

Globe and Mail – OPINION

It's time to bring our children home from the residential schools

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TK'EMLÚPS TE SECWÉPEMC FIRST NATION

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There was a moment at Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation on Sunday evening, when a young boy suddenly sang out as he banged his hand drum on the powwow grounds.

Everyone listened in quiet awe, as we heard him sing, his echoes caressing the grounds of where the [remains of 215 children were discovered](#) at the former Kamloops Indian Residential School.

As his voice waned, he was answered by nearly 100 hand drummers who boomed forward in unity, gathered here from other nations and communities throughout Okanagan and Kamloops.

This is the sound of the drum. The beating of a heart.

It is the sound of all [Indigenous Peoples](#) on Turtle Island as we mourn what we knew – what Canada knew all along. That the children are buried here. Underneath our feet. Where they have been for decades.

The survivors of the Indian Residential School system told stories of their brothers and sisters, their friends and family members who went missing without a trace and no one did anything about it. Nothing at all. It was as if Canada did not believe them.

Where is the list of the children's names?

Why didn't the police investigate?

What in God's name are they doing now?

In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) published an entire volume called Missing Children and Unmarked Burials that is 266 pages long. "The most basic of questions about missing children – Who died? Why did they die? Where are they buried? – have never been addressed or comprehensively documented by the Canadian government," the report reads.

The TRC recorded 3,200 deaths – but that is just a small fraction of the true number. Former senator Murray Sinclair has told me it is more likely 15,000 lost as there were 1,300 different types of schools across Canada that Indigenous children were sent to or attended.

Canada only sanctioned 139 schools to be part of the commission.

Yes, that is another dirty secret – 1,300 schools that were privately run, run by other religious dominations or provinces. [Survivors have tried to petition](#) the government to add more schools to the list since the 2007 Indian Residential Settlement Schools Agreement was signed.

And, of the 3,200, the TRC notes that for just under one-third of those deaths, the government and the schools did not record the name of the student who died. For under one-quarter of the deaths, they did not record the gender of the student and [for almost half of them they did not record the cause of death](#).

Canada knows the story. Has held it in its hands and has repeatedly looked away.

The TRC sought additional funding from Canada to find and preserve the resting places all of the lost children. But Canada [callously said no to this request](#) – first by former Conservative Indian Affairs minister Jim Prentice and then former Indian Affairs minister Chuck Strahl.

If you need a roadmap, complete with aerial pictures and graphics pointing to some sites where the children are, read Dr. Scott Hamilton's report, ["Where are the Children Buried?"](#) on the National Truth and Reconciliation Commission website.

"In some cases information is readily available, but in others there was little to be found in the available archival documents. In those situations attention shifted to an internet-based search, coupled with examination of maps and satellite images," he wrote.

If Dr. Hamilton can do it, why can't Canada?

When Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was first elected, he promised to fulfill all of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action. Mr. Prime Minister, we are calling you in on that promise.

In the case of the Kamloops school, the silent-on-this-matter Catholic Church, [said this Monday](#):

"As we see ever more clearly the pain and suffering of the past, the Bishops of Canada pledge to continue walking side by side with Indigenous Peoples in the present, seeking greater healing and reconciliation for the future."

The survivors knew the truth. That their playmates disappeared. They got sick and never came back. They ran away, were never seen again. And worse.

Pope Francis must apologize at the very least. Canada, who sanctioned the Catholic Church to take care of the students, must demand it.

Time and again, be it the children who died in Thunder Bay while going to high school from 2000 to 2011, to our murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls, we have seen a lack of investigations, a turning away, done by press release from police authorities who are quick to say a "sudden death" occurred, "no foul play suspected," and they move on.

Across Canada, governments, schools and institutions are lowering their flags. People are wearing their orange T-shirts – a trend started by Phyllis Webstad after she attended the St. Joseph Mission school when she was six years old.

Do you hear the sound of the drum, Canada?

It is time to find our children. Show them they are not forgotten. That they mattered and are loved.