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COMMENTARY

SOCIAL POLICY

Dropouts: The Achilles Heel of Canada's High-School System

John Richards



In this issue...

High secondary school dropout rates, particularly among Aboriginals and francophone Quebecers, have negative impacts on the future of the individuals concerned and on Canada's economy.

THE STUDY IN BRIEF

THE AUTHOR OF THIS ISSUE

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The high dropout rate among francophone Quebec students, particularly boys, has recently received considerable attention in that province. Media coverage has been extensive, indicating widespread public concern. However, the high-school dropout-rate problem is not restricted to Quebec. Based on the 2006 census, four provinces – Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Newfoundland and Alberta – have higher dropout rates among those aged 20 to 24 than do Quebec francophones.

The ratio between the province with the highest dropout rate, Manitoba, and the lowest, British Columbia, is two to one. The major factor underlying the large number of students failing to complete high school in the Prairies is the concentration of Aboriginals and their low completion rate.

This *Commentary* examines different approaches to addressing the education challenges facing francophone Quebecers and Aboriginals, both those living on- and off-reserve. It emphasizes the value of collecting reliable data on student core-skill performance at various stages in the K-12 cycle and concludes with a range of potential interventions. These include campaigns to shift cultural attitudes toward education, investment in early childhood and early primary school programming, discretionary agreements with entrepreneurial school districts, and major institutional reform of on-reserve school administration.

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In the fall of 2008, former Quebec premier Jacques Parizeau wrote a newspaper article drawing attention to the high dropout rate among francophone students – particularly among boys.¹ He cited government statistics on high-school completion rates as of 2007, showing that in Montréal French-language public schools 63 percent of girls and only 49 percent of boys had graduated seven years after entering secondary studies.

The comparable statistics in Montreal English-language public schools were 86 percent for girls and 79 percent for boys. “Why,” he asked, “are the results of [Quebec’s] English-language school system so much better than those of the French-language system?”

In his indiscriminate critique of provincial education ministers and officials, Parizeau went too far, but his article drew wide attention to the Achilles heel of Quebec’s public school system. His article preceded, by six months, a substantive venture directed by Jacques Ménard, president of BMO Financial Group, Quebec and chairman of BMO Nesbitt Burns. In early 2009, Ménard announced the formation of a 27-member group of prominent Quebecers committed to explore initiatives to lower *décrochage* (dropping out). They titled their report *Savoir pour Pouvoir*; (knowledge is power), a quotation from 17th century philosopher Francis Bacon.

If Quebec elites have recently become concerned over low high-school completion rates in their province, the elites in several other provinces should be even more concerned. Once every five years, the census provides a snapshot of the state of education

achievement among Canadians age 15 and over. (The youngest tabulated cohort for which it is reasonable to expect completion of secondary school is aged 20-24.)

Among Quebec francophones who fail to complete high school as teenagers, some obtain equivalent certification at an older age. The large difference in graduation rates between the 20 to 24 and 25 to 34 cohorts is disturbing: why are so many completing secondary studies at an age above 25? Figure 1a shows the percentage of the population without secondary school certification for the 20 to 24 group by sex, by province and, in the case of Quebec, by English and French mother tongue. Figure 1b does the same for the 25 to 34 group, the cohort with the best high-school completion results. For both cohorts, the three Prairie provinces and Newfoundland recorded even worse completion rates than Quebec francophones.²

This *Commentary’s* first section addresses the apparent contradiction between Canada’s low high-school completion rates in particular provinces and relatively high performance in the Programme for International Student Assessment, a major international exam for 15-year-olds conducted every three years by the OECD. The second section examines three examples of less-than-satisfactory education accomplishment – Quebec francophones, Aboriginals and men (relative to women). The final section provides an introduction to the empirical analysis of factors bearing on education outcomes, combined with two sets of comprehensive recommendations (each summarized in a box) for education reform in Quebec and among Aboriginals.

These recommendations, one from the Ménard *Groupe d’action* and the other from a forthcoming report of the Canadian Policy Research Networks on Aboriginal education, are exercises in “whole system” reform.

(The report of Ménard’s *Groupe d’action* exists in French only and has received very little attention in

Education is a complex policy file. I thank the following for advice on aspects they know better than I: Dan Beavon, Fred Caron, Pierre Fortin, Gerry Hurton, Michael Mendelson, Henry Milner, Audrey Roadhouse, Bill Robson, Megan Scott, Larry Steeves, Charles Ungerleider, and Aidan Vining. Colin Busby and Ben Dachis provided a careful “in-house” review of earlier drafts. James Fleming oversaw editing and production.

1 *Le Journal de Montréal*, Sept. 11, 2008.

2 Aggregate P.E.I. results are almost identical to those for Quebec francophones, but are particularly subject to uncertainty due to small numbers in the 20 percent census sample underlying these statistics.

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