

Written Testimony of Jo Ann Kauffman, MPH
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Before the Michigan House of Representatives
Appropriations Subcommittee on General Government

Hearing on the Michigan Native American Boarding School Study
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Mr. Chairman, and members of the Michigan House Appropriations Subcommittee on General Government, thank you for the opportunity to testify regarding our work on the Michigan Native Americans in Boarding Schools Study.

My name is Jo Ann Kauffman. I am an enrolled member of the Nez Perce Tribe, and the founder and president of Kauffman and Associates, Inc., (KAI). Today I have brought with me two of my colleagues at KAI, our CEO, Kevin Keefe and Dr. Chesleigh Keene, our Vice President of Research, Evaluation, and Planning.

My testimony today will address three main topics: (1) KAI's background, selection and team; (2) our design and methods, and (3) challenges, both methodological and contractual.

After completing my master's in public health from the University of California at Berkeley, I formed KAI to address health and wellbeing of American Indian and Alaska Native tribes and communities. Over its 36-year history, KAI has earned the respect of those we serve, including hundreds of tribal governments, states, federal government agencies, national nonprofits, and numerous philanthropies who all share our ethos of 'doing work that matters'. This work has included research, evaluation, communications, technical assistance, training, and event support on both national and regional scales. Our prior work includes developing the nations' first Native American boarding school healing tool kit for the US Indian Health Service, which we did in close collaboration with tribes. In 2005, following a 2005 mass shooting in Indian Country, KAI was asked by the federal government to help design a Native youth suicide, violence and bullying prevention model for all Native communities, a model that continues to this day and was included in the President's Budget request for Fiscal Year 2026. KAI is a mission-driven company committed to the healing and health of Native communities.

KAI responded to the State's December 2023 RFP for an exploratory study of Michigan's Indian boarding schools. KAI was selected following competitive review and work began in January 2024. We were amazed to see any state step forward to better understand the difficult topic of Indian boarding schools in its own history. We understood the significance this work represented for many tribes in Michigan and for the many survivors and descendants of boarding schools. We recognized both the historical trauma this work could trigger and the need for a safe, respectful, trauma-informed approach.

Getting the study right was our top priority, and to do so we assembled an exceptionally qualified, multidisciplinary team over the course of the nearly two years of this study. Our core team included ten professionals, eight of whom held PhDs and brought nationally recognized expertise in Indigenous education, federal Indian law, historical trauma, archival research,

repatriation, and culturally grounded methodologies. To ensure the study was Tribally led, we convened a Tribal Advisory Group composed of Tribal leaders, cultural knowledge holders, boarding school experts, historians, behavioral health specialists, and several were doctoral-trained or longstanding subject matter experts in their fields. The Tribal Advisory Group was composed of representatives from 10 of Michigan's 12 federally recognized Tribes. One Tribe declined to join, and one did not respond to the invitation.

We engaged Michigan-based experts with deep knowledge of Mount Pleasant Indian Industrial Boarding School and scholarship at the intersection of treaties, Tribal sovereignty, and Native education. We conducted key informant interviews with Tribal leaders and Elders.

KAI followed a culturally grounded and trauma-informed approach. We validated our methods and findings with MDCR throughout the project's first year, through regular meetings with the Tribal Advisory Group, which met monthly during the first half of this project. The following is a quick summary of KAI's approach:

Research design: In accordance with our contract, this was a preliminary, exploratory study built on a mixed-methods model designed with MDCR and the Tribal Advisory Group. We combined dense archival research and a literature review with key-informant interviews, community talking circles, survivor and descendant questionnaires, and optional recorded oral histories. We used an ecological lens, looking at individuals, families, community systems, Michigan context, and federal and state policy together, so that survivor truths and historical evidence were braided into one coherent picture.

Culturally grounded and trauma-informed: We grounded the work in Anishinaabe values and the Indigenous Evaluation Framework. Every engagement followed community protocol, opening prayers or blessings, land acknowledgements, and clear consent of participants. Because of the sensitivity of the topic, we provided multiple safe ways to share, including private interviews, anonymous online and hard-copy questionnaires, facilitated talking circles, and, only when people chose it, recorded oral histories. Consent was continuous. People could pause, skip, or withdraw their consent at any time. Wellness and after-care resources were available at the point of engagement.

Governance and validation: The Tribal Advisory Group reviewed the design, instruments, outreach, preliminary analyses, and advised interpretation to ensure cultural fitness and community legitimacy.

Archival work: We accessed National Archives (DC, Chicago), Archives of Michigan, Tribal repositories, church collections (where accessible), and university holdings, including BIA contracts, school statistics, ledgers, correspondence, and contemporaneous press. While some holdings remain embargoed or incomplete, the record is sufficient to document Michigan-specific operations and identify areas for future inquiry.

Study engagement activities: We hosted four talking-circle forums (three in-person and one virtual), opened with local protocol and documented with consent. We conducted more than 40 early key informant interviews (scholars, Survivor/Descendant leaders, Tribal education/repatriation/behavioral health experts, and selected state/federal/Tribal officials) and

recorded oral histories with consent. We fielded Survivor (n=30) and Descendant/Impacted (n=165) questionnaires (online, hard copy, or one-on-one), with privacy maintained by separating contact information from responses.

Data safeguards and analysis: Participants were 18 and older and provided informed consent with the ability to withdraw at any time. Quantitative data were analyzed with descriptive statistics; qualitative materials were coded inductively and deductively and thematically reviewed with the Tribal Advisory Group to protect cultural integrity and avoid analytic misinterpretation.

