

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE  
HOUSE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON TRIBAL AFFAIRS**

March 6, 2024

3:38 p.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Representative CJ McCormick, Chair  
Representative Sarah Vance  
Representative Jamie Allard  
Representative Maxine Dibert  
Representative Ashley Carrick

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

Representative Ben Carpenter  
Representative Thomas Baker

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 17

Urging the United States Congress to pass the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act.

- MOVED HJR 17 OUT OF COMMITTEE

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

BILL: HJR 17

SHORT TITLE: SUPPORT FED TRUTH AND HEALING COMMISSION

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) MCCORMICK

01/18/24	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/18/24	(H)	TRB
03/04/24	(H)	TRB AT 3:30 PM DAVIS 106
03/04/24	(H)	Heard & Held
03/04/24	(H)	MINUTE (TRB)
03/06/24	(H)	TRB AT 3:30 PM DAVIS 106

**WITNESS REGISTER**

CALLAN CHYTHLOOK-SIFSOF, Staff  
Representative CJ McCormick  
Alaska State Legislature  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Provided a recap of HJR 17, on behalf of Representative McCormick, prime sponsor.

EMILY EDENSHAW, President  
Alaska Native Heritage Center  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Provided invited testimony in support of HJR 17.

BENJAMIN JACUK, Indigenous Researcher  
Alaska Native Heritage Center  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Provided invited testimony in support of HJR 17.

### **ACTION NARRATIVE**

[3:37:26 PM](#)

**CHAIR CJ MCCORMICK** called the House Special Committee on Tribal Affairs meeting to order at 3:38 p.m. Representatives Carrick, Dibert, Allard, and McCormick were present at the call to order. Representative Vance arrived as the meeting was in progress.

### **HJR 17-SUPPORT FED TRUTH AND HEALING COMMISSION**

[3:38:36 PM](#)

CHAIR MCCORMICK announced that the only order of business would be HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 17, Urging the United States Congress to pass the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act.

[3:39:45 PM](#)

The committee took a brief at-ease.

[3:40:14 PM](#)

CHAIR MCCORMICK introduced his staff to provide a brief overview of HJR 17.

[3:40:29 PM](#)

CALLAN CHYTHLOOK-SIFSOF, Staff, Representative CJ McCormick, Alaska State Legislature, on behalf of Representative McCormick, prime sponsor, provided a recap of HJR 17. She said that HJR 17 urges the U.S. Congress to pass the Truth and Healing Commission on the Indian Boarding School Policies Act. She explained that

the resolution is in support of U.S. Senate Bill 1723. The resolution refers to the 2022 Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative Investigative Report findings. She explained that there is ample data to be compiled to account for the abuse and trauma that Native children experienced from the boarding school era in Alaska. The intent of the legislation is to acknowledge the harm from the assimilation and elimination of culture that occurred. The aim is to also compile records to validate first person accounts across Alaska and recognize these atrocities to heal and move forward.

MS. CHYTHLOOK-SIFSOF provided a personal anecdote about unaddressed trauma in her own family. Supporting this resolution would help to validate the experiences of elders from the era of assimilative boarding schools.

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EMILY EDENSHAW, President, Alaska Native Heritage Center, shared her background studying generational trauma among Alaska Native people who have traumatic boarding school experiences for her doctoral dissertation through the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. She shared a personal story about her grandfather who attended boarding school. She noted that her mother was forcibly adopted and met her biological family at age 18. Her biological grandfather refused to speak in his Native language because of his experiences at boarding school. She noted that healing is at the center of her work. She said, "When I heal myself, I heal my ancestors who have come before me."

[3:51:14 PM](#)

MS. EDENSHAW expressed her support for HJR 17, which would champion the well-being of Alaska's first peoples. She thanked the committee.

[3:52:04 PM](#)

BENJAMIN JACUK, Indigenous Researcher, Alaska Native Heritage Center, emphasized that every Alaska Native person knows someone who has a story about boarding schools. He explained that throughout his upbringing, the topic of assimilative boarding schools were "unspoken stories." His experiences at the Princeton Theological Seminary helped him to realize how much is left to learn about the experiences of Alaska Native peoples. He recollected his realization that no other Alaska Native person other than himself had graduated or attended the

Princeton Theological Seminary because it was the alma mater of Sheldon Jackson. He mentioned "historical amnesia" and explained that stories of Alaska Native assimilation have been forgotten on purpose.

MR. JACUK described the archives from the last 100 years that have yet to be interpreted and may be used to better understand the impacts on Native Alaskans. He offered to discuss structural violence and peace research and offered his understanding about how structures negatively affected Alaska Native peoples because of boarding schools. Primary source material has verified 100 stories throughout the United States so far. He mentioned that the Alaska Native Heritage Center is working with the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition and hopes to publish its work later this year.

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MS. EDENSHAW discussed how the Alaska Federation of Natives unanimously passed a resolution. She described a healing pole that was constructed and raised with 1,000 people in attendance. She explained that this is a resolution around healing and is not meant to create blame or vilify any organizations, in fact, there are partnerships with churches and universities. Raising the healing pole was historic and signified positive healing energy. She explained that Alaska Natives and all Alaskans have the right to know what happened during the boarding school era. She added that since raising the healing pole, the Alaska Native Heritage Center was invited to apply for \$3.5 million in funding to raise 10 more healing monuments. She urged the committee to champion the legislature to continue helping Native communities to heal.

[4:02:07 PM](#)

CHAIR MCCORMICK thanked the presenters and invited questions.

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REPRESENTATIVE ALLARD asked when the last boarding school was open.

