

Ontario's schools: The gap between policy and reality ^[1]

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Introduction

Ontario continues to have one of the most successful public education systems in the world when measured by graduation rates, reading, writing, math and science scores.

But is there more to education than graduation rates and scores in the 3 R's?

The answer from education systems around the world is a resounding 'yes'.

This year, Ontario's Ministry of Education added student well-being as a fourth goal for Ontario's education system, to go along with existing goals of student achievement, equity, and public confidence.⁵ Internationally, there is an increased focus on "soft" skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, and creativity.

Locally, elementary and secondary schools increasingly report that they are monitoring students' progress in areas such as health and well-being, social-emotional skills, and creativity.

But...

While local school boards and schools might recognize the importance of broader skills and quality learning environments, they continue to be held accountable to the public and the Ministry of Education based on narrow measures of success in reading, writing and mathematics. Until broader goals are concretely defined and broader measures of success are identified and implemented, boards and schools will continue to feel compelled to focus resources, time and support on "what counts".

The gap between policy and reality

One of the themes that emerges from this year's report is the disparity between the goals identified in Ontario's policies and the availability of 'on the ground' resources to realize those goals.

As a society, we invest more than \$20 billion per year on education to support 1.9 million students. But even that amount leaves the system facing scarcity in many areas. Adding student well-being as a goal for education, while laudable, must come with the resources to support it, and with careful consideration of how school success is being measured. Without these considerations, we may worsen the disparity between the goals in Ontario's central policies and the actual resources available to meet the goals.

Quick Facts

- 84% of students now graduate in five years or less.¹
- 72% of grade 3 and 6 students now meet the provincial standard (equivalent to a 'B' grade) in reading, writing and math, and more than 80% are proficient ('C').
- Ontario was the only province in Canada to score above the Canadian average in reading, mathematics and science on the most recent Pan-Canadian assessment.
- Ontario scored highest of all OECD countries on tests of computer literacy, which includes the ability to use computers to investigate, create and communicate in order to participate effectively at home, at school, in the workplace, and in society.

Early childhood education and family support

In the last five years, the Ontario government has shifted the responsibility of early childhood education and family support to the Ministry of Education.

The Early Years Division now includes kindergarten programs, extended day programs, licensed child care, parenting and family literacy

programs, programs for children with special needs, and other family support programs. This policy decision recognizes the importance of the early years and their link to life long learning.

During early childhood, the brain develops at a rapid rate. The experiences and learning environments that a child is exposed to at this time are linked to cognitive, social, and emotional development. Decades of studies have shown that early childhood developmental processes can predict later life outcomes.

Consequently, supports and resources in early years can be critical. Investments in high-quality early years programs are among the most effective, leading to more equitable education outcomes.

Ontario's government has recognized the importance of early childhood programs and has made notable strides in improving access to childcare and early childhood education in recent years. Research has demonstrated that children who attend Ontario's full-day kindergarten program are better prepared for grade ,and exhibit higher outcomes in the areas of social competence, communication skills, and cognitive development.

Access to Integrated Child Care

A number of new provincial policies have also sought to improve the coordination of early learning and child care, to ensure “seamless and integrated provision of child care and education programs and services.” Provincial policy mandates that school boards must provide before- and afterschool programs for kindergarten students at schools where “there is interest from the families of at least 20 children.”

In this year's survey, we looked at the availability of on-site child care now that Ontario has fully implemented the fullday kindergarten program.

In schools with kindergarten, 72 percent report having onsite child care for kindergarten-aged children, representing a steady increase from 2011/12.

Among the schools with on-site child care for kindergarten aged children:

- 90% report on-site child care before school.
- 94% report on-site child care after school.
- 89% report on-site child care both before and after school.
- 41% report on-site child care year-round.

For schools with grades 1–6, 70 percent of schools report having child care. Of these schools,

- 87% report having child care before school.
- 95% report having child care after school.
- 38% report having child care year round

Seamless and integrated—promising practices

School boards that directly offer before and after school programs are able to accommodate all families that request the program. They are not limited by space and program restrictions. This alleviates stress for families and reduces administrative challenges for school principals.

Strong leadership and a commitment to early learning in the Waterloo Region and the Ottawa-Carleton District School Boards have increased access to high quality programming and on-site child care for thousands of families. Both boards provide successful examples of integrated and seamless early learning programs for students.

In the Waterloo Board, extended day programs are now offered in 80 out of 87 schools, providing programs to over 4000 children between kindergarten and grade 3. Older children attend Youth Development Programs offered by Conestoga College and other community partners. In the Ottawa Board, 6000 children attend before- and after-school programs in over 100 schools.

Challenges to implementation

The growth in the availability of on-site child care is encouraging, and suggests considerable progress throughout the province. However, a number of obstacles have persisted. In rural areas, for example, schools may face challenges finding child care providers or trained staff to operate before- or after-school programs.

In this year's survey, the challenges that schools commented on most frequently related to space limitations. Space constraints in some schools seem to be negatively influencing the seamless integration of school and care.⁸⁰

To resolve these problems, some schools have begun to purchase portable facilities, construct new facilities, and partner with local community groups to use their space.

Family Support Programs

The province allocates \$90 million per year to support “universally accessible programs, services, and resources in easily accessible locations.” These programs are organized under Best Start Child and Family Resource Centres and include programs such as Ontario Early Years Centres, Child Care/

Family Resource Centres, and Parenting and Family Literacy Centres. In its report to the Ministry of Education, the Ontario Early Years Centre Provincial Network stressed the critical importance of an integrated system involving seamless transitions among family support programs, child care, and school.

In this year's survey, however, only 36 percent of schools serving kindergarten-aged children indicate that they have a family support program.

Next steps

Ontario has made great strides in improving access to early childhood education and care. However, the integration of early learning supports across the system is a key objective in Ontario's early learning policy, and that goal has not yet been realized. To ensure that all families have access to quality early childhood supports and services, and to ensure that Ontario has a truly seamless model for early childhood learning and care, it is vital to address challenges pertaining to access and integration of on-site programs.

Region: Ontario ^[4]

Tags: integration ^[5]

full-day early learning ^[6]

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