

Excerpts from:

**ABORIGINAL STUDIES 20**

**Peoples  
and Cultural Change**

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## LIFE AT A RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL

This portrayal of life at a residential school is fictional. However, it is a composite based on many First Nations and Inuit children's experiences. Many available resources give first-hand accounts. Some are more positive than this composite.

Early in the morning, the children awoke to the clanging of a bell. In the half-dark of their crowded dormitory, they hurriedly pulled on their clothes, then filed into the chapel for a brief morning service. After that they ate breakfast. Then came three hours in the classroom.

The teachers at the front of the classrooms were nuns, priests, or ministers, and often had little or no formal training in education. In Tsuu T'ina, they were *mi k'i yi ja ni t/u na* — “priests” or “the ones with the long robe.” Their lessons were usually straightforward, focusing mainly on the “three Rs” — reading, writing and arithmetic — plus a fourth R: religion.

Class discipline was difficult to maintain because the teachers were poorly trained, the classrooms overcrowded, and the students hungry and unhappy. Many teachers kept leather straps or wooden paddles handy, and did not hesitate to use them. The rules of behaviour were often strict, and punishment was swift.

The other half of the day was devoted to practical education. In other words, the students were given manual chores. They were told that this would help build the skills they needed to find jobs later in life. Many students suspected that free student labour was the only thing that kept the schools financially afloat.

In many of the schools, the surface discipline concealed a strong undercurrent of resistance. Students took

every opportunity to quietly subvert their teachers' authority. Many continued to speak their own languages in private, even though this was often strictly forbidden. Some stole food from the pantries. Others ran away, desperately trying to return home.

In the chapel, in the classroom, and in the fields, children heard a consistent message: their culture was inferior.

Sometimes this message was explicitly taught, sometimes it was only implied, but either way it was deeply hurtful. In some students it bred feelings of anger and resentment. Others turned that anger inward, and learned to hate themselves.

At the end of the day, many students crawled into their beds hungry, homesick, and exhausted.

### REFLECTION

What was life like at a residential school? Reflect on your thoughts in your journal.



*Ruth MacLaurin's painting, St. Joe's Residential Residue, is a depiction of the legacy of physical and sexual abuse that some residential school students endured. What evidence of her message can you see in the artwork?*

Image  
not available

*Nicholas Flood Davin  
was a Member of  
Parliament representing  
Regina, Saskatchewan.  
Why was his report so  
influential to the  
Canadian government?*

## RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

When mission and day schools did not accomplish their stated goal of assimilation, the government looked for a new education system for First Nations. They believed that the solution might lie south of the border. Prime Minister John A. Macdonald appointed a backbencher, Nicholas Flood Davin, to study American methods for educating Native American children. Davin toured the United States, and came away very impressed with the American system of industrial boarding schools. In 1879, Davin issued his report.

He recommended separating First Nations children from their families and communities. "If anything is to be done with the Indian," Davin wrote, "we must catch them very young."

Davin recommended taking children as far away as possible from the cultural influence of their families and communities. He proposed a system of industrial boarding schools across western Canada where students could be trained to lead a Christian lifestyle and to practise European work habits.

Both the government and the churches warmly embraced the Davin Report. The government began to shift emphasis away from day schools and towards what they called Indian Residential Schools. Six years later, because of the 1885 Resistance, the government became more convinced than ever of the importance of assimilating First Nations people.

Despite many problems with the system (see page 179), some First



*Students of residential schools studied religion as one of their main subjects. These boys are pictured at Bishop Horden Memorial Residential School, at Moose Factory, Ontario, an Anglican school.*

Nations and Inuit people look back fondly on their times at residential school and at the people who taught them there. Some successful residential school students eventually returned home to become leaders of their communities.

The majority of the staff and administrators of the schools sincerely believed that they were acting in their pupils' best interests. Working at a residential school demanded a great deal of dedication and personal sacrifice.

In 1868, there were only two residential schools in Canada. By 1894, that number had grown to forty-five. The government took several steps to boost First Nations enrolment. In 1894 and 1920, amendments were made to the Indian Act to make school attendance

compulsory. Indian agents on reserves exerted pressures of their own, withholding food and benefits from families who did not send their children to school.

