



# The Equalizer:

How Education Creates Fairness  
for Children in Canada

**UNICEF REPORT CARD 15**  
Canadian Companion

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## CANADIAN COMPANION TO UNICEF REPORT CARD 15

# The Equalizer: How Education Creates Fairness for Children in Canada

This Canadian Companion distils and interprets data for UNICEF Report Card 15, *Unfair Start: Inequality in Children's Education in Rich Countries*. Visit [unicef.ca/irc15](http://unicef.ca/irc15) for these reports, infographics and background papers. Data sources and full references are cited in the Report Card.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>In our children’s education, fairness counts as much as greatness</b> .....	<b>1</b>
A message from President and CEO David Morley	
<b>Executive summary: Seven important things this Report Card tells Canadians</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>Measuring the rights and well-being of a generation of children</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Educational inequality across the school years: The league table</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>When Canada has big dreams</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>Ready for learning? Equality in preschool</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>Growing equal? Equality in primary school</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>Ready for the future? Equality in secondary school</b> .....	<b>19</b>
<b>How migration affects educational equality</b> .....	<b>26</b>
<b>A gender gap in education</b> .....	<b>28</b>
<b>The echo of inequality: Future expectations</b> .....	<b>30</b>
<b>Better is always possible</b> .....	<b>33</b>
GROWING THREATS? .....	34
BIG OPPORTUNITIES! .....	38
<b>Appendix: League table indicators and data sources</b> .....	<b>45</b>
<b>Sources</b> .....	<b>46</b>
<b>Endnotes</b> .....	<b>46</b>



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# IN OUR CHILDREN'S EDUCATION, FAIRNESS COUNTS AS MUCH AS GREATNESS

A message from President and CEO David Morley

It's not often Canada tops international league tables in child and youth well-being. I am delighted to report that Canada is one of the top ten rich countries for educational equality. The education inequality gap in Canada ranks 9th among 38 rich countries. UNICEF Report Card 15 shows that Canada's public education system produces for many not only fairness, but also greatness. Not only achievement, but also equality.

Too many children in Canada start school with unequal access to opportunity for development and learning, but our education systems work inordinately hard to close the gaps. Between primary and secondary school the gap in achievement is smaller relative to peer countries, and most children are turning their aspirations toward further education. Migrant children tend to do at least as well as the average child in school. The influence of family affluence on achievement is not as strong as in most countries, and schools are much more inclusive.

But we leave too many boys behind. Too many Indigenous children, children of some racialized groups, children with disabilities and children in care are at the bottom of the education gap, as are many children living in poverty.

And there are growing threats to the fairness and high standards Canada achieves in education. Income inequality and its side-effects may stretch the education gap wider. On the other hand, there are big opportunities to close the education gap we have while improving learning and broader well-being for children on both sides of the gap.

What might Canada achieve if we did for every child in school what we do for so many?

What might Canada achieve if we did for children's health and relationships, poverty and food security what we do for education?

Canada would have more children with good lives and great dreams.

Canada would be, measurably, among the best places in the world to grow up.

How can we make the possible achievable? Reducing income inequality and child poverty; expanding high-quality early childcare and learning; and continuing to strengthen school policies that work against inequality and make learning more inclusive and supportive of the well-being of every child.

Please join UNICEF Canada's One Youth campaign, bringing young people together with caring adults, organizations and decision-makers to understand and work on some of Canada's greatest challenges to children and youth well-being.

Sincerely,



David Morley  
President and CEO  
UNICEF Canada

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: SEVEN IMPORTANT THINGS THIS REPORT CARD TELLS CANADIANS

CANADA'S OVERALL RANK	9 <sup>TH</sup>
Stage of Education (based on reading scores)	Canada's Rank
Preschool equality of access	22
Primary school equality of achievement	18
Secondary school equality of achievement	9
Equality in expectations of further education	9
Gender equality in secondary school	13
Equality of achievement of migrant children in secondary school	1
Inequality between primary schools	22
Inequality between secondary schools	10
Inequality in secondary schools due to family circumstances	6
Inequality in future expectations by family circumstances	4

## 1. Canada's education system is among the most equitable in the rich world.

Overall rank:

**9<sup>TH</sup> OF 38 COUNTRIES**

All provinces have greater educational equality than the average among rich countries.

## 2. Inequality gaps become smaller as children progress through school in Canada compared to many peer countries. In about half the world's rich countries, inequality gaps grow as children progress through school.

Preschool participation gap:

**RANK: 22<sup>ND</sup>**

Primary school reading gap:

**RANK: 18<sup>TH</sup>**

High school reading gap:

**RANK: 9<sup>TH</sup>**

Expectations of further education gap (between children in low and high income):

**RANK: 9<sup>TH</sup>**

*In the world's richest countries, some children do worse at school than others because of circumstances beyond their control. Those circumstances are not inevitable.*

### 3. Education is not an equalizer for some children:

- Migrant children do just as well in reading achievement in high school as Canadian-born children.
- There is a reading gap between girls and boys that widens in favour of girls on the journey through school.
- Many First Nations children, children with disabilities, some racialized children and children in care are left behind. For some groups of children, education gaps are growing; for others they are shrinking.

### 4. Canada achieves a relatively high level of equality in education compared to peer countries because:

- Family affluence has somewhat less influence on achievement.
- There is less variation in achievement between schools.

Factors that contribute to this include:

- Canada's federal, provincial and territorial governments invest more in education and in regional equality.
- Public education systems distribute quality teaching and resources across schools.
- Students are not selected into schools as much as in other countries – there is more student diversity in schools by income, gender, ethnicity, ability and in other ways.
- Public schools have a range of inclusive policies and programs.

### 5. Countries like Canada with greater educational equality also have higher levels of achievement – there is no tradeoff between fairness and greatness. A more equal system pulls all students up.

### 6. Canada must do better for children at both ends of our education inequality gap.

There are threats to educational equality that we need to pay attention to and work against:

- Income inequality and related effects
- School stratification (how students are pooled between and in schools)
- Shadow education (the private investment gap in children's education)

There are big opportunities to sustain and improve Canada's educational equality:

- Reduce income inequality
- Guarantee access to high quality early child learning and care
- Close the achievement gaps between children in schools and establish a reconciliation framework to close gaps for Indigenous children
- Expand learning for the future – the new basics
- Make learning safer and healthier (reduce bullying, provide school meals and support well-being)

### 7. If Canada brought to other aspects of child and youth well-being the shared commitment we have to a good education, many more children would be healthy, free of violence and able to dream about and reach their full potential.

# MEASURING THE RIGHTS AND WELL-BEING OF A GENERATION OF CHILDREN

Since UNICEF began to monitor and compare the state of children and youth in wealthy countries a generation ago, we have measured the toxic impacts of widening income and social inequality on Canada's children. Widening inequality is one of the reasons why Canada trails behind its economic peer countries in children's health, the violence they experience and the rate of child poverty (see figure 1). But Canada consistently tops the international rankings in education. In UNICEF Report Card 15, Canada is among the top 10 of the world's 38 richest countries in the league table of inequality in education (see figure 2).

Canada also stands out because educational inequality decreases as children progress through school relative to other countries. Canada rises from a middle rank of 22 for equality in preschool access to a rank of 18 for equality in primary school reading achievement, to a rank of 9 in secondary school reading achievement and in expectations for further education (among the top third of countries)<sup>1</sup>.

Canada, Japan and Ireland are among only a handful of countries that rise from a low rank in preschool to a top rank by high school. About half of rich countries fall down the rankings as their children progress through school; the other half climb the league table. A few countries sustain equality throughout the education journey; others remain highly unequal.

In Canada, the impacts of family affluence on achievement are significant but not as strong as in many peer countries. Education systems and broader policies and conditions help minimize the differences between schools that some countries experience, and support our large population of migrant children to achieve.

Not only do Canada's education systems create a relatively high level of equality, they also support a very high level of overall achievement. There is no trade-off between fairness and greatness. But we can be fairer. And we can't be complacent in the face of growing threats to educational equality.

**UNICEF Report Card 15 raises these questions and provides some answers:**

1. How much educational inequality is there in rich countries? How and why does this vary between countries?
2. To what extent do children's starting points and family circumstances explain educational inequalities – making them inequitable?
3. To what extent do schools magnify or reduce inequalities between children? How and why do they do that?
4. What policies and practices can help to further reduce inequalities while supporting high achievement?

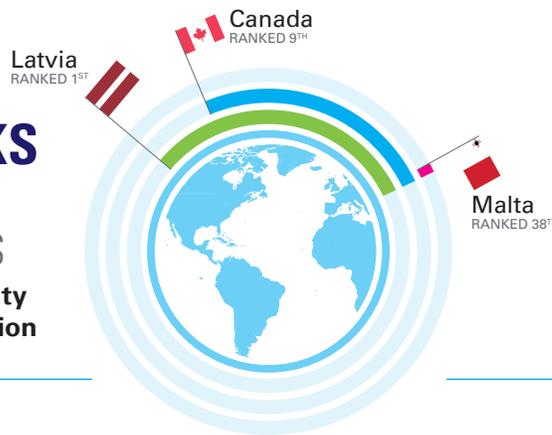
*States Parties recognize the right of the child to education ... with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity*

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, Article 28

<sup>1</sup> The indicators of educational inequality at each stage of school are different. The first is preschool participation, which contributes to wide variation in readiness to learn. The next two indicators are reading achievement in primary school and in high school, followed by expectations high school students have of pursuing further education. They are not directly comparable to each other, but the extent to which children have different access, achievement and expectations are markers of inequality as each influences the next along the life course, and each is influenced to some extent by unfair circumstances.

# CANADA RANKS 9<sup>TH</sup> OUT OF 38 COUNTRIES

In the league table of equality across the stages of education



**Figure 1: The well-being of Canada's children and youth**

CANADA'S INDICATORS	RANK AMONG 41 COUNTRIES	% CHILDREN AFFECTED
<b>MENTAL HEALTH</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>22%</b>
<b>FOOD INSECURITY</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>12%</b>
<b>CHILD POVERTY</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>22%</b>
<b>BULLYING</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>15%</b>
<b>OBESITY</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>25%</b>

(TWICE IN PAST MONTH)

Data from UNICEF Report Card 14 (2017).

## A generation of UNICEF Report Cards

UNICEF has produced 15 Report Cards describing the rights and well-being of children and youth in rich countries over the past 18 years. We compare these countries because they have similar resources and capacity but achieve very different outcomes for children. There is no systematic relationship between country wealth and the indicators of equality in education or of broader child well-being. The differences in children's well-being are largely the result of differences in public policy – how societies use their resources to give children a great start in life. We compare countries to better understand children's lives and what is possible to dream and achieve as a country. We do this so as a country we can learn and do better. Just like we ask of our children, every day, in schools across Canada.

### Equality or Equity?

While inequality relates to differences, inequity relates to differences that are unfair. Educational inequities are differences in education opportunities and outcomes that stem from different and unfair circumstances and advantages available to children, such as variation in school funding.

*“By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes”*

Sustainable Development Goal 4.1

# EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY ACROSS THE SCHOOL YEARS: THE LEAGUE TABLE

Educational inequalities can be measured in various ways. We measure markers of inequality along the life course of childhood, from access to early education, to reading achievement in primary and secondary school, to children's expectations of continuing into further education.

The league table measures how education systems contribute to shrinking or growing the inequality

that children bring to school because of their family circumstances, their gender and other status, and the broader social policies that shape their lives (see figure 2).

Canada's overall rank is based on the education gap in secondary school because this summarizes the accumulation of inequality in children's education toward the end of compulsory schooling.

We focus on reading literacy to measure educational inequality because reading is a gateway to all learning, not because math, science and other subjects are less important. However, Canada ranks in the top ten OECD countries for math and science achievement and equality as well as reading.

## WHO AND WHAT IS LEFT OUT?

Who and what this Report Card doesn't measure, matters.

Who international surveys don't include are children who are not in school because they are in institutions, are home-schooled, have severe health problems, have disabilities, have dropped out, are truant and for other reasons. Children who are in special education are typically not captured in the data, nor are children who are not in standard housing because they are homeless, in temporary accommodation or part of an unregistered family. In Canada, a much higher proportion of Indigenous children are left out of international surveys than other Canadian children; some groups of children are also underrepresented in some other countries. Across the OECD, the proportion of missing students averages 3 per cent in the schools sampled. The comparisons are at least based on a fairly consistent underestimation of inequality.

What this Report Card doesn't measure are areas of learning beyond reading or even math and science that are important to children today and tomorrow, including children's rights,

creativity and collaboration. What we don't measure are many other important aspects of well-being that affect and are affected by children's school experience, with the exception of bullying, because the data is not linked. Poverty, mental health, food security, participation in decision-making, discrimination, happiness and cultural expression are just some of these.

There is a Canadian paradox in this Report Card: Canada achieves good outcomes for many children in many aspects of education, but lags behind peer countries in child poverty, health and violence measured in other UNICEF Report Cards. The data is a partial view of both their educational journey and their wider well-being<sup>2</sup>. Other UNICEF Report Cards help fill in some of the gaps. The UNICEF Canada Index of Child and Youth Well-being will bring this data together for a more balanced and comprehensive view of children's lives (see [www.unicef.ca/oneyouth](http://www.unicef.ca/oneyouth)).

<sup>2</sup> For more insight about children's well-being in relation to this Report Card, see UNICEF Report Card 14 at [www.unicef.ca/irc14](http://www.unicef.ca/irc14)

**Figure 2: The league table of equality across the stages of education**

Rank	Country	Preschool (Participation) rank	Primary School (Reading Achievement Gap) rank	Secondary School (Reading Achievement Gap) rank	Rank Change Preschool to Secondary School
1	Latvia	6	2	1	+5
2	Ireland	33	16	2	+31
3	Spain	22	4	3	+19
4	Denmark	18	12	4	+14
5	Estonia	31		5	+26
6	Poland	6	15	6	0
7	Croatia	25		7	+18
8	Japan	34		8	+26
9	 <b>Canada</b>	22	18	9	+13
10	Slovenia	28	17	10	+18
11	Finland	14	3	11	+3
12	Portugal	8	8	12	-4
13	Italy	15	6	13	+2
14	Romania	39		14	+25
15	Lithuania	1	13	15	-14
16	United Kingdom	20	23	16	+4
17	Republic of Korea	35		17	+17
18	Switzerland	6		18	-12
19	Hungary	32	19	19	+13
20	Norway	18	7	20	+2
21	Greece	29		21	+8
22	Iceland	3		22	-19
23	Germany	23	20	23	0
24	United States	40	22	24	+16
25	Sweden	16	11	25	-9
26	Netherlands	11	1	26	-15
27	Czech Republic	38	10	27	+11
28	Belgium	11	9	28	-17
29	Austria	11	5	29	-18
30	Australia	36	25	30	+6
31	Cyprus	26		31	-5
32	Slovakia	37	21	32	+5
33	New Zealand	30	28	33	-3
34	Luxembourg	13		34	-21
35	France	3	14	35	-32
36	Israel	6	27	36	-30
37	Bulgaria	25	26	37	-12
38	Malta	18	29	38	-20
-	Chile	21	24		
-	Mexico	9			
-	Turkey	41			

## Indicators

**Preschool:** the percentage of students enrolled in organized learning one year before the official age for entering primary school. This is a measure of equality of access to preschool education rather than equality of outcomes at this age. In Canada, the Early Development Instrument (EDI) provides insight about equality in developmental outcomes at the start of school, but there is no internationally comparable data for the EDI.

**Primary school:** the gap in reading scores between the lowest and highest performing students at fourth grade (at the 10th and 90th percentiles) (from PIRLS survey data).

**Secondary school:** the gap in reading scores between the lowest and highest performing students at age 15 (at the 10th and 90th percentiles) (from PISA survey data).

**See UNICEF Report Card 15 for more detail on these measures and their data sources.**

**NOTE:** Country rankings are based on the equality gap in secondary school.

A light blue background indicates a place in the top third of the rankings, medium blue in the middle third, and dark blue in the bottom third. Blank spaces indicate a lack of data, for the countries that did not participate in the international PIRLS survey.

Chile, Mexico and Turkey are omitted from the summary league table because the proportion of 15-year-olds who are either excluded from PISA 2015 or are not at school exceeds 20 per cent. This means that the figures for these countries are not a reliable measure of educational inequality for that age group. Their positions on the other indicators appear below the league table for reference.

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# WHEN CANADA HAS BIG DREAMS

This UNICEF Report Card demonstrates that when Canadians have dreams for their children, great things happen. Canadians support a strong public education system and deliver it comparatively very well.

If we can create fairness as well as high achievement in education, we should also be able to boost outcomes and close gaps in other aspects of children's lives that are critical to their rights and well-being. Canada should be able to join our peers at the top of league tables with lower child poverty, more food security, less violence in children's lives and better health – areas where Canada finds itself at the bottom<sup>i</sup>. Canada's expenditure on primary and secondary education is higher than the OECD average, but overall public social spending is far below the OECD average<sup>ii</sup>. By improving these aspects of children's lives and closing the gaps among children, we could do more to improve educational equality as well.

UNICEF Report Card 15 reminds us with urgency that better is always possible in education too. Some children do better at school than others not because of differences in ability, but because of the circumstances that they are born into<sup>3</sup>. Children start primary school with a wide variation in access to learning and in their development progress<sup>4</sup>. Some take a long time to catch up. Some never do. Some children do better than others because their schooling creates different opportunities to pursue their interests, develop their talents and skills and reach their full potential.

The gender gap in Canada widens in favour of girls between primary school and high school. The education gap for First Nations communities has widened in the past 15 years<sup>iii</sup>. While high school graduation for First Nations has been improving, the results for all Canadians improved by more, stretching the gap from 30 percentage points in 2001 to 33 points in 2016. Youth in care, children with disabilities and some racialized groups are among children who are at much greater risk of disengagement, lower achievement and dropping out of school.

Although family affluence and school differences have somewhat less influence on children's reading achievement and expectations for future education than in many other countries, they create unfair learning advantages for some children. Income inequality creates a "private investment gap" in childhood, with wealthier and better-educated parents better able to provide resources and environments that support children's development through the school years; for instance, more food security, safer homes and neighbourhoods, support for children with disabilities and richer opportunities to play and learn in and outside school.

Compounding income inequality is unequal access to parental leave,

breastfeeding support and child development programs including childcare and early learning programs. Children are already at different starting points on their first day at school and an educational achievement gap is sustained as children progress through school and form their aspirations for further education. School policies help to spread fairness, but there is more that can be done to equalize educational opportunities.

The gaps in education matter at both ends. Widening social inequality is also fuelling extraordinary pressures on children to compete and achieve in school. For a growing group of children at the high end of the education gap, the stress and anxiety of "concerted cultivation" is affecting their health, development and even learning. At the bottom end of the gap lie missed opportunities and dimmer dreams. While there are growing threats to Canada's ability to close the gap in education, education systems in Canada have been making progress and closing gaps for some groups of children. There is also national progress to reduce child poverty and give more children a fair start with early learning opportunities. And there are bigger opportunities to give every child better opportunities to reach their potential.

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3 As with the last three UNICEF Report Cards, the focus is on high- and middle-income countries that are members of the OECD and/or the European Union. We refer to these countries collectively as 'rich' countries or economies.

4 Canada's Early Development Instrument measures children's development in five domains at the start of primary school, as well as the inequalities among children in their development.

