



Roadmaps and roadblocks

Career and life planning, guidance,
and streaming in Ontario's schools



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Data from the survey

Specific research data from the survey can be provided for a fee. Elementary school data have been collected since 1997, and secondary school data have been collected since 2000. For more information, please contact info@peopleforeducation.ca.

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Roadmaps and roadblocks

Career and life planning, guidance, and streaming in Ontario's schools

“The reality is that the challenges and opportunities faced by students in this century are unlike those of any previous generation, and that all students today require specific knowledge and skills in education and career/life planning to support them in making sound choices throughout their lives.”

– *Creating Pathways to Success: An Education and Career/Life Planning Program for Ontario Schools* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013)

One of the main purposes of schooling is to prepare students for a rapidly changing future. In today's world, hyper-charged technological and social change – from automation and artificial intelligence to climate change and increasing inequality – has increased the pressure on schools, students, and their families.

Challenges of this scope affect everything students should learn – from literacy and STEM, to citizenship, social-emotional learning, problem-solving, and creativity. There are multiple reports attempting to articulate what today's graduates will need, including new “clusters” of skills such as citizenship, healthy living, creativity, and collaboration, as well as attributes such as adaptability and an orientation to lifelong learning, so that they can move between jobs (e.g. Grant, 2016; OECD, 2018; RBC, 2018).

As students develop – academically and personally – the school system itself provides support and navigational aids. More than that, it helps shape opportunities for the future. And sometimes, it creates barriers.

In Ontario, one area of the academic program focuses *specifically* on preparing students for the unknown: career and life planning. Ontario's *Creating Pathways to Success* policy includes guidelines for the use of portfolios, school-based career and life planning committees, and professional development for teachers, to help students navigate their future.

Ontario has the policy, but there are a number of challenges in ensuring that all students can successfully navigate their way through school to the future they choose.

This report is based on data from the 1254 schools that participated in People for Education's Annual Ontario School Survey. Among the findings:

- Only 23% of elementary schools have guidance counsellors. While this is a sizeable increase over last year, these supports are mostly unavailable for students making the transition to high school.
- In secondary schools, guidance counsellors are, on average, responsible for 375 students each.
- It is mandatory for every student in secondary school to have an Individual Pathways Plan (IPP), but only 57% of high schools report that all students have IPPs.
- Only 23% of secondary schools that require transfer courses for students who want to transfer from applied to academic courses, offer those courses.

Building vital competencies through career and life planning

The *Creating Pathways to Success* policy is framed around a four-step inquiry process for all students, from kindergarten through to graduation:

1. **Knowing yourself:** Who am I?
2. **Exploring opportunities:** What are my opportunities?
3. **Making decisions and setting goals:** Who do I want to become?
4. **Achieving goals and making transitions:** What is my plan for achieving my goals?

