

Federal American Indian Policy – American Indian Boarding Schools

Fast Facts

Curriculum Area: Social Studies
Grade Level: Grades 6-8
Suggested Duration: Five Days

Stage 1 Desired Results

Established Goals -Montana 6-8 Social Studies Standards

(3) The geography content standards for sixth through eighth grade are that each student will:
(f) identify how the historical and contemporary movement of people, goods, and ideas from one area can impact change, conflict, and cooperation in other areas.

(4) The history content standards for sixth through eighth grade are that each student will:
(e) explain how Montana has changed over time and how this history impacts the present;
(f) understand that there are multiple perspectives and interpretations of historical events;

Understandings

- History is a story most often related through the subjective experience of the teller. With the inclusion of more and varied voices, histories are being rediscovered and revised (EU 6).
- Establish an understanding of American Indian boarding schools from 1870 to present day.
- Compare and contrast the differences in the structure of education that was established for American Indian children of the United States.

Essential Questions

- Why did the U.S. Government establish American Indian boarding schools in the United States?
- Who ran and funded these schools?
- How were the boarding schools different from other schools in the United States?
- How did the boarding schools impact the lives and cultures of American Indian families?
- Are American Indian boarding schools still here today and what has changed about them?

Students will be able to...

- discuss the stages of the development of American Indian boarding schools in the United States and, specifically, Montana.
- recognize key people and organizations.
- express their findings in oral presentations and journals.



Students will know...

- American Indian boarding schools were established in the United States and Montana Indian children attended these schools.
- American Indian boarding schools still exist and there are day and boarding schools in Montana.

Stage 2 Assessment Evidence

Performance Tasks

1. Create a timeline of American Indian boarding schools from 1870-present (highlight specific events).
2. Students will read information pertaining to American Indian boarding schools.
3. Students will conduct research projects (timeline, research presentations).
4. Write a short reaction paper to [Dislocation/Relocation](#) after viewing.

Stage 3 Learning Plan

Learning Activities

Introduce the topic by asking students to imagine that they are a young child age 6-8. America has been invaded and overtaken by a foreign nation. Once in charge, the new nation takes them, their brothers and sisters, and other young children and ships them off to a school far away from their home. When they arrive, their hair is cut short, any special items given to them by friends and family members are taken, and they are forced to wear different clothes. Courses are taught in a foreign language and students are punished for speaking English. Sometimes the punishment might even be physical in nature. They are forced to adopt and practice a new religion and belief system that is very different from their family upbringing. For about half of the day, they are asked to do work tasks which grown adults would normally do. The foreign leaders and school masters tell them and their parents this schooling is for their own good and will help them fit better into the new ruling society and learn their ways. Lead a short class discussion using the following questions as prompts.

- How would this make them feel?
- Would they believe that being away from their families and learning a new language and religion would be helpful for them?
- Would they go along with this or would they try to fight back, disobey rules, etc.?
- Do they think this approach would be successful and that students who experienced this would be better able to adapt to their new society?

Share with students that something similar happened to American Indians in Montana and all-across the United States. As a way to assimilate American Indians into mainstream society and “civilize” them, the U.S. government authorized churches and missionary societies to open schools for American Indian children. Attendance was required by law and parents could be deprived of food rations for refusing to let their students attend. Sometimes, the schools were located on reservations and students only attended during the day. These were commonly known as “day schools.” Other times, the schools were located far away from the reservation and the children were required to move away from home.

These were known as boarding schools. In addition to being taught English and Christianity, students were taught skills and trades that were designed to help them find jobs in traditional American society. The federal government used a number of justifications to explain this treatment of American Indians:

- Increased numbers of white settlers were moving west and onto American Indian lands, creating increased conflicts and the perception that American Indians were a problem.
- Most Americans believed in the idea of “Manifest Destiny,” which was the idea that God had chosen the United States to farm the west and bring Christianity onto American Indian lands.
- They believed American Indians were savages and that being taught Christianity would help them be more civilized. This was also sometimes called “Social Evolution.”
- Teaching them trades that could lead to jobs in American society would help them become more self-sufficient.
- Helping American Indians be more self-sufficient would relieve the government of some of the costs of feeding, clothing, and providing health care for them as was promised in the treaties by which they acquired American Indian land.
- Assimilating American Indians and having them move away from their historical homelands and into cities and other places where they could find jobs would allow the government to acquire more of their traditional lands for white settlement.

Show the clip of the film, *Montana Mosaic*, produced by the Montana Historical Society. Watch the segment titled [Dislocation/Relocation](#) as it gives a good overview of the boarding school experience from an American Indian perspective.

