

This conversation guide is designed for use by instructional leaders and learning communities or as a self-paced study. It is designed to give each reader parts of “truth” that will lead individuals and groups in the direction of reconciliation. This guide is not a substitute for engaging in meaningful conversations with the indigenous community. Consult the *Advancing Reconciliation Conversation Guide*.

References

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vdR9HcmiXLA>

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Getting to the Truth

There are many misconceptions about residential schools. Before reviewing the timeline of events related to residential schools, it is important to understand that residential schools were not just about “educating the Indian.” Residential schools were more about eliminating a rich and vibrant culture and forcefully assimilating the Indigenous culture into a white, European culture. Earlier historical information about residential schools has often overlooked the fact that residential schools were the result of government created policies aimed at “getting rid of the Indian problem”. It is by reviewing and understanding the various components of assimilation and their related policies that we truly get a sense of the atrocity of residential schools in Canada.

Civilizing the Savage

As the British began setting up new colonies across Canada, new perspectives were emerging throughout the British Empire about the role the British would play in relation to Indigenous peoples. This new perspective brought about Eurocentric beliefs and placed the Indigenous people in an inferior position to the rest of settler society. There was always a strong desire to bring “civilization” to the Indigenous people. The British believed it was their duty to bring Christianity and agriculture to First Nations. Indian agents accordingly began encouraging First Nations to abandon their traditional lifestyles and to adopt more agricultural and sedentary ways of life. As we now know, these policies were intended to assimilate First Nations into the larger British and Christian agrarian society. Starting in the 1820s, colonial administrators undertook many initiatives aimed at “civilizing” First Nations.

What is Assimilation?

The process of assimilation was to absorb Aboriginal people into white society. The ultimate intent of assimilation was the destruction of Aboriginal society and culture. The British believed the only way to deconstruct Indigenous identity and assimilate the Indigenous people was through enfranchisement, the *Indian Act* and education.

What is Enfranchisement?

The *Gradual Civilization Act* of 1857, sought to assimilate Indigenous peoples (then referred to as “Indians”) by encouraging enfranchisement. Under the *Act*, a debt-free, “educated Indian,” who was of “good moral character,” could apply for a land grant from the federal government.

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If an Indigenous person became enfranchised, they were expected to relinquish their treaty rights and Indian status. These were then replaced by land parcelled out for homesteading and voting privileges. Voluntary enfranchisement meant that Indigenous individuals consented to the abandonment of Indigenous identity and communal society in order to merge with the "free" non-Aboriginal majority. There were, in fact, relatively few enfranchisements over the years and this policy was seen as unpopular and a failure.

The Indian Act

The *Indian Act* of 1876 gave the federal government complete control over the lives of First Nation people. The *Indian Act* was based on the premise that it was the Crown's responsibility to care for and protect the interests of First Nations. It would carry out this responsibility by acting as a "guardian," until such time as First Nations could fully integrate into Canadian society. The *Act* gave greater authority to the federal Department of Indian Affairs. The Department could now intervene in a wide variety of internal band issues and make sweeping policy decisions, such as determining who was an Indian. The *Indian Act* was a consolidation of previous policies; its intention was to continue the assimilation process. The *Act* violated human rights and created social and cultural disruptions for generations. Under the *Act*, the Department also managed Indian lands, resources and moneys; control access to intoxicants; and promote "civilization." The legislation became increasingly restrictive, imposing ever-greater controls on the lives of First Nations. The *Indian Act* does not pertain to the Métis or Inuit.

The *Act* is still in effect today and has been amended several times, most significantly in 1951 and 1985, with changes focusing on the removal of particularly discriminatory sections. The *Indian Act* is one of the most frequently amended pieces of legislation in Canadian history. It was amended nearly every year between 1876 and 1927.

In the 1880s, the government imposed a new system of band councils and governance, with the final authority resting with the Indian agent. The *Act* forced the abandonment of traditional ways of life, introducing bans on spiritual and religious ceremonies, such as the potlatch and sundance.