The number of residential schools reached its peak in the 1930s. There were eighty schools, spread throughout every province and territory except New Brunswick, Newfoundland, and Prince Edward Island. Beginning in 1930, Indian agents had the power to hold First Nations students at residential school until age eighteen.

Area administrators in Inuit communities fulfilled the same role in the Arctic, forcing Inuit children to attend school. From the 1930s–1960s, Inuit children were taken from their families to *ilihariniartuat iningat*, Inuvialuktun for “residential schools,” that were sometimes 1000 kilometres from home. In earlier years, the children travelled by boat. In the 1960s, they were collected by plane. The long distances sometimes meant Inuit children could not return to their communities for holidays or summers. Their parents could not travel the long distances to visit. Some went several years without seeing a family member.

Church missions would likely have built schools for Métis children as well, if there had been funding from the government to do so. In fact, no education was offered specifically to Métis people — they were ignored as a group by the federal government. The only school built expressly for Métis children was at the St. Paul des Métis settlement. You learned about

## TYPES OF SCHOOLS

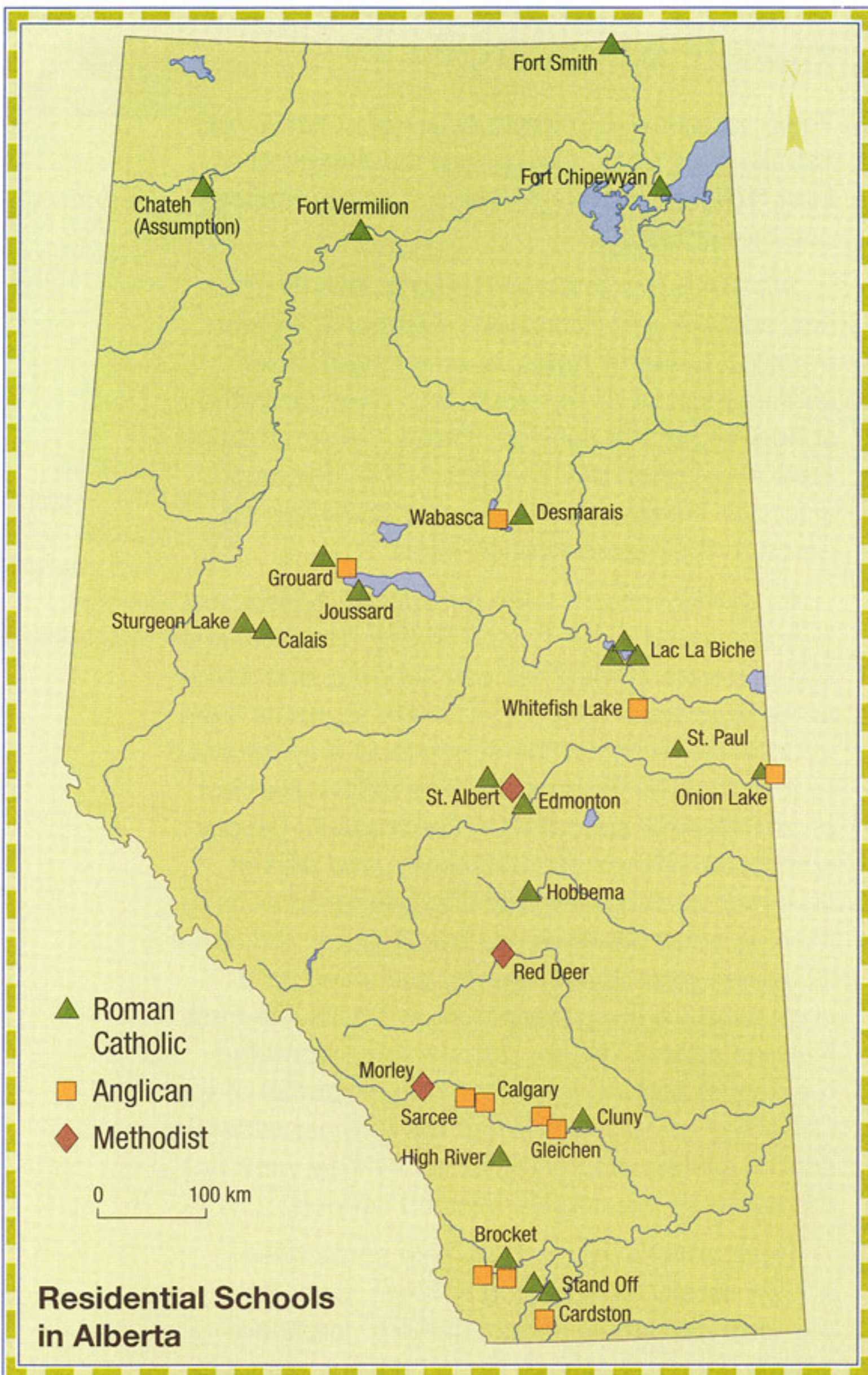
There were many different types of schools and names for schools throughout the evolution of First Nations formal education. The terminology can be confusing.

