Native American Boarding Schools

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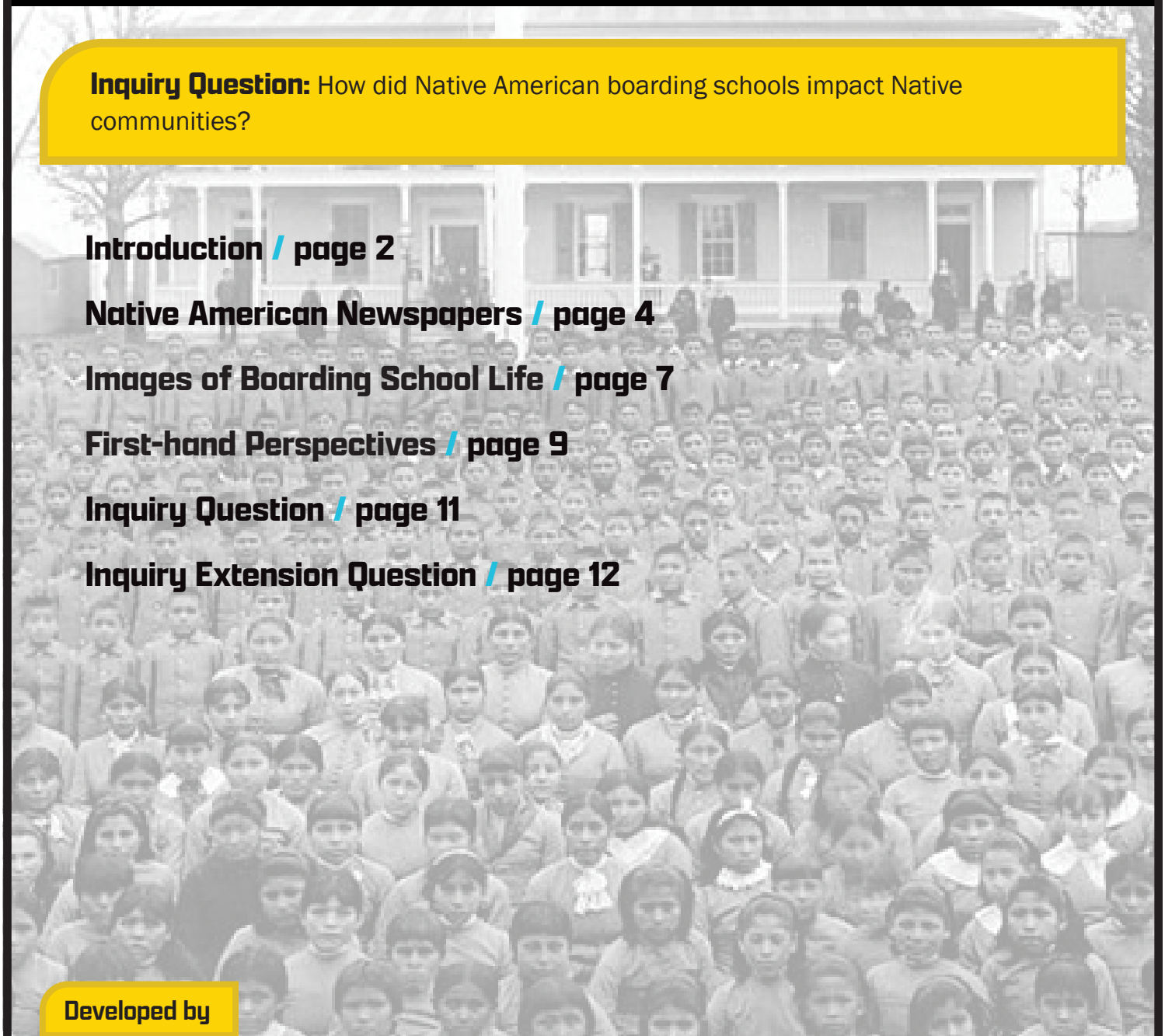
An Inquiry Pack to Accompany LegalTimelines.org

Inquiry Question: How did Native American boarding schools impact Native communities?



