

Grade structure. School attendance is compulsory for about 10 years in every province — the starting age is 5, 6 or 7, and the minimum leaving age, 15 or 16. However, the elementary-secondary program usually extends over 12 years. Particularly in urban areas, local authorities may also provide an introductory year of education prior to grade one. More than 1,200 private kindergartens operate under varying degrees of provincial supervision. Some private kindergartens admit 3-year-olds. Total kindergarten enrolment in 1976-77 was 391,500.

In the past, eight elementary and four secondary grades constituted the basic structure of public education outside of Quebec. Many jurisdictions have modified this framework by adding a year of secondary school or introducing junior high. As a result, 6-3-3 and 6-3-4 grade plans are now common. Before the secondary level, education is general and basic.

High school students usually have a choice of two programs — academic or vocational. The latter range from one to four years. At one time secondary schools were predominantly academic and prepared students for university. Vocational schools were separate institutions, located only in large cities. Today, in addition to technical and commercial high schools, most secondary institutions are composite or comprehensive. Programs include both purely academic courses as a prelude to university, and vocational courses that prepare students either for an occupation or for further post-secondary non-university education. Vocational training covers such subjects as home economics, agriculture, shop-work and commercial skills.

The principle of continuous progress has been implemented to a greater extent in secondary schools than at the elementary level. Some jurisdictions have partially or entirely eliminated age-grouped classes. The length of schooling depends on accumulation of a requisite number of credits. Thus subject-promotion is replacing grade-promotion. Most provinces have abolished external graduating examinations administered by the education department; schools conduct their own. Diplomas are still issued by the province on the recommendation of individual schools.

7.2.1 Other types of schools

Separate schools. One of the most obvious differences among provincial education systems is in provision for separate schools. Some provinces allow religious groups to establish schools under the authority of the education department. They must conform to department regulations on curriculum, textbooks and teacher certification. As legal corporations, separate school boards can levy taxes and receive government grants but not always at the same level as the public system.

Private schools. Between 3% and 4% of all elementary-secondary students attend schools operated independently of the public systems. Provincial policies on private institutions vary from direct operating grants to minimum provincial control. Independent schools have been established as alternatives to the public system, based on religion, language, or academic or social status.

Special education. A number of strategies have been developed to educate children with special needs and abilities, an estimated 5%-10% of all students. They may be accommodated in separate institutions, public or private, or in special classes in regular schools. Interest in the education of exceptional children has resulted in enriched and accelerated elementary and secondary programs. Education for the handicapped varies from province to province, and is most common in city systems. Schools for the blind and deaf are sometimes administered directly by a province, sometimes by interprovincial agreement. Many local systems operate schools or classes for disabled children. Nonetheless, the trend, and the official goal in several provinces, is for handicapped students to stay in regular school as long as possible.

7.2.2 Federal schools

Although education is a provincial responsibility, the federal government has assumed direct control over the education of persons beyond the jurisdiction of the provinces — native peoples and armed forces personnel and their families.