



# Stepping Stones



## RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS—MÉTIS EXPERIENCE

### Planning your learning journey

*How were the Métis people in Alberta impacted by the Indian residential school system?*



DECHÂTELETS ARCHIVES, OBLATES OF MARY IMMACULATE COLLECTION

*Saint-Paul-des-Métis School.*

### FIRST STEPS



The first church-run mission schools established in western Canada beginning in the 1860s were open to First Nations and Métis children. As a result, many Métis students in the communities of Fort Chipewyan, St Albert and Lesser Slave Lake did attend school. In 1879 the Government of Canada, as part of its strategy of First Nations assimilation into the Euro-Canadian culture, entered into a partnership with the Christian churches to establish government-funded, church-run residential schools for Indigenous children. While the federal government acknowledged its responsibility for educating First Nations children, its overall policy was that the provinces were responsible for Métis children.

Local public schools often refused to admit Métis children, and most of the Métis communities did not have enough funds to build their own schools.<sup>1</sup> In very few cases, schools were established for Métis children. The town of St Paul originated as a Métis farming settlement (St Paul des Métis), and a school was established in 1903. The school was, however, unpopular with the community and was burned down in 1905.<sup>2</sup> In some instances, Métis children were admitted to federally funded schools as acts of charity or if the parents were willing to pay.<sup>3</sup> Many Métis parents who wished to see their children educated in schools had no option but to try to have them accepted into a residential school.



## MÉTIS STUDENT ATTENDANCE AT RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

The federal government's position on accepting Métis students was caught between their unwillingness to pay for the education and its fear that if Métis children were not taken into residential schools, they would not be assimilated into the dominant culture. In 1899 Indian Affairs minister Clifford Sifton ruled that Métis children should be admitted to government funded residential schools, because without formal schooling they would grow up an "uneducated and barbarous class."<sup>4</sup> However, this policy was inconsistently applied; admission to residential schools was erratic and often depended on the local situation, church involved, local government officials and enforcement of admission regulations.<sup>5</sup>

For most of the residential school history, Métis were not recognized as Indians by the federal government and were often discouraged from attending the federally funded schools, especially if they were seen as "Christianized" and "civilized enough." Other times, federal officials called for the inclusion of Métis children and regarded them as part of the "dangerous class," leading an "Indian way of life" and in need of assimilation.<sup>6</sup>

Some First Nations who refused to enter Treaty were labelled Métis by the government. Other people chose to enfranchise so they wouldn't have to send their child to residential school.

From the early 1920s until the 1940s, Métis parents faced numerous barriers if they wanted to provide their children with a formal education. Once again,



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*Grouard School.*

the federal government had started to dismiss Métis students from residential schools, while the provinces, for cost reasons, were reluctant to ensure that they were admitted to public schools.<sup>7</sup>

### What factors impacted Métis school attendance?

Federal government funding for residential schools was calculated on a per student basis. To control costs, the federal government often sought to limit admittance to First Nations students. For their part, the churches that administered the schools sought to admit both First Nations and Métis students. In some cases, Métis children from schools with adequate enrolment would be relocated to schools that needed more students.<sup>8</sup>

Residential schooling also led to situations in which Métis peoples were pressured to identify themselves as First Nations. For example, when Treaty 8 was entered into, Roman Catholic priests encouraged Métis to declare themselves as Indians so that their children could be sent to residential schools, allowing the churches to collect funding.<sup>9</sup>

In 1937, the federal government announced that it would no longer be providing any funding for Métis children attending residential schools.<sup>10</sup>

By the 1940s the federal government owned most residential schools. There were, however, a number of church-owned schools that had a greater degree of control over admissions. In Alberta, six church-owned schools did not need government approval to admit students.<sup>11</sup> Catholic run schools in Alberta consistently reported a high number of Métis children enrolled, including the Grey Nuns run institutions in St Albert and Fort Chipewyan.<sup>12</sup> Hobbema, Fort Vermilion, Blue Quills, Grouard, Fort Chipewyan, Jousard and Wabasca increased enrolment of Métis children throughout the 1940s and '50s, with inconsistent support from the provincial government.<sup>13</sup> In 1945, 100 of the 123 students enrolled at St Bernard School in Grouard were reported as Métis.<sup>14</sup>

During this time, the schools looked to the provinces for more funding. Beginning in the 1940s, the Alberta government began providing funds to residential schools for Métis children apprehended by child welfare. The

Alberta government paid for Métis children to attend the residential school in Grouard until 1958, when a government inspector reported disturbing conditions at the school.<sup>15</sup>

### How many Métis children attended residential schools?

While the majority of students attending residential schools were First Nations, many Métis were part of the residential school system. Due to incomplete records, inconsistent regulations and inaccurate status accounts, it is impossible to know how many Métis children attended residential schools.<sup>16</sup> In some cases, Métis children were not officially placed on the register and therefore not reported to the federal government.<sup>17</sup> Indian and Northern Affairs Canada estimated that out of about 105,000 former residential school students alive in 1991, 9 per cent were Métis.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada found that Métis students did attend almost every residential school at some point, and based on the evidence of the students who attended residential schools, it is clear that the education of Métis people experienced in the residential school system paralleled that of First Nations and Inuit students.<sup>18</sup> Regardless of the exact number of children in attendance, Métis people share in the Indigenous collective trauma resulting from government policies of forced assimilation through residential schools.

