

News



Glenn Drapeau, director of the Dakota Language Department at the Marty Indian School, poses for a portrait outside his home in Lake Andes, S.D., Sept. 12, 2021. He blames the old federal Indian boarding school system for upending Native American families by isolating children from their parents and tribes. "We pray our elders' truth will be known," Drapeau said. (OSV News/Reuters/Callaghan O'hare)



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Washington — March 23, 2026

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Chairmen of several U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops committees wrote in a letter to key House lawmakers that they support a bill that would establish an effort to investigate and document the histories and practices of Indian boarding schools, and their long-term effects on Native American peoples.

"The forced removal of children from their tribal lands and communities as part of federal boarding school policies was a moral failure that disregarded the unique culture and dignity of Indigenous peoples," stated the letter signed by Archbishop Shelton Fabre of Louisville, Kentucky, chair of the Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development; Bishop John Folda of Fargo, North Dakota, chair of the Subcommittee on Native American Affairs; Bishop Robert Brennan of Brooklyn, New York, chair of the Committee on Cultural Diversity in the Church; and Bishop Barry Knestout of Richmond, Virginia, chair of the Committee on the Protection of Children and Young People.

The bishops wrote to House lawmakers in the letter dated March 16 to reiterate their previous support of the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act (H.R. 7325).

Some 87 Catholic-run Native boarding schools had operated in 22 U.S. states prior to 1978, according to a list maintained by the group Catholic Truth and Healing. The schools were among more than 400 overseen by the U.S. federal government in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The federal government had enlisted Christian churches and organizations into operating many of these sites — a model that ran counter to the Church's history in North America of providing Catholic education within Indigenous communities themselves and close to their families. Under the government's plan, they sought to forcibly strip Indigenous children of their culture and language and assimilate them to a way of life that the government viewed as European, and therefore Christian in its eyes, even though many of these children came from families that had been Christian for several generations, living it through their Indigenous culture. Thousands of students were physically, mentally, and sexually abused in the process.

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The USCCB chairmen's letter praised several aspects of the House legislation, such as the exclusion of a broad subpoena power, which it argued "will invite greater cooperative, transparent participation across government, secular, and religious institutions to properly begin and carry forward the process of truth, healing, and justice."

The letter also praised the bill's designation of three seats to the Federal and Religious Truth and Healing Advisory Committee "for representatives of religious communities that have historic ties to this era," which it argued "invites those communities to enter formally into this dialogue as established stakeholders invested in the commission's outcome." It maintained the provision would allow for "direct participation from the Catholic Church and other faith traditions," which would "help to better facilitate requests for records."

"True healing and reconciliation are only possible through the involvement of all relevant parties," the letter said, acknowledging that the "pain from the Native American boarding school era continues to echo today."

Pointing to the USCCB's pastoral framework, "Keeping Christ's Sacred Promise: A pastoral Framework for Indigenous Ministry," and the late Pope Francis' acknowledgment of the harm caused by these institutions, they said, "If enacted, we believe H.R. 7325 would help to build up that historical memory essential to learning and healing."

The bipartisan legislation was reintroduced in February by Reps. Tom Cole, R-Okla., and Sharice Davids, D-Kansas. A Feb. 9 press release on the bill from Cole's office identified him as a member of the Chickasaw Nation of Oklahoma and the longest-serving Native American in the U.S. House. It identified Davids as a member of the Ho-Chunk Nation of Wisconsin and one of the first two Native women ever elected to Congress.