

# A Visit to the Dark Parts of Canada's Past: Taking Steps Towards a Brighter Future

by Craig and Marc Kielburger



Not far from the sleepy suburb where we grew up, there is a site of unspeakable trauma.

About 120 kilometres west of Toronto, you'll find the grounds of the former Mohawk Institute, one of Canada's longest-run residential schools. From 1828 until it finally shuttered in 1970, thousands of Indigenous children were sent to the boarding school, ripped from their families in an act of cultural genocide.

The site of this historic trauma is separated from our idyllic childhood by a short stretch of Highway 401—but we never saw it.

We're betting most readers haven't, either.

Some of our strongest memories from school involve field trips to museums and science centres. We visited none of the sites from our nation's darkest moments.

Most of the roughly [140 residential schools](#) that once dotted the country were tucked away, but a few stood near major cities and towns, with grounds or memorials still accessible to the majority of Canadians.

Over nine million people in Ontario's golden horseshoe live within 300 kilometres of the [Woodland Cultural Centre](#) that now occupies the buildings of the Mohawk Institute in Brantford, Ontario. Around 15,000 people visit every year, including many school groups, to learn about the past, present and future of First Nations in Ontario and the impact of Canada's residential schools.

Seeing history is often more powerful than learning about it in textbooks—but far fewer people visit the grounds of former residential schools near Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Winnipeg, Saskatoon or Halifax. Museums many not stand at those sites, but the grounds, remaining structures and often-unmarked cemeteries can still tell stories that are important for all Canadians to hear. Following the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, all sites of former residential schools [should have memorials](#).

For many, like Ry Moran, Director of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, preserving and witnessing these grounds is a step toward reconciliation. "The buildings and

the sites ought to be remembered, designated, commemorated," he says. "They offer a chance to learn."

The [80,000 residential school survivors](#) still alive today are getting older—remembering their stories should be a pressing concern for all Canadians. We're not the only ones with dark spots on our history, and we can take a cue from others.

In response to a [rising tide of antisemitism](#), a Berlin state legislator tabled a radical idea earlier this year: [mandatory trips](#) to former Nazi concentration camps for all Germans. The only way to combat the evils of history, she said, is to confront them.

We think Canadians have more confronting to do.

"It's important to see the schools, to see the evidence, to see where the children slept and where too many of them are buried," says Moran.

Not all young people can visit a residential school and not all Indigenous communities want to open the doors of their trauma. The community most affected should have the last word on how to memorialize their history. But parents and educators who have the opportunity and community consent can make our history come alive for the youngest Canadians, charting a better path forward.

*Craig and Marc Kielburger are the co-founders of the **WE movement**, which includes WE Charity, ME to WE Social Enterprise and WE Day. For more dispatches from WE, check out **WE Stories**.*