

Streaming in Ontario's public education system

Issue

Ontario prides itself on having a world-class education system that provides a critical foundation for millions of young people to succeed. However, the practice of streaming students according to perceived ability creates an unfair division that prevents countless young people from reaching their potential. Despite previous efforts to address these inequities, more needs to be done to support all students.

Background

Prior to 1999, secondary students were grouped into three streams that explicitly prepared them for post-secondary opportunities: basic (workplace), general (apprenticeship or college), and advanced (university).

In 1999, the provincial government introduced new policy (OSS:99) which was supposed to end streaming in secondary schools. This policy called for a uniformly rigorous curriculum and a high degree of flexibility in allowing students to mix academic and applied level courses.¹ OSS:99 requires students to choose between academic, applied and essentials/locally developed courses in Grades 9 and 10. In Grades 11 and 12, students then choose courses that are categorized as university, university/college, college, or workplace, which prepare them for post-secondary opportunities accordingly. The courses a student takes in Grades 9 and 10 affect the options they can choose from in Grades 11 and 12.

This practice is an inefficient way to deliver education and it excludes many students from establishing success and self-sufficiency in the future.

Key Considerations

Streaming is inefficient and does not prepare young people to fully participate in today's economy.

- Students in the applied stream are less likely to graduate within four years or go on to post-secondary education.²
- People who do not attend post-secondary education have a significantly increased likelihood of experiencing poverty.³
- Getting an "A" grade in an applied class is the same as getting a "D" in an academic class in terms of outcome.⁴ Despite earning a high grade, there are still fewer opportunities for student success once they graduate.
- Research demonstrates that enrolling in applied courses results in less achievement between students who had otherwise comparable educational backgrounds prior to being streamed.⁵

Streaming disproportionately impacts students from socially disadvantaged groups.

- Toronto-based research has demonstrated that low-income and racialized students are over-represented in the applied stream.⁶ This is also reflected in international research: students from marginalized demographics are more likely to be enrolled in streams with fewer learning opportunities and post-secondary options.⁷
- There is a strong connection between high levels of parental involvement and student success.⁸ Parents with low SES and low levels of educational attainment generally have lower levels of involvement in their children's education.^{9,10} Low-income and single parents experience significant barriers to involvement, including

low levels of social capital and unpredictable work hours.^{11,12} Similarly, language differences and unfamiliarity with school systems are barriers to involvement for newcomer parents.¹³

- The prohibitive cost of tutors and private academic supports means that students from low-income families are less likely to receive additional external support to reach academic standards. In Toronto, the common rate for private tutors with teaching experience is \$40 to \$50 per hour.¹⁴
- Recommendations towards specific streams are highly subjective, and may be based on unfair judgements about socio-demographic characteristics.¹⁵ Even when racialized students have the grades to move into academic streams, they are funnelled into applied classrooms.¹⁶

Students are unprepared to make such important decision in Grade 8.

- Research demonstrates that students do not consider the future impact of their course selection in the eighth grade.¹⁷ Adolescent students experience significant developmental and socio-emotional changes that impact their perspectives and goals, and would benefit from a more flexible approach to course selection.¹⁸
- There is a shortage of guidance counsellors throughout Ontario, which impacts student ability to make informed decisions about the courses they take.¹⁹
- Parents do not have adequate information about the course selection process and the outcomes of different streams.²⁰ Most parents report getting the majority of information about course selection from their children instead of from schools.²¹
- Research has found that students tend to take the majority of their courses at the same level and do not move between levels.^{22,23} Therefore, the courses they take in grade 9 can have lifelong impacts.

- There is a lack of transitional resources to support students to move from one stream to another.²⁴ Students who could be studying in an academic classroom may decide to stay in applied streams due to this lack of support.

The practice of streaming begins long before secondary school.

- Low expectations and unaddressed achievement gaps based on socio-demographic characteristics follow a student through school, leading to inequitable outcomes.²⁵
- Students who do not meet grade expectations are transferred to higher grades, rather than promoted. This fails to address student learning needs and sets them up for failure in the future. Toronto-based research demonstrates that most transferred students end up in applied courses.²⁶
- Students report their levels of motivation in relation to their expected educational outcomes.²⁷ Educator biases can inhibit student achievement and create a climate that impedes the development of motivation.

Streaming wastes public money.

- Facilitating fair access to, and within, education can benefit the province at large. Research demonstrates that higher skill levels contribute to larger GDPs.²⁸
- People with higher education are also more likely to be economically sufficient.²⁹ This makes them less likely to require support through Ontario Works and welfare programs.
- Students who drop out or don't attend post-secondary have a much higher rate of experiencing poverty.³⁰ Taking preventative steps to decrease poverty and increase the pool of skilled workers also demonstrates a more efficient use of public tax dollars.

Options & Recommendations

1. De-stream grade 9.

Take a cue from all other Canadian provinces and create a common curriculum for ninth grade students.

2. Support adequate student guidance.

Invest in guidance counsellors for every school and ensure that course selection information is comprehensive and equitable for every student. Reinstate Parents Reaching Out grants to support information sharing and educational involvement.

3. Invest in transitional supports between streams.

Provide accessible means for students to transfer between streams and access a greater number of post-secondary options.

4. Reduce achievement gaps in early years.

Early interventions reduce the likelihood of achievement gaps later on. Provide educators with adequate resources to support all students to meet curriculum measures and reduce student transfers in favour of promotion.

Conclusion

Public education provides an integral foundation for Ontario's youth. Evidence demonstrates that the practice of streaming is inefficient, inequitable, and does not prepare Ontario's students with the skills that they need to succeed in the future. More must be done to change this reality and ensure the best for our province.

Prepared by the Coalition for Alternatives to Streaming in Education (CASE):

CASE is a diverse group of organizations, community groups, and individuals committed to promoting student success and to ending the practice of streaming in Ontario's public schools.

Contact

Sharma Queiser

squeiser@socialplanningtoronto.org

416-351-0095 ext. 219

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