

Ontario

Introduction

1. This note outlines how functions within the schooling system in Ontario are organised. To assist understanding of the nature of Ontario's system, relevant contextual information is also provided.

Overall structure of schooling and demographic context

2. Children are required to start school from age 6. However, since 2014¹ district school boards have been required to make available full day kindergarten programmes to four and five year olds, with these referred to as Junior Kindergarten and Kindergarten. The Ontario Ministry of Education presents Junior Kindergarten and Kindergarten as part of the school system.
3. Students are required to attend school until age 18 unless they have achieved the Ontario Secondary School Diploma.
4. There are effectively four publicly funded school systems in Ontario – the English speaking Catholic and public systems, and the French-speaking Catholic and public systems. Access to French language and Catholic school education are guaranteed by the Constitution.
5. School education is divided into three stages; junior kindergarten and kindergarten, primary grades 1 to 8, and secondary grades 9 to 12.² During the four years of secondary education, students complete a programme of study to meet the requirements for the Ontario Secondary School Diploma. The diploma is structured around credits, with most individual courses being worth 1 credit.³⁴ In addition to achieving the required 30 credits, students must pass the Ontario Secondary Schools Literacy Test, the only externally assessed part of the diploma, and undertake 40 hours of community service⁵.
6. The Ontario publicly funded school system is more than twice the size of the New Zealand system. In 2016/17 there were 3,975 primary schools and 902 secondary schools, educating some 2 million students (including Junior Kindergarten and Kindergarten). Approximately five percent of enrolments were in the French systems (public and Catholic) and 30 percent in the Catholic systems (English and French).
7. Most publicly funded schools are configured as either elementary schools – to grade 8, or secondary schools comprising grades 9 to 12. There are, however, some composite schools – from junior kindergarten to grade 12, and some schools that provide schooling from grades 7 to 12.

¹ Introduced in 2010 with full implementation in 2014.

² Up until 2003, schooling included an additional grade 13.

³ In total, a minimum of 30 credits are required, 18 of which are compulsory. The compulsory credits are for English or French, mathematics, science, Canadian history, Canadian geography, arts, health and physical education, a second language, careers studies, and civics. The compulsory credits are structured to provide breadth of learning along with depth in key subject areas.

⁴ Students who do not achieve the diploma can apply for a certificate, with this requiring achievement of 14 credits, 7 of which are compulsory.

⁵ I could not find reference to moderation arrangements for internally assessed credits. In Ontario, individual universities determine entry requirements, and the application process often includes requirements for an essay, and other tests in addition to consideration of grades achieved in the Ontario Secondary School Diploma.

8. Some 130,000 students attend private schools.⁶ These schools do not receive government funding. The legislative framework sets minimal requirements for them. Each year private school operators must provide a notice of ‘Intention to Operate’ setting out key information. Private schools are only ‘inspected’ if they seek to award the Ontario Secondary School Diploma, with the inspection limited to evaluating their capacity to provide and assess the required programme of learning.
9. Accurate information on the degree of ethnic diversity of the Ontario school system is not available, although overall population statistics are indicative of diversity. In 2017, the government of Ontario announced that it would begin to collect and analyse data on ethnicity as part of its equity action plan to improve school achievement.⁷ In regard to the overall population of Ontario, 26 percent belong to a visible minority group⁸ and 2.4 percent are aboriginal (Metis and First Nations descent).⁹

Achievement

10. Ontario has a high performing and equitable schooling system as measured by the achievement of 15 year olds in PISA assessments of reading, mathematics and science. Ontario has consistently achieved above the OECD average.¹⁰ As shown in Table 1, mathematics performance has, however, declined since 2000. Performance in science improved over 2000 to 2006, but has since fallen near to the 2000 level. Performance in reading has been relatively stable.

Table 1 Average PISA score for 15 year olds in Ontario 2000, 2006 and 2015

	2000	2006	2015
Reading	533	534	527
Mathematics	524	526	509
Science	522	537	524

11. Ontario performs well in terms of mitigating the impact of a student’s socio-economic background on achievement, and there is little gap in achievement between boys and girls. There is, however, a gap in performance between the French and English speaking systems within Ontario.
12. In recent years, Ontario has significantly increased its high school graduation rate, from 68 percent in 2004 to 86.5 percent in 2016 – an 18 percentage point increase. Further, the proportion of students graduating in four years increased by 23 percentage points, reaching 79.6 percent in 2016.¹¹

⁶ It was not possible to find private school enrolments for 2016/17. Private school enrolments were 133,919 in 2015/16.

