

1986

## Educating the American Indian

Barbara Blin Milder  
*University of Northern Iowa*

*Let us know how access to this document benefits you*

Copyright ©1986 Barbara Blin Miller

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Milder, Barbara Blin, "Educating the American Indian" (1986). *Graduate Research Papers*. 2953.  
<https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp/2953>

This Open Access Graduate Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Research Papers by an authorized administrator of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@uni.edu](mailto:scholarworks@uni.edu).

**Offensive Materials Statement:** Materials located in UNI ScholarWorks come from a broad range of sources and time periods. Some of these materials may contain offensive stereotypes, ideas, visuals, or language.

---

## Educating the American Indian

### Abstract

Indian educational boarding schools gained popularity in the United States after the Civil War, with the government's intention to assimilate the children into the white culture. By 1878 the Indians were located on reservations, but school facilities to accommodate only about 20% were available (Smith, 1976, p. 164). Originally considered a solution to the "Indian problem," the boarding school system became part of the problem.

EDUCATING THE AMERICAN  
INDIAN

---

A Research Paper  
Presented to  
The Department of Educational Administration  
and Counseling  
University of Northern Iowa

---

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Education

---


by  
Barbara Blin Miller  
December 1986

This Research Paper by: Barbara Blin Miller


Entitled: Educating The American Indian

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement for  
the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.


James E. Albrecht

10-22-86  
Date Approved  Adviser/Director of Research Paper

Robert H. Decker

10-24-86  
Date Approved  Second Reader of Research Paper

Norman McCumsey

10-28-86  
Date Received  Head, Department of Educational  
Administration and Counseling

Indian educational boarding schools gained popularity in the United States after the Civil War, with the government's intention to assimilate the children into the white culture. By 1878 the Indians were located on reservations, but school facilities to accommodate only about 20% were available (Smith, 1976, p. 164). Originally considered a solution to the "Indian problem," the boarding school system became part of the problem.

Efforts to educate the American Indian developed differently than for any other segment of the population. The goals were similar to those sought for European immigrants, but the educational setting was different. And not until the government's policy shifted from extermination to assimilation did education for Indians really become more than a token gesture.

Administrators of the early schools were operating from a stereotypical view of the Indians as savages. Administrative practices were strictly bureaucratic in nature, with scant attention paid to human relations.

This paper reviews the literature related to Indian education, with particular emphasis on the period when boarding schools became common. This period was marked by serious mistakes in the administration of those schools, mistakes often rooted in the attitudes prevalent during that time.

Those attitudes often developed from disagreements over the implications of the concept of cultural assimilation, disagreements which remain troublesome today as this country wrestles with the

challenge of educating its increasing minority population. The immediacy of the challenge is reflected in the fact that in 1985, 63% of America's school children attended predominantly minority schools (Cardens, 1985, p. 5).

Perhaps a reexamination of the uneven efforts to educate Native American youngsters will be useful to those charged with meeting today's challenges, even if it serves as nothing more than a reminder of where and why those efforts missed the mark.

White Americans found political expression in the confident faith that continuous expansion was the God-intended plan for 19th century America (Billington, 1966). In the meantime, the Indians were quickly shifting to a minority population. As white encroachment progressed, it was becoming increasingly difficult to have vast continuous areas for the Indians and to prevent military clashes at the same time. In 1865, a Congressional Committee was appointed to tour the West, and it recommended detached reservations and education as more humane and less costly policies than military control (Adams, 1946).

The literature published prior to 1900 revealed a common philosophy toward education for the Indians. It included many variations of the theme of assimilation. In "Rules for Indian Schools," published in 1890, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs stated, "The general purpose of the Government is the preparation of Indian youth for assimilation into the national life by such a course of training as will prepare them for the duties and

privileges of American citizenship" (Cohen, 1974, p. 1756).

Through assimilation it was hoped that the Indians' concept of life could be remolded, for Indian values were expressed in the education of their children and their attitude toward the land. Assimilationists attacked both of these (Szasz, 1977).

Assimilationist attitudes sprang from a paternalism that marked much of the United States' dealings with the Indians (Prucha, 1985, p. 10). Reform groups to help the Indians had been formed in the last two decades of the 19th century; they were composed of zealous men and women who were the culmination of the humanitarian movement that had grown through the century. According to Prucha (1985), these Christian people were absolutely sure they knew what was best for the Indians. They insisted the Indians throw over their traditional tribalism with its communal emphasis and adopt the individualism that marked white society (Prucha, 1985, p. 23).

