

Stakeholder Summary

Destreaming in Ontario high schools should be expanded to all core subjects in Grades 9 and 10

Ontario is the only province in the country that separates students into academic and non-academic streams as early as Grade 9. Evidence from both Ontario and international contexts has shown this practice disadvantages many students, especially racialized and lower-income students. Although a recent announcement by the Ontario government of their commitment to ending streaming for Grade 9 math is a positive start, a new report published by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) calls for destreaming for all Grade 9 and 10 core subjects so every student has the full selection of Grade 11 course offerings. The report also provides a series of recommendations to improve the success of destreaming initiatives.

In December 2019, HEQCO and People for Education held a two-day event that brought together stakeholders from across the education sector — researchers, administrators, educators, students, and government and community representatives — to share their experiences and perspectives, their research pertaining to student pathways, and ideas for policy change to remove barriers for postsecondary participation. Throughout the event, the impact of streaming on postsecondary access was a frequent topic, with many participants noting that individual and systemic biases often affect decisions about which students end up streamed into each group. The new HEQCO report, *Destreaming in Ontario: History, Evidence and Educator Reflections*, builds on the conversations from this event with discussions of the current policy context in Ontario, sample destreaming initiatives and international research.

Participants at the event repeatedly stated that the practice of streaming as early as Grade 9 forces Ontario students to make life-altering decisions about their educational and career pathways when they are only 13 or 14 years old. According to data from the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), Ontario students in applied courses have historically demonstrated lower results on provincial assessments than their peers in academic courses. Previous work by People for Education has shown that this is especially problematic given evidence that being in the applied stream can depress achievement: “Students with comparable academic backgrounds (i.e., similar scores, even poor scores on Grade 6 tests) are far more likely to do better in academic than applied courses”. According to EQAO, about 26% of Ontario students taking Grade 9 math took the applied version in 2017-18. Toronto District School Board data has consistently shown that racialized students, especially Black males and students from lower-income families, are more likely to enrol in applied courses, and students from wealthier families are more likely to enrol in the academic stream.

This has significant consequences for equitable access to postsecondary education. Even though applied courses are intended to lead to college as well as university, Ontario’s postsecondary application centre data reveals that between 2010 and 2016, just 33% of students who took applied math and language courses in Grade 9 attended postsecondary directly after graduation, compared to 73% of students who took academic courses.

The process of implementing destreaming has barriers, as evidenced by Ontario's history of failed attempts to destream. Event participants noted the difficulty of challenging a status quo supported by privileged perspectives and oppressive systems. Sustained systemic change, they argued, requires buy-in and often a shift in attitudes among leadership, educators and even students themselves. Destreaming policies and plans should ensure all students have access to rigorous instruction alongside extra resources and/or bridging courses. Strategies like stakeholder engagement and professional development, including anti-racism training for teachers and administrators, should be embraced to address individual and systemic biases that impact expectations and depress achievement. Ongoing evaluation of destreaming efforts will also be essential with many participants stressing the importance of reporting on progress toward goals. This includes drawing on reliable data, such as EQAO results, to measure and demonstrate effects, which helps build buy-in among stakeholders like educators and parents.

Destreaming in Ontario: History, Evidence and Educator Reflections was written by Jackie Pichette, Fiona Deller and Julia Colyar.