CANADIAN COUNCIL ON LEARNING CCL CCA CONSEIL CANADIEN SUR L'APPRENTISSAGE

LESSONS IN LEARNING

Good news: Canada's high-school dropout rates are falling

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The good news is that high school dropout rates have been declining steadily over the past decade. The bad news is that among certain groups – rural and Aboriginal students in particular – the rates are well above the national average. This article will examine what we know about factors affecting high-school completion, and examine ways to encourage all students to complete high school.

High-school dropouts: What we know today

Prior to the Second World War, relatively few Canadians attended, much less completed, high school, and most of those who did aimed to join the clergy or the few professions that required a high-school education. However, following the war it became evident that high school attendance and, preferably completion, were necessary for getting ahead. Governments and parents urged the young to stay in school. And, over the past half century, young Canadians have stayed in school in increasing numbers.

Changes in the economy and in society over the half century have increased the value of education. Between 1971 and 2001, the percentage of knowledge workers in the Canadian workforce almost doubled, rising from 14% to 25%.[1] The highest levels of knowledge intensity are found in health and education; the other major sectors where there are substantial numbers of knowledge workers are business services, finance and insurance, communications and utilities, oil and gas, and manufacturing. The demand for unskilled or semi-skilled workers in manufacturing (resource sector) has dropped as these jobs have become more technologically sophisticated and skills based. The service sector now accounts for the largest share of jobs in the economy. Vast numbers of service sector jobs are in high-end services that require workers with advanced literacy and numeracy skills, in addition to more specialized education. Where demand still exists for unskilled workers, jobs tend to be poorly paid, temporary, and often little scope for flexibility.

Today, graduation from high school is the minimum level of education required to gain access to a range of opportunities (with rare exceptions), including entry to post-secondary education. The labour market is generally inhospitable to high school dropouts. In 2004, for example, the unemployment rate among 25- to 44-year-olds without a high school diploma was 12%, compared to 7% for those with a high school diploma.

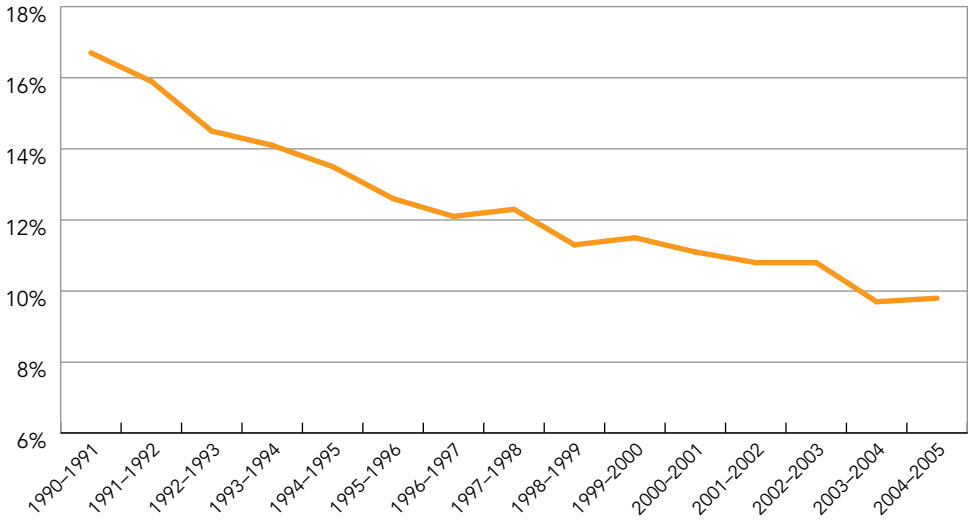
In recent years, the Canadian school attendance rate for 15- to 19-year-olds was in the 82% to 84% range. This rate was a marked increase from just 25 years earlier when only two-thirds of 15- to 19-year-olds were in school. And like their Canadian peers, adolescents in other countries are also staying in school. Educational attainment is growing in most of the economically-developed countries as more young people complete high school and post-secondary education.[2]

Clearly, high-school completion benefits the individual and Canadian society as a whole. High-school graduates are more employable, are employed more regularly, and earn more than those who leave school without graduating. They have better knowledge of the factors contributing to a healthy lifestyle, and they make fewer visits to physicians. Efforts spent to encourage high school completion pay lifelong dividends.

