



# Stepping Stones



## RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS—FIRST NATIONS EXPERIENCE

### Planning your learning journey

*What was the purpose of residential schools, and what are the lasting impacts?*



PROVINCIAL ARCHIVES OF ALBERTA, FROM THE SISTER ANNETTE POTVIN FONDS, PR2010.0475/1.

*Students at Blue Quills Residential School, Saddle Lake*

### FIRST STEPS



Over a 100-year period, more than 150,000 First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, some as young as four years of age, were separated from their parents and sent to residential schools.<sup>1</sup> For most of this history, the schools were operated in partnership between the Canadian government and the country's leading Christian churches. At the time of Confederation in 1867, two such schools existed in Ontario. By the time the final school closed in the mid-1990s, over 150 schools and residences had been in operation across every geographic region of the country, with the majority of the schools located in western Canada.<sup>2</sup> Alberta was home to twenty-five residential schools.<sup>3</sup> Residential schools are not just part of Canada's history. About 80,000 former students, who are often described as residential school survivors, are alive today. Many of these survivors launched court cases seeking compensation for the treatment they experienced. It was through the efforts of the survivors that the history and legacy of the residential schools finally gained national attention.





## WHAT WAS THE PURPOSE OF RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS?



Government and church leaders often said the purpose of residential schooling was to “Christianize” and “civilize”

Indigenous Peoples. Planners expected that the students who emerged from these schools would be so spiritually, linguistically, culturally and socially different from their parents that they would not want to return to their home communities and would willingly give up their Indian identity as defined under the *Indian Act*.<sup>4</sup> As former students gave up their status (through a process called enfranchisement), it was expected that within one or two generations there would be no legal Indigenous Peoples, no reserves and no treaty obligations. Day schools were judged as incapable of performing this sort of radical transformation since they did not sever the connections between children and their parents and their home community. The assault on Indigenous cultures and identities often started on the first day of school: upon arrival students would have their hair shorn, traditional clothing taken from them and their name changed. The use of Indigenous languages was often punished and parental visits discouraged.<sup>5</sup> These goals and practices have led the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC)<sup>6</sup> to describe the schools’ primary purpose as cultural genocide.<sup>7</sup>

Residential schooling was also a key element in Canada’s colonization of the Northwest Territories. The Davin Report 1879,<sup>8</sup> recommended that the government, in partnership with the churches, establish a series of residential schools across the prairies to remove children from the influence of family and community and bring them into what Davin called “the circle of civilized conditions.” In 1883 the dramatic expansion of the residential school system began with a decision to

build three large government funded schools at Qu’Appelle, Battleford and High River. By 1930 there were 80 residential schools in Canada, 56 of which were in the western provinces and territories.<sup>9</sup> The goals of the residential school system were forced isolation and assimilation of Indigenous children into the dominant society.<sup>10</sup>

### What types of schools were established?

Although the umbrella term *residential schools* is used, a variety of institutions existed beyond the federally supported, church-run boarding schools. Initially the federal government and the churches distinguished between two types of residential schools: boarding schools and industrial schools. The boarding schools were smaller, established by churches, limited in the types of education and training they provided, and located relatively close to the reserves from which they sought to recruit students. Industrial schools were larger, government initiatives administered and staffed by church employees. They were supposed to be reserved for older students and were more often located at a greater distance from First Nations communities. Although they were called industrial, most of these schools provided a limited range of training opportunities for students: agriculture for boys and domestic work for girls. By the 1920s, the government dropped these terms, simply referring to all the schools as residential schools. From the 1950s onward, the government introduced several variations to the system. For example, it might simply establish a residence that students lived in while attending a separately administered day school. In the late 1960s, the federal government ended its partnership with the churches and took over direct responsibility for administration of the residences and schools.<sup>11</sup>