The reformers had a three-part formula. First, the reservations, which were perceived as the basis of tribal community life, must be broken up and the land allotted to individual Indians. Second, the individual Indian must be made subject to white laws and ultimately accept the rights and duties of American citizenship. And third, the Indian children must be educated in English-speaking schools, not only in the three R's, but in vocational skills and in patriotic citizenship (Prucha, 1985, p. 23). A lobbying effort was launched to get these ideas realized through legislation.

The passage of the Dawes Act of 1887 was the first step. Also known as the Land Allotment Act, it was viewed as an avenue to Indian self-sufficiency and was encouraged by Westerners eager to acquire Indian land (Szasz, 1977). This statute provided for the severalty of land to Indians on the various reservations (Riegel, 1971). But the Dawes Act did not produce Indian self-sufficiency. Instead, the government became increasingly involved, due to the land allotment program, and wardship resulted (Prucha, 1985). The Indian Office expanded its influence and functions, especially in the 1880's when education and small family-owned farms were viewed as a solution to the "Indian problem."

Addressing a need for educating Native Americans was not a new concept. As early as 1819, Congress provided \$10,000 per year in appropriations for education of the Indians (Jackson, 1965). During the early 1800's, the U.S Government mainly subsidized the mission schools run by various religious denominations, although Congress ended this support in 1897 (Jackson, 1965). A standard provision found in treaties of the 1800's between the U.S. Government and Indian tribes spoke to education. The following is an excerpt from Article VII of a treaty with the Cheyenne and Arapaho in 1867:

In order to ensure the civilization of the tribes entering into this treaty, the necessity of education is admitted, especially by such of them as are or may be settled on



said agricultural reservation, and they therefore pledge themselves to compel their children, male and female, between the ages of six and sixteen years, to attend school; and it is hereby made the duty of the agent for said Indians to see that for every thirty children between said ages, who can be induced or compelled to attend school, a house shall be provided, and a teacher competent to teach the elementary branches of an English education shall be furnished, who will reside among said Indians, and faithfully discharge his or her duties as a teacher. The provisions of this article to continue for not less than twenty years (Fay, 1977, p. 32).

There were several goals for Indian education from the 1880's through World War I. An important objective for easing the Indians into a white way of life was to erase all vestiges of their tribal culture, with particular emphasis upon eradicating tribal languages. Another major goal was to educate them in vocational skills and to teach them agriculture. Still other goals were to Christianize them and to prepare the Indians for eventual citizenship.

After 1870, the church sponsored mission schools were gradually replaced by government schools (Adams, 1946). As the federal government stepped up its responsibility for Indian education, the adoption of the most suitable type of school became an issue. By this time there were three types of schools in existence: day schools on the reservations, boarding schools on the reservations, and boarding schools in communities remote from the reservations.

Boarding schools were the preferred institutions by government officials through the turn of the century. For it was in boarding schools where the aforementioned goals for Indian education could most nearly be met. The entire boarding school phenomenon is a unique feature of the educational history of the United States, for no other minority population has been educated in this manner in such large numbers. And it required a massive federal bureaucracy to implement the system.

In a report of the Joint Special Committee in 1867, Senator J.R. Doolittle of Wisconsin strongly endorsed the boarding school concept. He felt the day schools had been of little benefit to the Indians and noted the inadequate pay for teachers and shortage of books (Cohen, 1974). In 1867, Doolittle asserted that it was an impossibility to educate Indian children while they were permitted to associate with "their ignorant, barbarous, and superstitious parents" (Cohen, 1974, p. 1735). He believed that any learning at school was lost as soon as the children were home, and that the only Indian schools with any degree of success were those where the children were lodged separately from their parents and tribe members (Cohen, 1974). Appraisals such as this led to an increase in the establishment of off-reservation boarding schools. In 1870 Congress authorized \$100,000 to be set aside for the support of industrial and other schools for tribes not otherwise provided for (Adams, 1946).

In 1881 President Arthur called for legislative action to introduce the Indians to civilized life. He proposed an allotment system of Indian land to dissolve the tribal bond, and addressed the need for liberal appropriations for the support of Indian schools (Cohen, 1974). President Arthur encouraged the construction of additional off-reservation boarding schools. In reference to boarding schools, the President stated, "They are doubtless more potent for good than the day-schools upon the reservation, as the pupils are altogether separated from the surroundings of savage life and brought into constant contact with civilization" (Cohen, 1974, p. 1754).

