

HISTORY OF NATIVE AMERICAN EDUCATION: A SNAPSHOT

Beginning with the first colonies in the New World, European settlers made it a priority to educate members of Native American tribes and convert them to Christianity. The education of Native peoples began with different religious groups in *missionary schools*. The purpose of these schools was to educate and baptize Native people with the hope that they would become “civilized” and follow the cultural customs and religious beliefs of white settlers. Before long, Native children were sent to live at *boarding schools* to make separating them from their parental and tribal influence easier. Treaties written in the 1800s by the U.S. government included *federal policies* that put educational requirements in place as a trade-off for accepting a *reservation*—a new, smaller homeland on which to settle. This led to the creation of boarding schools on the reservations.

In 1875, an American military officer named Richard Henry Pratt established the first *off-reservation boarding school* in Pennsylvania, far from their homes. Known as Carlisle Indian Industrial School, it is here that Pratt put into practice his motto of "Kill the Indian ... Save the man." He implemented strict *assimilation* techniques, believing that by removing students from their homes, he could *civilize* them, and they would forget their Native languages, religious traditions, and other elements of tribal *culture*. This would cause them to assimilate to the culture of white Americans, as they would adopt the ways of a culture different from their own.

On arrival at the school, students’ belongings were taken away from them. They were forced to choose an English name and adopt their father’s name as their last name. Their tribal regalia was replaced with military-style uniforms, and their hair was cut in the Euro-American style.

They were forced to give up their Native languages and speak only English, both inside and outside of the classroom. The punishments for breaking these rules were harsh. Students were sometimes hit by teachers, forced to wash their mouths out with soap, not allowed to eat or drink, or worse. While living for years at school, students were also urged to convert to Christianity.

Assimilation was the goal of the boarding schools. During its 39 years of its operation, only 8% of students graduated from Carlisle. Children in these boarding schools lived for years away from their families and homelands only to return strangers to their people, their mother tongue, and their families. However, not everyone returned home. On the grounds of almost every boarding school in North America was a cemetery. Children died for a variety of reasons: illness, starvation, abuse, and even homesickness. Despite the generations of trauma these schools caused for Native children, some former students reported positive experiences in boarding schools and looked fondly on them as their alma mater.

In 1918, Carlisle closed because there were financial problems and not enough students were attending. Other federally funded boarding schools also were closed for similar reasons over the years. However, not all federally funded schools closed. According to the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), “Currently, there are 183 Bureau-funded elementary and secondary schools, 53 BIE-operated and 130 tribally controlled under BIE contracts or grants.” Although all of these schools currently use a *culturally inclusive* education—a system that allows students to celebrate their tribal traditions—more and more tribally enrolled students attend local public schools.

Despite attending public schools, Native American students still have the lowest graduation rates of all demographic groups in the US. More and more, students are challenging the old assimilation methods; instead, they focus on *preservation* to save their culture. Today, Native Americans demand that their history and languages be taught in schools, that they be allowed to wear regalia and eagle feathers at graduation ceremonies, and that funding for Indian Education be continued.

In the past few years, different tribes have exercised their *sovereignty*, the right to govern themselves, by starting charter schools where they can implement a culturally rich curriculum for their students. Native education has come a long way since the founding of the missionary and boarding schools; however, there is more work to be done. As long as tribes continue to exercise their sovereignty, the future for Native education is a bright one.

Sources

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