*Mission schools* began to open shortly after first contact with Europeans. Missionaries who travelled to North America established small settlements called missions, and often operated a school within the mission. These mission schools were most often *day schools* — the students attended classes during the day and returned home to their families each night.

*Industrial schools* were introduced based on a model found in the United States. The industrial schools were sometimes day schools, and sometimes *residential schools* — where students lived in dormitories within the school and only returned to their families for holidays. The defining aspect of an industrial school was that students usually spent part of their day in classes, and part of their day working and learning hands-on skills for farming and homemaking. The Dunbow Industrial School in High River, Alberta, was used as a showcase for the government to display its First Nations school system. Missionaries operated residential and industrial schools on behalf of the Canadian government when the formal residential school system was established — they were not the same as the original mission schools.

Residential schools were also sometimes known simply as *boarding schools*. Over time, the term *residential school* came to imply not simply boarding school, but a harmful, coercive, or abusive institution intended to interrupt the continuity of First Nations culture.

After some provisions for First Nations control of education were established, numerous day schools operated on reserves. These schools were *federally-operated schools* or *band-operated schools* that were federally funded. These were different from the original day schools operated by missionaries, and resembled non-Aboriginal *public schools*.



*More residential schools were built on the prairies than in eastern Canada. Why do you think that was? Give reasons based on what you have learned about the history of western settlement.*



what happened to that school, and about the Métis struggle for access to public schools, in Chapter Four.

Despite the legislation and the pressures, many First Nations and Inuit people resisted the government's efforts to assimilate their children. Some spoke out directly against the system. Many others simply refused to send their children to school, no matter what the

consequences. Attendance remained low, in both residential and day schools. Only 3 per cent of First Nations children remained in school beyond Grade Six.

Some non-Aboriginal Canadians had their own concerns about residential schools. Alberta newspaper publisher and politician Frank Oliver pointed out that the Ten Commandments tell Christians to honour our mothers and fathers. "It seems strange," he wrote in a 1908 letter, "that in the name of religion a system of education should have been instituted, the foundation principle of which not only ignored but contradicted this command."

Even the best-run residential schools and the most dedicated staff inflicted untold damage because of the flawed system. Entire generations of First Nations and Inuit people were essentially deprived of a normal family life. Parents lost the chance to raise their own children, and children lost the love and security of their homes, families, and communities. Not only was traditional education of First Nations and Inuit children interfered with, the traditional family structure was broken.

The hurt was cultural as well as personal. At residential schools, First Nations and Inuit children were taught that their cultures — their spiritual beliefs, their languages, even the clothes they wore — were inferior and wrong.

A minority of residential school staff deliberately used their positions to abuse students emotionally, physically, and sometimes even sexually. Because of their positions of power,

and the relative powerlessness of their victims, these abusers never expected to have to someday account for their crimes. The sexual abuse that took place in some schools damaged the self-identity of the abused children, which led to increased violence and suicide in First Nations and Inuit communities.

Many residential school students received an inferior education. Because they spent only half of each day in the classroom, they did not have the same opportunities as other children. In the eyes of the system, First Nations and Inuit people were fit only for menial work. It was considered a waste to prepare them for anything more. Many children left the schools at age eighteen with the equivalent of only a Grade Five education.

