

Stakeholder summary

Improving Canadian high school education: No single recipe but think system-wide

What can Canada learn from other countries with high secondary school graduation rates? A new report commissioned by the **Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario** suggests that while a system-wide approach to change appears to be key, there is no one recipe for success, and importing isolated strategies from other systems is not likely to be effective.

Project description

International Approaches to Secondary Education explores secondary schooling in Canada and six other countries that offer diverse educational approaches, have scored in the top 10 in the Programme for International Assessment (PISA) or have produced extensive literature on educational change. Systems in Canada, England, Finland, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, and the US are reviewed, focusing on organization, curriculum, accountability systems, organization of teaching and leadership, and overall spending. The report utilizes publicly available reviews and documentary material.

Findings

Whether it be class size or curriculum, cherry-picking particular elements from other systems ignores the extent to which an education system is a product of its history, culture and institutional structure, says the report. While improvement across entire systems is clearly possible, the report finds that education policy typically does not focus on system-wide improvement. “In only a few cases, such as in Ontario in the last few years, we can see a determined and comprehensive effort to improve outcomes across an entire system using a range of policy levers.”

The report is a virtual compendium of comparative data between systems. For example, Canada is the only federated nation within the membership of the OECD that has no federal minister or department of education. While all seven systems have high graduation rates, Japan has the highest at 95 per cent, followed by Finland and South Korea at 93 per cent. Canada trails the group at 76 per cent although the report notes that most Canadian students do obtain a high school diploma or equivalent within a few years. Those who do not graduate from high school in Canada are most likely to be young men who live in poverty outside large urban centers, and those who have disabilities and/or are visible minorities, including Aboriginal people.

Despite attention to equity issues in all countries, most of the systems still have large inequities based on social background, although South Korea, Finland and Canada have less variance in student achievement related to socio-economic status than do the other four countries.

In Canada, the US, England and New Zealand, the educational focus is on employability, national productivity and international competitiveness, while South Korea and Japan promote creativity, individualism and imagination as skills that are necessary for today's competitive world. Finland has

introduced greater flexibility into its upper secondary school programs, which are not organized according to grades, so students can progress either as a group or individually.

While the general public perception of education is positive throughout Canada, says the report, the status of teachers varies by province, whereas in Finland, classroom teaching is considered a high-status profession that attracts some of the best secondary school graduates. In Japan, teachers are highly respected and teaching is perceived as a high status profession with job security and relatively high salaries.

The systems also share many attributes. Secondary schools serve the same general population in terms of age and are organized into very similar structures of courses and subjects. The evidence suggests they involve similar pedagogy and share a curriculum approach that is focused on traditional subjects despite rapid changes in knowledge.

Policy implications

The structural aspects of these systems are not the drivers of good results, says the report. “It seems that countries can produce good results with more or less centralized systems, or with more or less demanding examination systems. Features such as length of the school year or day, or the division into subjects, do not seem to matter very much – although they are the subject of much policy attention.”

The report says there is reason to be optimistic about the possibilities for improving student outcomes in Canadian secondary schools based on the experiences of other systems, and of Ontario in recent years. Being strategic about system improvement seems to be important, and systems with strong links to the labour market appear to have better results from their vocational efforts -- an area that could be developed further in Ontario.

While much remains to be learned about effective secondary school practice, a range of different approaches can yield good results if there is systematic effort and attention. “The key to improvement appears to be a determined effort across an entire system, taking into account both external evidence and local context.”

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