Developed by

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Introduction

Free public education has long been considered an important part of American life and culture. Though many view free public education as an important and positive element of American life, some groups have not had a positive experience with it throughout history. One of those groups is Native Americans.

In the early to mid-1800s, the federal government began funding boarding schools for Native Americans. By the 1920s, more than 80% of all Native American children were attending boarding schools. These were schools where students were sent far away from home to get an education, often run by a Christian church. Because they were sent so far from home, these schools provided students with housing, supervision, meals, and more.

The education at these schools was not the same kind as students today receive. Native American students were forced to assimilate to (or become a full part of) white American culture. They had to cut their hair, stop speaking their language, wear different clothes, and change other parts of their customs and culture. Classes taught white American culture; English; Christianity; trades including farming, sewing, woodworking, and more.

The Carlisle Indian Industrial School was a nationally known boarding school and model for other schools. It opened in 1879 and stayed open for almost 30 years, with over 8,000 students from more than 100 different tribal cultures. Its founder was famous for saying: "Kill the Indian in him, and save the man." This was the approach he took for his school, where he forced students to abandon their cultures (thereby to "kill the Indian in him") and become immersed in white American culture (thereby to "save the man").

Attendance at these schools was very often traumatic for students. Mistreatment at some schools included malnourishment, and physical and sexual abuse. Recently, it has been estimated that there were at least 500 student deaths at these schools. This estimate was only recently identified—in 2022—and many experts believe that as this history is studied more, that number will grow significantly. Joe Wheeler was a student at a boarding school in Oklahoma. He said of his experience: "First they cut my hair, then they made me eat soap and then they beat me for speaking my language."

After their time in school was over, many students returned to their communities having forgotten their native language and their tribal customs and culture. However, they didn't fit into white American culture, either.

By the 1920s, changes slowly began to take place in the boarding school system. Initially, a government-funded report recommended that younger students attend local community schools, rather than being sent away to boarding school. By the 1960s, the federal government established school boards to help make decisions and policies for the schools, with many Native American community members serving on the boards. By the late 1970s, federal laws allowed Native parents the choice of sending their child to a local school or a boarding school. During this time many tribal governments took over the management of schools. This allowed them to change what was taught and how students were treated. Students were able to learn about their own culture and speak their tribe's language at these schools. By the 1980s and 1990s, more and more of these boarding schools closed as students began to attend their community schools or other local public schools. By 2023, only four federally run boarding schools existed outside of reservation lands.

Many American students have not learned about the history of Native American boarding schools. It usually gets glossed over in teaching Native American history. More recently, though, these schools have drawn the attention of the public and of the federal government. In 2022, the U.S. government did its first survey of deaths at Native American boarding schools. Over the past few years, congressmembers have introduced a bill to establish a Truth and Healing Commission that would study the country's history of Native American

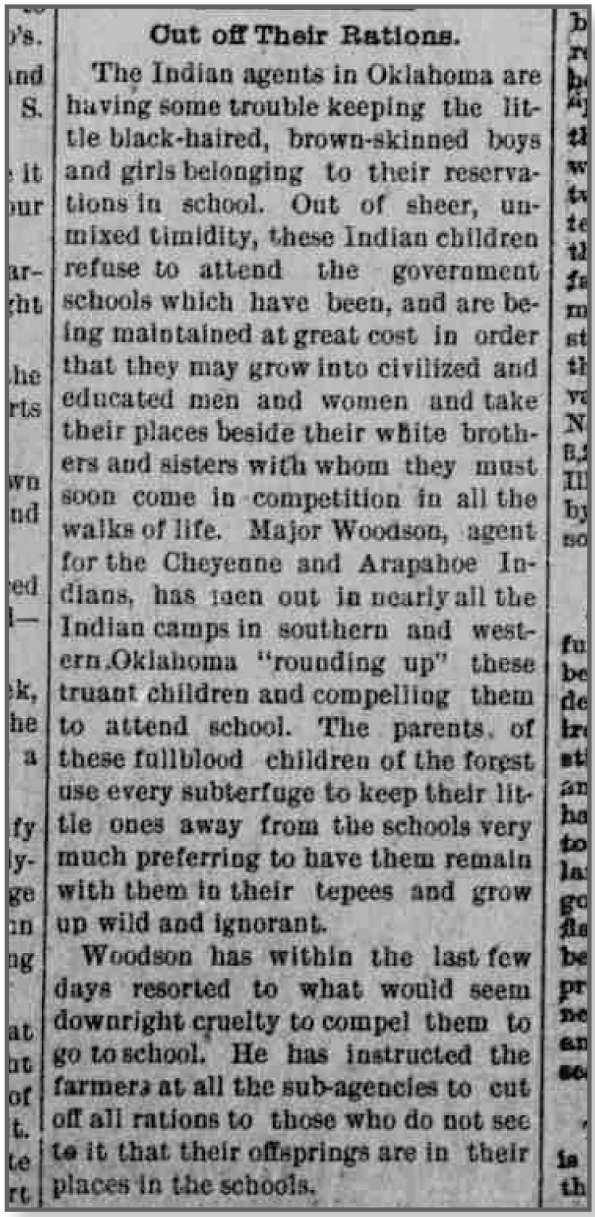
boarding schools. Much of this has come under the leadership of Deb Haaland, a member of the Native Pueblo [PWEB-loh] of Laguna Tribe, and the head of the U.S. Department of the Interior.

