

# The Dark Ages of Education and a New Hope

## Teaching Native American history in Maine schools

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In 2001, I authored legislation that required all public schools in Maine to teach Maine Indian history. On June 14 of that year, Gov. Angus King signed “An Act to Require Maine Native American History and Culture in Maine’s Schools” into law—the first of its kind in the U.S.

What makes the law unique is its requirement that specific topics be studied, such as: 1) tribal governments and political systems and their relationship with local, state, national and international governments; 2) Maine Native American cultural systems and the experience of Maine tribal people throughout history; 3) Maine Native American territories; and 4) Maine Native American economic systems.

The most important piece of this legislation was the creation of a Native American History Commission to help schools gather a wide range of materials and resources to implement the law. This led to creation of the Wabanaki Educational Curriculum, which tells the story of the Wabanaki people of Maine from the Wabanaki perspective. It is leading us out of the “dark ages” of education.

“Dark ages” because education has been a two-edged sword for Native people. On one hand, it has opened opportunities. On the other, it harmed us physically, psychologically and spiritually. It inflicted spiritual wounds upon Native people lasting for generations. We call these wounds “Soul Wounds.”

Richard Henry Pratt, who founded the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania in 1879, had a saying, “kill the Indian and save the man.” The intention was to kill the cultural core within Indian children through boarding-school education and forced assimilation that included prohibitions on speaking their Native language or practicing Native traditional religion. Justification for this came from the notion that Indians were less than human. This view is abundantly evident in the way Indians were depicted by the press at the time. Among many 19th-century cartoons of Indians, one in particular comes to mind. It can be found today on the cover of John M. Coward’s book, *The Newspaper Indian*, published by University of Illinois Press in 1999. In this drawing we see a Union soldier who has just shot Lakota Chief Sitting Bull (1831-1890). Depicted as half-man, half-beast, Sitting Bull has clawed hands and a lower body comprised of the back-end and legs of a buck deer. The caption of the original cartoon read: “The Right Way to Dispose of Sitting Bull and His Braves.”

Indians were simply seen as subhuman savages to be disposed of. Thus began Indian education from the white man’s perspective: Educate the Indian in white man’s culture and values, and he will become for all intents and purposes a productive member of white society. Indian children were forcibly taken from their mothers and fathers on the reservations and were mentally, physically, psychologically, spiritually and even sexually abused. Native people call this cultural genocide.

The first off-reservation boarding school in the U.S., Carlisle became a model for schools in other locations, which echoed its efforts to forcibly assimilate Native American children. Canada also utilized residential schools, many operated by the Catholic church. I have seen films and read books on the abuse these schools perpetrated on the Indian children in their effort to “kill the Indian.” I recently read *Out of the Depth* by Isabelle Knockwood chronicling the trauma she and other Mi’kmaq Children experienced at the Indian Residential School at Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia. It is one of the most powerful accounts I have ever read. Knockwood, who attended the school from 1936 to 1947, writes:

*I remember a nun shaking a girl by the shoulders and yelling, “Look at me, look at me” ... [even though] direct eye contact between child and adult was considered arrogant in the Native culture. We were being forcibly disconnected from everything our parents and elders had taught us. We sang songs in honor of Christopher Columbus who discovered America. Apparently our ancestors had been “discovered” by this white man who was lost on his way to find spices. No one told us that the Hurons shown scalping the missionaries in the textbooks wanted their children to learn and to keep their own Native spirituality and their own land.*

In some ways the experience I had in the public and private educational system in the U.S. was like Knockwood’s. I was never abused in the same way as the Indian children who were forced to go to residential schools, but the purpose was the same: to assimilate me into the white man’s world. And I have learned well how to walk in that world.

