Title: American Indian Education in San Diego, 1930-1945

Subheading: Boarding School Traditions (1870s-1920s)

In the late 19th century, off-reservation boarding schools for American Indians began sprouting up from coast to coast. The mission of these schools, Americanization. Prevailing notions of the day dictated that in order to save the Indian from total annihilation, they needed to be absorbed into mainstream white society.

Captain Richard Pratt, founder of The Carlisle Indian Industrial School, echoed these sentiments:

"A great general has said that the only good Indian is a dead one...in a sense I agree with this sentiment but only in this that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead kill the Indian in him and save the man."

As the founder of the first federally-funded off reservation boarding school, Pratt’s approach to education as a tool to kill the Indian within the Indian became a model for later schools.

Carlisle’s mission was to ensure that students from varying tribes all across the continent were given the vocational and cultural training that would allow them to be successful off the reservations that they were forced onto.

This mission of complete assimilation and utter cultural annihilation was furthered with the Dawes Act of 1887. The Dawes Act essentially broke up reservations into individual landholdings. It sought to destroy the social unit of tribes, encouraged competition, and opened up more land for non-tribal purchase.

The Dawes act promoted the idea that off reservation schools would provide the best opportunity for Indians to adopt American culture and assimilate into white society.

Students who attended boarding schools either by force on their own volition were made to cut their hair, forget their language, abandon their culture, and in all ways encouraged to lose every shred of what made up their Indian identity.
Subheading: The Cost of Education

One such federal off reservation boarding school was Sherman Institute.

Located in Southern California, Sherman Institute began taking students in 1902. Students who attended Sherman came from tribes all across the nation.

These children spent the majority of their youth away from their family, community, and culture. Instead, their lives focused on work.

Although policies and conditions varied, Most boarding schools operated on half-day schedules. Four hours a day, students practiced reading, writing, and arithmetic.

While the other four hours were dedicated to vocational training. That is, children ranging from 9 to 19, spent half of their day working in kitchens, fields, shops, and laundries.

Boarding schools, like Sherman, often used student labor to further the interests of local business owners. Rather than learning skilled trades, students were often used to work fields and harvest crops. Young students at Sherman were even used as an emergency firefighting crew to battle local fires during a particularly dry season. Students at Sherman Institute reported being exhausted and overworked.

Students at Sherman, like most boarding schools, were made to participate in the outing program. The outing program was a work training program that operated during the summer and sometimes on the weekends. It was designed to immerse Indian students into the white community and teach Indian students white values and work ethics. Students were taught to accept second-class citizenship and become compliant members of a servant class.

This intense focus on work, the alienation, and the complete disregard of culture prompted many students to runaway from the boarding schools that sought to shape them.

Run away students were such a rampant problem there in a few cases fire escapes were locked to deter students from leaving the boarding schools. Students reported being overworked, mistreated, and denied rights to visit their families. Subjected to horrific conditions and mistreatment, students who tried to run away, or failed to conform to school rules, were severely punished and even beaten.
In the 1920s, continued accounts of runaway students and unhappy families coupled with an increase in poverty across all reservations drew harsh criticisms to US-Indian policy.

It was becoming more and more apparent that a system of assimilation through boarding education was failing.

**Subheading: Shifts in Federal Policy Shifts**

In 1926, the Department of the Interior contracted independent investigators to report on the conditions across Indian communities.

The findings of this investigation, known as the Meriam report, illustrate the harsh realities of Indian life in the early 20th century.

While the 872 page report touches on a variety of topics from Indian Health, economic conditions on reservations, and family life, it is especially critical of education.

Investigators found that schools operated on minuscule budgets that often left little room for appropriate services such as student meals, transportation, let alone well-trained teachers.

The Meriam report stated that from the view of education the Indian service, was literally, a starved service.

In addition to limited budgets, boarding schools were cited as unacceptably inadequate and destructive to native peoples. Among the recommendations for education, it was stressed that Indian education needed to focus on the whole community, involve the family, and completely break out of the boarding school mold.