[4:02:54 PM](#)

MR. JACUK answered that with the New Deal in 1932, the Bureau of Indian Affairs took over boarding schools. He explained that Mt. Edgecombe school is still around but has since transitioned

away from being an assimilative institution. He said that several institutions are still standing, but there were significant policy changes that came into effect in 1969 and 1970.

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REPRESENTATIVE ALLARD sought to clarify if 1932 was the last year of assimilative boarding schools before the Bureau of Indian Affairs took over.

MR. JACUK answered yes and explained that independent ecclesial schools still received federal funding. He exemplified the Wrangell Institute which was a boarding school that was operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs after 1932.

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REPRESENTATIVE VANCE commented that HJR 17 appears to be a straight-forward piece of legislation. She noted that the testimony she heard alluded to relatively short timeframes of attendance at the boarding schools. She asked how long children were proposed to attend the boarding schools.

[4:07:27 PM](#)

MS. EDENSHAW referenced Dianne Hirshberg, who was one of the first academics to interview boarding school survivors. She explained that the time spent at boarding schools varied. Some accounts involved children as young as 4 or 5, and some children attended until they were 18. She explained that just because the testifiers were there for one to five years, boarding school experiences were still traumatic. She mentioned that one of the interviewees from her research was away from their family from ages 8-18. She described how she would feel if her child was taken by the government or church at such a young age with limited communication. She offered to follow up with primary source documents. She emphasized the importance of continuing the research to record more experiences. She sought to not diminish the experiences of those who may have spent less time at boarding schools compared to others.

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MR. JACUK said in 1885 Sheldon Jackson was actively taking children from their homes. He described a U.S. Supreme Court case, which ruled on the side of the parents. In the 1887

Boarding School Report on Education in Alaska, Sheldon Jackson defied the ruling and defined an orphan as a child with one parent or, by his own definition, parents who are unable to care for their child, which opened the door for any child to be taken away. He explained that dog tags were used to identify children if they ran away.

MR. JACUK told a story of his great uncle and aunt who were taken to a boarding school. He said that his great grandfather attempted to retrieve his children from boarding school.

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REPRESENTATIVE VANCE said that she didn't want to minimize the impacts of the trauma and abuse. She noted lawlessness that was perpetuated through time and thanked them for the clarification.

[4:15:08 PM](#)

MR. JACUK explained how Sheldon Jackson, through the doctrines of predestination and discovery forcibly assimilated Alaska Natives. He said that at the time, Americanization and Christianity were one in the same and the laws of the period reflected the views of Christians.

[4:16:58 PM](#)

MS. CHYTHLOOK-SIFSOF thanked the presenters for their expertise. She acknowledged the difficulties of comprehending the mindsets of leaders from the boarding school era. She stated that as she learns more about what is being uncovered through the research accomplished by the Alaska Native Heritage Center, the easier it is for her to find clarity and healing.

[4:17:57 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE VANCE asked about the global impacts of the British Empire and how religious aspects are intertwined with many other cultures around the world.

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MR. JACUK said that reformational theology is highlighted in theologian Charles Hodge's "Systematic Theology Volume II." He discussed the comity plan, which was the first time where ecclesial institutions came together. He described efforts from

the comity plan spreading though mission groups throughout Canada, Korea, New Zealand, Australia, and other countries.

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MS. EDENSHAW emphasized that history has many "aha moments." There are certain parts of history that recently are being uncovered. She explained that as she continues to learn, she feels a sense of responsibility to ensure that accurate information is available for all Alaskans. She discussed how Sheldon Jackson's assimilation tactics had lasting impacts that are still felt today. She mentioned the loss of languages. She emphasized the importance of continuing research.

[4:25:18 PM](#)

CHAIR MCCORMICK opened public testimony on HJR 17, and after ascertaining that no one wished to testify, he closed public testimony.

[4:26:24 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE VANCE said she appreciated the sponsor for bringing forward the resolution and the discussion. She said that she resonated with the feelings of sending her children off to school. She noted the difficulty in admitting that our own government and churches participated in assimilative boarding schools for such a long time. She noted that having difficult conversations about history is important. She noted the challenge in hearing what Christian churches had done to Alaska Natives.

REPRESENTATIVE VANCE said that she was recently referred to as a "Christian Nationalist." She said that she loves her nation, and she loves Jesus. She explained that during the presentation she learned of a deep history that has created hardship that she was previously unaware of. This realization has helped her to understand that the label "Christian Nationalist" is used in fear and concern that the same actions could happen again. She noted the heavy topics that are discussed in committee meetings and that she does not condone the actions of the past. She stated that she wants to be a part of the healing process. Talking about difficult topics and finding solutions will help to transform the next generation.

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CHAIR MCCORMICK added that he feels he is "standing on the shoulders of the work of others." He highlighted the strength and courage of the presenters for telling their personal stories. He thanked the presenters for their research.

[4:31:28 PM](#)

MS. CHYTHLOOK-SIFSOF thanked the committee and presenters for their eloquent words.

[4:31:49 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE DIBERT moved to report HJR 17 from committee with individual recommendations and the accompanying fiscal notes. There being no objection, HJR 17 was reported from the House Special Committee on Tribal Affairs.

[4:32:28 PM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 4:32 p.m. to 4:36 p.m.

[4:36:46 PM](#)

MS. EDENSHAW provided closing remarks and thanked the committee and presenters for taking a collective step forward in terms of healing. She thanked Representative Vance for her comments.

[4:38:16 PM](#)

MR. JACUK thanked the committee for the opportunity to tell these stories.

[4:38:41 PM](#)

#### **ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further business before the committee, the House Special Committee on Tribal Affairs meeting was adjourned at 4:38 p.m.