

# THE QUALITY OF PUBLIC EDUCATION IN CANADA



## WHO IS AT RISK?

While most Canadian students are doing quite well in international tests, there are a number of students who aren't making the grade. This achievement gap should be a concern for all Canadians – the OECD has found that nations, such as Canada, that reduce the gap between students who succeed and those at risk of failure tend to achieve sustained economic success and a relatively high quality of life.

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# Students At Risk

## A Complex Problem, With No Easy Solutions

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**P**roblem-learners. Kids who 'fall through the cracks.' Potential dropouts. Truants. Students who are somehow left behind.

These are all colloquial terms that have been used over the years to describe Canadian students who have not kept up with their classmates in meeting the educational benchmarks set by our provinces and territories. In recent years, these students have been given the general description of being 'at risk.'

But who is at risk, and why do these students matter? While numerous education studies have been directed to this question, the exact number of at risk students is difficult to determine

and the significance of the difficulties they face is often overlooked as Canadian students do relatively well in international achievement tests like the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study (see TLP Progress Report 2003).

Canadians should be proud of the many successes and accomplishments of our public school system. Canadian students are among the best in the world and our schools have smaller gaps between the highest and lowest performing students than do most other countries, especially given our diverse population and large differences in wealth.

*'Students At-Risk' continued on page 2*

This paper, the second Progress Report from The Learning Partnership, focuses on the phenomenon of students at risk with an aim to facilitating greater understanding among Canadians of the nature of the problem. It outlines the factors that influence risk and identifies school and community initiatives that have sought to reduce risk. Based on the understanding that there are no easy solutions to the problem, the paper concludes with a series of recommendations for educators and the community at large suggesting that with sustained, concerted effort, progress in this area is possible.

## HOW TO USE THIS REPORT

We encourage you to use this report in a variety of ways:

- › Share it with your friends and colleagues
- › Discuss it at parent and student council meetings
- › Use it at parent-teacher interviews
- › Talk to members of your local school boards and business partners
- › Discuss the issue with your local community groups and political representatives

To download an electronic copy of the report and / or to send it to a friend or colleague, go to publications on our website [www.thelearningpartnership.ca](http://www.thelearningpartnership.ca).

**Canadians care about the quality of their children's education. Let this report inform the dialogue!**

## 'Students At-Risk' continued from page 1

Yet Canadians must recognize the importance of confronting the challenges that at risk students have to overcome.

Why? At risk students require the attention of all Canadians precisely because the cost of ignoring them is very high. The issue of risk is important because increased educational attainment is related to virtually every important positive life outcome. More education is linked to greater career choice, satisfaction in employment, higher incomes, better health, fewer accidents, longer life, greater volunteerism, more civic involvement and greater tolerance. A number of studies have made the link between targeted investments in learning and positive social and economic benefits later on in life.

The reality is that for all our success,

Canada still has a significant number of young people who are unable to succeed in school, and as a consequence, face real disadvantages in their efforts to live productive lives.

Given the challenges, it is obvious that only sustained effort can help reduce the number of students at risk. Yet, even with increased attention to the needs of our schools, it is important to realize that schools *alone* cannot solve all of the problems of students at risk. Canada's schools do not cause social problems, and cannot be expected to solve them on their own. Schools can and should, though, be part of the effort to improve educational success for all students, including those 'at risk'. The effort, however, needs to be shared by all elements of Canadian society. And the benefits of any sustained commitment can be enormous. ■

*continued from page 1* But what causes some students to fall behind? Why are some students at risk? There is no simple definition, or exact number, that can help us understand students at risk. A proper examination of the available research, however, can help policy makers, educators and the community successfully tackle the challenges that these students face.

## THE AVAILABLE EVIDENCE

In the last few years, the amount of information on students at risk in Canada has improved significantly, thanks in part to the increased use of research and data. Relevant data relating to at risk students can be found within the following research initiatives.