# READY FOR LEARNING? EQUALITY IN PRESCHOOL

## Canada Ranks:

22<sup>ND</sup> (97%)

## Top performer:

LITHUANIA (99.9%)

A child's journey through the education system usually begins in childcare or preschool<sup>5</sup>. The differences between childcare and preschool are somewhat blurry in an international context. Both can and should be play-based. Both can and should be delivered equitably. Although there are international and nation-wide differences in the organization of early childhood education, including the quality of provision, the hours of attendance and whether attendance is statutory, almost all children in rich countries (nine in ten) start primary school with at least some preschool (see figure 3). This is because children need high-quality early learning environments. Most children have working parents, children of working parents need high quality childcare, and high quality early education offers benefits to children and helps close developmental gaps between them.

Canada's enrolment rate in preschool the year before primary education (Kindergarten for most children) at 97%

is almost universal, but leaves out more children than most of its peers, ranking 22nd<sup>6</sup>. Kindergarten is available across Canada but attendance is only mandatory in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. Four jurisdictions offer a half day program. Evidence suggests that a half-day program doesn't deliver a sufficient "dose" to create the benefits for child development that full-day participation can.

There is even greater international variation in younger children's participation in early learning programs. Overall, more than 50% of children age 3 and older attend preschool in most wealthy countries. But at least 80% attend in two-thirds of rich countries, with near-universal enrolment in Belgium, Denmark, Iceland, Spain and Sweden.

For children under age 3, enrolment rates are below 50% in nearly all countries. The only exceptions are Luxembourg, France, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal and Sweden, where around 50% of children under 3 spend some time in centre-based care, and Denmark which stands out as the country with the highest childcare enrolment rate for under-threes (at 70%).

In Canada, 54% of 2-4-year-olds attend centre-based early childhood education and care, but this figure

hides substantial variation between the provinces and territories. The enrolment rate ranges from just 34% in Newfoundland to 73% in Quebec.<sup>7</sup>

The gaps in preschool participation in Canada are mainly due to the lack of a universal approach, with access limited by the availability and affordability of spaces.

## How much do family circumstances matter to equality in preschool?

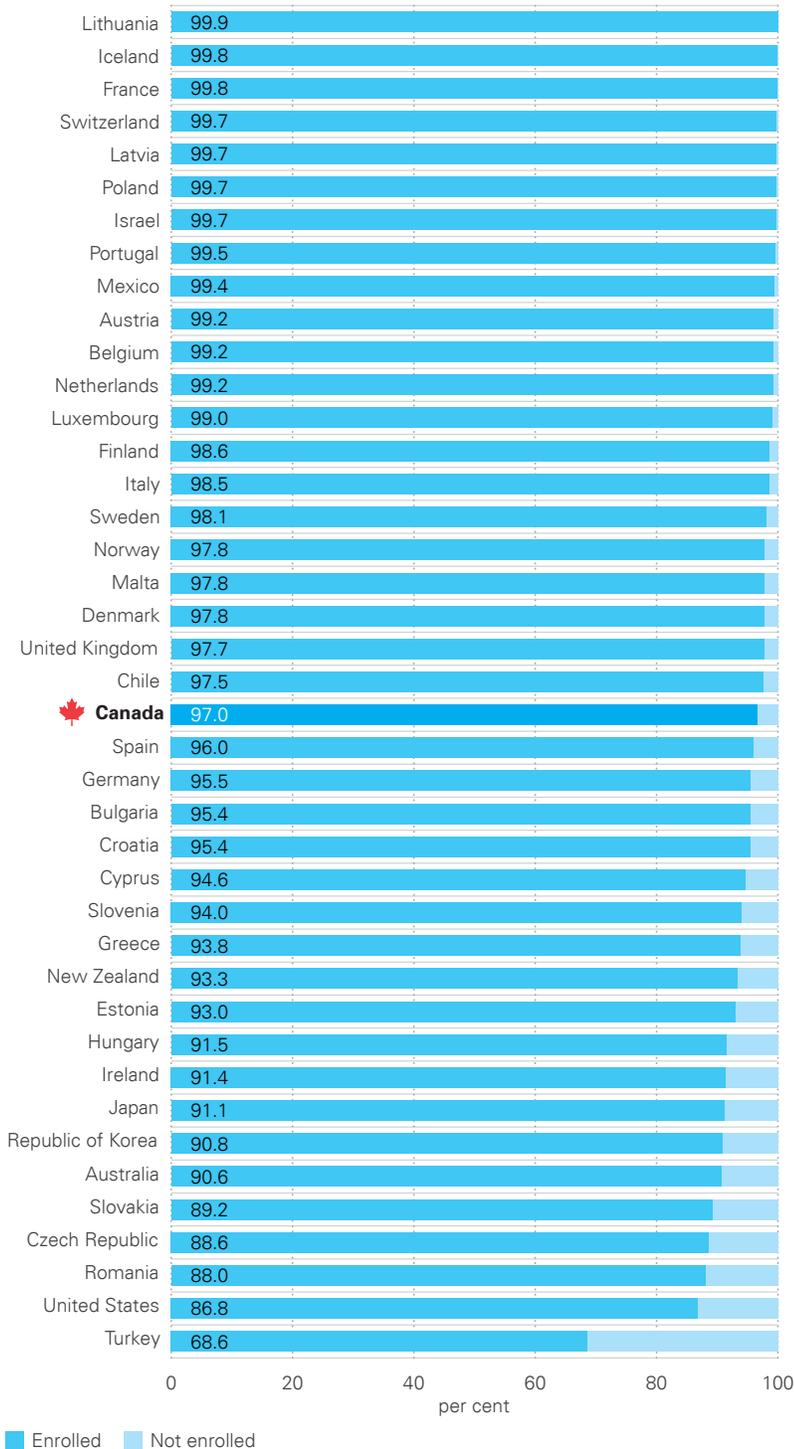
Canada's public education systems are playing a greater role in preschool; about 40% of Canada's children attend preschool which has no tuition/fees. Other children, particularly those under age 4, are in a childcare market. The affordability of childcare is a crucial barrier to access in Canada and elsewhere where preschool is not a universal public system. Children aged 3 and older are less likely to attend if they live in the lowest income households in half of the countries for which data are available (see figure 4). Yet these children typically benefit most from access to high quality early learning and care.

In Canada, access to formal childcare varies widely with household income. We do not have data on average childcare fees for each province/

- 5 Report Card 15 uses the terms preschool and childcare interchangeably to refer to all forms of centre-based early childhood education and care. The divide between care and preschool education is blurred in many countries, but it is still common to think of services for under-3s as childcare and those for children age 3 and older as preschool. However, it is notable that in Canada, early child education has two streams. Preschool is universal, publicly funded and delivered, with no tuition. Childcare is largely privately delivered with varying levels of public subsidy with wide variation in availability and fees.
- 6 Updated figures are available from Statistics Canada post-dating the gathering of data for this report, reporting an enrolment rate of 97% in 2015 (the previously reported 2015 figure was 95%) <https://www144.statcan.gc.ca/sdg-odd/goal-objectif04-eng.htm>. Due to timing of the update we are not able to incorporate this in the core Report Card calculations.
- 7 Akbari, E. and McCuaig, K. (2018) Early Childhood Education Report 2017. Toronto: Atkinson Centre/University of Toronto. <http://ecereport.ca/en/report>.

**Figure 3: How many children attend preschool?**

Percentage of children participating in preschool education (one year before official age for entering primary school) in 2015



territory, but this information exists for major Canadian cities.<sup>8</sup> Childcare fees are lowest in Quebec cities, so it is not surprising that the province has the highest enrolment rate for 2-4-year-olds. In Toronto, the average cost of a childcare space for children under 5 amounts to 27% of average net household incomes for families with at least one child under age 5. This is the least affordable of the 20 cities in the comparison.<sup>9</sup>

**How much does the availability of early learning opportunities matter to equality in preschool?**

Without a public, universal system of education for young children, affordability is an issue for many Canadian families, but availability is also inequitable. Provinces that spend a greater share of their budgets on early childhood education and care tend to ensure higher enrolment rates in preschool and more childcare spaces for children 2-to-4-years old (see figure 5).

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives has mapped “childcare deserts” across Canada, areas where there is inadequate access to licensed childcare (at least three children in potential competition for each licensed space) irrespective of fees<sup>iv</sup>. An estimated 776,000 children (44% of all non-school-aged children) in Canada

8 MacDonald, D. and Friendly, M. (2017) Time Out: Child care fees in Canada 2017. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

9 The city-level data were compiled by Emis Akbari and Kerry McCuaig from the University of Toronto.

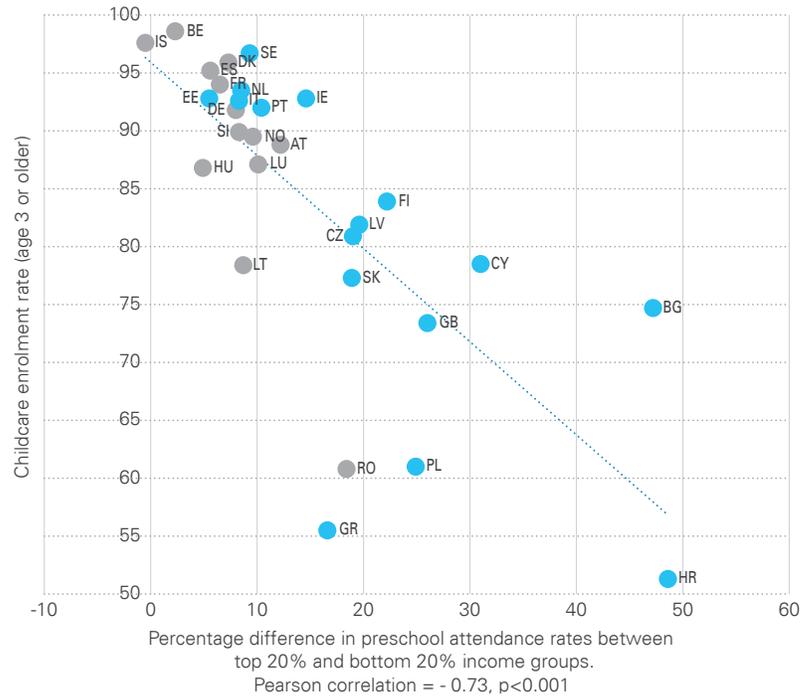
**Note:** Most recent data are for 2013 for Iceland and Japan, and 2014 for Slovenia, Portugal, Greece, Poland, Mexico, Luxembourg, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

**Source:** SDG Indicators Global Database, Indicator 4.2.2 (UNESCO, OECD and EUROSTAT Surveys of Formal Education), except Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany and Slovakia (age 5 enrolment in centre-based services, EU-SILC 2015) and Canada (Indicator 4.2.2, 2015-16, Government of Canada Sustainable Development Goal Data Hub, <https://www144.statcan.gc.ca/sdg-odd/goal-objectif04-eng.htm>).

live in childcare deserts. Licensed childcare coverage is highest in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island and in many of the larger cities in Quebec. These cities have an average coverage rate of 70% or better, with at least seven spaces for every 10 children. These cities are also in provinces that regulate childcare fees. In Ontario, People for Education reports that 90% of public elementary schools with a high proportion of students whose parents have completed university have fee-based childcare available for Kindergarten-aged students, compared to 66% of schools with a low proportion of university graduates<sup>9</sup>.

Thousands of young children in Canada start school without the long-term advantages of early learning that could put many on a better trajectory for school and for life. For younger children, the access gap in Canada is even wider in contrast to many peer countries. So at the very start of primary school, there are already large differences in children’s development.<sup>10</sup> This is measured by the Early Development Instrument in Canada, which shows a wide variation in physical, social, emotional, language and communication skills and behaviour among Canada’s children at Kindergarten. There is a well-established body of research identifying language, memory and other academic skill gaps, as well as neurological differences, between children from high and low family affluence at school entry (e.g.

**Figure 4: Where income inequality is high, preschool attendance is often low (2016)**



**Note:** Countries with statistically significant differences between the top and bottom income quintiles (at p<0.05) are noted in blue.

**Source:** See UNICEF Report Card 15.

Buckingham, Wheldall, & Beaman-Wheldall, 2013; Hair, Hanson, Wolfe, & Pollak, 2015; Morgan, Farkas, Hillemeier, & Maczuga, 2009). These disparities contribute to wide inequality in children’s readiness to learn at the start of primary school.

The Sustainable Development Goals embody a vision that all children benefit from quality preschool education (Target 4.2). Universal public provision of high-quality early learning programs is not only necessary to give children a good start when their parents work, but also to provide a stimulating social

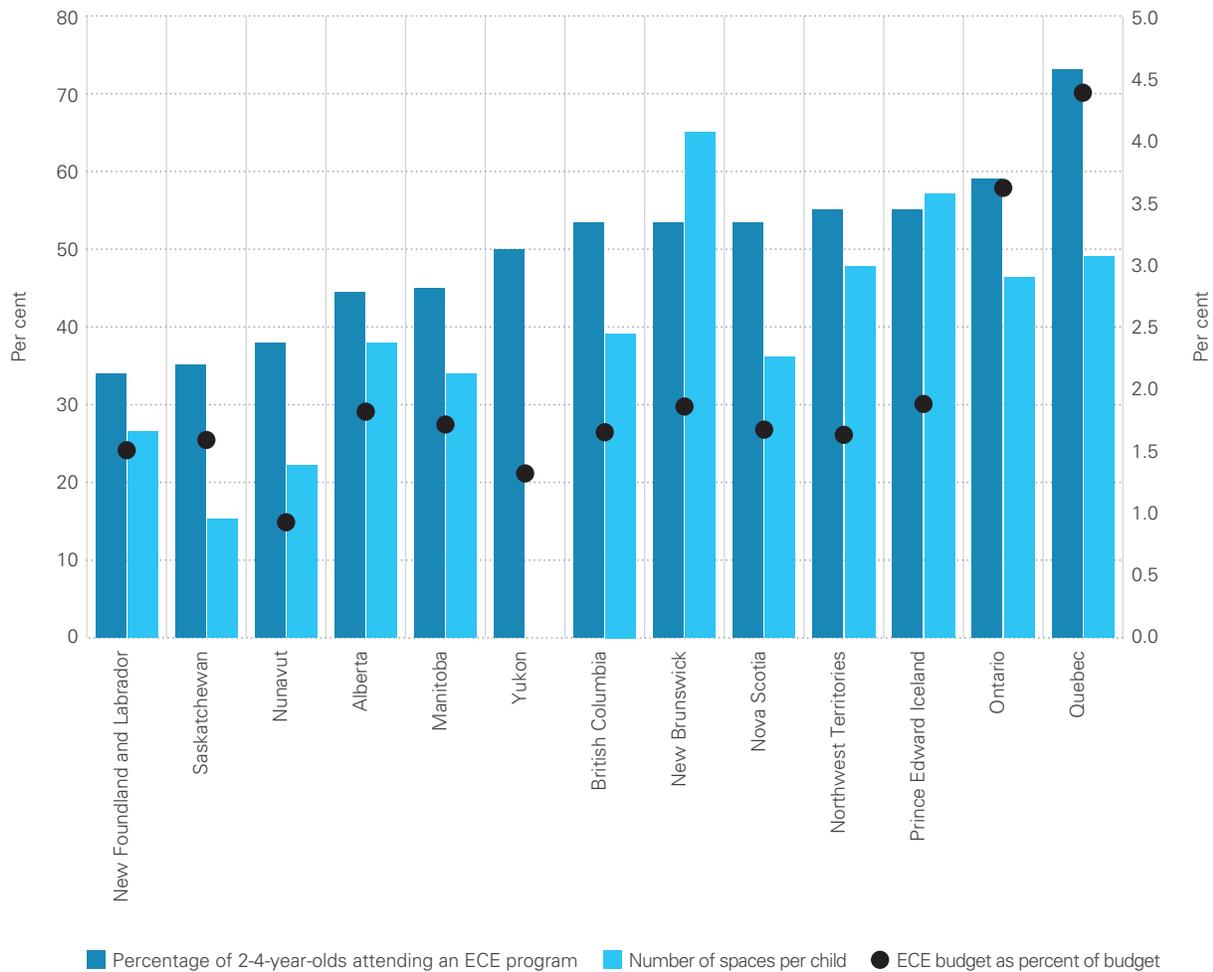
and learning environment.<sup>11</sup> Most children benefit from some access to high quality, organized play-based learning before the start of compulsory school. Early child education also helps counteract the unequal starting conditions of children from different families, and the benefits can last through their school journey. Even at the end of compulsory school, 15-year-olds who had more than one year of pre-primary education do substantially better at reading than those with no pre-primary education.<sup>12</sup>

10 See Bradbury, B., Corak, M., Waldfogel, J., & Washbrook, E. (2015). Too Many Children Left Behind: The U.S. Achievement Gap in Comparative Perspective. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

11 See Blossfeld, H-P, Kulic N., Skopek, J. and Triventi, M. (2017) Childcare, early education and social inequality: An International Perspective. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

12 OECD (2010), PISA 2009 results: Overcoming social background – equity in learning opportunities and outcomes (Volume II). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264091504-en>.

**Figure 5: Early child education enrolment rates (preschool and childcare) and spending vary across Canadian provinces and territories (2016)**



**Note:** The childcare enrolment rate refers to the percentage of children between the ages of 2 and 4 who regularly attend an early childhood education program. Availability is measured as the number of regulated childcare spaces divided by the population of children in this age range. PT denotes provincial and territorial.

**Source:** Akbari, E. and K. McCuaig, Early Childhood Education Report 2017, Atkinson Centre/University of Toronto, Toronto, 2018.

# GROWING EQUAL? EQUALITY IN PRIMARY SCHOOL

Canada Ranks:

18<sup>TH</sup>

Top performer:

NETHERLANDS

Students reaching basic reading ability:

Canada:

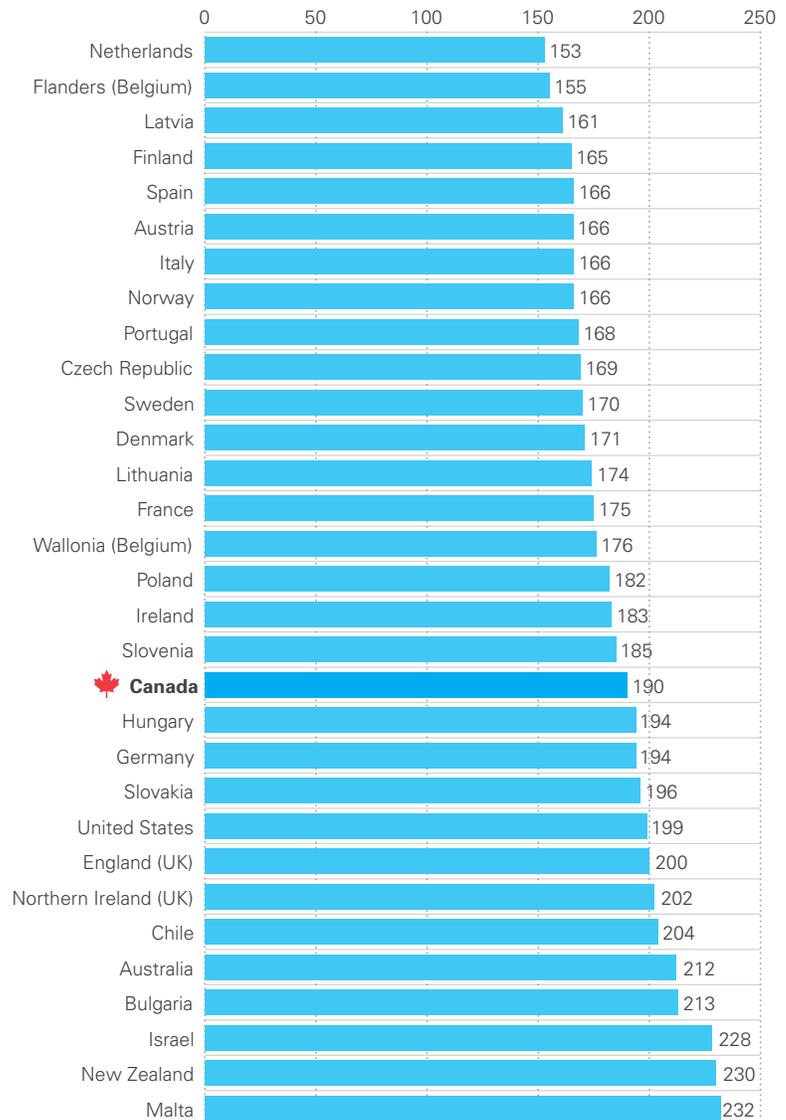
83%

Country average:

80%

In Canada, children start primary school with fairly wide variation in preschool participation (ranking 22nd) and readiness to learn<sup>13</sup>. At Grade 4, the size of the gap in reading scores is also wide (see figure 6). Canada ranks in the middle of its peers at 18th place, with a gap in reading proficiency in Grade 4 of 190 points (on the PIRLS reading test). The average gap among rich countries is 185 points. Flanders (Belgium), Latvia and the Netherlands have the smallest reading score gaps, close to 150 points. Israel, New Zealand and Malta have the largest gaps, of more than 230 points. A wide variation between countries indicates that wider gaps are not a product of differences in “natural abilities” but a marker of differences in education systems and broader circumstances affecting learning.

