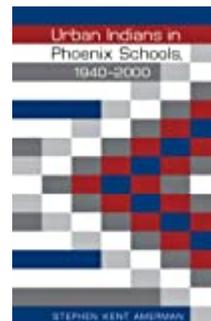




**Stephen Kent Amerman.** *Urban Indians in Phoenix Schools, 1940-2000.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010. 280 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-2985-3.



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## Learning through the City and School System

*Urban Indians in Phoenix Schools* is Stephen Kent Amerman's first book. In it, Amerman builds on a small but established literature on American Indians in specific U.S. cities. Straddling the school system and the greater Phoenix community, Amerman constructs an education history that iteratively examines the changing demographics of the city, its politics within the school system, and struggles for curricular and organizational change in schools that attend to the American Indian presence and the needs of Native students and families. The author relies primarily on oral history interviews with individual students and parents who were particularly active in the Phoenix schools and reform efforts during the 1970s; he evaluates and appreciates these accounts by corroborating them with traditional documentary sources, including U.S. census data, archival records from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Foundation, and the Phoenix public school system, as well as newspaper articles and participants' papers. What distinguishes Amerman's book is his attention to the educational—and sometimes educative—processes

American Indians experienced within and outside of the Phoenix public school system. Although Amerman does not underscore this point of significance in a direct manner, his attention to both the school system and the city of Phoenix as educational venues, rather than just the city serving as context for what went on inside schools, demonstrates both how the school does not have an exclusive hold on "education" and how oral history serves the field of education methodologically.

Beginning with the question of how so many American Indians ended up in Phoenix, Amerman provides chronologically sequenced snapshots of demographic changes in chapter 1, entitled "The City, from 1910 to 2000." From the 1960s through the 1990s, the American Indian population in Phoenix roughly doubled every decade. Though Phoenix was not part of the federal government's Indian relocation program, which moved Native populations to cities around the country in the post-World War II period, large numbers of American Indians moved to Phoenix to attend the Phoenix Indian School or college, or to find work during this period. Many who

moved to the city for school, in fact, remained for jobs in the Bureau of Indian Affairs or in the private sector. Economic reasons, Amerman argues, were the primary impetus for the explosive growth of the American Indian population in Phoenix.

This demographic change along with expanding populations of Mexican Americans, African Americans, and Anglo-Americans made Phoenix a culturally pluralistic city on a scale that it had not yet seen. Chapters 2 (‘‘The Schools’’) and 3 (‘‘The Students’’) trace how Native students and families figured out how to be ‘‘Indian’’ off the reservation amid a dynamic cultural shift in the late 1950s through the 1960s. One of the ways in which the Phoenix American Indian community did this was by living in the same neighborhoods. This, in turn, meant that clusters of American Indian children attended the same neighborhood schools and had similar experiences at those schools. Those experiences ranged from overt segregation, as Anglo families moved out of mixed neighborhoods and as schools tracked nonwhite students into remedial classes, to being mistaken as Mexican American, to being invisible within the school system. Many teachers and school administrators believed not only that American Indian children were inherently cognitively behind their non-Native peers but also that American Indians were peoples of the past since their histories did not appear in textbooks or in teacher talk in meaningful ways. Teachers seemed to assume that assimilation always existed. It was against this backdrop that American Indian families organized, forming such institutions as the Phoenix Indian Center and the Arizona Indian Association. These organizations provided support for American Indian families, who, despite frequent trips back to reservations for significant ceremonies and family occasions, experienced tribal language and cultural loss by living away from their reservations. The off-reservation institutions, as Amerman argues, however, were not enough; the Phoenix public school system’s recognition of American Indians as a distinct ethnic group was also important and necessary.

In the 1970s, as it became visible that the African American and Mexican American civil rights movements of the 1960s evidenced how social action could transform policy, a number of American Indian students, parents, and Native community members became activists, forg-

ing coalitions to counteract and correct hegemonic policies and practices in the Phoenix public school system. Though forming these coalitions was not always easy, as Amerman illustrates in chapter 4 (‘‘The Fight’’), individual and group persistence did effect change and built on American Indian identity politics that were already gaining traction on a national scale. Relying, perhaps overly so, on the oral history of Michael Hughes, a Native student activist with national ties who was instrumental in organizing American Indian students and parents, Amerman sketches how students and parents worked together to change the Phoenix public school curriculum, ensure that schools had support staff specifically for American Indian students, and track how the school system and its individual campuses were using Johnson-O’Malley and other federal funds guaranteed for Native students. By the 1980s and 1990s, several Phoenix schools had changed their practices to include learning circles for American Indian students and added classes in Navajo language. American Indian parents and students also organized intramural clubs and sports. These changes, as Amerman shows in chapter 5 (‘‘The Aftermath’’), dramatically improved graduation rates for students who participated. While these improvements were positive, other problems persisted, such as recruitment and retention of Native teachers, education of non-Native teachers about American Indian histories and cultures, and a general decline in student enrollment across all racial and ethnic groups in the Phoenix public school system.

Amerman’s book is a significant contribution to the scholarly work on American Indian education and on urban–or off-reservation–Indians. Amerman expands the scope of research in each of these areas by demonstrating how educational processes unfolded inside and outside of formal classroom settings, and by highlighting the Phoenix metropolitan area, a city whose Native population had yet to be studied by researchers despite its centrality for many southwestern indigenous peoples. Historians of education, in particular, will benefit methodologically from Amerman’s example as he fluidly and conscientiously collects, analyzes, vets, and interprets oral histories against the documentary record. *Urban Indians in Phoenix Schools* will serve scholars and graduate students who are interested in American Indian studies well. But the book is written such that it is very accessible to undergraduate and lay readers, too.

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