

Engaging with the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation at Western

Date: Thursday, September 30, 2021

This document is intended to provide educators and leaders with information relevant to the new statutory holiday on September 30: National Day of Truth and Reconciliation.

Western University is organizing several events and learning opportunities on September 30. Learn more [here](#). Ontario has not declared this day a provincial holiday and classes will remain in session.

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I. What is the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation?

The National Day for Truth and Reconciliation takes place on September 30. This date was previously, and is still observed in Indigenous communities, as *Orange Shirt Day* in what is now known as Canada. This day seeks to honour survivors of Indian Residential Schools (IRS), and those who did not make it home.

Indian Residential Schools ran in some capacity before Confederation and were operated by the Canadian government and various churches such as the Roman Catholic, Anglican and United, from the 1870s, until 1996 in Canada.

In 2008, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was created to document Residential School Survivors' accounts. The commission completed their work and released a report with 94 Calls to Action in 2015, asking for all Canadians and level of government to participate.

The National Day for Truth and Reconciliation was established in 2021 in response to Call #80

*80. We call upon the federal government, in collaboration with Aboriginal peoples, to establish, as a statutory holiday, a National Day for Truth and Reconciliation **to honour Survivors, their families, and communities, and ensure that public commemoration of the history and legacy of residential schools remains a vital component of the reconciliation process.***

II. Quick Facts on Residential Schools ([Reconciliation Canada](#))

- Indigenous children were forcibly taken from their homes by RCMP
- 150,000 Indigenous children were taken from their families
- 90 to 100% suffered severe physical, emotional, and sexual abuse
- There was a 40 – 60% mortality rate in Indian residential schools
- Residential schools date back to the 1870s
- Over 130 residential schools were located across Canada, and the last school closed as recently as 1996
- Two-thirds of Canadians believe (and four in ten strongly believe) that Canadians with no experience in Indian residential schools have a role to play in reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and all Canadians

iii. What is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada?

The [Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada](#) was struck after the Indian Residential Schools Settlement* in 2007. The survivors who participated requested the Commission be created to ensure that no one in Canada could claim ignorance of what happened and to facilitate reconciliation. You can find the official mandate [here](#). The TRC travelled across Canada from 2008-2015, gathering over 6500 stories from survivors and their families that were included in the report, as well as families of those who did not make it home. It is from those stories that the 94 Calls to Action were created. The TRC also held national educational events and created a historical record of the Indian Residential School system, gathering documents from the Canadian government and some churches and organizations including Huron College here at Western.

*The settlement, as well as the TRC, did not account for every IRS, nor the Day Schools that operated in the same timelines.

iv. What are Indian Residential Schools?

The Indian Residential School system was in operation from the 1870s until 1996 in Canada, with some schools operating before Confederation. They were boarding schools run by the Canadian government and various Church sects such as Roman Catholic, United and Anglican, and over 150 000 Indigenous children were forced to attend. In many cases, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) were used to collect children from their homes and bring them to the schools. You can find more information in the [TRC Reports](#) or on [UBC's Indigenous Foundations page](#).

Locally, the Mt. Elgin Residential School, also known as the Muncey Institute, ran near Muncey, ON, where Chippewas of the Thames First Nation (COTTFN) is located. The school was created in 1847 and was run from 1851-1862 by the Wesleyan Methodist Society, and again from 1867-1946, with the United Church of Canada taking over in 1925. The building is no longer standing, however there is a monument in COTTFN featuring all the names of the students who attended. Read more about Mt Elgin [here](#).

Another school that ran locally in Brantford, ON was the Mohawk Institute Residential School, known colloquially as "The Mushhole." The school was converted into The Woodland Cultural Centre in 1972, dedicated to preserving the school's history and revitalizing the languages and cultures the school sought to destroy. In operation from 1831-1970, the Mushhole was run by the Anglican Church and is notorious for the abuses students faced there.

Read more about the Mohawk Institute [here](#).

Virtual tours of the Mohawk Institute are available [here](#).

