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### Canadian residential school system



St. Paul's Indian Industrial School, Middlechurch, Manitoba, 1901

The **Canadian residential school system** consisted of a number of schools for Aboriginal children, operated during the 19th and 20th century by churches of various denominations (about sixty per cent by Roman Catholics, and thirty per cent by the United Church of Canada (and its pre-1925 predecessors, Presbyterian, Congregationalist and Methodist churches) and the Anglican Church of Canada) and funded under the Indian Act by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, a branch of the federal government. Similar schools in the United States were known as Indian Boarding Schools.

The foundations of the system were the pre-confederation Gradual Civilization Act (1857) and the Gradual Enfranchisement Act (1869). These acts assumed the inherent superiority of [British](#) ways, and the need for Indians to become English-speakers, Christians [and](#) farmers. At the time, aboriginal leaders wanted these acts overturned.

Two major types of problems have been associated with the residential school system. First, there was a clear intent to assimilate Indian people (First Nations) into the non-native culture. Second, there was widespread physical and sexual abuse, and, owing to overcrowding, poor sanitation and a lack of medical care and [the](#) resulting high rates of tuberculosis, death rates up to 69 percent because the First Nations children were systematically exposed to tuberculosis. Details of mistreatment of students had been published numerous times through the century, but following the closure of the schools in the 1990s, the work of indigenous activists and historians led to the change in the [public](#) perception of the residential school system, official government apologies and a (controversial) legal settlement..

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## History

The first residential schools were set up during the French colonial rule in the 1600s by Roman Catholic missionaries. Their primary roles were to convert Indigenous children to Christianity and to “civilize them”. However, many First Nations people did not wish to be converted. Despite inducements from and pressure by the Society of Jesus and the colonial government, few students could be recruited for the schools, and those who did enrol frequently left during hunting season. Eventually the few students who attended either ran away permanently or [refused](#) to co-operate. Most schools did not last over a decade.



Lebert, Qu'Appelle Valley, District of Assiniboia, NWT, Indian Industrial School, ca. 1885. Parents of Indian children had to camp outside the gates of the residential schools in order to visit their children.

In the early 1800s, Protestant missionaries opened residential schools in the current Ontario region. The [Protestant](#) churches not only spread Christianity, but also [tried](#) to encourage the [indigenous people](#) to adopt agriculture as a way to ensure they would not return to their original lifestyle after graduation.. For graduates to receive individual allotments of farmland, however, would require changes in the reserve system, something fiercely opposed by First Nations governments. In 1857, the Gradual Civilization Act was passed by the Legislature of the Province of Canada with the aim of assimilating First Nations people. This Act awarded fifty acres of land to any indigenous male deemed “sufficiently advanced in the elementary branches of education” and would automatically “enfranchise” him, removing any tribal affiliation or treaty rights. With this legislation, and through the creation of residential schools, the colonial government believed indigenous people could eventually become assimilated into the population. After confederation (1867), Prime Minister Sir John A. [Macdonald](#) commissioned Nicholas Flood Davin to write a “Report on Industrial Schools for

Indians and Half-Breeds” (now known as the “Davin Report”), which was submitted to Ottawa in March 1879 and led to public funding for the residential school system in Canada.

In 1920, attendance became compulsory by law for all children aged 6 to 15. Children were often forcibly removed from their families, or their families were threatened with prison if they failed to send their children willingly. Some have suggested that many of the practices exerted on the children were consistent with *current* UN conventions on genocide, though destruction of culture and language does not fit the usual definition of genocide as mass killing of ethnic or racial groups. They claim the schools systematically tried to destroy their language and their way of life. The idea of *cultural genocide* appears to have arisen within lawsuits against the government and churches, as advanced by lawyers.