The Davin Report (1879 Report on Industrial Schools for Indians and Half Breeds)

Following the organization of the Department of Indian Affairs and *Indian Act* in 1876, the attention of the federal government became focused on the education of Indigenous children. Sir John A. MacDonald, then Prime Minister, commissioned a study of the Industrial Boarding schools in the United States. MacDonald hired Nicholas Flood Davin to look further into the American schools and prepare a report. Davin was impressed with the schools and recommended the funding of four schools in the west: the first at Prince Albert to be operated by the Episcopalian Church; one at Old Bow Fort to be operated by the

Methodists; another at Qu'Appelle to be operated by the Roman Catholics; and the last at Riding Mountain to be run by the Presbyterian Church. Davin also recommended that parents who cooperated and sent their children would receive extra rations and that students who showed "special aptitudes or exceptional general quickness" should be offered special advantages. Davin reported that in the United States, Indian Education was used as a vehicle to force assimilation. Davin was impressed with this model and found such "boarding schools," as they were called, to be effective in "deconstructing young Indians."

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Education

The implementation of the *Indian Act* led to the establishment of church-operated residential and industrial schools. Church groups and federal government authorities started to take control of First Nations' education as early as the 1880's. Indian Affairs saw residential schools as a primary vehicle for "civilization" and "assimilation." Through the schools, First Nations children were to be educated just like other Canadian children. However, they did not receive the same education and were forced to abandon their traditional languages, dress, spirituality and lifestyle. To accomplish these goals, a vast network of 132 residential schools was established across Canada by the Catholic, United, Anglican and Presbyterian churches, in partnership with the federal government. More than 150,000 Aboriginal children attended residential schools between 1857 and 1996.

A Timeline of Events

1831 Mohawk Indian Residential School opens in Brantford, Ontario; it will become the longest-operating residential school, closing in 1969.

1847 Egerton Ryerson's study of Indian education recommends religious-based, government-funded industrial schools.

1892 Federal government and churches enter into a formal partnership in the operation of Indian schools. Before long, the government began to hear many serious and legitimate complaints from parents and native leaders: under-qualified teachers, emphasis on religious zeal, allegations of physical and sexual abuse. The ongoing outbreaks of tuberculosis at the schools took a toll on students' lives. Children were malnourished and physically weakened, making them susceptible to more disease.

1907 The government responds to growing complaints by sending Indian Affairs' Chief Medical Inspector P.H. Bryce to assess conditions. In his official report, Bryce called the tuberculosis epidemic a "national crime" ... [and] the consequence of inadequate government funding, poorly constructed schools, sanitary and ventilation problems, inadequate diet, clothing and medical care." He calculated mortality rates among school age children ranging from 35 percent to 60 percent. Parts of his incriminating report were suppressed by Duncan Campbell Scott, Superintendent of Indian Affairs, who then terminated the position of Medical Inspector. Instead, Scott termed disease in the schools a "final solution to the Indian Problem."

1920 Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs Duncan Campbell Scott makes residential school attendance compulsory.

1944 Senior Indian Affairs officials argue for a policy shift from residential to day schools.

1969 Partnership between government and churches ends; government takes over residential school system and begins to transfer control to Indian bands.

1970 Blue Quills is the first residential school to be transferred to band control.

1996 The last residential school – Gordon Indian Residential School in Saskatchewan – closes.

2006 Government signs the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement with legal representatives for Survivors, AFN, Inuit representatives and church entities.

2008 Truth and Reconciliation Commission is launched.

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The Métis Experience in Residential Schools

Children from Métis homes were not always admitted to residential school in the same ways that First Nations were. Special policies were created by the department of Indian Affairs on how to admit Métis or “Halfbreed” children, if they would be allowed to be admitted at all. The Department would categorize the “Halfbreed Children” according to three “classes” of “Halfbreeds” and would instruct residential school administrators to admit only those that were of a certain class. Métis children remember being the “outsiders” to the residential schools. In some cases told they were too “white” for the “Indian Schools” or in other cases told they were too “Indian” for the provincial school system. Métis education was not covered by treaty or a federal department so Métis attendance often came at a cost to Métis communities, the schools or the churches.

