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Archbishop Peter Hundt. Register file photo

Newfoundland acquires 32 schools owned by archdiocese

By [Quinton Amundson, The Catholic Register](#)

- May 10, 2023

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A recent tentative agreement struck in a St. John's courtroom will transfer control over 32 schools on the Avalon and Burin peninsulas from the Roman Catholic Episcopal Corporation of St. John's (RCESJ) to the Newfoundland and Labrador government.

After months of uncertainty gripping these schools because of the RCESJ's insolvency after being found liable for the claims of abuse survivors, this deal paves the way for these institutes to continue being used for the education of young minds for the long-term future.

Meanwhile, the \$13 million granted to the episcopal corporation, the property arm of the Archdiocese of St. John's, through this transaction will go towards compensating victims of abuse at the infamous Mount Cashel Orphanage and Catholic clergy over the years.

The RCESJ had already raised \$31 million through the sale of 43 church properties in 2022. Adding the \$13 million from the schools generates a compensation pot of \$44 million. Geoffrey Budden, the lawyer representing most of the abuse survivors, has publicly stated many times that it would take more than \$50 million to adequately compensate the over 100 people expected to step forward to make a claim.

"Right from the beginning I have said this has to be a survivor-centred process, and I thought we would need at least \$50 million to do justice to the claims," said Budden. "What I mean is to pay them the values that a court would order if these were going through a typical court assessment. I think we are on track. The money is starting to get to where we need it to get, but there is still work to do."

St. John's Archbishop Peter Hundt told *The Catholic Register* in an email that the archdiocese is "hopeful that this tentative agreement will be a positive step forward in our efforts to meet our obligations to the victims of abuse."

In 2020, the Court of Appeal of Newfoundland and Labrador decreed — later affirmed by the Supreme Court of Canada in January 2021 — that the RCESJ was "vicariously liable" for the brutalities carried out by the Christian Brothers, which filed for bankruptcy in 2011 after being found liable for the abuse claims.

Budden said he first filed a preliminary motion to attain some documents outlining the RCESJ's ownership of schools in the province. In November, it was determined a critical hearing would be hosted in February to determine if the schools could be included in the fire sale. This scenario would open the door to a buyer with deep pockets acquiring schools and converting the buildings into something else entirely.

However, at the hearing in February, the lawyer for the government, Todd Stanley, called for a postponement because the positive tenor of the discussions between the lawyers suggested an out-of-court settlement was possible. This tentative agreement was signed off on April 18.

John Haggie, the province's education minister, affirmed there will be no disturbance to school programming for students, parents, teachers and staff during this ownership transition. Over 11,000 students are schooled by these educational institutions.

Stanley told media after the proceedings that there are steps to complete to finalize the agreement and ready it for court approval by completing individual transactions for each school.

"We now have 32 real estate transactions we have to get through for some properties that have never been surveyed," said Stanley.

Sorting through the documentation could require comprehensive work since the ownership histories for some of the schools date back over 150 years.

Meanwhile Budden and RCESJ lawyer Geoffrey Spencer will be back in court later this month. Negotiations are at an impasse over approval of a claims officer.

Budden said "I hope so" when asked if claimants can still expect to receive some money before the end of the year despite this obstacle.

"The claims filing deadline is not until Sept. 30. Our practice, like most plaintiff lawyers, is not to wait until Sept. 29 to deliver a great big pile of claims protocols on the claims officer's desk. As we complete them we will file them. Hopefully we will be in a position to at least have an interim distribution at some point before the end of 2023."

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