

Career and life planning in Ontario schools

2017

This report is an excerpt from People for Education's Annual report on Ontario's publicly funded schools 2017, and an excerpt from People for Education's report, Career and life-planning in schools.¹

Across Canada, rapid technological, economic, and social change has prompted public education systems to adapt their models for career and life planning. Ontario has committed to developing “an integrated strategy to help the province’s current and future workforce adapt to the demands of a technology-driven knowledge economy...by bridging the worlds of skills development, education and training.”²

In 2013, Ontario introduced *Creating Pathways to Success: An Education and Career/Life Planning Program for Ontario Schools*. This policy is intended to support students as they transition through school and plan for their futures. It includes a number of mandatory components:³

- portfolios for every student from grade 7 to grade 12;
- career and life planning committees in every school; and
- professional development for teachers.

In 2017:

- 15% of elementary and 39% of secondary schools report they have career and life planning committees.
- 34% of elementary and 56% of secondary schools report that every student has an education and career/life planning portfolio.
- 23% of elementary and 40% of secondary schools report professional development on career and life planning is available to their teachers.
- The average ratio of students to guidance counsellors per secondary school is 380 to 1. In 10% of schools, that ratio is as high as 600 to 1.

The goals of *Creating Pathways to Success* are to:

- allow students to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to be able to make education and career/life choices;
- provide students with opportunities for learning in and out of the classroom; and
- engage parents and the broader community in the development, implementation and evaluation of the program.

Student portfolios

Part of the approach of *Creating Pathways to Success* is to put students “at the centre of their own learning.”⁴ It is intended to support students’ capacity for self-discovery and build their self-knowledge.

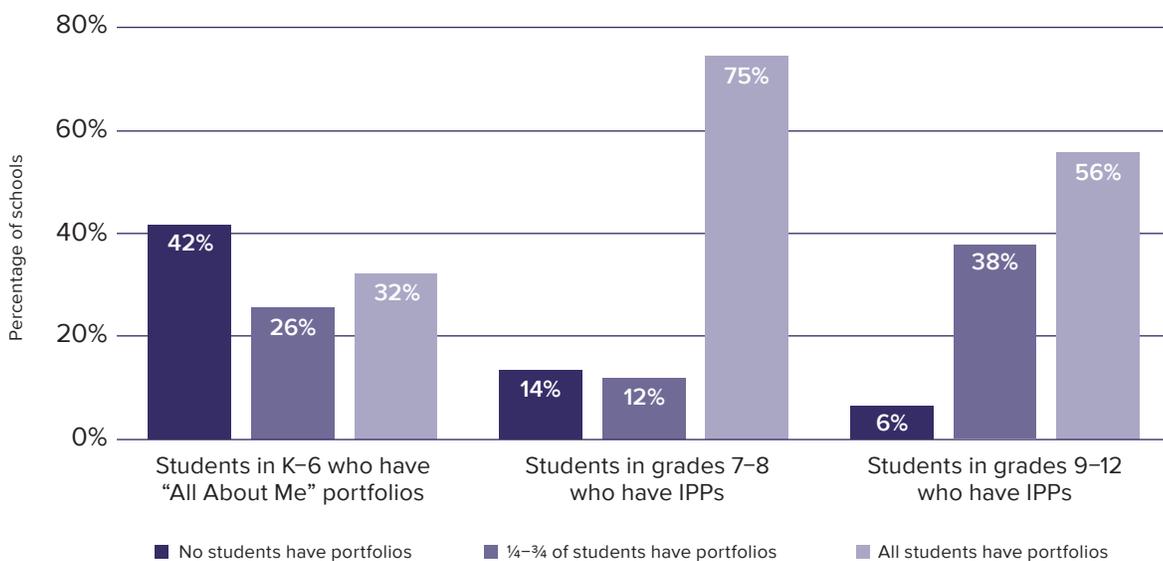
Student portfolios are an important element of the program. The portfolios track student learning, guide school transitions and course selection, and allow students to reflect on their career and life goals.⁵

From kindergarten to grade 6, students document their learning in an “All About Me” portfolio. The portfolio contains evidence of their learning in an age-appropriate format (e.g. drawings, self-reflections, handouts).

“Our guidance counsellor is half-time and shared between two schools. It makes it difficult to follow up and support students.”
Elementary school, Toronto DSB

Figure 1

Students with education and career/life planning portfolios



“We are just at the very initial stages with the All About Me and IPPs. There have been software glitches and staff have been asked to use other techniques—not where we would like to be either at the school nor board level.”

