



The Navajo Nation  
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**Navajo Nation leaders commend Interior Secretary  
Haaland's initiative to investigate federal boarding schools**

**WINDOW ROCK, Ariz.** — Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez and Vice President Myron Lizer commend U.S. Department of the Interior Secretary Debra Haaland's announcement of the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative, which is described as a comprehensive review of the troubled legacy of federal boarding school policies. President Nez was notified of the initiative by the Interior Department on Tuesday.

Secretary Haaland directed the Department to prepare a report detailing available historical records, with an emphasis on cemeteries or potential burial sites relating to the federal boarding school program. The initiative was prompted by the recent discovery of 215 unmarked graves by Canada's Tk'emlúps te Secwepemc First Nation at the Kamloops Indian Residential School, to shed more light on these past traumas.

President Nez said he fully supports the initiative and stated that federal boarding schools is only one example of injustices and harm inflicted on Native American people stemming from racism.

"Last week, Congress and President Biden established 'Juneteenth' as a national holiday, in observance of the end of slavery, which I fully support as a means to healing the African American community. Now, from my perspective as a Navajo person, there are so many atrocities and injustices that have been inflicted upon Native Americans dating back hundreds of years to the present day that also require national attention, so that the American society in general is more knowledgeable and capable of understanding the challenges that we face today. From there, we can try to begin to heal our people so that our children and future generations will be more empowered by all of the adversities and wrongdoings that our people have endured, overcome, and persevered through to be where we are today. As Navajo people, we've demonstrated our resilience time and time again throughout history and to this day," said President Nez.

He stated that Native Americans continue to be discriminated against on many fronts related to voter suppression, high numbers of missing and murdered persons, inadequate access to clean water, and other issues that require more attention. President Nez also thanked Secretary Haaland for her bold action and for being a voice for all tribal nations and said he stands with her in full support of the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative.

“As Navajo people, we all have parents, grandparents, and other elders who were subjected to boarding schools and that has contributed to many of the modern-day monsters in our society such as suicide, substance abuse and addiction, violence in our homes and communities, the physical and mental health of our people, and much more. Our people were forcefully removed from their homes and families, placed into the boarding school system, and stripped of their identity as Navajo people to assimilate them. Some were abused physically, mentally, and sexually, and sadly, many had their lives taken. This troubling history deserves more attention to raise awareness and to educate others about the atrocities that our people experienced, so that they can better understand our society today and work together to heal and move forward,” said President Nez.

According to the Department of the Interior, beginning with the Indian Civilization Act of 1819, the United States enacted laws and implemented policies establishing and supporting Indian boarding schools across the nation. The purpose of Indian boarding schools was to culturally assimilate Indigenous children by forcibly relocating them from their families and communities to distant residential facilities where their American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian identities, languages, and beliefs were to be forcibly suppressed. For over 150 years, hundreds of thousands of Indigenous children were taken from their communities.

The U.S. Department of the Interior released a statement from Secretary Haaland in which she stated, “The Interior Department will address the inter-generational impact of Indian boarding schools to shed light on the unspoken traumas of the past, no matter how hard it will be,” said Secretary Haaland. “I know that this process will be long and difficult. I know that this process will be painful. It won’t undo the heartbreak and loss we feel. But only by acknowledging the past can we work toward a future that we’re all proud to embrace.”

“It’s disheartening to learn more about the 215 unmarked graves that were reported in Canada, but it is now serving to raise awareness and to have the federal government acknowledge what occurred. The generations of Navajo people who attended boarding schools can testify to the harsh experiences and some also attest to the strength of our people and their ability to become self-reliant, even under those difficult circumstances. The Navajo Nation continues to offer support through the Division of Behavioral and Mental Health Services for all of our people who continue to struggle with mental health issues to this day. We will work closely with Secretary Haaland in regards to the initiative announced today, to help prevent future tragedies. We must also continue to offer prayers for our Navajo people who were subjected to the boarding school system,” stated Vice President Lizer.

The Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative will occur in several phases and include the identification and collection of records and information related to the Department of Interior’s own oversight and implementation of the Indian boarding school program; formal consultations with tribal nations, Alaska Native corporations, and Native Hawaiian organizations to clarify the processes and procedures for protecting identified burial sites and associated information; and the submission of a final written report on the investigation to the Secretary by April 1, 2022.

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