“In them days there was no bus, no nothing, we had to walk through the bush three or four miles to go to school and when we did get there... you won’t get in, in the morning, if you’re too early. We had to have our lunch outside... we sat outside and our lunch was frozen. We were outsiders; they called us ‘externs’, whatever that meant.” *-Forgotten: The Métis Residential School Experience*

The Inuit Residential School Experience

While residential schools existed in Canada since 1831, it was not until the 1950s that a significant number of these church-run and federally or provincially funded schools were operating in the Canadian North. This was because before 1939 Inuit were not considered “Indians” and therefore did not fall under federal jurisdiction. On April 5, 1939, the Supreme Court of Canada unanimously ruled that Inuit were Indians according to the *British North America Act of 1867*, and therefore subject to the *Indian Act*. This made Inuit health, welfare and education a responsibility of the federal government, although Canada was reluctant to take on this role.

In Labrador, many young Inuit attended residential schools in communities far from their homes, and shared many of the devastating experiences all across the Canadian Arctic that were common to students of the Indian Residential School System. In the Northwest Territories, prior to 1955, less than 15 percent of school-aged Inuit children were enrolled in residential schools.

By 1964, the number of school-aged Inuit children attending residential school had increased to over 75 percent. Some children started school as young as four or five, others were teenagers; some attended for a short time while others spent their entire youth in the Residential School System. Many students only saw their parents once a year. Some were unable to return home for years at a time, because of the difficulty and expense of northern travel by plane or boat, and the great distances they had to travel just to go to school – sometimes in other provinces and territories. In fact, even today, 90 percent of Canadian Inuit communities are only accessible by air.

As Survivor Peter Irniq recounts, “We weren’t able to communicate with our parents for the entire nine months that we were in Chesterfield Inlet. Inuit were forbidden to speak their own language or practice any aspect of their culture in the schools, dormitories, hostels and other residences. Furthermore, Inuit children were made to feel ashamed of their traditional way of life, and many acquired disdain for their parents, their culture, their centuries-old practices and beliefs and even for the food their parents provided.

-We Were So Far Away

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Survivor Stories

On Transportation to School

“The size of the group increased as we went from reserve to reserve. It was not uncommon to have up to 40 children ranging in age from 5 to 16 piled in the back of the truck.” -George Peequaquat

On Arrival

Students were stripped of their clothing (never to be seen again) and roughly bathed.

On First Impressions

“The school seemed enormous with marbled floors and ceilings, and hallways about two hundred feet long. It smelled strongly of disinfectant, and our voices echoed when we spoke. The whole place looked cold and sterile; even the walls were covered with pictures of stern-looking people in suits and stiff collars.” -Raphael Ironstand

On Education

“When we couldn’t get our additions and subtractions right, I remember her using the whip on our knuckles. I remember my knuckles being black and blue and sore.” -Pauline Arnouse

In 1912, a federal Indian agent wrote that teachers tended “to devote too much time to imparting religious instruction to the children as compared with the imparting of secular knowledge.”

Keeping good teachers was an ongoing problem. Public school teachers in the West earned \$500-\$650 per year compared to residential school teachers who earned \$300 per year.

On Clothes

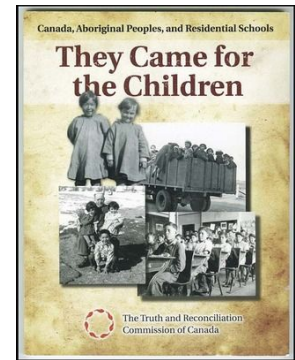
Children were given a new wardrobe – often used and ill-fitting. Even though her Grandmother had made her warm winter clothing, Lillian Elias was not allowed to wear it at school.



On Hair

“I remember my head being shaved and all my long hair falling on the floor.” -Alphonse Janvier *They Came for the Children*: pg. 22.

Charlie Bigknife recalls being told, after his hair had been sheared off “Now you are no longer an Indian.”



All survivor stories are from They Came for the Children unless noted otherwise.

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On Identity

Children were assigned numbers that corresponded to their clothes, their bed and their locker. “The nuns used to call ‘39’, or ‘3 where are you?’ Or ‘25, come here right now!’”

