

Native Languages Destruction and Revitalization

Christian churches were deeply involved in efforts to “civilize” Native Americans, and this included efforts to destroy Native languages. There is a role for churches to help support and fund language revitalization programs.

Until the 1970s, the U.S. government’s approach to Indian education can be summed up in two words: **conversion and assimilation**. The devastating impact these policies had on Native languages and cultures remains strong today. The number of fluent Ojibwe and Dakota speakers in Minnesota has dropped so low that there is little opportunity for language to be passed from generation to generation. Languages are an integral part of cultural identity, and local Native American leaders are making great efforts to reclaim them.

A brief history of the efforts to suppress—and then reclaim—Native languages follows.

Civilization Fund Act (1819)ⁱ: The Act provided money to both the federal government and Christian missions to educate and civilize Native Americans. The goal was to “civilize” and “Christianize” Native Americans. This was the preamble to the boarding school era. It also created a class structure and split within Native American communities—between traditional Indians who opposed the schools and those who attended, and learned English and more American ways.

Boarding School Era: The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) opened its first boarding school in 1860 on the Yakima Indian Reservation.ⁱⁱ The Carlisle Indian Industrial School opened in 1879 in Pennsylvania as the first off-reservation boarding school.ⁱⁱⁱ It became the national model. Founder Capt. Richard Pratt summed up his philosophy with the phrase: “Kill the Indian and save the man.”^{iv} Native children were forced to give up their communities, their dress, their language, and even their names. The War Department ordered Pratt to recruit his first students from the Dakota, Lakota and Nakota nations – peoples who had most resisted the United States. “Within three decades of Carlisle opening, nearly 500 [boarding] schools extended all the way to California. The Bureau of Indian Affairs controlled 25 off-reservation boarding schools while churches ran 460 boarding and day schools on reservations with government funds.”^v “The number of Native American children in the boarding schools reached a peak in the 1970s, with an estimated enrollment of 60,000 in 1973.”^{vi}

The Meriam Report: The Problem of Indian Administration (1928): This federal report criticized many U.S. policies towards Indians, particularly boarding schools. It concluded the schools were overcrowded, provided poor diet and insufficient medical services, were supported by student labor, and relied on a uniform curriculum rather than raising teacher standards.^{vii} Among its recommendations was to abolish the “Uniform Course of Study”, which taught only majority American cultural values.^{viii} (Assimilation policies would continue for decades.)

The Kennedy Report: Indian Education: A National Tragedy, A National Challenge (1969)^{ix}: The report criticized coercive assimilation policies, saying they had strong negative influences on national attitudes towards Indians and disastrous effects on the education of Indian children. Recommendations include to “set a national policy committing the nation to achieving educational excellence for American Indians; to maximize participation and control by Indians in establishing Indian education programs; and assuring sufficient federal funds ...”



[Native American Languages Act \(1990\)](#)^x: Congress found convincing evidence that “student achievement and performance, community and school pride, and educational opportunity are clearly and directly tied to respect for, and support of, the first language of the child.” The Act repudiates past federal policies, declaring the government’s intention “to preserve, protect and promote the rights and freedoms of Native Americans to use, practice and develop Native American Languages.”

[Indian Nations At Risk Task Force Report \(1991\)](#)^{xi}: Chartered by the U.S. Department of Education, the Task Force identified reasons Indian Nations were at risk, including because, “The language and cultural base of the American Native are rapidly eroding.” The report’s goals include: “Maintain Native Languages and Cultures: By the year 2000 all schools will offer Native students the opportunity to maintain and develop their tribal languages and will create a multicultural environment that enhances the many cultures represented in the school.”

[White House Conference on Indian Education \(1992\)](#)^{xii}: The report’s numerous resolutions include: “that American Indian /Alaska Native students will have access to curriculum and material which provides accurate and relevant information on the language, history, and culture of the American Indian /Alaska Native.” Further, it states that successful Early Childhood Programs shall “Respect the use of Native American culture and language in the educational process of Indian children at an early age to enhance the level of pride and self-esteem in learning...”

[Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act \(2006\)](#)^{xiii}: The Act funds programs to preserve Native American languages through language immersion programs. This bill is set to expire. Action on bills to extend it until 2022 are pending in Congress.

[Report to the Legislature on Dakota and Ojibwe Language Revitalization, Minnesota Indian Affairs Council \(2011\)](#)^{xiv}: The report states: “Minnesota’s most enduring languages are in danger of disappearing. Without timely intervention, the use of Dakota and Ojibwe languages ... will decline to a point beyond recovery. These languages ... express, reflect, and maintain communal connections and ways of understanding the world. ... The benefits of language revitalization are abundant. For Dakota and Ojibwe people the effort is a matter of cultural survival ...” It concludes that immersion schools are the only available option to preserve these languages.

[Strategic Plan for Dakota and Ojibwe Language Revitalization in Minnesota, Minnesota Indian Affairs Council \(2013\)](#)^{xv}: It opens by observing that “At the center of rescuing and preserving Indian language is the important task of honoring its integrity. Indian language loses much of its meaning in translation to English.” The strategic plan lays out broad goals, including increasing opportunities to learn Dakota and Ojibwe, increase immersion opportunities, increase the numbers of teachers and master apprentice programs, and to broaden family and community-based language learning.

The Threat Remains: A 2012 Voice of America report quoted Willard Gilbert, president of the National Indian Education Association (NIEA) saying: "There were 175 Native American languages still spoken in 1996. However only twenty of these languages will still be spoken by the year 2050 without urgent help to keep them alive." In Minnesota, there are language immersion programs in Dakota and Anishinaabe, but they are not adequately funded and are in desperate need of Native language speaking teachers. Dakota and Ojibwe cultural leaders have made great strides, but they need support.

Endnotes

- ⁱ Wikipedia Entry on the [Civilization Fund Act](#). Key parts of the text found at [Digital Library](#).
- ⁱⁱ American Indian Relief Council website, "[History and Culture](#)" section
- ⁱⁱⁱ Wikipedia entry on the [Carlisle School](#)
- ^{iv} History Matters: <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/4929/>
- ^v [Soul Wound: The Legacy of Native American Schools](#), Amnesty International Magazine, March 2007:
- ^{vi} Wikipedia: [American Indian Boarding Schools](#) entry
- ^{vii} Wikipedia: [Meriam Report](#) entry; Native American Rights Fund link to full [Meriam Report](#).
- ^{viii} Wikipedia: [Cultural Assimilation of Native Americans](#) entry
- ^{ix} Native American Rights Fund link to full [Kennedy Report](#).
- ^x [Public Law 101 477](#), Oct. 30, 1990
- ^{xi} Full report of the [Indian Nations At Risk Task Forced Report](#) to the U.S. Department of Education.
- ^{xii} The [Final Report of the White House Conference on Indian Education](#), May 22, 1992
- ^{xiii} Wikipedia entry on the [Esther Martinez Native American Language Preservation Act](#).
- ^{xiv} Full report to the Legislature on [Dakota and Ojibwe Language Revitalization](#), 2011.
- ^{xv} Full report to the Legislature of the [Strategic Plan for Dakota and Ojibwe Language Revitalization](#), 2013