

By the Kansas Historical Society

A History of American Indian Education

By the 1880s several decades of forced relocation to reservations, disease, and conflict had hurt American Indian populations and resulted in severe poverty. Through these hardships most tribes kept their traditions. Well-meaning reformers believed that American Indians would always be “backward” unless white society helped them become “civilized.” Reformers felt that assimilation, or having Indians adopt the lifestyles and customs of the white population, was the only way for Indians to survive. As Secretary of the Interior Lucius Q. Lamar stated, the “only alternative now presented to the American Indian race is speedy entrance into the pale of American civilization, or absolute extinction.”

In 1880 the Indian Rights Association thought formal education for American Indian children was the quickest path to assimilation. Congress provided funding for American Indian education with the goal of breaking students’ ties to their tribal traditions and emphasizing individual self-reliance. Students would:

- Be able to read, write, and speak English.
- Receive a general “civilized” education (math, history, geography, etc.).
- Learn the importance of the individual, not the group (or tribe).
- Study and practice the Christian faith.
- Have a strong commitment to citizenship and recognize the power of U.S. law.

The program supported the use of off-reservation boarding schools. The first school opened in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, in 1879. It followed a strict military approach to schooling and discipline. Soon Congress approved funding for more boarding schools. Among the first was the United States Indian Industrial Training School in Lawrence, Kansas.

Many American Indian parents did not want to send their children to the far-off schools. As a result, attendance at the schools remained low. In 1891 new laws required all American Indian youth to attend school. Two years later the commissioner of the Indian office was granted permission to withhold benefits such as clothing, food, and payments, to Indian families who failed to enroll their children in school. School enrollment rose quickly. In 1884 the government estimated that only 25 percent of American Indian children were being educated in schools; by 1926 that number was 83 percent.



Photograph of Haskell Institute and students, 1908.

At the boarding schools any tribal reminders, including clothing and food, were removed and students were assigned “Christian” names. Students were required to wear military-style school uniforms. Often students from the same tribe were separated into different groups to disconnect them from their tribes and enforce English-only rules. Students’ classes and living quarters were separated by gender and boys and girls were seldom allowed to interact. A strict, military-style schedule was enforced seven days a week.

Courses ranged from subjects such as reading and math to manual labor. Boys completed training in farming, animal husbandry, masonry, and carpentry. Girls took classes in cooking, sewing, laundry, and childcare. These subjects were considered to be the type of “civilized” skills needed for success after graduation. Many schools coordinated “outing” programs during winter and summer breaks for students to practice their labor skills in settings beyond the boarding school. Students were housed with local white families and earned a small wage for their work. School administrators promoted the program as an important step toward a student’s career, while many American Indian students and families felt the program only used students as cheap labor.

After 1900 reformers felt the schools were spending too much money to educate too few students. Others criticized the schools’ practice of separating children from their families. These reformers often supported using American Indian language and traditions as part of the students’ formal education. Over time public and government preference shifted away from off-reservation boarding schools to on-reservation day and boarding schools. Many Indians, often former graduates of boarding schools, were hired as teachers and facility operators. Because these schools were located on reservations the local tribal community had more influence in day-to-day operations. Parents became more supportive of the schools as their opportunities to participate increased.

By 1935 only 12 of the original 25 off-reservation boarding schools remained open. The off-reservation boarding school system lasted approximately 50 years. To the American Indian community it symbolized nearly three generations, or tens of thousands of youth, reluctantly educated outside of their tribes. In 2000 only seven off-reservation boarding schools were still open. These remaining schools have changed considerably from their original format. Many now have curriculum that is heavily influenced by the cultural traditions of their students and families.



Photograph of students at Haskell between 1887 and 1909.