Students were required to stay in residences on school premises, which were often walled or fortified in some manner, and were often forcibly removed from their homes, parents, and communities. Most students had no contact with their families for up to 10 months at a time due to the distance between their home communities and schools. Often, they did not have contact with their families for years at a time. The locations of the schools were planned deliberately to ensure a “proper distance” from the reserves. They were prohibited from speaking Aboriginal languages, even amongst themselves and outside the classroom, so that English or French would be successfully learned and their own languages forgotten. Students were subject to often unreasonably severe corporal punishment for speaking Aboriginal languages or practising non-Christian faiths. It is because of this that the residential school system has been called blatantly racist by native rights groups and have been severely criticized as culturally insensitive or even inhumane. It was also openly acknowledged that the schools were an attempt by government and the churches of Canada to assimilate the Aboriginals into the European-Canadian culture, and it was at least partially successful in many cases.

In 1909, Dr. Peter Bryce, general medical superintendent for the Department of Indian Affairs (DIA), reported to the department that between 1894 and 1908 mortality rates at residential schools in Western Canada ranged from 35% to 60% over five years (that is, five years after entry, 35% to 60% of students had died). These statistics did not become public until 1922, when Bryce, who was no longer working for the government, published *The Story of a National Crime: Being a Record of the Health Conditions of the Indians of Canada from 1904 to 1921*. In particular, he alleged that the high mortality rates were frequently deliberate, with healthy children being exposed to children with tuberculosis.



Residential school group photograph, Regina, Saskatchewan circa 1921

In 1920 and 1922, Dr. F. A. Corbett was commissioned to visit the schools in the west of the country, and found similar results to Bryce. At the Ermineskin school in Hobbema, Alberta, he found 50% of the children had tuberculosis. At Sarcee Boarding School near Calgary, all 33 students were “much below even a passable standard of health” and “11 but four were infected with tuberculosis.” When he entered a classroom there, he found sixteen of the children, many of them near death, were still being made to sit through lessons.

After the Second World War, the Canadian Family Allowance Act began to grant “baby bonuses” to families with children, but ensured this money was cut off if parents refused to send their children to school. This act, then, added yet another coercive element pressuring indigenous parents to accept the residential school system.

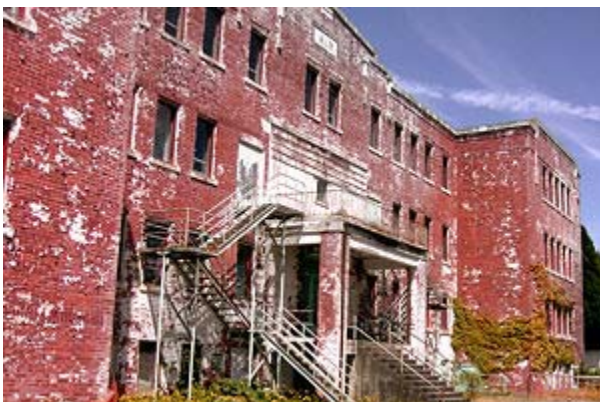
Compulsory attendance at the residential schools had ended by 1948, following the 1947 report of a Special Joint Committee and subsequent amendment of the Indian Act; although this did little to improve conditions for those attending. Until the late 1950s, residential schools were severely underfunded, and relied on the forced labour of their students to maintain their facilities. The work was arduous, and severely compromised the academic and social development of the students. Literary education, or any serious efforts to inspire literacy in English or French, were almost non-existent. School books and textbooks, if they were present at all, were drawn mainly from the curricula of the provincially funded public schools for non-Aboriginal students, and teachers at the residential schools were notoriously under-trained. In 1969, after years of sharing power with churches, the DIA took sole control of the residential school system.

In Northern Alberta, parents protested the DIA decision to close the Blue Quills Indian School. In the summer of 1970, they occupied the building and demanded the right to run it themselves. Their protests were successful and Blue Quills became the first Native-administered school in the country. It continues to operate today as the Blue Quills First Nations College.

In the 1990s, it was revealed that many students at residential schools were subjected to severe physical, psychological, and sexual abuse, as well as outright murder by teachers and school officials. Several prominent court cases led to large monetary payments from the federal government and churches to former students of residential schools.