The survivors of the Indian residential school system have, in many cases, continued to have their lives shaped by the experiences in these schools. Persons who attended these schools continue to struggle with their identity after years of being taught to hate themselves and their culture. The residential school led to a disruption in the transference of parenting skills from one generation to the next. Without these skills, many survivors had difficulty in raising their own children. In residential schools, they learned that adults often exert power and control through abuse. The lessons learned in childhood are often repeated in adulthood with the result that many survivors of the residential school system often inflict abuse on their own children. These children in turn use the same tools on their children.

— *Report of the Royal Commission  
on Aboriginal Peoples*

Issues for Investigation

## COMPARING CANADA'S RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS TO AUSTRALIA'S

Australia's indigenous peoples faced an education system similar to the one First Nations and Inuit peoples of Canada faced. The colonial Australian government instituted a school system that removed Aboriginal children from their families in order to assimilate them through education.

How did the Canadian and Australian education systems for Aboriginal peoples compare?

### WHAT TO DO

1. The movie *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002) tells the story of one Australian Aboriginal girl who was taken from her mother and brought to school. Watch the movie, or another suggested by your teacher, then research the Australian Aboriginal school system further.
2. Work with a partner to compare the Australian Aboriginal school system to the residential school system of Canada.
3. Create a chart that depicts the similarities and the differences.

Over time, government officials and church leaders came to recognize the tragic error they had made in trying to assimilate First Nations and Inuit peoples. They had to face up to the damage they had done to individuals, families, and communities. They also had to confront the abuse that had gone on unnoticed, and sometimes condoned, in their midst.

### **UNRESOLVED ISSUES: VICTIMS OF RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL ABUSE**

In the early 1990s, Canadian newspapers were filled with stories about sexual abuse in Newfoundland's Mount Cashel Orphanage. Members of the Catholic order that ran the orphanage were jailed for abusing children in the 1970s. Canadians were shocked to learn that religious caregivers could inflict such cruelty. They were also moved by the courage of the victims, who came forward to tell about the lasting damage the abuse had caused in their lives.

Soon, Canadians learned that Mount Cashel was not a unique case. First Nations and Inuit people who had attended church-run residential schools had horror stories of their own to tell. Phil



*On January 7, 1998, Grand Chief of the Assembly of First Nations Phil Fontaine and Indian Affairs Minister Jane Stewart shake hands in Ottawa in this photograph. Stewart delivered a speech apologizing on behalf of the federal government for sexual and physical abuse suffered by First Nations and Inuit people at residential schools. Do you think an apology from the government helps victims? Why or why not?*

Fontaine, then leader of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs (and later National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations), spoke out publicly about sexual abuse he had suffered as a boy at a Catholic-run residential school. By speaking out, Fontaine gave a public voice to rumours that had been quietly circulating for decades.

In the weeks that followed, Fontaine's office was flooded by hundreds of calls from First Nations and Inuit people who had also been abused at residential schools. The media began calling for a public inquiry into residential schools,

Put simply, the residential school system was an attempt by successive governments to determine the fate of Aboriginal people in Canada by appropriating and reshaping their future in the form of thousands of children who were removed from their homes and communities and placed in the care of strangers.

— *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*

When we talk about violence, it doesn't have to be punching somebody's lights out. Violence is what is done to people to deny them their sense of self worth.

— Phil Fontaine,  
on residential schools

similar to the one being held for the non-Aboriginal victims at Mount Cashel.

In 1996, the *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* came out. It gave a great deal of attention to the legacy of residential schools, and the ongoing pain and suffering they left behind. The Department of Indian and Northern Affairs set up a Residential School Unit to begin examining formal claims. More than 200 claims were presented, but in the years that followed the number grew into the thousands.

In 2001, a new government department was created to attempt to resolve outstanding claims. In 2004, Indian Residential Schools Resolution Canada had over 5000 cases on its books, involving nearly 12 000 individuals. Churches are involved in 70 per cent of the claims.

