

10. What explains Canada's success in education?

As a developed country, Canada is able to devote considerable public resources to education. But Canada does not necessarily spend more on education than other developed countries. Money matters, but mostly in terms of how it is distributed throughout the system.

What makes Canada so successful in education? Clearly many factors contribute to the positive results reviewed above; a comprehensive discussion of each plausible explanation is well beyond the scope of this brief overview. Such a discussion would need to take into account historical and cultural factors shaping the development not only of public education systems in Canada but also of Canadian society more generally, particularly its class structure. The objective here is more modest. As well as recalling some of the points made above, this section focuses on a limited number of additional elements that help to distinguish education in Canada.

Education spending and teacher salaries

Canada's spending on primary and secondary education, whether measured on a per student basis or as a percentage of GDP, is above the OECD average.⁴⁸ At the same time, however, Canada does not stand out as a leader in this area; it also is surpassed in spending by a number of countries that it consistently out-performs, notably the United States. (The OECD has emphasized that there is not a deterministic relationship between spending and performance.)

Canada does stand out somewhat more in terms of spending on teaching salaries. Teaching salaries in Canada are not only above average, but are among the best (in 2014, only five countries had higher starting salaries for primary school teachers). The salaries of Canadian teachers are also higher than the average salary for all workers in Canada with a tertiary education, which is not the case in most other OECD countries.⁴⁹

- "Findings from the 2012 OECD Programme for International Students Assessment (PISA) suggest that high-performing

systems tend to prioritize higher salaries for teachers, especially in high-income countries. Among countries and economies whose per capita GDP is more than USD 20 000, including most OECD countries, systems that pay teachers more (i.e. higher teachers' salaries relative to national income per capita) tend to perform better in mathematics."⁵⁰

The issue of teacher salary is important because it can be read as an indicator of the degree of professionalization of the teaching workforce. Countries with higher teaching salaries tend to both attract higher quality candidates to the profession and require more of them in terms of training and professional development. Teachers' associations that are successful at bargaining for better working conditions are also strong enough to encourage professional development, leadership training and innovative practices within their membership.

Federalism and Equalization

A very different aspect of education spending in Canada relates to the variation in spending across the federation, which in turn concerns the issue of equity. It is often remarked that Canada is one of the most decentralized federal countries, a point which is especially germane to discussions of education, which in Canada is a domain that falls exclusively under provincial jurisdiction (with the exception of education on First Nations reserves). The division of powers as they relate to law-making in education in Canada, however, risks giving the misleading impression that the federal government plays no role. On the contrary, the federal government plays a crucial role in education in Canada, albeit an indirect one, through the redistribution of wealth across the federation in the form of intergovernmental transfers (notably the Canada Social Transfer and equalization). These transfers have the intent and the effect of ensuring a significant degree of equality across provinces in their ability to deliver social services such as education.

⁴⁸ A variety of indicators covering education expenditure are reported in Chapter B of the OECD's Education at a Glance 2014 (<http://www.oecd.org/edu/Education-at-a-Glance-2014.pdf>).

⁴⁹ A variety of indicators covering teachers salaries are reported in Chapter D, Section 3 of the OECD's Education at a Glance 2014 (<http://www.oecd.org/edu/Education-at-a-Glance-2014.pdf>).

⁵⁰ OECD, Education at a Glance 2014, Box D3.1, p. 457.

- (A secondary element to consider is the fact that, while education is decentralized in Canada in terms of the federal-provincial division of powers, it is quite centralized within each province in terms of the power of the provincial government over local authorities (school boards and districts). This means that, while the federal government can equalize the resources across provinces in the federation, the provincial education departments can do the same across regions, municipalities and neighbourhoods within each province. This contrasts with the situation in the US, for instance, where education remains subject to a much greater degree of local control.)

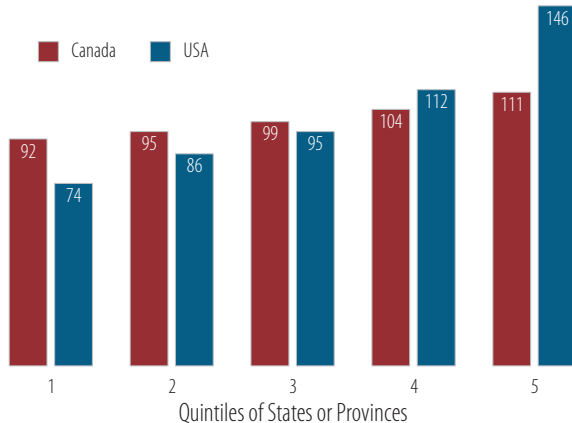
The importance of the redistribution of wealth across the federation can be illustrated by comparing the variation in education spending per student across provinces in Canada with that across states in the US. In no Canadian province does spending per student fall below 90 percent of the national average, or rise above 120 percent. In contrast, spending in the US falls below 90 percent of the national average in 22 states, and below 80 percent in eight states; it also rises above 120 percent in 11 states and above 130 percent in nine states. This is shown in summary form in Chart 8, which displays per student spending averages (as a percent of the national average) for provinces and states grouped by spending quintiles (two provinces and ten states per quintile).

Putting it All Together: Achievement, Equity and Efficiency

The above points on spending point to an effective distribution of resources within Canada’s education systems, a factor recently highlighted by the Center on International Education Benchmarking (CIBE). The Center examined the performance of countries in terms of educational achievement, equity and system efficiency (that is, spending that is efficient as opposed to high) and found that only three – Finland, Estonia, and Canada – combine high ranking in all three categories. In other word, Canada is one of only three countries in the world whose education systems “are able to offer their students a quality education regardless of socio-economic background at a low cost and still come out at the top of the international league tables for overall student performance.” (See graphic on page 2).⁵¹

Chart 8
School Spending as a Percent of the National Average

School Spending per Student, by Quintile



Source: author’s calculations using data from the Canadian Education Statistics Council (Canada, 2009–10) and the National Centre for Education Statistics (US, 2010–11); excludes postsecondary education.

⁵¹ See: <http://www.ncee.org/2015/01/statistic-of-the-month-education-performance-equity-and-efficiency/>