

Understanding Residential Schools in Canada

Grades 6-9

Residential schools are an important part of Canada's history. These schools were created by the government and run by churches from the 1870s until the 1990s. During that time, about 150,000 Indigenous children attended these schools. In 1920, it was mandated that all children between the ages of 7-16 had to go to school.

The goal of residential schools was to teach Indigenous children English or French and make them follow European ways of life. But to do that, the children were often forced to stop speaking their own languages and practicing their cultures. Many children were separated from their families for months, or even years. Some were treated badly. Survivors of these schools have shared powerful stories about how painful those experiences were. Many people today believe the schools were part of something called **cultural genocide**—an attempt to erase Indigenous cultures.

While it's important to listen to survivors and understand how harmful these schools were, some people also ask questions about how we tell the story of residential schools. They believe it's important to look at all the facts, even the difficult ones. For example, they point out that schools long ago—whether Indigenous or not—were very different from schools today. Many children back then faced hard times, including poverty, disease, and strict punishments, whether they were in residential schools or not.

Some people also wonder if today's discussions about residential schools are always fair. They are concerned that only one side of the story is being told, and that people who ask questions may be unfairly labeled as hateful or wrong. These people believe we should still ask for strong evidence when we hear big claims—like stories about mass graves—while always treating survivors and their stories with kindness and respect.

Good thinking means being able to do two things at once: we must listen carefully to those who were hurt by residential schools, and also think clearly about the facts. Not every school was the same. Not every child had the exact same experience. And not every teacher or worker was cruel. Some people believe the schools completely failed Indigenous communities. Others believe that even though the schools were flawed and harmful, they also gave some children a chance to learn reading, writing, and other skills.

In the end, learning about residential schools helps us understand both the mistakes of the past and how we can make things better in the future. We should always show respect, ask good questions, and work toward truth and reconciliation.