

August 4, 2025

Presentation in Chemainus

Author: Ashley Whitworth, Lead Researcher for Kuper Island Industrial School / IRS

I am grateful to be able to share this community-led research update with you today.

Although I am presenting this research, please know that the findings were uncovered through the dedication and commitment of the elders committee and community researchers, whom I will introduce at the end of this presentation.

Today, we want to share with you some of our discoveries, challenges, and confirmations.

We have been dedicated to researching the archives since February 2024.

Our work includes repatriating archives and expanding our understanding of the school and student experience with a local perspective.

It is essential that this research be conducted locally. The knowledge, care, and attention to accuracy can only be achieved when the community is actively involved in the work.

Researching records from a centralized out-of-province agency lacks lived knowledge, relationship connections, and contextual understanding necessary to conduct this research with the level of care and completeness it deserves.

Lead communities, like Penelakut, have been tasked with finding all the missing children who went to residential schools across Canada. This work has many barriers. We do not have access to all the records, and we are forced to wait through a governmental backlog of archive access requests along with all other communities. We also have been forced to work in silo's even though it was more common than not for students to be moved to other institutions, often without the parents' knowledge.

Kuper Island IRS hosted children from more than 72 unique communities. In the later years of Indian Residential Schooling policies, truant or poorly behaved children from other schools as far away as North of Prince Rupert or as far East as Saskatchewan were sent to Kuper Island in an attempt to restrict their movement, leveraging the island's natural isolation.

Kuper Island Residential School has a dark history that is already well documented amongst thousands of pages of government, RCMP, and church archives.

Our archival research team has pulled thousands of these documents from almost a dozen sources. We have reviewed more than 80,000 pages to date. This page count will continue to grow as we gain access to community documents and testimonials archived by the government and religious entities.

One of the most limiting challenges every research community faces is getting access to records about them.

For example, we are still waiting on requests we submitted almost a year ago. Delaying our research and the answers we can provide to our elders.

For the last year, we focused on, searching for what was available to us. We have reviewed newspapers, private collections, census reports, and archives from various institutions, including Libraries and Archives Canada, the Historical Department of Indian Affairs, the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, the Royal BC Museum, the RCMP, and reports and theses.

A lot of information is publicly available for the early years. We have high confidence that we have found all the children's names between 1890 and 1953. This confidence comes from layering records of the same person across different authority types, such as birth certificates, admission and discharge records, class reports, census reports over time, and community knowledge.

The process to review records requires scanning the archives for high-value content, such as student lists, administrative names, dates, conditions, events, and notes. One record alone will not tell a story or provide a truth. Records need to be layered on top of each other to determine accuracy, omissions, gaps, and biases.

Records we have reviewed so far have been mostly photos of records, letters, and reports. This means that the document is an image and cannot be searched, and its text content cannot be copied.

To effectively conduct our research, we transcribe these documents into a readable and searchable format. This means we need to type out the content and build databases to track records. This work takes time and is incredibly complex. An individual child may have as many as 50 references concerning them.

We started with a student list provided by the NCTR, the appointed entity for this work. Their list had 2,120 names. Some references only had a first name, no community, no birth date, age, or admission paperwork. The gaps in records stem not only from clerical errors but also from the financial-focused approach to reporting, which dehumanizes the child to a number.

We work to identify children with missing information by investigating multiple sources, such as census data or community knowledge. When related data connects, we update their status from unknown to known. Through our work, we have been able to convert more than 500 children from unknown to known.

We have uncovered more than a hundred duplicates within the original NCTR list and have since identified and added significantly more than a hundred new students. These are some of the missing children.

With engagement with the elders of the Penelakut Tribe, we added more missing names of children from the Penelakut community and other local communities. We are working to find the remaining names in the next phase of our work when we gain access to files and engage with other communities.

The memorial list provided to us by the NCTR had approximately 121 names. Our in-progress research from 1890 to 1953 can confirm 85 deaths through the records. The research team are tracking the other 32.

Archival evidence strongly suggests that there are more deaths based on notes to file, death certificates and community knowledge. We are investigating an additional 30-40 deaths that occurred from 1890 to 1-2 years after the closure of the school that can be directly related to Kuper.

We have been working diligently to find the missing children and provide documentation support to families and the communities impacted by this school.

We know through the archives that sickness in this school was exacerbated due to overcrowding, lack of timely medical care, malnutrition, and no natural defence against colonial diseases such as TB and Typhoid Fever. The school's early years had poor ventilation and conditions that increased the likelihood of spreading the disease, fast.

There are many records where children were admitted to Kuper Island Industrial School in a healthy state and then were discharged within a month with TB, dying within days at home. In these early years, parents lost trust in the care and protection of their children, which was promised to them. Parents, by 1922, were boycotting the school on account of so many deaths. It is interesting to note that by 1921 we can find evidence that only 3 of the 74 children went to the hospital before dying. 71 died at home.

Kuper Island IRS was well documented as a place of abuse and trauma. Survivors of the school who died after discharge from sickness and unnatural causes are awfully high.

In 1919, a survey was conducted to track the condition of the former students. The results indicated that 35% or 116 of 329 had died. These were students who were discharged from

the school, in most cases, “aged out,” and died within a short period. These children are not included in the memorial lists. Disease devastated community populations.

This school had statistically higher numbers of deaths due to TB and related diseases than other researched Indigenous populations by nearly double, 30% death rate in the early years, and the average rate of Indigenous death, according to the National Medical Association, was already 6 times higher than that of non-indigenous populations.

The archives document other deaths as well. From as early as 1898, students attempted to escape by swimming or crossing the channel in canoes or small boats. Many of these children did not make it to the other side.

We are tracing 16 students who died of suspicious causes.

Our research has surfaced numerous concerning themes. For example, we are exploring a pattern of discharge dates that are days or, if not, months after the date of death. We know that each child was a source of a per diem cost recovery – we hypothesize that the delay in discharging the student benefited the school.

We also know that throughout this school's history, the principals took in more children than the government would accept. At one point, the school had as many as 40% more students than the government was paying for.

This significant delta in revenue through grants is aligned with an increase in industrial education, such as farming, dairy, laundry, carpentry, plumbing, sewing, shoe making, cleaning, and cooking. Children were given incentives for good work in these areas.

This shift towards more hours allocated to industrial education is interesting against the current research statistics, which show that many students achieved only a grade 3 or 4 education before discharge. Additionally, we have records of students aging out at age 16 with as little as a grade 2 education. Yet, performance comments indicated these same students were good and very good with reference to sewing, woodwork, and carpentry.

Our intention is to understand and give back to the communities information which can fill in the history, but through the voices of the community. We can find information such as birth certificates, siblings at school, schooling, notes from teachers, transfers, and hospital time. We can trace students across schools.

To do this work well, it is essential to engage with survivors and knowledge holders in all the communities who had children go to Kuper and any other IRS school and Indian hospital.

At this point, I would like to thank and introduce Phoenix Charlie of the Penelakut Tribe, who has been working alongside me to collect archival documents, research history, and

protect the truth. He is here today to support any knowledge you or relatives might have which can help fill in the many gaps in our research. I will also be available to look up student names and add names for further study.

Thank you for allowing space for this information.