

Steering the Course Back  
to Equity in Education

# Report on the State and Needs of Education 2014-2016

SUMMARY

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#### SUMMARY

Equity, which consists in treating individuals in a manner that takes into account their different needs, is a widely shared value. As such, it figures prominently as one of the values contained in key ministerial documents. And rightly so, as equity often characterizes those education systems generally regarded as the most efficient. Achieving and maintaining it, however, can be an exacting goal, as equity does not develop organically, nor is it ever permanently gained. In order to safeguard the democratic access to quality education for all, it is imperative to remain vigilant.

The situation presented in the *Report on the State and Needs of Education 2014-2016* shows that while policies over the past 30 years—torn between the pursuit of equity and the promotion of meritocratic excellence—have undoubtedly contributed to Québec scoring well in international tests, they have also produced some unwanted results that are undercutting these gains. An accretion of drifts observed in the course of education are putting social justice in school and values we uphold as a society at risk. In particular, a culture of competition is feeding a vicious circle that is not only undermining public confidence in the classrooms of public education, but encouraging the development of a multi-tiered school. The Conseil believes the time has thus come to put the issue of justice in education back on the political agenda and steer the course back to equity in education.

#### Main Findings

The OECD's 2012 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) ranked Canada among the top equitable societies. The socio-economic status of Canadian students appears in effect to have relatively little influence on their score (OECD 2014). However, in every subject measured by PISA, the difference in achievement between students from schools in disadvantaged areas and those in affluent ones continues to be markedly more significant in Québec than in other Canadian provinces or territories. And yet social programs in Québec are considered to be more generous than in other provinces. The analysis also shows that the stratification of the offer in compulsory education—brought about by a proliferation of selective special programs and private schools—is leading to **an unequal treatment that tends to favour the more fortunate.**

In other words, those who most need the best learning conditions are not benefitting from them, and this runs counter to the very essence of equity.

Rather than reducing social inequality, however, the Québec education system operates in ways that contribute in some extent to perpetuating it. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with learning disabilities are overrepresented in public classrooms, and this is creating environments less conducive for learning (and teaching). In addition, families from disadvantaged communities tend to be less informed about their rights or lack the capability to assert them. Thus despite countervailing measures in place in these communities, the education system has barely made a dent in reducing these contextual inequalities. If nothing is done to turn the ship around, this trend of grouping students by educational and socio-economic profile is likely to become more pronounced.

Today more than ever, actively taking part in society and exercising citizenship demand a certain level of literacy, numeracy and digital literacy. Education should enable all those who have the potential to develop these competencies—which are vital to their independence—and to do so at any point in their lives. Yet it appears that the system is letting a greater number of students or individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds “slip through,” perpetuating the cycle of poverty and social exclusion. In addition, as past school experience can condition the relationship with knowledge and access to lifelong learning, those children who are not able to develop their skills in school are likely to suffer negative effects throughout their lives, with the whole of society ultimately losing out.

### **The Adverse Effects of a Culture of Competition in Education**

The quasi-market rationale that has taken root in the field of education is not surprising, given that we have now become consumers of services tailored to our individual preferences. Unfortunately, not all families are on the same footing in this game of offer and demand. Moreover, unequal treatment is undermining other efforts to foster perseverance and encourage youth to stay in school.

#### **At the Institutional Level**

Competition in education goes hand in hand with the belief that not all schools are alike, and is feeding a crisis of confidence that is weakening the public education system. This crisis reinforces the tendency to group students by educational and or socio-economic profiles, resulting in a form of exclusion that is opening the door to a multi-tiered school. Thus a gap is growing between communities, with some institutions

or classrooms viewed as less conducive for learning (shunned by those families who can) and working conditions more challenging (shunned by those teachers who can).

In such a context, the Government could intervene in a more targeted way by strengthening the countervailing policies in disadvantaged communities. Yet these measures, however necessary, would fail to address the root causes of the issue. Indeed, they may even contribute to more exclusion, as a community labeled as disadvantaged is not very attractive in a competitive environment. For this reason, it is all the more important to take steps to narrow the gap between communities, which should encourage a greater social diversity and student mix in classrooms and institutions.