⁷ CBC, Ontario to begin collecting data on students’ race, ethnicity, hoping to boost achievement, posted September 2017, www.cbc.ca accessed on 8 June 2018.

⁸ Including 7.6% South Asian, 5% Chinese, 4.3% Black, 2.2% Filipino, 1.4% Latin American, 1.1% Arab, 1.1% South East Asian, 1% West Asian, 0.6% Korean and 0.2% Japanese.

⁹ World Population Review, Ontario Population 2018, www.worldpopulationreview.com, accessed on 8 June 2018.

¹⁰ In 2015 Ontario achieved at a lower level than Alberta, British Columbia and Quebec

¹¹ Ontario Ministry of Education, High School Graduation Rate Climbs to All Time High, May 8 2017, www.news.ontario.ca, accessed on 13 June 2018.

System structure¹²

13. In Canada, responsibility for education falls entirely under the jurisdiction of provincial governments. Since 1967, provincial Ministers have come together in the Council of Ministers of Education to provide pan-Canada leadership of education. The forum provides a mechanism to discuss policy issues, to undertake projects of mutual interest¹³, to consult and co-operate with national level organisations, including the federal government, and to represent the education interests of Canada internationally.
14. The Ontario system has three layers, the Ministry of Education, district school boards and individual schools.

Ministry of Education

15. The Ministry of Education provides province-wide leadership and sets the direction for education policy. Specifically, it sets standards for student outcomes, develops the province-wide curriculum, provides district school boards with resources, including funding and support for programme implementation, promotes a safe, equitable, inclusive and respectful schooling environment, promotes accountability, and promotes and supports excellence in teaching.
16. The Ministry also sets the requirements for the Ontario Secondary School Diploma, and makes regulations that govern the organisation of schools and district school boards and the duties of teachers, principals and district school board officials. Through these mechanisms along with various strategies the Ministry has a 'significant reach' into what happens at individual schools, notwithstanding the decentralised structure of provision.¹⁴
17. The Ministry has adopted a strategy of bringing educators into the Ministry, especially to the student achievement policy function. In 2015, some two thirds of the policy staff in this function were practising educators working up to three years in the Ministry. The goal was to build the capacity of both those working in policy and on the front line. It is suggested that the approach helped to create alignment between goals, priorities, methodologies and implementation.¹⁵

District School Boards

18. There are 72 district school boards in Ontario, with each board responsible for a group of English public schools, English Catholic schools, French public schools, or French Catholic schools in a defined geographic area.¹⁶¹⁷ District school boards are governed by elected trustees while the functions of the board are undertaken by staff employed by the board. Within a district school board, the director of education is the chief executive officer and chief educational

¹² This section draws heavily on, Good Governance, A guide for Trustees, School Boards, Directors of Education and Communities, 2014, www.cge.ontarioschooltrustees.org, accessed on 8 June 2018.

¹³ For example, participation in PISA.

¹⁴ It also responsible for the administration of a small number of schools. This paper does not provide detail in relation to these schools or the small number of schools administered by provincial authorities.

¹⁵ Deidre Faughy, Learning from Successful Education Reforms in Canada, Part 1, International Education News; www.internationalednews.com, posted October 2015, accessed 8 May 2018

¹⁶ School boards have existed in Ontario since 1816, with members of school boards the first democratically elected representatives in Ontario. Boards were originally managed individual schools. Over time boards have been amalgamated and the historical power to tax removed. The current structure of boards has been in place since 1998.

¹⁷ 31 are English public boards, 4 French public boards, 29 English Catholic Boards, and 8 French Catholic Boards.

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officer, is the sole employee who reports directly to the board and is also secretary to the board.