### **From the Council of Ministers of Education in Canada:**

Student Achievement Indicators Program (SAIP)  
[www.cmec.ca/saip](http://www.cmec.ca/saip)

### **From Statistics Canada:**

National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth (NLSCY)  
Youth in Transition Study (YITS)  
[www.statscan.ca](http://www.statscan.ca)

### **From the OECD:**

Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)  
[www.oecd.org](http://www.oecd.org)

In broad terms a student 'at risk' is one whose past or present characteristics or conditions are associated with a higher probability of failing to complete high school. Risk is frequently judged on the basis of relative performance. In any Canadian classroom, some of the students will be working at a level below that of others. How far behind do they have to be to be considered at risk? Is being behind in one or two subjects a serious problem, or is a consistent pattern neces-

sary? Is being behind in one year enough to raise alarms, or does one have to see the pattern repeated over time? These questions do not have a single right answer, but they help highlight the complexity of the issue.

Since risk is always measured against a norm, it is also important to bear in mind that what was once considered a 'normal' education achievement is now often considered inadequate; we expect students to achieve more while in school. In Canada today failure to complete at least secondary schooling is seen as a serious deficiency, but as recently as 1981 only half the Canadian population had completed high school. A generation ago, few would consider a high-school dropout as facing a lifetime disadvantage. Today, high school is considered a bare minimum before entering into the work force – and those students who are unable to complete high school are faced with significant social and economic challenges later on in life.

Not only have our expectations for education increased, but we are more likely to apply those expectations to the entire population. Societal inequities still exist in Canada, but it is simply no longer acceptable to prevent a student from succeeding because of gender, ethnicity, religion, language or family income. Because of this shared value, the attention given to assuring equality of instruction in the classroom is not surprising. Most attempts to help students at risk are, in fact, part of broader efforts to redress existing inequities in Canadian society.

Although there are different approaches used to measure risk a reasonable conclusion drawn from recent studies would be that roughly a quarter of Canadian children have some definite vulnerability to risk – *with ten to fifteen per cent experiencing serious adverse consequences based on their current situation and conditions*. These rates appear similar to estimates in other OECD countries. ■

## HOW DO WE MEASURE WHO IS AT RISK?

**There are several different measurements one might use to convey the degree of risk facing students in Canada. Three approaches are discussed here – the child poverty rate, the high school dropout rate and the Statistics Canada vulnerability index (NLSCY).**

***Child poverty rate*** Because socio-economic status continues to be the most powerful predictor of life outcomes, the proportion of children living in poverty is an important risk indicator. Although the rate of child poverty has changed somewhat with changes in the economy and unemployment rates, it has remained between 15% and 21% for the last 20 years. It is worth noting that this is consistently higher than the overall poverty rate and that Canada's poverty rate is among the highest in the developed world.

Child poverty is relevant because studies show that, whatever definition of risk or vulnerability is used, its incidence is higher, often much higher, in high poverty communities.

***The dropout rate*** A second indicator of the number of students at risk is the proportion of young people who do not complete high school by a given age – often called the 'dropout rate'. In the 1980s and early 1990s the dropout rate in Canada was widely thought to be about 30 per cent. The dropout rate declined throughout the 1990s and by 1999 the rate of non-completion at age 20 was actually about 12 per cent.

While overall high school completion rates appear to have improved significantly, dropout rates remain high for particular groups. In some provinces, dropout rates remain high, especially for young males. And the rate remains high for the Aboriginal population as well.

***Vulnerability index*** The National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth (NLSCY), measured by Statistics Canada, has yielded a more complex set of indicators of risk in children. Almost 30 per cent of Canadian children measured under NLSCY could be judged 'vulnerable' either in cognitive or behavioural terms, with only a very small proportion (about 3 per cent) showing difficulties in both areas. In all groups boys show higher rates of difficulty than do girls – a trend that has also been seen in other education studies.



## RESEARCH ON RESILIENCE

**Even if a student faces a number of negative influences, it would be wrong to assume that early challenges are immutable and cannot be overcome.**

A great many students at risk end up leading very rewarding lives. Indeed, the concept of resilience – of successfully adapting one’s learning skills to overcome barriers – has been a growing field of interest among education researchers. The study of resilience should enable policy-makers to understand what helps ensure that some high-risk students not only survive, but succeed.

# What Puts Children At Risk?

**A number of factors can place children in at risk situations. It is important to remember that the existence of multiple factors, especially when they persist over time, create the most likely conditions for students to be at risk. Some of the common ones include:**

## POVERTY

Researchers have discovered that family income is often the most prevalent family link to the phenomenon of students at risk. Regardless of the national system of education, reports have shown strong links between higher poverty levels and poorer educational outcomes in the developed world.