Elementary school,
Algonquin and Lakeshore CDSB

“More connections [are] required from industry to help give students experiential learning and to see what opportunities wait for them.”

Secondary school, Toronto DSB

“PD on this has been very limited. Nobody really knows what is expected or what to do regarding ‘All About Me.’”

Elementary School,
Thames Valley DSB

From grades 7 to 12, students keep track of their learning through mandatory Individual Pathways Plans (IPP). While the “All About Me” portfolio focuses more on self-knowledge, the IPP is intended to be the primary planning tool for choosing courses and exploring post-secondary destinations.⁶

There is more consistent use of IPPs in grades 7 and 8 than there is in secondary school. One the reasons for this, according to principals’ comments, is that the IPPs are seen as useful for supporting transitions to secondary school, including course selection. Principals also said that professional development is available to support teachers in grades 7 and 8 in using web-based planning tools to develop IPPs.

Education and Career/Life Planning Program Advisory Committees

The policy requires every school to have a committee to support career and life planning strategies. The committee must include administrators, teachers, students, parents, and members of the community. In secondary schools, the committee must also include guidance staff.⁷

Even though they are mandatory, only 15% of elementary and 39% of secondary schools report having Education and Career/Life Planning Program Advisory Committees. It has also been difficult for schools to meet the membership requirements.

In the schools with committees:

- Only 13% of elementary and 8% of secondary schools report having community members on the committee.
- Only 33% of elementary and 12% of secondary schools report that their committees include parents.

Professional development for teachers

One of the goals of the *Creating Pathways* policy is that education and career/life planning is integrated into existing curriculum, from kindergarten to grade 12. To support this integration, *Creating Pathways* mandates professional development for teachers on all aspects of the education and career/life planning program. However, only 23% of elementary and 40% of secondary schools report that teachers are receiving training.

Schools commented that the lack of access to professional development is a major roadblock to the implementation of the “All About Me” and Individual Pathways Plan portfolios.

The role of guidance counsellors

Guidance counsellors in elementary schools

One of the purposes of the education and career/life planning strategy is to support students as they make transitions—from grade to grade, from elementary to secondary school, and from secondary school to their post-secondary destinations. There is evidence that the transition from elementary to secondary school is particularly challenging for many students.⁸

Only 17% of elementary schools have guidance counsellors, and the majority are part-time. In elementary schools that include grades 7 and 8—where the more complex IPPs are required—only 23% have guidance counsellors, the majority part-time.

Guidance counsellors in secondary school

Data from the 2017 survey confirm that in the majority (80%) of secondary schools, the guidance counsellor is primarily responsible for helping students create and review Individual Pathways Plans. During grades 11 and 12, semi-annual reviews of IPPs provide an opportunity for students to receive direct guidance from school personnel on crucial course selections and post-secondary planning.⁹ Guidance counsellors are identified as a key part of this process, but data from the 2017 survey show that 16% of secondary schools do not have a full-time guidance counsellor, and the average ratio of students to guidance counsellors per school is 380 to 1. In 10% of schools, that ratio is as high as 600 to 1.

“Despite having 600 students in grades 7 and 8, and 900 students in total (6, 7, 8) our Guidance allocation is only 0.5 [FTE]. It’s not enough. We need to put our money where our mouth is and give more support to planning, guidance, and mental health.”

Elementary school, Peel DSB

Notes

1. Katie Peterson and Daniel Hamlin, *Career and Life Planning in Schools: Multiple Paths; Multiple Policies; Multiple Challenges* (Toronto, ON: People for Education, March 1, 2017).
2. The Premier’s Highly Skilled Workforce Expert Panel, *Building the Workforce of Tomorrow: A Shared Responsibility* (Toronto, ON: Queen’s Printer for Ontario, 2016).
3. In January, 2017 the Ministry of Education amended this policy, removing the mandatory requirement for “All About Me” portfolios for students in grades 1 to 6.
4. Ontario Ministry of Education, *Creating Pathways to Success: An Education and Career/Life Planning Program for Ontario Schools* (Toronto, ON: Queen’s Printer, 2013), 7.
5. Ibid., 17-9.
6. Ibid., 17-9.
7. Ibid., 41.
8. Daniel Hamlin, David Hagen Cameron, and Elyse Watkins, *Ontario’s Guidance Counsellors: Spread Thinly in an Environment of Growing Expectations* (Toronto, ON: People for Education, March 7, 2016).
9. Ibid., 4.