Figure 6: Where are the widest gaps in Grade 4 reading ability (2016)?



**Note:** Wallonia (Belgium) denotes the French-speaking Community / Federation Wallonia-Brussels, while Flanders (Belgium) refers to the Flemish speaking region of Flanders.

The performance gap is measured as the absolute difference between the 90th and

10th percentiles of the reading score.

The reading achievement scale has a mean of 500, corresponding to mean reading achievement in 2001, and a standard deviation of 100.

**Source:** PIRLS 2016.

13 The analysis draws on data from the latest round of Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS 2016). This is a large scale international assessment of fourth grade children’s reading comprehension. It tests nationally representative samples of approximately 4,000 fourth-grade students from 150 to 200 schools per country or territory. An average fourth grade child across the 31 school systems is 10 years old.

The PIRLS reading scale has four points that measure the reading comprehension of students: Low International Benchmark (400), Intermediate International Benchmark (475), High International Benchmark (550) and Advanced International Benchmark (625). The lowest benchmark is separated from the highest benchmark by 225 points. There is always going to be some variation in children’s test scores, but the reading gaps between the lowest and highest scoring students in rich countries are so large that some students can only read basic texts when others already interpret complex literary passages.

**Countries with more educational equality have more children who achieve proficiency in primary school**

Countries with greater equality in reading scores in primary school have more students reaching intermediate-level reading proficiency (see figure 7). So it is not surprising that Canada has both a moderate level of inequality in reading scores and a moderate number of students with reading proficiency compared to our peers (83% achieve proficiency, close to the country average of 80%). This underlines the benefits for all children of working to reduce inequality in education.

**How much do family circumstances matter to equality in primary education?**

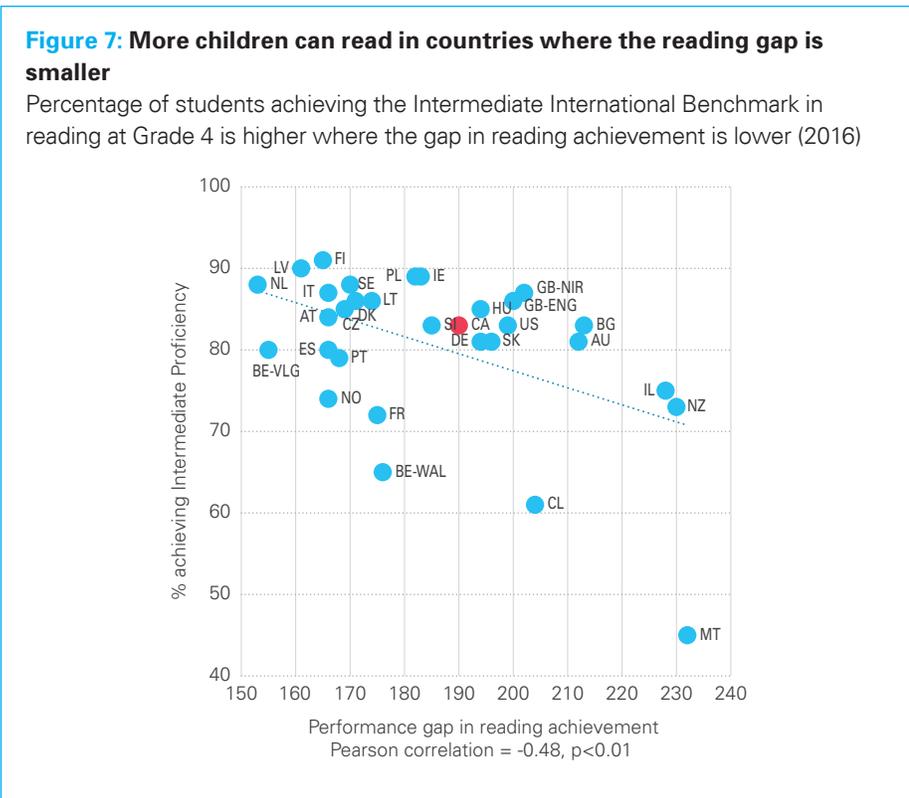
The family circumstances in which children grow up influence their learning and school achievement. But how much influence family affluence has varies between countries and education systems. Parent occupation is one variable that represents family wealth and social capital. Children with at least one parent working in a managerial, higher-paying occupation are more likely to have higher reading scores in primary school in almost every country (see figure 8). Differences in parental

occupation explain up to one-third of the variation in children’s Grade 4 reading scores in rich countries. Other child and family characteristics explain another one-third to two-fifths of the variation in children’s reading scores (these include the child’s gender, the language of testing relative to the language the child speaks at home, the location of the school, the country of the child’s birth and whether the child comes to school hungry or tired) (see figure 9).

Unfortunately, we don’t have comparable data for Canada on the influence of family circumstances in primary school. But considering Canada’s fairly wide gaps in preschool access and in primary school reading achievement, our relatively high rate of child poverty<sup>vi</sup>, the EDI and other research in Canada, we know that family affluence plays an important role in educational inequality among young children.

**How much do schools matter to equality in primary education?**

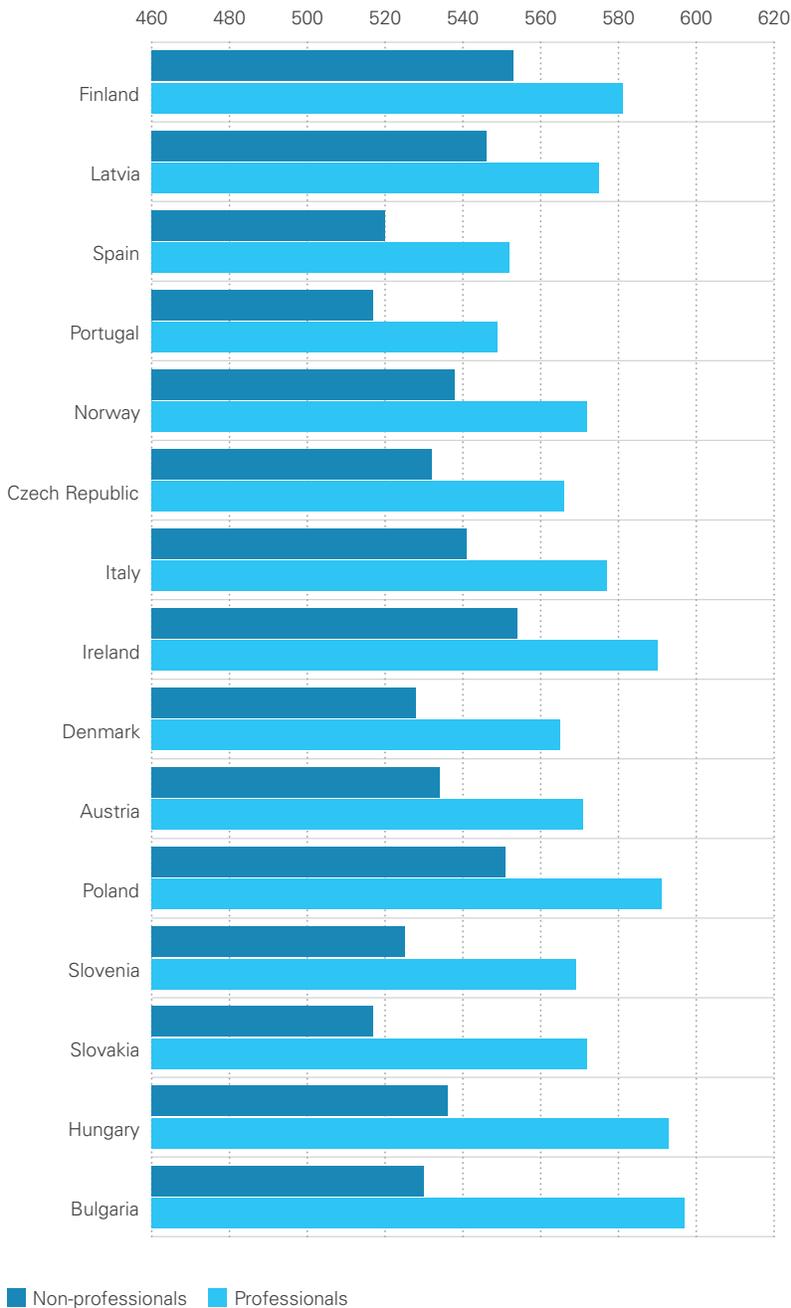
Educational inequalities between children can be reinforced or reduced by the schools they attend. In addition to family circumstances, the variation in children’s reading scores across rich countries is partly due to the differences between schools. Educational inequality tends to be wider in countries where there is greater variation between schools in average school-level scores



Source: PIRLS 2016.

**Figure 8: Children of professionals score higher in reading tests in Grade 4**

Children's average reading scores at Grade 4 by parental occupation (2016)



**Note:** Countries are listed in order according to the magnitude of the parental occupation gap in reading scores.

Countries with more than 15% of responses missing parental occupation are excluded.

Highest parental level of occupation: "non-professionals" include small business owners, clerical workers, skilled workers, general labourers, and those who never worked for pay. The percentage of children whose parents work in professional occupations ranges from 32% in Austria to 70% in Norway.

Countries with statistically significant differences between occupational groups (at  $p < 0.05$ ) are noted with more intense shading.

**Source:** PIRLS 2016.

(between-school inequality). Differences between schools in rich countries account for one-fifth of the total variation in children's reading achievement on average (see figure 10).

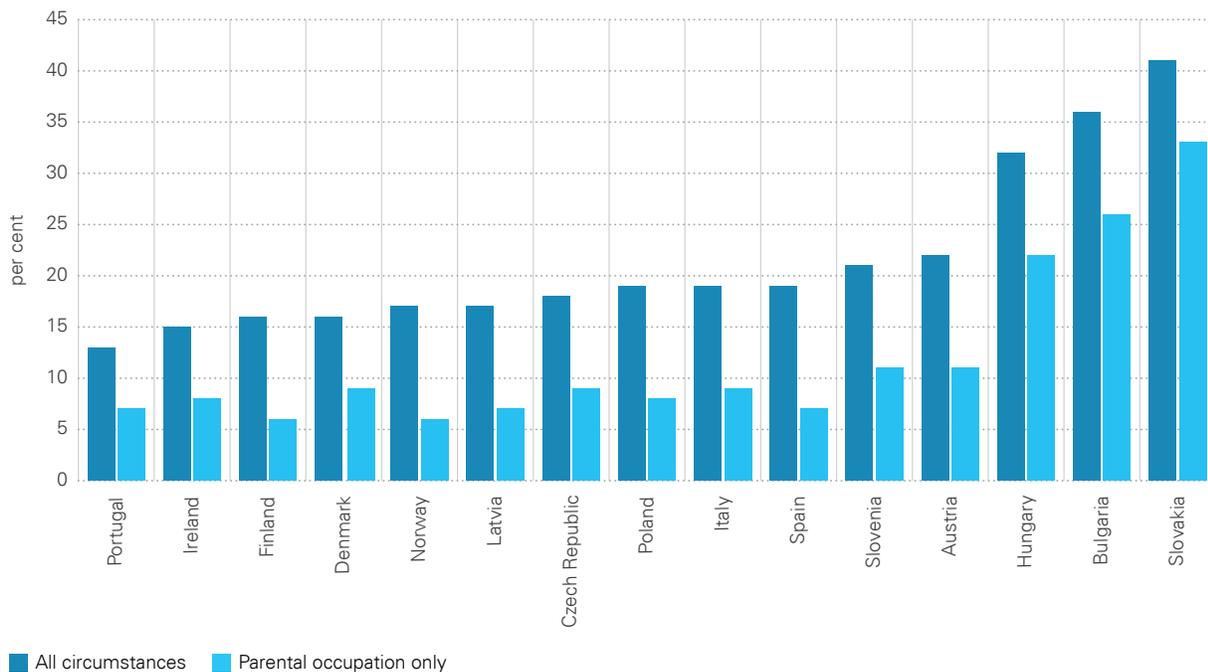
In Canada, the level of between-school inequality in reading scores in primary school is fairly wide at 23%, ranking 22nd of 31 countries. The influence of school difference ranges from just 4% in Slovenia to 40% in Bulgaria and Israel, and averages 19%.

Typically, where there is greater between-school inequality in school achievement, there is more within-school equality of school achievement (although there is a lot of variation in this relationship; see figure 11). This is because where schools produce very different reading test scores, it is often because they pool better performing and lower performing children into different schools. Internationally, this usually occurs where schools are selecting children on the basis of affluence or other characteristics. Another explanation for between-school variation in scores is that neighbourhoods, and therefore local schools, are polarized by income and schools don't compensate for the effects of family affluence with sufficient targeted investment.

The stratification of children into different schools, for whatever reason, matters because it contributes to educational inequality: the achievement of children with fewer advantages is lower than if they attended schools with more economic diversity. It can also contribute to weak social cohesion and other problems.

**Figure 9: How much do child and family circumstances affect reading scores in Grade 4?**

Percentage of variation in children’s reading achievement at Grade 4 explained by child and family circumstances (2016)



**Note:** Child and family circumstances include: the child’s gender, the language of testing and the language the child speaks at home, the location of the school, the country of the child’s birth, parental occupation and education, and whether the child comes to school hungry or tired.

**Source:** PIRLS 2016.

**How much does access to preschool matter in primary education?**

The wide gap in educational inequality in primary school in Canada may be partly explained by unequal access to preschool. Canadian babies are pretty much the same at birth in health status<sup>vii</sup>, but, by school entry, poverty and inadequate nurturing and stimulation contribute to gaps in health and development. At Kindergarten, 33% of boys and 19% of girls show developmental delays in health, vocabulary or self-confidence.<sup>viii</sup> Many will not have the basic skills to support their transition to school. For instance, children with delays may have a harder time getting along with their

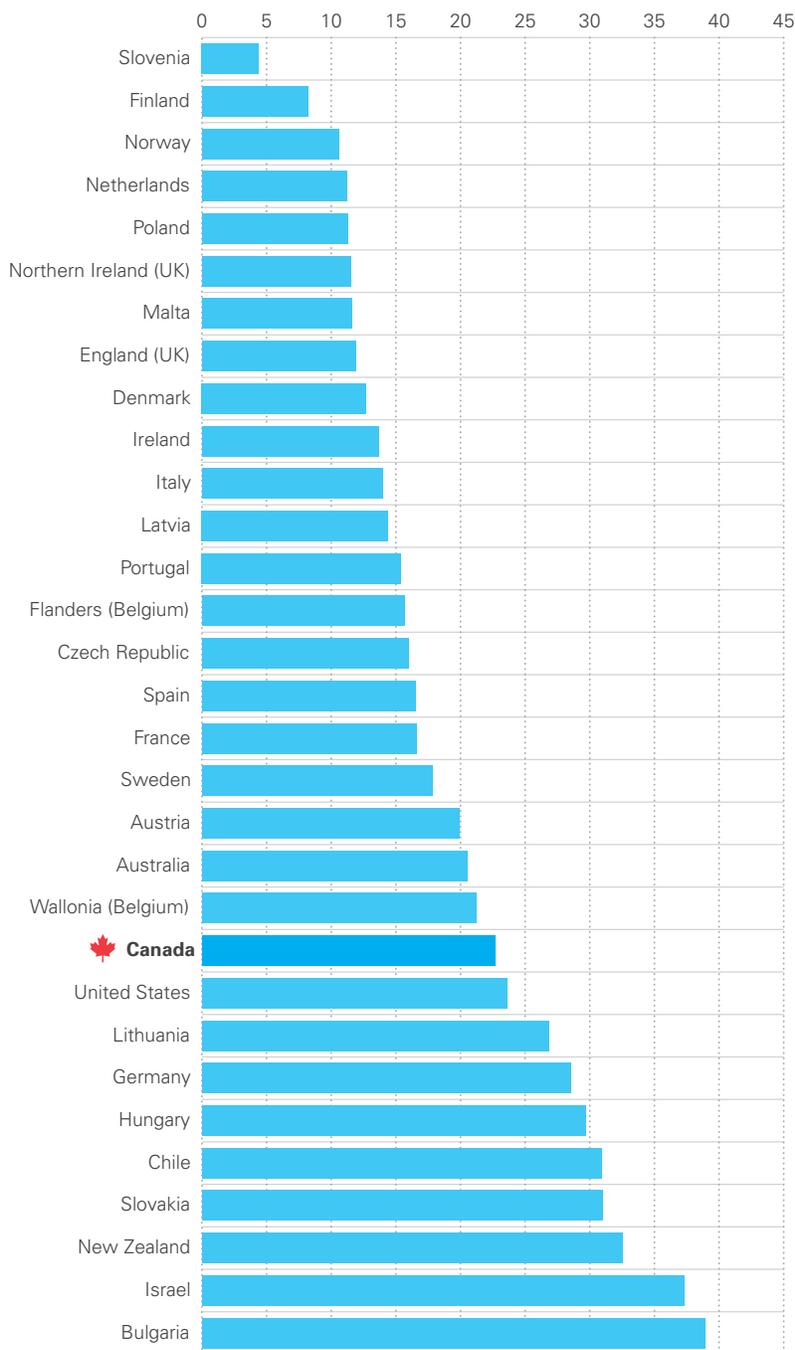
classmates and teachers.

It is during the years before school entry when the foundations of learning, health and social behaviour are established. Early language development sets the foundation for literacy, numeracy and creative thinking. It is in the early years when children develop their basic values, skills, attitudes and sense of citizenship.<sup>ix</sup> Children who start school behind their more advantaged classmates find it harder to catch up. For some, the difficulties they experience at school entry are likely to grow rather than lessen over time.<sup>x</sup> These gaps can be closed - competencies in these areas are

teachable and learnable<sup>xi</sup>. But schools struggle to find the expertise and funding to compensate children for what they missed in their earliest years.

Intervening before learning and other development challenges become rooted decreases their human and financial costs, including the remedial costs borne by education systems through primary school and beyond. A wide swath of research supports front-ending education with preschool to improve children’s outcomes. When early education is designed to simultaneously support mothers’ workforce participation, it also reduces family poverty.<sup>xii</sup>

**Figure 10: How much do schools influence reading scores in Grade 4?**  
 Share of variation in reading scores at Grade 4 explained by school differences (2016)



**Note:** Wallonia (Belgium) denotes the French-speaking Community / Federation Wallonia-Brussels. The length of each bar denotes the share of school-level variance obtained from a multilevel model.  
**Source:** PIRLS 2016.

