

# ON THE USE OF ENGLISH IN INDIAN SCHOOLS

1887

----- *J.D.C. Atkins* -----

Starting in the 1830s, the United States government forced Native Americans into designated territories or reservations. The government saw schools as a prime means of assimilating Native Americans. The number of students enrolled in government schools increased from 3,000 in 1877 to 21,000 in 1900, and government funding soared from \$20,000 to almost \$3 million in that time. In an annual report written in the 1880s, J. D. C. Atkins, the commissioner of Indian affairs, states the importance of using the English language in all missionary and Indian schools on reservations.

## **THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Identifying Problems**

What were some of the assumptions in this period about what it meant to be a citizen?

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...Longer and closer consideration of the subject has only deepened my conviction that it is a matter not only of importance, but of necessity that the Indians acquire the English language as rapidly as possible. The Government has entered upon the great work of educating and citizenizing the Indians and establishing them upon homesteads. The adults are expected to assume the role of citizens, and of course the rising generation will be expected and required more nearly to fill the measure of citizenship, and the main purpose of educating them is to enable them to read, write, and speak the English language and to transact business with English-speaking people. When they take upon themselves the responsibilities and privileges of citizenship their vernacular will be of no advantage. Only through the medium of the English tongue can they acquire a knowledge of the Constitution of the country and their rights and duties thereunder.

Every nation is jealous of its own language, and no nation ought to be more so than ours, which approaches nearer than any other nationality to the perfect protection of its people. True Americans all feel that the Constitution, laws, and institutions of the United States, in their adaptation to the wants and requirements of man, are superior to those of any other country; and they should understand that by the spread of the English language will these laws and institutions be more firmly established and widely disseminated. Nothing so surely and perfectly stamps upon an individual a national characteristic as language. So manifest and important is this that nations the world over, in both ancient and modern times, have ever imposed the strictest requirements upon their public schools as to the teaching of the national tongue. Only English has been allowed to be taught in the public schools in the territory acquired by this country from Spain, Mexico, and

Russia, although the native populations spoke another tongue. All are familiar with the recent prohibitory order of the German Empire forbidding the teaching of the French language in either public or private schools in Alsace and Lorraine. Although the population is almost universally opposed to German rule, they are firmly held to German political allegiance by the military hand of the Iron Chancellor. If the Indians were in Germany or France or any other civilized country, they should be instructed in the language there used. As they are in an English-speaking country, they must be taught the language which they must use in transacting business with the people of this country. No unity or community of feeling can be established among different peoples unless they are brought to speak the same language, and thus become imbued with like ideas of duty.

Deeming it for the very best interest of the Indian, both as an individual and as an embryo citizen, to have this policy strictly enforced among the various schools on Indian reservations, orders have been issued accordingly to Indian agents, and the texts of the orders and of some explanations made thereof are given below:

December 14, 1886.

In all schools conducted by missionary organizations it is required that all instructions shall be given in the English language.

February 2, 1887.

In reply I have to advise you that the rule applies to all schools on Indian reservations, whether they be Government or mission schools. The instruction of the Indians in the vernacular is not only of no use to them, but is detrimental to the cause of their education and civilization, and no school will be permitted on the reservation in which the English language is not exclusively taught.

July 16, 1887.

Your attention is called to the regulation of this office which forbids instruction in schools in any Indian language. This rule applies to all schools on an Indian reservation, whether Government or mission schools. The education of Indians in the vernacular is not only of no use to them, but is detrimental to their education and civilization.

You are instructed to see that this rule is rigidly enforced in all schools upon the reservation under your charge.

No mission school will be allowed upon the reservation which does not comply with the regulation.

The following was sent to representatives of all societies having contracts with this bureau for the conduct of Indian schools:

July 16, 1887.

Your attention is called to the provisions of the contracts for educating Indian pupils, which provides that the schools shall "teach the ordinary branches of an English education." This provision must be faithfully adhered to, and no books in any Indian language must be used or instruction given in that language to Indian pupils in any school where this office has entered into contract for the education of Indians. The same rule prevails in all Government Indian schools and will be strictly enforced in all contract and other Indian schools.

The instruction of Indians in the vernacular is not only of no use to them, but is detrimental to the cause of their education and civilization, and it will not be permitted in any Indian school over which the Government has any control, or in which it has any interest whatever.

This circular has been sent to all parties who have contracted to educate Indian pupils during the present fiscal year.

You will see that this regulation is rigidly enforced in the schools under your direction where Indians are placed under contract.

I have given the text of these orders in detail because various misrepresentations and complaints in regard to them have been made, and various misunderstandings seem to have arisen. They do not, as has been urged, touch the question of the preaching of the Gospel in the churches nor in any wise hamper or hinder the efforts of missionaries to bring the various tribes to a knowledge of the Christian religion. Preaching of the Gospel to Indians in the vernacular is, of course, not prohibited. In fact, the question of the effect of this policy upon any missionary body was not considered. All the office insists upon is that in the schools established for the rising generation of Indians shall be taught the language of the Republic of which they are to become citizens.

It is believed that if any Indian vernacular is allowed to be taught by the missionaries in schools on Indian reservations, it will prejudice the youthful pupil as well as his untutored and uncivilized or semi-civilized parent against the English language, and, to some extent at least, against Government schools in which the English language exclusively has always been taught. To teach Indian school children their native tongue is practically to exclude English, and to prevent them from acquiring it. This language, which is good enough for a white man and a black man, ought to be good enough for the red man. It is also believed that teaching an Indian youth in his own barbarous dialect is a positive detriment to him. The first step to be taken toward civilization, toward teaching the Indians the mischief and folly of continuing in their barbarous practices, it to teach them the English language. The impracticability, if not impossibility, of civilizing the Indians of this country in any other tongue than our own would seem to be obvious, especially in view of the fact that the number of Indian vernaculars is even greater than the number of tribes. Bands of the same tribes inhabiting different localities have different dialects, and sometimes can not communicate with each other except by the sign language. If we expect to infuse into the rising generation the leaven of American citizenship, we must remove the stumbling blocks of hereditary customs and manners, and of these language is one of the most important elements....

[*House Executive Document* no. 1, 50th Cong., 1st sess., serial 2542, pp. 19–21.]

Source: *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, September 21, 1887* by J. D. C. Atkins. Reprinted in *Documents of United States Indian Policy*, edited by Francis Paul Prucha (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975), pp. 174–176.

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY : ANSWER**

Students may answer that this report reflects several assumptions about American citizenship. The report asserts that knowing English is necessary for citizenship because it is necessary for understanding the Constitution and transacting business. The report also asserts that having a common language creates a "unity or community of feeling" among a nation's people, and it creates a shared sense of duty to the country. The report also argues that English is a mark of "civilization." Students may argue that these assumptions operated to suppress minorities' cultures and to create an authoritarian environment.