### What were the experiences of students at residential schools?

The government’s goal for residential schools was ambitious, but its economic

commitment to the schools was always inadequate. The buildings were poorly built and poorly maintained fire traps. Over the years, 53 were destroyed in fires that claimed the lives of 40 students. Policies requiring students to be examined for contagious diseases prior to being admitted were often ignored, and living quarters were cramped. As a result, the schools became breeding grounds for deadly diseases, particularly tuberculosis. Many students became gravely ill and the death rates were high; over 6,000 children died because of their school experiences.<sup>12</sup>

The government believed the industrial schools should become self-supporting and funding was insufficient.<sup>13</sup> The schools operated on the half-day system under which older students spent half the school time in class and the other half supposedly learning a trade. The pressures created by underfunding meant that vocational training was often little more than child labour. Instead of learning a skill, students were assigned routine housekeeping tasks to keep the school operating. It was common for boys to raise most of the food, and the girls to clothe and feed the students. Even the children who were not on the half-day system often had an hour or more of chores to do each day. Diet was inadequate throughout the system’s history; to raise money, the schools often sold food that the students raised. Even into the 1960s, there were reports of inadequate diets at residential schools.<sup>14</sup> In some cases, diets were so poor that the malnourished students were seen as ideal subjects for nutritional studies.<sup>15</sup>

Residential school students were taught in overcrowded, under-resourced classrooms by poorly trained teachers. Because of the half-day system, they had less classroom time than other Canadian students. Although a number of students persevered and achieved academic success, overall graduation rates were very low. Discipline was also very harsh and far different from what students were accustomed to at home. Not surprisingly, parents objected to sending their children to these schools,

and children often put themselves at great risk by running away from school.<sup>16</sup> Opposition to the schools was so strong that in 1920 parliament adopted an amendment to the *Indian Act* that empowered the Indian agents to compel parents to send their children to residential schools. In some cases, parents were fined and even jailed for refusing to send their children to the schools, while at least 33 students died from exposure while running away from school. In many schools, harsh discipline was compounded with physical and sexual abuse.<sup>17</sup> Separated from their parents, families and home communities, virtually every child experienced some form of emotional neglect.<sup>18</sup>

The people responsible for the system were well aware of its shortcomings. The government record contains numerous assessments that point out that the discipline in residential schools was harsher than in public schools, and the funding lower than that provided to similar institutions, such as orphanages that housed non-Indigenous children.<sup>19</sup>

## THE RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS LEGACY

### What is the ongoing impact of the residential school system?

The residential school system created deep and lasting trauma in many Indigenous families and communities that is still evident in our society today. Not only are the 80,000 survivors still living with the legacy of their time at the schools, their experiences have impacted their families. In this way, the children and grandchildren of traumatized parents experience what is termed *intergenerational trauma*<sup>20</sup> leading to elevated rates of addictions, crime and suicide. The cycle of abuse and trauma can continue from one generation to the next.<sup>21</sup>

### What steps have been taken to reconcile with survivors and Indigenous communities?

Some steps have been taken to address this dark chapter in our history.

Starting in the 1980s, many of the churches began offering statements of apology or regret for their involvement in the schools and the impact that the schools have had on Indigenous Peoples and communities. In 1998 the Aboriginal Healing Foundation<sup>22</sup> was established to provide healing initiatives and programs to benefit survivors. In 2006, a class-action lawsuit launched by survivors resulted in the negotiated Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement.<sup>23</sup> This agreement provided financial compensation to former students and the creation of an independent process to compensate those survivors who had suffered abuse in the schools. The agreement also established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC), which travelled across the country providing a safe environment for survivors to tell their stories and mandated the creation of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation<sup>24</sup> to house those stories. In 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued a Statement of Apology<sup>25</sup> in the House of Commons to survivors, acknowledging the policy of assimilation and the great harm it caused. The Alberta government has demonstrated its commitment to reconciliation by ensuring the history and legacy of residential schools is mandated curriculum for all students, K-12, and providing funding for teacher professional development across the province.<sup>26</sup> Many individuals, families and communities have begun the healing process through connection to culture, language, ceremony and ongoing learning, regardless of external reconciliation initiatives.

