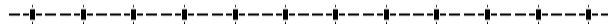


## History of Cree Education



In Canada we Aboriginal people educated our children in our own way long before the coming of the Europeans. In hunting communities like ours, education was simply part of our everyday lives. Our children learned from their parents and grand-parents. They learned by watching and doing. They sat at the feet of their Elders, absorbing their knowledge, wisdom and attitudes. This is where our unique Aboriginal approach to the natural world was passed on from generation to generation. This is where Aboriginal people developed our sense that we are participants in the natural world, dependent upon and responsible to all creatures and to the land and waters we jointly occupy, use and nurture, respectful of them all.

None of this created problems. We were a well-adjusted people. But as European-style society began to encircle and encroach upon us, our people were confronted with needs they had never known before. As Canadian society became more complex, so did our need to communicate with those around us become more complex and difficult.

With the arrival of European-style education in formal institutions our real problems began.  
(For the view of a [Cree Elder, Robbie Matthew](#), senior, of Chisasibi, on the modern education system, click here).

These institutions with their rigid school years, their rigid school-days, their concentration on European-style knowledge, did not blend well with the Cree way of life. Even if the schools were in our communities, which at the beginning was only rarely so, their very existence constituted a rude interruption in the rhythms of our hunting lives, requiring a sharp break in our own bush-based education system, since the children were required to stay in the communities while the parents pursued their traditional lives in the bush. This proved to be an agonizing system for children and parents alike. Children whose education had started in the bush, at the early age of five or six were confined to the educational institutions. By this move, they lost not only the love and security of their close families, but lost also the only role-models they had ever known. They were placed in institutions which seemed harsh and unfeeling. Institutions which prevented them from using their own language, which bent every effort to make the children over, rebuilding them into images of the Europeans who were now running things.

The system, in fact, was a caricature of what an educational system should have been. And its negative impact on Aboriginal life was disastrous from coast to coast. The ideology of the Euro-Canadian education system was consistent with the federal government's attitude to Aboriginal people as expressed in the Indian Act --- to assimilate Aboriginal people into the norms of Euro-Canadian life. As late as 1966, the survey of the economic, political and educational needs of the contemporary Indians of Canada (known as the Hawthorn Report), was still able to describe the traditional government ideology as "isolationist, protectionist and paternalistic." This attitude had been in full command before the Second World War, but, the report said, even after a revision of the Indian Act in 1951, the same attitude still pervaded the Act and the government attitudes.

The Hawthorn report led to an effort to improve the education offered to Aboriginal children, but, to quote the words of the late Richard F. Salisbury in his 1986 book *A Homeland for the Cree*, the system still "tended to reflect southern white views of 'desirable schooling' rather than northern realities," leading to a "disjunction between schooling designed to fit middle-class southern Canadians into urban life, and children growing up in northern Indian villages."

Historically, the Anglican church before the Second World War ran elementary schools in Fort George, now Chisasibi, (for children from the coastal bands) and Moose Factory, across the Ontario border, (for children from the inland bands). These, and the hostels which went along with them, were supported by the federal government. Faced with home-sickness, with the terrors of having a foreign language forced on them, and with a wildly unsuitable curriculum, few of these children made it through all six grades needed to graduate to high school. Residential schools at Brantford, Ontario and La Tuque, Quebec accepted primary level pupils as boarders during the 1960s, and by 1968 psychologists such as Peter Sindell, of McGill University were reporting on the severe psychological problems suffered by the Cree children who were subjected to this regime. A large number of these children, reported Sindell, were suffering from clinically observable symptoms of depression. In other words, the system was a disaster.

A primary school opened in Mistissini in 1964. The quality of teachers improved, but the commitment of such teachers to the community was minimal. Usually the teachers would leave the community the day after the school year ended; to be replaced by a different lot the day before the next school year opened.

By 1971 each Cree community had a village primary school, in some of the smaller villages simply a one-room school for grades 1 and 2, up to grade 6 in Mistissini and Fort George. In these two communities, children from the other Cree communities had to become boarders (or live with foster parents), but at least they were able to stay in Cree communities. By 1971 the provision of foster care and support for the school had become the major source of wage-income in Fort George.

At this time, the few students who were able to make it through the primary system were found places in urban high schools. The first group went to Sault Ste. Marie, and later groups to Hull, Quebec, and Brampton, Ontario, where they were boarded with local families.

The first local high school was established in Fort George in 1972, which became the educational centre of the region. Still, local communities had no say over the education of their children.