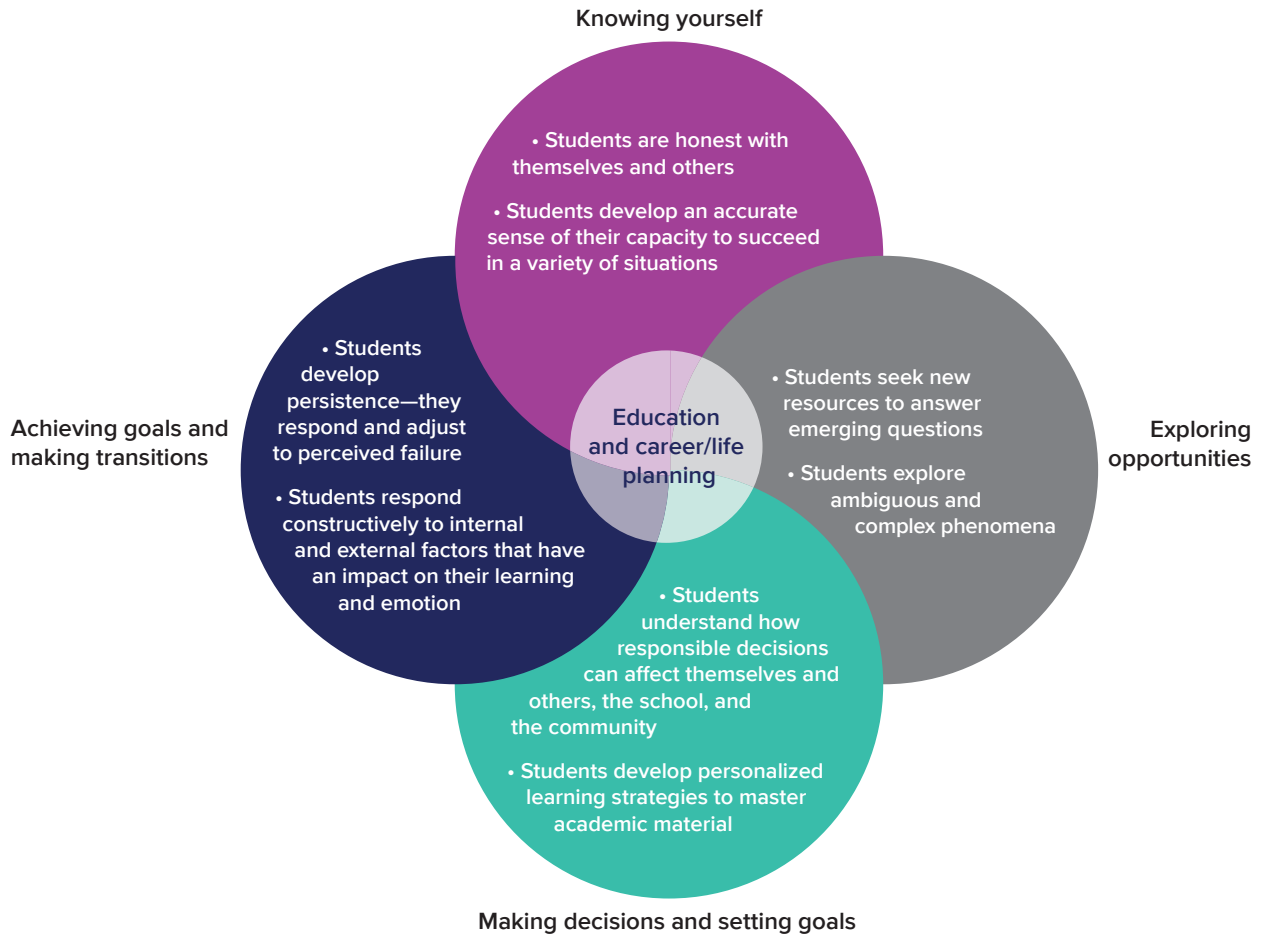
Working through these questions aims to help students plan, and also supports them in developing competencies and skills in areas such as social-emotional development, resiliency, and problem solving. The *Creating Pathways* policy states that this four-step inquiry process is to be embedded “across all subjects, courses, and daily learning activities” for all schools (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 10).

People for Education – working with experts from across Canada and internationally – has defined a set of competencies that students need to go on to lead happy, healthy, economically secure, civically engaged lives. (People for Education, 2016) Figure 1 maps some of those competencies across the four-step *Creating Pathways* framework.

Provinces such as Alberta, British Columbia, and Québec have embedded these core competencies throughout their curricula (Alberta Ministry of Education, 2016; British Columbia Ministry of Education, n.d.; Québec Ministry of Education, n.d.), but Ontario has not.

Figure 1

Competencies for career and life planning



These are some examples of core competencies from People for Education’s Measuring What Matters initiative (People for Education, 2016), overlaid onto the four-step inquiry process from Ontario’s career and life planning policy (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013).

Elementary school – supporting self-knowledge and exploration

“This is just one more thing for teachers to manage when they are already overwhelmed with covering curriculum and managing behaviour, anxiety, learning needs, parents, etc.”

Elementary principal,
York Region DSB

Under the original *Creating Pathways* policy, every student in elementary school up to grade 6 was required to develop *All About Me* portfolios, and use them to record their growing sense of themselves and the opportunities available to them. It was also mandatory that every school have a Career/Life Planning Program Advisory Committee. These committees are supposed to include school administration, guidance counsellors, teachers, parents, community members, and students. Their purpose is to ensure that the school’s career and life planning program is comprehensive – embedded and supported across the curriculum and across the school community.