The non-reservation boarding school that was viewed as a model institution was opened in 1879 by General (then Captain) Richard H. Pratt. Pratt was able to persuade Congress to renovate an abandoned Army barracks outside Carlisle, Pennsylvania, for a government boarding school (Utley, 1964). He strongly believed in the complete integration of the Native Americans into white society and his program was geared to that goal (Prucha, 1984, p. 696). Pratt was opposed to the tribal schools on the reservations and stated, "Indian schools are just as well calculated to keep the Indians intact as Catholic schools are to keep the Catholics intact" (Prucha, 1973, p. 266).

Captain Pratt was chagrined at the prejudice from both races toward one another. He wanted to teach Indians and whites that neither was as bad as the other perceived. "This lesson could

never be learned by the Indian or our people through the indurated system of segregating and reserving the Indians and denying them all the chances to see and thus to learn and to prove their qualities through competition" (Utley, 1964, p. 214). Captain Pratt was true to his ideals, and Carlisle became a well-known school and example for those to follow as the century closed.

The Department of Indian Affairs grew as the Federal Government stepped up its involvement in education. John H. Oberly was appointed to be Superintendent of Indian Schools, and in 1885, he organized the Education Division within the Department of Indian Affairs (Adams, 1946). Oberly advocated the boarding school because it accommodated the majority of Indian children and made it possible to take them away from the Indian camps while they were young and susceptible to training. He proposed compulsory attendance and mentioned the need for a reform school for incorrigible Indian students. Oberly also took the first steps toward improvement of school personnel by use of a merit system (Adams, 1946).

An 1881 Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs aptly sums up the argument for government non-reservation boarding schools:

So long as the American people demand that Indians shall become white men within one generation, the Indian child must have other opportunities and come under influences other than the reservations can offer. He must be compelled to adopt the

English language, must so be placed that attendance at school shall be regular, and that vacations shall not be periods of retrogression, and must breathe the atmosphere of a civilized instead of barbarous community. Therefore, youth chosen for their intelligence, force of character, and soundness of constitution are sent to Carlisle, Hampton, and Forest Grove to acquire the discipline and training which, on their return, shall serve as a leverage for the uplifting of their people (Cohen, 1974, p. 1756).

Thomas J. Morgan was another person to have a significant influence on the policies for Indian education when he served as Commissioner of Indian Schools from 1889-1893. Government boarding schools swung into action during his administration, for he strongly advocated them. Twelve non-reservation boarding schools opened while he served as commissioner. As Adams (1946) stated, "A sincere effort was made to develop the type of school that would destroy tribal ways..." (p. 56). Morgan felt it best to remove students entirely from their native environment. Under Morgan, the Codification of Rules for Indian Schools evolved, which led to regimentation throughout the system. It precisely prescribed a universal curriculum and rules for operating the government schools (Adams, 1946).

Non-reservation boarding schools have been likened to the reform schools of the day (Jackson, 1965; McBeth, 1983). Strict military discipline was the rule. Pupils over twelve, guilty of

extreme misbehavior, might either receive corporal punishment or be imprisoned in the guardhouse (Adams, 1946; Cohen, 1974). Boys and girls were segregated, except for classes and meals, to the point of having separate playgrounds, according to the Rules for Indian Schools (Cohen, 1974).

A typical schedule involved approximately one-half day academic study and one-half day work experience in agricultural, farm, and domestic work (McBeth, 1983; Jackson, 1965). For, besides classrooms and dormitories, these schools were farming operations to sustain the institution and to supplement the shortage of funds. As Jackson (1965) stated, "Every annual report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs from 1880-1920 included a statement reflecting the statistics related to farming, gardening, and dairying at Indian boarding schools of the time" (p. 53).

The curriculum ignored and/or actively suppressed the customs and symbols of Indian life. Speaking native languages or visibly adhering to a native lifestyle was forbidden (McBeth, 1983). For example, rule #41 of the Rules for Indian Schools, 1890 stated:

All instruction must be in the English language. Pupils must be compelled to converse with each other in English, and should be properly rebuked or punished for violation of this rule. Every effort should be made to encourage them to abandon their tribal language. To facilitate this work it is essential that all school employees be able to speak English fluently, and that they speak English exclusively

to the pupils, and also to each other in the presence of pupils (Cohen, 1974, p. 1757).

