

Underfunding, short rations and overwork contributed, doctors and agents across the system reported, to the children's ill-health, and some doctors even alerted the department to a connection they observed between malnutrition and tuberculosis.¹⁹⁹ Furthermore, the range and quality of food the children did receive was affected by efforts to economize. It was a widespread practice "to sell most of the milk and eggs...in order to augment maintenance funds".²⁰⁰ Inspector R.H. Cairns was so disturbed by this practice in the British Columbia schools, and in particular by milk skimming to collect cream for sale, that he declared, "if I had my way I would banish every separator....The pupils need the butter fat so much."²⁰¹

By many departmental accounts, the variety of food served was limited; "decidedly monotonous" was the way Benson described the "regulation school meal" in 1897 – "bread and drippings or boiled beef and potatoes".²⁰² In fact, there appears to have been a persistent shortage of meat and fish which, unlike grains and vegetables, were difficult to secure in bulk and to store.²⁰³ Ironically, children entering a school likely left behind a better diet, provided by communities still living on the land, than what was provided by the churches and the department.

Unfortunately, it is impossible to assess the nutritional value of school diets before 1946. In that year, however, the nutrition division of the department of national health and welfare surveyed the food services at eight schools. Though the department characterized the results as "fairly satisfactory", the report itself did not support such a conclusion but rather confirmed the impressions given by the files throughout the history of the system. The dietitians found that "mediocre" salaries secured kitchen staff who were "unqualified", carried out their "work in a careless and uninterested fashion" and thus "the food quality was not good". Poor menu planning that failed to recognize the nutritional value of certain foods, equipment that was "unfit", "antiquated cooking facilities", and bad cooking practices contributed to the "nutritional inadequacy of the children's diet", which lacked sufficient amounts of vitamins A, B and C. The children received too little meat and not enough green vegetables, whole grains, fruit, juices, milk, iodized salt and eggs.²⁰⁴

The dietitians laid much of the blame for the conditions they described on "financial limitations" – the same limitations that plagued every other aspect of the system and always led in the end to neglect of the children. With the benefit of hindsight, Davey's 1968 review of the system up to 1950 acknowledged that fact. Neither the churches nor the department, he charged,

appeared to have had any real understanding of the needs of the children....The method of financing these institutions by per capita grants was an iniquitous system which made no provision for the establishment and maintenance of standards, even in such basic elements as staffing, food and clothing.²⁰⁵

All that was to have changed in 1957, when the department brought an end to the per capita system and placed the schools on a "controlled cost basis" intended to achieve "greater efficiency in their operation" as well as to assure proper "standards of food, clothing and supervision at all schools." This system was formalized by new contracts with the churches signed in 1961. The government was prepared to "reimburse each school for actual expenditures within certain limitations."²⁰⁶ Those limitations were translated into allowances – maximum rates set for teachers' salaries, transportation, extra-curricular activities, rental costs, building repairs and maintenance, and capital costs.

In terms of standards of care, the department strove to bring the budgeting process more into line with the children's needs and regional cost differentials. In particular, with food and clothing, it attempted "to make special provision for the requirements of older children." Thus in calculating the allowances for food and clothes, the children were divided into two groups, those in grade 6 and lower grades and those in grade 7 or higher grades, with appropriate rates assigned to each.²⁰⁷ In addition, as early as 1953, the department began to issue directives to the schools on issues of care, and more detailed reporting procedures by principals were developed.

None of this was enough, however, to prevent a continuation of problems still endemic in the system. The post-1957 record of the controlled cost system was not an improvement over the previous decades. There was in fact an underlying contradiction between the intention to close down the system and that of keeping the schools in peak physical condition. Davey himself signalled this in recommending that “expenditures should be limited to emergency repairs which are basic to the health and safety of the children” in cases “where closure is anticipated, due to integration”.²⁰⁸ Budgeting favoured integration, which was at the centre of the department’s education strategy. In a detailed brief to the department in 1968, the national association of principals and administrators of Indian residences pointed out that in the allocation of funds, the integration program received a much greater proportion, resulting in a situation where “our Federal schools are sadly neglected when compared with the Provincial schools.”²⁰⁹ Indeed, a report commissioned by the department established in 1967 that the funding level was still very “low in comparison with most progressive institutional programs” in the United States and in the provincial sector.²¹⁰

The principals’ association went on to detail the effects of underfunding in a school-by-school survey that echoed the Paget report – a long system-wide catalogue of deferred maintenance, hazardous fire conditions, inadequate wiring, heating and plumbing, and much needed capital construction to replace structures that were “totally unsuitable and a disgrace to Indian affairs”. Even schools built since the war to serve communities in areas outside the scope of integration gave evidence of faulty construction and inadequate recreation, residence and classroom space. In conclusion, the association tried to impress upon the department the seriousness of the situation. It was not prepared to accept the “old cliché: lack of funds”. That was “not an excuse, nor an explanation for we know that funds do exist.”²¹¹

In a memo from Davey forwarded to the deputy minister along with the association’s brief, he admitted that,

Although I can take exception to some of the examples given in the brief, the fact remains that we are not meeting requirements as we should nor have we provided the facilities which are required for the appropriate functioning of a residential school system.²¹²

It was impossible to do so, for there were simply “too many of these units” and the department was too heavily committed in other areas of higher priority – in community development, integration and welfare expenditures. Nor did he think it was wise to devote effort to achieving increased appropriations for, with “the best interests of the Indian children” in mind, it was more sensible to close the system down.²¹³

The deputy minister, J.A. Macdonald, followed this line in his reply to the principals. There was no attempt to refute their characterization of the condition of the system. The department had failed, he conceded, to carry out “necessary repairs and renovations and capital projects”. This had been “simply due to financial limitations”, which he was sure, taking refuge in the “old cliché”, would not improve in the future.²¹⁴ In the final analysis, however, the funds were inadequate and, as the association asserted, it was always the children who were “the first to feel the pinch of departmental economy”.²¹⁵