In 2017, People for Education reported that *All About Me* portfolios were used by all K-6 students in only 32% of elementary schools, and only 15% of elementary schools had Career/Life Planning Advisory Committees. Shortly afterward, the provincial government changed the requirements, and made the *All About Me* portfolio and the advisory committees an “optional strategy” (Rodrigues, 2017). Since that time, the percentage of schools reporting all students have *All About Me* portfolios has declined to 19%, and only 14% have Career/Life Planning Advisory Committees.

In the 14% of elementary schools that have Career/Life Planning Advisory Committees, membership is mostly staff. Very few schools report involvement of parents (12%), community members (7%), or students (14%). However, having a committee appears to have an impact on professional development for teachers around career and life planning: 49% of elementary schools with advisory committees offer professional development for teachers, compared to 17% of schools without committees.

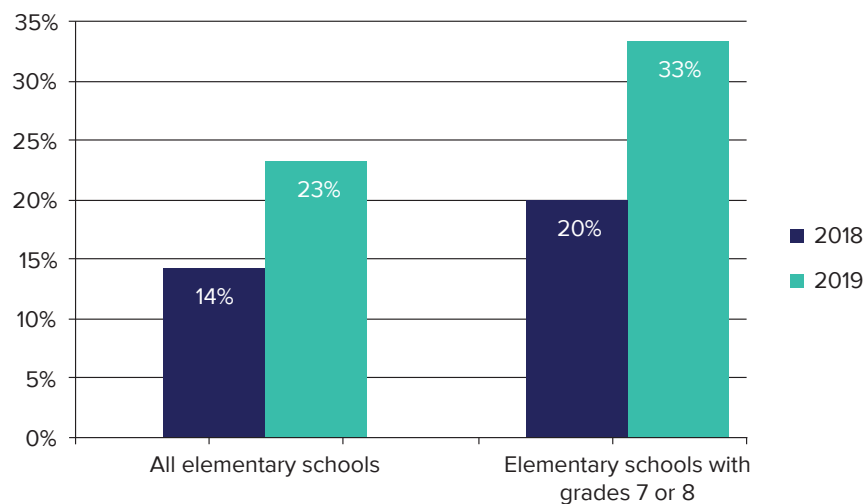
One of the reasons for the lack of participation in the initiative may be that elementary schools have limited resources beyond the classroom teacher to support students’ career and life planning.

When we first started asking about implementing the *Creating Pathways* policy, principals reported a number of challenges, including a lack of professional development, limited time in the school day, and a lack of technical support for the online components of the policy (People for Education, 2017).

A lack of guidance support is also among the challenges principals report in implementing *Creating Pathways*. This year, only 23% of all elementary schools have a guidance counsellor, and the vast majority are part-time (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Guidance counsellors in elementary schools, full- or part-time



“As the *All About Me* portfolios are not mandatory, and they are work intensive, teachers do not choose to use them.

Elementary principal,
Kawartha Pine Ridge DSB

“It is difficult to fit everything into the instructional program, as we have a strong focus on literacy and numeracy at our school.

Elementary principal,
Keewatin-Patricia DSB

“The K to grade 6 teachers need assistance from the Guidance Teacher for the *All About Me* portfolio. The Guidance Teacher only visits our school for one half day twice a month, so the focus is mostly on grades 7 & 8 and dealing with students who have behaviour issues.

Elementary principal,
Toronto Catholic DSB

“Elementary guidance counsellors are new position this year – this has been great for getting the IPPs started.”

Elementary school,
Simcoe Muskoka Catholic DSB

“First year with increased guidance support from 0.1 to 0.5 FTE and that is making a big difference in terms of the support/planning we are able to provide.”

Elementary principal,
Peel DSB

The middle years – making the transition to secondary school

While grades 7 and 8 are still considered elementary school, they are key years in defining students’ future opportunities. Among many other tasks, guidance counsellors support students in choosing courses for high school, as well as their ongoing inquiry process within the *Creating Pathways* framework.

