Aboriginal policy. Dennis advised Macdonald that the long-term goal should be to instruct "our Indian and half-breed populations" in farming, raising cattle, and the mechanical trades, rendering them self-sufficient. This would pave the way "for their emancipation from tribal government, and for their final absorption into the general community." Dennis argued that residential schools were key to fulfilling these goals. It was his opinion that in a short time, schools might become "self-sustaining institutions."[108]

In the following year, Nicholas Davin, a failed Conservative candidate, carried out a brief study of the boarding schools that the United States government had established for Native Americans. He recommended that Canada establish a series of such schools on the Prairies. Davin acknowledged that a central element of the education provided at these schools would be directed towards the destruction of Aboriginal spirituality. Since all civilizations were based on religion, it would be inexcusable, he thought, to do away with Aboriginal faith "without supplying a better [one]." For this reason, he recommended that while the government should fund the schools, the churches should operate them.[109]

The decision to continue to rely on the churches to administer the schools on a day-to-day basis had serious consequences. The government constantly struggled, and failed, to assert control over the churches' drive to increase the number of schools they operated. At various times, each denomination involved in school operation established boarding schools without government support or approval, and then lobbied later for per capita funding. When the churches concluded, quite legitimately, that the per capita grant they received was too low, they sought other types of increases in school funding. Building on their network of missions in the Northwest, the Catholics quickly came to dominate the field, usually operating twice as many schools as did the Protestant denominations. Among the Protestant churches, the Anglicans were predominant, establishing and maintaining more residential schools than the Methodists or the Presbyterians. The United Church, created by a union of Methodist and Presbyterian congregations, took over most of the Methodist and Presbyterian schools in the mid-1920s. Presbyterian congregations that did not participate in the union established the Presbyterian Church in Canada and retained responsibility for two residential schools. In addition to these national denominations, a local Baptist mission ran a residence for Aboriginal students in Whitehorse in the 1940s and 1950s, and a Mennonite ministry operated three schools in northwestern Ontario in the 1970s and 1980s. Each faith, in its turn, claimed government discrimination against it. Competition for converts meant that churches sought to establish schools in the same locations as their rivals, leading to internal divisions within communities and expensive duplication of services.

The model for these residential schools for Aboriginal children, both in Canada and the United States, did not come from the private boarding schools to which members of the economic elites in Britain and Canada sent their children. Instead, the model came from the reformatories and industrial schools that were being constructed in Europe and North America for the children of the urban poor. The British parliament adopted the