The Meriam report would change the tone and focus of the United States Indian policy and lead to sweeping changes in Indian education.
The attention garnered from the report led to a reassessment of federal Indian policy culminating with the 1933 appointment of John COL-ee-ehr as a commissioner Indian Affairs.

Collier and colleagues instituted a series of reforms including the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934. The Indian Reorganization Act, also referred to as the Indian New Deal, aimed at reversing the unwanted effects of boarding schools in allotment. Rather than obsessing over assimilation, federal policy began to stress tribal autonomy, religious freedom and educational reform.

The Indian New Deal promised to return power over Indian education back to the states and to the tribes. It encouraged states to allow tribes to oversee their own educational affairs while reconfirming federal commitment to providing financial assistance for Indian educational services. At least outwardly, it looked like there was change on the horizon.

**Subheading: San Diego**

While measures were taken to change Indian education on the federal level, the true impact of the Meriam report and the Indian New Deal can be better gauged by looking at the local level in San Diego County.

Following the federal path, a local investigation of Indian day schools in San Diego uncovered similar findings. On a whole, it was deemed that San Diego’s federally funded Indian day schools were not providing adequate services or education for the Indian children of San Diego.

By 1933, a handful of Indian students were attending schools with white children in rural areas. However, the majority of Indian students in and around the county attended government day schools on reservations or they attended Sherman Institute. By the end of 1933, five Indian day schools in San Diego County were to be closed and all the children attending these schools were to be integrated into local public school systems.

As is evidenced from the many letters of the Mission Indian agency... Bureau of Indian Affairs local official, Harry Coonradt, among several others, worked tirelessly throughout the early 1930s to improve the education of American Indian youth in San Diego.
Mirroring shifts in Federal policy, they sought to not only remove students from the boarding schools condemned by the Meriam report, but they also hoped to integrate American Indian youth into the public school systems which were predominantly white.

While the intention to integrate Indian students into San Diego public schools sought to better serve the needs of Indian students, the disconnect between intentions and actual outcomes is astonishing. Many problems impeded integration and severely slowed the progression towards an education as described in the Indian New Deal.

San Diego’s implementation of New Deal policies was marred with ineffective outcomes due to limited visions and misplanning which would create new barriers and result in a lack of appropriate services for San Diego Indian Youth.

The movement to integrate came before critical details concerning budgets, and other logistics were worked out; leaving public schools, already weary about integration, to cover the costs. School districts like Lakeside Union and Julian wrote to the Mission Indian Agency demanding federal funds to supplement their strained budgets. These funding issues negatively impacted integration from the very beginning, causing schools and white communities to respond in a variety of ways from redistricting to denying Indian students the right to enter schools.

Another byproduct of poor logistical planning that greatly hindered the success of post-boarding school reforms in San Diego was the lack of reliable transportation for Indian Students. Public schools were often far from reservations, thus, transportation to and from school was absolutely critical.

For example, the students of the Pala day school were to attend the Bonsal public school twelve miles off the reservation. Unreliable transportation or in some cases no transportation left American Indian students to either walk up to 24 mile the day or to simply not attend school.

Letters from concerned Indian parents flooded the office of Coonradt.

Mary Valle from Mesa Grande expressed her frustrations,

“I don’t know why these two kids are like slaves, walking to school everyday sometimes without shoes too, right now they are too tired to walk to school.”
In addition to demanding transportation and questioning policies, parents fought to get other necessary services provided. During the years of the Great Depression securing a daily lunch made all the difference, and yet the service was not always provided to American Indian students in the public schools when it was provided to white students. Indian parents wondered why school lunches were not always provided to their young students.

Valle and other parents were frustrated with the haphazard integration. They didn’t just desire change, they worked within their means to correct the social injustices that blocked progress for their children and communities.

Another obstacle that crippled the success of post-boarding school reforms in San Diego was opposition to integration from local whites. Opposition from white parents, staff, students, and school boards slowed integration and created hostile environments. Outraged parents like Rhena Flegal wrote to school districts and state representatives expressing their displeasure with Indian integration.

