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Public Education in Canada: Measuring Success

Canadians care about the quality of public education. It is key to the success of future generations, to our international competitiveness and to our overall quality of life.

But the debate over educational options and priorities takes place largely at the expert level.

A new series of “Progress Reports” on the quality of public education in Canada hopes to change that, and widen the debate to include parents and the public at large.

“Schools, educators and governments aren’t the only ingredients of success,” says Judith Maxwell, President of Canadian Policy Research Networks, and a partner in the project. “Parents and communities also play a vital role and must be part of the conversation.”

The progress reports are the brainchild of The Learning Partnership in collaboration with CPRN. The first report in the series, *The Quality of Public Education in Canada*, raises the questions of how we measure success, what we measure, and what we need to know to improve results.

“Looking at existing national and international measures, we have much to celebrate,” says Veronica Lacey, President of The Learning Partnership.

In fact, nationally, the writing skills and mathematical problem-solving skills of Canadian 13- and 16-year-olds have improved over the past decade, as has science achievement among 16-year-olds.

Internationally, Canada’s 15-year-olds,

- Rank second (behind Finland) in reading,
- Rank third (behind Korea and Japan) in mathematics, and
- Rank fourth (behind Korea, Japan and Finland) in science.

“The suggestion that Canada’s academic achievement has been declining doesn’t match the facts,” Lacey says.

What’s more, national results hide the above average achievement of Alberta (best in the world in reading, with Finland), and Alberta and Quebec (best in the world in math, with Japan and Korea, and best in the world in science, with Japan and Finland).

The progress report also highlights two other dimensions of success: the extent to which academic progress is shared among *all* students, regardless of socio-economic background, and the trend in high school dropout rates.

Canada, along with Finland and Japan, shows less variation than other countries between test scores of students from high socioeconomic status families and those of students from less well-off families.

As for high school dropout rates, considerable progress has been made in reducing them over the decade of the nineties. Still, rates for boys remain high, at a national average of 15%, compared to girls at 9%.

“There’s much here to be pleased with, as well as room for improvement. But what of our other goals for education?” asks Maxwell. “There is much we still do not measure. What importance should we attach to knowledge of Canadian history, the ability to think critically, or problem-solving skills, for example? This is where public participation in the discussion is needed.”

A better understanding of all the factors that contribute to good educational outcomes is also needed. Future progress reports will address such questions as;

- Does class size matter?
- What is the role of technology in the classroom?
- How can parents help their children to achieve their best?
- What is the role of early childhood education in preparing children for school?
- How do communities and business contribute in individual schools?
- How do we improve educational opportunities for Aboriginal children?

“We hope these reports draw parents and a wider public into this important national conversation,” says Lacey. “We want to identify the ingredients of success and the part each of us can play in providing the best public education possible for our children.”

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CPRN is a national not-for-profit research institute whose mission is to create knowledge and lead public debate on social and economic issues important to the well-being of Canadians, in order to help build a more just, prosperous and caring society.

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