The highest concentrations of at risk youth in Canada are to be found in core urban areas, poor rural areas, and isolated northern and Aboriginal communities. The risk is compounded if family poverty is persistent over many years.

## A CHILD’S NATURAL DEVELOPMENT

Many risk factors can be detected long before formal schooling. A child born with a significant disability, for example, can face unique challenges once they enter into a learning environment. A child’s personality can also influence risk. Work on resilience shows that children who are able to work effectively with others, or have a sense of efficacy and autonomy, seem to experience better learning outcomes. Recent concerns about the learning gap between girls and boys in school have highlighted the degree to which characteristics such as obedi-

ence (or the ability to sit still) may also drive student outcomes.

## PARENTAL INFLUENCE

Researchers agree that adolescent parenthood is a significant risk factor, in part because adolescent parents are highly likely to have less education, be poorer, have fewer social supports than other parents and tend to be single parents.

Even though a number of other factors, such as persistently low family income, are linked to diminished learning outcomes for students, good parenting skills minimize risk in a number of ways and can reverse the trend: providing secure care-giving in infancy, monitoring school performance of children and establishing consistent routines at home can all help produce positive learning outcomes.

## THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

A growing body of research has found an independent influence of the neighbourhood on children’s educational outcomes, factors that are outside the control of any school. The importance of community supports, such as social groups, mentors or solid local employment prospects can help alleviate risk. Conversely, the lack of these neighbourhood supports can increase risk. ■



## Recent Attempts To Minimize Risk

A number of initiatives to minimize risk among students have been attempted in recent years, with varying degrees of success. Some of the more common initiatives have included:

### Offering supplementary services to needy students.

These in-school programs have included lunch and breakfast service for students from low-income families to feed children who appear to be hungry, additional counseling for students exhibiting problems, providing warm winter clothing to those who do not have it, allocating additional funds so that students can participate in school sports and club activities that normally require parental contributions, etc.

There is surprisingly little evidence on the outcomes of such programs given how widespread they have been. The limitation of all these programs is that they do not directly address academic achievement. If our concern is to increase graduation rates, or reduce retention in grade or referral to special education, these services alone are unlikely to make the necessary difference.

### Developing 'special' or targeted programs.

These approaches are adopted largely because they are the least disruptive to existing arrange-

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# HOW DO WE MINIMIZE RISK?

## The role of schools

One of the purposes of public schooling is to give every young Canadian an equal chance to learn and to succeed, regardless of economic or social background. Although the positive record of public schools in promoting equity is clear, it is not unblemished: there is evidence that schools can play a role in creating as well as reducing inequality in outcomes. For example, research on high school dropouts shows that about one-half of the dropouts in one study were making reasonable academic progress and chose to leave (or were asked to leave) because of personal difficulties in their lives *or with the school*.

Yet schools can effectively help overcome some of the challenges faced by students at risk. The methods used can be refreshingly straightforward: research studies identify active support from caring teachers as an important factor in children's success. But maintaining high levels of achievement in schools with a significant number of at risk students is no easy task, and ambitious goals for student achievement may only add to the challenges. The belief that every school can be successful no matter what the students' background has the effect of blaming schools for prob-

lems not of their own making and setting up the system itself for failure whenever some students fall through the gaps.

Efforts to improve schooling results for vulnerable students are not new. A number of the political pledges regarding education today can be traced back to commitments made in the 1960s and early 1970s, if not well before that. But the history of past education reforms can provide some useful guidance. Throughout the decades, successful approaches to minimizing risk have had some common characteristics. These have included:

- › **strong political support from several different spheres (including not just parents and educators, but business, labour and community groups)**
- › **a shared vision among stakeholders on what needs to be done, as well as a sustained commitment to any reforms that are attempted**
- › **a strong supporting legal, policy and institutional structure that mandates or provides financial and social supports over the long-term. This characteristic is often difficult to achieve, given shifting political priorities within departments and ministries of education.** ■

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ments and they resolve teachers' concerns about how to cope with 'difficult children' by removing them from regular classes. In many cases segregated programs are supported by specific funding programs or grants.