The Conseil would like to point out that a wealth of research has shown heterogeneous groups to be the most efficient and equitable. Indeed, academically speaking, while the tendency to homogenize classes does not appear to significantly impact those students who learn easily, it is particularly detrimental to students who are more at risk. More importantly, homogenization diminishes the opportunity for a diverse group of students to sit side by side every day, an essential prerequisite for learning tolerance, solidarity and how to live together. The Conseil sees a serious threat here, not only to the system's equity but also to its overall efficiency. Sweden, a country whose PISA ranking has been slipping in recent years (OECD 2015), is an example of how no one is immune from setbacks when it comes to maintaining equity and efficiency in its education system.

In order to break the vicious circle that has taken hold and create the conditions that favour a greater social diversity and student mix, it is crucial to make the investments necessary to offer satisfactory quality in all institutions. To rebuild confidence and delineate the freedom of choice the system allows (or ensure this does not become a source of inequality itself), it is indeed important that all schools have the essential and appropriate infrastructures to meet the needs of youth, as well as sufficient and adequate resources to fulfill their own mission and provide quality services in every community. In particular this means not filling schools in disadvantaged areas or the most challenging classrooms with only budding teachers starting their careers or those with precarious employment status.

### **At the Student Level**

More insidiously, the culture of competition in education also has undesirable consequences for students. Not all children arrive in the classroom equally equipped to understand the codes of the school system. Their individual paces and abilities must be

considered, as well as the proximity of their family culture to the behaviour expected in the school environment, not to mention the subjects, skills and attitudes promoted by the curriculum. Given these differences, rather than attenuating inequality, the school can amplify inequality it from the starting line.

As they are currently carried out, student learning assessments in a sense set children to compete against each other as early as their first class, by placing them in a hierarchy at a very young age, from which it is not always easy to escape. Thus they contribute to a school experience that for many children—including those without any learning disability and even high achievers—is seen as source of stress and anxiety, if not failure.

This competition also leads some children to disengage, disconnecting from learning when something appears to them beyond their grasp or limit. It also encourages others to study simply to get a good grade (“does it count”?) rather than for the sake of learning. In addition, in a race for high grades or averages there is no room for taking risks (a mistake is seen as points lost rather a welcome opportunity to learn) nor developing a spirit of cooperation.

Thus the education system, through the competition it generates and the type of success it promotes, can transmute certain differences into inequality. Even the notion of equality of chances itself—generally considered to be synonymous with equity—implies that there will be some losers. School consequently becomes a sprint to be won by the fastest rather than a marathon that each completes at his or her own pace. Yet the idea that some may not finish the race even if they have the potential is incompatible with the mission of compulsory education, which is worth reiterating: to allow individuals to develop their full potential, **regardless of what that potential may be**. Rather than creating a hierarchy of students, the education system should be recognizing the potential of each and allowing him or her to fully develop in the right conditions, in other words, at their own pace and with the support needed.

### **Toward a More Encompassing Vision of Success**

To move beyond this rationale of competition, primarily focused on school success with winners and losers, the Conseil deems that a more encompassing vision of success needs to be embraced. **Educational success** also includes capabilities and independence developed that reflect *all* components of the mission of education, which consists in not only imparting knowledge, but also in fostering social development and in giving qualifications.

In this broader vision, **the quality of the educational experience**, which conditions the relationship with learning and knowledge, is not measured solely by the attainment of a

diploma. For example, regardless of the level of education reached, when an individual has experienced being valued at school, a sense of belonging, a positive relationship with learning, and has acquired the abilities and independence that enable him or her to actively take part in society, we can consider him or her to have experienced a positive, quality education—one from which all of society stands to gain.

In order to act on this intention, the different strengths of individuals must first be recognized before any contribution can be made to their development. Building on these strengths allows these individuals to experience achievement, even when this may not be demonstrated in the subjects or competencies promoted by the curriculum. This is not about lowering standards, but rather recognizing what individuals do well, to motivate them as students and boost their confidence in their ability to learn. This confidence is capital in engaging them to fully develop their life skills and equipping them with tools to continue their lifelong learning. For this reason, selective special projects or programs should be open to all based on an assessment of needs or interests (and not reserved only for certain students contingent on their grades or their parents' ability to pay).

It is also important to offer different types of success models and provide educational pathways that respond to a wide range of interests, competencies or skills. For example, there are many young people today who know what they want to do (e.g.: type of job) but are sent by the system on long detours down abstract pathways in General Education, whereas they may have had previous negative school experiences. Or, they could further develop their analytical and reasoning skills in Applied General Education, yet this is not always open to them. Put simply, a curriculum leading to a secondary school diploma conceived to prepare young people for post-secondary studies, as implemented does not leave much room for those who wish to develop other types of abilities. This tends to act as a deterrent and increase the risk of dropping out.

