



Truth and
Reconciliation
Commission of Canada

trc.ca

Indian Residential Schools An Overview

On June 11, 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued an apology to the former students of Canada's Indian residential school system, calling it a "sad chapter in our history." That chapter is part of a broader story: one in which the Canadian government gained control over Aboriginal land and peoples, disrupted Aboriginal governments and economies, and sought to repress Aboriginal cultures and spiritual practices. The government, often in partnership with the country's major religious bodies sought to "civilize" and Christianize, and, ultimately, assimilate Aboriginal people into the Canadian society. The deputy minister of Indian Affairs predicted in 1920 that in a century, thanks to the work of these schools, Aboriginal people would cease to exist as an identifiable cultural group in Canada.



Education was seen as a central element in this project. For their part Aboriginal people saw the value in schooling: it was at their insistence, for example, that many treaties required government to provide teachers and establish reserve schools.

The decision to invest in residential schools was based on a belief that the cultural and spiritual transformation that the government and churches sought to bring about in Aboriginal people could be most effectively accomplished in schools that broke the bonds between parent and child.

When Canada was created in 1867 the churches were already operating a small number of boarding schools for Aboriginal people of Ontario. In the coming years, Roman Catholic and Protestant

missionaries established missions and small boarding schools throughout the west. The relationship between the government and the churches was institutionalized in 1883 when the federal government decided to establish three large residential schools in Western Canada.



By the 1930s, there were over 70 residential schools in operation in all parts of the country. By then approximately one-third of school-aged Aboriginal children were attending residential schools. Eventually more than 150,000 students would pass through the system. Over the century that the system was in operation more than 130 residential schools received government support.

The assault on an Aboriginal identity often began the moment the child took the first step across the school's threshold. Braided hair (which often had spiritual connotations) was cut, home-made clothing exchanged for a school uniform, Aboriginal names replaced with a Euro-Canadian ones (and a number), and the unrestricted freedom of life in Aboriginal community foregone for the regimen of an institution in which every activity from morning to evening was scheduled. Males and females, brothers and sisters were separated and, with some exceptions, parental visits were discouraged and controlled.

Hastily and cheaply built schools were often found to have poor or non-existent sanitation and ventilation systems. With few infirmaries in which students with contagious diseases could be isolated, epidemics could quickly spread through a school with deadly results. Because schools were funded on a per capita basis, administrators often violated health guidelines and admitted children who were infected with such deadly and contagious diseases as tuberculosis. Parents were also often not informed if their children became sick, died, or ran away.



For the first half of the twentieth century, the schools were on what was termed the half-day system, under which half a day was spent in the classroom and the other half in vocational training. For the boys this was largely restricted to farming and the crafts that a farmer might have need of while the girls were trained in the domestic sciences. In reality, this was not so much training as child labour, undertaken to subsidize the ongoing operation of the schools.

The government mandated that English be the language of instruction. And while some missionaries had learned Aboriginal languages and provided religious instruction in those languages, in many schools students were punished for speaking an Aboriginal language. For most of the system's history the federal government had no clear policy on discipline. Students were not only

strapped and humiliated, in some schools, they were handcuffed, manacled, beaten, locked in cellars and other makeshift jails, or displayed in stocks. Overcrowding and a high student-staff ratio meant that even those children who were not subject to physical discipline grew up in an atmosphere of emotional neglect.

From the beginning, many Aboriginal people were resistant to the residential school system. Missionaries found it difficult to convince parents to send their children to residential schools, and children ran away, often at great personal risk and with tragic outcome.

While the issue of sexual abuse was largely unreported during the years in which the schools were in operation, over the past 25 years it has become clear that this was a serious problem in some schools. While a number of high-profile court cases have led to the conviction of school officials and employees, the extent of such abuse—and its legacy—requires further research.

For most of their history, residential school wages were far below those offered to other teachers, making the recruitment and retention of teachers an ongoing issue. While many remarkable people devoted their lives to these institutions, the churches did not require the same level of training as was expected by the Canadian public school system. It was not until after the 1950s that the schools, for example, began to provide high school education.

Many students have positive memories of their experiences of residential schools and speak positively of the skills they acquired, the recreational and sporting activities, and the friendships they made. Some students went on to further their studies and develop distinguished careers. But for most students academic success was elusive and they left as soon as they could. On return to their home

communities, they often felt isolated from their families and their culture. They had lost their language and not been provided with the skills to follow traditional economic pursuit. Many found that they had not been provided with the skills needed to succeed in the Euro-Canadian economy. Nor did they have any experience of family life or parenting.



By the 1940s federal officials had concluded that the system was both expensive and ineffective. As a result, the federal government began to substantially increase the number of on-reserve day schools and, in the 1950s, to enter into agreements with provincial governments and local school boards to have Aboriginal students educated in public schools. This policy of slowly winding down the residential school system was coupled with an expansion of the system in the Canadian north from 1955 onwards. Once again children were separated from families for lengthy periods, taught by people who had no understanding of their language or culture, and housed in crowded and makeshift facilities.

The partnership with the churches remained in place until 1969 and, while most of the schools had closed by the 1980s, the last federally supported residential schools remained in operation until the mid-1990s.

In the 1980s various members of Canadian society began to undertake a reassessment of the residential school experience. Starting in 1986, Canadian churches began to issue apologies for attempting to impose European culture and values on Aboriginal people. Apologies specific to the residential schools were to follow in the 1990s. Former students began to speak out publicly about the experiences, leading to both the criminal charges against sexual abusers and to the launching of class-action suits against the churches and the federal government. The cases were eventually resolved in the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement, the largest class-action settlement in Canadian history, which was reached in 2006 and came into effect in 2007.



That agreement provided for a payment to all former students who resided as federally supported residential schools, additional compensation for those who suffered sexual or serious physical abuses, or other abuses, a contribution to the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, support for commemoration projects, the establishment of Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the provision of mental health supports for all participants in settlement agreement initiatives.

Contact Us

Telephone: 1 (888) 872-5554

Email: info@trc.ca

Website: www.trc.ca

Fax: (204) 984-5915

Mail: **Truth and Reconciliation
Commission of Canada**
1500-360 Main Street
Winnipeg, MB R3C 3Z3