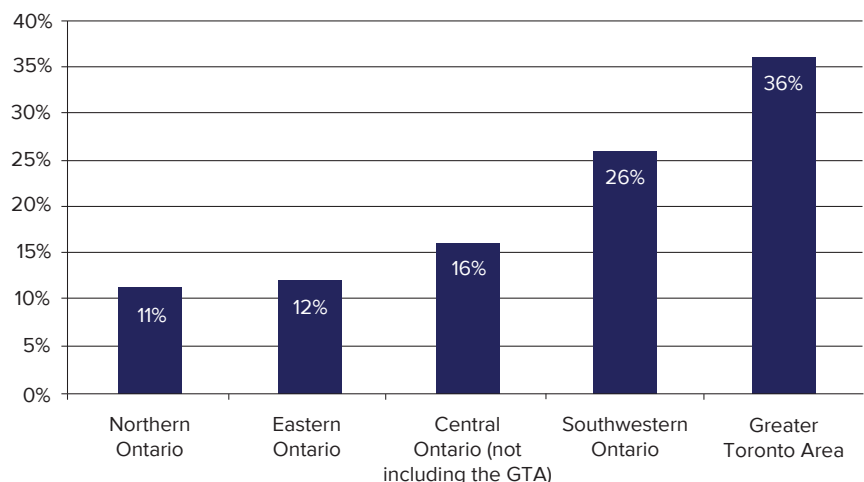
In 2017/18, the Ministry of Education provided an additional \$46 million to fund guidance counsellors for grades 7 and 8 at a ratio of 385 students to one guidance counsellor – an improvement from the previous funding, which was provided at a ratio of 1000 students for each guidance counsellor (Davis, 2018).

This year, 33% of elementary schools with grades 7 and 8 have a guidance counsellor, up from 20% last year. However, in August of 2018, the funding policy changed, so that school boards can spend what had been targeted guidance funding for elementary schools on *any* strategy relating to careers or mental health, in either elementary or secondary schools (Rodrigues, 2018).

Despite the funding increases, guidance counsellors continue to be unevenly distributed across the province. Elementary schools in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) are over three times more likely to have a guidance counsellor – either part- or full-time – than elementary schools in the North (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Percentage of elementary schools with a guidance counsellor, part- or full-time, by region



Plans and choices in grades 7 and 8

While the province made *All About Me* portfolios optional for kindergarten to grade 6, the *Creating Pathways* policy still mandates that all students in grades 7 to 12 have an Individual Pathways Plan (IPP) – which is a continuation of the *All About Me* portfolio. Students from grades 7 to 12 (and their teachers) are expected to use the IPP as the “primary planning tool for students as they move through the grades towards their initial post-secondary destination” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 18).

This year’s data show that while the mandatory policy is there on paper, the reality in schools is different. Only 74% of elementary schools with grades 7 and 8 report that *all* students have an IPP, and in 15% of schools, no students have IPPs.

Choosing courses – choices now may limit choices later

Until the end of grade 8, all students study the same curriculum. However, before they move on to grade 9, students must choose between applied and academic courses for their grade 9 year – decisions that may have long-lasting consequences.

Students and their parents may not be getting sufficient information to make informed choices. When asked about the main source of information regarding course selection for students in grade 8 and their parents:

- 55% of schools report that their main source is information nights
- 14% report it is one-on-one counselling
- 10% mainly use handouts
- 5% report primarily using email

A number of schools reported innovative new programs, where staff from both grade 8 and high schools worked together to help answer questions.

Academic vs. applied courses – significant differences in outcomes

According to data from the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), there are more than 33,000 students in grade 9 applied courses in Ontario. Research has shown that these students are more likely to come from lower income families, and are much less likely to graduate from high school (Brown & Tam, 2017a; People for Education, 2015).

“The high school principal and guidance counsellor visit. And we have two open houses (one for our 8th graders as well as one for our parents).¹”

Elementary principal,
Conseil scolaire catholique
MonAvenir

Academic and applied courses

In Ontario in grades 9 and 10, Mathematics, English, Geography, Science and French courses are offered at either the applied or academic levels. *Academic* courses emphasize “the study of theory and abstract problems” while *applied* courses in the same mandatory subjects emphasize “practical applications and concrete examples” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 71). Academic courses are prerequisites for university or college courses in grades 11 and 12, while applied courses are prerequisites for college or workplace courses.

