



SOCIAL SCIENCES

# Cultural Assimilation and Indian Boarding Schools

## ESSENTIAL UNDERSTANDINGS

- Identity
- History
- Genocide, Federal Policy and Laws

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Students can explain how Indian boarding schools served as a form of forced assimilation for Native Americans.
- Students can create an example of a historical marker for Chemawa Indian School to describe its significance and its controversial history.
- Students can discuss how the history of forced assimilation and Indian boarding schools is still relevant to Native Americans today.

## ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- How was assimilation used as a tool to force Native Americans to leave behind their traditional lifeways?
- What role did Indian boarding schools play in this forced assimilation?
- How is the history of Indian boarding schools still a relevant issue to Native Americans today?

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## Overview

The U.S. government's effort to culturally assimilate Native Americans can be traced to at least 1819, with the passage of the Civilization Fund Act. Up to that time the U.S. government's approach to Native Americans had been one of outright extermination, at worst, or forced removal to reservations, at best. While it would take several more decades to play out, the Civilization Fund Act began an era in which many Euro-American politicians, religious leaders, and cultural reformers would push for the assimilation of Native Americans into mainstream Western culture.

Some of these cultural reformers were well-intentioned, believing that assimilation would be the best thing for the survival and health of Native people. For others, cultural assimilation was a convenient excuse to deny tribal sovereignty and to steal tribal land and resources. In either case, these assimilation efforts would have a devastating impact on many Native people, families, communities, and entire tribal cultures. That impact can be traced to one policy: the forced removal of Native American children from their families and their enrollment in Indian boarding schools.



## LOGISTICS

- Where does the activity take place?  
*Classroom*
- How are the students organized?
  - ☑ Whole class    ☑ Teams: 2 – 4
  - ☑ Pairs    ☑ Individually

## TIME REQUIRED

120 minutes

Beginning in 1860 and not officially ending until the passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978, thousands of Native children and youth were sent to Indian boarding schools, often in places far removed from their ancestral territory. There were ultimately more than 350 such government- or church-operated boarding schools across the United States.

In these schools, Native children were typically subjected to a type of cultural reprogramming, in which every effort was made to strip them of their Native identity and to replace it with Euro-American values, manners, and beliefs. The underlying goal of this “assimilation through education” was bluntly stated by Richard Henry Pratt, a former U.S. cavalry officer who operated one of the most infamous Indian boarding schools, the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, which opened in 1879: “Kill the Indian in him,” said Pratt, “and save the man.”

In a March 2019 article in *The Atlantic* (<https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2019/03/traumatic-legacy-indian-boarding-schools/584293/>), writer and photographer Mary Annette Pember, a member

## STANDARDS

### Oregon social sciences standards

**8.7** – Analyze the expanding eligibility of citizenship in the continuing struggle for the expansion of rights for ethnic and traditionally marginalized groups.

**8.24** – Examine the cause and effect of social, political, and economic factors that motivated westward expansion, invasion of indigenous peoples, institutions, and the resulting impacts.

**8.28** – Identify issues related to historical events to recognize the power, authority, and governance as it relates to systemic oppression and its impact on ethnic and religious groups, as well as other historically persecuted individuals in the United States in the modern era (bias, injustice, discrimination, and stereotypes).

## MATERIALS

### What materials are needed for students to engage in this activity?

- Technological ability to display PowerPoint slides
- PowerPoint file PPT\_G8\_Assimilation
- Internet connection and ability to show videos on an internet browser
  - “Unseen Tears: The Native American Boarding School Experience in Western New York, Part 1” (Activity 2) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ioAzgmes8c>
  - “Chemawa: The Future of Native American Youth” (Activity 3) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q9xEfjZCgCc>

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of the Red Cliff Tribe of Wisconsin Ojibwe, explores the traumatic consequences of this effort to “civilize” Native children and youth.

