

# POVERTY & INEQUALITY

A Report from People for Education

*The work to create the conditions that support greater educational opportunities for children affected by poverty falls not only to schools but also to policymakers who, along with families and communities, have significant responsibilities in this comprehensive, shared endeavour.<sup>1</sup>*

Every year, People for Education conducts an Annual School Survey. Distributed to all of Ontario’s 4,900 publicly funded elementary and secondary schools, the survey asks principals for information on resources and programs in the school and about the school’s connection with its community.

In 2012, 1018 schools responded to the survey. This report is an excerpt from the **2012 Annual Report on Ontario’s Publicly Funded Schools**.

## FAMILY INCOME AFFECTS STUDENTS’ CHANCES FOR SUCCESS

Providing every child—rich or poor—with an equitable chance for success is one of the central missions of any publicly funded education system.

While Ontario is justifiably proud that the achievement gap between high- and low-income students is smaller than the gap in many OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries,<sup>2</sup> family income continues to have a powerful influence on children’s chances for success in school.

In 2011, over 400,000 Ontario children and youth were living below the low-income cut-off (LICO), Statistics Canada’s widely accepted measure of poverty.<sup>3</sup> That translates to one in six children.<sup>4</sup>

But the risk of poverty is not equal. The highest rates of poverty are seen amongst people with disabilities, Aboriginal populations, lone parents and new Canadians. Almost half of Ontario children whose families recently immigrated to Canada experience poverty.<sup>5</sup>

Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO): <sup>6</sup>			
DEMOGRAPHICS OF ONTARIO ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS			
	Ontario Average	Low-income schools <sup>7</sup>	High-income schools
Students in low-income (LICO) families	17%	45%	3%
Average family income	\$75,716	\$48,331	\$94,647
Parents with university degrees	30%	28%	29%
Parents without a high school diploma	7%	13%	5%
Lone-parent households	19%	32%	11%
Recent immigrants	5%	15%	0%
Aboriginals	3%	2%	3%
Percentage of students with special educational needs	19%	22%	18%
English Language Learners	7%	14%	1%
First language other than English or French	19%	46%	5%

## THE GAP BETWEEN HIGHEST- AND LOWEST-INCOME SCHOOLS

Using provincial data to compare the 10% of schools with the lowest average family income to the 10% with the highest average incomes, the differences are stark. Among the lowest-income schools:

- average family incomes are half that of the high-income schools;
- one-third of the students live with a single parent, compared to one-tenth of the children from the richest schools; and,
- parents are nearly three times as likely to not have a high school diploma.

People for Education's survey data show that schools' capacity to fundraise is also affected by average family incomes. Schools in the top 10% fundraise five times the amount of those in the bottom 10%. As a result, some children have a double disadvantage: Their families are unable to afford educational resources at home,<sup>8</sup> and they attend schools where far less money is raised to cover the costs of enrichment and enhanced resources. If inequalities in wealth and income continue to increase in Canada,<sup>9</sup> it is likely that many of these trends in schools will only intensify.

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**Poverty pervades all we do. Our playground equipment is going to be declared unusable and then we won't have anything for our JK–grade 2 classes to play on. We cannot raise the funds locally to support buying new equipment and the cost of replacement is well over \$40,000.**

*Elementary school principal, Thames Valley DSB*

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There are also similarities between the lowest- and highest-income schools: Overall, the proportions of Aboriginal students and students with special educational needs are roughly the same. There is also little difference between the

percentage of parents with university degrees, a finding that reflects the “high-education/low-income paradox,” which refers to the fact that, in Ontario, unlike most OECD jurisdictions, a relatively large proportion of university graduates are in lower-income categories.<sup>10</sup> This finding runs counter to stereotypes about who lives in poverty, and suggests the importance of developing Ontario-specific approaches to overcoming the impact of poverty in schools.

## NEWCOMERS IN HIGH-POVERTY SCHOOLS

One of the key distinguishing features of low-income Ontario schools is the overrepresentation of newcomer students.

While the percentage of children who have immigrated in the past five years is virtually zero in high-income schools, there are some low-income schools where more than 50% of students are recent immigrants. On average, 46% of students in low-income schools speak a first language other than English, compared to only 5% in high-income schools, and the proportion of students in low-income schools who need support because they are English Language Learners is twice the provincial average.

## EXTRA SUPPORTS IN LOW-INCOME SCHOOLS

People for Education's analysis shows that lower-income schools have greater access to certain key resources: They are more likely to have full-day kindergarten for 4- and 5-year-olds, for example, and family-support programs. This suggests that an increasing number of children living in poorer households have been provided with priority access to early years support, which can save families as much as \$6,500 a year.<sup>11</sup> This was one of the goals of Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy.

Furthermore, the survey results indicate that lower-income schools, on average, have lower student-teacher ratios for English as a Second Language, English Language Development and special education.

## DISAPPEARING LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES GRANT

Provincial policy and funding through the Learning Opportunities Grant (LOG) provides some extra support to school boards based on characteristics such as family income, lone-parent status and parental education. Since 2005, however, the total amount in the LOG has been cut by 6%.<sup>12</sup> Not only has the funding been cut, but the focus of the grant itself has also been diluted.

