Regina Indian Industrial Residential School (1891 - 1910) was operated by the Presbyterian Church of Canada through the Foreign Mission Committee. The school was built on 320 acres of farm land on Wascana Creek, four miles (6.44 kms) northwest of Regina (Treaty 4). As an industrial school, the government paid all the expenses until 1893/94, when the school was put on a per capita grant of $120.1 However, correspondence regarding this transition did not make clear which institution was financially responsible for the maintenance and management of the school. A growing deficit was the cause of much debate over whom would pay. Due to public pressure, the government covered the deficits. The school closed in 1910, becoming a jail and later a home for delinquent boys. It was destroyed by fire in 1948.

Early Years

In its early years, the Regina school was reportedly thriving. Reverend Angus J. McLeod, the school’s first principal, reported in the second year of operation that the students had “put up a wire fence, had planted 4 acres of potatoes and vegetables, 9 acres of wheat, 19 acres of oats, 27 acres of mixed hay, as well as some barley, rye and millet.”2 Eight boys in carpentry had built a three-truss bridge over the Wascana, an ice-house, a root cellar, a laundry and a building that housed a carpentry shop, a paint shop, a shoe shop, and bedrooms for employees.3 In 1893, Principal McLeod requested a library, stating that although the students hadn’t yet taken an interest in books, it was important that they had opportunity to develop a taste for reading, especially during the winter months. By 1898, it was reported, "The books of the school library, all carefully selected, are in demand, especially during winter."4 George Raymond is an example of someone who did become a skilled trades worker from his education at the Regina school. He worked as a printer at the Moosomin World;5 Photo: Front view of Regina Indian Industrial School with men, horses and buggies out front, City of Regina Archives/CORA-B-714

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Deficit Debate: Mismanagement or Insufficient Per Capita Grant System and Who was Responsible to Pay

Following the death of Principal McLeod, Rev. John A. Sinclair was hired as principal in 1901. Two years later, Sinclair was running a deficit of nearly $6000 (June, 1903). Sinclair suggested the deficit was due to increased costs of repairs and reduced enrolment. The government called for an audit. The auditors reported that by January 1904, the deficit had increased to $9, 201. They attempted to explain the deficit, writing that since 1900, students in attendance had dropped from 106 to 76, which “materially affects the revenue of the Institution.” Also, that the amount received per pupil from the government was “in every case less” than the per capita of $120, due to the number of half-grant earning students. This meant that since 1900 when the school received $12, 378.73 the funding had dropped substantially to $5, 464.23 (7 months into the year). Though revenue had steadily decreased, expenditures had steadily increased and it did not appear to the auditors that there had been any excess in spending; the children were not “at all overfed.” The cost of heating, they speculated, must be “due to the difficulty in heating the building since they had not been ‘comfortably warm’ in their visit, though the weather had been moderate.” Further, “the salaries had increased but not beyond the normal rate and were considerably less than the amount estimated for wages.” Expenditures on repairs formed a large part of the deficit. The Principal’s annual estimates for required repairs were “very considerably reduced by the Department,” and so the repairs considered essential came out of the per capita grant.

The auditors concluded that the per capita system was not working: “When the Industrial Schools were established the Department regarded the ages between 6 and 14 as those the most suitable for admission, and when the schools were placed upon the per capita system there was no suggestion of any departure from that principle. In August 1900, however, the Department refused to pay more than one-half of the per capita grant for any child admitted to an Industrial School thereafter of less than 10 years of age.”7

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2 The History, Part 1 Origins to 1919, Vol. 5, p. 150
3 The History, Part 1 Origins to 1919, Vol. 5, p. 137
6 Missing Children and Unmarked Graves, Vol. 4, p. 126
7 Indian Affairs. RG 10, Vol. 3927, File 76, 126-1A. A 1904 report made to the Superintendent General of Indian Affairs by J.A. McKenna, J.A. Ahearn, and R.F. Mackay.
Abuse: A 1903 letter "noted that a female student ran away but was brought back and shut in a room by herself where she attempted to commit suicide by hanging. The staff member who found the girl in time 'pulled out a revolver and giving it to the girl told her to shoot herself. The girl took the revolver and shot twice but it was empty. The letter also mentioned that a runaway boy who was found by a staff member had his hands tied behind his back and was taken back to the IRS ‘in the manner of an animal.’" Also in 1903, "a missionary reported that two girls were raped by two boys in the basement of the school. A staff member threatened the students with terrible punishment if they spoke of the incident to their parents." (NCTR school summary, p. 5)

The report urged the government to reconsider its per capita model, and to "institute inquiry into the whole question of Indian education, with a view to ascertaining the relative value of education at Industrial Schools and at Boarding Schools, to making the work of the different grades of schools dovetail, and to laying down definite lines as to the recruiting of pupils." The auditors were critical of the recruiting done by the churches: "That Principals of Schools should tramp the country, at great expense, competing with each other, and even bribing parents to secure children for their schools is humiliating and demoralizing." They reminded the government that the "per capita system was adopted as a tentative one, and it was never intended that rates fixed when prices and wages were lower than they are to-day should continue irrespective of changed conditions."