*This is what achieving civilization looked like in practice: Students were stripped of all things associated with Native life. Their long hair, a source of pride for many Native peoples, was cut short, usually into identical bowl haircuts. They exchanged traditional clothing for uniforms and embarked on a life influenced by strict military-style regimentation. Students were physically punished for speaking their Native languages. Contact with family and community members was discouraged or forbidden altogether. Survivors have described a culture of pervasive physical and sexual abuse at the schools. Food and medical attention were often scarce; many students died. Their parents sometimes learned of their death only after they had been buried in school cemeteries, some of which were unmarked.*

It is impossible to understand contemporary Native American culture without exploring this dark chapter of forced assimilation and the boarding school experience. For many Native people, this era was one of cultural genocide, in which the dominant Euro-American culture sought to destroy Native languages, lifeways, traditions, and identities. Miraculously, many tribal cultures have survived and are making renewed efforts to revitalize their Indigenous languages and traditional lifeways and to heal the wounds of forced cultural assimilation.

### **MATERIALS** *(Continued)*

**What materials are needed for students to engage in this activity?**

- PDF article, “Chemawa Boarding School” by SuAnn M. Reddick
- Oregon Public Broadcasting (OPB) article, “OPB Chemawa Series”
- Chemawa Letter handout

### **VOCABULARY**

**Assimilation** – The process of becoming similar to something.

**Cultural assimilation** – The process in which a racial/ethnic group comes to resemble a dominant racial/ethnic group and assumes the values, behaviors, and beliefs of the dominant group. This is often accomplished through force or coercion.

**Indian boarding school** – A residential school with the primary goal of assimilating American Indian children to comply and live by Euro-American cultural standards or values.

This lesson introduces students to the concept of cultural assimilation and the history of Indian boarding schools, including the Chemawa Indian School in Salem, Oregon, which operates to this day.

## Background for teachers

- Preview the video to be shown in Activity 2: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ioAzggmes8c>
- Preview the first video to be shown in Activity 3: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q9xEFjZCgCc>
- Preview the second video to be shown in Activity 3: <https://www.opb.org/video/2017/11/17/chemawa-the-us-governments-oldest-operating-indian-boarding-school/>
- Read the Oregon Public Broadcasting series on the Chemawa Indian School: <https://www.opb.org/article/2025/02/25/chemawa-indian-school-opened-145-years-ago/>
- Review these resources for information on Indian boarding schools and assimilation:
  - <https://boardingschoolhealing.org/>
  - [https://prezi.com/1w6bvwx4145\\_/the-assimilation-of-american-indians-in-the-late-1800s/?utm\\_campaign=share&utm\\_medium=copy](https://prezi.com/1w6bvwx4145_/the-assimilation-of-american-indians-in-the-late-1800s/?utm_campaign=share&utm_medium=copy)
  - <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/08/30/us/native-american-boarding-schools.html>
  - <https://civics.sites.unc.edu/files/2014/10/IndianEducation.pdf>
  - <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/lessons/indian-schools/>
- Review these resources for information on Chemawa Indian School:
  - [https://oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/chemawa\\_indian\\_boarding\\_school/#.XQEi1497ncs](https://oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/chemawa_indian_boarding_school/#.XQEi1497ncs)
  - <https://web.archive.org/web/20070927210922/https://cis.bie.edu/our-school/our-history#:~:text=History%20of%20Chemawa%20Indian%20School,land%20rented%20from%20Pacific%20University>



## Considerations for teachers

### Assessment

- Teachers will assess student learning by listening to small-group and large-group discussion to determine how thoroughly students understand the concepts.
- Teachers will assess students' historical marker paragraphs describing the significance and history of the Chemawa Indian School.

### Practices

- *Individual work* - Some activities rely on students completing work independently, with encouragement and assistance from the instructor when needed.
- *Small group* - Small-group activities allow students to share and analyze ideas with one, two, or three other people. This practice can be good for students who do not want to share their ideas with the whole class and/or who may be afraid of others' reactions.
- *Classroom discussion* - Large-group, whole-class discussion allows students to express their thoughts and hear the thoughts of others. For the instructor, this practice is a good way to take the pulse of the group and see what general themes are emerging.
- *Sensitive topics* - The discussion of personal identities and cultural assimilation may be sensitive or uncomfortable topics for some students. Spend time at the beginning of the lesson to reiterate classroom norms and expectations. Give students options to temporarily disengage if they need a break (examples: stepping outside the classroom, listening to music with headphones). Also, put aside time following the lesson (or at another convenient time) for students to speak with the instructor one-on-one.