The sources in this inquiry pack provide some insight into the effect of boarding schools on Native American communities. Explore the source sets below to identify additional impacts that boarding schools had on tribal communities. As you explore, take the words of Jim Gerenscer—co-director of a project to remember the history of the Carlisle Indian School—into account: "[Boarding schools are] often not even talked about at all, but when [they are] talked about, it's always from the white person's perspective. It's a very different story when you look at it from the perspective of people who were there first."

Native American Newspapers

Native American newspapers existed as early as the 1820s in the United States. These were newspapers produced by Native Americans and focused on the lives, news, and culture of their own communities. Some newspapers were written partially in native languages, while many others were in English. *The Daily Chieftain* (Source A) and *The Tomahawk* (Source B) were two newspapers focused on important news about their tribes.

Source A: "Cut off Their Rations," *The Daily Chieftain* (October 14, 1898)[1]



Cut off Their Rations.

The Indian agents in Oklahoma are having some trouble keeping the little black-haired, brown-skinned boys and girls belonging to their reservations in school. Out of sheer, unmixed timidity, these Indian children refuse to attend the government schools which have been, and are being maintained at great cost in order that they may grow into civilized and educated men and women and take their places beside their white brothers and sisters with whom they must soon come in competition in all the walks of life. Major Woodson, agent for the Cheyenne and Arapahoe Indians, has men out in nearly all the Indian camps in southern and western Oklahoma "rounding up" these truant children and compelling them to attend school. The parents of these fullblood children of the forest use every subterfuge to keep their little ones away from the schools very much preferring to have them remain with them in their tepees and grow up wild and ignorant.

Woodson has within the last few days resorted to what would seem downright cruelty to compel them to go to school. He has instructed the farmers at all the sub-agencies to cut off all rations to those who do not see to it that their offsprings are in their places in the schools.

Transcription of Source A:

