



Re-Framing Quality Public Education as a Fundamental Human Right

By Annie Kidder

"Education is a basic human right and the best investment that we can make to ensure a sustainable future and leave no one behind."

UNESCO, *Right to Education Handbook*, 2019

Imagine a world where every child and young person lives the vision outlined in the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child: a world where every child is guaranteed the right to an education that grants them "an equal opportunity to develop [their] abilities, [their] individual judgement, and [their] sense of moral and social responsibility, and to become a useful member of society."

Imagine if those were the kinds of goals we articulated for our schools, rather than targets for standardized test scores.

For years in education, we have talked about "moving the equity needle." But despite everyone's best efforts, that needle remains stuck in place: socioeconomic, race, disability and even geography are still strong predictors of success in education. At People for Education, we're wondering whether the real problem is that all along, we've been focused on the wrong needle.

What if, instead of promoting the idea that everyone in education just needs to work harder and better to move the equity needle, we focused on quality education as a fundamental human right, and we structured our systems, our policies and our schools on that basic premise? Might that provide a new and more productive "needle" by which to measure our progress? And is it possible that this approach might be more effective in addressing entrenched systemic inequities?

What if, when designing our education systems, developing education policy, and creating annual plans for our boards and our schools, our number one priority was to ensure that every student – and not just some – could fully realize their right to a quality education?

A bigger, broader vision

For many years, school leaders in Ontario have been tasked with coming up with plans focused on improving student achievement, often using EQAO scores as the measurement tool. And, for the most part, we measure our progress toward equity based on those scores. But if we took a rights-based approach to education, it is possible that we could instead measure progress based on a bigger, broader, stronger vision.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights – signed onto in 1948 by all the countries in the United Nations – describes the purpose of education as follows:

"Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace."

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights goes into more detail describing the role of education. The Covenant states that education is "the primary vehicle by which socially and economically marginalized adults and children can lift themselves out of poverty."

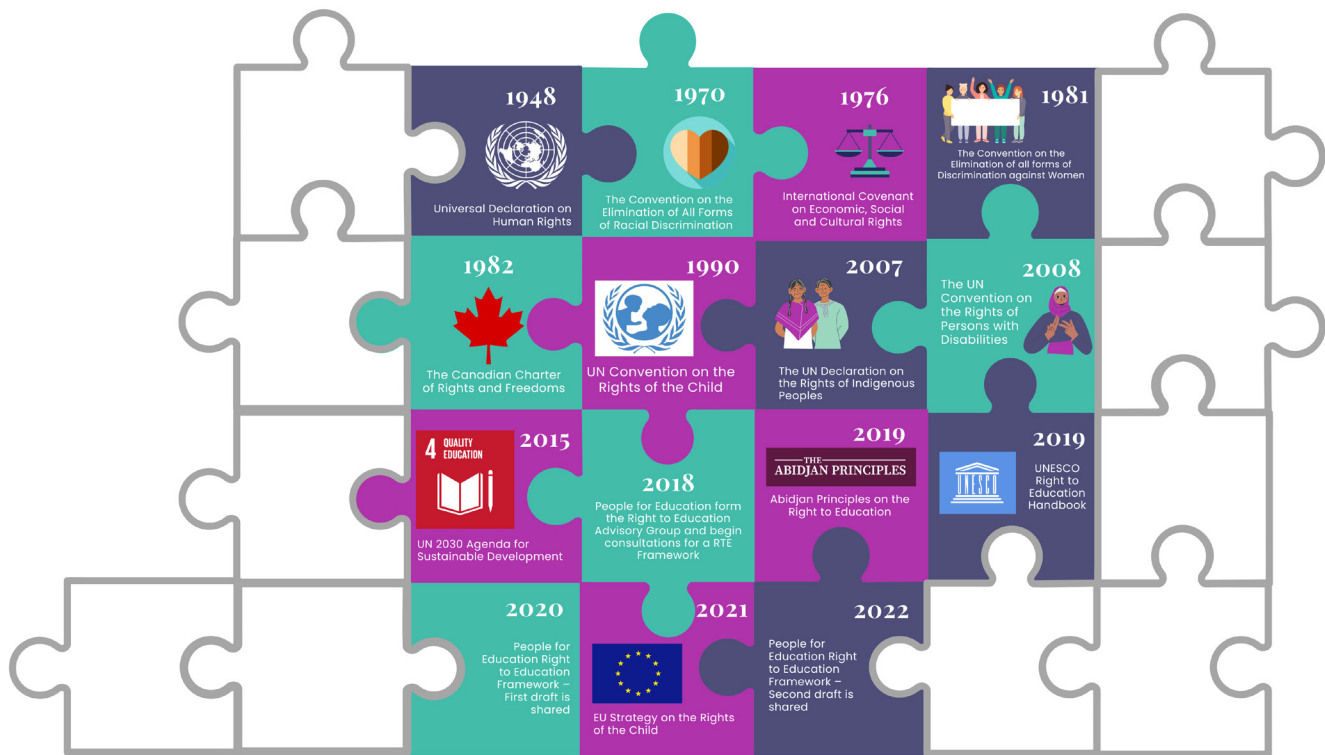
New measures for success

So how could we measure our schools' success in something as broad as "the full development of the human personality?" And how can we accomplish this without adding to the burden of already overworked school leaders, teachers and support staff?

The Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (which includes education) proposes a way to develop goals and measure progress that could work for schools,

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Putting the pieces together



school boards, provinces and territories, and even at a pan-Canadian level.

The concept is called “progressive realization,” which means that instead of setting up narrow targets to measure the success or failure of systems, the focus is on measuring progress. First, a vision and a set of goals are defined, then, there is a commitment to providing the resources necessary to meet those goals, and lastly, and most importantly, there is a commitment to reporting every year on the progress being made toward those goals.

In Ontario, the goals for schools might still include test scores, but it should also consider components like results from student and staff surveys, and data on student achievement, participation in extracurricular activities, suspensions and expulsions, all of which can be disaggregated by demographic variables including race, disability, special needs, 2SLGBTQ+ self-identification, Indigenous self-identification and socio-economic status.

This way, instead of narrow measures like targets for EQAO scores, we could focus on frameworks that define the quality of education that all students should have a right to and commit to reporting annually on our progress toward achieving those goals.

But we can't do this by just asking administrators to do more. This fact was made starkly clear in principals' responses over the last two years to People for Education's Annual Ontario School Surveys. Principals reported a lack of staff, poor communication with the ministry, sparse resources to support new curriculum implementation, and a complete absence of collaboration and consultation. The pandemic also made clear that there are cracks in our system and deeply entrenched inequities that cannot be addressed by adding new requirements, new targets and new policies.

Focusing on every student's right to a quality education requires a new provincial approach and would involve consultation at every level, including increased recognition and support for the overarching responsibilities of school leaders. However, it could also provide a real path toward equity in education, a method for schools and school boards to be accountable to their students and their communities, and a hopeful long-term vision for education. [CE](#)

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