## School stratification or segregation

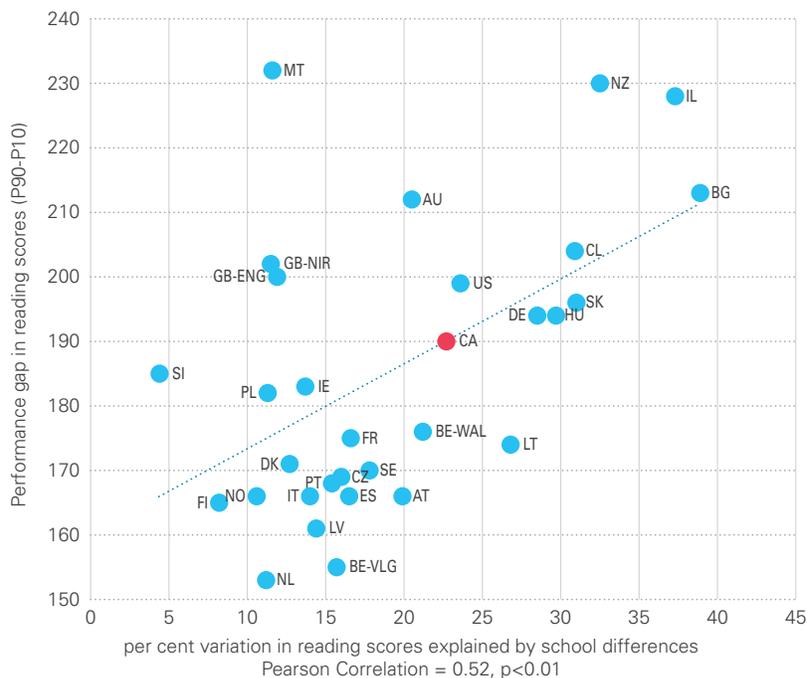
When children with the same social and economic position are clustered together in schools, for whatever reason, it is called socio-economic segregation<sup>14</sup>. The segregation or stratification of children into different schools occurs in various ways.

Some schools select students directly or indirectly by academic ability, household income or religious affiliation. This can occur in both private/independent and in public schools. Residential or neighbourhood polarization can result in children from poorer and richer neighbourhoods attending different schools. Even when diverse children in a residential area are eligible to attend their local school, policies allowing for enrolment in other jurisdictions can result in segregation and between-school differences in achievement.

The ability of parents or children to choose their school varies widely, from Finnish schools where families have virtually no choice (Sahlberg, 2011) to New Orleans where the majority of K-12 schools are independent charter schools (New Orleans Equity Index, 2018). Every Canadian province and territory offers public education, but there are also elements of school choice in every system. Specialty, alternative or enrichment schools might be embedded within the regional school district, and separate, publicly-funded faith-based or charter schools may

**Figure 11: Unequal schools contribute to unequal reading scores**

The gap in children’s reading scores at Grade 4 is larger where between-school variance is greater (2016)



**Note:** Wallonia (Belgium) denotes the French-speaking Community / Federation Wallonia-Brussels.

The share of school-level variance is obtained from a multilevel model.

**Source:** PIRLS 2016.

be on offer. There are variations in availability, funding, regulation and enrolment in private schools in each jurisdiction, and overall one in 10 Canadian schools is private or independent.

According to a 2005 survey of parents, approximately a third of Canadian parents choose an alternative to their local public school (Davies & Aurini, 2011). Another third of parents choose their public school indirectly by moving to a preferred neighbourhood so their children

can attend the local public school. Overall, parents with higher levels of education and higher incomes are more likely to participate in ‘choosing’. Opportunities for school choice may play a role in dividing families and students along socio-economic lines.

Schools can also amplify or reduce inequalities between schools with variations in the quality of leadership and teaching, school facilities and materials, private fundraising, drop-out rates, insufficient targeting of resource allocation and in other ways.

14 Willms, J.D. (2006) Learning Divides: Ten policy questions about the performance and equity of schools and schooling systems. Montreal: UNESCO Institute for Statistics; Gutierrez, G., Jerrim, J. & Torres, R. (2017) School segregation across the world: has any progress been made in reducing the separation of the rich from the poor? (Working Paper). London: UCL Institute of Education.

# READY FOR THE FUTURE? EQUALITY IN SECONDARY SCHOOL

Canada Ranks:

9<sup>TH</sup>

Top performer:

LATVIA

Students reaching basic reading ability:

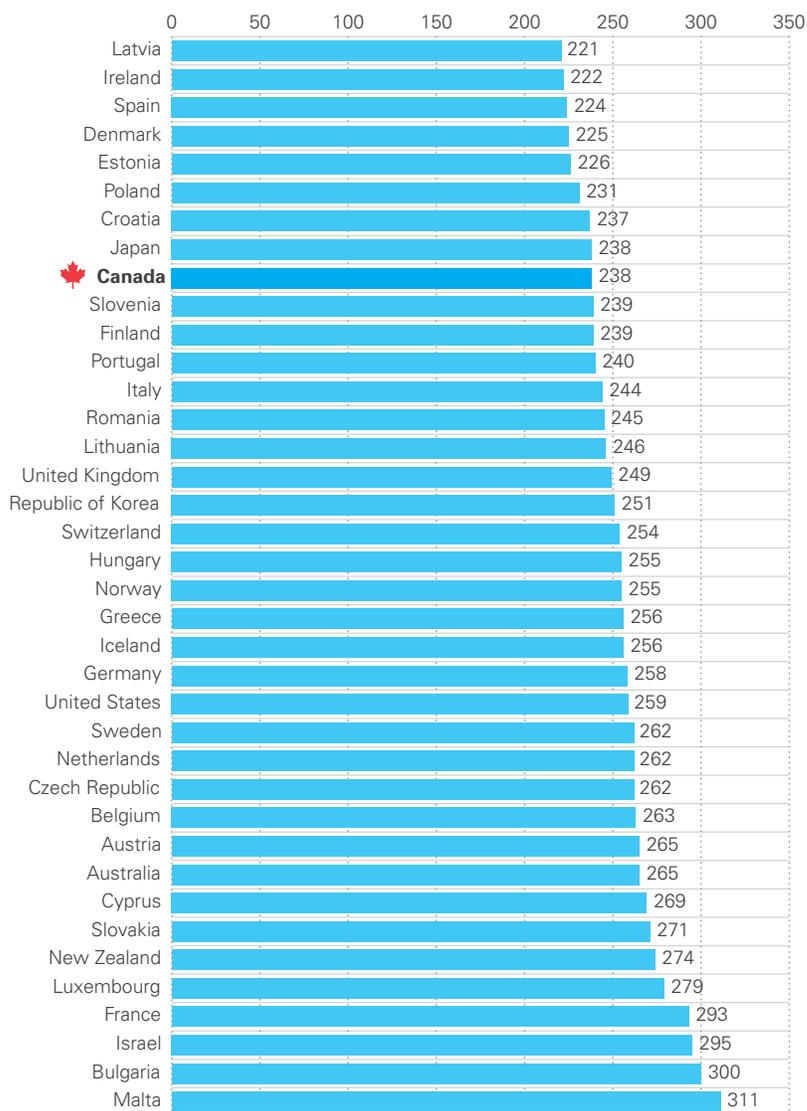
Canada:  
89%

Country average:  
78%

In high school at age 15, the gap in reading scores in Canada is relatively smaller compared to peer countries (see figure 12). It seems that the efforts schools make to lift all students' achievement show results. Canada, Denmark, Ireland, Poland and Slovenia move from a middle ranking in educational equality at primary-school to the top third of rich countries at secondary-school. Canada's ranking rises from 18th place to 9th place. The gap in high school reading scores in Canada is 238 points (see figure 12). The gap ranges from 221 points in Latvia to 311 points in Malta, and averages 254 points. This gap in high school reading score points is actually larger than the score point gap in primary school (190 points). But in many other countries, the difference is much larger<sup>15</sup>.

15 Canada appears to have wider reading inequality in absolute terms in secondary school than in primary school. However, the PIRLS test score in primary school and the PISA test score in secondary school are not comparable in absolute terms (because of the way they are calculated and because they measure different aspects of reading competency). So we can't say definitively that overall reading inequality decreases between primary and secondary school. We can only make comparisons in relative terms; that is, the size of the reading gap at each stage of education in contrast to peer countries.

Figure 12: Where are the widest gaps in reading ability at age 15 (2015)?



**Note:** The performance gap is measured as the absolute difference between the 90th and 10th percentiles of the reading score.

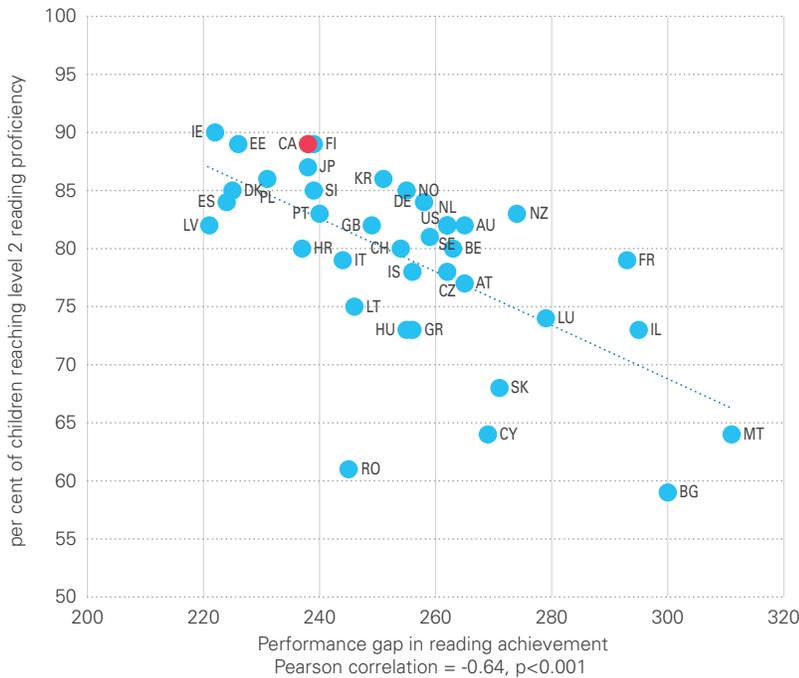
The reading achievement scale has a mean of 500 and a standard deviation of 100 based on a reference group of countries.

Chile, Mexico and Turkey are not included in the rankings. This is due to low coverage rates (below 80 per cent) in PISA (see OECD, 2016b, Table A2.1, Coverage Index 3), which means that their results may not be representative.

**Source:** PISA 2015.

**Figure 13: Reading proficiency is greater in countries where the gap in reading achievement is smaller**

Percentage of students achieving basic reading proficiency at 15 years old is higher where the gap in reading achievement is smaller (2015)



**Note:** Chile, Mexico and Turkey are not shown in this analysis.

**Source:** PISA 2015.

Many countries fall down the league table ranking between primary and secondary school. The Netherlands is ranked the most equal country for students in primary school, but is in the bottom third in high school. Austria, Belgium and the Czech Republic also fall from the top third to the bottom third. Australia, Bulgaria, Israel, Malta, New Zealand and Slovakia maintain low rankings. But some countries sustain high rankings at both stages of education, such as Finland, Latvia, Portugal, Italy and Spain.

**Countries with more educational equality have more children who achieve proficiency in high school**

Countries with smaller gaps in reading scores at high school tend to have more children reaching basic proficiency - the same pattern evident in primary school (see figure 13)<sup>16</sup>. There is no evidence that working towards greater equality impedes high educational standards or dampens the progress of higher-achieving students at any level of compulsory education. A more equal system pulls all students up.

Canada has both a high rate of secondary school children achieving proficiency (89%, well above the 78% country average) and a comparatively small gap in achievement. In fact, more children achieve proficiency in Canada than might be expected in relation to the size of the equality gap.

**Canada’s provincial education systems equalize education**

National averages can hide large differences within countries<sup>17</sup>. But every Canadian province has both a lower level of inequality in reading scores in high school and more children achieving proficiency than the country averages in the UNICEF Report Card (see figure 14)<sup>18</sup>. Overall inequality in Canada and in every province is well below the Report Card average of 254 points. Prince Edward Island had the lowest inequality in reading (218 point difference) and Ontario the highest (244 point difference). Proficiency levels are well above the Report Card average of 78% in all ten provinces, ranging from 83% in Manitoba to 92% in British Columbia. Seven of the 10 provinces meet the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal (Target 4.1.1c-2) for reading proficiency of 86%.

There are relatively small differences in educational achievement and equality between Canada’s provinces compared to the differences between countries. This is partly because every public education system distributes teaching quality and resources fairly evenly, and equalization funding in Canada shares national wealth. At the provincial level

16 The PISA study for 15-year-olds has a different definition for reading proficiency than the PIRLS study for Grade 4 students (see previous section). PISA sets the baseline for proficiency at Level 2. Students at this level ‘begin to demonstrate the reading skills that will enable them to participate effectively and productively in life’.

17 PISA data is available for sub-national regions in four countries; we have data for the ten provinces in Canada.

18 This is different from the OECD average used in the PISA reports.

there is no clear relationship between a province’s level of achievement and its equality gap. The reasons are beyond the ability of this Report Card to address in detail but may be because the differences between them are comparatively small.

There is more inequality inside countries than between them. Among 15-year-olds the largest gap in average reading scores between countries is 95 points – between Canada and Bulgaria. In comparison, the gap between children at the 10th and 90th percentile in Canada is 238 points.

### How much do family circumstances matter to equality in secondary education?

In all countries, children with higher-earning parents tend to have significantly higher reading scores in secondary school than those with low-earning parents (see figure 15). The differences are much larger in some countries than others. Canada ranks 6th due to the relatively smaller influence of parental earning on reading scores in high school. The score difference in favour of children with higher earning parents is 39 points. The difference ranges from 26 to 89 points and averages 52 points across countries. This is an

indicator of how hard the education system works against the drag of income inequality, given the unequal start Canada’s children have in school, Canada’s relatively higher rate of child poverty and broader income inequality than many peer countries<sup>xiii</sup>.

The gap in reading scores between children in families with low-earning and high-earning occupational status ranges from 23 points in Saskatchewan to 45 points in Quebec – all provinces limit the influence of affluence better than the rich country average. The inter-provincial differences in the reading gap are fairly small. However, provinces with a wider gap in children’s

**Figure 14: Educational achievement and inequality in secondary school in Canada’s provinces (2015)**

		Proficiency	Inequality	Female	Male	Ratio	Low-status occupation	High-status occupation	Gap
Average (38 countries)		79%	255			6.2%			51
Minimum (38 countries)		59%	222			2.3%			26
Maximum (38 countries)		90%	311			12.4%			87
<b>Canada</b>		<b>89%</b>	<b>238</b>	<b>540</b>	<b>514</b>	<b>5.1%</b>	<b>513</b>	<b>552</b>	<b>39</b>
Province	No. of children	Proficiency	Inequality	Female	Male	Ratio	Low-status occupation	High-status occupation	Gap
Newfoundland and Labrador	1203	86%	229	514	496	3.6%	500	531	31
Prince Edward Island	392	90%	218	534	497	7.3%	505	535	30
Nova Scotia	1439	89%	228	531	503	5.6%	510	542	32
New Brunswick	1555	85%	236	518	494	4.9%	494	538	43
Quebec	2915	90%	234	541	522	3.7%	512	557	45
Ontario	4223	89%	244	542	512	5.8%	515	553	38
Manitoba	2317	83%	235	512	486	5.4%	487	528	41
Saskatchewan	1928	84%	222	508	485	4.8%	491	514	23
Alberta	2133	91%	235	545	521	4.6%	520	556	36
British Columbia	1953	92%	229	549	522	5.2%	523	557	34

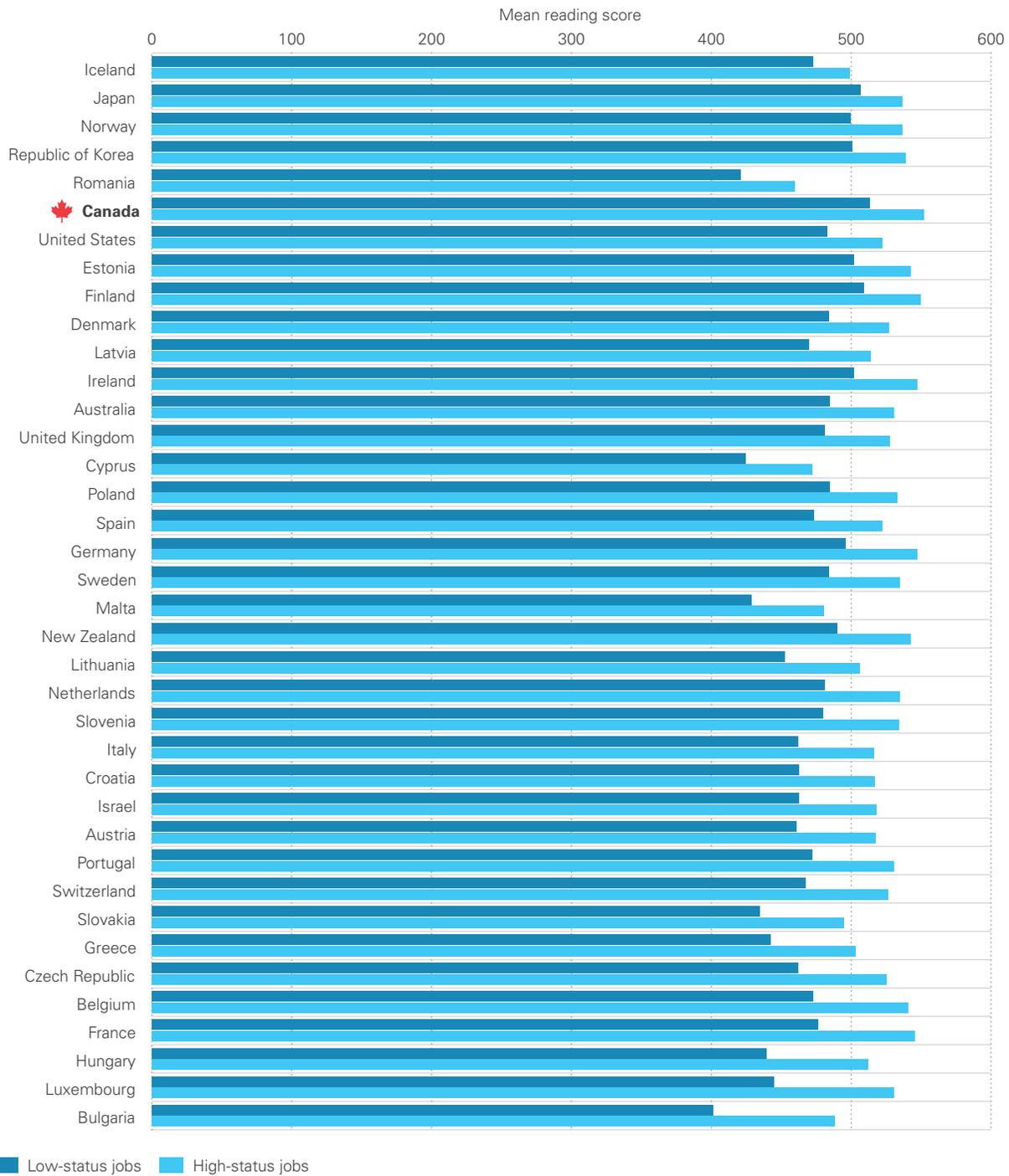
**The statistical columns of this table show:**

1. The percentage of children who have reached basic proficiency in reading, defined as level 2
2. The gap in reading scores between children at the 10th and 90th percentile of the distribution
3. The mean reading score for females
4. The mean reading score for males
5. The percentage difference in reading scores between females and males (i.e. the % by which females score higher than males)
6. The mean reading scores for children living in families in the bottom half of the parental occupation scale for the country
7. The mean reading scores for children living in families in the top half of the parental occupation scale for the country
8. The gap between the above two mean scores – this is a kind of socio-economic inequality measure

The first three rows of this table show the average, minimum and maximum scores in the countries included in the main analysis of the Report Card. The next row shows the statistics for Canada as a whole, exempting Nunavut, Northwest Territories and Yukon Territory. The remaining rows show the statistics for each region as defined in the PISA data set. After each region’s name, the number of children participating in the survey in that region is shown.