The evidence on the success of these programs, however, is weak. There is a consensus among North American researchers that segregating students because of lower achievement levels can be ineffective; there is also consensus among special education researchers that segregated schools and classrooms for disabled students are more expensive and are no more effective than integrated programs as a means of dealing with students at risk.

### **Focusing on the student-teacher relationship.**

Current thinking on effective school change has highlighted the importance of strong student-teacher relationships and relationships with other significant adults in school. Teachers and mentors can have a profound effect on the motivation of students at risk to do well in school.

### **Remembering the**

**Parents.** Communication between educators and parents has long been an important aspect of our children's education. It has also, in more recent years, been recognized as an important element in building school success. Schools in many settings are making increasing efforts to reach out to parents – with mixed success, but with an obvious intent. Parents are critical to the success of a student's education. ■



## **BEYOND THE SCHOOL**

### *Expanding the Focus*

As many researchers have found, the issue of economic well-being is paramount to ensuring successful learning outcomes: when poverty levels are reduced, family stresses diminish and the situation of the young learner improves. Because of this, the availability of government or community-run programs that help improve economic equity, such as good childcare, employment insurance or social assistance can have an enormous effect on learning outcomes.

In recent years, more and more Canadians have looked beyond the classroom in the search of solutions. This enlarged focus can be seen in the increased public attention given to the field of early childhood education, and the idea of lifelong learning.

Many intervention programs related to students at risk have focused on the preschool years. In the United States, substantial investments have been made to Head Start programs. Canada has a modest number of preschool programs, including some targeted specifically at Aboriginal children and communities. In the recent federal election, the government expressed a willingness to commit significant investments in the field of childhood development. All of these investments have been made (or promised) because there is a widely

held belief that early intervention will create significant improvements in outcomes, yet the evidence is actually not so straightforward. Most studies affirm that preschool is an important area for action, but it is not a sufficient investment in itself.

While learning outcomes can shift dramatically over different stages of a child's schooling, early experiences are very powerful influences on children's entire life course. Recent research in this area has drawn national policy attention to efforts that improve the situation of very young children. The national Early Childhood Development agreement, for example, signed between the federal and provincial governments in 2000, targeted substantial sums to initiatives in this area with specific actions determined in each province.

*The benefits of good parenting skills and positive family relationship have also been shown to overcome other risk factors.*

A second area that may be related to improved outcomes for at risk students is adult education – an area that has, in recent years, fallen under the broader public concern with lifelong learning. Adult education is seen as a good investment because improving the skills of adults can improve the lives of their children. Although many school systems in Canada operate adult learning programs, support for such programs by provinces and school systems tends to be modest and programs often lack a solid policy base that would promote wider accessibility and high quality.

The focus on early childhood development and lifelong learning has brought attention to a number of variables that can influence – however indirectly – learning outcomes. In recent years, programs have been developed that target

the number of low birth weight babies born in Canada, widespread incidences of inadequate housing and nutrition, and specific (and highly preventable) health risks such as lead-poisoning or fetal alcohol poisoning.

Educators may rightly claim that some of these issues are clearly beyond

their responsibility and capacity. Yet any careful discussion of what puts children at risk and what might be done to reduce risk must draw attention to these influences. The key policy question must be: *What interventions are likely to produce the greatest improvement, given the available resources?*

## SOME SUGGESTIONS: WHAT WE CAN DO NEXT

In order to make real gains on the question of risk, education stakeholders must recognize that there is no magic bullet. Effective interventions require the recognition that the education system cannot do it all, especially when many of the root causes stem from broader economic and social factors.

As this report has highlighted, *successful reforms cannot be achieved easily*. Trendy education reforms may be popular for a time, but the challenges of reducing risk require sustained, long-term commitment. Policy-makers also need to have an appropriate balance of optimism and realism. Social inequality, the prime cause of risk, is deeply rooted and unlikely to disappear – perhaps unlikely even to be diminished significantly – any time soon. Better schools can only go so far in achieving greater levels of equity in educational outcomes; the issue of social and economic inequity is one that schools cannot combat alone.

There are, however, a number of initiatives that can be taken at the school, community and ministry level to help students at risk successfully meet the benchmarks set by Canada's systems of education. Given the social and economic benefits that emerge when at risk students are able to succeed, supporting any number of these initiatives is important for all of Canadian society.

