

Unit Three: Assignment 7: Residential Schools

Introduction: When Government Policy Destroys Families

Imagine being taken from your parents at age seven and not seeing them again for years. Imagine being forbidden to speak your language, practice your culture, or even use your real name. This was the reality for over 150,000 Indigenous children in Canada between 1831 and 1996. The **residential school system** was designed by the Canadian government to "kill the Indian in the child"—a deliberate attempt at **cultural genocide** that separated children from their families, languages, and traditions

Today, as Canada grapples with the ongoing legacy of residential schools—from the discovery of unmarked graves to calls for reconciliation—we must understand how government policies can cause intergenerational trauma that affects communities for generations. The residential school timeline reveals a disturbing pattern: a 165-year system of forced assimilation that violated human rights, yet took decades to acknowledge and address.

By studying this timeline, we can understand how discriminatory policies develop, persist, and cause lasting harm—and why the work of truth and reconciliation remains essential today.

Background: The Foundation of Assimilation Policy

The Indian Act and Government Control

The residential school system didn't emerge in isolation. It was built upon the foundation of the **Indian Act of 1876**, which gave the Canadian government exclusive control over Indigenous peoples' lives. This Act defined who was considered "Indian," controlled where Indigenous people could live, and restricted their basic freedoms. The government believed Indigenous cultures were "inferior" and that Indigenous people needed to be "civilized" to survive in modern Canada.

Sir John A. Macdonald's Vision

In 1883, Prime Minister **Sir John A. Macdonald** officially authorized the creation of residential schools across western Canada. His government's strategy was clear and devastating. **Sir Hector Langevin**, Secretary of State, told Parliament: "In order to educate the children properly we must separate them from their families. Some people may say this is hard, but if we want to civilize them we must do that."

This wasn't education—it was cultural destruction. The government partnered with Christian churches (primarily Catholic, Anglican, United, and Presbyterian) to run these institutions. The churches provided religious justification for the policy, while the government provided funding and legal authority.

The System in Operation

Early Years: Establishing Control

The Mohawk Institute in Brantford, Ontario, opened in 1831 as Canada's first residential school. Initially, attendance was voluntary, but this changed dramatically as government policy evolved. By 1885, traditional Indigenous ceremonies like potlatches and Sun Dances were banned under the Indian Act—part of a broader strategy to eliminate Indigenous culture entirely.

Compulsory Attendance and Expansion

The system became truly devastating in 1920 when **Duncan Campbell Scott**, Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs, made residential school attendance **compulsory for children ages 7-15**. Parents who refused to send their children faced imprisonment. Indian Agents and police forcibly removed children from their homes, often without warning.

At its peak, over 130 residential schools operated across Canada. Children were transported hundreds of miles from their families, stripped of traditional clothing, given European names, and forbidden to speak Indigenous languages. The goal was complete **assimilation**—to eliminate Indigenous identity entirely.

Health Crisis and Neglect

As early as 1907, **Dr. P.H. Bryce**, Medical Inspector for Indian Affairs, reported that health conditions in residential schools constituted a "**national crime**." Overcrowding, poor nutrition, inadequate medical care, and substandard living conditions led to extremely high death rates. Many children died from tuberculosis, influenza, and other preventable diseases. The government was aware of these conditions but continued operating the schools.

Students received minimal education—often only basic literacy and vocational training. Boys learned farming and manual trades, while girls learned domestic work. The curriculum was designed to prepare Indigenous children for lives as laborers and servants, not as leaders or professionals in their own communities.

Abuse and Trauma

Residential schools were sites of widespread physical, emotional, sexual, and psychological abuse. Children were punished for speaking their languages, practicing their traditions, or maintaining connections to their families. Many survivors have testified about experiences of violence, malnutrition, medical experimentation, and forced labor.

The "**half-day system**" required students to spend half their time in class and half working to maintain the school—essentially providing free labor to keep costs low. This meant children received even less actual education while performing demanding physical work.

Slow Recognition and Resistance (1951-1996)

Gradual Changes

By the 1950s, evidence of the system's failures was overwhelming. In 1951, major revisions to the **Indian Act** removed some restrictions—women could participate in band democracy, and prohibitions on traditional ceremonies were lifted. However, residential schools continued operating.

In 1958, **Indian Affairs regional inspectors recommended abolishing residential schools**, recognizing they were not achieving their stated educational goals. Yet it took nearly 40 more years for the last school to close. The **Gordonstoun School** in Saskatchewan closed in 1996—165 years after the first school opened.

Why Did It Take So Long?

