

## **Seeking truth at North Vancouver's residential school**

*"Direct me in your truth"* is a fitting and timely motto of North Vancouver's St. Thomas Aquinas Secondary School, given this summer's renewed anguish of national reckoning over residential schools, as the discovery of hundreds of unmarked graves are being reported across the country.

Late last month, North Vancouver MLA Bowinn Ma and I each wrote to the school's principal and the Superintendent of Catholic Schools of the Archdiocese of Vancouver in support of a request from the Squamish Nation for their cooperation in an Indigenous-led inquiry of St. Paul's Indian Residential School.

The now-demolished school was located on what is currently the parking lot of St. Thomas Aquinas, in the 500-block of West Keith Road.

Over 2,000 students from six generations attended the school between 1899 and 1959. Squamish Nation spokesperson Khelsilem has called St. Paul's a "horrific place of abuse for many Squamish and other Indigenous peoples."

In the 1930s, authorities described the school as an overcrowded 'death trap' and a 'fire trap,' and raised concerns about children not being fed properly. Survivors have spoken about sexual and emotional abuse. It is not known how many children died while at the school.

"The Squamish Nation joins many others in calling for the implementation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls-to-action," Khelsilem has said, "which include developing and implementing strategies and procedures for the identification of cemeteries or other sites at which residential school children are buried."

"Stories passed on to us by our elders and survivors tell of horrific conditions with unaccounted disappearances. We don't know precisely what happened at St. Paul's, which is why we want to do a fulsome investigation," he stated.

## **Investigation in planning stage**

To honour the victims and survivors of St. Paul's Indian Residential School, it is extremely important that this work is done right. The Squamish Nation Council is currently gathering information to best determine what an Indigenous-led inquiry could look like.

Consistent with the motto of St. Thomas Aquinas School, the Superintendent of Catholic Schools and the Archdiocese of Vancouver have promised their full support and cooperation. So, too, have the City of North Vancouver, and the provincial and federal governments.

"The solidarity of support has been helpful and welcome, as many of our people are devastated by the latest confirmations of the ongoing legacy of residential schools," Khelsilem says.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission estimated that more than 4,100 Indigenous students died in residential schools across Canada. Through the experiences shared by survivors, we know that there are other cases of unmarked graves across the country, and many more will be located. This is the grim reality of residential schools.

## **Trauma a revelation for some**

Some Canadians are only now learning of the trauma that survivors, families, and communities are experiencing because of the intergenerational impacts of residential schools.

More than 150,000 Indigenous children were forced to attend the institutions from the 1870s until the late 1990s. Many were abused physically and sexually, forced to learn English, and sometimes harshly prevented from practicing their cultural traditions and languages.

While this is often referred to as a dark chapter of Canada's past, Indigenous people are living with the repercussions today. Survivors, and the families and communities who never knew what happened to their children, are still living through this tragedy and we must support them.

I was very affected on Canada Day by the words spoken by Carleen Thomas of the Tsleil Waututh nation. She said, "It's OK not to know. But it's not OK to do nothing - now that you do know."

We can all assist in the healing process by listening to and supporting individuals and communities, and by educating ourselves about the historic mistreatment of Indigenous peoples. The Truth and Reconciliation Report is only a Google search away.

“Direct me in your truth.”