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Backgrounder

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History of Canada's Indian Residential School System

Early History

- The cornerstone for an Indian Residential School System was laid as far back as 1842 when the government of Upper Canada determined that Aboriginal people needed to acquire industrial skills and knowledge if they were to become valuable members of society.
- Soon after a policy of assimilation was adopted by Canada, which was faced with the challenge of building a new nation without an existing labour class.

The "Indian Problem" and Assimilation

- In 1867, legislative responsibility for Indigenous peoples, who had title to Canada, was placed under the British North America Act. Canada called this responsibility the "Indian Problem." Canada adopted their policy of assimilation in order to remove Aboriginal peoples from their territories and claim their lands and the "natural resources" those lands held.
- In 1876, Canada assumed responsibility for "Indian" education under the Indian Act. The Indian education policy was based on the American model, which effectively cut children off from the presumed negative influences of their families and culture.
- The first schools were termed industrial schools and were operated by churches of various denominations, including Roman Catholic, the United Church of Canada (and its pre-1925 predecessors, Presbyterian, Congregationalist and Methodist churches) and the Anglican Church of Canada. They were funded by the federal government through per capita funding agreements with the churches.
- Initially, the schools were seen as a bridge from the Aboriginal societies into non-Aboriginal communities—as the children moved from reserves to schools, and from schools to cities, there would be no one left on the reserves.

Policy Shift to Segregation

- Due to the lack of a placement program into the non-aboriginal world, based largely on race prejudice, few openings were available to graduates of the industrial training school. Beginning in 1900, concerns about the lack of success of the schools emerged as students failed to fit into non-Aboriginal society or doing well in their own communities.

- By 1910, there appeared to be no alternative but to return to the reserves upon graduation. Canada's Indian education policy soon shifted from one of assimilation to one of segregation.
- By 1922, as a result of this policy shift, there was a movement from vocational/industrial curriculum to more focus on practical skills for life in a rural setting.

Life in Residential Schools

- Students were required to stay in residences on school premises. 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.
- Removal of children and placing them into residential schools was generally considered more of a necessity by the government in western and northern Canada where there was less European contact and the lifestyle was more nomadic.
- At residential school, everything was foreign to Aboriginal children. They had come from a learning environment which was person-centered and based on oral and observational learning, to residential schools, which were focused on assimilation and creating a labour class than in educating their students.
- Children's hair was cut short and uniforms were mandatory.
- Children were prohibited from speaking Aboriginal languages and practicing their cultures, even amongst themselves and outside the classroom. Punishment for even the smallest transgression could be cruel and harsh.
- Until the 1950s, parents could not choose whether to send their children to a residential school. The churches recruited students and "Indian agents" were employed by the government to ensure all Aboriginal children went to school.
- In 1906, non-attendance became punishable by law. Children were often forcibly removed from their families. Those who failed to send their children were threatened with a \$2 fine or 10 days in jail.
- In 1920, attendance became compulsory by law.
- Until 1951, the residential school curriculum consisted of a half-day of classroom study, usually less than two hours daily of reading, writing and arithmetic, and a half-day of learning a trade.
- Boys were taught agriculture, shoemaking, tin and blacksmithing, carpentry, printing and, later, auto mechanics. Girls learned nursing, sewing, cooking, laundry, dairying, ironing and other domestic skills. This became the means to provide for the day-to-day operation of the school. Often the vegetables grown and products made were sold for profit. This system made the schools cheaper to manage. As a result, however, the children had to eat inferior and spoiled foods.
- At the peak of the residential school system, there were about 130 schools with more than 105,000 students in Canada. They were in every territory and province except Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick.

Residential Schools in BC

- In 1861, the first residential school in British Columbia was built in Mission BC. St. Mary's Mission became functional in 1863 when 42 Aboriginal boys became students.

- In total, British Columbia became home to 18 residential schools, up to a quarter of the total schools in Canada. From 1880 to 1970, an average of 1,500 Aboriginal children in BC attended Residential Schools per year.
- It is estimated that 14,000 residential school survivors live in BC — the second highest survivor population in Canada.

The Litigation Path

- Residential school survivors from BC have led the way in seeking justice for the atrocities suffered by Aboriginal schoolchildren.
- In 1988, the first public allegations of sexual abuse were made by eight survivors from St. George’s Residential School in Lytton, BC. The case of *Mowatt v. Clarke* became the first civil case involving the Anglican Church to come to trial in Canada. In this case, the church and federal government admitted fault before the trial began and agreed to a settlement.
- In 1990, eight survivors from St. Joseph’s Residential School in Williams Lake filed suit for damages for sexual assault leading to a precedent-setting agreement between the Catholic Church, the federal government and the survivors.
- In 1995, 30 survivors from the Alberni Indian Residential School (IRS) filed charges of physical and sexual abuse against Arthur Plint, a residential supervisor, and then followed up with civil litigation. The *Blackwater v. Plint* case became the first residential court judgment in which a church was held co-liable for the suffering of Aboriginal students at the federally-owned and funded schools. This 1998 ruling was later overturned, with a decision that the federal government was 100 per cent liable for the abuse of survivors at the Alberni IRS.

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The First Nations Leadership Council is comprised of the political executives of the B.C. Assembly of First Nations, First Nations Summit, and the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs. The Council works together to politically represent the interests of First Nations in British Columbia and develop strategies and actions to bring about significant and substantive changes to government policy that will benefit all First Nations in British Columbia.

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