## MÉTIS STUDENT EXPERIENCES IN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

The experiences of Métis children at residential schools varied and depended on many factors. The extent to which they identified with their European ancestry, their familiarity with the Christian church doctrines and the conditions of each individual school all influenced the students' experiences. As well, the degree to which school employees projected negative stereotypes on Métis children's identity also had an impact. For many Métis, the prejudices against them in residential schools was reflective of the prejudices from the dominant settler society; they were

seen as “lesser than” both their First Nations relations and their European ancestors.<sup>19</sup>

Métis children frequently faced racism and discrimination inside residential schools. In some places, Métis were often cast as “worse off than Indians” or because they were half-breeds, they were considered by others to be less than either one of their halves.<sup>20</sup> They were often seen as outsiders by other children and were frequently treated as second-class citizens by school staff. At times, they were made to work longer and harder on housekeeping tasks to operate the school than other students to earn their education.<sup>21</sup> For example, officials from the Red Deer school objected to the federal government’s removal of Métis students because “some of the biggest and best trained boys and girls” were among the non-Treaty children; “no quantity of new pupils could fill their place because all new pupils are young and untrained.”<sup>22</sup>

Many Métis at that time spoke an Indigenous language and followed distinct cultural practices or lifestyles closely related to their First Nations relatives. Attendance at residential schools had similar lasting detrimental impacts on their identity, culture, language and families as it did for other Indigenous students.<sup>23</sup> As with First Nations and Inuit children, some former Métis students speak of positive experiences at the schools.<sup>24</sup> Because of the lack of reporting of Métis children enrolment in the schools, the full extent of their experience is not yet known. One common thread between many Indigenous former students, however, was the hardship suffered. The tragedies of substandard education, separation from family, institutionalization, horrific living conditions, extreme loneliness, cultural disconnect, multiple forms of abuse and lasting trauma inflicted on Métis children did not differ from those of First Nations or Inuit students.

## ADDRESSING ALBERTA MÉTIS EDUCATION NEEDS

The 1932 formation of the Métis Brotherhood of Alberta (later to become the Métis Nation of Alberta) was due, in part, to the poor living conditions of the Métis, including

the education opportunities for their children. The Métis Brotherhood was successful in lobbying the Alberta government to form the Ewing Commission tasked with investigating the living conditions of Métis in the province. The 1936 *Report of the Royal Commission Appointed to Investigate the Conditions of the Half-Breed Population in Alberta* (Ewing Commission<sup>25</sup>) reported that approximately 80 per cent of Métis children in Alberta lacked formal, western education because of jurisdictional negligence.<sup>26</sup> Then in 1937 the federal government reversed Sifton’s policy of including Métis children in residential schools, denying any federal government responsibility for Métis education that now fell squarely on the province.

Métis people living throughout the province of Alberta were entitled to attend provincially funded schools as a result of the Ewing Commission. In remote northern areas, the province paid for Métis students to continue to attend federal residential schools operated by the churches. When the Métis Settlement lands were designated in 1938, these communities worked to establish and operate their own public schools. In 1960, the Alberta government established the Northland School Division comprising 30 school divisions and 20 schools in the northern part of the province, including six Métis Settlement schools to coordinate educational services for the north. The *Northland School Division Act*<sup>28</sup> was revised in 2017 to allow for seven elected trustees each with a ward council consisting of one school council representative from each school in the ward. The Northland School Division currently has 20 schools and 2,200 students of which 95 per cent are of First Nations, Métis or Inuit descent.<sup>29</sup>

As of 2018, Métis organizations and the federal government are still at odds over the recognition of Métis residential school survivors. The majority of Métis residential school survivors have not been acknowledged for their suffering at residential schools. While the Residential Schools Settlement Agreement included some Métis in the common experience payments, many who attended day schools, provincially funded schools and other types of residential schools were not recognized in the settlement.<sup>30</sup> The Métis National Council continues to seek compensation for residential school survivors and has held national gatherings for

dialogue and sharing in the healing process, including *Nobody’s Children* in Saskatchewan, 2012, and *We Are Children of the Métis Nation* in Ottawa, 2013.

## NEXT STEPS



Métis are one of the three distinct Aboriginal peoples of Canada recognized in the 1982 Canadian Constitution. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission stated in its final report *The Métis Experience, Volume 3*:<sup>31</sup> “There is no denying that the harm done to the children, their parents and the Métis community was substantial. It is an ongoing shame that this damage has not been addressed and rectified.”<sup>32</sup> The experiences of Métis students in the residential school system are similar to First Nations and Inuit students, but they are also unique.

Today, Métis people live in every community in Alberta and their children attend public schools. Learning the truth about the Métis residential school experience helps teachers to understand the ongoing issues and concerns of Métis peoples. Respectfully inviting Métis residential school survivors to share their stories is a strategy for schools to participate in the reconciliation process with Indigenous peoples.



DECHÂTELETS ARCHIVES, OBLATES OF MARY IMMACULATE COLLECTION

Joussard School.

# Continuing Your Learning Journey

a) Why were only some of the Métis residential school survivors recognized in the Residential Schools Settlement Agreement?

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b) How have the experiences of residential schools shaped contemporary realities for Métis people and communities?

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## NOTES

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