

TEACHER'S GUIDE - NATIVE AMERICAN BOARDING SCHOOLS

Why Were Boarding Schools Created?

Between the 1870s and 1930s, children from American Indian tribes across the country were sent to government and religious boarding schools, where they were forced to abandon traditions their ancestors had passed down to them by **assimilating**.

The idea of forcing American Indians to assimilate so that they would adopt the customs of white settlers was not a new concept when the boarding schools were created. As early as 1743, Eleazar Wheelock created Dartmouth College with the intention of teaching American Indians to be ministers. He envisioned that they would go out into the countryside and teach members of their tribes to behave in ways that whites viewed as “civilized.” The notion that Indians were “savages” who needed to be civilized in order to live peacefully among whites remained popular among politicians, educators, and citizens, in general, for many decades.

In 1819, Congress passed the Indian Civilization Act, encouraging white citizens to teach Native Americans to read and write. The Indian Civilization Act resulted from battles and massacres between white settlers and American Indians. Known as the Indian Wars, these conflicts, often rooted in land disputes, had been happening over the two centuries since European settlers first arrived in North America. Many of the settlers in the 19th century embraced “manifest destiny,” an idea which emphasized that the European settlers had the right to any land in the country not yet settled. Manifest destiny gave them the right to remove American Indians from their lands and onto reservations created by the government.

When government officials realized that engaging in warfare with American Indian tribes was expensive, they rationalized that using education to “civilize” them would be less costly. A strong supporter of this idea was Richard Henry Pratt, a military officer. In 1879, he created the first federally funded off-reservation boarding school for American Indians, located in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. He believed that if he brought American Indians from across the nation to a location far from their homeland, cut their hair, and forced them to adopt the customs of white Americans, they would, in the end, become civilized. He said that his aim was to “Kill the Indian [in them] and save the man.”

Going to the Schools

Between 1879 and 1902, more than a couple dozen federally funded schools opened in 15 states. More than 25,000 American Indian children attended them. The government found different ways of forcing children to attend. Sometimes, tribal members were arrested and sent to prison if they refused to send their children to the schools. Congress passed laws in 1893 that cut off food rations to tribes who disobeyed. The Compulsory Indian Education Act in 1887 ensured that the schools the children were sent to would receive funding.

When they arrived, children were disinfected with kerosene or lye and their long hair, a defining part of many students' cultural identities, was cut short. They were stripped of their tribal clothing and made to wear military-style uniforms. Asa Daklugie, a Chiricahua Apache student at Carlisle, recalled, "We'd lost our hair and we'd lost our clothes; with the two we'd lost our identity as Indians." They could no longer practice tribal religions; they were given American-sounding names; they were punished severely for speaking their native languages. For students who couldn't speak English, punishment was unavoidable.

Some of the students who attended the schools became sick with highly contagious diseases like flu and tuberculosis (TB). Students who caught it were taken to special hospitals called "sanitariums," where many would die from the disease. Officials often didn't contact parents until after their children had died and were buried in cemeteries on school grounds.

Students were given vocational training meant to prepare them to work after they had assimilated. Boys were taught different trades, including carpentry, blacksmithing, and farming. Girls were trained in skills that would be more useful in the household, including sewing, pottery making, and weaving. Schools often assigned students to work in nearby communities. These "outing programs" allowed white citizens to put students to work on farms doing difficult manual labor. It was common for students from the Sherman Indian School in California to spend long days harvesting cantaloupes and oranges in very hot temperatures.

Students who ran away and tried to return to their homes were punished severely. At Chilocco, even kindergartners were locked in the school jail for trying to run away. Students who subtly rebelled secretly spoke to each other in their tribal language hoping they would be caught. Creek, Cherokee, and other students at Chilocco sometimes sneaked off campus to participate in stomp dances, a familiar activity that connected them to their native cultures.

Changes Come to the Boarding School

The 1920s were a pivotal time for the boarding schools. Although the Indian Citizenship Act passed by Congress in 1924 granted citizenship to all American Indians, it would still be thirty years before some of them could vote.

In the later years of the '20s, politicians, writers, and activists made it their mission to fight for the rights of American Indians. They were committed to exposing the poor conditions in the boarding schools. Former students from the boarding schools, including author and activist Luther Standing Bear (Sicangu/Oglala Lakota), were also critical of the schools. Standing Bear, whose books describe his experiences at Carlisle, writes of the damage that preventing children from speaking their native languages had done to the nation: "This rule is uncalled for, and today is not only robbing the Indian, but America of a rich heritage."

In 1928, Lewis Meriam of the Institute of Government Research published *The Problem of Indian Administration*. The *Meriam Report* detailed the abuse, sickness, and malnourishment typical in many of the schools and offered suggestions to remedy these problems. In 1933, when John Collier began serving as Commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs under President Franklin D. Roosevelt, he made it his mission to right many of the wrongs identified in the *Meriam Report*.

Although they never became ideal, conditions in the schools slowly improved. Although students were still subjected to physical and verbal abuse by teachers, they were permitted to gradually return to their tribal traditions. Art teacher at the Santa Fe Indian School in New Mexico, Dorothy Dunn, encouraged her students to incorporate cultural symbols from their tribes into their artwork. Her students, including Pablita Velarde (Santa Clara Pueblo), went on to become successful artists who cherished their time in her classroom.

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