

Egerton Ryerson, the Residential School System and Truth and Reconciliation

[Ryerson University](#) is proud of our history and of the contribution our namesake, Egerton Ryerson, made to Ontario's educational system. However, while Egerton Ryerson supported free and compulsory education, he also believed in different systems of education for White and Aboriginal children. These beliefs played a role in the establishment of what became the Residential School System that has had such a devastating impact on First Nations, Metis and Inuit people across Canada. While remaining proud of the "Ryerson tradition", we think it is important to acknowledge this role and in so doing firmly state our commitment to respectful relationships with Aboriginal communities, both within and outside Ryerson University.

Ryerson University is known for recognizing and celebrating diversity as one of its educational and employment strengths. Ryerson's student body is one of the most culturally diverse in Canada. Our undergraduate students represent approximately 146 countries around the world and our campus is arguably one of the most ethnically diverse in Canada. In addition, the University's Employment Equity Policy aims to achieve and maintain a representative workforce for all employees by actively seeking to attract individuals of diverse backgrounds while affirmatively addressing the historic under-representation of Aboriginal Peoples, people with disabilities, visible minorities and women.

Egerton Ryerson was a prominent 19th century Canadian who played an influential role in the fields of politics, religion, arts, sciences and education. Ryerson's major success was establishing a free and compulsory public education system that revolutionized education in Canada. The establishment of the Normal School, which was Toronto's first teacher's college in the mid-1800s, was a part of this process. The Normal School's facade sits at the heart of our campus forming the entrance to the University's Recreation and Athletic Centre. In addition, institutions that Ryerson pioneered developed into the Royal Ontario Museum, Ontario College of Art and Design, Ryerson University and the University of Guelph. Because of Ryerson's achievements, particularly in establishing the public education system as we know it today, our University was named after him in 1948.

Ryerson took a progressive stand in advocating for the separation of Church and State within education. His views were clearly expressed in his opinion of the Separate Schools Act of 1843 when he stated:

... no child shall be compelled to read any religious book or attend any religious exercise contrary to the wishes of his parents and guardians....My Report on a system of Public Elementary Instruction for Upper Canada, as well as various decisions and opinions

which I have given, amply show that I am far from advocating the establishment of denominational schools (Putman, 1912, p. 177-178).

However, when it came to education for Aboriginal children, Egerton Ryerson held a different position.

Residential Schools for Aboriginal children were not initially given this name. Throughout history, these schools have been called manual labour schools, industrial schools, boarding schools and residential schools. According to Miller (1996), the educational system for Aboriginal children

...consisted of larger institutions designated 'industrial' which were usually located far from reserves, and smaller boarding institutions, which were normally near or even on a reserve. The process of evolution would continue after the amalgamation of industrial and boarding schools into a single residential school system in 1923 (p. 148).

Nevertheless, there were no differences between industrial schools and boarding schools nor did the running of them change once they were amalgamated under the name of Residential Schools. According to Miller (1996) in 1910, "the superintendent of education, D.C. Scott, acknowledged that residential schools were 'divided into two classes, industrial and boarding, but the work carried on at each is in all essentials the same" (p. 141).

The precedent for what would become known as residential schools for Aboriginal children was established very early in Canadian history, beginning with the French Regime in the early 17th century. According to historian John Milloy (1999), first the Recollets and later the Jesuits created seminaries where Aboriginal children were educated. At these schools, children were taught religion and the French language, so that they "would be made French in heart and mind" (p. 14).

During the British Imperial Period, the Governor of Upper Canada, Sir Peregrine Maitland, submitted a proposal in 1820 that focussed on “civilizing” Aboriginal children through instruction and industry (Milloy, 1999). Most of Maitland’s concepts and techniques were implemented over the next 30 years in the schools for Aboriginal children (Milloy, 1999).

The Bagot Report of 1842 is viewed as the starting point for the residential school system. According to Milloy (1999), “the recommendations of the Bagot Commission Report began the reformulations that brought forward the assimilative policy and eventually the residential school system” (p. 13). The authors of the Bagot Report proposed the creation of “as many manual labour or industrial schools” as possible (p. 13). Milloy (1999) notes that when the Bagot Report was published, Egerton Ryerson was a “very influential supporter of residential education” for Aboriginal children (p. 15).

In 1847, five years after the publication of the Bagot Report, Egerton Ryerson was asked by the Department of Indian Affairs for his suggestions on “Industrial Schools for the benefit of the aboriginal Indian tribes” (Ryerson, 1847, p. 73). Of course, by this point, the Canadian government had already decided that such schools were going to be implemented throughout the country. At the time, Ryerson held the position of Chief Superintendent of Education in Upper Canada, which later became the province of Ontario. He complied with this request in a letter to George Vardon, Assistant Superintendent of Indian Affairs. In his letter, Ryerson (1847) states that for Aboriginal people “nothing can be done to improve and elevate his character and condition without the aid of religious feeling. This information must be superadded to all others to make the Indian a sober and industrious man” (p. 73).

In justifying his position that education should be different for White and Aboriginal children, Ryerson (1847) explained:

It is a fact established by numerous experiments, that the North American Indian cannot be civilized or preserved in a state of civilization (including habits of industry and sobriety) except in connection with, if not by the influence of, not only religious instruction and sentiment but of religious feelings (p. 73).

Ryerson (1847) was also clear on his understanding of the goal for the education of Aboriginal children, writing, “I understand the end proposed to be making of the pupils industrious farmers, and that learning is provided for and pursued only so far as it will contribute to that end” (p. 74). He also clearly indicated what bodies should oversee the schools for Aboriginal children, stating that there should be “concurrence between the

Government and the religious denominations through the agency of which each of these schools is to be conducted” (Ryerson, 1847, p. 74). However, Ryerson (1847) was also clear in his position that the “paramount authority of the government be preserved” through the “power over the grant” (p. 74). Thus, even though he indicated that the government and churches should be partners in overseeing the residential school system, he stressed that the government should hold the upper hand.

