

Native leaders look forward after apology

Biden: Acknowledgment of abuses at boarding schools 'long overdue'

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President Joe Biden formally apologized Friday for the abuses committed by Indigenous boarding schools for more than a century during a visit to the Gila River Indian Community in Arizona, an important step toward healing wounds inflicted upon survivors and their descendants, Native American leaders in Oklahoma said.

More than 417 schools were funded by the U.S. to assimilate Native American children, according to a federal report under Biden and his Interior secretary, Deb Haaland. More schools — 87 — were located in Oklahoma than in any other state.

At least 973 Native American children died at U.S.-funded boarding schools they were forced to attend, and there were 74 sites where children were buried on school grounds, according to the report.

Biden called his apology the most consequential thing he's ever had the opportunity to do as president. He said he wanted to chart a new path toward healing.

"I formally apologize, as president of the United States of America, for what we did. I formally apologize. That's long overdue," Biden said. "There's no excuse that this apology took 50 years."

Biden's apology comes after Haaland's three-year investigation into federally run and funded boarding schools for Native children. Her department concluded in 2022 that the schools operated for more than a century with the express purpose of eradicating Native cultures and communities. The federal government did not abandon the model until the mid-1900s.

A subsequent 105-page report released this year expands on the department's previous findings and calls for a slate of actions, including a formal apology from the U.S. government.



Audience members watch President Joe Biden deliver a formal apology Friday over the atrocities inflicted by Native American boarding schools operated or funded by the U.S. PHOTOS BY ELIZABETH FRANTZ/REUTERS

During his speech Friday, Biden described injustices caused by the boarding schools as heinous and horrific and said they can't be buried. "The truth must be told. The truth must be told across America," he said. "This official apology is only one step forward."

Biden called Native Americans the first Americans, and the most patriotic. Generations of Native Americans have served in the military at higher rates than the nation as a whole.

'True healing goes beyond words'

Cherokee Nation Principal Chief Chuck Hoskin Jr. called Biden's apology a profound moment for Native Americans across the country. He applauded Biden's acknowledgment of the pain and suffering inflicted on tribes and boarding school survivors.

"Our children were made to live in a world that erased their identities, their culture and upended their spoken language," Hoskin said in a statement. "They often suffered harm, abuse, neglect and forced to live in the shadows."

Margo Gray, executive director of United Indian Nations of Oklahoma, told The Oklahoman that Biden's apology is a step in the right direction.

"We drive through our communities



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right now, and you see a school. You don't see a cemetery next to it, but that's the way it was for Indian kids that went away to boarding school, never to go home, and so often, never told that they had passed away at boarding school," said Gray, who is an Osage Nation citizen. "They suffered under immense levels of cruelty that we'll never understand."

Generations of Native Americans were separated from tribal culture, traditions and ceremonies, Gray said.

"They cut their hair. They did everything to to change their culture, their language, who they were as a people," Gray said. "The way they prayed was

changed. It's just unheard of, but that's the way we were treated."

Shawnee Tribe Chief Ben Barnes, who attended Biden's address in Arizona, said in a statement Thursday that he was pleased to work alongside boarding school survivors and allies in bringing to light this chapter of U.S. history.

"Survivors have said receiving an apology for the atrocities that occurred in these institutions is important to them," said Barnes, who's also a member of the board of directors for the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition.

Hoskin said Cherokee Nation citizens still feel the impact of Indigenous boarding schools today. He said Biden's apology must be followed by continued action, calling the Department of the Interior's recommendations for the preservation of Native languages and the repatriation of ancestors and cultural items a path toward healing.

"We know from experience that true healing goes beyond words — it requires action, resources, and commitment," Hoskin said. "Cherokee Nation publicly acknowledged our own role in the painful history of Cherokee Freedmen and have worked to address positive change, and so, too, can this country."

Gray said the next step the U.S. needs to take toward healing the damage done by Indigenous boarding schools is passing the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act.

The bill would establish a Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies and formally investigate, document and report on the histories of the boarding schools, their policies and the systematic effects of them on Native Americans.

It would also develop recommendations for federal action based on the findings of the commission and would seek to promote healing for survivors of Indigenous boarding schools and their descendants and communities.

Gray said this bill is important for creating an avenue in which survivors can tell and document their stories.

"This is American history," Gray said. "It's just not my family history. It's just not Oklahoma Indian history. This is American history."