



Lesson Plan

The Dawes Act and Native Sovereignty Elementary

AIM

How can understanding different ideas about land, culture, and community help us understand the impact of the Dawes Act?

GUIDING OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Define **assimilation** and explain why it became a major federal policy toward Native Americans.
- Explain how the Dawes Act attempted to change Native communities by dividing communally held reservation land into individual allotments.
- Compare different ideas about **land ownership, responsibility, and community**.
- Examine why some Americans supported assimilation while Native people resisted it.
- Explain how assimilation policies affected Native land, families, cultures, and governments.
- Consider the difference between **helping someone** and **forcing someone to change**.
- Identify ways Native people resisted assimilation and preserved their cultures.

KEY VOCABULARY

Assimilation — The process of forcing or pressuring one group to adopt the culture, beliefs, and way of life of another group.

Allotment — A specific piece of land assigned to an individual or family. Under the Dawes Act, reservation land was divided into individual allotments.

Communal — Shared by a group or community rather than owned by one individual.

Culture — The language, beliefs, traditions, values, customs, arts, and ways of life shared by a group of people.

Reservation — Land set aside by the U.S. government for a Native nation or community.

Resistance — Actions taken to oppose or fight against something, including unfair treatment or unwanted change.

Sovereignty — The right of a people or nation to govern themselves and make their own decisions.

STANDARDS ALIGNMENT AT END



ACTIVITIES

1. HOOK: WHAT DO YOU THINK? — 5 minutes

Tell students:

I'm going to read you five statements. For each one, decide whether you would answer YES or NO. There are no right or wrong answers.

Students can show thumbs up/thumbs down, stand up for YES or write YES/NO.

1. **If you own land, should you be able to do anything you want with it?**
YES / NO
2. **Should land belong to everyone in a community instead of being divided so it is owned by one person?**
YES / NO
3. **Should people think about future generations when they decide how to use land?**
YES / NO
4. **If people think their way of life is better than yours, should they be able to make you change?**
YES / NO
5. **Should the government should be able to take land from one group of people and give or sell it to someone else?.**
YES / NO

After each statement, ask one or two students to briefly explain their answer. Do not debate the answers yet.

Then tell students:

Keep your answers in mind as we watch the video. You're going to see what happened when the United States government tried to impose its ideas about land and culture on Native nations.

2. WATCH THE VIDEO — 5 minutes

Tell students to listen for two questions:

1. **Why did the U.S. government want Native people to change their way of life?**
2. **How did the Dawes Act affect Native people's land?**



3. LAND COUNCIL SIMULATION — 17 minutes

SET-UP

Divide students into groups of 3–5 and give each group its role card from the **Appendix**.

Tell students:

It is 1887. The U.S. government has proposed a new policy for Native reservation lands that it claims will benefit everyone, settlers and Native Americans alike. You are going to take on the role of a particular group and decide whether your group supports or opposes the proposal.

Your job is not to say what YOU personally think. Your job is to make the strongest argument you can from the perspective of your assigned group.

Your role card explains what your group cares about and how your group might view the proposal. Read it carefully before preparing your argument.

ROUND 1: PREPARE YOUR POSITION — 7 minutes

Each group reads its role description and discusses:

- Does your group support or oppose the proposal?
- Why?
- What is your group's biggest concern?
- What do you want the government to do?

Then prepare a **persuasive statement of about 60 seconds** that:

1. Clearly states whether your group is **for or against** the proposal.
2. Gives **at least two reasons**.
3. Explains what is most important to your group.
4. Ends by telling the government what your group wants.

Tell students:

Try to persuade the people listening to you. Use what you have learned about land, community, culture, and the goals of the government.



ROUND 2: COMMUNITY HEARING — 8 minutes

Each group presents its persuasive statement. After each presentation, allow **one question from another group**. You may also ask questions yourself.

As students listen, ask them to think about:

- 1. How does each group think land should be used and who should control it?**
- 2. What does each group think is most important: individual ownership, community, economic opportunity, culture, or future generations?**

ROUND 3: STEP OUT OF THE ROLE — 2 minutes

Tell students:

Now step out of your role. What did you notice about the different ideas about land?

Take several responses.

Then explain:

In real life, the Dawes Act was not a fair debate between groups with equal power. The federal government passed the law and imposed the policy on sovereign Native nations, none of whom wanted to change from collective land ownership to individual land ownership. The simulation helps us understand the different perspectives, but Native nations did not have equal power to decide whether the policy would happen.

