

Response to residential schools



Background Briefs

Historic injustices and redress in Canada



A residential school survivor celebrated the historic class action lawsuit to seek redress for abuses.
Source David P. Ball, *The Tyee*.

The movement for redress and early government responses

Until recently, the history of neglect and abuse in residential schools was largely unknown in Canada. Beginning in the late 1980s, Aboriginal groups filed lawsuits demanding compensation from the federal government for residential school abuse. This continued in the early 1990s, when Aboriginal leaders began to speak about their own experiences of violation at the schools. Only after this pressure did the Canadian government and churches begin to confront the issue. The possibility of a lawsuit that might result in a large settlement was also crucial in motivating a government response.

As a result of growing social problems in Aboriginal communities throughout Canada, in the early 1990s the federal government created the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP). This commission reported that residential schools played a large role in creating a social crisis in Aboriginal communities, and that the schools had left a legacy of trauma on generations of Aboriginal peoples. In response, the federal government created the Aboriginal Healing

Foundation (AHF) in 1998. The AHF supports initiatives to help heal the scars left from physical and sexual abuse suffered in residential schools.

Government apology and the redress agreement

Following many years of work by survivors, Aboriginal communities and organizations, the government of Canada implemented the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement (IRSSA) in September 2007. The following is a summary of the main elements:

- *Common Experience Payment (CEP)* set aside \$40 million to pay eligible former students of residential schools up to \$3000 each which they can use to further their education.
- *Independent Assessment Process (IAP)* is an out-of-court process to resolve claims of sexual abuse, serious physical abuse and other wrongful acts suffered at residential schools.
- *Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)* was established to inform all Canadians about what happened in residential schools and their impact on the survivors, their families and communities. Over the course of its five-year program, the TRC will provide former students and anyone affected by the residential school legacy with an opportunity to share their individual experiences in a safe and culturally appropriate manner.
- A \$20 million initiative that supports local, regional and national activities that honour, educate, remember, memorialize and/or pay tribute to residential school students, their families and their communities.



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- Indian Residential Schools Resolution Health Support Program (IRSRHSP) provides mental health and emotional supports for eligible former students and their families as they participate in the components of the Settlement Agreement.
- As part of the Settlement Agreement, the government of Canada provided \$125 million to the AHF to support community-based healing initiatives.

In June 2008, the federal government apologized for its role in the residential school system. By saying he was sorry on behalf of the government, Prime Minister Stephen Harper acknowledged the Canadian government’s central role in carrying out this historical injustice, and in inflicting untold pain and suffering on generations of Aboriginal children. Harper called residential schools a “sad chapter” in Canadian history and indicated that the policies that supported and protected the system were harmful and wrong.

Reactions to the apology and redress agreement

Assembly of First Nations (a leading political organization) National Chief Phil Fontaine stated in his acceptance of the government’s apology,

... for all of the generations which have preceded us, this day testifies to nothing less than the achievement of the impossible.

... We heard the Government of Canada take full responsibility for this dreadful chapter in our shared history. We heard the Prime Minister declare that this will never happen again. Finally, we heard Canada say it is sorry.

... The memories of residential schools sometimes cut like merciless knives at our souls. This day will help us to put that pain behind us.



National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations Phil Fontaine accepting Canada’s official apology for residential schools in the House of Commons on June 11, 2008.
Source: Prime Minister of Canada Stephen Harper, Government of Canada.

... I reach out to all Canadians today in this spirit of reconciliation—Meegwetch [thank you].¹

First Nations abuse survivor Charlie Thompson, who watched the apology from the House of Commons gallery said he felt relieved to hear the prime minister acknowledge the horrible legacy.

Today I feel relief. I feel good. For me, this is a historical day.²

Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (Inuit political and cultural association) President Mary Simon said,

I am one of these people that have dreamed for this day and there have been times in this long journey when I despaired that this would never happen. I am filled with hope and compassion for my fellow aboriginal Canadians. There is much hard work to be done. We need the help and support of all thoughtful Canadians and our governments to rebuild strong healthy families and communities. This can only be achieved when dignity, confidence and respect for traditional values and human rights once again become part of our daily lives and are mirrored in our relationships with governments and other Canadians.³



Native Women's Association of Canada
President Beverly Jacobs said,

Prior to the residential schools system, prior to colonization, the women in our communities were very well respected and honoured for the role that they have in our communities as being the life givers, being the caretakers of the spirit that we bring to mother earth. We have been given those responsibilities to look after our children and to bring that spirit into this physical world. Residential schools caused so much harm to that respect and to that honour. We have given thanks to you for your apology. I have to also give you credit for standing up. I did not see any other governments before today come forward and apologize, so I do thank you for that.⁴

Tom King, Canadian author, Governor General's Award nominee and survivor of a U.S. residential school, said:

It is a symbolic act and it is really in the end no more than that. It is not going to change the history that we have had to live with and that many people will have to deal with. It is not going to change the damage that was done to native families, to reserves, to tribes across Canada. Today is just one day. What I am looking forward to is what tomorrow brings.⁵

Most believe there is still much to be done. Grand Chief Edward John of the First Nations Summit, an umbrella group of B.C, said,

The full story of the residential school system's impact on our people has yet to be told.⁶

Apology delivered by Prime Minister Stephen Harper on June 11, 2008 in the House of Commons

Mr. Speaker, I stand before you today to offer an apology to former students of Indian residential schools. The treatment of children in Indian residential schools is a sad chapter in our history. In the 1870's, the federal government, partly in order to meet its obligation to educate aboriginal children, began to play a role in the development and administration of these schools.

Two primary objectives of the residential schools system were to remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions and cultures, and to assimilate them into the dominant culture. These objectives were based on the assumption that aboriginal cultures and spiritual beliefs were inferior and unequal. Indeed, some sought, as it was infamously said, "to kill the Indian in the child." Today, we recognize that this policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country. Most schools were operated as "joint ventures" with Anglican, Catholic, Presbyterian or United Churches.

The government of Canada built an educational system in which very young children were often forcibly removed from their homes, often taken far from their communities. Many were inadequately fed, clothed and housed. All were deprived of the care and nurturing of their parents, grandparents and communities. First Nations, Inuit and Métis languages and cultural practices were prohibited in these schools. Tragically, some of these children died while attending residential schools and others never returned home. The government now recognizes that the consequences of the Indian residential schools policy were profoundly negative and that this policy has had a lasting and damaging impact on aboriginal culture, heritage and language.

¹ Transcript of Chief Phil Fontaine (National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations), Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, Government of Canada.

² About Residential Schools, Legacy of Hope Foundation.

³ Transcript: Day of Apology, Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, Government of Canada.

⁴ Transcript: Day of Apology, Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, Government of Canada.

⁵ Reaction to the federal government's apology to Canada's Aboriginal People for the residential school system. Canwest News Service, June 11, 2008.

⁶ About Residential Schools, Legacy of Hope Foundation.