Ask students to write up a brief (approximately 250 words) reaction paper to the film and have them hand in at the end of class.

At the start of the second day, ask students to share some of their reactions. Circle back to the question of whether or not they thought this approach to assimilation would work. After some student responses and possible discussion, explain the boarding schools created new and complex problems for American Indian people that are still felt today. The mental and physical abuse (sometimes even sexual in nature) created intergenerational trauma that still exists today. Many of the issues that still plague American Indian people today such as alcoholism, drug use, and higher rates of suicide are a result of this trauma. In many families the traditional parenting practices that had worked for American Indian families for hundreds of years were lost causing a sense of loneliness and isolation among many children. The model of child rearing learned at boarding schools involved mental and physical abuse of children who don't follow rules or behave. Children who experienced this model of parenting often passed it on to their children when they became adults. Many American Indians lost the ability to speak in their Native language, resulting in fewer and fewer fluent speakers of tribal languages.

Read the following quote from Lone Wolf, who was a Piegan Blackfoot and quoted in *Native American Testimony*, page 220, a book by Peter Nabakov (1991).

None of us wanted to go and our parents didn't want to let us go. Oh, we cried, for this was the first time we were to be separated from our parents. Nobody waved as the wagons, escorted by the soldiers, took us toward the school at Fort Shaw. Once there, our belongings were taken from us, even the little medicine bags our mothers had given to us to protect us from harm. Everything was placed in a heap and set afire.

After reading the quote, ask the students to reflect on the following questions and then discuss their thoughts briefly with a partner:

- What would it feel like to be taken away in tears with their parents' heads down as they leave?
- Why were U.S. soldiers needed to escort children away from their families?
- Why did the boarding schools feel the need to burn the students' belongings when they arrived?
- How might living through an experience like impact them, their families, their children, and their grandchildren?

After students have shared their thoughts with their partner(s), conduct a quick share out of what students talked about, following up on any salient points or conversation pieces where appropriate.

Remind students that all histories are complex and that some children did have positive experiences at boarding schools. The story of the 1904 Fort Shaw girls' basketball team would be one example of this. The girls who had been taught to play basketball at the Fort Shaw boarding school travelled to St. Louis for the World's Fair and participated in the Women's Basketball World Championship. They were undefeated and even beat some men's teams they played. This story is still considered a highlight of Montana history today. Some parents willingly sent their students away to the schools as they thought it would be beneficial to them. Many students also made strong and lasting friendships with other students they met at boarding schools. Show this short video clip from Gros Ventre member [Everall Fox talking about the boarding school experience](#). At the conclusion of the video, you can emphasize that boarding school experience, like individual histories, was complex and that the lasting legacy of boarding schools was loss of tribal languages and cultures.

For the remainder of the class period and the next two, students will be asked to develop a timeline of boarding schools and write up a brief description of the boarding school experience. Explain to the students that evaluation of their timeline and description should be based upon how well they answer the Essential Questions. Have them utilize the suggested resources. Students could also research a specific boarding school such as Carlisle, Flandreau, or Haskell and write up a summary of the information they found and emphasizing how boarding schools are different today. If time allows, you can have students provide a summary of their findings to the class.

Extension activity

Have students read and prepare a book report regarding one of the following books about boarding schools:

- *Jim Thorpe Original All American* by Joseph Bruchac
- *Sweet Grass Basket* by Marlene Carvell
- *My Name is Seepeetza* by Shirley Sterling

Resources

[Montana Mosaic: 20th Century People and Events](#). * Helena, MT: Montana Historical Society, 2006.

Juneau, Stan, revised and updated by Walter Fleming and Lance Foster. "Chapter Three: The American Indian Boarding School (1617-Present)," in [History and Foundation of American Indian Education Policy](#). * Helena, MT: Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2013.

Julie Cajune. "Chapter Five Tribal Histories Narrative Boarding Schools: The Abduction of Children," in [Montana Tribal Histories: Educators Resource Guide](#). * Helena, MT: Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2013.

[Indian Education for All Model Teaching Unit for Joseph Bruchac's Jim Thorpe's Bright Path.](#)* Helena, MT: Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2010.

[Indian Education for All Model Teaching Unit Sweetgrass Basket by Marlene Carvell.](#) Helena, MT: Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2016.

Library of Congress. Classroom Materials, [Native American Boarding Schools.](#)

*Sent to your library by the Montana Historical Society and the Montana Office of Public Instruction.