

Think nationally, act locally: A pan-Canadian strategy for education and training ^[1]

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Executive summary

Why should Canadians build a national education strategy? What would it look like? How can we construct it? What role should business play in that strategy?

These questions are central to optimising learning conditions nationwide.

This analysis will begin with a review of the declining performance of Canadian education in contrast to comparator countries in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Recent results from the OECD's Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) are particularly alarming. They confirm the mediocre basic skill levels of Canadian adults. Since the competencies of adult Canadians with post-secondary education (PSE) are near the bottom for all three basic skills, PIAAC results presage further Canadian slipping down the learning curve.

In Part I, other troubling trends are cited as examples from a much longer potential list of our shortcomings in learning. They include regression in OECD rankings of secondary school students; a lack of basic information about performance in early childhood education (ECE); weakness in K-12 vocational education and training (VET); a low proportion of graduates in science, engineering and computer science; and the absence of any coherent national system of tertiary education.

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Early childhood education and care (p. 13)

The OECD observes that participation in early childhood education and care (ECEC) programs "tends to lead to better outcomes later in life. The difference between students who attended pre-primary ... and those who have not attended pre-primary averaged 54 points in the PISA reading assessment - or more than one year of formal schooling".

Paradoxically, even while Canadians such as Dr. Fraser Mustard have been internationally prominent in showing the lifelong impact of good early childhood education and care, Canada has remained a laggard in this area. One illustration: among 37 OECD countries, Canadian enrolment rates in 2010 at age four in early childhood and primary education ranked 36th (OECD 2012).

The OECD sets out five "policy levers" to improve the quality of ECEC. While there is considerable variation among provinces in developing the instruments of the OECD "toolbox", Canada as a whole has implemented none of them. This implies that we will continue to lag, with predictably negative consequences for the future.

The OECD identifies "data collection, research and monitoring" as "powerful tools for improving children's outcomes and driving continuous improvement in service delivery". How then does Canada perform in the use of these tools? Of all OECD countries, Canada is the only one that cannot report on the two key measures of service delivery to young children: expenditure on ECEC as a percentage of GDP, and ratio of children to teaching staff in ECEC. What we refuse to know need not be remedied.

What this reveals is not just that Canada trails partner countries in ECEC. Far more significantly, it indicates that the absence of a concerted approach deprives us of the very tools we need to improve our performance in this key aspect of education.

Region: Canada ^[5]

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