1. Translated from French. Original comment: “Visite de la direction et l’orienteur de notre école secondaire. Invitation à deux portes ouvertes (une pour nos élèves de la 8e ainsi qu’une pour nos parents).”

Information about the *outcomes* of applied vs. academic courses is not usually part of the information sessions or handouts for students and parents. While many educators continue to recommend applied courses because they believe struggling students have a better chance of success there, there are significant differences in outcomes facing students enrolled in applied courses.

Students in applied courses are much less likely to graduate from high school, and less than half of them go on to college. Recent research from the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) showed that 88% of students in academic programs of study² graduated, as opposed to 59% of students in applied courses (Brown & Tam, 2017a). Other TDSB research showed that students in academic courses are much more likely to be accepted into post-secondary education than those in applied (82% vs. 48%). And even though applied courses are intended to lead to college, workplace, and apprenticeships, only 37% of those in an applied program of study are accepted into college (Brown & Tam, 2017b).

“We have phased out grade nine applied French and grade nine applied Geography. All grade nine students take French and Geography at the academic course type. Based on the belief that all students can learn, progress, and achieve with time, support, and caring teacher, a culture of high expectations allows engaged students who attend regularly to have a better academic foundation to be successful at the subsequent grade level.”

Secondary principal,
Lambton Kent DSB

Do applied courses depress achievement?

Research by EQAO that follows students over time shows that students with comparable academic background (i.e. similar scores, even poor scores, on grade 6 tests) are far more likely to do better in academic than applied courses (EQAO, 2018).

The results over the past decade consistently show that students in applied courses are *much less likely* to meet the provincial standard in math or literacy (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

Outcomes in EQAO secondary school assessments, 2017-18

	Academic	Applied
Percent of students meeting the provincial standard (roughly a B) in grade 9 math	84%	45%
Percent of fully participating first-time eligible students who pass the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (gr. 10)	90%	39%

Source: EQAO, 2018

- An applied program of study means that students take a majority of their courses at the applied level; an academic program of study means that students take a majority of their courses at the academic level.

These results are consistent with long-standing international research that suggests grouping students by perceived ability or academic destination actually depresses student achievement (Brooks, 1985; Curtis, Livingstone, & Smaller, 1992; Hanushek & Woessmann, 2006; Hattie, 2009; Krahn & Taylor, 2007). Based on this literature and international test results, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) recommends that schools defer streaming students into later secondary school (2013).

Applied courses may depress achievement in another way. A recent analysis by the TDSB suggests that achievement in applied courses does not “count” in the way that achievement in academic courses does. For example, students with an A-range mark in applied math have the same likelihood of going on to post-secondary (college or university) as students with a D-range grade in academic math (Brown, 2018).

Who is streamed into applied courses and why is it a problem?

A number of factors affect which students take applied courses in grade 9.

Students’ Individual Pathway Plans (IPPs) in grade 8 can have an impact on their trajectory into high school – 84% of elementary schools report that students’ IPPs are used to inform course recommendations (i.e. applied/academic) for students going into secondary school. Aspects of the IPP that may be used include things like students’ self-selected career destinations and their past academic achievement. There has also been extensive research showing that racialized students and students from lower income families are more likely to go into applied courses in high school (James & Turner, 2017; Robson Anisef, Brown, & Parekh, 2018).

Over the past five years, there has been more and more information available about problems with streaming students into different course types. Some schools and school boards are going further to actively steer students towards the pathway associated with better outcomes.

Last year, based on years of its own data and international research, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) adopted a three-year plan to move most students into academic programming in grade 9, with a strong emphasis on planning that starts as early as grade 7.

The ultimate purpose of the TDSB initiative – which follows successful pilot projects in a number of schools – is to boost achievement and ensure “improved post-secondary choice at the work, college, apprenticeship, and university levels for *all* students” (TDSB, 2018, p. 15).

Transferring across streams – how much flexibility is there?

Adolescence is a time of significant change. As students develop and explore alternatives, schools sometimes lack flexibility to support them when they change direction or realize that their new plans require them to take courses with prerequisites that didn’t seem important in grade 8 or 9.

The current streaming structure under academic, applied, and essentials has led to inequitable outcomes, particularly for students from marginalized, underserved groups. In some cases, it also has the potential of limiting post-secondary pathways. ...