19. The number of trustees on each board is determined by the provincial government. Trustees must be residents of the district, and are elected at four yearly intervals by residents of the district alongside wider local body elections.¹⁸¹⁹ The district school board is therefore a community rather than a parent body. In terms of parental involvement, district school boards are required to establish a Parental Involvement Committee, which has an advisory role at the district level. Separately each school is required to have a Parent Council which advises the principal of the school.
20. District school boards are required to have between one and three student trustees. They are not full board members and do not have a binding vote on the board. Student trustees are senior school students and are elected annually by other students.
21. District school boards are responsible for the provision of publicly funded school education within their area, within the legislative and regulatory framework set, and the funding provided, by the provincial government. Boards are the employer of school staff, and responsible for the oversight of schools in their district. More specifically, they are responsible for delivering effective and appropriate education programmes for their students, for student achievement and wellbeing, and for ensuring effective stewardship of the board's resources.
22. The trustees exercise a governance role; articulating the mission of their district system, making policy to achieve this mission/vision, making strategic resource allocation decisions, monitoring outcomes and holding the school system to account for student achievement through the director of education, and monitoring the Board's own performance and taking action to improve its governance role.
23. A key role of the trustees is the appointment of a qualified director of education, and the appraisal of his/her performance. The appointment is subject to confirmation by the Minister of Education that the recommended candidate is eligible for the position.²⁰
24. The director of education is responsible for operationalizing the board's policies. The director manages all facets of the school board's operations with all board staff (including principals and school staff) reporting directly or indirectly to the director of education. The director advises the board on operational matters, implements board policies, ensures that the board's multi-year plan establishes the board's priorities, identifies the resources that will be used to achieve them, implements and monitors the implementation of the plan, and reports to the board on its progress.
25. At the 'second tier' Boards are required to have supervisory officers who are accountable to the director of education for the implementation, operation and supervision of education programmes in groups of schools. They are required

¹⁸ The election arrangements include a 'ward' system so that there is representation across the district.

¹⁹ Trustees receive an honoraria which is set according to a formula and depends on the size of the Board and the trustees' role on the Board. Honoraria range between C\$6,000 and C\$26,000.

²⁰ Subject to the Minister's agreement two or more Boards can share a director of education.

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to hold both a teaching and supervisory qualification. Their appointment is also subject to confirmation by the Minister of Education.

26. The key focus for these superintendents is improving student achievement and wellbeing and strengthening accountability of the schools they oversee. They work with principals and school staff to ensure that schools have a School Improvement Plan for Student Achievement. They are also responsible for performance appraisals of principals and for ensuring that school buildings are appropriately maintained.

Schools and Principals

27. The autonomy at the individual school level is more limited than in some other systems. For example, there is provincial direction on class sizes and on instructional time and schools must use approved text books. The principal is required to operate within the framework established by both the provincial government and the district school board.
28. Principals are the educational leaders in individual schools and are responsible for its day-to-day operation. They are responsible for student achievement and wellbeing in their school, for providing a safe and accepting environment for students, and for developing the vision and direction for the school in line with the priorities and strategies of the district school board.
29. The principal is responsible for supervising teachers and education programmes, but does not directly appoint school staff but rather makes recommendations to the district school board (through the director of education) on appointments, promotions and dismissals. The principal undertakes the performance appraisal of teachers.
30. The principal is also responsible for developing the implementation of new education initiatives and, in collaboration with staff, parents and the community, for the development of a School Improvement Plan and for its implementation. The principal has a key role in ensuring that the Parent Council for the school works effectively.
31. Principals and vice principals are required to have an annual growth plan and be appraised once every five years.

Curriculum and assessment

32. As noted above, the Ministry of Education is responsible for the development of the curriculum. This appears to be a curriculum, rather than a curriculum framework within which district school boards or individual schools develop a local curriculum.
33. The curriculum specifies both content and performance standards for each grade or course, with assessment based on both sets of standards. The content standards describe the knowledge and skills students are expected to develop and demonstrate, and are framed at both a general and specific level. Performance standards are criterion referenced and are specified at four levels of achievement.
34. Since 2003 the Ministry of Education has operated a curriculum review cycle, which is intended to ensure the curriculum remains relevant but avoids the

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disruption of complete redevelopment. A number of subjects enter the review cycle each year.

35. The review process is research and evidenced based. It starts with third party research and benchmarking with curricula across Canada and in other countries. The reviews are worked on by teams of experts in the relevant subject areas. Once the new curriculum is developed, implementation is supported through the provision of implementation learning sessions for teams from district school boards and for stakeholders, as well as relevant resources.
36. Ontario also has a Curriculum Council, established in 2007, which provides the Minister of Education with strategic level advice on issues relating to the elementary and secondary curriculum. The Council is made up of knowledgeable and committed community leaders. The Minister appoints the Chair of the Council, and in consultation with the Chair appoints other Council members. Appointments are for a two year term and membership is representative of the English and French communities.
37. Reviews are undertaken by the Council at the request of the Minister and are wide ranging. The Council may establish working groups of experts to assist its work. It has provided advice on environment education, financial literacy and the elementary school curriculum.

