

Executive Summary

As countries across the world battle to put the years of recession behind them and establish the right conditions for a sustained economic recovery, attention invariably turns to the role of education. In this context, it is no surprise that the comparative performance of education systems is attracting more attention than ever before.

In Canada, questions are being raised about whether we are keeping pace with the world's leading education systems, and whether our performance has been eroding over time. There are also concerns about whether too many students from less advantaged backgrounds are being left behind. This report addresses these questions and concerns by reviewing the latest international evidence regarding achievement and equity in education in Canada and other jurisdictions. For purposes of context, Canada's system of education is in fact 13 distinct systems (10 provinces and 3 territories). Unlike almost every other country, Canada has no national department of education or federal education policy.

The results of this analysis are encouraging. Canada continues to lead the world in terms of educational attainment (that is, the number of years or levels of education completed). And in terms of educational achievement (proficiency in core subjects), Canada consistently places among an elite group of high performing countries and economies. Based on a variety of international assessments across OECD countries, only Korea, Japan, and the Asian city-regions of Hong Kong, Shanghai and Singapore consistently perform better than Canada. No country outside of east Asia performs better than Canada on a regular basis. This performance is remarkable given that most of east Asia (especially Korea and Japan) are relatively homogeneous societies that do not face the challenges of educating significant numbers of students whose language and culture are different from the host country.

It is the case that the performance of Canadian students on some achievement measures has declined over time, but the nature and extent of this trend has been exaggerated, and has not eroded Canada's position as an overall high achieving country in education.

Alarm bells also have been rung about the state of education in this country in terms of Canada's investment in early childhood education, the quality of its postsecondary graduates, and the performance of boys relative to girls. In each case, however, the available evidence suggests that

Canada continues to perform well in comparison with other countries.

At first glance, the skills of Canadian adults are less impressive than those of children in school. A recent assessment of the performance of adult literacy, numeracy, and problem solving on computers places Canada in the middle of the pack, rather than near the top. But such measures need to differentiate between those adults who obtained their education in Canada and those whose credential is from somewhere else. The performance of adults with a Canadian education are much more encouraging than the overall comparative ranking of countries would suggest.

Canada distinguishes itself internationally in education not only by virtue of its comparatively high ranking, but more notably by its ability to combine high levels of achievement and high degrees of equity. One of the main reasons for Canada's strong overall performance in education is its success in ensuring the educational achievement of children with immigrant backgrounds. In fact, Canada is one of just a small handful of high-immigration countries that shows no significant achievement gap between immigrants and non-immigrants.

As well, public schools in Canada are among the best in the world at helping to level the playing field between rich and poor children. Among high-performing OECD countries, only one (Estonia) has a weaker relationship between educational performance and socio-economic status than does Canada.

Finally, international comparisons suggest that Canada does a good job of distributing resources within the education system, supporting a professionalized teaching workforce and minimizing resource disparities across schools and regions. This achievement, combined with the results on achievement and equity, place Canada in an almost unique position. A recent study that examined the performance of countries in terms of educational achievement, equity and system efficiency (that is, spending that is efficient as opposed to high) found that only three – Finland, Estonia, and Canada – combine high rankings in all three categories.

Canada's system of education is not without its challenges. Canada deserves its reputation as a world leader in equity in education, but this reputation is tarnished once the situation of Aboriginal peoples is considered. The educational

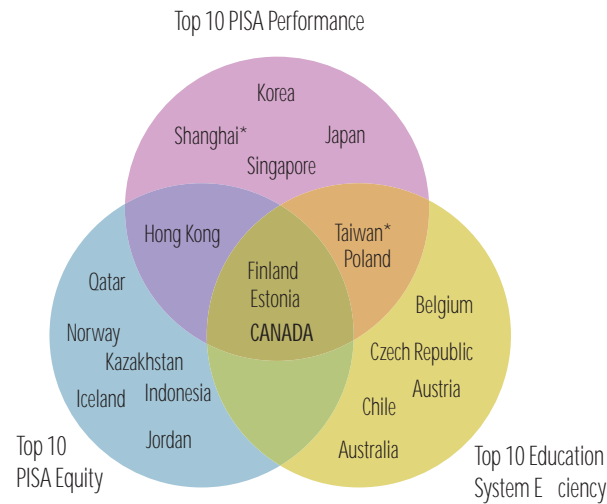
attainment of Aboriginal peoples in Canada is increasing, but the achievement gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples at the higher end of the education attainment spectrum continues to widen.

More generally, Canada's relative advantage internationally is diminishing as a number of other rapidly modernizing countries are catching up. In terms of attainment, for instance, Canada's top position overall reflects in part the fact that its postsecondary education system expanded somewhat earlier in the postwar period than did that of many European or Asian countries. This means that older Canadians (many of

whom had opportunities for college or university education) enjoy a significant educational advantage over their OECD counterparts that no longer holds for younger generations. In education, as in so many other things, the world is increasingly competitive; as many industrialized countries make rapid gains, the comparative advantage enjoyed by older generations of Canadians erodes.

No matter how well Canada may have performed to date in any given international study, there is will always be a need to strive for improvement. Canada, however, approaches this challenge from an enviable position of strength.

Performance, Equity and Efficiency in Educational Outcomes Top 10 Countries in Each Dimension*



*Comparable spending data unavailable for Shanghai and Hong Kong

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Sources: OECD PISA 2012, OECD Education at a Glance 2014, and Singapore Ministry of Education