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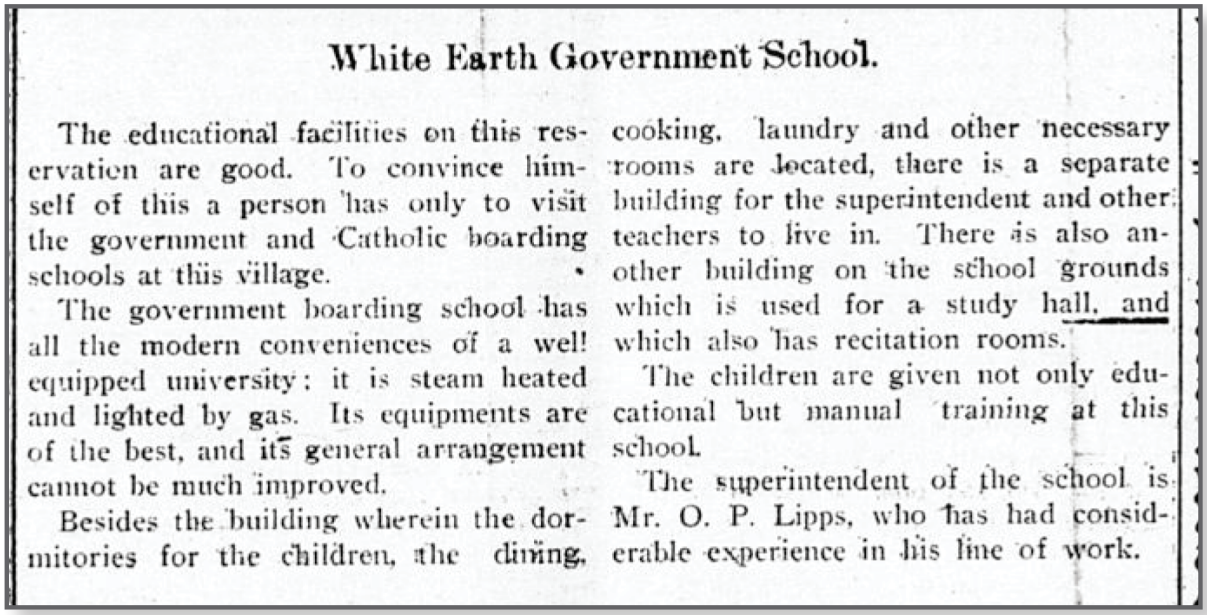
Source A Information: *The Daily Chieftain* was a Native American-run newspaper that was produced in Vinita, which was Cherokee [CHEH-roh-kee] Territory in Oklahoma. Though it was run by Cherokee men, it was owned by a white man who was a local merchant. The newspaper's motto was "Devoted to the Interests of the Cherokees, Choctaws, Seminoles, Creeks, and Other Indians of the Indian Territory." (See source at Library of Congress.)

Glossary of key terms from the source:

- *rations:* government-supplied food
- *subterfuge:* trickery
- *timidity:* lack of courage or confidence
- *truant:* absent without explanation

Source B: "White Earth Government School," *The Tomahawk* (June 16, 1903)[2]



White Earth Government School.

The educational facilities on this reservation are good. To convince himself of this a person has only to visit the government and Catholic boarding schools at this village.

The government boarding school has all the modern conveniences of a well equipped university: it is steam heated and lighted by gas. Its equipments are of the best, and its general arrangement cannot be much improved.

Besides the building wherein the dormitories for the children, the dining, cooking, laundry and other necessary rooms are located, there is a separate building for the superintendent and other teachers to live in. There is also another building on the school grounds which is used for a study hall, and which also has recitation rooms.

The children are given not only educational but manual training at this school.

The superintendent of the school is Mr. O. P. Lipps, who has had considerable experience in his line of work.

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Source B Information: *The Tomahawk* newspaper began in 1903 and claimed to be the official newspaper of the Minnesota Ojibwe [oh-JIB-way] tribe. Its first owner wrote of the newspaper, "Believing the pen is mightier than the sword we start on the war-path with a paper tomahawk." (See source at Library of Congress.)

Glossary of key terms from the source:

- *manual training:* farming, sewing, woodworking, and other activities that require developing skills using the hands
- *tomahawk:* an axe used by the Ojibwe people and many other Native American tribes

Questions to Consider for Sources A and B:

1. **Observe:** What information stands out to you in these sources?
2. **Reflect:** What can these sources tell you about the impact of boarding schools on Native American communities? To what degree does the source information for each of these sources influence your perception of bias in these sources?
3. **Question:** What is one question you have about each source?

Images of Boarding School Life

There are not many sources from the 19th and early 20th centuries that depict students' boarding school lives from their own perspectives. The two images in this section provide different perspectives on boarding school life. The image set in Source C was taken by a photographer for the Carlisle Industrial Indian School. The second image is a political cartoon drawn by a cartoonist who regularly published his works in popular magazines and newspapers.