Institutional Arrangements supporting teacher quality and educational leadership

Ontario College of Teachers

38. The Ontario College of Teachers licences, governs and regulates the teaching profession in Ontario. It is governed by a 37 member council. Twenty three members are elected by the members of the college and 14 members are appointed by the Minister of Education.
39. Teachers in publicly funded schools must be certified to teach by the College. It sets both ethical standards and standards of practice for teachers that describe the knowledge, skills and values. The College issues teaching certificates, accredits initial teacher education programmes and other programmes and courses for teachers, and investigates and hears complaints about its members. It has developed a professional learning framework to support and guide teachers in their ongoing professional development and also issues professional advisories to guide and advise members about issues of importance to the profession.

Initial Teacher Education

40. Programme requirements for initial teacher education were strengthened from September 2015. Programmes are required to be 4 (rather than 2) semesters, and the requirement for practice teaching was doubled to 80 days. Simultaneously the number of places in initial teacher education were halved, making entry to the profession more competitive. Historically initial teacher education was often undertaken concurrently with bachelor degree programmes, but some institutions are now moving to graduate level programmes only.

New Teacher Induction Programme²¹

41. Related to the arrangements for initial teacher education, all publicly funded schools are required to provide new teacher induction programmes²². This programme consists of orientation for all new teachers, professional development appropriate to the needs of the teacher, and mentoring for teachers new to the profession by experienced teachers. The programme provides newly graduated teachers a further year of professional support. New teachers are considered to have completed the programme when they have two successful performance appraisals, normally conducted during the first year of service²³.

Teacher Appraisal

42. Principals are required to conduct regular appraisals of their teaching staff against province-wide teacher performance appraisal standards, with experienced teachers appraised once every five years. The system is intended to provide teachers with meaningful appraisal that encourages professional learning and growth. (Separately teachers also complete an annual learning plan outlining their plans for personal growth.)
43. The appraisal includes classroom observation, and both a parent and student survey. The Ontario Ministry of Education provides resources to support this process, including guidance manuals etc.

Institute for Educational Leaders

44. In 2005, Ontario established an Institute for Educational Leaders to support principals and system leaders in maximising achievement and wellbeing for all students. It is a virtual organization, funded by the Ministry of Education. Its membership is made up of principals, directors of education, supervisory officers, and senior business officials (within district boards). It is governed by a steering group made up of one representative from the associations representing each of these groups. Decisions are made by consensus in order to support a collaborative approach.
45. The Institute is focused on building and disseminating a strong evidence base about effective leadership of school education in Ontario and assisting to build a strong leadership cadre. Key tools are the Ontario Leadership Framework and Ontario Leadership Strategy. The Institute engages in profession inquiry relating to both and supports their ongoing development, including commissioning research on effective leadership.

Ontario Leadership Framework

46. The Ontario Leadership Framework, which was first introduced in 2006, describes successful individual and small group practices for both school and system leaders, as well as effective organizational practice at both school and system level. It provides principals, vice principals, system leaders and aspiring leaders with a road map based on leading edge research and the thinking and experience of successful leaders across Ontario and around the world.

²¹ Provincial Government Requirement

²² District school boards are responsible for overseeing the quality of the programme, meeting the cost and reporting the results of the programme to the Ministry of Education.

²³ Successful completion is noted on their Certificate of Qualification and on the Public Register of the Ontario College of Teachers. Graduate teachers who do not have two successful appraisals are given 24 months to improve.

Ontario Leadership Strategy

47. The Ontario Leadership Strategy has been in place since 2008. Its goals are to attract the right people to leadership roles and develop their capability, promote effective leadership practices and develop leadership capacity and coherence in education organizations. It has a particular focus on attracting the right people to principal roles and helping vice principals and principals to develop into the best possible instructional leaders. The Ministry of Education provides specific funding to district school boards to enable them to establish leadership and succession planning strategies that meet their particular needs.