In 2008, [the Canadian government via Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued an apology to Indian Residential School Survivors on behalf of all Canadians](#). You can watch the video [here](#).

The Anglican, Presbyterian and United Churches have also publicly apologized, but an apology remains absent from the Roman Catholic Church. The Roman Catholic Church [also has yet to pay the \\$25 million ordered in the 2007 IRS settlement](#).

v. What is Orange Shirt Day?

“Orange Shirt Day is a legacy of the St. Joseph Mission (SJM) Residential School (1891-1981) Commemoration Project and Reunion events that took place in Williams Lake, BC, Canada, in May 2013. This project was the vision of Esketemc (Alkali Lake) Chief Fred Robbins, who is a former student himself. It brought together former students and their families from the Secwepemc, Tsilhqot’in, Southern Dakelh and St’at’imc Nations, along with the Cariboo Regional District, the Mayors and municipalities, School Districts and civic organizations in the Cariboo Region.

The events were designed to commemorate the residential school experience, to witness and honour the healing journey of the survivors and their families, and to commit to the ongoing process of reconciliation. Chief Justice Murray Sinclair challenged all participants to keep the reconciliation process alive, because of the realization that every former student had similar stories.

Orange Shirt Day is a legacy of this project. As spokesperson for the Reunion group leading up to the events, former student Phyllis (Jack) Webstad told her story of her first day at residential school when her shiny new orange shirt, bought by her grandmother, was taken from her as a six-year old girl.” (OrangeShirtDay.org)

You can find Phyllis’ story [here](#).

vi. Who is this day for?

All people living in what is now known as Canada are encouraged to commemorate NDTR and Orange Shirt Day in ways that centre and honour survivors, their families, and communities.

While the TRC Calls to Action focus on the IRS legacy, there are many Calls that seek to address other systemic inequities such as the Indian Act, or concepts of terra nullius and the Doctrine of Discovery. Anishinaabe scholar Leanne Simpson writes a critique of “reconciliation” in her book *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back*, published in 2011.

As reconciliation becomes institutionalized, I worry our participation will benefit the state in an asymmetrical fashion, by attempting to neutralize the legitimacy of Indigenous resistance. If reconciliation is focused only on residential schools rather than the broader set of relationships aimed at assimilation and political genocide, legislation, and practices, then there is a risk that reconciliation will "level the playing field" in the eyes of Canadians. In the eyes of liberalism the historical "wrong" has now been "righted" and further transformation is not needed, since the historic situation has been remedied. (Simpson 21-22)

In Call to Action #80, all levels of government as well as organizations and institutions are asked to “ensure that public commemoration of the history and legacy of residential schools remains a vital component of the reconciliation process.”

It is important to consider how the work we do around reconciliation honours and centres survivors, and their families and communities. Many families live with the impacts of IRS and will continue to do so for generations; however, the schools were and are not the only violence inflicted upon Indigenous Peoples and lands in Canada. Simpson (2011) writes:

*I also worry that institutionalization of a narrowly defined "reconciliation" subjugates treaty and nation-based participation by locking out Elders - the ones that suffered the most directly at the hands of residential schools - in a position of victimhood. **Of course, they are anything but victims. They are our strongest visionaries, and they inspire us to envision alternative futures.** Are we participating in a process that allows the state to co-op the individual and collective pain and suffering of our people, while also criminalizing the inter-generational impacts of residential schools and ignoring the larger neo-assimilation project to which our children are now subjected? (Simpson 22)*

We must consider the complicated nature of addressing the legacy of IRS. Indigenous Peoples are disproportionately represented in Canada’s justice system, and [Indigenous youth make up almost half of Canada’s incarcerated youth population](#). Indigenous youth [make up over half of the children currently in the child welfare system](#) as well, with advocates pointing to this statistic as a [direct correlation to the dysfunction created in families whose members attended Indian Residential Schools](#).

