

From the Early Republic through the Cold War, the United States government used education to try to culturally and politically assimilate Native Americans into white American society. By 1960, Native communities in Alaska and Arizona began to advocate for greater control over the educational opportunities available to their children, while, simultaneously, Native employees in the federal government worked to change the outcomes of federal Indian education policy. Native communities wanted more influence in school administrations, lobbied the schools to hire more Indigenous teachers, and pushed for the school curricula to include courses on their community's history and language. Simultaneously, Native employees in the Bureau of Indian Affairs proposed new policies designed to provide Native communities more choice and control in education and to end the use of schooling as an assimilationist tool. Using Native voices, found in Native newspapers, federal documents, oral interviews, and memoirs, and in the actions of Native employees in the federal government, this dissertation demonstrates the foundational role that the activism for educational control played in the Native self-determination movement in the 1960s and 1970s. This activism, which consisted of the combined, yet oftentimes disconnected, efforts of grassroots groups, national Native organizations, educators, parents, students, and Native and non-Native employees in the Bureau of Indian Affairs, fought for Indigenous-sovereign education to end federal policies of assimilation and paternalism. Indigenous-sovereign education activism illustrates one of the most important ways in which Native communities continued to resist assimilation efforts and reinvigorate their own cultures and languages; by ensuring that the younger generations received opportunities to learn their heritage, from their kin and neighbors, in their own languages, and in their own communities.