Trends in the dropout rate

The Canadian Council on Learning commissioned Statistics Canada to analyze data about school attendance from the Labour Force Survey (LFS). In the 1990–1991 school year, the first year for which dropout rates were calculated using the LFS, the rate was 17% (Figure 1). In 2004, only 10% of Canadians 20 to 24 years of age did not have a high-school diploma and were not enrolled in school. This means that, in 2004-2005, there were 212,000 20- to 24-year-olds in Canada who were not in school and who had not graduated from high school. Typically, dropout rates are determined for September to April, corresponding to the period when most students are in school.

Figure 1:
High school dropouts as a percentage of all 20- to 24-year-olds, Canada, 1990–1991 – 2004–2005



Source: Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey.

Dropping out of high school is becoming less common in all parts of Canada, but the decrease in the dropout rate is most apparent in eastern Canada. For the 1990–1991 to 1992–1993 school years, approximately 20% of 20- to 24-year-olds in Newfoundland and Labrador and in Prince Edward Island were without a high school diploma and were not attending school. These were the highest dropout rates in the country at the time. During the three most recent school years, the dropout rate in both of these provinces has been in the range of 8% to 10%, putting them among the lowest in Canada. Dropout rates also declined sharply in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. (see Table 1)

Looking at Canada as a whole, two groups of provinces stand out. The first group includes Atlantic Canada, Ontario and British Columbia, which have dropout rates below 10%. The second group of provinces includes Quebec and the Prairie provinces with dropout rates averaging above 10% over the last three years (although these rates are also declining).

The learning challenge: High-risk groups

Dropout rates have followed a downward trend in all provinces in recent years, but not all population sub-groups have declined equally. Dropout rates remain higher for boys than for girls. They are higher in some parts of rural and small-town Canada than in urban areas (though not necessarily in impoverished inner-city neighbourhoods). Dropout rates also remain substantially higher among the Aboriginal population.

Young men drop out at a higher rate than young women. In 1990–1991, 19% of males between the ages of 20 and 24 had not completed high school compared to 14% of young women. By 2004–2005, the rate for young men was down to 12% and to 7% for young women. (see Table 2)

The over-representation of males among young dropouts is not new, but the share of male school leavers has increased in recent years. In 1990-91, a sizable majority of dropouts were young men (58%) but, by 2004–2005, that proportion had increased to 64%. The change in proportion for males does not indicate that more young men are dropping out—in fact, there has been a decrease in the actual number of male dropouts. The proportional increase for males reflects the fact that the dropout rate for young women has fallen more sharply than for young men. Across Canada the pattern is the same: More men than women drop out. The difference is most pronounced in Quebec where, in 2004–2005, seven in ten young dropouts were men.

Young men and women have different reasons for dropping out of high school. According to the Youth in Transition Survey (YITS), young male dropouts are less engaged in school than their female counterparts.[3] They are more likely than other students to have trouble with their teachers and are less likely to complete

Table 1:
High-school dropouts as a percentage of all 20- to 24-year-olds, Canada and provinces, 1990–1991 to 1992–1993 and 2002–2003 to 2004–2005 school year averages

	Dropout Rates (%)	
	1990-91 to 1992-93	2002-03 to 2004-05
Canada	15.7	10.1
Newfoundland and Labrador	20.0	8.0
Prince Edward Island	19.1	9.7
Nova Scotia	17.9	9.3
New Brunswick	15.4	9.2
Quebec	17.4	11.9
Ontario	14.7	9.1
Manitoba	16.1	13.0
Saskatchewan	16.3	10.7
Alberta	15.8	12.0
British Columbia	13.3	7.5

Source: Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey.

