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## **Cultural Conversion and Language Preservation: Support and Subversion of Federal Assimilation Policies at a Benedictine Mission in Minnesota**

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# Cultural Conversion and Language Preservation: Support and Subversion of Federal Assimilation

## Policies at a Benedictine Mission in Minnesota

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### Abstract

In 1878, the Order of Saint Benedict (OSB) established a mission school at the White Earth Reservation in central Minnesota. Contracting with the federal government to assimilate Ojibway children into American culture and the (Catholic) Christian religion, OSB furthered the goals of conversion—but altered them to fit the specific aims of the Catholic church and the limitations of the reservation. Contrary to federal policies, they supported the preservation of the Ojibway language. This project investigates archival records to better understand how OSB both supported and subverted federal policies.

### Methods

Research was conducted primarily through archival research at the Saint Benedict's Monastery Archives, including government documents and interview transcripts. Further research was conducted outside of the archives, in order to locate contemporary literature, historical data located elsewhere, and biographical data about former students and employees of the school. Collected data was analyzed and sorted into summaries, key points, and timelines created using an online service. An hour-long interview was conducted on campus with a Benedictine nun, who authored a doctoral thesis on the same subject titled "Climbing Learner's Hill: Benedictines at White Earth, 1878-1945" (1981).



Photo used with the permission of Saint Benedict's Monastery Archives.



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Courtesy of the University of Minnesota Archives

### Political and Economic Context

OSB established four Native American Boarding Schools to support President Ulysses S. Grant's 1868 tribal peace policy. Founded in 1878, the White Earth Mission School was the first of the four schools. The goal was the complete assimilation of Native Americans via Christian missionaries, primarily through education. Federal policies promoted boarding schools as the "ideal" model, due to separation of children from parents' culture.

Initially, the federal government provided financial support for the White Earth Mission School, but this decreased in the early 20th Century as the government began to prefer military-run boarding schools. St. Katherine Drexel began privately funding the school in 1890.

Missionaries placed at the school aimed to be involved in the community, including learning crafts from community members and advocating for awareness of sociopolitical issues.

### The School

The school experienced a high turnover rate and its teachers often had little to no training in education. Because most were German immigrants, they often spoke English as a second language. The school attempted to be self-sufficient and required students to assist in day-to-day running of the school.

Catholic values were strictly imposed for teaching authority, gender relations, and moral values. Male-female relations, including between siblings, were strictly controlled. Former students noted expectations of "ladylike" behavior. Patriotism was heavily emphasized.

There was no formal ban on the Ojibwe language. Of the original three missionaries, one was fluent in Ojibwe and two spoke rudimentary level. Records indicate some teachers were more focused on acculturation than assimilation.

### The Students

Students enrolled at the school were on average between the ages of 6 to 17, and enrollment numbered around 150 students at a time. In total, over 2,000 students attended the boarding school; a significant population were orphans who lived there permanently.

Former students noted that the sisters were "insistent on perfection". Many recalled about it was difficult to understand some of the missionaries who spoke English as a second language.

Former students criticized the values taught at the mission school, especially because these values undermined tribal authority and relations between within families.

Rose Barstow, a former student, recalled an experience with the school's priest, who told her "You know those are lies about your people [in that text book]. Try to forgive." Barstow later co-founded the University of Minnesota's Ojibwe language program.