Source C: "Two portraits of Tom Torlino," Photographs (1882–1885)[3]

Source C Information: This source shows two images of Tom Torlino, a student at Carlisle (PA) Industrial Indian School. The "before" picture on the left was taken in 1882 when Torlino arrived at the school. The after picture was taken in 1885, after he had spent three years at the school. The pictures were taken by J.N. Choate, a photographer from Pennsylvania. Photo provided courtesy of the Cumberland County Historical Society, Carlisle, PA. (See source at the National Museum of the American Indian.)

Source D: "The American Indian Past. Present." Lithograph Print (1906)[4]

Transcription of Elements from Source D:

- The top center text outside of the cartoon reads "PUCK"
- The bottom text outside of the cartoon reads "THE PUCK PRESS" (bottom left), "PAST" (beneath left image), "THE AMERICAN INDIAN" (bottom center), and "PRESENT" (beneath right image).
- The flag displayed in the right image reads "CARLISLE" and is a reference to the Carlisle (PA) Industrial Indian School that Tom Torlino (from Source C) attended.

Source D Information: This image depicts cartoonist Albert Levering's interpretation of Native American life of the past and present (from the time of this drawing in 1906). Albert Levering was a cartoonist who worked for several publications including the *Chicago Tribune, Harper's Monthly Magazine,* and *Puck* (which is where this cartoon was published). (See source at Library of Congress.)

Questions to Consider for Sources C and D:

1. **Observe:** What do you notice about these sources?
2. **Reflect:** What can these sources tell you about the impact of boarding schools on Native American communities? To what degree does the source information for each of these sources influence your perception of bias in these sources?
3. **Question:** What is one question you have about one or both of these sources?

First-Hand Perspectives

Recall the quote from Jim Gerenscer from the end of the introduction reading: "[Boarding schools are] often not even talked about at all, but when [they are] talked about, it's always from the white person's perspective. It's a very different story when you look at it from the perspective of people who were there first." There are many accounts of boarding school life written by white superintendents, educators, and journalists. There are fewer accounts that come directly from Native Americans who experienced boarding school life. Sources E and F provide two first-hand accounts about boarding school experiences.

Source E: "The School Days of an Indian Girl," Zitkala-Sa (1921)[5]

Late in the morning, my friend Judéwin gave me a terrible warning. Judéwin knew a few words of English, and she had overheard the paleface woman talk about cutting our long, heavy hair. Our mothers had taught us that only unskilled warriors who were captured had their hair shingled by the enemy. Among our people, short hair was worn by mourners, and shingled hair by cowards!

We discussed our fate some moments, and when Judéwin said, "We have to submit, because they are strong," I rebelled.

"No, I will not submit! I will struggle first!" I answered.

I watched my chance, and when no one noticed I disappeared. I crept up the stairs as quietly as I could in my squeaking shoes, – my moccasins had been exchanged for shoes. Along the hall I passed, without knowing whither I was going. Turning aside to an open door, I found a large room with three white beds in it. The windows were covered with dark green curtains, which made the room very dim. Thankful that no one was there, I directed my steps toward the corner farthest from the door. On my hands and knees I crawled under the bed, and cuddled myself in the dark corner.

From my hiding place I peered out, shuddering with fear whenever I heard footsteps near by. Though in the hall loud voices were calling my name, and I knew that even Judéwin was searching for me, I did not open my mouth to answer. Then the steps were quickened and the voices became excited. The sounds came nearer and nearer. Women and girls entered the room. I held my breath, and watched them open closet doors and peep behind large trunks. Some one threw up the curtains, and the room was filled with sudden light. What caused them to stoop and look under the bed I do not know. I remember being dragged out, though I resisted by kicking and scratching wildly. In spite of myself, I was carried downstairs and tied fast in a chair.

I cried aloud, shaking my head all the while until I felt the cold blades of the scissors against my neck, and heard them gnaw off one of my thick braids. Then I lost my spirit. Since the day I was taken from my mother I had suffered extreme indignities. People had stared at me. I had been tossed about in the air like a wooden puppet. And now my long hair was shingled like a coward's! In my anguish I moaned for my mother, but no one came to comfort me. Not a soul reasoned quietly with me, as my own mother used to do; for now I was only one of many little animals driven by a herder.