Based on a three-year phased schedule, we will begin to support the majority of our students in academic level programming for grades 9 and 10. ... This is one significant way of addressing the inequity in educational outcomes and the achievement, opportunity, and participation gaps that exist for certain groups of students in our system. Where necessary, students will have access to additional supports.

Toronto District School Board, 2018, p. 14

“We have gap-closing classes in grade 9 to attempt to move grade 8 kids to the academic stream and we have also provided summer classes prior to grade 9 for our feeder students. It has been very successful.”

Secondary principal, Hamilton Wentworth Catholic DSB

“We offer students the opportunity to achieve an applied credit rather than an academic if they are misplaced. We have also de-streamed our grade 9 Science and Geography in order to help students and parents understand the best level for the student to work at moving forward.”

Secondary principal,
Ottawa-Carleton DSB

“We have meetings with students, teachers, and parents when they are in grade 8....Also, we timetable applied/college and academic/university courses during the same time so that transferring from one to the other can be possible.”

Secondary principal,
York Region DSB

Students who want to transfer from applied to academic courses in grades 9 and 10 continue to face significant barriers. In 47% of high schools, principals report that students transfer from applied to academic courses “never” or “not very often.” There has been little change in this statistic over the past five years. Just over a quarter (27%) of schools require students to take a transfer course before they change from applied to academic, and most of those (77%) do not offer the transfer course during school hours.

Secondary school – career and life planning and guidance support

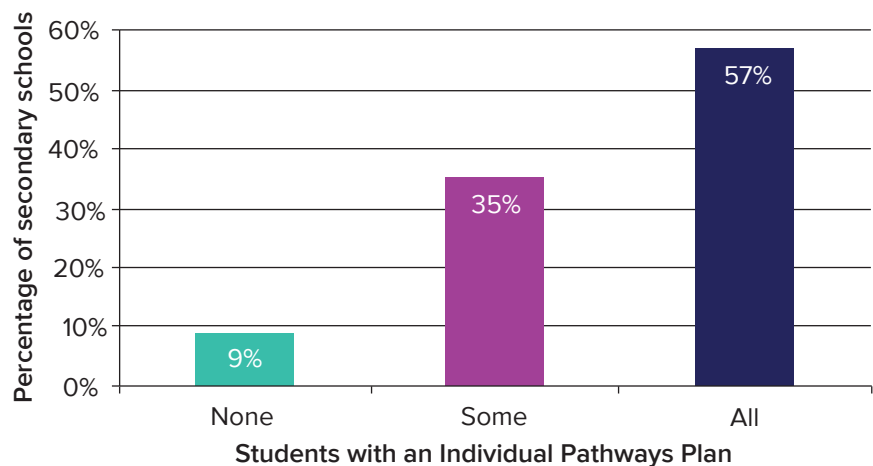
As students progress through secondary school, they face many choices, and need to take active steps to prepare themselves for life after high school.

The *Creating Pathways* policy, with its four-step inquiry process, is intended to provide students with greater capacity to make those choices.

Under the policy, it remains mandatory for all students in secondary school to have an Individual Pathways Plan (IPP). However, in 2019, only 57% of secondary schools report that all of their students have an IPP, and in 9% of schools, no students have IPPs (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Portfolio use in secondary schools



Guidance counsellors have many roles in Ontario high schools, including supporting students who are struggling with their mental health, making course choices, or navigating special education. But they play a particularly vital role in career and life planning.

Nearly every high school in the province (98%) has at least a part-time guidance counsellor. However, the average ratio per school of students to guidance counsellors is 375 to one, and in 10% of secondary schools the ratio is as high as 687 to one.

In most secondary schools, guidance counsellors support students in the development of their IPPs and sit on the Career/Life Planning Program Advisory Committees required in the *Creating Pathways* policy.

Currently, only 34% of secondary schools have these advisory committees, but where they exist, it appears that they do make a difference (or perhaps, the establishment of these committees reflects a school-wide commitment to career and life planning). There are several signs that the committees have an impact in schools:

- Schools with committees are far more likely to provide professional development to ensure teachers are knowledgeable about career planning: 67% of schools with committees provide professional development in this area vs. 30% where there is no committee.
- Schools with committees are more likely to report that *all* students are using the Individual Pathways Planning tool: in 64% of schools with committees, *all* students have IPPs vs. 52% of schools without.
- Schools without a committee are over twice as likely to report that *no* students are using the IPP (11% vs. 4%).