Government and churches have formally apologized to First Nations and Inuit people for the residential school system, and they have accepted moral and legal responsibility for the harm they did to the children in their care. They face a massive logistical and financial challenge to compensate the victims.

First Nations and Inuit people are adamant that the victims of residential schools deserve justice. Until all of the wrongs they experienced have been addressed, this chapter of Canada's history will remain open.

## OFFICIAL APOLOGIES

The following are excerpts from the official statement of apology to First Nations and Inuit people from the Anglican church.

I am deeply conscious of the sacredness of the stories that you have told and I hold in the highest honour those who have told them.

I have heard with admiration the stories of people and communities who have worked at healing, and I am aware of how much healing is needed.

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I am sorry, more than I can say, that we were part of a system which took you and your children from home and family.

I am sorry, more than I can say, that we tried to remake you in our image, taking from you your language and the signs of your identity.

I am sorry, more than I can say, that in our schools so many were abused physically, sexually, culturally and emotionally.

On behalf of the Anglican Church of Canada, I present our apology.

— Michael Peers, the Anglican Church of Canada Archbishop and Primate, to the National Native Convocation, Minaki, Ontario, August 6, 1993

The Canadian government and other churches have also issued official apologies to the estimated 87 500 people alive today who attended residential schools. How do you think these apologies have affected First Nations and Inuit communities?



Read these excerpts from interviews with First Nations Elders. The excerpts present both positive and negative experiences from residential schools.

I went to the St. Paul's Anglican Indian Residential School from 1957 to 1961. I had to go there. My parents were going to be charged if I didn't go to school. My sister tricked me into going because she said that they showed movies there every night. I thought that would be so fun so I went.

We were taught math, English, reading, writing and we had religious classes. This was a little useful as I learned some English.

When I went to school I only spoke Blackfoot. We used it all the time at home. Of course, when we went to school we were not allowed to speak it anymore. I got hit for speaking Blackfoot. I was really hit with a wooden pointer. If you couldn't pronounce a word properly, you would get hit. I always dreaded going back to class because I knew what was going to happen.

— Kainai Elder/Survivor S who attended St. Paul's Indian Residential School in Cardston, Alberta, as recorded by Makai'stoo (Leo Fox) in *Kipaitapiiwahsinnooni: Alcohol and Drug Abuse Education Program*



*Kainai children at meal time at the Anglican St. Paul's Indian Residential School in Cardston, Alberta. The school opened in 1900 and closed in 1972.*



*Children attending the Anglican St. Peter's Indian Residential School in Grouard (Lesser Slave Lake), Alberta, pose in front of the school, circa 1924–1925. The school opened in 1900 and closed in 1932.*

[The] Sisters didn't treat me good — they gave me rotten food to eat and punished me for not eating it. [I] was locked in a room, fed bread and water and beaten with a strap, sometimes on the face, and sometimes [they] took my clothes off and beat me — this is the reason I ran away.

— Christine Haines, who attended Williams Lake Residential School in Caribou, British Columbia, *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*

No one forced me to go; I wasn't pulled away from my family.

I'm not saying times were not hard, but I'm always thankful that I was in the school. I can't say the nuns were not mean. It's true we had whippings pretty near every night...

We always had a lot to eat. The food wasn't always that good but we ate better than some people on the reserve. Life at the school wasn't always work, work, work. I learned how to sing. I can still sing the requiem mass.

— Theresa Gadwa, Cree, Saddle Lake First Nation, who attended Blue Quills Indian Residential School in Lac La Biche, Alberta, as printed in the *Edmonton Journal* June 11, 1991

In the classrooms of the schools, we faced unimaginable racism and discrimination, in our tattered clothes, dirty faces and unkempt hair. No one saw the terror in our eyes, or knew of the horrors we experienced at home, after school, the abuse, physical, mental, emotional and sexual. Many of us relied on the trash cans behind the stores and hotels for food. The dropout rate was extremely high among Dene students, even in elementary school, and there was no wonder why. Every member of my generation has a personal account of brutal hardship and despair. We came to believe as children that we were the last Dene people in the world, since our parents could not talk anymore.