4. WHAT REALLY HAPPENED? — 8 minutes

A. WHAT WAS THE GOVERNMENT TRYING TO CHANGE?

Ask: The Dawes Act was part of a larger policy of assimilation. What did the government want Native people to change?

Guide students toward:

- land ownership
- farming and economic practices
- tribal governments
- family life
- language and culture
- Native identity



Write on the board:

ASSIMILATION = PRESSURING OR FORCING A GROUP TO ADOPT THE CULTURE AND WAY OF LIFE OF ANOTHER GROUP.

Then ask: **What is the difference between choosing to adopt something from another culture and being forced to abandon your own culture?**

B. ASSIMILATION AND LAND LOSS

Tell students: **The government said assimilation would help Native people become more like white Americans. But the policy also had another major result: it allowed the United States to take millions of acres of land from Native nations and make that land available to white settlers.**

Ask:

So was the Dawes Act only about changing Native culture?

No.

Was it only about taking Native land?

No.

Explain: **It did both. The government used individual allotments as a way to break up communal tribal land and push assimilation. Once the land was divided, millions of acres that the government labeled “surplus” could be transferred to white settlers.**

Write on the board:

ASSIMILATION → BREAK UP COMMUNAL LAND → NATIVE LAND LOSS → LAND AVAILABLE TO WHITE SETTLERS

Ask:

Why would dividing land into individual pieces make it easier for the government to accomplish both goals?

Guide students toward the idea that breaking up communal land also weakened the political and social structure of Native communities while creating land that could be transferred to outsiders.



C. WAS IT REALLY “HELP”?

Return to the government's stated justification. Ask:

The government said individual land ownership and farming would improve Native lives. But who got to decide what “improvement” meant?

Is it possible for someone to believe they are helping you while actually causing harm?

What is the difference between choosing to change your own way of life and being forced to change it?

Explain that many Americans who supported assimilation believed they were helping Native people, but their policy required Native people to give up important parts of their own cultures, communities, governments, and ways of life.

D. LAND AND CULTURE

Ask: **Why might taking control of land also affect a people's culture and identity?**

Draw out ideas such as:

- communities become divided;
- people can no longer make decisions together;
- traditional activities may depend on access to particular lands;
- families can be separated;
- tribal governments lose power;
- younger generations can lose connections to language, traditions, and community.

Then connect to boarding schools:

The government wasn't only changing the land. It was also trying to change the children. What happened to Native children in boarding schools?

Students should recall that children were taken from their families and punished for speaking their languages or practicing their cultures.

Explain: **The Dawes Act and boarding schools were different policies, but both were part of the larger effort to assimilate Native people. One attacked the foundations of Native communities through land and government; the other targeted children, language, family, and culture.**



5. RESISTANCE AND SURVIVAL — 5 minutes

Ask: **What did Native people do when the government tried to change their land, culture, and communities?**

Students should identify examples from the video:

- preserving language and traditions;
- passing culture to younger generations;
- maintaining community;
- legal challenges;
- continuing tribal governments;
- resisting assimilation.

Then ask: **Why is continuing your culture a form of resistance?**

Connect to the video's closing idea: **"The best way to win is to live and live well."**

Then ask: **What does that idea mean in the context of the Dawes Act and assimilation?**

Guide students toward the idea that survival, maintaining identity, and passing culture to future generations can themselves be forms of resistance.

6. EXIT TICKET — 3 minutes

Have students answer: **The Dawes Act changed more than where Native people lived. Explain TWO ways the policy affected Native life and ONE way Native people resisted or responded to these changes.**

Optional challenge: **What is one important difference between the way land was viewed by the Native community in today's simulation and the way the U.S. government viewed land?**



STUDENT HANDOUT

DAWES ACT—LAND COUNCIL SIMULATION

YOUR TASK

It is **1887**. The U.S. government has proposed a new policy for Native reservation lands.

The government wants to:

- divide reservation land into individual pieces called **allotments**;
- give individual Native families their own allotments;
- declare some remaining land “surplus”;
- make that land available to white settlers.

The government says the plan will help Native people become farmers, individual landowners, and U.S. citizens.

Your group has been asked to give its opinion on the proposal.

IMPORTANT

You are **role-playing**. Your job is not to give your personal opinion. Your job is to make the strongest argument you can from the perspective of your assigned group.



GROUP 1

NATIVE COMMUNITY COUNCIL

You are leaders of a Native community living on a reservation.

Your community has traditionally made decisions about land together. Land provides food, homes, and places connected to your community's history and culture.

You believe people have responsibilities to the community and to future generations.

The government wants to divide your community's land into individual allotments. Some land would then be considered “surplus” and sold to white settlers.

