

March 31, 2025

Statement Supporting the Establishment of a Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies in the United States

Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst (MA)

As a faith-based organization, Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst (MA) supports the passage of the *Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act* (S. 761) in the 119th Congress. We urge all members of Congress to support this important legislation, and we hope for its passage and enactment this year.

From the 1860s through as late as the 1960s, U.S. federal boarding school policies sought to assimilate Native children into white American culture. Recognizing that the Indian boarding school policy, while perhaps undertaken with good intent, was morally wrong and contrary to the teachings of our own faiths, many of the undersigned denominations and religious groups have begun finding and facing our own histories of harm with respect to Indian boarding schools. The faith community cannot do this work alone- the reach of the Indian Boarding School system extended far beyond the ability of one denomination to address.

We declare that every person is inherently worthy and has the right to flourish with dignity, love, and compassion.

- **Unitarian Universalist Value of Equity**

Our faith's values and traditions emphasize the importance of the family, especially the right of families to raise their children how they see fit. The Indian Boarding School system undermined the institution of the family in Native communities by willfully preventing Native parents, grandparents, and relatives from raising their children. For over a hundred years, the U.S. federal government and faith groups, including early Unitarians and Congregationalists, engaged in gross, repeated, and targeted interference with Native families and children.

Existing research from Native academics, researchers, tribal leaders, boarding school survivors and descendants, religious institutions, and others – documents an intense focus on cultural assimilation. These policies taught Indigenous children that their traditional lifeways were inferior. Additional horrors included:

- children separated from their families and communities, in many cases against the wishes of their parents, and sent far away from their homes,
- children punished for speaking their Native language or practicing their traditional spirituality or culture, and

- children physically, sexually, and/or emotionally abused. Many children never returned home, and some died from disease, abuse or lack of care without being able to communicate with their parents or Tribal community.

Numerous Native communities today do not know what became of their children who were taken away, including where they may be buried.

Much remains unknown about the Indian Boarding School Era. The Department of the Interior's Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative began a necessary oversight investigation, but significant work lies ahead. Reporting from December of 2024 in the *Washington Post* emphasizes how little the government knows about its own involvement in these schools. The magnitude of the task and the federal government's central role in Indian boarding school policies necessitate the establishment of a formal commission to investigate, document, and acknowledge these past injustices.

Repairing the damage of our collective past has been challenging, but it has also proven to be a tremendous blessing. Confronting the truth is a crucial first step toward laying a new foundation for right relationships with Native communities.

We recognize that any federal investigation must be undertaken with the full and willing participation of faith communities. We are committed to the establishment of an effective, truth finding Commission and will support this work in good faith. We ask you to bring the federal government into this process by establishing a federal Commission to rigorously examine U.S. Indian boarding school policies. In consultation with Indigenous communities and faith groups, the Commission should examine the harms caused by these policies and make recommendations to Congress to address historic and lasting imprints.

We look forward to working with Congress, the federal government, and Native communities in all these efforts.

Sincerely,

Rev. Rachael Hayes

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