Key Findings: I want to briefly summarize a few important take-aways from this exploratory study. First, we identified more than 30 boarding school-and-related institutional sites in Michigan. This is far more than the handful acknowledged in earlier federal reports. This confirms that the system in Michigan was broad and deeply rooted.

Second, for many Native children in Michigan, attendance was not voluntary. It was enforced through federal policy, state and county actors, mission authorities, and sometimes local law enforcement. Families were often coerced or threatened with consequences if they resisted.

Third, we found evidence of multijurisdictional coordination that sustained the system over time. Federal agencies, state and county officials, church organizations, and local authorities often operated in tandem, creating a structure in which no single entity held full responsibility, but all contributed to maintaining the movement and placement of Native children into these institutions.

Fourth, survivors and descendants described identity erasure, the teaching of cultural shame, and the heavy burden placed on children to protect younger siblings and one another.

Fifth, we heard reports pervasive physical, emotional, and sexual abuse that occurred in the schools and, in some cases, known or suspected child deaths.

Finally, these harms did not end when the schools closed. We documented clear intergenerational impacts (in family systems, language loss, cultural transmission, mental health, abuse, and community wellbeing). Descendant voices were essential in understanding how boarding school trauma continues to shape Native families in Michigan today.

It is important to say clearly that this is not just history. The trauma, family separation, cultural loss, and systemic harms created by these schools continue, and are still being lived today by survivors, their children, and their grandchildren. This is not simply a chapter from the past, its effects remain a present-day reality in Michigan Tribal families and communities.

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, these are difficult truths, but they reflect what survivors and descendants entrusted to this study.

Challenges Encountered

Challenges inherent to boarding school research include incomplete, biased, or dispersed records (often controlled by historically involved institutions), interstate student transfers, and

the ethical imperatives of trauma-informed practice, cultural protocol, and Tribal data sovereignty. Our approach centered Indigenous voices and intergenerational impacts.

Aside from the methodological challenges inherent to this type of work, a significant challenge to KAI was the disconnect between our contractual scope of work and the conflicting verbal directives from those overseeing our work on behalf of the state. Near the conclusion of our base contract, MDCR executed a contract modification that extended our period of performance and added funds. While the language in our contract modification was very similar to our base contract, it alluded to requirements in legislative language without much guidance as to what the requirements might be. MDCR replaced staff assigned to KAI's contract, and we worked to build new relationships.

The change in MDCR staffing was accompanied by the inclusion of representatives from the Attorney General's office. From this point on, the AG representatives led all project calls and provided substantive direction. An AG representative gave new directives to KAI to significantly shift and narrow the scope of our study. The AG-led directives included:

- Limits on interpretation and Key Findings and requests to retroactively apply new legislative questions while restricting additional archival work. Limiting our role in this way was consequential. This request undermined KAI's ability to make the data meaningful, responsible, and usable. This request also removed the originally planned TAG, tribal, and SME interpretation of the data and findings.
- Content suppression of out-of-state placement of Native students, county/State references, and institutional accountability. Asking for the deletion of references to Native children being sent out of state and the deletion of references to counties, county entities, and the State of Michigan, except when directly quoted by a participant, ran counter to the stated goals of the project and to the trust extended to researchers by survivors, descendants, and tribal partners.
- Exclusion of Descendant testimonies and a reduction from 34 identified schools to 5 federal schools. Removing or minimizing these voices not only compromises the methodological integrity of the findings but also violates the relational commitments made to participants who shared painful family histories in good faith. Descendant voices were not incidental to this study; they were central to its purpose. As intergenerational witnesses and knowledge holders, descendants speak to the enduring harm, resilience, and cultural continuity resulting from the boarding school era.
- Requests were made for unredacted signed consent forms, which conflicted with confidentiality, human subject protections, and Tribal data sovereignty.

Our concern about these conflicting directives was so great, that we documented them in a formal letter, in August 2025, to the AG's office, MDCR, and the Executive Office of the Governor. A copy of this letter is included in the materials submitted today. In response to this letter, MDCR requested a phone call to discuss KAI's concerns.

The State conducted a formal Tribal Consultation in August 2025 in Manistee, and presented the much abbreviated 50-page summary of our work. We also attended. Tribal leaders and other tribal participants at this meeting rejected the abbreviated report, and demanded the full reporting. At this meeting, KAI committed to honoring the tribal feedback and to restoring all items previously omitted at the request of the AG. Needless to say, responding to directives inconsistent with our contract diverted valuable time and undermined the collaborative process vital for producing a quality final report.

We believe that our final deliverable, the September 2025 version of our report, is the most accurate representation of the findings and commitments made to participants and to the Tribes.

We were dismayed to learn that our work later faced significant public criticism by an MDCR official before the Civil Rights Commission. In response, we sent a January 2026 letter to the Attorney General and MDCR Executive Director. We have also included a copy of this letter in our materials submitted today. We have not received a response to this letter.

Our full and final report is not merely a contractual deliverable. It is the product of careful, often painful truth telling by people rarely afforded a platform. As researchers, and as Native people, we are obligated to reflect the fullness of the historical record and the voices entrusted to bear witness to these historical events and generational impacts. We also note that in the legislative appropriations language regarding this study, the legislature recognized the need for “findings and recommendations” from the study “to be shared with the public and this state.”

We commend the state of Michigan for pursuing this study to understand this painful chapter of Michigan and tribal history. We urge your continued partnership with tribes to further this inquiry. Truth is the first step to healing.

In summary, KAI met all our contractual requirements with the state and kept our promise to the tribes and boarding school survivors and descendants, including the delivery of the full report that not only protects the confidentiality of participants, but also honors their truths that were shared.

Thank you for your time and for the opportunity to testify today.

Note: This testimony has been corrected to reflect the following (changes shown in underlined text):

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