Several factors explain the system's persistence:

- **Institutional inertia:** large bureaucratic systems resist change
- **Economic interests:** churches and contractors profited from government funding
- **Lack of Indigenous political power:** Indigenous people couldn't vote federally until 1960
- **Public indifference:** most Canadians were unaware of conditions in residential schools
- **Continued belief in assimilation:** many officials still believed the policy was necessary

The Path to Truth and Reconciliation (1986-2015)

Churches Acknowledge Wrongdoing

Between 1986 and 1994, the major churches involved in residential schools began issuing formal apologies. The **United Church, Catholic Missionary Oblates, Anglican Church, and Presbyterian Church** all acknowledged their participation in cultural genocide and abuse.

Survivors Seek Justice

In the 1990s, residential school survivors began organizing legal challenges. Class action lawsuits led by survivors like **Willie Blackwater and Nora Bernard** sought compensation and recognition of the harm caused. In 2005, **Assembly of First Nations National Chief Phil Fontaine** announced a major class action lawsuit against the Canadian government.

Government Apology and the TRC

On June 11, 2008, Prime Minister **Stephen Harper** delivered an official apology to First

Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples for the residential school system. He acknowledged that the policy was wrong and caused lasting damage to Indigenous communities.

The **Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement (IRSSA)** established the **Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)** in 2009. Led by **Justice Murray Sinclair**, the TRC spent six years gathering testimony from survivors and researching the system's history. The TRC held events across Canada, allowing survivors to share their stories and educating Canadians about this history.

The National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation

In 2013, the **University of Manitoba** was chosen as the permanent home for the **National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR)**. The Centre preserves survivor testimonies, documents, and artifacts from residential schools. Its spirit name, **bezhig miigwan** (meaning "one feather"), reminds us to treat each survivor with the respect of an eagle feather and that we are all connected in the work of reconciliation.

Modern Impacts and Ongoing Challenges

Intergenerational Trauma

The National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation

The residential school system's effects didn't end when schools closed. **Intergenerational trauma**—the passing of trauma from survivors to their children and grandchildren—continues to affect Indigenous communities today. Many survivors struggled with parenting because they were denied normal family relationships during their childhood.

Higher rates of addiction, mental health issues, family violence, and suicide in Indigenous communities are directly linked to residential school trauma. Language and cultural loss remains devastating—many Indigenous languages are endangered because residential schools prevented their transmission from parents to children.

The 94 Calls to Action

In 2015, the TRC released its final report with **94 Calls to Action**—specific recommendations for governments, institutions, and all Canadians to advance reconciliation. These include:

- Improved education about Indigenous history
- Protection of Indigenous languages
- Reforms to child welfare, justice, and health systems
- Support for survivors and their families

Unmarked Graves and Renewed Attention

In 2021, the discovery of unmarked graves at former residential school sites brought renewed international attention to this history. Ground-penetrating radar has identified over 1,800 potential grave sites across Canada, though investigations are ongoing. These discoveries have sparked new conversations about commemoration, justice, and reconciliation.

Modern Challenges

Indigenous communities continue to face systemic discrimination and inequality in education, healthcare, housing, and economic opportunities. The **overrepresentation of Indigenous children in foster care** has been called a "Millennium Scoop"—continuing the pattern of family separation begun by residential schools.

Progress on the TRC's 94 Calls to Action has been slow and uneven. While some recommendations have been implemented, many require sustained political will and resources that have not yet materialized.

Questions to Think About

For all the following questions, you must use the introduce, illustrate and conclude approach. Each question has a specific word count range. Work within that range if you want to earn full marks for the assignment.

1. The residential school system operated for 165 years (1831-1996), but the Truth and Reconciliation Commission didn't begin until 2009. Why do you think it took so long for Canada to officially address this history? (100-200 words)

2. Based on the timeline, how did government policy toward Indigenous peoples change between 1876 and 1996? What specific laws or decisions marked turning points in this evolution? (50-200 words) Here's the timeline: <https://nctr.ca/exhibits/residential-school-timeline/>.

Final Task

Using the National Center for Truth and Reconciliation timeline (see link above) and additional research, and investigate one specific residential school that operated in Canada. For your chosen school, provide the following information:

1. **Basic Information:** name, location, years of operation, which church(es) ran it.
2. **Student Population:** how many children attended; what First Nation did the students come from.
3. **Documented Problems:** what specific issues (health, abuse, deaths) were reported at this school.
4. **Survivor Testimonies:** what have survivors said about their experiences at this school (if available).
5. **Current Status:** what happened to the site of the school? Was it knocked down or turned into a memorial?
6. **Your Analysis:** based on your research, what evidence shows this school followed the Canadian government's goal of "killing the Indian in the child"? Give specific examples.

Your response should follow the introduce, illustrate and conclude format and be in the 300 to 500 word range. Please include the URL(s) where you found your information. Do not use AI.