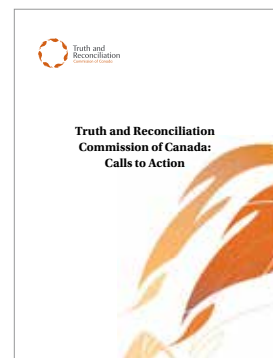
## Continuing Your Learning Journey

- What are the TRC 11 Calls to Action pertaining directly to education?*
- How can you make the TRC Calls to Action a living document in your school community?*
- How have the experiences of residential schools shaped*

## NEXT STEPS



Reconciliation is about all Canadians understanding the past and working together to build a new future. We all have a responsibility to learn and acknowledge the truth of residential schools and to understand the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action.<sup>27</sup> Many schools demonstrate understanding of the history and legacy of residential schools by participating in cross-country projects such as Imagine a Canada,<sup>28</sup> Project of Heart<sup>29</sup> and Orange Shirt Day.<sup>30</sup> The Calls to Action on Education posters and the Government of Canada's statement of apology<sup>31</sup> for residential schools are posted on the walls in some Alberta schools. Respectfully inviting survivors to share their stories is another way school communities participate in reconciliation. Residential schools are a blight on our shared history and impact our communities and our classrooms to this day. As well, developing an understanding of the causes and effects of intergenerational trauma and learning about trauma informed practice can help school staffs better meet the needs of Indigenous students and their families.



*Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action, 2015.*



contemporary realities for First Nations Peoples and communities?

## NOTES

1. National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, *A Knock at the Door*, (Winnipeg, Man: University of Manitoba Press, 2016), 5–6.
2. “Residential School Locations,” Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada website, [www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=12](http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=12) (accessed October 1, 2018).
3. Source: <http://trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=12>.
4. For more information, go to [www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/indian-act](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/indian-act) (accessed October 1, 2018).
5. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, 2015, 37–43.
6. For more information, go to [www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=3](http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=3).
7. For more information, go to [www.historicacanada.ca/sites/default/files/PDF/ResidentialSchools\\_English.pdf](http://www.historicacanada.ca/sites/default/files/PDF/ResidentialSchools_English.pdf).
8. For more information, go to <https://canadianhistory.ca/natives/timeline/1870s/1879-davin-report>.
9. National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, *A Knock at the Door*, (Winnipeg, Man: University of Manitoba Press, 2016), 5–6.
10. National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, *A Knock at the Door* (Winnipeg, Man: University of Manitoba Press, 2016), 3.
11. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, 2015, 57.
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14. National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, *A Knock at the Door* (Winnipeg, Man: University of Manitoba Press, 2016), 67–72.
15. Ian Mosby, “Administering Colonial Science: Nutrition Research and Human Biomedical Experimentation in Aboriginal Communities and Residential Schools, 1942–1952,” *Social History* 46, no 91, (May 2013), 145–72, also available at <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/512043> (accessed October 1, 2018).
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19. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, 2015.
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21. *Historic Trauma and Aboriginal Healing*, (Ottawa: Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2004), [www.ahf.ca/downloads/historic-trauma.pdf](http://www.ahf.ca/downloads/historic-trauma.pdf) (accessed October 1, 2018).
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23. For more information, go to [www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100015576/1100100015577#sect1](http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100015576/1100100015577#sect1).
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28. For more information, go to Imagine a Canada, <https://education.nctr.ca/#imagine>.
29. For more information, go to Project of Heart, <http://projectofheart.ca/>.
30. For more information, go to Safe and Caring Schools and Communities, Orange Shirt Day, <http://safeandcaring.ca/orangeshirtday/>.
31. Statement of Apology to Former Students of Indian Residential Schools, Government of Canada, [www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100015644/1100100015649](http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100015644/1100100015649) (accessed October 1, 2018).



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Walking Together

EDUCATION FOR RECONCILIATION