**Figure 15: Children of higher-earning parents have higher reading scores**

Children’s reading scores at 15 years old by parents’ occupation (2015)

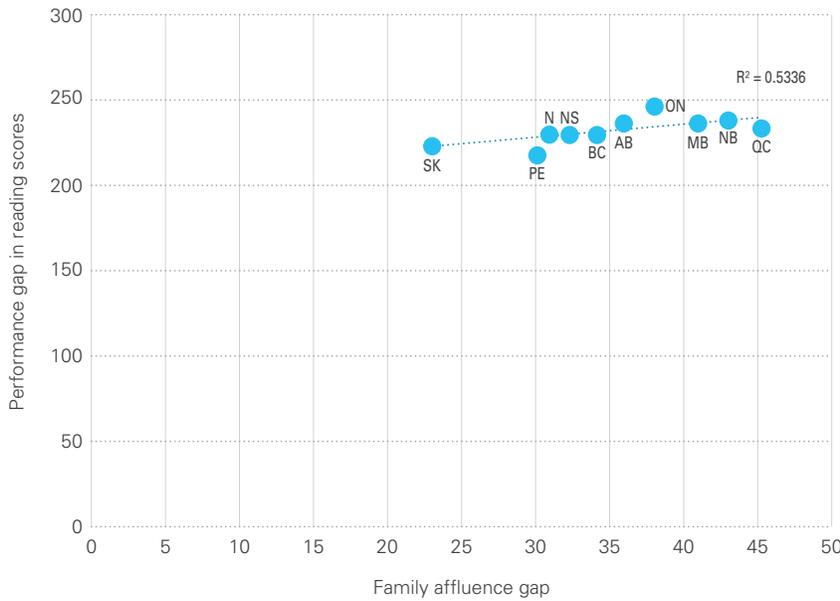


**Note:** The chart shows the mean scores for children whose parents were in the top and bottom half of the occupation classification in each country. The differences in means were statistically significant in all countries. The chart is ranked in order of the size of the gap from smallest to largest.

**Source:** PISA 2015.

**Figure 16: Provinces with a wider gap in children’s family affluence tend to have a wider reading inequality gap (2015)**

Pearson correlation = 0.73, p<0.05



family affluence tend to have a wider high school reading inequality gap (see figure 16).

**How much do schools matter to equality in secondary education?**

In most countries, parental occupation and earnings are more strongly linked to educational inequalities between high schools than are school factors. But children’s educational achievement can be substantially influenced by which school they attend (see figure 17). As in primary school, wider between-school differences in high school suggest that children may be more segregated on the basis of affluence or other characteristics that amplify educational inequalities.

At high school, Scandinavian countries tend to have low levels of this type of segregation, as do some East Asian and English-speaking countries including Canada. In Canada, about 82% of the inequality in reading scores is between children within high schools, and only around 18% of the inequality is between schools, indicating that fairness is comparatively well spread across schools. Canada ranks 10th in the extent of inequality explained by school differences. In most other countries, at least one-fifth or 20% of the variation in reading scores is related to differences between schools. But in Iceland, about 95% of the inequality in reading scores is between children within schools, and only about 5% is between schools. In France, Bulgaria, Hungary and the Netherlands, there is

more inequality between schools than within schools.

Canada improves between-school inequality in reading scores between primary school (accounting for 23% of variation in achievement with a rank of 22) and secondary school (accounting for 18% of variation with a rank of 10). In contrast, the Netherlands has relatively low variation between primary schools but has the most variation when children are in secondary school. This pattern might be expected as high school students tend to have more school choice.

As discussed in the section on primary education, between-school variation in education achievement and inequality is shaped both by broader conditions such as neighbourhood-level income inequality and by school policies.<sup>19</sup> Countries with greater socio-economic segregation between schools tend to have greater inequality of achievement based on a parent’s occupation (see figure 18).

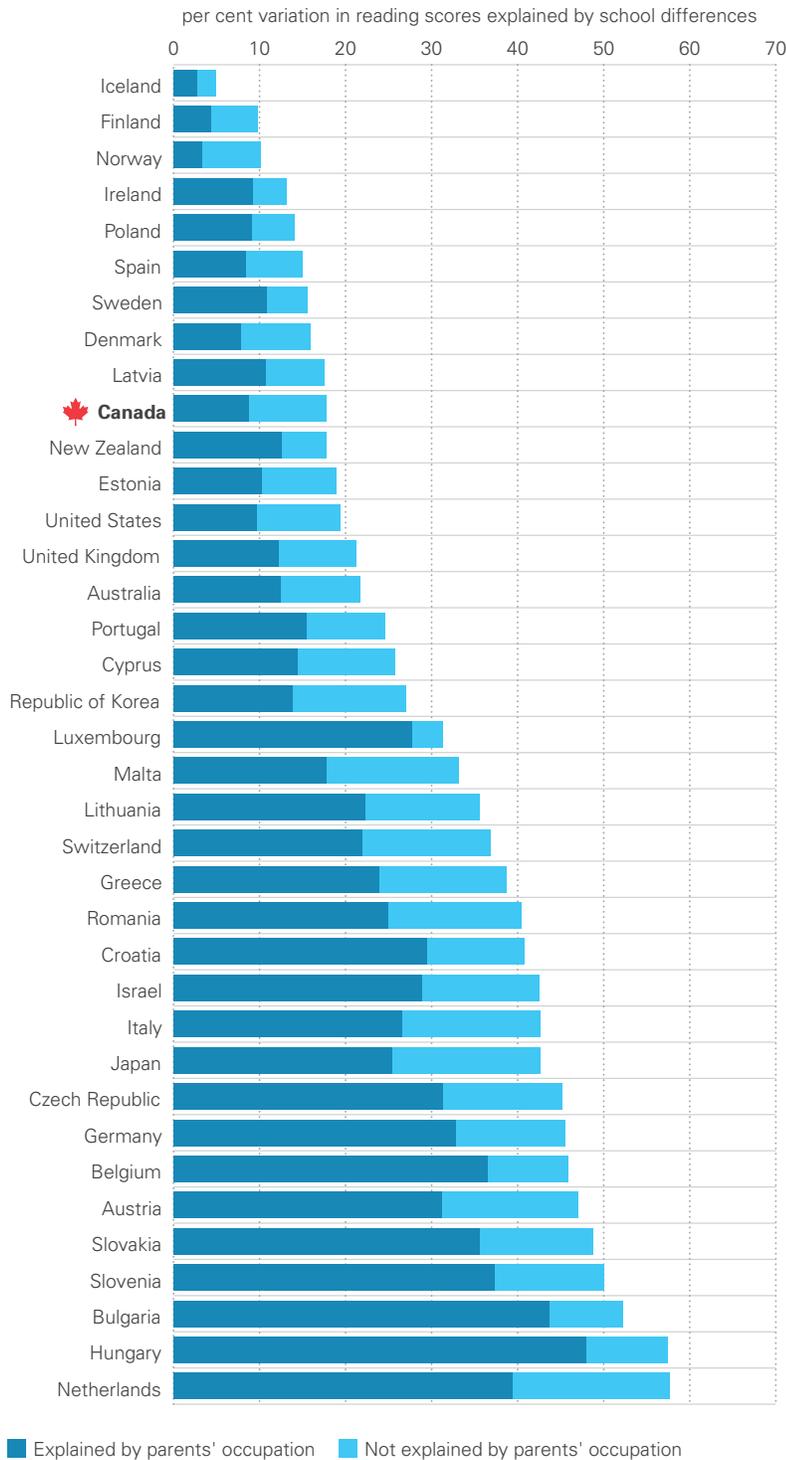
In Canada, the influence of parental affluence and the level of between-school differences are fairly small compared to peer countries; they are not negligible. But given the relatively high rate of within-school variation in Canada, it is important to look at the kinds of school policies and actions that can help close gaps between children in the same school.

Some countries make extensive use of ability grouping within schools, differentiating learning tracks that will prepare them for different destinations such as college, university, an

19 OECD (2016b). PISA 2015 Results (Volume II): Policies and Practices for Successful Schools. Paris: OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264267510-en>

**Figure 17: Some countries have much smaller differences in reading inequality between schools**

Share of variation in reading scores at 15 years old explained by school differences (2015)



apprenticeship program or directly into the workplace. This can take the form of 'streaming' into different classes or 'setting' children into different groups within classes. This practice may apply to all subjects or to selected subjects. Grouping children by their abilities is widely used in Canada (see figure 29). Over 86% of schools in Canada use some form of streaming in contrast to a country average of 45%, ranking 36 among 41 peer countries in the prevalence of streaming.

It might be argued that given Canada's education results, ability streaming might contribute to better outcomes, or at least make a limited contribution to inequalities. Supporters of streaming believe it allows schools to design a better course of studies for students in each track. Opponents say it increases inequalities without increasing achievement for lower achieving students.<sup>20</sup> Early ability streaming can give the effects of family circumstances disproportionate influence and limit future opportunities. Children from less privileged families tend to be over-represented in the lower streams. In Ontario, students in lower income neighbourhoods as well as Indigenous and Black students are more likely to be enrolled in applied streams<sup>xiv</sup>. More than 80% of Grade 9 students in the academic math stream meet the provincial standard, in contrast to 44% of students in the applied math stream. On the other hand, there is strong

20 Hanushek, E.A., L. Woessmann (2006): Does Educational Tracking Affect Performance and Inequality? Differences-in-Differences Evidence Across Countries. *Economic Journal*, Vol. 116, pp. C363 - C376.

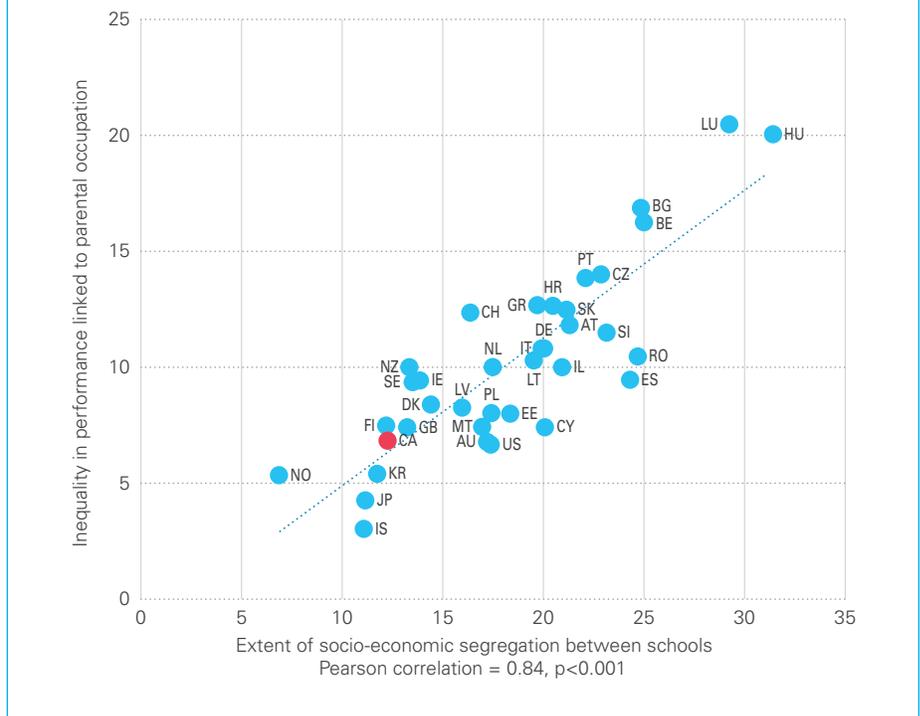
**Note:** The total length of each bar represents the percentage of total variance in test scores occurring between schools obtained from an empty multi-level model. As noted in the initial report on the PISA 2015 survey (OECD 2016a) 'In some countries, sub-units within schools were sampled instead of schools, and this may affect the estimation of the between-school variance components.' (p. 294).

**Source:** PISA 2015.

evidence that higher achievement does not suffer by including all students in blended ability classrooms.

Streaming often takes place at an age when many students are too young to show their potential (the age at which streaming starts varies from 10 years old in Austria and Germany to 16 years old in many countries including Australia, Estonia and the UK)<sup>21</sup>. In Canada, streaming starts as early as age 13 (Grade 9), based on achievement in Grade 8. As well, streaming is typically determined by the school’s recommendation. Even if the recommendation can be challenged by parents, children have little say, and it is a process that requires some effort, knowledge and resources. Typically, children have limited capacity to change tracks as they progress through high school. Some countries with good educational achievement and equality manage to do it without widespread ability streaming.

**Figure 18: Family affluence influences children’s test scores more where there is greater socio-economic segregation between schools (2015)**



**Note:** The vertical axis shows the R-squared from a regression of reading scores onto highest parental occupation. The horizontal axis shows the intra-class correlation coefficient from an empty multilevel model with mean school-level highest parental occupation as the independent variable.

**Source:** PISA 2015.

21 Brunello and Checchi (2007) Does school tracking affect equality of opportunity? *New international evidence. Economic Policy*, 22(52), 782-861

# HOW MIGRATION AFFECTS EDUCATIONAL EQUALITY

## Canada Ranks:

1<sup>ST</sup>

Children who move to a new country often face challenges that directly or indirectly affect their progress. These can include adapting to a different way of life, making new friends, learning a new language and integrating into a new educational system. Their family's economic circumstances may have been affected by their move. They could have experienced trauma before or during their journey. So how do child immigrants or the children of immigrants fare educationally in rich countries? We answer this question using reading scores for 15-year-olds in 23 countries where at least 5% of children are immigrant students. We use three OECD categories to define immigration status<sup>22</sup>:

1. Non-immigrant students are children who have at least one parent who was born in the country, irrespective of whether the child was born there.
1. First-generation immigrant students are foreign-born children whose parents are also both foreign-born.
2. Second-generation immigrant students are children who were born in the country and whose parents are both foreign-born.

In Canada, more than a third of students are from families where both parents are from another country. Yet Canada is one of the few countries where migrant children achieve at a level similar to other children.

Figure 19 shows the percentage of children in each country who have not reached a basic level of reading proficiency (in the test language) at 15 years old, by immigration status. In most countries, first-generation immigrant children have significantly lower reading scores than non-immigrant children. However, the difference between these groups is not statistically significant in Canada, Australia, Estonia and New Zealand. Second-generation immigrant children also have significantly lower reading scores than non-immigrant children in 15 countries, while in Canada and Australia they do better than their non-immigrant peers. Overall, around 10% of migrant children in Canada do not reach basic reading proficiency. As well, first-generation immigrant students in Canada report a stronger sense of belonging at school than non-immigrant students. This is opposite the pattern in most OECD countries except Australia. Canada also has the highest number of first-generation immigrant students who expect to earn a university degree (80%).

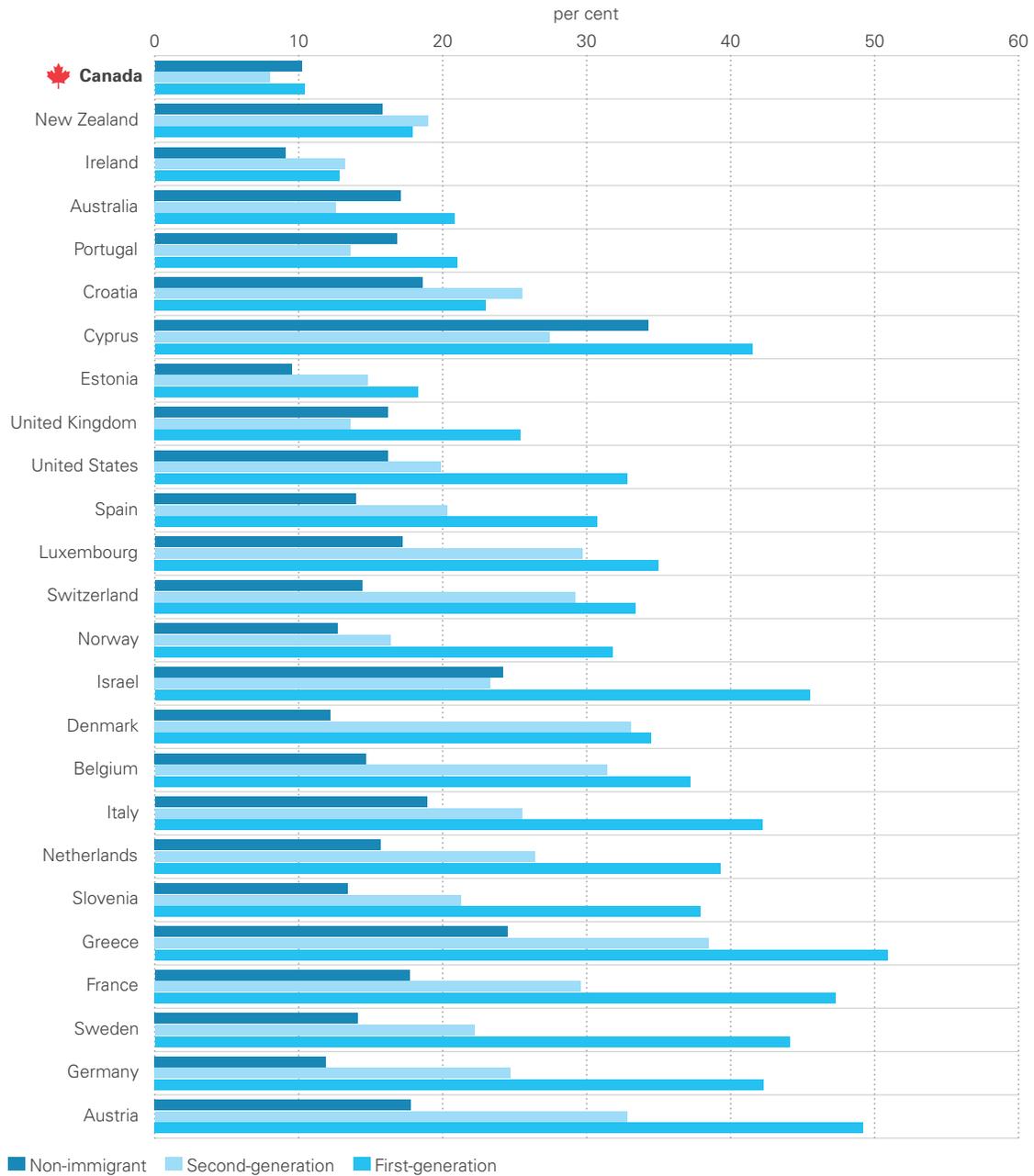
These results may reflect different patterns of migration. For example, the OECD identifies Canada, Australia and New Zealand as 'settlement

countries' where immigration is part of the heritage of the country. Many immigrants are highly educated and the majority are economically affluent. Canada's education systems also work hard to integrate children with different languages and countries of origin through special programs and a focus on inclusion. Canadian education systems typically respect the rights of children by enrolling students whose migration status is precarious, though there are some exclusions in practice. On the other hand, according to the OECD, Austria, Belgium, France and Germany are long-standing destination countries but have more lower-educated migrants. Greece, Italy and Spain have experienced substantial levels of immigration in recent years, particularly refugees and asylum-seekers.