Table 2:
High-school dropouts as a percentage of all 20- to 24-year-olds, Canada and provinces, Male and Female, 2004–2005 school year average

	Dropout Rates (%)	
	Male	Female
Canada	11.8	7.7
Newfoundland and Labrador	9.8	7.1
Prince Edward Island	10.5	8.3
Nova Scotia	11.9	5.0
New Brunswick	12.7	8.0
Quebec	14.4	8.5
Ontario	10.8	6.4
Manitoba	13.6	12.6
Saskatchewan	12.2	9.8
Alberta	13.8	10.5
British Columbia	7.6	6.6

Source: Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey.

school assignments. Disaffection with school and wanting to get into the labour force are key factors in their decision to leave high school without a diploma. Male dropouts also have lower grades than female dropouts. However, low grades may not be a particularly important factor for either sex with respect to dropping out of high school. According to YITS, nearly half of all dropouts had at least a B average and less than 5% of dropouts reported grade averages below 50%.[4]

For young women, pregnancy often plays a large role in the decision to drop out of high school. Labour Force Survey data indicate that nearly four in ten young female dropouts had children and were heading a household, but here too, the trend is pointing downward. In the early 1990s, approximately 60,000 female dropouts headed a household with children in Canada. This number dropped to about 30,000 in recent years. The share of female dropouts who had children was highest in eastern Canada and in Saskatchewan. On average, over the last 16 years, more than half of the female dropouts in those parts of the country were heading a household and had children.

The dropout rate remains comparatively high in Canada's small towns and isolated rural communities. Outside of Canada's largest communities, the dropout rate in the 2004–2005 school year was 16%, roughly double the rate (9%) within Census Metropolitan Areas and Census Agglomerations (CMA/CA). Over the last five years, the average dropout rate has been especially high in rural and small-town Alberta, Quebec, and Manitoba (see Table 3). In those areas, the dropout rates for 20- to 24-year-olds were approximately 20%. In Alberta, there was a particularly sharp divide between the rural and urban areas. Dropout rates in rural areas and small towns exceeded 20% and fell below 10% in the larger urban areas. In Manitoba and Quebec, high rural dropout rates were matched by higher than average dropout rates in the urban parts of those provinces. Over the 2003–2005 period, dropout rates in urban Quebec and Manitoba averaged approximately 11%.

Defining and Measuring the Dropout Rate

The typical age of high-school completion is 18 years. However, for some, finishing high school is a longer process, whether that is because they repeated a grade or returned to make up for missing credits. The 2002 Youth in Transition Survey (YITS) found, for example, that 2% of youth graduated from high school between the ages of 20 and 22.

In addition, second chance opportunities are offered by every jurisdiction across the country. These opportunities are available to young people who have dropped out of high school, but wish to return to complete the requirements for graduation. YITS found that by age 22, 11% of those who were dropouts at age 20 had returned to high school and a further 16% had taken advantage of second-chance opportunities offered at the post-secondary level. Overall, in 2002, the effective dropout rate at age 22 was 9%, below the 11% recorded for this group two years earlier when they were 20 years old.

In order to include late graduates, the high school dropout rate used here is measured as the percentage of 20- to 24-year-olds who are not attending school and who have not graduated from high school. This is the definition used for international comparisons by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Data from the Census of Canada and from the Aboriginal Peoples Survey provide new information on trends in the educational attainment of the Aboriginal population living in eleven census metropolitan areas in Canada over the 1981 to 2001 period.[5] The good news is that the proportion of Aboriginal youth who dropped out of high school decreased in those CMAs between 1981 and 2001. Aboriginal dropout rates decreased in all of the CMAs, but the decreases were particularly sharp in Winnipeg and Regina where dropout rates fell by as much as 30 percentage points. School attendance among Aboriginal youth in these CMAs also increased substantially over the same period. In 1981, Aboriginal attendance rates ranged from a low of 30.6% in Edmonton to a high of 51.3% in Ottawa-Hull. In 2001, the low end of the range had moved up to 47.9% in Toronto and the high end was at 66.4% in Sudbury.

Table 3:
High-school dropouts as a percentage of all 20- to 24-year-olds, Canada and provinces, Rural and Urban, school year average from 2001–2002 to 2004–2005

	Dropout Rates (%)		
	Total (average)	Urban	Rural
Canada	10.2	9.2	16.4
Newfoundland and Labrador	8.0	5.8	11.2
Prince Edward Island	9.8	7.3	13.9
Nova Scotia	9.9	8.2	14.3
New Brunswick	9.3	7.4	12.4
Quebec	12.6	11.3	19.5
Ontario	9.1	8.6	13.8
Manitoba	12.7	10.8	19.0
Saskatchewan	10.7	9.4	14.6
Alberta	11.8	9.9	21.3
British Columbia	7.7	7.3	12.6

Source: Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey.