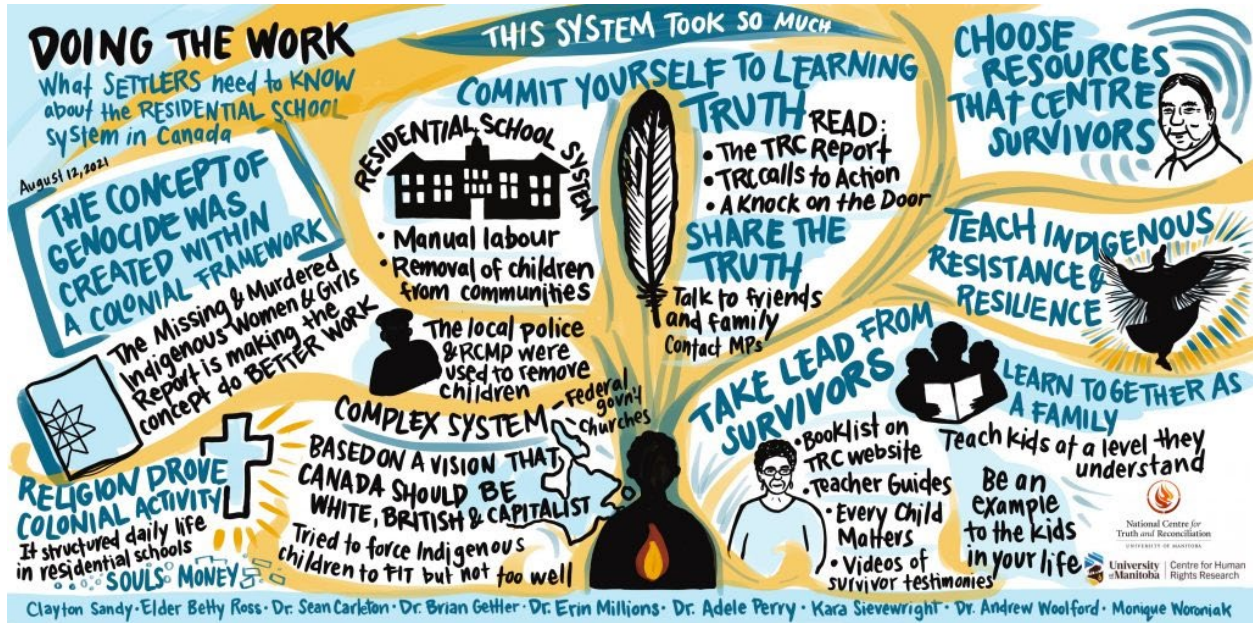
VII. What is Reconciliation?

Definition: This term came into use in the post-WWII period to mark socio-political processes of healing and transformation in the wake of gross human rights violations and major political conflicts. In Canada, reconciliation has come to signify a process of grappling with colonialism and forging better relationships between the Government of Canada (as well as society more broadly) and Indigenous peoples. The TRC “defines reconciliation as an ongoing process of establishing and maintaining respectful relationships. A critical part of this process involves repairing damaged trust by making apologies, providing individual and collective reparations, and following through with concrete actions that demonstrate real societal change” (Honouring the Truth, 2015, p. 16).

Debates: Unfortunately, “reconciliation” is used in very different ways by different constituencies. The Government of Canada often uses the term to suggest that colonialism is over and that the government’s relationship with Indigenous peoples has now changed for the better. However, others contend that reconciliation operates as a “politics of distraction,” obscuring the fact that colonialism has not ended (Corntassel & Holder, 2008, p. 472). For many Indigenous peoples, righting colonial wrongs involves much more than symbolic gestures; it necessitates fiscal compensation, the return of significant portions of land, and meaningful recognition of Indigenous rights to self-determination. The etymology of the word “reconciliation” also makes its application to the Government of Canada’s relations with Indigenous peoples problematic. First, the “re” in “reconciliation” suggests a return to a previously amicable state of relations that, many scholars assert, never existed in the context of colonization (Chrisjohn & Wasacase, 2009, p. 222). Additionally, the word “reconciliation” is steeped in Catholicism, where it signifies a sacrament through which sinners are “reconciled with the Church” (Garneau, 2012, p. 35). Some Indigenous peoples contend that the term “conciliation” is more appropriate because it “acknowledge[s]” that conflict has occurred and that “distrust” must be “overcome” (Amagoalik, 2008, p. 93).