"In practice," writes Salisbury, "regional planning by white officials developed an entire system, utilizing the system of grades, curricula and recruitment of teachers that was used across Canada in Department of Indian Affairs schools. Salisbury's figures show that in 1971-2 70 per cent of the 607 children between the ages of four and nine were attending school. He estimated that some 30 per cent of parents delayed sending their children to school because they wanted to have them in the bush with them during the winter. Of children from 10 to 14, some 73 per cent were in school; of those between 15-19 some 55 per cent; of those between 20 and 24, only 20 were attending an educational institution, a rate of 14 per cent, which Salisbury estimated placed Cree education some 10 years behind that of rural populations in other parts of Quebec.

He admitted, however, that the results of this education were not impressive: Cree children averaged more than three years older in each grade than the Canadian average, as a result of their delayed entry into school, their need to master a second language, and their feelings of alienation. He said this alienation resulted from (1) exposure to teachers who were strangers to the north, (2) irrelevant curricula, and (3) an apparent lack of purpose for education, since few local Crees at that time were able to pursue careers that required an education.

His summary of the situation before the launching of the James Bay hydro project in 1971 was:

"Cree education was neither intolerably bad nor commendably good in 1971. It was improving rapidly from an earlier period of neglect; it had reached the standard of rural school systems in southern Canada of perhaps ten years earlier; it was provided by white officials, through white teachers, in village schools. Involvement of Cree in the provision of that education, and in a concern for its quality, was restricted to a very small number of individuals. None had yet become involved in the regional structures outside the villages that supplied the village school."

By 1967 the first six Cree high school graduates had returned from Sault Ste. Marie, in time to find themselves and their society plunged into the crisis posed by the James Bay hydro project. These first six graduates were Billy Diamond, Albert Diamond, Philip Awashish, Peter Gull, Buckley Petawabano and John Mark. By 1971 perhaps another 30 had joined them, and there were about another 100 or so who had attended high school, but dropped out. When the James Bay hydro project was announced, these few young Crees, who had come through the white man's schools and learned English, were the core of those who had to carry the burden of negotiating the Cree future, steering a course against all-powerful governments and huge billion-dollar development companies, who, at first, virtually ignored the existence of the Cree people.

One of the aspects of the future that they negotiated in the [James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement](#) in 1975 was their own Cree School Board. Like almost everything else about this Agreement, they negotiated the best deal they could, but, because of the duress under which the Agreement was negotiated, the result was far from perfect.

The Cree School Board was to have one school commissioner appointed by each of the Cree communities and one commissioner appointed by the Grand Council. Elementary and secondary school committees were to be established in each community with elementary and secondary schools.

But the board was placed under the surveillance of the Quebec department of education, and was required in many ways to follow their guidelines.

The Board's by-laws, for example, require the approval of the Quebec education minister, who could disallow any by-law within 40 days of its being passed by the Board (a provision very similar to the long-term practice established in the Indian Act, in respect of all by-laws passed by Indian Band Councils).

The Quebec government was to contribute 25%, the federal government 75% of the Cree School Board budget, "in accordance with a formula to be determined by the Quebec Department of Education, the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and the Crees."

Quebec and Canada undertook to ensure the continuation of existing educational services and programs to the Crees, including student allowances, maintenance of foster homes for students, and living, tuition and transportation allowances for post-secondary students.

The School Board was to negotiate working conditions for its employees "in consultation with the Minister of Education," but exempted were to be "basic salary, basic marginal benefits and basic work loads", all of which were negotiated at the provincial level, in which the Crees had no say. (By such measures, outside standards negotiated for the province as a whole, were rapidly imposed on the Cree School Board in several areas).

Nevertheless, to have their own school board was a huge advance for the Crees over anything that had gone before, providing us with the opportunity to provide a relevant education for Cree children.

For example, the Cree School Board was given special powers to make agreements with Canada for programs not provided by Quebec; to determine the school year and school calendar (always within the limits established for the Quebec system as a whole); to determine the number of Aboriginal persons and non-Aboriginal persons required as teachers in each of its schools; to hire Aboriginal persons as teachers even though they might not be fully qualified; to select courses, textbooks and teaching materials appropriate for the Crees; to develop courses, textbooks and materials designed to preserve and transmit the Cree language and culture; to make agreements with universities, colleges, institutions or individuals for the development of the courses, textbooks and materials for its programs and services; and to establish courses and training programs to qualify Aboriginal persons as teachers.

Furthermore, the Agreement provided that Cree should be a teaching language.

As the Cree School Board became established, by 1981 the Cree school population had increased to some 2,700 from 1,700 just ten years before, with an increase in those educated on-reserve, and a considerable reduction in those, especially in the early years of secondary school, sent out for schooling to Ontario and Quebec provincial schools.

With the growing population of Crees in Eeyou Astchee, the number of pupils in various levels of Cree schooling by 1997 had reached some 4,000, almost four times higher than in the early 1970s. See [1997 Annual report of Cree School Board](#).