22 OECD (2016a) page 243.

**Figure 19: Children’s migration status has far less influence on their reading proficiency in some countries**

Percentage of 15-year-olds by migrant status who had not reached Level 2 proficiency in reading (2015)



**Note:** The chart shows percentages for each group of children by migration, in countries where at least 5 per cent of children were not born in the country. Countries are ranked on absolute gaps between non-immigrant and first-generation migrants.

**Source:** PISA 2015.

# A GENDER GAP IN EDUCATION

Canada Ranks:

13<sup>TH</sup>

Top performer:

PORTUGAL

There are differences in educational achievement between girls and boys in every country. Gender gaps emerge in the early years<sup>23</sup> and they tend to persist or grow across different stages in education.<sup>24</sup> These gaps can be different for different subjects. In all countries, girls have higher mean reading scores than boys, and in all countries gender inequality widens between primary and secondary school (see figure 20). Eight of the 10 most gender-unequal countries at Grade 4 are also among the most unequal when children are 15 years old.

In Canada, the reading gender gap widens from 2.2% to 5.1% in favour of girls between primary and secondary school. The size of the gap in Canada in secondary school ranks 13th, in the middle among peer countries and slightly better than the average of 6.2%. Girls score higher than boys in all Canadian provinces (see figure 14). The percentage by which girls do better than boys in reading scores ranges from 3.6% in Newfoundland and Labrador to 7.3% in Prince Edward Island. Prince Edward Island is the only province that

**Figure 20: Girls outperform boys in reading in all countries**

The percentage by which girls score higher than boys in reading at Grade 4 and at 15 years old (2015)

Country	Grade 4 (PIRLS)	15 years old (PISA)	Gender Gap Rank
Ireland	2.1%	2.3%	1
Belgium	2.1%	3.3%	2
Italy	1.4%	3.4%	3
Portugal	(0.3%)	3.4%	4
USA	1.5%	4.1%	5
Germany	2.1%	4.2%	6
Spain	1.6%	4.2%	7
Austria	1.1%	4.3%	8
Denmark	2.4%	4.5%	9
UK	2.7%	4.5%	10
Netherlands	1.9%	4.8%	11
Israel	2.5%	4.9%	12
<b>Canada</b> 	<b>2.2%</b>	<b>5.1%</b>	<b>13</b>
Hungary	2.3%	5.4%	14
Czech Republic	1.9%	5.5%	15
France	1.5%	6.0%	16
Poland	3.2%	6.0%	17
Australia	4.0%	6.5%	18
New Zealand	4.2%	6.5%	19
Norway	3.9%	8.1%	20
Slovakia	1.7%	8.2%	21
Sweden	2.8%	8.2%	22
Lithuania	3.8%	8.6%	23
Slovenia	3.5%	8.9%	24
Latvia	3.1%	9.0%	25
Finland	3.9%	9.2%	26
Malta	4.7%	9.9%	27
Bulgaria	2.9%	11.5%	28

**Note:** The table shows the extent to which girls did better than boys in reading tests for the countries that took part in both PIRLS 2016 and PISA 2015. The two surveys test different reading skills so are not directly comparable, but it appears that the gap tends to widen as children get older. The table shows the percentage by which girls score higher than boys in reading in each country and stage, calculated as  $100 * (\text{Girls' mean} - \text{Boys' mean}) / \text{Boys' mean}$ . The gap is expressed as a percentage based on the difference between the two scores divided by the boys' score. For example, if the mean score for girls was 550 and the mean score for boys was 500 then girls would be doing 10-per-cent better than boys. All differences were statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) except in Portugal at Grade 4. The shading shows the countries in the lowest (light blue), middle (medium blue) and highest (dark blue) third of the rankings among the countries that took part in both surveys. The gender gaps for other countries participating in PISA were: Japan (2.6 per cent); Mexico (3.8 per cent); Romania (4.1 per cent); Luxembourg (4.5 per cent); Switzerland (5.3 per cent); Croatia (5.6 per cent); Turkey (6.7 per cent); Estonia (5.5 per cent); Greece (8.3 per cent); Rep. of Korea (8.1 per cent); Iceland (9.0 per cent); Cyprus (12.4 per cent).

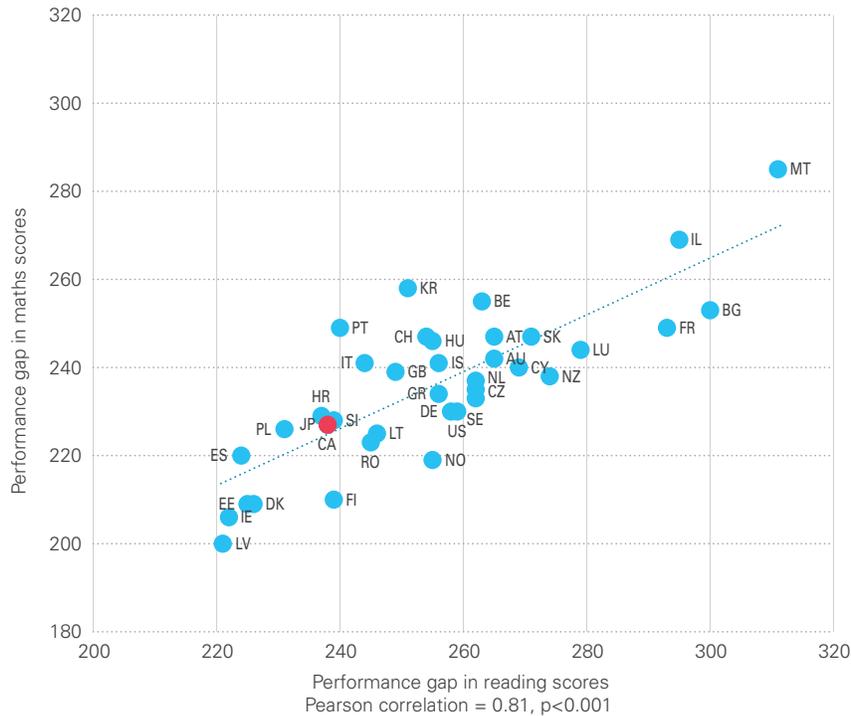
In Canada, PIRLS does not cover the entire country: SK, MB and PEI do not participate in PIRLS.

**Source:** PIRLS 2016 and PISA 2015.

23 Mensah, F. & Kiernan, K. (2010). Gender differences in educational attainment: influences of the family environment. *British Educational Research Journal*, 36(2), 239-260.

24 Bradbury, B., Corak, M., Waldfogel, J., & Washbrook, E. (2015). *Too Many Children Left Behind: The U.S. Achievement Gap in Comparative Perspective*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

**Figure 21: Inequalities in reading and math are fairly similar across countries (15 years old) (2015)**



**Note:** The chart shows the gaps between children at the 10th and 90th percentile in mathematics and reading.

**Source:** PISA 2015.

has greater gender inequality than the Report Card average (though the P.E.I. sample size is small so we can't be very confident about this).

To what extent are these gender differences unique to reading?

- For mathematics, boys in most countries tend to score higher than girls in high school. However, these differences are significant in just over half of the countries covered in this report. There is no math gender gap in Canada.
- For science, there is a more mixed picture. In some countries, boys do better than girls. In other countries, girls do better than boys. On average across countries there is

a relatively small gender gap of a few score points in favour of boys in high school. This is also the case in Canada.

The gender gap in reading is important because reading is a fundamental gateway skill for achievement in many other academic subjects. There is a gender gap in high school graduation in Canada, with only 84% of males graduating in contrast to 91% of females<sup>25</sup>. Furthermore, girls tend to have higher expectations than boys of gaining a university degree in most rich countries, translating to a higher rate of participation in higher education among girls than boys<sup>25</sup>. Various reasons have been proposed for these gaps,

## How do inequalities differ for reading and math?

This report focuses on children's reading scores because proficiency in reading is a necessary skill for studying many other subjects at school and for life. Would the picture have been any different if we had focused on mathematics? Comparing the results for reading and for math, the pattern is similar in most countries. But in some countries, there are equality differences across subjects (see figure 21).

- Canada has fairly similar levels of inequality in reading (238 points) and mathematics (227 points).
- Countries that are above and to the left of the line, such as Korea and Portugal, have higher inequality in mathematics than reading.
- Countries that are below and to the right of the line, such as Finland, Latvia and Norway, have higher inequality in reading than mathematics.

Gender differences are larger in reading than in math.

The relationship between parental occupation and math is similar to the relationship between parental occupation and reading.

including the internalization of gender roles and norms by children as they grow up, curriculum, teaching style, the balance of female and male teachers and labour market segregation<sup>26</sup>. But it is clear that closing the gender gap needs to start very early.

<sup>25</sup> ECD (2017) Education at a Glance 2017: OECD Indicators. Paris: OECD.

<sup>26</sup> Hadjar, A., Krolak-Schwerdt, S., Priem, K. & Glock, S. (2014) Gender and educational achievement. Educational Research, 56(2), 117-125.

# THE ECHO OF INEQUALITY: FUTURE EXPECTATIONS

Canada Ranks:

9<sup>TH</sup>

Top performer:

REPUBLIC OF KOREA

Students in the rich countries of the world are on unequal footing as they near the end of compulsory schooling and contemplate the future.

Asked what level of education they expect to complete, at age 15 many children have ideas not only about what they hope to do in the future, but also what they might realistically expect to do, given their circumstances and educational progress. Many children in Canada, close to 80%, say they expect to complete tertiary education. Expectations range from less than 20% in Germany and the Netherlands to just under 90% in Korea.

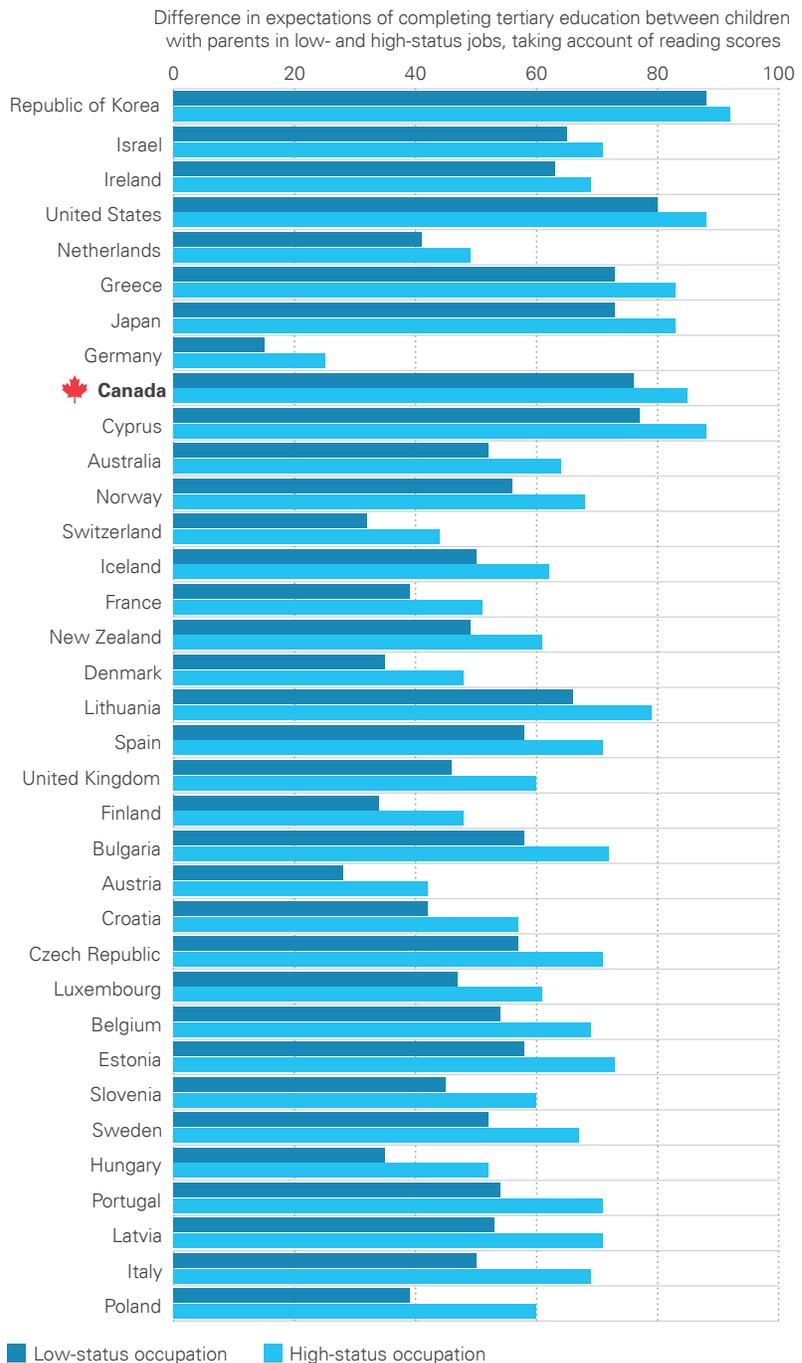
Aspirations and expectations are shaped by what came before the end of high school, and the horizons of opportunity provided by further education and employment. Family affluence affects expectations. Gender continues to exert an influence. While some countries establish the right of young people to further education, Canada's education legislation does

**Note:** The bars show the expectations of completing tertiary education for children of low- and high-earning parents in each country, from a regression model controlling for reading scores. Countries are ranked in ascending order of the size of the difference between the two groups.

**Source:** PISA 2015.

**Figure 22: In some countries there is little difference in children's expectations of further education despite differences in wealth (when their reading scores are similar)**

Expectation gap between children with low-earning parents and those with high-earning parents with the same reading scores (2015)



not. Post-secondary education policies affecting pricing and location affect expectations. Some policies that aim to reduce costs and other barriers are effective; but some can actually reinforce inequality gaps in education by benefitting the already advantaged.

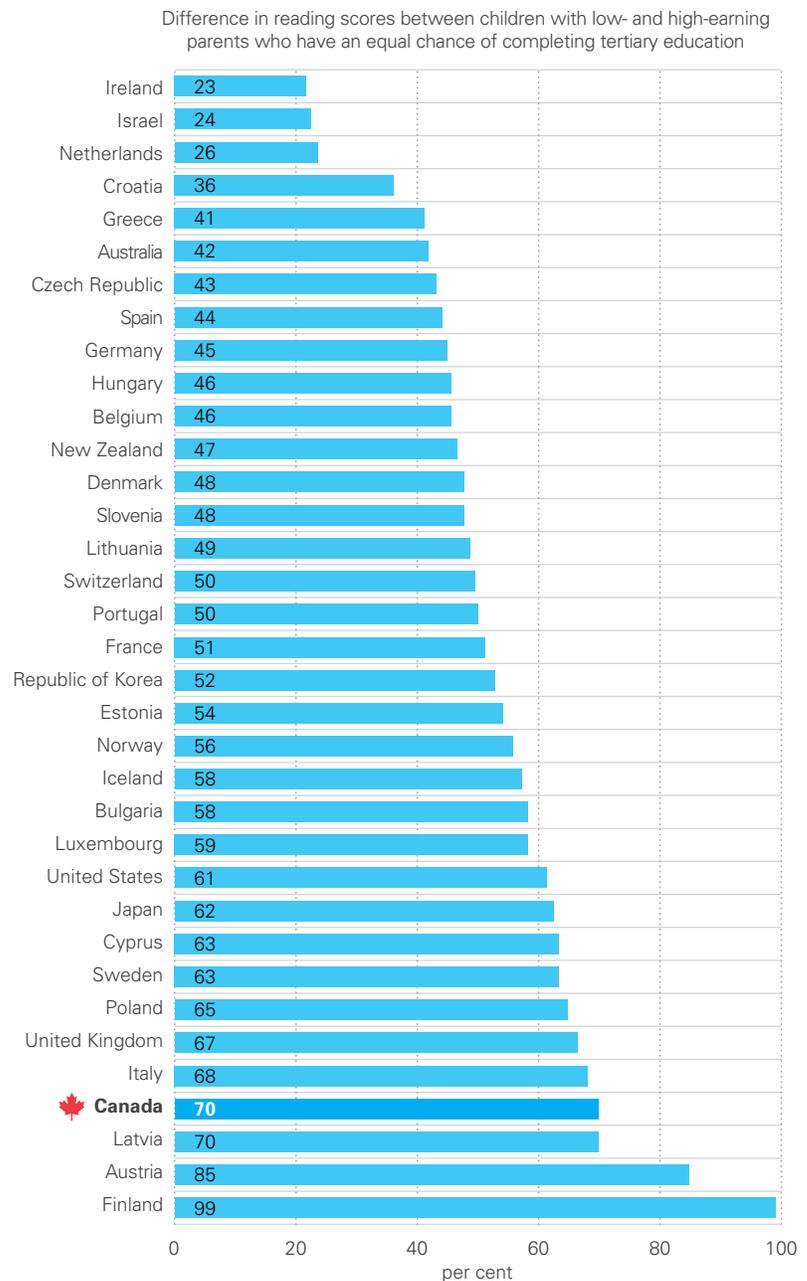
### How much do family circumstances matter to children's expectations for further education?

Beyond the cost of further education, the employment benefits it produces and other features of how it is provided, variations in children's expectations to participate are rooted in established cultural and social differences. The shaping of aspirations starts very early in life. In every country, children with high-earning parents are significantly more likely to expect to complete some form of tertiary education than children with low-earning parents (see figure 22). But the extent to which family circumstances matter varies between countries. In Canada, family affluence has less influence than in many peer countries, but it matters. In 2016, 60% of postsecondary students in the country came from the wealthier 40% of families. To some extent this can be anticipated because children from higher earning parents tend to be doing better at school.

But that is not the whole story. In all countries, children of low-earning parents are less likely to say that they expect to complete further education even if they score as highly as their peers with high-earning parents. Canada ranks 9th among 36 countries in the size of the expectations gap related to family affluence. In Canada, 85% of children from more affluent

**Figure 23: Difference in reading scores between children of different levels of family affluence with similar expectations of completing tertiary education**

Average reading score gap between children of low- and high-earning parents with the same expectations of tertiary education (2015)



**Note:** The bars show the reading score gap in expectations of completing tertiary education between children of low- and high-earning parents in each country.

**Source:** PISA 2015.

families expect to continue their education compared to 76% of the less affluent, a difference of about 10 percentage points. This gap ranges from only around 4 percentage points in the Republic of Korea to 20 percentage points in Poland.

In Canada, even children with considerably lower reading scores in families with lower affluence have higher expectations of participating in tertiary education than in most countries - Canada ranks 4th based on how much reading score differences

affect expectations (see figure 23). This is another indication that affluence has a weaker influence on expectations in Canada than in many peer countries.

### **Girls and boys have different expectations**

In addition to differing expectations for further education based on family background, expectations are different for boys and girls. In 30 of 36 countries, girls are significantly more likely than boys to expect to complete tertiary education. A gender gap is also found in

enrolment in tertiary education, where the rate in Canada is 69% for males in contrast to 95% for females.<sup>xvi</sup>

In relative terms, Canada generates fairly high expectations and a lot of post-secondary students. To reduce barriers further, both post-secondary policies and school policies such as within-school ability grouping should be considered for their impact on children's equitable opportunities, aspirations and expectations.