[\(Office of Indigenous Initiatives Key Terms\)](#)

VIII. Why is it important to participate in Reconciliation & observe this day in your classroom, office, or unit?



Treaties with Indigenous Peoples are how Canada came to be. While Indian Residential Schools were not the direct wish or order of every Canadian, the last school closed in 1996. The schools were effectively created to “kill the Indian in the child” under the government established by Sir John A. McDonald. Duncan Campbell Scott managed IRS systems and policy from 1913-1932 and notoriously said:

I want to get rid of the Indian problem. I do not think as a matter of fact, that the country ought to continuously protect a class of people who are able to stand alone...Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department, that is the whole object of this Bill. ([Canadian Encyclopedia](#))

This statement clearly expresses the intent of the schools. Due to the creation of the Indian Act, the Canadian federal government designates who is and is not an Indian through “Indian Status.” Once all Indians are successfully assimilated in the body politic of Canada, Treaties will cease legitimacy in favour of the Nation-state. The schools, and this policy, are intended to eradicate Indigenous Nationhood.

When the Truth and Reconciliation report was released in 2015, Justice Murray Sinclair gave a statement which outlined the work they had done and thanking survivors.

[Of the report and the Calls, Sinclair stated:](#)

The Survivors have entrusted us, and by extension, all the people in Canada, with two priorities:

First, the Survivors need to know before they leave this earth that people understand what happened and what the schools did to them.

Second, the Survivors need to know that, having been heard and understood, we will act to ensure the repair of damages done (Macleans Magazine, June 2, 2015).

It is in this spirit of reconciliation every Canadian is invited to reflect upon the legacy of IRS and to work together to ensure this part of Canada's history is never forgotten, and that we all do what we can to ensure the repair of the damages done.

Please check out this guide from the University of Manitoba's Centre for Human Rights "[Doing the Work: Truth Before Reconciliation](#)" that emerged from a panel discussion they held in collaboration with the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation for more suggestions on engaging in Reconciliation.

ix. What are the Calls to Action?

The 94 Calls to Action were created by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in response to the evidence and stories they gathered from 2008-2015. These Calls are intended as a roadmap to facilitate Reconciliation in Canada. You can read them [here](#).

x. What is the significance of the 215 unmarked graves found in Kamloops?

Since the [discovery of the 215 unmarked graves at the Kamloops Indian Residential School grounds in May of 2021](#), over 1000 more have been detected at old school grounds across Canada using ground penetrating radar. The TRC reports and accounts estimated 3213 children died at IRS, and even then, it was believed the number was higher. A report was published in 2015, in addition to the TRC's six volumes of reports entitled "[Where are the Children Buried?](#)" and has more detailed recommendations on how to address the issue.

Finding the graves is Call #75 in the Calls to Action:

75. We call upon the federal government to work with provincial, territorial, and municipal governments, churches, Aboriginal communities, former residential school students, and current landowners to develop and implement strategies and procedures for the ongoing identification, documentation, maintenance, commemoration, and protection of residential school cemeteries or other sites at which residential school

children were buried. This is to include the provision of appropriate memorial ceremonies and commemorative markers to honour the deceased children.

XI. Why is the word ‘Aboriginal’ used in the report and not Indigenous?

‘Aboriginal’ is the legal term used in the Constitution and laws of Canada, as well as the term “Indian,” in regard to Indian Status and the Indian Act. There is no legal definition of the term “Indigenous” in Canada and therefore the word Aboriginal is the most appropriate in this context. For more information on terminology see [The Elements of Indigenous Style](#) or Chelsea Vowel’s blog post “[What to Call us](#)”

xii. Engaging Students

When engaging students on this topic, consider how the conversations around Indian Residential Schools and their legacy will impact students with lived experiences in your classroom. While every educator has a responsibility to facilitate learning experiences through generative discussion and debate, conversations around the severity or impact of IRS, or whether IRS should be defined as genocide, will have impacts on students far beyond the classroom and do little to further reconciliation on campus, or in our society. Please handle the topic of IRS and the TRC with care, as Indigenous Peoples are living with the impacts of IRS today in all aspects of our lives – from education, to child welfare and incarceration, as well as our mental, physical, and emotional health, culture and spirituality.