Source E Information: Zitkala-Sa, also known by the name Gertrude Simmons Bonnin, was a Lakota [lah-KOH-tah] writer, educator, and activist. "The Schools Days of an Indian Girl," was one of several texts she wrote about growing up Lakota and being stripped of her native identity. Though she was raised in South Dakota, she attended White's Indiana Manual Labor Institute in Indiana. She attended the school for three years, until 1887. This text is based on her experiences there. (See source at "American Indian Stories" by Zitkala-Sa.)

Glossary of key terms from the source:

- *herder: someone who rounds up and takes care of animals*
- *indignities: treatment that causes someone to feel ashamed*
- *mourners: people who are feeling grief over the death of someone*

Source F: "A Picture of Northwest Indians," Anton George (December 9, 1938)[6]

> Now I see the Nooksacs [NUUK-saks] have chosen. They have chosen allotments that they might be free as white men. But, where is that freedom? White men have taken our children from our houses to schools where they learn to be white men. But, can the deer of the high hills become a cow by going to school? Can the sons of free Nooksacs become farmers as are the whites? Can he learn the ways of slaves?
>
> Now I am old and my eyes see dimly. But, I see only a handful of people who call themselves Nooksacs. The white man has promised many things. But this is what his promises brought to the Nooksacs—a handful of people left where there were many. I am an old man, yet I still live. Yet, I must talk through an interpreter to the sons of Nooksacs. Is this the promise of the white man?

Source F Information: The Federal Writers' Project (FWP) was created by the federal government during Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration to try to stimulate the economy during the Depression by providing jobs to unemployed writers. These writers were tasked with writing works to provide a history and overview of the United States. This interview was conducted by R.G. Stillman, who was employed by the FWP. The excerpt above is the interviewee, Anton George's, recollection of a tribal meeting of the Nooksac in which an older tribe member shares some of the history of the tribe. (View source at Library of Congress.)

Glossary of key terms from the source:

- *allotments:* land broken up by the federal government and given to individuals to privately own

Questions to Consider for Sources E and F:

1. **Observe:** What stands out to you in each of these three excerpts?
2. **Reflect:** What can these sources tell you about the impact of boarding schools on Native American communities? To what degree does the source information for each of these sources influence your perception of bias in these sources?
3. **Question:** What is one question you have about these excerpts?

Inquiry Question

How did Native American boarding schools impact Native communities?

Inquiry Extension Question

Examine the three links below, each of which provides a description of attempts to address the harms caused by Native American boarding schools.

Which one of these do you think is the most important to address the harms caused by Native American boarding schools?

- Federal Boarding School Initiative
- Truth and Healing Commission on Boarding School Policies Act
- The “New” Riverside Indian School

Notes

[1] "Cut off Their Rations," *The Daily Chieftain* (Vinita, Indian Territory, OK), October 14, 1898. From Library of Congress Chronicling America, https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn93050700/1898-10-14/ed-1/?sp=4&q=%22cut+off+their+rations%22&r=-0.184,0.687,1.109,0.755,0.

[2] "White Earth Government School," T*he Tomahawk* (White Earth, Becker County, MN), June 16, 1903. From Library of Congress Chronicling America, https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89064695/1903-06-16/ed-1/seq-5/#.

[3] J.N. Choate, "Two portraits of Tom Torlino," Photographs, 1882-1885, Cumberland County Historical Society, Carlisle, Pennsylvania. From Nation Museum of the American Indian, https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/code-talkers/boarding-schools/#.

[4] Albert Levering, "The American Indian Past. Present," Lithograph Print, 1906. From Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, https://www.loc.gov/resource/ds.03750/.

[5] Zitkala-Sa, "The School Days of an Indian Girl," *American Indian Stories,* Washington: Hayworth Publishing House, 1921. From University of Pennsylvania Library, http://www.digital.library.upenn.edu/women/zitkala-sa/stories/school.html.

[6] Anton George, "A Picture of Northwest Indians," interview by R.G. Stillman, Federal Writers' Project, December 9, 1938. From Library of Congress Manuscript Division, https://www.loc.gov/item/wpalh002771.