

Excerpts from the Preface of
The Survivors Speak: A Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada

The federal government has estimated that at least 150,000 First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students passed through [the Indian Residential] schools. The assault on Aboriginal identity usually began the moment the child took the first step across the school's threshold. Braided hair (which often had spiritual significance) was cut, homemade traditional clothing was exchanged for a school uniform, Aboriginal names were replaced with Euro-Canadian ones (and a number), and the freedom of life in their own communities was foregone for the regimen of an institution in which every activity from morning to night was scheduled. Males and females, and siblings, were separated, and, with some exceptions, parental visits were discouraged and controlled.

Hastily and cheaply built schools often had poor or non-existent sanitation and ventilation systems. With few infirmaries in which students with contagious diseases could be isolated, epidemics could quickly spread through a school with deadly results. Because schools were funded on a per capita basis, administrators often violated health guidelines and admitted children who were infected with such deadly and contagious diseases as tuberculosis. Often, parents were not informed if their children became sick, died, or ran away.

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The government mandated that English (or in Québec, French) be the language of instruction. And, although some missionaries had learned Aboriginal languages and provided religious instruction in those languages, in many schools, students were punished for speaking their language.

For most of the system's history, the federal government had no clear policy on discipline. Students were not only strapped and humiliated, but in some schools, they were also handcuffed, manacled, beaten, locked in cellars and other makeshift jails, or displayed in stocks. Overcrowding and a high student-staff ratio meant that even those children who were not subject to physical discipline grew up in an atmosphere of neglect.

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Many students have positive memories of their experiences of residential schools and acknowledge the skills they acquired, the beneficial impacts of the recreational and sporting activities in which they engaged, and the friendships they made. Some students went to public schools so they could graduate and attend post-secondary institutions and develop distinguished careers. But, for most students, academic success was elusive and they left as soon as they could. On return to their home communities, they often felt isolated from their families and their culture. They had lost their language and had not been provided with the skills to follow traditional economic pursuits, or with the skills needed to succeed in the Euro-Canadian economy. Worst of all, they did not have any experience of family life or parenting.

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A Survivor is not just someone who "made it through" the schools, or "got by" or was "making do." A Survivor is a person who persevered against and overcame adversity. The word came to mean someone who emerged victorious, though not unscathed, whose head was "bloody but unbowed." It referred to someone who had taken all that could be thrown at them and remained standing at the end. It came to mean someone who could legitimately say "I am still here!" For that achievement, Survivors deserve our highest respect. But, for that achievement, we also owe them the debt of doing the right thing. Reconciliation is the right thing to do, coming out of this history.

Justice Murray Sinclair, Chair, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada
Chief Wilton Littlechild, Commissioner
Dr. Marie Wilson, Commissioner