## Learning targets

- I can explain how Indian boarding schools served as a form of forced assimilation for Native Americans.
- I can describe the history of the Chemawa Indian School and its current effort to meet the needs of Native American students.
- I can discuss how the history of forced assimilation and Indian boarding schools is still relevant to Native Americans today.

## Options/extensions

- Use all or parts of the following videos:
  - Native American Boarding Schools <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yo1bYj-R7F0>
  - Native Life! Season 1, Episode 7 – Assimilation (Boarding Schools) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ISpbGP1dYIU>  
This is a relatively short video (4:19) that contains powerful imagery that would make for a great class discussion.

**NOTE:** It is highly recommended that the teacher preview this video prior to using it in a classroom setting. The video contains sensitive content, including gun usage and acts of violence. If possible, arrange to have a counselor in the room or available to students who would like to discuss it further.

Prior to the discussion activity, the teacher should review ground rules, including respecting each other, listening, and creating a safe space for everyone. It's OK to disagree on a topic, just do it respectfully.

- While watching Native Life! Season 1, Episode 7 video clip (0:00-4:10) – Pass out index cards to students in a table group setting (groups of five or so) and have them write down ideas for discussion. After the video, students can put the index cards in a pile to shuffle, pull out a card, and then discuss. The teacher can then call on groups to share (if time permits) their discussion findings.

- Ask students to construct a timeline of the Chemawa Indian School and significant events in the school's history using the article "Chemawa Indian School" by SuAnn M. Reddick.
- Show the remainder of the video about Chemawa Indian School:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q9xEFjZCgCc>
- Use another article from the Oregon Public Broadcasting series on the Chemawa School: <https://www.opb.org/news/series/chemawa/>
- Have students read "Behind the Fence: Chemawa's Culture of Secrecy" and write a reflection, using citations from the article and resources from the lesson, based on one of the following prompts:
  - Do schools need fences for safety reasons?
  - How do past practices influence the school today?
  - What makes a good school?
  - Do schools continue to use forced assimilation on Native people?
- Students can draw or paint with watercolor pencils while the video is playing ("Unseen Tears: The Native American Boarding School Experience in Western New York, Part I" (Activity 2).

## Reflection/closure

Display slide 14 and ask students to write a public, historical marker for the Chemawa Indian School.

Ask for a few volunteer students to share their markers, then generate a discussion by asking: Do you think Indian boarding schools are still necessary or relevant today?



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## Activity 1

# What Is Cultural Assimilation?

*Time: 40 minutes*

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This activity introduces and defines the term cultural assimilation and uses visual aids to demonstrate assimilation of Native American youth in Indian boarding schools.

### Step 1:

Display slide 2 and read over the definitions of assimilation and cultural assimilation.

### Say:

*Have you ever felt that you had to downplay, adjust, or explain your cultural behaviors, values, or beliefs to fit in? If so, how did that make you feel?*

If students struggle to think of experiences from their own life, offer the following examples to get them thinking:

- Downplaying your intelligence and/or good grades to avoid looking like a “nerd”
- Dressing or acting “professional” to impress someone that you perceive as having more power
- Adjusting your behavior to be viewed as “more feminine” or “more masculine”
- Explaining why you or your family do or do not celebrate a certain holiday
- Explaining why you do or do not eat certain foods

Allow time for student responses. Keep the discussion focused on how their experiences have made them feel.



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## Activity 1 *(Continued)*

### **Facilitator note:**

This activity may bring up a wide range of examples, observations, and emotions as students discuss their own experiences with assimilation. If possible, arrange to have a counselor in the room or available to students who would like to discuss it further.

### **Step 2:**

Display slide 3 and read through the information on the slide.