— Ila Bussidor, Sayisi Dene, Tadoule Lake, Manitoba, who attended MacKay Indian Residential School in Dauphin, Manitoba, June 1, 1993, *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*

As we went by the school I said a silent prayer that I would never have to see the inside of it again as long as I lived...

There was a lump in my throat and I felt like crying from the happiness, and in my heart there was such hope and optimism at the thought of my home waiting for me.

— Alice French, Inuit, who attended Aklavik Catholic Indian Residential School in Aklavik, Northwest Territories, *The Restless Nomad*

As a child I lived in perpetual fear of saying and doing anything, even if it was good, for if my work was too good, I knew that would bring the response, "Who do you think you are? You think you're such a big shot!" And I was always afraid to do my best. If I knew my work was good, I made sure that I didn't finish it. Then the nun could only yell, "Why didn't you finish the job I asked you to do?" To me, that was better than being ridiculed.

— Isabelle Knockwood, Mi'kmaq, who attended Shubenacadie Indian Residential School in Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia, *Out of the Depths*

I was raised in Siksika by my grandparents. They did not believe in sending me away to school early, so I stayed home longer than the other children of my age. I attended Crowfoot Roman Catholic Indian Residential School as a day student. I was well treated there and I cannot criticize that school at all. It hurts me to hear other people say unkind things about the priests and nuns. I learned to sew, and do household chores and keep a clean house. I am grateful for all that I learned. Whenever I got the strap or was punished, it was usually my fault. I learned about my religion and to respect elders. I quit school at 15 years of age to take care of my sick mother.

— Mia'nistohkomiaakii (Mary Ann Wells), Siksika, who attended Crowfoot Indian Residential School in Cluny, Alberta, *Kitomahkitapiiminnooniksi: Stories from Our Elders*



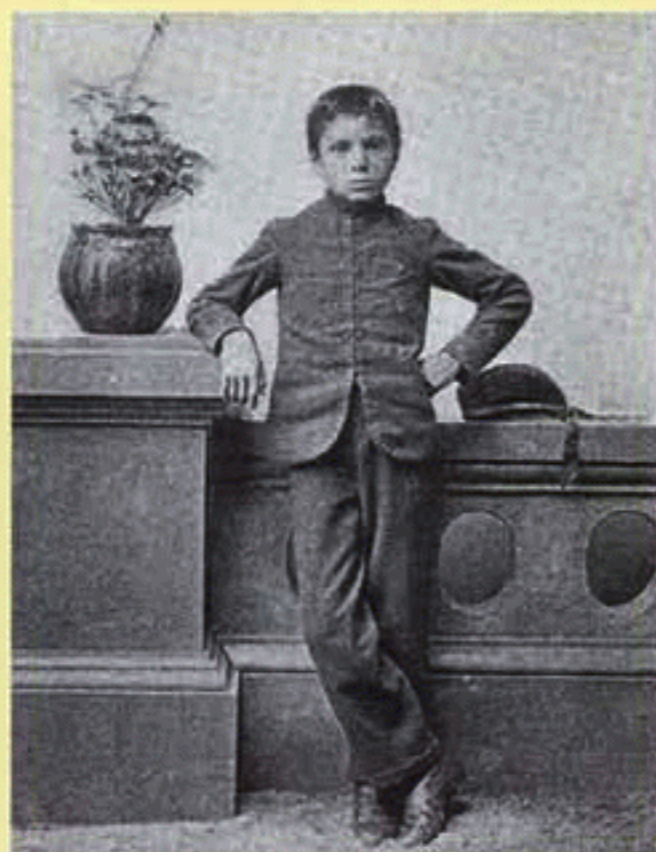
*Cree children play in the snow at the Catholic Sturgeon Lake Indian Residential School in Sturgeon Lake, Alberta, circa 1946. The school opened in 1907 and closed in 1957.*

## REFLECTION

Before you read these stories by Elders and survivors of residential schools, were you familiar with the history of residential schools in Canada? What was your impression of their impact on First Nations and Inuit peoples?

After reading these stories, has your impression changed? Did you find out something new?

Based on these stories, think about how the residential school system impacted First Nations and Inuit cultures in Canada. Write down your ideas in your journal.

