

The failure to develop, implement, and monitor effective discipline sent an unspoken message that there were no real limits on what could be done to Aboriginal children within the walls of a residential school. The door had been opened early to an appalling level of physical and sexual abuse of students, and it remained open throughout the existence of the system.

Abuse: “And he did awful things to me.”

From the nineteenth century onwards, the government and churches were well aware of the risk that staff might sexually abuse residential school students. As early as 1886, Jean L’Heureux, who worked as a translator for Indian Affairs and a recruiter for Roman Catholic schools in Alberta, was accused of sexually abusing boys in his care. The officials responsible for the schools recognized that his actions were not appropriate. Despite this, there is no record of a criminal investigation being carried out at the time.⁴³³ When new allegations against L’Heureux emerged in 1891, he was allowed to resign. In dealing with the matter, Indian Affairs Deputy Minister Lawrence Vankoughnet hoped “it would not be necessary to state the cause which led to the same [the resignation].”⁴³⁴

When it came to taking action on the abuse of Aboriginal children, early on, Indian Affairs and the churches placed their own interests ahead of the children in their care and then covered up that victimization. It was cowardly behaviour.

This set the tone for the way the churches and government would treat the sexual abuse of children for the entire history of the residential school system. Complaints often were ignored. In some cases where allegations were made against a school principal, the only measure that Indian Affairs took was to contact the principal.⁴³⁵ In at least one case, Indian Affairs officials worked with school officials to frustrate a police investigation into abuse at a school. When attempting to return some runaway boys to the Kuper Island school in 1939, British Columbia Provincial Police officers concluded that there was good reason to believe the boys had run away because they were being sexually abused at the school. The police launched an investigation and refused to return the boys to the school.⁴³⁶ When Indian Affairs officials finally investigated, they concluded that the allegations had merit. However, to protect the school’s reputation, the local Indian Affairs official advised the suspected abusers to leave the province, allowing them to avoid prosecution.⁴³⁷ Nothing was done for the students who had been victimized or for their parents.

These patterns persisted into the late twentieth century. Officials continued to dismiss Aboriginal reports of abuse.⁴³⁸ In some cases, staff members were not fired, even after being convicted of assaulting a student.⁴³⁹ Complaints were improperly investigated. For example, charges of sexual impropriety made against the principal of the Gordon’s school were investigated by a school staff member in 1956.⁴⁴⁰ Church officials failed to report cases of abuse to Indian Affairs, and Indian Affairs failed to report cases of abuse to families.⁴⁴¹ It