### **Step 3:**

Display slide 4 and instruct students to spend a couple minutes looking at the photographs.

### **Step 4:**

Facilitate a discussion on the photographs in slide 4 using the following questions:

- What stands out to you about these photos?
- What are the major differences you notice?
- What emotions do you feel while looking at these photos?
- Think about the people taking the photos. What was their motivation for taking these photographs? What were they trying to accomplish?
- Think about the young people in the photographs. What do you think they felt on the days these pictures were taken? What do you think their experience was like in between the days these pictures were taken?

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## Activity 1 *(Continued)*

### Step 5:

Distribute the Chemawa Letter handout and either ask students to read it silently or ask for volunteers to read the letter out loud. After reading the letter, discuss the following questions:

- What stands out to you in this letter?
- Where do you see examples of assimilation?
- Where do you see examples of students pushing back against assimilation?
- If you were in this situation, how would you feel?  
What would you do?

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## Activity 2

# Indian Boarding Schools in the United States

*Time: 30 minutes*

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This activity provides an overview of Indian boarding schools in the United States.

### Step 1:

Display slide 5. Read the quotation on the left or ask for a student volunteer to read the quote. Explain that, prior to interference from Euro-Americans, Native Americans already had their own education system in place.

### Step 2:

Use slide 6 to explain the creation of Indian boarding schools and display slide 7 to show the locations of those schools across the United States.

### Step 3:

Use slides 8, 9, and 10 to provide more information about Indian boarding schools.

### Step 4:

Display slide 11 and read the quotation out loud to the class.

### Say:

*These are the words of the man responsible for the first Indian boarding school in the United States. What does this quote tell us about the mindset and motives of the people running the boarding schools?*

### Step 5:

Allow a few minutes for student responses.

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## Activity 2 *(Continued)*

### Step 6:

Show the video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ioAzggmes8c>.

(Approximately 10 minutes)

### Facilitator note:

This video describes many of the abuses and assaults that Native Americans experienced in boarding schools. It may be difficult and painful for students to watch. If possible, arrange to have a counselor in the room or available to students who would like to discuss it further.

### Step 7:

Following the video, use some or all of the following questions to facilitate discussion:

- In the video, we heard the stories of several Native Americans who went to boarding schools. What stood out to you about their stories?
- Students as young as four and five were taken from their families and sent to boarding schools. How do you think that experience impacted their lives, both at the time they were taken and later on?
- At the beginning of the clip, Michael Martin states, "This never makes it into the history books; this is never talked about." Why do you think that is? What is the benefit of knowing this part of American history?
- What other historical events does this remind you of? What current events does this remind you of?

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### Activity 3

## Chemawa Indian School: Past and Present

*Time: 50 minutes*

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This activity provides information on the Chemawa Indian School in Oregon. The first part of the activity asks students to reflect on the school's history and the second part of the activity asks students to reflect on current issues the school is facing.

#### **Say:**

*You may have noticed on the map that there is an Indian boarding school in Oregon that was established on June 1, 1885. We're going to finish this lesson by learning more about the history of this school and how it's doing today.*

#### **Step 1:**

Show the video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q9xEFjZCgCc>. Show the video from the beginning until minute 2:38.

#### **Step 2:**

Distribute the article "Chemawa Indian School" by SuAnn M. Reddick. Give students 5 to 10 minutes to read through this article on their own.

#### **Step 3:**

Display slide 12 and ask students to respond to the discussion questions with a partner or in their table groups.

#### **Step 4:**

Distribute the handout Oregon Public Broadcasting Chemawa Series and tell students they are going to read an article and watch a video about some struggles the Chemawa Indian School faces today. Show the video: <https://www.opb.org/video/2017/11/17/chemawa-the-us-governments-oldest-operating-indian-boarding-school/>. Following the video, allow 15 to 20 minutes for students to read the article.

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### Activity 3 *(Continued)*

#### Step 5:

Display slide 13 and use the questions on the slide to process the article.

Choose the discussion method that works best for your classroom: think-pair-share, small-group discussion, or whole-class discussion.