YOUR POSITION

Your group **OPPOSES** the proposal.

You believe dividing the land will weaken your community and take away your ability to control your own land and future.

PREPARE YOUR ARGUMENT

Discuss:

- Why does your group oppose the proposal?
- What is your biggest concern?
- What could happen to your community if the land is divided?
- What do you want the government to do?

Prepare a **30–60 second persuasive statement**.



GROUP 2

U.S. GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS

You are U.S. government officials who support **assimilation**.

You believe Native people should adopt more of the customs and practices of white Americans.

You believe individual land ownership and farming will help Native people change their way of life and become U.S. citizens.

You also believe that land not being used in the way you consider productive should be available to settlers.

YOUR POSITION

Your group **SUPPORTS** the proposal.

You believe it will encourage assimilation, promote individual land ownership and farming, and open additional land to white settlement.

PREPARE YOUR ARGUMENT

Discuss:

- Why does your group support the proposal?
- Why do you think individual land ownership is important?
- Why do you think Native people should change their way of life?
- What do you want the government to do?

Prepare a **30–60 second persuasive statement**.



GROUP 3

NATIVE FAMILIES & YOUNG PEOPLE

You are Native families and young people living in a community where people share relationships, traditions, and responsibilities.

You are concerned that dividing the land could separate families and weaken the community.

You are also concerned about other assimilation policies, including sending Native children away to boarding schools and punishing them for speaking their languages or practicing their cultures.

YOUR POSITION

Your group **OPPOSES** the proposal.

You believe it threatens your family's community, culture, and future.

PREPARE YOUR ARGUMENT

Discuss:

- How could dividing the land affect your family?
- How could it affect your community?
- What could happen to your culture?
- What do you want the government to understand?

Prepare a **30–60 second persuasive statement**.



GROUP 4

WHITE SETTLERS

You are white settlers who want land for your families, farms, and businesses.

You believe that if the government makes land available for settlement, you should have an opportunity to acquire it and develop it.

The government plans to declare some reservation land “surplus” and make it available to white settlers after Native land is divided into individual allotments.

YOUR POSITION

Your group **SUPPORTS** the proposal because it creates opportunities to obtain land.

However, you should also think about an important question:

Where did this land come from, and what happens to the people who already live there?

PREPARE YOUR ARGUMENT

Discuss:

- Why does your group support the proposal?
- Why do you want land?
- What might you do with the land?
- What questions should you consider about where the land came from?

Prepare a **30–60 second persuasive statement**.



GROUP 5

FUTURE GENERATIONS

You represent people who will live **50 or 100 years from now**.

You care about what today's decisions will leave behind.

Land is not only something that can have economic value. It can also provide homes, resources, community, history, and connections to culture.

YOUR POSITION

Your group must decide whether the proposal protects or harms the interests of future generations.

Think carefully about:

- What happens if land is divided and sold?
- Who will control the land in the future?
- What might future generations gain?
- What might they lose?
- What responsibilities do people today have to people who come after them?

PREPARE YOUR ARGUMENT

Decide whether your group **SUPPORTS** or **OPPOSES** the proposal.

Prepare a **30–60 second persuasive statement** explaining your position.



COMMUNITY HEARING

When your group presents:

1. State your position.

We support / oppose the proposal because...

2. Give at least TWO reasons.

3. Explain what is most important to your group.

4. Tell the government what you want it to do.

LISTENING QUESTION

As you listen to the other groups, think about:

How does each group think land should be used and who should control it?

What does each group think is most important: individual ownership, community, economic opportunity, culture, or future generations?



STANDARDS

For a national audience, I'd keep these to **Common Core ELA** plus the national social-studies framework rather than tying the lesson to a particular state's standards.

Common Core State Standards — English Language Arts

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.6

Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author's point of view or purpose.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.1

Write arguments focused on discipline-specific content.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6-8.1

Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions with diverse partners on topics, texts, and issues.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6-8.4

Present claims and findings, emphasizing salient points in a focused, coherent manner.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6-8.6

Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.

National Curriculum Framework — Social Studies

NCSS Theme II: Time, Continuity, and Change

Students examine the past and its connections to the present, including how historical events and developments have shaped contemporary society.

NCSS Theme III: People, Places, and Environments

Students examine relationships between people, places, and environments, including differing perspectives on the use and meaning of land.

NCSS Theme VI: Power, Authority, and Governance

Students examine how governments acquire, exercise, and limit power and how governmental decisions affect individuals and groups.

NCSS Theme X: Civic Ideals and Practices

Students examine differing perspectives, participate in discussion and deliberation, and consider issues of rights, responsibilities, and justice