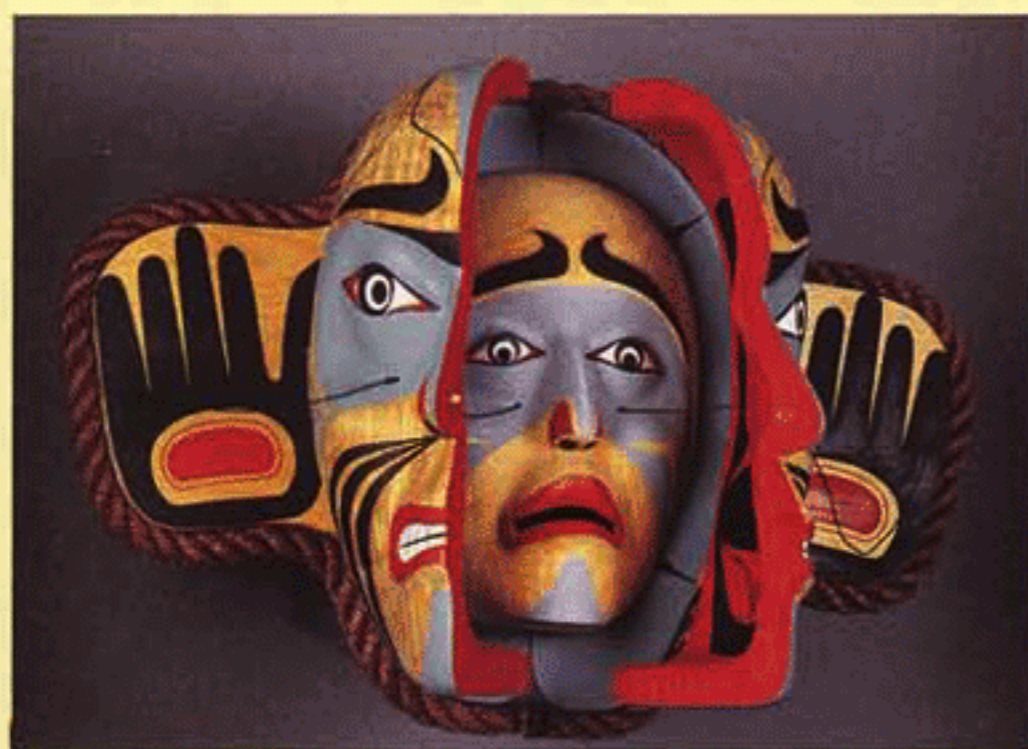


*Thomas Moore before and after his entrance into the Regina Indian Residential School in 1897. What is the significance of his altered appearance?*

## CLOTHING AND APPEARANCE

A person's choice of clothing and hairstyle can be a powerful form of self-expression. Different cultures often have radically different styles and kinds of clothing. An individual's appearance is often enough for an observer to make an educated guess as to another's cultural background.

When First Nations and Inuit students entered residential schools in Canada, they faced many restrictions to their self-expression. For example, they often were not allowed to speak their own language. The images of Thomas Moore on this page demonstrate another restriction — many Aboriginal children were not allowed to wear the usual clothing and hairstyles that were common in their communities.



*David Neel is a Kwak'waka'wakw sculptor from Vancouver, British Columbia. The title of this artwork by David Neel is Residential School Survivor Mask. Why do you think he made this mask interactive? What makes it different from other works of art?*

## SYMBOLISM

Other forms of expression are less obvious, and more symbolic. The artwork depicted on this page of a mask both open and closed, can be seen as a representation of a person who periodically hides their true self. Students living at residential schools often felt limited in their capacity to express themselves freely.

### Your Project

Create a dramatic presentation that demonstrates the harm caused to students forced to suppress their own culture. For example, you might include language or dress.

## LOOKING BACK

Before moving on to the next section, answer these questions:

What is assimilation? What elements of the Canadian education system for First Nations people promoted assimilation?

What was the Davin report? Why is it significant?

Why is the history of residential schools so significant to First Nations and Inuit history? How is the legacy of residential schools being resolved?