

School Grades: An Update to Identifying Alberta's Best Public Schools (2010)

For the *e-brief* by David Johnson, [click here](#).

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The David Johnson/C.D. Howe Institute Alberta School Grades Database (2010):

For the 2010 school performance indicators, [click here](#).

For the 2010 school community profiles, [click here](#).

For the 2007 database and *Backgrounder* [click here](#).

Project Summary and Methodology

There are about 1,800 elementary and junior high 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 year, Alberta students in Grades 3, 6 and 9 write the Provincial Achievement Test in various subjects administered by Alberta Education. 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 40 to 47 per cent of the variation in school success rates, depending on whether testing results from grade 3, 6 or 9 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 almost 1,200 elementary and junior high schools in Alberta, including public, private, charter and independent schools. Only schools where we have results from at least 45 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, and Grade 9. 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:

- October 2009 Richards, John. [Dropouts: The Achilles' Heel of Canada's High-School System](#). Commentary 298.
- August 2009 Johnson, David. [Ontario's Best Public Schools, 2005/06-2007/08: An Update to Signposts of Success \(2005\)](#). ebrief.
- May 2009 Moussaly-Sergieh, Karim and François Vaillancourt. [Extra Earning Power: The Financial Returns to University Education in Canada](#)
- March 2009 Johnson, David. [Collateral Damage: The Impact of Work Stoppages on Student Performance in Ontario](#). ebrief.
- December 2008 Richards, John, Jennifer Hove and Kemi Afolabi. [Understanding the Aboriginal/Non-Aboriginal Gap in Student Performance: Lessons From British Columbia](#). Commentary 276.
- October 2008 Richards, John. [Closing the Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal Education Gaps](#). Backgrounder 116.
- October 2008 Card, David, Martin Dooley and A. Abigail Payne. [School Choice and the Benefits of Competition: Evidence from Ontario](#). Backgrounder 115.
- August 2008 Johnson, David. [Heads of the Class: A Comparison of Ontario School Boards by Student Achievement](#). ebrief.
- February 2008 Johnson, David. [School Grades: Identifying British Columbia's Best Schools](#). C.D. Howe Institute Commentary 258
- October 2007 Guillemette, Yvan. [Breaking Down Monopolies: Expanding Choice and Competition in Education](#). C.D. Howe Institute Backgrounder 105
- September 2007 Johnson, David. [School Grades: Identifying Alberta's Best Public Schools](#). C.D. Howe Institute Backgrounder 104.
- 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.
- 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.
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Researchers interested in obtaining this database in a useable electronic format to carry out their own research should contact the C.D. Howe Institute at cdhowe@cdhowe.org with a short description of their research project