Despite these impressive gains, Aboriginal youth in those CMAs remain significantly less likely to complete high school than non-Aboriginal youth. Furthermore, while the proportion of Aboriginal youth who had not completed high school declined between 1981 and 2001 in all the CMAs studied, the proportion of non-Aboriginal youth who had not completed high school decreased even more. Consequently, the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth widened. Finally, Aboriginal males fell further behind their Aboriginal female counterparts in terms of high school completion between 1981 and 2001.

Labour market consequences of dropping out

Analyses of the 2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey clearly show that Canadians with lower levels of literacy (a group that includes a large percentage of high-school dropouts) have lower rates of employment, tend to work in occupations with lower skill requirements, have lower earnings and, in the longer term, have poorer health outcomes than other Canadians.[6]

Given that high school dropouts are not occupying their time with schoolwork, we might expect their labour market participation rates to be significantly higher than they are for other young adults. However, data from the Labour Force Survey show that in 2004–2005, approximately 77% of 20- to 24-year-old dropouts participated in the labour market, which was only slightly above the 75% participation rate of all 20- to 24-year-olds.

Furthermore, only about 62% of dropouts were employed in 2004-05 (Figure 2), well below the employment rate for all 20- to 24-year-olds (68%). Alberta's booming oil economy provides the one exception to the otherwise bleak employment prospects for high–school dropouts. Over the last three school years, the employment rate for high school non-completers in Alberta averaged 69%, meaning that dropouts in Alberta's strong economy were more likely to be working than those with a high school diploma in other provinces.

The flip side of the employment rate is the unemployment rate and this is where problems are apparent for young dropouts. In 2004-2005, the unemployment rate was 19% among 20- to 24-year-olds who were not attending school and had not graduated from high school. This was almost double the rate of 10% among all 20- to 24-year-olds.

Summary

The evidence suggests that much progress has been made across Canada in reducing the high-school dropout rate, especially in the Atlantic provinces.

However, progress has been slower among particular sub-groups. Dropout rates generally remain higher in rural areas and in small towns than in urban areas, especially in Quebec, Manitoba and Alberta. And clearly, young males are more likely to drop out than young females. Despite some encouraging progress, there remain over 200,000 young Canadians who can be considered dropouts. This is worrisome, especially given the evidence that the failure to complete high school will have negative consequences for their health and for their social and economic progress.[4]

The evidence is also clear that young dropouts face real barriers in the labour market. The unemployment rate among dropouts is double that of other 20- to 24-year-olds, a reality that will be reflected in their earnings and their longer term prospects.

Lessons in learning

The substantial decline in the dropout rate over the past decade suggests that many of the programs that have been put in place to encourage young people to stay in school until they graduate have been successful. The most recent dropout statistics suggest that future success in dropout prevention will depend on our ability to reach out to particular sub-groups that continue to experience above average dropout rates.

Aboriginal Students

Case studies (Schwab, 2001)[7] of Australian educational programs that have succeeded in retaining Aboriginal students have isolated the following factors as critical to keeping Aboriginal students engaged in their own education. These factors are likely to remain important in the Canadian context.

- **Community-based education and training:** Many Aboriginal students express a greater sense of ownership of programs that are visibly tied to their home communities. This sense of ownership leads to greater engagement and more successful outcomes.

- **Community relevance:** Aboriginal students are often drawn to practical fields of study that will allow them to return to their communities to work.
- **A commitment to Aboriginal employment:** Many Aboriginal students are motivated by the prospect of employment rather than strictly educational goals. When learning goals are focussed on jobs, Aboriginal student retention often improves.
- **Balancing expectations from two cultures:** Acknowledging and supporting Aboriginal students' cultural heritage and providing course structures and materials that fit their preferred learning styles can encourage Aboriginal students to stay in school. It is important at the same time to maintain appropriate expectations concerning attendance, participation, and achievement.