### » FOR SCHOOLS

#### LEARN FROM THE DATA.

Quantifiable measurements have gained in popularity among educators, but little analysis has been done to help teachers discover research-driven ways that can help bridge the performance gap between students at risk and their peers.

**COMMUNICATE.** Given the home and neighbourhood influences on student outcomes, it is critical for teachers and school administrators to form partnerships with the community they serve. The classroom cannot be isolated from the world around it, nor should it be.

**LEARN FROM PEERS, AND PRACTICE.** It is critical that schools share best practices and classroom innova-

tions. More needs to be done to encourage and enable teachers to utilize the best available research on effective teaching for students at risk.

#### RECOGNIZE THAT LEARNING OFTEN OCCURS OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM.

For many students at risk, the rigid learning of the classroom often aggravates problems already in place. A number of these same students have found support outside the classroom, but within the school: in school clubs or sports teams, or in peer networks set up by guidance departments. Schools need to recognize the enormous value of these networks, and see that the coaches, guidance counsellors and volunteers that support these groups can be positive role models to students at risk.

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*In order to make real gains on the question of risk, education stakeholders must recognize that there is no magic bullet, and that the education system cannot do it alone.*

## WHO WE ARE

The Learning Partnership is a national organization with a mission to champion a strong public education system. We pursue this goal by conducting research and developing policy alternatives, by introducing innovative programs that help children to learn and by initiating varied avenues for dialogue with government, educators, business and the community about publicly funded education.

## RELATED READINGS

Levin, Ben. (2004) *This publication is based on Students At Risk: A Review of the Research.*, Prepared for The Learning Partnership by Dr. Ben Levin, April 2004. To download the paper go to publications on our website [www.thelearningpartnership.ca](http://www.thelearningpartnership.ca).

## WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU

The Learning Partnership seeks to engage Canadians in a wide-ranging discussion on educational values, goals and strategies to ensure that our children have the best public education possible. We therefore want to know what people think about the issues raised in this report. Please contact us:

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THE LEARNING PARTNERSHIP

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**ADOPT INTERVENTION PROGRAMS ALIGNED WITH SPECIFIC SCHOOL NEEDS.** There are a number of useful interventions, such as literacy and math programs, that are currently yielding promising results in schools across the country. Schools should seek and utilize those programs that best suit their specific circumstances.

### » FOR MINISTRIES OR DEPARTMENTS OF EDUCATION

**SETTING CLEAR GOALS.** While achieving higher test scores is seen as a worthy goal, a more formidable achievement would be to reduce the number of children who are unable to achieve the minimum learning outcomes set by provincial and territorial departments. **FOCUS ON EARLY CHILDHOOD.** The importance of strong early childhood support for families is a national imperative. Given that risk factors can accumulate over a lifetime, early intervention can provide an improved base for positive learning outcomes at a later date. **CO-ORDINATE BETWEEN GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS.** The most worthy goals set by an education department can be compromised by policies legislated by the finance department, or

the ministry of social services. More co-ordination is needed to ensure that the initiatives of other departments support the learning agenda set by the education department.

### » FOR THE BROADER COMMUNITY

#### **INVEST IN ADULT EDUCATION.**

Programs aimed at improving parenting, language facility and employment skills are an important investment for families and society in general. Adult education can yield greater success at school for all children, and is especially important in fostering success for students at risk.

**RECOGNIZE THAT SCHOOLS CANNOT MINIMIZE RISK ALONE.** When students start to fall behind, it is easy to blame the education system. But, as research has shown, a number of factors influence risk – many of them found outside of the classroom.

**ENGAGE IN A DIALOGUE ABOUT RISK.** Given that early and sustained investments that target students at risk can produce savings down the road, all parents – indeed all sectors of society – need to engage in a discussion on what needs to be done both inside and outside the classroom.

### » A CALL FOR COLLABORATION

This dialogue on at risk students won't provide answers over night. Business, labour groups, and the broader community need to support schools as they tackle risk in the classroom, but they also need to address the risk factors that are present in our labour market, our social policy, and in our neighbourhoods. As stated above, our nation's schools do not cause most social problems, and cannot be expected to solve them. Schools can and should, be part of the sustained and rigorous effort to improve educational and other life outcomes. But they cannot do it alone. ■

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