

School Grades: Identifying Alberta's Best Public Schools (2007)

For the *Backgrounder* by David Johnson, [click here](#).

The David Johnson/C.D. Howe Institute Alberta School Grades Database (2007):

For the 2007 school performance indicators, [click here](#).

For the 2007 school community profiles, [click here](#).

Project Summary and Methodology

There are about 2,240 elementary schools in Alberta. Can we determine which do the best job of educating students? Yes – but not through the measurement methods that have been prevalent until recently.

Each January, Alberta students in Grades 3 and 6 write assessments in various subjects administered by Alberta Education under the Achievement Testing Program. If a student scores at a level called the ‘standard of excellence’ in these assessments, that student's performance is classified as successful. The percentages of students that achieve the standard of excellence in each subject and grade at a given school are published annually. It is on that basis that schools have generally been evaluated.

In reality, however, a school cannot be considered a success just because a high percentage of students score well on achievement tests, nor can schools be meaningfully ranked on this basis. Under such a system, schools that draw students from neighbourhoods with the highest incomes and best-educated parents will likely have the highest success rates since these factors have been shown to correlate strongly with student performance.

But not all variation in school results can be traced to variation in the social and economic characteristics of the communities where they are located. By linking student postal codes to census data on education, income, employment, housing status and other variables, I have constructed profiles of the Alberta communities from which elementary school students are drawn. I found that only 39 to 44 per cent of the variation in school success rates, depending on whether testing results from grade 3 or 6 are examined, can be ascribed to socio-economic factors.

By focusing on the statistical variation that remains after the influence of socio-economic variables has been accounted for, I have been able to create meaningful performance indicators for over 1,000 elementary schools in Alberta, including public, private, charter and independent schools. Only schools where we have results from at least 40 students over a three-year period are evaluated so as to have enough data to compare schools fairly.

Schools are graded using a percentile measure in Grade 3, Grade 6, or both. The number 90, for instance, indicates that a school's results for that grade are better than the results at 90 per cent of schools with similar socio-economic profiles. This comparison is fair to teachers and principals because it is performed after separating out the effects of the school's student pool. If a school has rated in the 50th percentile, it is performing as expected when compared to others with similar neighbourhood characteristics. A parent with children at a low percentile school should expect better results. School

administrators should be very interested in what is happening at a school with either very low (20 or less) or very high (80 or more) percentile scores.

Other Education Series Papers:

- February 2007 Finnie, Ross and Alex Usher. [Room at the Top: Strategies for Increasing the Number of Graduate Students in Canada](#). C.D. Howe Institute Commentary 245.
- February 2007 Johnson, David. [Ontario's Best Public Schools: An Update to Signposts of Success](#) (2005). Ebrief 39.
- May 2006 Guillemette, Yvan. [The Case for Income-Contingent Repayment of Student Loans](#). C.D. Howe Institute Commentary 233.
- February 2006 Pakravan, Payam. [The Future Is Not What It Used to Be: Re-examining Provincial Postsecondary Funding Mechanisms in Canada](#). C.D. Howe Institute Commentary 227.
- December 2005 Oreopoulos, Philip. [Stay in School: New Lessons on the Benefits of Raising the Legal School- Leaving Age](#). Commentary 223.
- November 2005 Chant, John. [How We Pay Professors and Why It Matters](#). Commentary 221.
- October 2005 Laidler, David E.W. [Redirecting Rae: Some Proposals for Postsecondary Education in Ontario](#). Backgrounder 92.
- October 2005 Collins, Kirk A., and James B. Davies. [Carrots & Sticks: The Effect of Recent Spending and Tax Changes on the Incentive to Attend University](#). Commentary 220.
- October 2005 Auld, Doug. [Selling Postsecondary Education: The Role of Private Vocational and Career Colleges](#). Commentary 219.
- October 2005 Coulombe, Serge, and Jean-François Tremblay. [Public Investment in Skills: Are Canadian Governments Doing Enough?](#) Commentary 217.
- August 2005 Guillemette, Yvan. [School Class Size: Smaller Isn't Better](#). Commentary 215.
- March 2005 Johnson, David. [Signposts of Success: Interpreting Ontario's Elementary School Test Scores](#). Policy Study 40.
- January 2005 Guillemette, Yvan. [School Enrolment Is Down; Spending Is Up](#). What's Wrong With This Picture? e-brief.
- April 2004 Richards, John, and Aidan Vining. [Aboriginal Off-Reserve Education: Time for Action](#). Commentary 198.