“I was number one hundred and sixteen. I was trying to find myself; I was lost. I felt like I had been placed in a black garbage bag that was sealed. Everything was black, completely black to my eyes and I wondered if I was the only one to feel that way.”

On Names

Christian identity required the imposition of new names. Pemutewithinew became James Hope, Masak became Alice, Ochankugahe (Path Maker) became Daniel Kennedy.



Ermineskin (Hobbema) Indian Residential School. Source: National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation

On Siblings

Boys and girls were strictly segregated. Raphael Ironstand did not see his sister for the rest of the year. “I still remember her looking apprehensively over her shoulder as she was led away.”

“I remember seeing my brother in the back of the class. I went to talk to him and he was really nervous. He said, ‘Don’t come over and talk to me.’ I asked, ‘why’ and he said ‘you’re not supposed to.’ I told him ‘why you are my brother’ and right away I was taken to the front of the class and I was given the ruler on the palm of my hands.

On Religion

“All we ever got was religion, religion, religion. I can still fall on my knees at seventy-two years of age and not hurt myself because of the training and conditioning I got.” -Solomon Pooyak

Religion was the fourth “R” and was of greater importance than reading, writing or arithmetic.

On Hunger

“Hunger is both the first thing and the last thing I remember about that school...” -George Manuel

“I always felt hungry. We didn’t get big helpings of food. There wasn’t much variety.” -Mable James

“At dinnertime, we’d have some kind of mush, a stew of some sort, a pudding and a slice of bread, no butter. At suppertime, we’d have the same kind of mush and some vegetables.” -Maggie Shaw



“I missed the roast moose, the dried beaver meat, the fish fresh from a frying pan, the warm bread and bannock and berries.” -Mary John

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On Work

For most of their history, residential schools depended on students labour to survive. Until the 1950s, the schools ran on what was called the “half-day system,” Under this system, the older students spent half a day in class, while the other half was supposed to be spent in vocational training. In reality, this training often simply amounted to free labour for the school. The girls prepared the meals, did the cleaning and made and repaired much of the students clothing. The boys farmed, raised animals, did repairs, ran tailor shops and made and repaired shoes. In many cases the students were not learning, but performing the same laborious tasks again and again.

On Discipline

In 1896, an Indian agent said the behaviour of a teacher at the Red Deer school “would not be tolerated in a white school for a single day in any part of Canada.” The agent was so alarmed by the teacher’s behaviour that he kept a boy out of school for fear he would be abused.

Bedwetting was treated cruelly. Abraham Ruben had terrible nightmares on his first night at Residential School. In the morning, he found he had wet his bed. When a nun discovered what he had done, Ruben said she slapped him in the face, and called him “a dirty pig.”

Runaways were subject to punishment and humiliations. One principal tied the hands of a group of runaway boys together and made them run behind his buggy back to the school. In other cases, runaways were shackled to their beds at night.

On Sexual Abuse

Within a week of arrival at residential school, Greg Murdock was raped by a group of older boys. When he reported the assault to the school's staff, the boys beat him and subjected him to another assault. He simply stopped reporting further abuse.

The sexual and physical abuse of students by staff and other students represents the most extreme failing of the residential school system. In an underfunded, under-supervised system, there was little to protect children from predators. The victims often were treated as liars or troublemakers. Students were taught to be quiet.

On Language

The ban on Indigenous languages created tremendous confusion and tensions among the students. Many of the students did not speak English when they entered the schools and could not possibly understand what was expected of them. For others, speaking the native tongue was a form of resistance – a way to hide from the school staff their true emotions and thoughts. But the schools usually responded to the use of native languages forcefully. *Stolen Lives Pg. 1*



St. Mary's Indian Residential School
<http://archives.algomau.ca/main/book/export/html/24019>

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Residential School Locations



» SOURCE: ASSEMBLY OF FIRST NATIONS

This map represents the original 130 Indian Residential Schools included in the 2007 *Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement* (seven institutions were added through Article 12 by Canada and the two schools which were added by the courts, bringing the total number of recognized schools to 139). Alberta had more residential schools than any other province. Each school in Alberta was different depending on the location and the religious affiliation. Sixteen were Roman Catholic, 3 were the United Church, and 7 were Anglican.

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