The LOG was originally intended to be used for programs and resources such as increased numbers of counsellors and social workers, more educational assistants, smaller class sizes, mentoring programs, breakfast and lunch programs, free access to extracurricular activities and recreation, and before- and after-school programs. Now, over one-third of the funding is targeted to cover a wide array of literacy and numeracy programs, specialist high skills majors, and the K-12 School Effectiveness Framework.

These changes are contrary to the recommendations in a 2002 government review, which urged the government to increase the amount of the grant and provide better analysis of the effectiveness of the programs and services it funds, to ensure that they are actually helping students at risk.<sup>13</sup> There is also no requirement that the funds be spent on programs for students whose socio-economic status may put them at risk of struggling in school. Many boards spend at least some of this funding on basic necessities such as heat and light.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Students' socio-economic status has an impact on their chances for success, and every effort should be made to mitigate that. Currently, in Ontario, average family income has an impact on the resources and programs available in schools, and the Learning Opportunities Grant is neither protected nor targeted at programs for disadvantaged students.

### **People for Education recommends that:**

- the province develop a new Equity in Education Grant, designated solely for providing programs to mitigate socio-economic and ethno-racial factors affecting students.
- the province collect data on students' ethnicity, race and socio-economic status, in order to assess and report on both the impact of programs funded through the Equity in Education Grant, and the impact of students' backgrounds on their pathways through school.
- the province protect the funding in the Equity in Education Grant and mandate that school boards report annually on the programs and services funded by the grant, and on their effectiveness.

# NOTES

- 1 Flessa, J. Joseph (2007) Poverty and Education: Towards Effective Action A Review of the Literature. P. 19 [http://cus.oise.utoronto.ca/UserFiles/File/Poverty%20lit%20review%20\(J\\_%20Flessa%20-%2010\\_2007\).pdf](http://cus.oise.utoronto.ca/UserFiles/File/Poverty%20lit%20review%20(J_%20Flessa%20-%2010_2007).pdf)
- 2 See, e.g., Education Quality and Accountability Office. (2010). *PISA, 2009: Highlights of Ontario student results*. Retrieved from [http://www.eqao.com/pdf\\_e/10/2009\\_PISA\\_Highlights\\_en.pdf](http://www.eqao.com/pdf_e/10/2009_PISA_Highlights_en.pdf).
- 3 LICOs are Statistics Canada's most established and widely recognized approach to estimating low-income cut-offs and are an estimate of an income threshold at which families are expected to spend 20 percentage points more than the average family on food, shelter and clothing. See Statistics Canada census dictionary, <http://www12.statcan.ca/census-recensement/2006/ref/dict/fam020-eng.cfm>.
- 4 Campaign 2000 (2010). *Report Card on Child & Family Poverty in Ontario*. Retrieved from <http://www.campaign2000.ca/reportCards/provincial/Ontario/2010OntarioReportCardEnglish.pdf>.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Analyses based on Education Quality and Accountability Office. (2011). Demographic data\_Elementary schools. Confidential spreadsheet on file with People for Education. EQAO's demographic data are based on information in the 2006 census.
- 7 The "poorest" schools are defined as the top 10% of schools with the highest percentage of students in low-income cut-offs (LICOs); the "richest" schools are the top 10% of schools with the lowest percentage of students in LICOs.
- 8 See, e.g., Kaushal, N., Magnusson K. & Waldfogel, J. How is family income related to investments in children's learning. In G.J. Duncan & R.J.Murnane, eds. *Whither opportunity? Rising inequality, schools, and children's life chances*. New York: Russell Sage, pp. 187-205.
- 9 Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. (2011). *Divided we stand: Why inequality keeps rising*. "Country Note: Canada." Retrieved from: <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/50/52/49177689.pdf>.
- 10 Zeman, K., McMullen, K. & de Broucker, P. (2010). *The high education/low income paradox: College and university graduates with low earnings, Ontario*, 2006. Statistics Canada. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/81-595-m/81-595-m2010081-eng.htm>.
- 11 Government of Ontario. (2011). *Breaking the cycle: Third progress report Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy*, p. ii. Retrieved from <http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/documents/breakingthecycle/2011AnnualReport.pdf>.
- 12 Government of Ontario. (2012). *Education Funding Technical Paper 2012- 2013*, p. 55. Retrieved from [http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/funding/1213/Technical12\\_13.pdf](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/funding/1213/Technical12_13.pdf); Government of Ontario. (2005). *Education Funding Technical Paper 2005- 06*, p. 51. Retrieved from <http://www.cpfont.on.ca/nav/Funding%20for%20FSL/Media/Technical%20Paper%202005-2006.pdf>.
- 13 Education Equality Task Force & Rozanski, M. (2002). *Investing in public education: Advancing the goal of continuous improvement in student learning and achievement* (Review). Toronto: Ontario Ministry of Education.



People for Education is a registered charity that works to support public education in Ontario's English, French and Catholic schools.

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