If the time spent attending compulsory schooling were to be prolonged, it is all the more important to offer educational pathways and learning environments that allow for the development of all forms of potential. In the view of the Conseil, this is not about forgoing proficiency in the language of instruction or mathematics, but rather to temper the use of these subjects as a form of social triage and allow for the development of these competencies in real environments.

Moving beyond a school that engages students in a culture of competition to an educational framework that fosters working together, taking risks, and developing abilities cannot be done simply by adding more resources, but requires changing the

way of doing things. Although school comes with prescriptive goals, the heterogeneity of society now demands a flexible framework, one that all students can feel welcome in, identify with, and develop a sense of belonging or a healthy relationship with learning. **Changes of this magnitude cannot be implemented without the involvement of stakeholders and can only be carried out with consistency and continuity.**

### **Guidelines For a More Just Education System**

In light of its analysis of the conditions observed and the principles of justice that guided the preparation of this report on the state and needs of education, the Conseil believes that the status quo—which in essence means accepting the idea of a multi-tiered school—is no longer defensible. The Conseil is by no means calling for a complete overhaul of the way things are done today, such as starting to limit the freedom of choice families currently have. However, the sweeping changes needed to achieve sustainable results demand first and foremost restoring confidence in the public education system, and this boils down to closing the gap between the different communities. Indeed, parents must not feel that they have to choose between their progressive values and the best interest of their child. Steering the course back to equity also requires redressing the systemic elements that feed the rationale of competition.

As its first guideline, the Conseil proposes **leaving behind the rationale of deficiency and compensation**. An unintended effect of the traditional form of education being primarily based on the component of its mission to impart knowledge is that natural differences in pace, interest or talent are treated as underachievement to be addressed. To move away from this rationale, it appears fundamental to uphold the *entire* mission of school: **recognizing diversity, promoting different pathways and assessing without prematurely categorizing** will ensure more young people are provided with qualifications. **Promoting a greater social diversity and student mix** in classrooms and institutions would ensure that all students would benefit from an environment conducive to learning, and put into action the mission of education as specified in the Québec Education Program: socialize to better prepare students to live together in harmony (Ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur, 2016).

A child's educational future is to a great extent already mapped out by the time he or she first sets foot in a classroom, and this significantly contributes to reproducing social inequalities in school. It is during the years of compulsory schooling that follow that unequal access and unequal treatment are the most unacceptable, as the quality of the educational experience has an influence on the development of a child's full potential and aspirations. It also has a direct impact on access to (and success in) post-secondary

studies, if not lifelong learning. As its second guideline, the Conseil thus proposes **concentrating efforts and means** where they will bring the greatest benefits for the greatest number of individuals, that is, starting from preschool all the way through compulsory education.

To improve the quality of the educational experience of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, we must **firmly tackle the root causes of poverty** rather than simply seek to mitigate its effects. It is important then that school intervention policies be coherent with social policies that target poverty in disadvantaged communities, so that the basic needs of children be met without stigmatizing families.

Lastly, the Conseil proposes in its third guideline that it is fundamental to establish **indicators that better capture changes in the education system in the area of social justice** to adequately steer the implementation of measures needed to achieve these desired changes.

## **Conclusion**

While Québec society has every right to rejoice over the advancements made in the past 50 years in the democratization of education, the relative equity of its system cannot be taken for granted. For several years now a culture of competition has swept through Québec institutions, feeding the development of a multi-tiered school. In this environment, the education system risks reaching the breaking point and potentially regressing, not only in terms of its equity, but also in its overall efficiency.

To break this vicious circle, it goes without saying that all schools must have the necessary resources to offer all the students they welcome a quality educational experience. Merely adding resources, however, will not suffice to stop the cycle of inequality. The very way school operates instils this culture of competition between students as early as the first years of school, creating a premature hierarchy that weighs heavily on their educational future. Yet school must allow each child to develop his or her full potential, regardless of what that potential may be. Implementing a different educational framework will also require working on the beliefs, values and preconceived notions behind long-standing practices whose time has come to be called into question. It is only in this way that the necessary changes can be deeply rooted in the education community and society at large.

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