“When we voted to have our union school we did so with the idea that we would not have the Indians in our public school. For the past three years, the indians have gone elsewhere. Now, just at the beginning of school about nine if the Indian children are desirous of attending our school. Not any of the trustees and scarcely any of the patrons are pleased to have them enter our school but Mr. H.W. Coonradt tells us a law has been passed whereby we are compelled to educate Indian in our schools on par with the white children. We have had no notice of this and when I was asked for instructions from the county superintendents office they say we are forced to let the Indians in our school, but referred us to your office. Five v of the children entered our school this week much to the annoyance the patrons. Now, is there anyway that can be arranged that we did not have to have these indians mix with our white children?

By law do we have to have these indians in our school?
If not how many we get them out of our school and keep them out?”

Flegal was not alone in her opposition. In his correspondences Coonradt noted that overt and intense Anti-Indian factions developed throughout the county.
Such open resistance, blatant racism, and disapproval from parents and staff prompted some school districts to expel Indian students or more drastically withdraw from districts that coupled them with Indian students.

For example, in 1936, Alpine chose to withdraw from the Alpine-Viejas school district leaving Viejas School District with no school buildings for its Indian population.

Alpine was not the only school that used redistricting to remove American Indian students. In 1937, four years after initial integration, The Valley Center school board requested that Rincon Reservation be taken out of their district. Clover Flat School District also redistricted to exclude Indian students.

Young Indian students, eager to learn hoped to receive educational opportunities afforded to other U.S. citizens, however, as noted by Coonradt and expressed again and again by Indian Parents, this was not the whole story.

By the early 1940s it was becoming clear that the educational opportunities and reforms envisioned by Coonradt and desperately desired by Indian communities were not fully within reach. On the contrary students were haphazardly pushed into unprepared schools.

Opposition, Underfunding, mismanagement, and poor planning all worked together to paralyze most policy changes. However, when faced with these barriers, Indian parents continued to push forward. They wrote letters, held meetings, and mobilized voters.

Tribal members in San Diego used every means necessary to advocate for their children. For example, Julio Ortega of Cupeño descent, wrote Congressman Ed Izsc asking not just for federal support, but for a senatorial investigation to uncover the injustices experienced during integration.

Despite the efforts of American Indian parents, integration into public schools proved to work detract from the equitable education described in Indian New Deal Rhetoric. While policies changed, local realities for American Indians did not: imprudence, opposition, and disorder severely limited the effectiveness of New Deal reforms at the local level.
By the end of the 1930s barriers to education endured. The legacy of being left behind, while persisting to push forward continued and still continues to this day.

[VIDEO CLIP: There are very serious problems right now in Indian education that the congress is not addressing and in my judgment the Bush administration is not addressing. The biggest problem is are two-fold, one is neglect, the second one is lack of funds. Lack of commitment to provide those funds. -Rep. Bill Richardson]

[C-SPAN2 VIDEO CLIP: We have a concern because over several years even though the department has continually asked for increased funding, the congress of the United States has not seen fit to substantially increase this particular budget. ....and yet, when you look at all of the characteristics which we often use to talk about youngsters, our schools and their respective problems, native american youngsters really have the highest poverty rates, dropout rates, all the indicators that really, really, concern us. So in that context I would suggest we’re trying very hard in my office, with hard working people to get the job done and to assist but at the same time we have a long way to go before we will have accomplished our mission. -Gerald Tirozzi, Education Department, Assistant Sec.]

[KSTP News 5 VIDEO CLIP: State education leaders are gathering all day long to work at reducing barriers facing American Indian students. For an achievement gap that has lasted decades, there is no easy fix.

{david sham, MN college and university system} We have an educational system that continues to fail native people big time. The latests standardized tests in the state show 78% of white third-graders performing at adequate levels in math, that's compared to 48 percent of American Indian students.]

[VIDEO CLIP: Education association says minnesota has the lowest four-year adjusted graduation rate only 42 percent of American Indian students graduate with a diploma in four years. ]

[News 18 VIDEO CLIP:40% of native American students in montana will drop out of high school it's a staggering statistic one that educators don't take lightly so what are they doing about it we'll find out]