As in elementary schools, most secondary schools report only staff members on the committees, with fewer than 27% reporting representation from community members, parents, or students.

Opportunities to explore career paths

While classroom learning is crucially important in developing communication, teamwork, and problem-solving skills, this learning is enriched when students have a chance for hands-on learning that takes them beyond the classroom. Over the past two years, these experiential learning opportunities have become more widespread in secondary schools.

Virtually every high school responding to our survey offers co-op courses, where students can learn in a workplace for credit. This type of work-based learning can expose students to employers' expectations, and help them make stronger connections between school and their futures. A quarter of schools also provide opportunities for students to participate in internships.

Almost all secondary schools use school trips (96%) and support volunteer opportunities (92%) to expose students to experiences beyond the school walls.

In addition, employers and post-secondary institutions are often invited into schools to expose students to potential education and career destinations at post-secondary fairs (92% of secondary schools) or career days (57% of schools).

“We have many local organizations and businesses who speak to students regarding careers in chosen fields as it is built into the curriculum.”

Secondary principal,
Rainbow DSB

Conclusion

Young people in Canada are facing a world of rapid change. And there is growing agreement that their future wellbeing, and the wellbeing of society and our economy, will depend on their acquisition of foundational “human skills” and competencies (RBC, 2018; Schleicher, 2018).

Ontario’s career and life planning policy provides a potential roadmap to ensure that students – from kindergarten through to grade 12 – develop the vital competencies and self-understanding that will prepare them for long-term success, no matter what their destination.

However, there needs to be a more comprehensive and coherent approach to curriculum, resources, and course choices.

Recommendations

People for Education recommends that the provincial government:

- Develop a coherent strategy and consistent language that integrates foundational competencies for long-term success (e.g. People for Education, 2018) across the curriculum from kindergarten to grade 12, and in areas like the *Creating Pathways* policy, the learning skills on Ontario’s report cards, experiential learning programs, and the province’s 21st century competencies.
- Provide resources to support collaboration time and professional development for educators focused on integrating an inquiry-based approach to career and life planning across curriculum.
- Hold consultations with school administrators, and conduct research to understand the barriers to effective career and life planning in schools, and address those barriers.
- Clarify the roles of guidance counsellors, by evaluating both the range of education policies that includes them and the funding that leads to high student to staff ratios in Ontario’s schools.
- Ensure that parents and students have sufficient information about course choices in secondary school, *including* data on outcomes, graduation rates, and post-secondary access.
- Use the research from school boards that are combining grade 9 academic and applied courses to develop a strategy for eliminating applied courses in grade 9 by the fall of 2020, while continuing to ensure that students who need it receive required special education and other learning supports.
- Provide resources and supports to ensure that students can more easily transfer between courses throughout secondary school, so that no doors are closed too early, and so that developing adolescents can change their minds about their futures while they are still in high school.

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Appendix:

Research methods

Unless cited from other sources, the statistics and quoted material in this report originate from People for Education's Annual Ontario School Survey, the 23rd annual survey of elementary and 20th annual survey of secondary schools conducted in 2018/19. Surveys were emailed to principals in every publicly funded school in Ontario in the fall of 2018. Surveys could be completed online via Survey Monkey in both English and French.

This year, we received 1,254 responses from elementary and secondary schools in 70 of Ontario's 72 publicly funded school boards, representing 26% of the province's publicly funded schools. Survey responses are also disaggregated to examine survey representation across provincial regions. Regional representation in this year's survey corresponds relatively well with the regional distribution of Ontario's schools.

Qualitative data analysis was conducted using inductive analysis. Researchers read responses and coded emergent themes in each set of data (i.e. the responses to each of the survey's open-ended questions).

The quantitative analyses in this report are based on both descriptive and inferential statistics. The chief objective of the descriptive analyses is to present numerical information in an illuminating format that is accessible to a broad public readership. All data were analyzed using SPSS statistical software.

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**The Counselling
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