

Talking Points for Away From Home: American Indian Boarding School Stories

Weather permitting the best place to present the talking points is immediately outside of the gallery, in front of the Chemawa photo mural, where the label “Hidden History” is located.

Keep in mind that some visitors may have visited HOME and been introduced to the important themes of family, community, land and language. This might be a way to connect the exhibition within the larger themes.

- This exhibition presents a part of American history from 1879 to the present that has been hidden for decades and is gradually becoming more widely known: it is the story of United States Federal Indian Boarding Schools. The Heard began to tell the stories through an exhibition in 2000. After the exhibition’s first decade we realized we had to continue telling the story because so many people were deeply moved by what they learned. In 2020 we opened this presentation utilizing new research, and improved technology.
- As with all of the Heard’s exhibitions, this exhibition and the 2000 exhibition were both developed by a dedicated team of Native American advisors. The advisors brought their knowledge as research scholars and subject matter specialists, combined with personal, family experiences. You can read brief biographies of the advisors in the exhibition and hear their commentary in videos within the gallery.
- The stories can best be experienced at your own pace, so here are some introductory points that will help you shape your experience.
- Mention the basic facts:
 - The schools began in 1879 and lasted more than 100 years
 - Six generations of Native American families attended boarding schools.
 - More than 100,000 children attended the schools. In the early years students were as young as four and as old as 20. Many were forcibly taken from families who had been confined to reservations.
 - The schools began under the War Department when the government realized, rather than outright warfare, it was cheaper to take American Indian lands by waging war on children

and families, obliterating lifeways through forced assimilation of children. It was cultural annihilation.

- Instead of saying “assimilation” say “forced assimilation.” The modifier is important. This was not assimilation of people who wanted to blend into colonizing society. This was not about teaching English and getting a good education.
 - The schools were founded on a military model with uniforms, drills, and harsh discipline.
 - Many children were taken far from home to discourage runaways.
 - Native religions were not recognized as legitimate religions and children were forced to accept a Christian denomination.
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- Within the big story of these boarding schools are many individual stories, complex and nuanced, some of which you will learn in the exhibition through video and touchscreen tables. The touchscreen tables have photos and timelines that are focused on important information related to the area of the exhibit that is surrounding you. They really enrich the experience.

 - You may want to point out that Indian School Road in Phoenix refers to the Phoenix Indian School that opened in 1891 and closed 99 years later in 1990. A visitor center on the site is open to the public by appointment.
 - You may want to point out that some children didn’t survive the trauma, poor food, and communicable diseases. Tuberculosis and influenza led to a high mortality rate, with tuberculosis incidence at four times the non-Indian rate.
 - You may want to tell people that they will visit three rooms in the exhibition. The classroom presents the educational experience that combined the three R’s with training in trades. The art room reflects resistance and resilience through art and the eventually sanctioned depiction of ceremony to teach art as a trade and make it more saleable. For some students, such as Hopi artist Fred Kabotie, it became a way to remember the ceremonies of home that were keenly missed. The dorm room is shown as it became one of the places of secret resistance. The video commentary and a touchscreen table in each room present photos and timelines marking major legislation affecting Native people and criticism of the schools that over decades led to some gradual change. The touchscreens include brief profiles of Native American leaders and innovators in education.

- You may want to tell visitors to pay special attention to video in the classroom that includes two very different stories. Native American journalist and Phoenix Indian School alumna Patty Talahongva talks about the “Outing Program” of the 1970s, a variation on the program of the earlier decades in which children were sent for summer months to strangers as cheap labor to work as domestics, farm laborers, and in various businesses. Because of the term “outing” a visitor might initially think of something pleasant as a field trip. It also includes Adam Fortunate Eagle whose experience was one that supported and prepared him for his future.
- You could mention later sections on performing arts, sports, and school clubs that begin to address change over time linked to federal law. The social clubs are cited as the beginning in the 1940s of gradual “Indianization” of the schools.
- As you approach the decline of boarding schools you learn about the Indian Self Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 that emphasized decentralization of students to local schools on reservations, leading to many school closures in the 1980s.
- You will see works by contemporary artists who chose to address personal and cultural intergenerational trauma of the boarding school experience and add to the many accounts that are now surfacing.
- The final video includes Tsianina Lomawaima’s insistence that the takeaway not be one of Native people as victims. The story is one of tragedy but also survival, rebounding, recovery and even soaring.
- If anyone asks about what is still around to day Sherman Indian High School in Riverside, California; Chemawa Indian School in Salem, Oregon; Flandreau Indian School in Flandreau, South Dakota; and Riverside Indian School in Anadarko, Oklahoma. Their students are high school age. The direction of the BIE is one of enhancing local choice.