

an excerpt from:

**EVERYTHING YOU
WANTED
TO KNOW ABOUT
INDIANS
BUT WERE AFRAID
TO ASK**

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What were Native residential boarding schools?

One of the most harmful parts of the war on Indigenous culture was the residential boarding school system.⁶¹ Beginning in the late 1800s, missionary, military, and government officials advocated for the removal of Indian children from their homes to better teach them in the English language and American culture. Captain Richard Henry Pratt, superintendent of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, the first of many Indian boarding schools, said, "Our goal is to kill the Indian in order to save the man."⁶² The idea of the schools had less to do with giving children an education than with taking away their culture. Children were sent to schools as far from home as possible in order to discourage runaways and inhibit parental contact. Their clothes were burned and their hair cut. They were strictly forbidden to speak tribal languages. At Carlisle and many other schools, children spent half the day working in fields or digging ditches and half the day in class. Attendance at Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) boarding schools or church



Pratt with Carlisle students, 1881.

mission schools was compulsory for Indian children—home schooling and public schools were not options for most Indian youth in the late nineteenth century.

The BIA schools came under criticism after many children began to die from malnutrition and diseases like tuberculosis; their bodies were not sent home for burial. The commissioner of Indian Affairs defended the situation in 1899, saying, “This education policy is based on the well-known inferiority of the great mass of Indians in religion, intelligence, morals, and home life.”⁶³ There were 25 such schools in operation that year, with 20,000 new students every year. Parents did have the option of sending their children to mission schools instead, but those schools were usually just as



Tom Torlino (Navajo), a Carlisle student from 1882-1886, before and after entering the school.



harsh in suppressing tribal languages and culture and even more likely to expose students to sexual molestation, which was commonly reported.⁶⁴ Problems were not immediately known to parents, who often thought that their children

would receive work opportunities upon graduation and at least three meals a day at the schools, which was more than many families could provide. Canada followed the American example and soon swept up a huge percentage of the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis population into the schools too.

The experience was devastating for most families. On returning home, many children could no longer recognize their own parents and could not speak the same language. The jobs people hoped would be

Carlisle students, 1900.

available for graduates never came to be in the country's racially polarized climate. Children often felt they could not fit in either on or off the reservations, and those feelings, together with the terrible poverty in most places, simply added to the growing problems on the reservations.

The schools came under increasing scrutiny as more than half the children at Carlisle had trachoma by 1900 and an influenza outbreak at Haskell in 1918 killed more than 300 students.⁶⁵ Official modifications did not change the dynamic, and Carlisle closed in 1918, but other schools actually continued to increase their enrollments. In 1928, the U.S. government commissioned the Merriam Report, which blasted the schools for poor nutrition and health care for



Native student burials at the United States Indian Industrial Training School in Lawrence, Kansas, now part of Haskell Indian Nations University.

students, insufficient clothing, exceedingly harsh physical punishment, and the breakup of tribal families. The next commissioner of Indian Affairs, John Collier, began to reform the BIA school system. It took many years, but after World War II, day schools started to dominate the educational experience of Indian children in the United States. Four BIA-operated boarding schools are still in existence today, but their policies have been reformed. In Canada, though, the residential schools for Native youth dominated Indigenous education well into the 1970s.

The long-term effects of the residential boarding school system are profound. People learn how to parent by how they are parented, and with as many as three generations of Natives in the United States and Canada forced to go through boarding schools, a critical piece of the social fabric was severely damaged. Many Native families have rebounded from the effects of boarding schools, but their blessings come in spite of the system rather than because of it. Of the remaining 150 tribal languages spoken in the United States and Canada, 130 are likely to go extinct in the next 30 years because only elders speak them.⁶⁶ Residential boarding schools are among the main reasons for this.

One of the goals of the residential boarding school system—educational achievement for Native youth—was directly hurt by the education policy itself. Many Natives developed or deepened distrust of politicians and educators as a result of their experiences in residential boarding schools. Today there is an astounding achievement gap for Native youth. One of the reasons is the distrust many family

members have of schools. Many Native parents do not feel comfortable at school conferences and choose not to attend, limiting their ability to provide positive intervention or support for teachers in bettering their children's education. If the residential boarding school experience had not psychologically crushed so many Natives and alienated them from their own culture, this part of modern education for Indigenous people would be very different.

How come 50 percent of Indians are flunking their state-mandated tests in English and math?

There is an achievement gap for many groups of the population in America and Canada, but, on closer examination, that "achievement gap" is really an "opportunity gap." Poverty is one of the factors that strongly contributes to that gap. Children growing up in poverty are far more likely to have a whole set of circumstances that hinder their advancement in education. Most of these causes and effects are well documented. Education was unfairly denied to Black American youth for a long time. Native youth carry the history of residential boarding schools and historical trauma: education was a tool used to assimilate them. As a result, many Indians rightly question whether modern education is still designed to assimilate. When I went to school, I often heard from my Native peers that my education, especially toward my advanced degrees, meant that I was assimilated. I was called an "apple"—red on the outside but White inside—because I was well educated.

The modern educational system in the U.S. has a long way to go to be more inclusive of Black and Latinx communities and curricula, but the system is starting to respond to those communities. There are strands in the social studies curricula for all states that require education about topics like the civil rights movement. Yet all that one can be sure of learning about Indians is a sugarcoated version of Christopher Columbus and Thanksgiving. Eighty-seven percent of school districts teach nothing about Native anything after 1900.⁶⁷ As a result, young Native learners often feel like the curriculum in most American schools is still designed to make them more White.

Those who develop state curriculum guidelines do not intend to alienate anyone or limit their opportunities, but that is exactly what they do to Native students. An Indian student in the modern educational system will navigate many curricular strands before high school, but the teachings about the people who made the country great (not them), the heroes, presidents, and cultural icons (not theirs), the success stories (not them), and the culture and history of great civilizations (not theirs) hurt their self-esteem. The omission of Indians from the curriculum means that Native children can go to school and learn all about the rest of the world but not about themselves.

The opportunity to learn about oneself is not the only gap that negatively affects Native kids' academic performance. The skill sets emphasized in modern education (math and reading) are great for some things and from some perspectives—but not all. Native people often have different