone Child College, Montana, Historical Trauma Curriculum

“...every day at this school, you’ve been weaving together thousands of years of your heritage, with the realities of your modern lives. And all of that preparation and hard work, graduates, is so critically important, because make no mistake about it, you all are the next generation of leaders in your communities, and not years from now or decades from now, but right now.”

- Michelle Obama, “Remarks by the First Lady at Santa Fe Indian School Commencement,” May 26, 2016

“They tried to bury us. They didn’t know we were seeds.”


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Boarding School Healing Today

The Santa Fe Indian Industrial School opened in 1890 to educate Native American children throughout the Southwest, it was one of two federal boarding schools in the state of New Mexico (the other was in Albuquerque). This school was established by the government during the Boarding School Era with a charge to assimilate Native children by prohibiting them from speaking their languages and practicing their traditional and spiritual beliefs. In the 1980s, the federally-run Santa Fe Indian Industrial School became the tribally-run Santa Fe Indian School, where language and culture are being revitalized.

On May 26, 2016, First Lady Michelle Obama, gave the commencement speech at the Santa Fe Indian School graduation ceremony.

Photo Credit: Kerri Cottle, Indian Country Today Media Network.

Photo of Native students at Carlisle Indian School circa 1881 and Native children in regalia today.

Photo Credit: Kerri Cottle, Indian Country Today Media Network.

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Boarding School Healing Today
LOOK INSIDE!
Exploring the History and Legacy of Indian Boarding Schools in the U.S.

“Sometimes a little boy would die from loneliness.” How? "They would just stop eating and die in their sleep, we would find them in the mornings.”
— Lenny (Ojibwe) Chemawa Boarding School, Oregon

Find out the truth about Indian Boarding Schools in the U.S. and what communities are doing to heal.

Visit us online at www.boardingschoolhealing.org
- Get access to educational resources
- Hear personal stories from boarding school survivors
- And get involved!

Child-size handcuffs from Haskell Indian School with before and after photo of “Three Lakota boys” at Carlisle Indian School, circa 1890.