However, Martin Benson’s (Dept. of Indian Affairs) response to the report placed responsibility solely on the principal, stating, "Since the death of the late Principal the Indians appear to be averse to sending their children to the school...In less than three years, it is over head and ears in debt, discredited by whites and Indians, and fast running down. Who is to blame for all this? Benson fixed the blame solely on Sinclair’s "extravagance, mismanagement, or incompetency. ...A 50% increase in consumption of provisions in three years indicates either starvation under the late Principal’s regime, or gluttony or waste under the present conditions. ...It was never the intention of the Department that a Principal of a school should assume the responsibility of purchasing material for repairs without authority, and it is beside the question whether the management was improvident in the matter of repairs or not, as it is the well-known rule of the Department that unauthorized expenditure is not to be recognized."

What followed was a debate between the Presbyterian church and the government over who was responsible for paying the deficit. The school had started out fully funded by the Department and had moved to the per capita model, but there had been no contract to clarify the responsibilities. In the end, because the public viewed the school as the Department’s, and to keep faith with creditors, the government paid the deficit, and gave instruction to put the buildings in a state of repair, and increased the per capita grant to $145. By the time this decision had been made in October 1904, however, the deficit had increased to almost $14,000.

In December, Benson submitted more evidence of Sinclair’s mismanagement, listing expense items he considered luxurious, such as cases of fruit, flowers for the grounds, and boots, shoes, uniform suits and knickerbockers—presumably for students. Clothing for students, in the eyes of the Department, should have been made not purchased. It should be noted that though Sinclair was being criticized for luxurious spending, over the months while the debate was waged over whom was financially responsible, the principal and staff were without salaries. It is hopeful, given this list of expenditures, that the students’ needs were being thought of and cared for while the school administrators were debating responsibility.

Illness and Death (1904)
A 1901 report indicated an inadequate isolation facility; however, three years later the issue had not yet been resolved. In January 1904, a student, Tom Peters (No. 183), developed small pox and was quarantined. The whole school was quarantined and building, bedding and clothing fumigated. Though the case was called an epidemic, only one student had small pox. There was an inquiry into the complaint that the case had not been treated properly. In February 1904, a student died (No. 169) of pulmonary tuberculosis. The student had been ill for about three months with this infectious disease. In the report, Dr. Graham recommends that "a room be set apart for nursing and treatment of such cases as they arise." Another student (No. 108), who suffered from an abdominal tumor, died following surgery in May 1904. Principal Sinclair died suddenly in January 1905. At the time of Sinclair’s death, it was discovered that the school was once again running a deficit of $2852 and the buildings were still in a state of disrepair.

R. B. Heron from File Hills took on the role as principal in 1905. He concluded that the cost of running the school was greater than the per capita grant. In 1908 an inspector reported that the school look ‘more like a deserted place than a government institution.’ The building was old, the floors worn, the plaster broken, and the paint worn off. Neither the children nor the dormitories appeared neat and tidy. There was no money for paint or bedsprads, or for replacing mattresses whose springs had sprung... By the following year, it was apparent that outbuildings were on the verge of collapse. Principal Heron also ran a deficit and the school was closed in 1910.
Debate over the future of the Regina school cemetery (1891 to 1910) illustrated “the challenges jurisdictions face when dealing with the residential school cemeteries, particularly those that now lie abandoned.

The Regina residential school cemetery was established on the western edge of the school property at 701 Pinkie Road. It became privately owned in the 1980s. In light of proposed development in the area, concern was raised about how best to protect the school cemetery.

An unpublished 2014 report prepared by the Regina Planning Department indicates that the cemetery contains the bodies of First Nations and Métis students as well as the children of the school’s first principal. A 2012 archaeological survey over the south part of the fenced cemetery yielded evidence of twenty-two graves. Documents dating to 1921 indicate that the original cemetery fence was destroyed in a prairie fire that might have also destroyed the wooden marker crosses of up to thirty-five or forty graves.

The planning document identified and evaluated various strategies for protection of the cemetery for the Municipal Heritage Advisory Committee to consider. The first option involved the City of Regina’s taking no further action. Since the cemetery is registered under the Saskatchewan Cemeteries Act, 1999, the landowner is deemed responsible for ongoing care. The cemetery is also currently registered as an archaeological site.

A second option was for the city to use its authority, under the Cemeteries Act, to compel the landowner to maintain the cemetery at a suitable standard. In this case, this was deemed to be adherence to the guidelines for “dryland vegetation management” (that is, regular cutting of grass within and around the cemetery). This option would ensure some level of maintenance of the cemetery while minimizing the landowner’s financial burden, but would fall short of offering enhanced heritage protection. A third option explicitly addressed the advisability of differing levels of municipal and provincial designation, commemoration, and protection.

Each of these three options was tempered by complex considerations regarding landowner responsibilities, the cost of site documentation required to facilitate heritage designation, and the potential risk to municipalities of precedent-setting decisions with budget implications. All the options recognized the need for appropriate consultation with First Nations communities from whom the deceased students originated. These complex issues will be common to many future discussions about how best to address the maintenance of residential school cemeteries, particularly those that lie abandoned and are not maintained.” (Extracted from NCTR Final Report: Missing Children and Unmarked Burials, Vol. 4, pp. 133-134)

In September 2016, the City of Regina officially approved heritage status for the cemetery at the former site of the Regina Indian Industrial School. RIIS Media is campaigning for a commemoration stone for the site.
"From 1891 to 1897, 48 children died at the Regina Indian Industrial School."
(The History, Part 1 Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 394)

The only marker remaining at the Regina Indian Industrial School cemetery: John Meredith and Robert Duncan, both died as infants. (Photo by Shuana Niessen)

Click to hear a podcast about efforts being made to provide a commemorative stone in remembrance of the children who died at the RIIS and who are buried in the institution’s cemetery. (Photo by Shuana Niessen)