

History of Residential Schools in Canada

The Indian residential school system predates Confederation and in part grew out of Canada's missionary experience with various religious organizations. The federal government began to play a role in the development and administration of this system as early as 1874. In 1920, Canada amended the Indian Act, making it mandatory for aboriginal parents to send their children to Indian residential schools.

Aboriginal children were sent thousands of miles away where their parents could not reach them. These schools would become institutions of horror for aboriginal boys and girls. Forced to learn and speak only English or risk being beaten, many suffered because they only knew how to speak their own languages. For many of these children, their lives literally changed overnight.

Around 130 residential schools across the nation herded aboriginal children like cattle to teach them how to become productive members of "white society." Matthew Coon Come, former Grand Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, stated that "basically, the goal was to take the Indian out of the Indian."

This state-funded enterprise was for the most part carried out in western Canada with tremendous missionary zeal for over a century. Christian ideology insisted it was acceptable to "obliterate" indigenous peoples' distinct cultural habits while simultaneously fostering the colonial "process of nation building."

Department of Indian Affairs' policy that aboriginal children must not be educated "above the possibilities of their station" were upheld. Grade three was the acceptable standard of education.

Psychological and emotional abuses and profound physical and sexual violence were constant. Estimates suggest that as many as 60% of the students died, due to illness, beatings, attempts to escape, or suicide, while in the schools.

In 1948, despite a joint committee recommendation that the schools be abolished, the churches' vigorous lobbying for the system to continue and the fact that it was being used as a social welfare placement kept the schools alive for almost fifty more years. By the 1970s, when the Native Indian Brotherhood called for native control of native education, the federal government had begun to wind down the residential school system. The last federally run residential school in Canada closed in Saskatchewan in 1996.