The last residential school, White Calf Collegiate, was closed in 1998. A settlement offered to former students came into effect on September 19, 2007.

## Reconciliation attempts





Former St. Micheal's Residential School in Alert Bay. Now the property of 'Namgis First Nation

In 1998, the government made a *Statement of Reconciliation* – including an apology to those people who were sexually or physically abused while attending residential schools – and established the Aboriginal Healing Foundation. The Foundation was provided \$350 million to fund community-based healing projects focusing on addressing the legacy of Indian residential schools. In its 2005 budget, the government committed an additional \$40 million to continue to support the important work of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation.

In June 2001, the Indian Residential Schools Resolution Canada (IRSRC) emerged as a new department of the federal government. Its mission is to address the legacy of the residential schools system and its effects on former students by providing alternative means of compensation and support to the victims.

In the fall of 2003, after some pilot projects launched since 1999, the *Alternative Dispute Resolution* process or “ADR” was launched. The ADR was a process outside of court providing compensation and psychological support for former students of residential schools who were physically or sexually abused or were in situations of wrongful confinement.

On November 23, 2005, the Canadian government announced a \$1.9 billion compensation package to benefit tens of thousands of survivors of abuse at native residential schools. National Chief Phil Fontaine of the Assembly of First Nations said the package covers, “decades in time, innumerable events and countless injuries to First Nations individuals and communities.” Justice Minister Irwin Cotler called the decision to house young Canadians in church-run residential schools “the single most harmful, disgraceful and racist act in our history.” At a news conference in Ottawa, Deputy Prime Minister Anne McLellan said: “We have made good on our shared resolve to deliver what I firmly believe will be a fair and lasting resolution of the Indian school legacy.”

This compensation package became a *Settlement Agreement* in May 2006. It proposes, among other things, some funding for the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, for commemoration and for a “Truth and Reconciliation” program in aboriginal communities, as well as an individual *Common Experience Payment*. Any person that can be verified as attending a federally run Indian residential school in Canada is entitled to this *Common Experience Payment*. The amount of compensation is based on the number of years attended by a particular former student of residential schools: \$10,000 for the first year attended plus \$3,000 for every year attended thereafter.

The *Settlement Agreement* also proposed an *advance payment* for former students alive and who are 65 years old and over as of May 30, 2005. The eligible former students had to fill out the advance payment form available for download on the IRSRC website to receive \$8,000 that was deducted from the *Common Experience Payment*. The deadline for reception of the advance payment form by IRSRC was December 31, 2006.

Following a legal process including an examination of the *Settlement Agreement* by the courts of the provinces and territories of Canada, an “opt-out” period occurred. During this time, the former students of residential schools could reject the agreement if they did not agree with its dispositions. This opt-out period ended on August 20, 2007.

The Common Experience Payment became available to all the former students of residential schools on September 19, 2007. All former students (including those 65 years of age and over as of May 30, 2005) have to fill out the Common Experience Payment application form to receive their full compensation. The deadline to apply for the CEP is September 19, 2011. This gives former Indian

Residential School students four years from the implementation date of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement to apply for the Common Experience Payment (CEP).

Similar forced residential boarding schools for indigenous communities were operated in the United States (under the name Indian boarding schools), as well as in Australia (referred to as the Stolen Generation).

The Indian Residential School Museum of Canada is scheduled to open on Long Plain First Nation, near Portage La Prairie, Manitoba, on June 21, 2008.

## Canadian federal government apology



Wikisource has original text related to this article:

*Apology to Former Students of Indian Residential Schools*

On June 11, 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper apologized, on behalf of the sitting Cabinet, in front of an audience of Aboriginal delegates, and in an address that was broadcast nationally on the CBC, for the past governments' policies of assimilation. The Prime Minister apologized not only for the known excesses of the residential school system, but for the creation of the system itself.

## See also

- List of Canadian residential schools
- Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission
- Education in Canada
- United States Indian Boarding School
- New Zealand Native schools

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