Students in Rural Areas

Students in rural and isolated communities may see limited returns for their investment in education. Job growth in Canada tends to be concentrated within a small number of urban areas (OECD: Regions at a Glance)[8]; therefore, high school students in rural areas may feel that their employment opportunities will not be greatly expanded by staying in school. Rural schools need to make special efforts to convince students of the long-term value of education. One approach is to have schools partner with local industries to create school-to-work initiatives. For example, in the Outaouais region of Quebec, rural high school dropout rates are particularly high: nearly 27 percent of adults in rural Outaouais areas have less than Grade 9 education, compared with only 13.7 percent in urban areas (Innovation Canada). In 1998-99, an Outaouais school board partnered with local pulp and paper mills to implement a high-school level vocational program to train specialized workers for the pulp and paper sector (Savoie-Zajc & Dolbec, 2002)[9]. The program alternates time in school with time in the workplace, affording up to 400 hours of hands-on training.

Male Students

Male students may be more inclined to stay in school if they can see a direct connection between schooling and near-term employment opportunities. School-to-work programs including co-operative education and apprenticeships are extremely valuable in this regard.

In British Columbia, the Abbotsford School District and the University College of the Fraser Valley have joined forces to provide skilled worker training to high school students through the Career Technical Centre (CTC). CTC students combine their Grade 11 and 12 classes with UCFV certificate programs. At the end of Grade 12, graduating students receive both a high school diploma and a first-year college studies certificate. The programs include supervised work experience and graduating students can either move directly into the workforce or take advantage of early admission to post-secondary studies.

Young Mothers

While teen pregnancy rates are falling and young mothers are becoming more likely to complete their high school requirements, programs that enable young women who become pregnant to continue their education while caring for their children remain important. Affordable, high-quality child care is a critical

component of any such program. Making child care available to student mothers provides these young women with opportunities to stay in school until graduation, learn effective parenting skills from child care professionals, and consider post-secondary educational opportunities[10].

The TEAM program at Gary Allan High School in Ontario is designed for pregnant teens and young mothers. The program allows these young women to earn high school credits while also learning parenting skills. Importantly, child care costs are covered for mothers on social assistance and subsidized for those who are not.

The Scandinavian Approach

Between the mid-80s and mid-90s, Finland, Norway and Sweden implemented a number of educational reforms focussing largely on vocational education as a means of encouraging students to stay in school. There were two features common to the reforms in all three countries:

1. Broadening of programs to provide a better initial foundation to prepare students for further learning, followed later by specialized training in one of a wide range of vocations.
2. Bridging the divide between vocational and general education through efforts to ensure that students who choose a vocational stream could easily pursue post-secondary studies, including general education university studies.

The Norwegian approach has been particularly successful: Norway currently has the lowest high-school dropout rate among OECD countries (4.6%).

The Norwegian reforms include:

- Creating a standard path that high school students can follow in order to become qualified workers in most trades: the "2+ apprenticeship model", which is two years of school and then two years of apprenticeship (after Grade 9);
- Creating incentives for employers to take on high school apprentices, by reducing apprentice wages from 80% to 50% of qualified workers' wages and offering employers the approximate equivalent of the cost of one year of schooling, plus a completion bonus if the apprentice passes the final trade examination;
- Creating new apprenticeship classifications in white collar and service occupations; and
- Providing follow-up services for high-school dropouts.

The Norwegian reforms had almost immediate positive results. Within the first year, the proportion of students following a normal progression (i.e., moving from one grade to the next without dropping out or being held back) increased by 10% , and the proportion of vocational students following a normal progression increased from 30% to 58%.

Furthermore, in the first year, the number of apprenticeship contracts rose by 22% and the proportion of apprenticeships going to youth under 20 increased from 21% to 36%.

Efforts were also made to reintegrate dropouts into the education system, and within two years of the reforms, 89% of dropouts were receiving assistance from follow-up services. Within three years of the reforms, 97% of those contacted by the follow-up services were either in school, employed, or participating in a labour market scheme.

Conclusion

Completing high school pays dividends for those who stay the course and for Canada as a whole. Better opportunities for employment and better health outcomes are two of the leading advantages to individuals and to Canada. More and better employment means more tax revenue and a higher standard of living. Better health outcomes mean fewer demands on the health care system and higher quality of life for the individual. Continued improvement in reducing dropout rates will depend on focussed programs directed toward particular population sub-groups, an investment that is well worthwhile.

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