# BETTER IS ALWAYS POSSIBLE

Every child has the right to education that not only equips them for the future but helps realize their rights to optimal mental and physical health, freedom from violence, participation and dignity. Every child has equal rights to opportunities to develop to their fullest potential. Every child should be able to dream and to achieve their dreams. There are many things that Canada's education system does well to help fulfil these rights. Better is possible, but will require actions inside and outside of Canada's education systems to address growing threats and to seize big opportunities. How can we produce fairer learning opportunities while advancing well-being for every child?

In our search for answers we looked

at some milestones on the path children take from preschool to the end of compulsory schooling and their educational expectations. The international surveys of educational achievement and inequality do not give the full picture of education – far from it - but they point to where some problems fester and where some solutions lie.

Canada's children start education with uneven access to preschool and inequality in readiness to learn. But despite moderately wide and growing income inequality and a high rate of child poverty in Canada, inequalities in education scores are comparatively smaller than in many peer countries, and this holds across the provinces

with their distinct education systems. Parental affluence has less influence than in many other countries. There is a fairly wide and persistent gender gap in favour of girls, but most migrant children do well in Canada's schools. Many children expect to continue their education beyond secondary school.

But national and provincial averages paper over the stark inequities for different groups of children. In Canada, too many Indigenous children are left behind. Children in racialized ethnic groups, children and youth in care, children with disabilities and children who carry the burdens of poverty and other life challenges also have equal rights to be included and nurtured for their unique potentials.

## HOW TO MAKE THE POSSIBLE ACHIEVABLE

Closing Canada's education gaps is possible. It should be pursued not with an exclusive focus on achievement and equality in a few core subjects, but also on broader learning and well-being outcomes. Closing the gaps is more than possible; it is a critical goal to create a fairer, more sustainable and prosperous society. And there is no time for complacency, because there are threats to the relative success of Canada's education results and critical features of Canada's public education system that need to be protected and further promoted. There are also some big opportunities to be even better.



### **GROWING THREATS**

**INCOME INEQUALITY**  
**SCHOOL STRATIFICATION**  
**POST-SECONDARY STRATIFICATION**  
**SHADOW EDUCATION**



### **BIG OPPORTUNITIES**

**REDUCE INCOME INEQUALITY AND CHILD POVERTY**  
**GUARANTEE HIGH-QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE TO EVERY CHILD**  
**CLOSE THE GAPS BETWEEN CHILDREN**  
**EXPAND LEARNING FOR THE FUTURE**  
**MAKE LEARNING SAFER AND HEALTHIER**

## GROWING THREATS?

We don't have a crystal ball to predict the future, but there are signals of possible threats to sustaining and improving fairness in education that we can lean against now.

### Income inequality

We hear much about income inequality today, and most Canadians are very concerned about it. Why is it important to a child's education? Income inequality is about more than poverty. It is a marker of how fairness in opportunity is distributed across society; not only between top and bottom incomes but also between the top and the middle and the middle and bottom. The evidence is clear – the higher the income inequality in a country, the lower the rate of social mobility. Income inequality creates a type of social 'stickiness'. With wider income inequality, the children of the wealthy are more likely to stay wealthy, the children of the poor are more likely to stay poor, and the children in the middle are equally as likely to fall down or rise up the income ladder. Today, income inequality in Canada is moderate and social mobility is significantly more fluid compared to countries like the U.S.A., U.K. and France. On the other hand, social mobility in Canada is stickier than in Norway, Finland and Denmark. Income inequality in Canada seems to play a role in dampening children's well-being and sustaining wide inequalities in many different aspects of children's lives, particularly in health and safety<sup>27</sup>.

Education has been called the 'great equalizer'. And there is good evidence including in this Report Card that Canada's education systems, founded on the principles of quality and equity,

work against income inequality and its side-effects. But if income inequality continues to grow, how might it erode the equalizing effects of education? The growth in income inequality in recent years may be a reason why Canada's progress to reduce the overall educational achievement gap seems to have stalled. In Canada, parental

affluence accounts for about half the disparities in educational achievement in high school. It also influences expectations and participation in further education. If income inequality continues to widen in Canada, the influence of affluence may increase, along with educational disparities. Income inequality may amplify

### *If I were Premier,*

*Let me get straight to the point.*

*We live in a time where university acceptances are competitive beyond belief. Getting a 90% overall average over the course of high school may mean a mere 20% chance that a student may get into top programs of their choice at Canadian universities.*

*I have noticed that this has created an ultra-competitive environment, where students may spend countless hours studying and stressing just to "boost" their average a couple of percentage points. This has contributed to an immense epidemic of mental health issues. The repercussions have been horrific. I have seen many people, including my close friends, break down and lose hours of sleep, night after night. I have even seen some develop anxiety and even suicidal thoughts due to the stress that this has caused them. Too many students have been affected by this for it to be considered a small issue.*

*To address this issue, I co-founded an organization. In our first 6 months, we received funding and have hosted workshops where we connected students with appropriate strategies to deal with school stress and with speakers and mental health professionals in our community. I strongly believe that if passionate, motivated people come together, we can solve the student mental wellness crisis.*

*Yash, age 17, Ontario*

*UNICEF Canada invites young people to write "If I were Premier" letters to share their experiences and solutions as part of the One Youth campaign.*

27 See UNICEF Report Cards 13 and 14 at [www.unicef.ca](http://www.unicef.ca)

educational inequality by increasing school segregation as neighbourhoods become increasingly divided by wealth, and by widening the private investment gap in education.

Widening income inequality also seems to be harmful to children at the top end of the education gap. There is emerging evidence that it is contributing to a fear among middle-income families of falling backward<sup>xvii</sup>. Income inequality seems to fuel a more competitive, ‘winner take all’ society. Not only does it stretch the opportunity gap for lower income groups, dimming aspirations; the fear of sliding down the income ladder among middle class families can trigger an intense, stressful pursuit for educational credentials that differentiate from the crowd<sup>xviii</sup>. This may be why we see a rise in Canada of the “concerted cultivation” of children, such as heavily scheduling children into extracurricular activities and tutoring; placing pressure on children to narrow their educational focus and to compete for grades to win a spot in higher education programs; and limiting the time and space for free play and risk-taking that is crucial to learning and development.

### **School stratification**

The growth of economic polarization between neighbourhoods in Canada might promote more school segregation, dividing children into schools according to affluence. Polarization is the geographic effect in which neighbourhoods become less mixed in economic class and increasingly concentrated into higher and lower incomes. Income inequality is a critical driver of polarization. Historically, urban areas in Canada were marked by relatively low rates of polarization.

As a result, schools were highly mixed by income (and typically by ethnicity, religion and other demographic factors). As well, public education has raised and distributed funding across schools to create a more equalizing effect than in many countries.

If income inequality and neighbourhood polarization continue to rise, there may be increased stratification of children’s schooling between and within schools. This may amplify educational inequalities. It matters because, as the Report Card shows, concentrating lower-achieving students and higher-achieving students in different schools contributes to lower overall achievement and greater educational inequality, among other negative impacts on children’s well-being.

Beyond neighbourhood differences in income, and the resulting segregation of neighbourhood schools, rising income inequality can create more demand for other forms of segregation.

Income inequality is associated with wider gaps in parents’ financial investments in their children. If income inequality widens, a wider “private fundraising gap” can also stretch education gaps between children and between schools. Fundraising is a norm in many Canadian publicly funded schools. In Ontario in 2018, 99% of elementary and 87% of secondary schools reported raising money for a range of initiatives<sup>xix</sup>. Fundraising often funds early learning, improved technology, arts enrichment and extra-curricular activities. Private fundraising for schools might increase school segregation by conferring more learning enrichment opportunities on schools where more affluent children

are pooled, and in more affluent neighbourhoods. Fundraising is linked to family income, so students attending the highest fundraising schools are also more likely to come from wealthier families. A study by People for Education found that in Ontario, elementary schools with lower rates of family poverty raise twice the amount of private fundraising than schools with higher rates of poverty<sup>xx</sup>. The top 10% of schools by family income raised 37 times the bottom 10%. The per-pupil difference in 2018 averaged \$27 in schools where there was higher child poverty compared to \$44 with lower poverty. The study found that the private fundraising gap seems to be growing, despite the introduction of provincial fundraising guidelines in 2012. So children in schools with more concentrated child poverty tend to start school with a gap in competency, their schools are less able to provide enrichment to help close the gap, and their families may not be able to provide these opportunities outside of school. School funding formulae may be an antidote to between-school as well as within-school differences in order to address different local needs and challenges.

Private schooling can, in some circumstances, contribute to segregation and educational inequality. The balance of schools managed by public bodies and private bodies varies widely across rich countries. Canada’s Constitution and all provinces and territories allow the establishment of private or independent schools. Almost one in ten schools in Canada are private (see figure 24) though the rate varies significantly across provinces, as does the provision of public funds to private schools and

**Figure 24: Key characteristics of school systems that can influence education equality (2012 and 2015)**

	PISA coverage rate (a)	First selection in the education system	Number of school types or programmes available to 15-year-olds	Within-school ability grouping (b)	Grade repetition (c)	Private school enrolment (d)
Country	%	Student's age	N	% of 15-year-olds	%	%
Australia	90.6	16	1	88.1	7.1	43.7
Austria	83.4	10	4	16.4	15.2	12.6
Belgium	92.9	12	4	28.4	34.0	w
Bulgaria	80.6	15 (e)	3	26.3	4.8	1.2
<b>Canada </b>	<b>83.5</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>86.8</b>	<b>5.7</b>	<b>9.7</b>
Chile	79.8	16	3	27.1	24.6	63.1
Croatia	90.8	14	1	22.9	1.6	2.3
Cyprus	94.9	15	2	27.0	4.7	16.0
Czech Republic	93.5	11	6	28.9	4.8	8.2
Denmark	89.0	16	1	25.2	3.4	23.2
Estonia	92.8	16	1	38.1	4.0	4.2
Finland	97.3	16	1	53.2	3.0	4.5
France	91.0	15	3	24.3	22.1	21.0
Germany	96.1	10	4	30.0	18.1	7.3
Greece	91.1	15	2	11.6	5.0	4.9
Hungary	89.6	11	3	35.1	9.5	18.0
Iceland	93.3	16	1	22.6	1.1	0.6
Ireland	96.5	15	4	95.9	7.2	57.3
Israel	93.7	15	2	97.8	9.0	m
Italy	80.3	14	4	13.1	15.1	4.1
Japan	94.7	15	2	53.6	0.0	31.8
Korea. Rep.	91.7	15	3	57.8	4.7	34.7
Latvia	88.8	16	5	18.7	5.0	2.0
Lithuania	90.2	m	5	51.0	2.5	2.3
Luxembourg	87.6	13	4	71.8	30.9	15.6
Malta	97.7	15	3	75.5	7.0	41.8
Mexico	61.7	15	3	46.9	15.8	12.5
Netherlands	95.1	12	7	70.8	20.1	60.1
New Zealand	90.2	16	1	89.9	4.9	6.6
Norway	91.3	16	1	15.7	0.0	1.9
Poland	90.9	16	1	38.0	5.3	3.5
Portugal	87.6	15	3	11.6	31.2	5.5
Romania	m	16	2	46.2	5.9	1.1
Slovak Republic	89.2	11	5	34.6	6.5	11.6
Slovenia	92.8	14	3	34.7	1.9	2.6
Spain	90.9	16	1	40.3	31.3	31.3
Sweden	93.6	16	1	21.4	4.0	17.9
Switzerland	96.2	12	4	62.3	20.0	6.1
Turkey	69.9	11	3	30.5	10.9	4.8
United Kingdom	84.0	16	1	99.8	2.8	55.8
United States	83.5	16	1	82.6	11.0	7.7

**Note:**

(a) These figures are the coverage rate for participation in the PISA survey at 15 years old.

(b) Percentage of 15-year-olds enrolled in schools that practice ability grouping for some or all subjects.

(c) Percentage of students who repeated a grade at least once in primary or secondary school.

(d) Based on the OECD definition of private schools: "schools that are directly or indirectly managed by a non-government organisation, such as a church, trade union, business, or other private institution".

(e) Starting age at some vocational schools is 14.

**Source:**

Private school enrolment: OECD (2016) PISA 2015 Results (Volume II): Policies and Practices for Successful Schools

Enrolment of 15-year-olds: OECD (2016) PISA 2015 Results (Volume I): Excellence and Equity in Education

Grade repetition, programme orientation: OECD (2016), self-reported by students

Ability grouping: Results based on reports by school principals in PISA 2015 data collection (OECD)

First age at selection in the education system and number of education programmes: OECD (2013), PISA 2012 Results: What Makes Schools Successful, Table IV.2.5?

the criteria they must meet, such as a cap on tuition. Independent schools can forego subsidies and charge much higher tuition and/or other fees. However, not all private schools charge tuition and select by affluence. So at the scale of countries and within some provinces, there is little apparent relationship between the proportion of private schools and levels of educational achievement and equality. But the effects can be visible at the neighbourhood level. An increase in private schooling might fuel public school responses to increase school choice and create “magnet” schools. Increasing the segregation of schools of any type can reinforce social inequality especially if they pool children by family affluence. Fewer children would have an opportunity to do well in school if any form of segregation by affluence increases.

### Post-secondary stratification

Many Canadian children participate in further education. Fairness in further education is a combination of many factors related to family affluence, gender, features of compulsory schooling and features of post-secondary education and the labour market beyond. Canada’s post-secondary system has, since the post-war period, been relatively open and accessible. One outcome of the emphasis on fairness of opportunity in post-secondary education, building on the equalizing role of compulsory education, has been a relatively high level of social mobility. In contrast, in three of the countries with the lowest rates of social mobility among rich countries (the U.S.A., the U.K. and France) post-secondary education is

highly stratified by the presence of exclusive schools. Highly selective post-secondary institutions can replicate affluence and advantage in societies with high income inequality.

There are signals of an emerging threat to fairness in post-secondary learning and future opportunity in Canada. Post-secondary costs are rising and specialized schools are emerging that have much higher tuition. This is related to the rise in demand for education credentials in a changing labour market. Over the last two decades, tuition costs for undergraduate education have risen in real terms in most provinces, with children and their families contributing more to the cost as governments decrease the contributions that enhanced equitable opportunity in the past. And with rising competition for credentials, stratification is further driven by pricing (tuition) in post-graduate studies. For example, prices for professional degrees have increased to Canadian averages of \$23,474 (dentistry), \$14,780 (medicine) and \$13,332 (law)<sup>xxi</sup>. Although such programs constitute a minority of university students, prices have also escalated in broader-based advanced degree programs. The pan-Canadian average for a regular MBA in 2018-2019 is \$30,570, with significant variation ranging from \$2,382 in Newfoundland and Labrador to \$44,759 in Ontario. While higher admission grades increasingly winnow students from prestigious programs, the ability to pay is also increasingly sifting out even the most academically ambitious students. These trends might contribute to greater educational and income inequality.

More stratification in post-secondary education can have a ‘trickle-down’ effect on primary and secondary education (and increasingly on preschool opportunity). At one end of the gap, affluent families competitively pursue advantage and differentiation in credentials. At the other end, putting further education further out of reach may dampen not only expectations but also high school graduation – a trend more evident in the U.S.A. where higher education credentials are out of reach for many, and having lower education credentials isn’t perceived to be worth the investment because they don’t contribute to social mobility<sup>xxii</sup>

### Shadow education

The rise of “shadow education”, privately paid and delivered supplementary education such as tutoring, is coincident with a rise in private education over the past two decades. It seems to arise from the educational competition propelled by widening income inequality<sup>xxiii</sup>. In countries with greater income equality there tend to be lower rates of private supplementary education (5-9% in Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark) compared to higher rates in countries with greater income inequality such as Canada, U.S.A. and the U.K. (17-18 %)<sup>xxiv</sup>. By and large, parents seem motivated more by seeking advantage than by dissatisfaction with public education. For many it is an affordable option in lieu of the ability to pay for private school to enhance their children’s competitiveness. Private supplemental education can be one form of “concerted cultivation” of children which also extends to other types of extra-curricular activities.

Private tutoring itself is stratified into a range of programs and costs, appealing to middle and high income families. The primary clients of private tutoring in Canada are students who are already achieving well, and there is a lack of evidence that tutoring improves educational outcomes, so it may not yet be having an impact

on educational inequality. More time spent learning does not always yield better results. However, middle- and high-income families are collectively fuelling a massive growth in this billion-dollar business. It is worth monitoring whether shadow education will cast a longer shadow, deepening the divide between children in low and high family

affluence and posing a threat to the goal of social and educational equity. As well, with about one in five of Canada's children enrolled in tutoring, there may be some opportunity cost in other pursuits that could foster children's learning and development<sup>xxv</sup>.

## BIG OPPORTUNITIES!

Social and economic policies as well as school policies can play a powerful role to weaken the influence of poverty and inequality on educational achievement. There are initiatives underway and actions we can take to boost what is working to promote equality, counter growing threats and create well-rounded opportunities and well-being among children and youth.

### Reduce income inequality and child poverty

Setting bigger goals to cut child poverty and limit income inequality will reduce childhood inequalities including the education gap in Canada - from the start. More than 1.2 million children live in poverty, and the rate of child poverty is highest among 0-5 year-olds, in the most formative years. The Canada Child Benefit together with provincial and territorial poverty reduction plans seem to be loosening the grip of child poverty. The Government of Canada has set a target to reduce poverty by at least 50% by 2030 – a big step forward to join the provincial and territorial governments in a common vision of dignity and opportunity for all. As children are among the poorest groups in Canada, UNICEF Canada believes we can cut child poverty by 60% by 2030, through a “Dignity Dividend”<sup>28</sup> to boost the incomes of the poorest

families with children. Implementing a human rights based National Housing Strategy with equitable investments in Indigenous communities is also a critical step to help equalize children's learning and development by ensuring access to adequate housing. By 2030, no child in Canada should be homeless.

### Guarantee high-quality early childhood education and care to every child

For a step-change toward closing educational inequalities and countering income inequality, every child in Canada should be able to access to early childhood education and care, including those with disabilities and special needs, irrespective of their parents' employment, migration status or income. Indigenous children have the right to equal access to services that are culturally appropriate. When children in some families benefit

from preschool that others can't afford, inequality grows. Canada's gap in preschool learning seems to help explain the wide reading gap in Canada's primary schools.

The Lancet (2016) found that by failing to invest in early child education and development, countries spend considerably more on education and health than they would otherwise need to. If more children started school ready to learn, public education investments could be redirected from dealing with disparities to more positive learning opportunities for all. It is more expensive to intervene after the effects of early adversity have become embedded. As well, increasing access to early child education in Canada would help lift families with young children out of poverty.

The Multilateral and Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Frameworks

28 See <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/afb2018>

build on the foundation for high-quality early child learning. To close the development gap child start with on their education journey, Canada's governments should join their peers to offer universal early learning and care supported by sustained funding of at least 1% GDP or 6% of their budgets by 2030. Every province and territory should offer full-day kindergarten to all children ages 4 and 5. Every child below age 5 should have access to high quality childcare/early learning programs.

### **Close the gaps between children**

From early child learning to further education, there are some groups of children disproportionately left behind. It has been difficult to make progress to close the overall education achievement gap (measured by international surveys), though there is progress for some groups of children. For instance, the Ontario Ministry of Education has adopted the bold goal to make its education system the most equitable in the world, and is narrowing the achievement gaps between genders and for children with special needs. Closing the gaps is a challenge with many solutions, inside and outside schools.