The boarding schools were inhabited by students ranging in age from 5-18 years, who were often a long distance from home. Indian agents traveled to the reservations to recruit children, by force, if necessary. Attendance was compulsory and if parents were unwilling to send their children away, the agents threatened them with the retaining of rations or annuities (Adams, 1946). Regarding recruitment, Leupp stated, "Never mind how he got them, the one point was to get them good or bad, sound or weakly, anything that would pass a very perfunctory scrutiny and add one name to the school roll" (Cohen, 1974, p. 2956). Rule #43 of the Code for Indian Schools further illustrated the coercive nature of the boarding schools: "Except in cases of emergency, pupils shall not be removed from school either by their parents or others, nor shall they be transferred from a Government school to a private school without special authority from the Indian Office" (Cohen, 1974, p. 1757).

A Hopi Indian described one recruitment scene in 1889:

A few years before my birth the U.S. Government had built a boarding school at the Keams Canyon Agency. At first our chief, Loluomai, had not wanted to send Oraibi children, but chiefs from other villages came and persuaded him to accept clothes, tools, and other supplies, to let them go. Most

of the people disliked this and refused to cooperate. Troops came to Oraibi several times to take the children by force and carry them off in wagons. The people said it was a terrible sight to see Negro soldiers come and tear children from their parents. Some boys later escaped from Keams Canyon and returned home on foot, a distance of forty miles (Simmons, 1942, p. 89).

Twenty-five new off-reservation boarding schools had been opened by the turn of the 20th century (McBeth, 1983). By this time, though, critics were appearing (McBeth, 1983; Jackson, 1965; Meriam, 1928; Adams, 1946). New officials within the Department of Indian Affairs brought different philosophies to the fore.

Dr. William N. Hailmann was appointed as Superintendent of Schools in 1893. He felt the Indian boarding schools should gradually be replaced by the public schools, and he tried to revise the drastic methods of forcing attendance. Dr. Hailmann attempted to modify student labor, for he considered the schools were for training, not profit (Adams, 1946, p. 61). When Hailmann left the office in 1897, there were eleven fewer boarding schools and twenty-four additional day-schools (Adams, 1946).

The first government official to advocate day-schools and to openly denounce boarding schools was Commissioner Francis E. Leupp. Leupp referred to the boarding schools as "an educational almshouse" (Adams, 1946, p. 62). Leupp felt the environment and classroom materials were not appropriate for children coming from



such a contrasting culture. He was against severing of domestic ties and of all things Indian. Commissioner Leupp also perceived political motivations in the people who wanted a Government Indian school in their town. He stated, "... any educational project can count on a certain amount of legislative support on the strength of its name; and once established, of course a school has to be kept up with goodly annual appropriations" (Leupp, 1910, p. 129).

Increased awareness of social problems arose in the years following World War I in America. The publication of the Meriam Report in 1928 marked a real beginning for the reorganization of Indian Affairs. This extensive report was a survey of the Indian social and economic status sponsored by the Institute for Government Research, at the request of the U.S. Department of Interior, and was financed by John D. Rockefeller, Jr. (Prucha, 1984).

Dr. Meriam and other members of the survey team visited sixty-four government boarding schools and thirty mission schools. For as of 1926, more than four-fifths of all Indian children were enrolled in boarding schools, which entailed an average attendance of nearly 18,000 pupils (Prucha, 1984). Meriam and his team called for drastic changes in the curriculum offered, an upgrading of facilities, and for better teachers (Meriam, 1928).

Meriam (1928) felt current social thought regarding the upbringing of children in the natural family setting was sound and that Indian children were having to endure an unhealthy situation. "From the educational standpoint the young child does

not belong in a boarding school. For normal healthy development he needs his family and his family needs him" (p. 34). Meriam wanted to accelerate the movement away from boarding schools and to eliminate pre-adolescent children from them altogether.

His report also denounced the routinization of the boarding school which worked against initiative, and criticized the uniform course of study throughout the system. He felt that the half-day plan of the boarding schools reduced their efficiency as educational institutions and that the work performed should be for pupil training, not to supply the needs of the institution. The report called for the boarding schools to provide a regular secondary educational curriculum to be supplemented to meet the needs of Indian children with material that would be culturally relevant (Meriam, 1928).

The Problem of Indian Administration (1928) by Meriam revealed some appalling aspects of the boarding school experience. Harmful punishments were uncovered and as Meriam stated, "Nearly every boarding school visited illustrated a failure to understand the underlying principles of human behavior" (p. 382). Overcrowding of the dormitories was the norm, inadequate bath facilities and toilets, blatant fire hazards, and poor heating and ventilation were noted. Poor food and nutrition were found in most schools and the team felt that scant attention was paid to the health of the students. The children appeared overworked and lacking adequate sleep. For example, "The Indian child's day begins at 6:00 AM

and continues for smaller children until 7:00 PM. For the older children, the day ends at 9:00 or 10:00 PM" (p. 332). The report further ventured that child labor laws were being violated due to the long hours and age of the students.