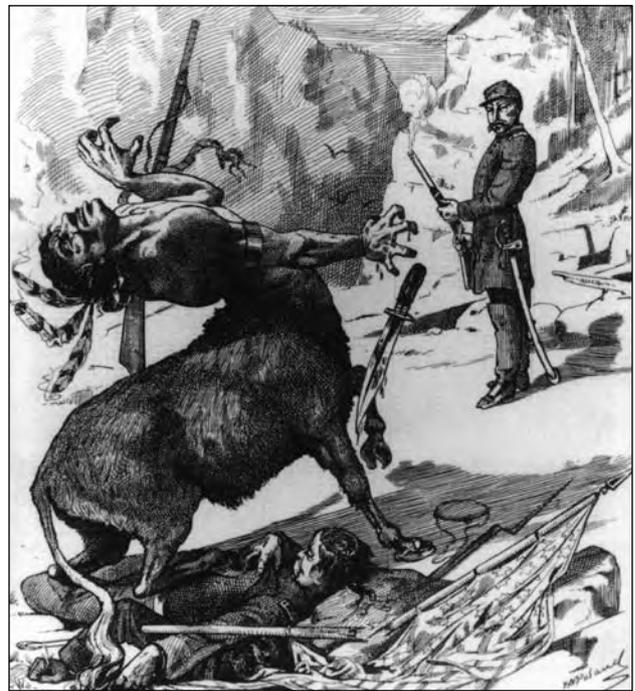
I attended elementary school, junior high school and one year of high school in Old Town, Maine, a non-Native community just across the river from where I lived on the Penobscot reservation at Indian Island. It was during those years that I learned what it was like to be discriminated against both overtly and subtly. Various students called me a “filthy squaw,” and teachers who for the most part ignored me made a point of calling on

me to answer questions pertaining to what they thought all Indians should know—such as which paw prints belonged to which animals. When I had enough of being treated like a second-class citizen, I asked my very religious, non-Native grandmother to get me into a religious school. I thought if I went to one of those schools I would be treated better and there would be no discrimination or racism. I was wrong on that count as well.

Like Isabelle Knockwood, I was taught a history centered on white men, such as George Washington and Christopher Columbus. I never had a class on Native American history. I had no sense of my own history or the contributions made to this country by my ancestors. My people and my race were made invisible by the educational system by the simple act of omission. I find it ironic that the First Nations of this continent were not only made invisible by the educational system but were disadvantaged and discriminated against because of it. I guess you could call the early years of “kill the Indian and save the man” the dark ages of education. Those dark ages have spilled into this century.

The failure to include Native American history in our educational system leads to low self-esteem among Native American students and a lack of respect among their peers. It also contributes to a low retention rate in high schools and colleges. Native Americans graduate high school at lower rates than all other ethnic groups and account for less than 1% of college students enrolled in New England, according to national data recently published by *THE NEW ENGLAND JOURNAL OF HIGHER EDUCATION*. [See “Trends & Indicators in Higher Education, *NEJHE*, Spring 2009.] But Native American statistics are rarely included. Native people are left out of the history pages and are left out of research and statistics. I read the newspapers and listen to media reports that give statistics about various subjects such as population growth or health issues. We are simply non-existent.

Education is supposed to be a shining light of knowledge and a gateway to a better life. Why has this gateway opened only one way for Indian people forcing us to learn only about white society? By omitting Native history, we continue to cheat countless students—Native and non-Native alike. Indian history is so interwoven into the very fabric of this country from George Washington and the Revolutionary War through Andrew Jackson with his Indian termination philosophy and his Indian Removal Act and Chief Justice John Marshall whose legal opinions based on the papal bulls “Right of Discovery” and “Manifest Destiny” have kept Native people in poverty because we cannot own our own land. Even though we could not own our own land, we have fought in every war to defend this country. Native people have the highest rate of military service compared to any race in the nation.



Cartoon attributed to *New York Graphic*, Aug. 15, 1876, courtesy of Sandy Barnard Collection.

Every student in this country needs to know the full story of the First Nations. The Maine Native American History and Culture Act holds great promise for our state. While work to carry it to fruition is ongoing, it has already proven to be one of the most important bills in history for Maine’s Native people. Eight years after the bill passed, there has been a renaissance in Native voices through Native-authored books, poetry, art, plays, museum exhibits and documentary films. The fact that Native history is required to be taught in public schools in Maine has begun to give Native people a strong, clear voice, a voice that they never had. The state of Maine is slowly learning from these voices.

An honest, truthful and inclusive educational system needs to emerge from the dark ages and into the light of full knowledge. Native history must be a required subject not only in public elementary schools but also in colleges across this country. It needs to be part of the core requirement, not just a token program of Native Studies or help for Native Nations. It is time our story is told and the educational system unlocks that one-way gate and allows us to take our rightful place in the history of this continent. It is the right thing to do, and I guarantee the results will be amazingly powerful and healing.

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