
INDIAN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS



Second Sunday of Advent
December 5, 2021

When the first Europeans arrived, Indigenous Peoples had traditional ways of bringing up and teaching their children and youth within their families and their communities. In the 17th century, the Recollets, an order of Franciscan teachers, and the Jesuits began teaching Indigenous Peoples about Jesus. Through the following centuries, other religious communities, Christian denominations and new dioceses started day schools and boarding schools for First Nations children alongside the missions they founded.

In the 1880s, the Canadian government amended the Indian Act to provide funding for the schools already operated by various churches and religious communities. The government thought that breaking traditional community and spiritual connections and replacing them with education and religious instruction was an effective way of dismantling Indigenous ways of life. Some Treaty clauses required schools and agricultural training to be provided to Indigenous communities, and mission schools were seen as a cost-effective way of providing this training.

Even earlier, the British government had researched different options for a system of schools for First Nations children. Later, the Canadian government did the same. Egerton Ryerson, the superintendent of education for Canada West at the time, produced an 1847 report that detailed his recommendations for using existing mission schools to create a school system that would teach farming to traditionally nomadic communities. The report also identified religious influence and the removal of children from the care of their families as an essential part of changing the way First Nations communities lived. The consent of the children's parents and their families was not considered.

Almost 40 years later, the Canadian government started to implement Ryerson's recommendations by funding the existing schools through grants. This system allowed the Department of Indian Affairs to inspect the schools and maintain oversight of the curriculum and enrollment without being responsible for the schools' inevitable operational shortcomings that would emerge. Leading up to the decision, the government studied other residential school systems, such as the United States' industrial schools, and consulted Oblate Archbishop Alexandre-Antoine Taché's writings on Indigenous ways of life.

Because of the late development of Canada's North, the Indian Residential Schools situation there was unique. At the turn of the 20th century, there were only two residential schools in the North-West Territories, one Catholic and one Anglican. The first Catholic school was established in 1867 with scant resources, mainly to house and educate the orphans (whose parents died of illnesses) and other children in need. It was only with the signing of Treaties 8 and 11 in 1899 and 1921 that the Government provided funding on a per capita basis.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's records indicate that 65 of the 141 government-funded Residential Schools were administered and staffed through Catholic dioceses, missions, or religious communities. The government prioritized removing children from their families to break up traditional communities and so some federally administered day schools had religious-run hostels or residence halls operating alongside them. Attendance at these schools was compulsory as of 1894. Annuities guaranteed for the children under certain Treaties were used for the maintenance of the schools and the children. Measures to ensure compliance included withholding food rations from the family, the use of force and the threat of incarceration.

Under the per-capita system, school administrations were paid according to the number of eligible children they enrolled. The money granted was frequently not enough to properly clothe, feed, supervise, and educate the students or to make critical repairs to buildings. Malfunctioning sewer systems, contaminated drinking water, and a lack of space to separate sick students from healthy ones were common issues. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's reports state that more children died at the Indian Residential Schools than were documented in official records. It also stated that there were unmarked graves in cemeteries attached to Residential Schools and community and mission cemeteries. In May 2021 the existence of these graves became more widely known. The identification of these graves is an ongoing process which Indigenous Peoples are leading.

Survivors reported being hungry and forced to eat food that was rotten or nutritionally deficient. In addition, in the 1940s and 1950s, officials of the government, military and private sector conducted experiments on the effects of malnutrition. The experiments included students of Indian Residential Schools as test subjects. The long-term effects of malnutrition were monitored and, in some cases, medical interventions were denied. These nutritional experiments were performed without the consent of the children and their families. Additionally, recent research suggests that malnutrition can have long-term, intergenerational effects. The way these experiments were conducted did not respect the human dignity of the students in the schools.

Due to a shortage of teachers, not all grades were available, particularly for high school students. Until the mid-1900s, the schools were run on a system of a half-day of instruction and a half-day of agriculture, trade, or domestic training. Students left the schools without a complete education and with broken connections to their Indigenous communities and traditional ways of life.

Throughout the years that the schools operated, children were seriously injured and died at the Indian Residential Schools for reasons connected to the standard of care at the schools. Disease, unsafe buildings, physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual abuse were common. In addition, some children were sexually abused.

Children were denied the right to pray in their own language. Some students who tried to run away succumbed to exposure to the elements. Children who survived these events were traumatized, both physically and psychologically. Also, the number who died outside the schools from diseases and injuries they acquired at the schools can only be estimated.

In 1969, the Department of Indian Affairs took over the running of all remaining Indian Residential Schools. Churches and religious communities were no longer involved in their operation. However, the damage was already done, as multiple generations of Indigenous people were deeply affected and left without connections to family, community, language and spirituality.

The last Indian Residential School closed in 1996, but many Indigenous Peoples continue to experience lasting effects.

For Reflection

1. As you reflect on what you have learned about Indian Residential Schools, how does this information change your previous awareness and add to your understanding of the history you were taught?