The Meriam report had an influence on government policy, and by 1932 the number of boarding schools had decreased. Senate documents revealed the trend, "That all reservation and nonreservation boarding schools, with an attendance of less than 45 and 80 pupils respectively, shall be discontinued on or before the beginning of the fiscal year 1922" (Fay, 1922, p. 294). Those remaining were improved, but enrollment in day-schools near students' homes was increasing as the century progressed. There are still boarding schools today, but attendance is not compulsory and the majority of Native American students are now in public schools.

Tippeconnic III and Gipp (1982) have stated, "The educational practices resulting from government policies are complex, contradictory, confusing, and characterized throughout history by the common belief that the formal education of American Indians has been a failure" (p. 125). A review of the literature revealed that the policies set by the Bureau of Indian Affairs are indeed confusing and contradictory. An ironic note is that the U.S. Government created the reservation system and then openly tried to keep the younger generation away from the influences there.

It must be borne in mind that there were benevolent educators and policy makers who felt they had the best interests of the

Indian children at heart. Environmental psychology was popular at the turn of the century and adherents felt that in a controlled environment, a cultural heritage could be eradicated in one generation. The assimilationist philosophy was not successful. According to Szasz (1977), most students who attended Bureau boarding schools returned to the reservations, rather than melting into white society. There they were the objects of ridicule and their education forced them to choose either the culture of the white man or the culture of the Indians (Szasz, 1977). Also, the training the children had received had little practical applicability to reservation conditions, nor to a heritage that stressed a communal existence.

Dependency became both the cause and result of the government's dealings with the Indians, and the ill effects of that paternalism are still in evidence today. It is easier to comprehend the condition of the Indians today if it is understood what they had to endure when it was acceptable for the majority population to attack Indian culture. In particular, forced schooling failed to achieve Americanization and instead left the American Indians in a cultural limbo.

There were other results of the boarding school experience, such as family disorganization, the breakdown of tribal culture, and lack of parent involvement in their children's education. Currently these problems are being corrected due to the passage of the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 (Tippeconnic III,

1982). The emotional and mental anguish of children forced into boarding schools cannot be erased, but, hopefully, will not be repeated.

## Reference List

- Adams, C. (1946). American Indian education: government schools and economic progress. New York: King's Press.
- Billington, R.A. (1966). America's frontier heritage. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- Cardenas, J., & First, J.M. (1985). Children at risk. Educational Leadership, 43(1), 5-8.
- Cohen, S. (Ed.). (1974). Education in the United States: A documentary history (Vol. 3 & 5). New York: Random House.
- Fay, G.E. (Ed.). (1977). Treaties, land cessions and other U.S. Congressional documents relative to American Indian tribes. Greeley: University of Northern Colorado.
- Jackson, C.E. (1965). Identification of unique features in education at American Indian schools. Provo: University of Utah.
- Kappler, C.J. (Ed.). (1929). Indian affairs: Laws and treaties (Vol. 4). Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Leupp, F.E. (1910). The Indian and his problem. New York: Scribner.
- McBeth, S.J. (1983). Ethnic identity and the boarding school experience of West-Central Oklahoma American Indians. Washington D.C.: University Press of America.
- Meriam, L. (1928). The problem of Indian administration. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press.

- Prucha, F.P. (Ed.). (1973). Americanizing the American Indian-  
Writings by the "friends of the Indian" 1880-1900. Cambridge,  
Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Prucha, F.P. (1984). The great father (Vol. II). Lincoln:  
University of Nebraska.
- Riegel, R.E. (1971). America moves west. New York: Holt,  
Rinehart, and Winston.
- Simmons, L.W. (Ed.). (1929). Sun Chief: The autobiography  
of a Hopi Indian. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Smith, J.F. (Ed.). (1976). Indian-white relations: A persistent  
paradox. Washington D.C.: Howard University Press.
- Szasz, M.C. (1977). Education and the American Indian.  
Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Tippeconic III, J.W., & Gipp, G.E. (1982). American Indian  
education. Encyclopedia of Educational Research (5th ed.).  
New York: The Free Press
- Utley, R.M. (Ed.). (1964). Battlefield and classroom.  
New Haven: Yale University Press.