Staff members were often motivated by a spirit of adventure as well as a religious commitment. As a young seminary student in Corsica, a French island in the Mediterranean, Nicolas Coccola wanted more than a life as a priest. In his memoir, he wrote, "The desire of foreign missions with the hope of martyrdom appeared to me as a higher calling." He ended up living out his life as a residential school principal in British Columbia.[582] As a small boy in England in the middle of the nineteenth century, Gibbon Stocken read with enthusiasm the missionary literature sent to him by an aunt. When he turned seventeen, he volunteered his services to the Anglican Church Missionary Society. He hoped to be sent to India. Instead, he was offered a position on the Blackfoot Reserve in what is now southern Alberta.[583] British-born nurse and midwife Margaret Butcher managed to get to India, where she worked for a British family. From there, she made her way to British Columbia, where she worked with a Methodist mission to Japanese immigrants.[584] In 1916, she was on her way to a job at the Methodist residential school in Kitamaat, British Columbia.[585]

This mix of motivations continued throughout the system's history. Lorraine Arbez, who worked at the Qu'Appelle school in the 1950s, said, "I chose this career to work with the children and my aim was to do something good with them and I hope I was of some use."[586] For Noreen Fischbuch, who worked at schools in Ontario and Alberta in the 1950s and 1960s, the residential schools offered much-needed experience: "As far as I was concerned, it was a teaching job, it was with the kids and I liked the kids.... The kids were getting an education; I had a job."[587] George Takashima, who taught at Sioux Lookout, explained, "I was just sort of adventuresome, you might say."[588]

Almost all the staff members were poorly paid. Government officials took the position that because many of the staff members belonged to missionary organizations, pay was a "minor consideration."[589] As a result, the schools had problems recruiting and keeping staff. Alexander Sutherland of the Methodist Church was particularly outspoken about the link between low wages and the difficulties the schools had in recruiting staff. In 1887, he wrote to the minister of Indian Affairs about the "difficulty of obtaining efficient and properly qualified teachers, on account of the meagre salaries paid."[590] The issue of low pay never went away. More than half a century later, in 1948, C. H. Birdsall, the chair of the United Church committee responsible for the Edmonton school, complained that it "is impossible for the Residential School to offer salaries in competition with" rates that Indian Affairs was paying teachers at day schools. Given the inadequate quality of accommodation, equipment, and staff at the school, he felt that it was "doubtful the present work with Indian Children could properly be called education."[591] Many of the Catholic schools survived on what amounted to volunteer labour. In 1948, Sechelt principal H. F. Dunlop informed Ottawa, "If this school kept out of the red during the past year it was largely due to the fact that four Oblates, working here full time, received in salaries from Jan 1947 to Jan 1948 the grand total of $1800."[592] As late as 1960, the nuns at the Christie Island school were being paid $50 a month—a fact that made Principal A. Noonan "feel like a heel."[593]