Ensuring the rights of every First Nations, Inuit and Métis child to equitable opportunities to learn will change Canada for the better. Indigenous children are the fastest-growing child population. By 2030 it is possible that close to one in ten children in Canada will be Indigenous. The 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission calls on Canada to jointly develop strategies to eliminate education gaps. Implementing a new framework for

culturally appropriate, high-quality education with equitable funding and implementing the Spirit Bear Plan proposed by the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society is an urgent priority<sup>29</sup>. Furthermore, every school in Canada should be a place where all children are able to develop respect for Indigenous cultures and peoples.

To help close gender gaps, some experts suggest the need for a better understanding of how girls and boys respond to different types of curriculum, teaching and assessment. Children with diverse gender and gender expression are not always fully included in schools due to bullying and discrimination. Some racialized groups of children are more likely to be suspended or expelled for infractions. Children with disabilities also experience exclusion, especially when specialized learning supports are unequally distributed to schools. Some children experience many types of discrimination or disadvantage in their lives, requiring integrated and coordinated supportive programs between schools and communities to address multiple barriers to learning, including mentoring, food security and housing.

Gaps in educational outcomes are produced inside and outside schools. Canada's education systems are identifying and working to identify and close gaps in many ways, some with explicit equity agendas produced collaboratively with children and their communities. More targeted funding to schools with wide within-school gaps, and to schools with lower average scores, would help increase equity. Because the within-school variation

## **Learn Canada 2020**

Learn Canada 2020 is the framework provincial and territorial education ministers developed to address pressing education issues:

### **PILLAR #1:**

#### **Early Childhood Learning and Development**

All children should have access to high-quality early childhood education that ensures they arrive at school ready to learn.

### **PILLAR #2:**

#### **Elementary to Secondary School Systems**

All children in our elementary to secondary school systems deserve teaching and learning opportunities that are inclusive and provide them with world-class skills in literacy, numeracy and science.

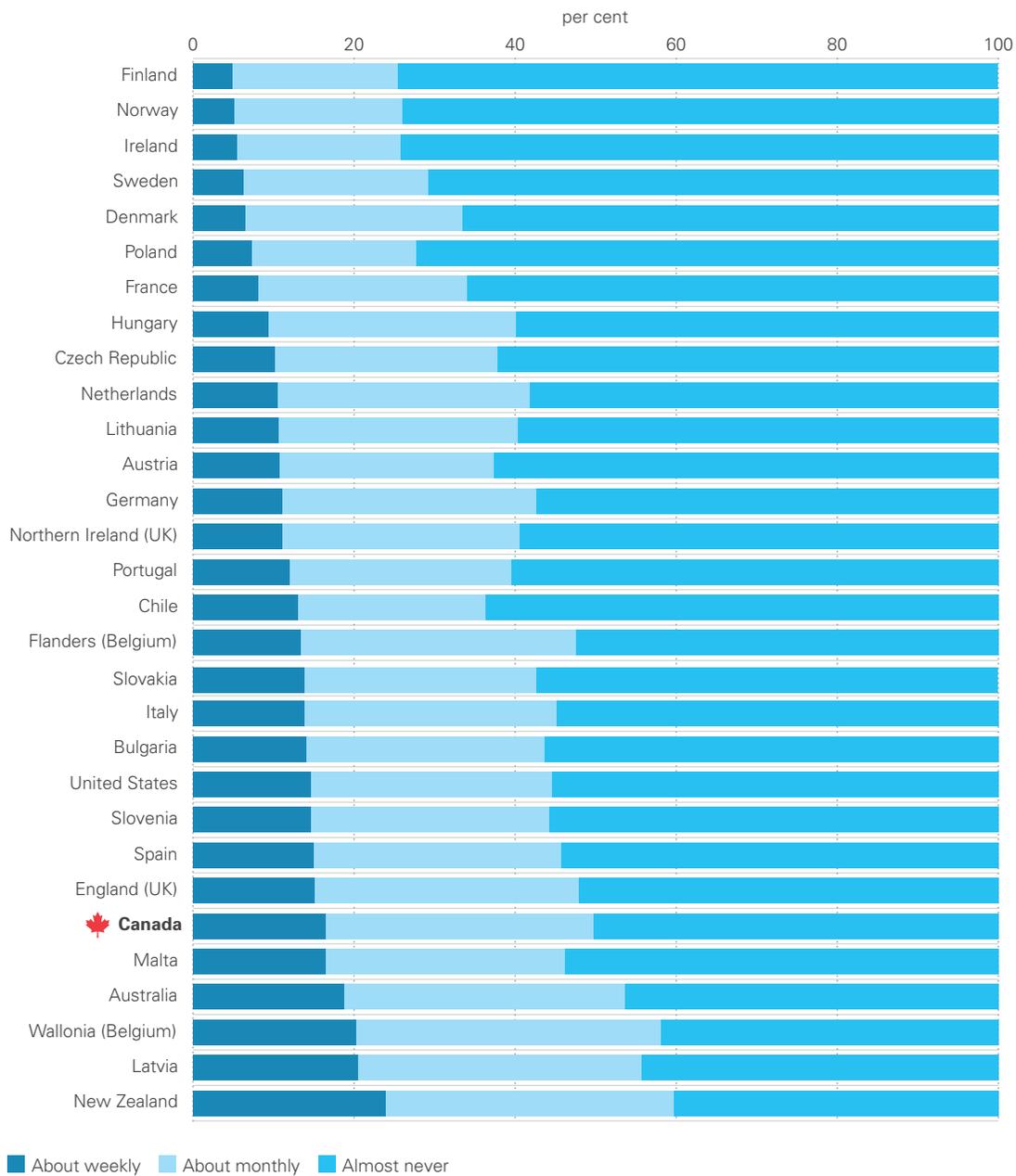
### **PILLAR #3:**

#### **Post-secondary Education**

Canada must increase the number of students pursuing post-secondary education by increasing the quality and accessibility of post-secondary education.

29 See <https://fnccaringociety.com/spirit-bear-plan>

**Figure 25: Percentage of Grade 4 children reporting bullying (2015)**



**Note:** no data for Israel.

During this year, how often have other students from your school done any of the following things to you (including through texting or the Internet)?: "made fun of me or called me names", "left me out of their games or activities", "spread lies about me", "stole something from me", "hit or hurt me", "made me do things I didn't want to do", "shared embarrassing information about me", "threatened me".

**Source:** PIRLS 2016.

in educational achievement in Canada is much higher than the variation between schools, policies like ability grouping could be considered from an equity perspective, such as delaying the age of streaming at least until age 16, allowing students to participate in decision-making and providing flexibility for changing tracks<sup>xxvi</sup>.

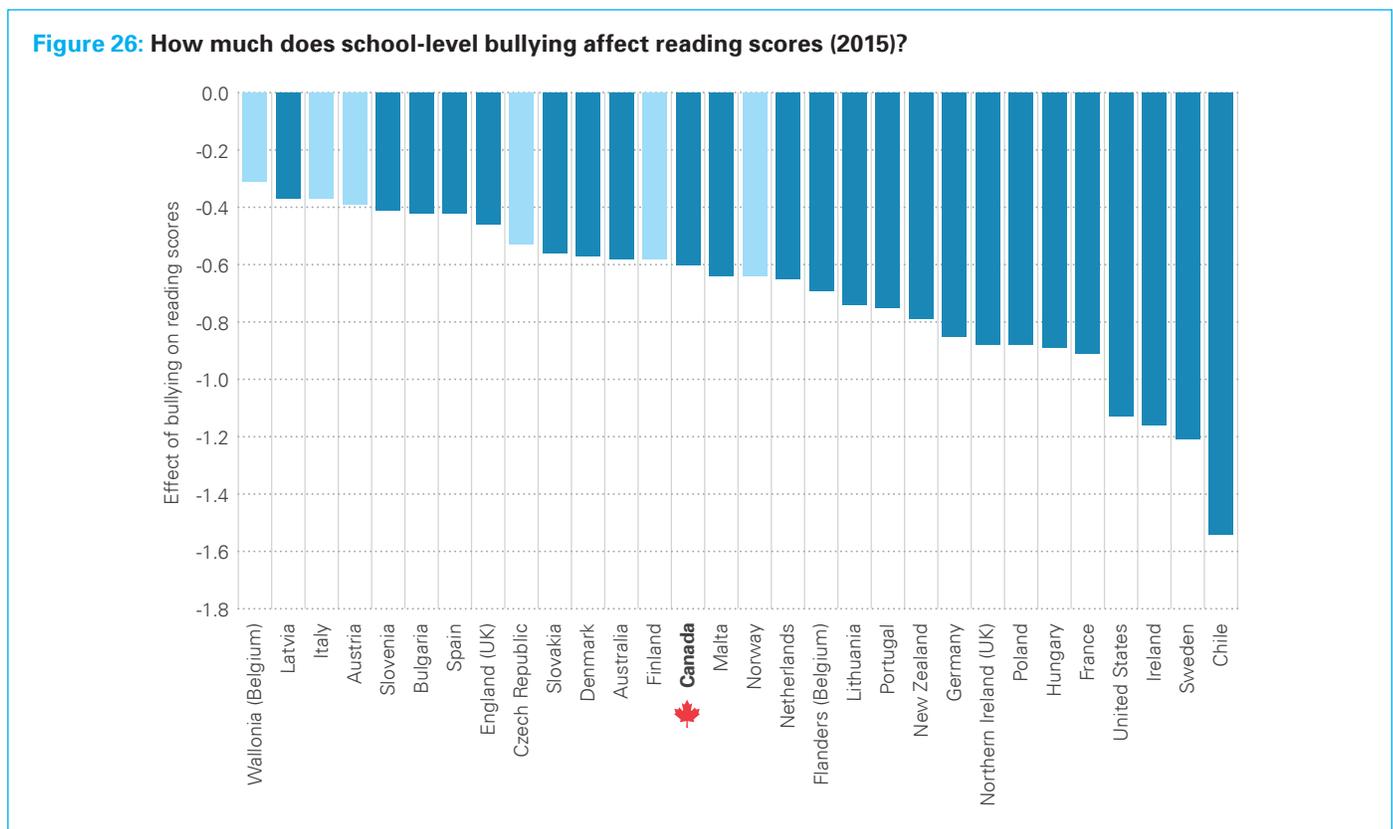
**Expand learning for the future**

Beyond competence in reading, science and math, children also want to learn life skills, how to manage their health, financial literacy and about their human rights. Educators, policy-makers and other experts agree that

student success in both school and life consists of much more than literacy and numeracy (e.g. UNESCO, 2015; UNICEF, 2015; Winthrop & McGivney, 2016).

But it is much easier to educate children for the past than for their future. According to the OCED, the biggest threat to schooling today is the loss of purpose and relevance<sup>xxvii</sup>. The CMEC Pan-Canadian Global Competencies Framework is guiding six new competencies in a number of provinces and territories. Moving to a more inclusive curriculum with “new basics” that support creativity, collaboration and innovation requires

public trust and collective vision for change. Schools that help develop children’s social and emotional skills and teach and respect children’s human rights enable children not only to learn the “basics” but to develop a sense of control over their life, become more resilient in the face of adversity and aim higher in their aspirations for the future (e.g. Christensen & Lane, 2016; OECD, 2016; People for Education, 2017). They support the well-being of children today and equip the rising generation for a future of unprecedented change. A number of education systems in Canada and around the world have started to move in this direction, embedding broader competencies



**Note:** The bars represent the statistical effect of a 1 percentage point lower school-level share of students reporting being bullied weekly on reading achievement, controlling for the child’s gender, the language of testing and the language the child speaks at home, the location of the school, whether the child comes to school hungry or tired, or has breakfast on school days, the child’s age, and principal-reported school composition by student socio-economic status.

Countries with statistically significant differences between occupational groups (at p<0.05) are noted with more intense shading.

**Source:** PIRLS 2016.

into curriculum, outcome expectations and assessment strategies (e.g. Alberta Education, 2011; Finland, 2016; Government of British Columbia, 2016; Gouvernement du Québec, 2007).

### Make learning safer and healthier

We focus on certain markers of equitable achievement in this Report

Card, but that does not diminish the need for a holistic and balanced approach to children's learning and broader well-being at school. Canada's relatively high rate of food insecurity, ranked 24 among wealthy nations, is linked to a high rate of child poverty, also ranked 24<sup>xviii</sup>. About one in six Canadian children (two in three Inuit children) are food-insecure. Reducing

poverty among children is key to reducing food insecurity. But many children from more affluent families come to school without breakfast and consume unhealthy food and drink. One-third of students in elementary schools and two-thirds of students in secondary schools do not eat a nutritious breakfast<sup>xix</sup>. A universal healthy school food program in Canada would give every child at least one healthy meal or snack every day, with many benefits to learning, physical and mental health and relationships at school. When children go to school hungry they are more likely to repeat a grade and less likely to graduate high school. When some schools provide school meals and others don't, this contributes to inequality in education.

Like food insecurity, bullying is also more common in societies with wider income inequality. Children who are food insecure are more likely to be bullied - both affect learning. In Canada, children who are bullied weekly in primary school score 34% lower in math than those not bullied so often. They also score lower in reading in Grade 4. But bullying affects all students, not just the targets. Most schools with higher rates of bullying have lower reading scores (see figure 25). Canada's children report a high rate of bullying on a weekly or monthly basis, well above the country average of 41% exposure. In both primary and secondary school, close to 50% of Canada's children report being bullied weekly or monthly. Canada ranks 24th out of 30 countries for exposure to bullying at age 15 (see figure 26), similar to the ranking in primary school. Most of the bullying is by school mates, so children who are frequently bullied are more likely to report that they feel like

## The Convention on the Rights of the Child requires that education support these aims:

1. The full development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities
2. The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms
3. The development of respect for the child's parents, cultural identity, language and values, as well as respect for the values of the child's country and other civilizations
4. The development of the child's responsibilities in a free society, including understanding, peace, tolerance, equality and friendship among all persons and groups
5. The development of respect for the natural environment

### For Health and Well-being:

*"The Committee urges States Parties, in line with articles 28 and 29 of the Convention to: (d) initiate and support measures, attitudes and activities that promote healthy behaviour by including relevant topics in school curricula"* - Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment 4, Paragraph 17

### For Human Rights:

*"Include in the educational curriculum information on human rights, including women and children's rights, gender equality and self-awareness and contribute to eliminating gender stereotypes and fostering an environment of non-discrimination"* - Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment 18, Paragraph 7, Section 3.2.68(c)

### For the Arts:

*"Consistent with obligations under article 29 concerning the aims of education, appropriate time and expertise must be allocated within the school curriculum for children to learn, participate in and generate cultural and artistic activities, including music, drama, literature, poetry and art, as well as sports and games."* - Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment 17, Paragraph 8, Section g

outsiders at school, affecting their well-being as well as their grades. Students' sense of belonging at school in Canada is weaker than the OECD average, and declining over time. Almost a quarter of students (23%) report feeling like an outsider at school in contrast to the average of 17%, and it is more prevalent among disadvantaged students.

School climate surveys, studies like the Ontario Student Mental Health and Well-being Survey (OSDUHS)<sup>30</sup> and international surveys suggest

that increasing pressure to compete and achieve at school in a context of widening social inequality and insecurity may partly explain why children's mental health has been declining<sup>xxx</sup> and why there is little difference in life satisfaction reported by top-achieving and low-achieving students<sup>xxxi</sup>. Anxiety about schoolwork is one of the sources of stress most commonly reported by children. The achievement motivation of Canada's students is considerably higher than the OECD average, but in Canada anxiety is more prevalent in schools

where students study more than 50 hours a week than in schools where they study 35-40 hours a week. Anxiety may be higher because students associate top grades with better career prospects – which might be fallout in a more income-unequal, competitive society. Schools can promote well-being by listening to student perspectives and considering the impacts of school policies and other decisions on children's rights and well-being using a child rights impact assessment tool.

**It is only by better understanding the state of our children and youth that Canada can identify the challenges, design solutions and direct smart investments to close the gaps and make children's lives better. It's up to all of us to sustain our commitment to Canada's great equalizer, our public education systems, and ensure they work for every child.**

**One Youth is a campaign to elevate the rights and well-being of Canada's children and youth.  
Please join us.**



30 Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 2017, Ontario Student Mental Health and Well-being Survey. CAMH, Toronto.

### International abbreviations (ISO) for countries and regions in the Report Card

AT	Austria
AU	Australia
BE	Belgium
BE-VLG	Flanders (Belgium)
BE-WAL	Wallonia (Belgium)
BG	Bulgaria
CA	Canada
CH	Switzerland
CL	Chile
CY	Cyprus
CZ	Czech Republic
DE	Germany
DK	Denmark
EE	Estonia
ES	Spain
FI	Finland
FR	France
GR	Greece
HR	Croatia
HU	Hungary
IE	Ireland
IL	Israel
IS	Iceland
IT	Italy
JP	Japan
KR	Republic of Korea
LT	Lithuania
LU	Luxembourg
LV	Latvia
MT	Malta
MX	Mexico
NL	Netherlands
NO	Norway
NZ	New Zealand
PL	Poland
PT	Portugal
RO	Romania
SE	Sweden
SI	Slovenia
SK	Slovakia
TR	Turkey
GB	United Kingdom
GB-ENG	England (UK)
GB-NIR	Northern Ireland (UK)
US	United States

### National abbreviations for Canadian provinces in the Report Card

AB	Alberta
BC	British Columbia
MB	Manitoba
NB	New Brunswick
NL	Newfoundland & Labrador
NS	Nova Scotia
ON	Ontario
PE	Prince Edward Island
QC	Quebec
SK	Saskatchewan

### Acronyms used in the Report Card

CMEC	Council of Ministers of Education Canada
EU	European Union
EUROSTAT	Statistical Office of the European Union
ePIRLS	Electronic (online) version of Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
MCS	Millennium Cohort Study
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

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# APPENDIX:

## LEAGUE TABLE INDICATORS AND DATA SOURCES

The core indicators and data sources for UNICEF Report Card 15 on which the rankings are based are described below (see the Report Card for additional information).

### Preschool

The percentage of students enrolled in organized (program) learning one year before the official age for entering primary school, whether or not it is mandatory. An average rank is reported for the countries that have the same preschool participation rate.

**Source:** Sustainable Development Goals Indicators Global Database (UNESCO, OECD and EUROSTAT Surveys of Formal Education) (See <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/database/>) except Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany and Slovakia (age 5 enrolment in formal childcare, EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions 2015) and Canada (Indicator 4.2.2, 2015-16, Government of Canada Sustainable Development Goal Data Hub, <https://www144.statcan.gc.ca/sdg-odd/goal-objectif04-eng.htm>).

### Primary school

The gap in reading scores\* between the fourth-grade students (around 10 years of age) who have done worse than 90% of their peers (10th percentile) and those who have done better than 90% of their peers (90th percentile). The rank for the UK is based on England and Northern Ireland only.

**Source:** Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2016, the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement. See <https://timssandpirls.bc.edu/pirls2016/index.html>.

### Secondary school

The gap in reading scores\* between the 15-year-old students (in Grade 7 or higher) who have done worse than 90% of their peers (10th percentile) and those who have done better than 90% of their peers (90th percentile).

**Source:** OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2015. See <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/>.

Chile, Mexico and Turkey are omitted from the overall ranking because the proportion of the 15-year-old population who are either excluded from PISA 2015 or not at school exceeds 20%. Their positions on the other indicators appear below the league table for reference.

**Source:** PISA 2015.

\* In these two studies reading scores are standardized so that they have an international mean of 500 and a standard deviation of 100. Most children tend to score between 300 and 700 points.

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