Quality Assurance

48. Ontario does not have the equivalent ERO or the UK OFSTED. However, an integral part of the Ontario system design is the role of directors of education and superintendents within individual school boards. They are responsible for oversight of schools, and supporting them in continuous improvement.
49. There does not appear to be systematic review of the performance of individual district school boards by the Ontario Ministry of Education. The Minister of Education appears to have the power to intervene in the affairs of an individual board when particular concerns are raised.²⁴ In 2015, district school boards were brought under the oversight of the Provincial Ombudsman.
50. The key means used to monitor the Ontario system are participation in international assessment and province-wide assessment of students reading, writing and maths administered by the Education Quality and Accountability Office.
51. The Education Quality and Accountability Office was established in 1996. It is an independent agency, governed by a board of directors appointed by the Lieutenant Governor in Council. The Office develops, administers, scores and reports on the province-wide tests, as well as manages Ontario's participation in international assessments.
52. Its mandate is to support and guide student improvement by providing credible information about the quality of publicly funded elementary and secondary education. A priority for the agency is to build capability for the use of, and respect for, the data generated through the assessments among teachers, administrators and parents – especially to support improvement planning.²⁵
53. The province-wide tests are administered at grades three, six and nine. There are separate tests for the English and French systems, the tests are directly related to the curriculum and student achievement information is comparable from year to year.
54. The Office is supported by an Assessment Advisory Committee, which includes representatives of directors of education, principals, teachers, school board trustees, parents and students. The Office also has a Psychometric Expert Panel, made of national and international assessment experts.
55. Educators are involved in all aspects of the assessment, including devising test items and marking the open-ended question. It is suggested that this has

²⁴ For example, the 2017 Review of the York Region District School Board.

²⁵ The Office has an outreach team of seven credible principals.

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become a valuable opportunity for professional learning, enabling teachers to further build their assessment literacy.²⁶

56. At grades three and six, a total of six hours of student time is involved in taking the tests across the three subjects. At grade nine, the maths assessment is two hours, and the literacy assessment (Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test) 2.5 hours. Students must pass the literacy test in order to qualify for the Ontario Secondary School Diploma.
57. Results of the tests are provided to each student. Reports are also provided to individual schools and school boards on their achievement, together with contextual, attitudinal and behavioural information.²⁷ The focus is on providing these in a timely way to support schools decisions regarding student placement, intervention programmes and school organisation and programme planning. Reports for schools and school boards are published on the Office's website.
58. The data generated through the assessments is used by the provincial government to identify where attention and resources are needed. The data also appears to be used by both schools and individual teachers to support student achievement and programme improvement.²⁸

The role of networks

59. It is suggested that, since 2003, Ontario has developed a culture of professional learning to improve practice for students learning. Collective Inquiry has become an integral part of teaching practice; teachers regularly work together analyse student work and plan new instructional strategies. There is also appears to be vertical engagement of teachers between the individual school, district school board and the Ministry, as well as horizontal networks of teachers, principals, superintendents and directors of education.

School choice

60. Generally in Ontario, children are required to attend designated schools based on enrolment zones. However, district school boards may permit out of zone enrolments on request, but policy varies across boards with some boards allowing more flexibility than others. There does not appear to be any requirement that individual boards provide capacity within their school system to support choice.
61. Some choice is provided, however, to the extent that families qualify on religious or language grounds to attend Catholic or French schools. Further, at the secondary level Catholic schools are allowed to accept enrolments of non-Catholic students.

²⁶ Deidre Faughey, Learning from Successful Education Reforms in Canada, Part 1, International Education News; www.internationalednews.com, posted October 2015, accessed 8 May 2018

²⁷ Alongside the test, survey information is gathered which enables analysis.

²⁸ A 2011 survey of 3400 elementary school principals, 8,500 grade three teachers and 7,300 grade six teachers indicated that: 96% of principals used achievement results and questionnaire information to guide school improvement initiatives for reading, writing and mathematics; 82% of grade 3, and 80% of grade 6 teachers said they used the data to identify areas of program strength and areas for improvement in reading, writing and mathematics; and 80% of grade 3, and 78% of grade 6 teachers said they used the data to identify how well students are meeting curriculum expectations.

Supporting Organisations

62. The Ontario Education Service Corporation was founded in 2002 by the four school trustee associations – that is, the associations for the English public and Catholic systems and for the French public and Catholic Systems. It is a non-profit organisation which provides services to all district school boards. It appears to enable boards to achieve the benefits of economies of scale and levels of expertise that would not be possible if they acted individually.
63. It provides educational and business services, including data analysis and behaviour management services; training programmes for directors of education, business officials and school administrators; and governance and other programmes endorsed and supported by the provincial Ministry of Education. It also inputs into Ministry of Education policy processes.

Concluding Comments

64. Overall, while Ontario has decentralised provision of schooling, this operates in the context of strong central direction and steering which draws on professional teaching expertise. Ontario also appears to benefit from institutional arrangements that have achieved a level of maturity, along with professional practice and culture that supports good vertical and horizontal linkages that enhance system capability.

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