a. Suggested activities:

Have students review the Truth and Reconciliation Report and the Calls to Action

- Have them identify calls that are relevant to their discipline, and how could they address them?
- Using CBC’s [Beyond94](#) Resource, have students explore the progress of various levels of government on the TRC Calls to Action

b. Teaching this topic with care:

When discussing or providing information on Indian Residential Schools, **please provide a content warning in advance of the lecture, materials, or discussion.** The purpose of providing content warnings is to ensure that anyone opening or

seeing content that might upset them, or trigger a trauma/emotional response, be prepared to navigate the content or skip it. Allowing Indigenous students to skip content on these topics that may be disturbing or triggering for them is a compassionate approach to teaching this material.

Content warnings could include language around: genocide, Indian Residential Schools, sexual abuse, violence against Indigenous Peoples.

E.g. *Content Warning: Indian Residential Schools, sexual abuse*

c. Student Support Resources

Please also provide the following support resources alongside any content, films, resources or messaging around Indian Residential Schools to your students:

- Elder Myrna Kicknosway is available and may be accessed via virtual appointment
 - Faculty can also invite Myrna or an Elder to their classroom to facilitate debrief circles and offer support. Please contact OII's Community Relations and Space Coordinator, Paula Hedgepeth at phedgepe@uwo.ca with your course, reason for seeking to invite an Elder, and applicable dates.
- Crisis Health & Wellness supports (including Mental Health Support) is available via **Western's Student Crisis Contact Information.**
- Off-campus support is also available via Atlohsa's Family Healing Services and its 24-hour Crisis Line at 1-800-605-7477.
- Zhaawanong Women's Shelter provides emergency shelter and support for Indigenous women and their children who are at risk of violence, abuse and/or homelessness. Crisis Line: Toll free 1-800-605-7477
- The national Indian Residential School crisis line is available to provide 24/7 support to Residential School survivors and others who are affected: 1-866-925-4419

XIII. Resources

- [National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation](#)
 - o [Reports](#)
 - o [NCTR Archives](#)
- [Orange Shirt Day official website](#)
- [Indian Residential School Survivors' Society](#)
- [Woodland Cultural Centre](#)
- [The Path, Module 3](#) (can be embedded into your course on OWL)
- Yellowhead Institute's [Calls to Action Accountability: A 2020 Status Update on Reconciliation](#)
- CBC's [Beyond 94](#) - looking at Calls to Action that have been achieved or are ongoing
- [The Children Remembered](#)
- [Historica Canada: Education Guide](#)
- [Legacy of Hope: Where are the Children \(Survivors Stories\)](#)
- [apihtawikosisan: Indigenous Issues 101](#)
- Podcasts & Episodes:
 - o [Historica Canada Residential Schools Podcast](#)
 - o [Canadaland: Residential Schools](#) (Ryan McMahon & Chelsea Vowel)
 - o [All of it: Connie Walker on Residential Schools](#)
 - o [Porcupine Podcast: Finding Healing after Surviving Residential Schools with George Tuccaro](#)
- Films/Videos:
 - o [Our Healing Journey](#)
(Two parts – Youtube; Chippewas of the Thames First Nation)
 - o [We Were Children](#) (NFB)
 - o [Indian Horse](#)
 - o [Our People Will be Healed](#) (NFB)
 - o Rhymes for Young Ghouls
 - o [Namwayut: We are all One, Truth and Reconciliation in Canada](#) (CBC Animation, Chief Robert Joseph)
 - o [Gord Downie's The Secret Path + Panel](#) (CBC Arts)
 - o [Canada's Dark Secret](#) (Al Jazeera English)
 - o [My Auntie Survived Residential School](#) (Sarain Fox, CBC Docs)
 - o [Murray Sinclair's Statement on Kamloops discoveries](#) (CBC)