Ryerson (1847) concludes his letter by writing that he “will be ready at any time to do what I can to promote the objects of these contemplated industrial schools” (p. 77). However, there is no record of anything further about education for Aboriginal children by Egerton Ryerson after his letter of 1847.

Egerton Ryerson, as an influential and respected Canadian within the area of education, was taken seriously by the Department of Indian Affairs and most of his suggestions were implemented in the educational system for Aboriginal children. Although he did not implement or oversee the launch of the schools, he contributed to the blueprint of them.

In 1879, journalist and Tory candidate, Nicholas Flood Davin, submitted a document to the government, *Report on Industrial Schools for Indians and Half-Breeds*, which became the official justification for residential school education (Milloy, 1999). Davin references Egerton Ryerson’s letter of 1847 as supporting industrial schools for Aboriginal children. However, while this report convinced the Mcdonald government to officially begin industrial schools across the country during the 1800s, it was not, “as it is often characterized, the genesis of the residential school system” (Milloy, 1999, p. 8). In fact, when Davin submitted his report, four residential schools, called manual labour schools at the time, already existed in Ontario – the Mohawk Institute, Mount Elgin, Shingwauk and Wikwemikong (Milloy, 1999). Thus, even though Battleford Industrial School, which opened in 1883 in Battleford, Saskatchewan is said to be the first residential school in Canada (Miller, 1996), this is not accurate (Milloy, 1999). As Milloy (1999) states:

The thought even before the deed – that is, before the residential school system took full physical shape across the country – was violent in its intention to “kill the Indian” in the child for the sake of Christian civilization. In that way, the system was, even as a concept, abusive (p. xv).

Egerton Ryerson contributed to the concept of the residential school system.

During the years that these schools operated across Canada, it is estimated that 150,000 Aboriginal children were forced into them (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2002). In 1907, the Indian Affairs Chief Medical Officer reported that 15 – 24% of the children in the schools died each year which rose to 42% when considering those who were sent home to die (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2002). The list of horrific abuses endured by Aboriginal children include sexual and physical abuse, needles pushed through tongues for speaking Aboriginal languages, eating of rotten food and medical experiments (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2002). Those who survived the schools were denied their identities, languages and cultures as Aboriginal people which is known as “cultural genocide” (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2002).

According to the Aboriginal Healing Foundation (2002), there are approximately 75,000 former students of the schools alive today. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission estimates that there are [80,000 survivors](#). This educational system for Aboriginal children brought trauma into Aboriginal communities which has been passed on from generation to generation. Collectively, this is referred to as the intergenerational legacy of the Residential School System. This unresolved trauma has caused effects such as:

- Lateral violence (when an oppressed group turns on itself and hurts each other)
- Suicide
- Mental health issues such as depression and anxiety disorders
- Poverty
- Substance abuse
- Post traumatic stress disorder
- Low self-esteem
- Parenting skills based on unhealthy learned behaviours
- Unhealed physical injuries and illnesses (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2002)

Gordon Residential School, operated by the Anglican Church and located near Punnichy, Saskatchewan, was the last school to close in 1996 (Assembly of First Nations, 2010).

Today, Aboriginal survivors of the Residential School System, their children, grandchildren and communities are engaged in healing processes. The aim of truth and reconciliation is for Canada as a whole to recognize the history and impacts of this educational system upon Aboriginal peoples and support Aboriginal communities in re-claiming their identities. Once denial is broken and dialogue begins, Aboriginal peoples and other Canadians can engage in a process of reconciliation which will lead to a new chapter in our collective history. Ryerson University is committed to this truth

and reconciliation process which includes acknowledging the role that our namesake had in the conception of residential schools and creating a learning environment which welcomes and respects Aboriginal people.

References

- Aboriginal Healing Foundation (2002). Research series. Retrieved June 1, 2010 from <http://www.ahf.ca/publications/research-series>
- Assembly of First Nations (2010). History of Indian Residential Schools. Retrieved June 1, 2010 from <http://www.afn.ca/policy-sectors/indian-residential-schools/>
- Miller, J. (1996). *Shinguak's vision: A history of Native residential schools*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Milloy, J.S. (1999). *A national crime: The Canadian government and the residential school system, 1879 to 1986*. Winnipeg, MN: University of Manitoba Press.
- Putman, J.H. (1912). *Egerton Ryerson and education in upper Canada*. Toronto: William Briggs.
- Ryerson, E. (1847). Report by Dr. Ryerson on industrial schools, appendix A. In *Statistics respecting Indian schools*. Ottawa: Government Printing Bureau, 1898.
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2010). Residential Schools. Retrieved June 1, 2010 from https://wayback.archive-it.org/6602/20151123202957/http://1000conversations.ca/?page_id=48

For additional information

[Aboriginal Healing Foundation: Residential school](#)

[Annett, K. Hidden from history: The Untold Story of the Genocide of Aboriginal Peoples by Church and State in Canada](#)

[Indian and Northern Affairs Canada: Indian residential schools](#)

Knockwood, I. (1994). *Out of the depths: The experiences of Mi'kmaw children at the Indian residential school at Shubenacadie, N.S.* Lockport, NS: Roseway Publishing.

[Legacy of hope: History and legacy of Canada's residential school system](#)

[Library and Archives Canada: Aboriginal Documentary Heritage](#)

[Residential Schools Settlement Official Court Notice](#)

[Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples](#)

[Ryerson Archives: Egerton Ryerson, 1803 – 1882](#)