



Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission

As the first national truth commission to be created in an established democracy Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission is a bold experiment. It is the first that focuses exclusively on crimes committed against children and indigenous groups. The commission began its work in June 2008 as Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper told his country's House of Commons, "The treatment of children in Indian residential schools is a sad chapter in our history."

BACKGROUND

Canada is working to address the legacies of Indian Residential Schools, a church- and state-run system that placed First Nations, Inuit and other Aboriginal children into residential schools, forcibly separating children from their families. In these schools, students were punished for using their native languages and, in many instances, were sexually and physically abused.

The schools represent a deeply traumatic episode in Canadian-Aboriginal relations. Launched in 1874, the schools formed a nationwide system that operated for more than 100 years, most extensively from the 1920s to the early 1960s. The last residential school closed in 1996, in Saskatchewan. Their legacies—loss of language and culture, and widespread emotional and societal problems such as substance abuse—persist today, both within Aboriginal communities and as a force shaping the relationship between those populations and the government.

SETTLEMENT AGREEMENT

After years of lawsuits and negotiations between Aboriginal groups and other interested parties, the Canadian government agreed in 2006 on a package of reparations for school victims. A year later, the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA), worth \$2 billion, came into force. The agreement includes provisions for financial compensation, a truth commission and additional healing measures for residential school survivors; these components make IRSSA the first attempt to comprehensively address legacies of abuse in an established democracy.

Indian Residential Schools of Canada (1874–1998)

Area	Schools
Yukon Territory	4
Northwest Territories	10
Nunavut	12
Québec	11
Newfoundland and Labrador	1
Prince Edward Island	1
Nova Scotia	2
Ontario	15
Manitoba	13
Saskatchewan	15
Alberta	22
British Columbia	20

Source: Indian and Northern Affairs Canada

IRSSA includes these individual and collective measures:

- **Common Experience Payment (CEP).** Lump sum compensation for former residential school students, recognizing the harm the schools caused them. Former students who spent at least part of one scholastic year living at the schools are eligible for \$10,000, plus \$3,000 for every additional year. About \$1.9 billion has been set aside for former students. As of August 2008, the government had received almost 95,000 applications and made payments to more than 68,000 people.
- **Independent Assessment Process.** Available in addition to the CEP, this compensates individuals up to \$275,000 for sexual abuse, serious physical abuse or other abuses that caused serious psychological effects.
- **Truth and Reconciliation Commission.** Allocated \$60 million to carry out its work over five years to provide a forum for survivors and to educate the public about the residential schools and their legacies.
- **Healing.** A \$125 million endowment for the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, which will support counseling and initiatives for spiritual renewal. Church entities that were involved in running the residential school system are supposed to contribute up to \$100 million of the total in cash and services.
- **Commemoration.** A total of \$20 million is designated for events and memorials to inform people about the residential school system and its consequences.

TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION

The commission has three members. Justice Harry S. LaForme is the chairperson, and Claudette Dumont-Smith and Jane Brewin Morley are commissioners; they officially began their work on June 1, 2008.

The commission is authorized to hold a series of national and community events to allow school survivors to share their experiences and to educate the public about the schools' history and consequences. The commission has five years to complete its work. The commissioners are scheduled to deliver a report on their findings and recommendations after two years and then, by the end of five years, to establish a research center.

Overview of the TRC

- Established June 1, 2008, as an independent body with a five-year mandate. It is not a judicial body.
- Chairperson of the commission is Justice Harry LaForme. His fellow commissioners are Claudette Dumont-Smith and Jane Brewin Morley.
- Part of the TRC's task is to provide former students and people affected by the Indian Residential Schools with an opportunity to share their personal experiences in a safe, respectful and culturally appropriate manner.
- It is scheduled to hold seven events across Canada and support community events designed by individual communities to meet their unique needs.
- The commission is charged with studying the conditions that gave rise to the schools.
- The TRC will write a report about its findings.
- All former students and their families can take part in the commission's activities, even if they are not participating in IRSSA.

2008

Excerpts from Prime Minister Stephen Harper's statement of apology, June 2008:

In the 1870s, 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 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.