

How to End Streaming in Ontario Schools

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Issue Statement

Academic streaming describes the process of dividing students into differentiated groups based on their perceived academic ability and/or prior achievement.¹ While streaming happens both formally and informally across grade levels, entrance into secondary school in Ontario marks a more institutional effort to align students to courses of a particular academic difficulty (i.e., academic, applied and essential).

Research has shown that streaming has harmful and disadvantageous consequences for both individual students and education systems more broadly. Students streamed into non-academic courses experience depressed achievement², delayed graduation³, and increased rates of drop-out⁴. Stigma associated with applied placement has been shown to negatively affect students' self-perception and academic performance.⁵ Students in Ontario with comparable past academic achievement perform significantly better in academic over applied courses.⁶ Coupled with a less engaging curriculum devoid of higher order thinking and reduced opportunities to learn⁷, teachers' perceptions of students' academic

¹ Segedin, Lauren. "Listening to the Student Voice: Understanding the School-Related Factors That Limit Student Success." *McGill Journal of Education* 47, no. 1 (2012): 93–107.

² People for Education. "Roadmaps and Roadblocks: Career and Life Planning, Guidance, and Streaming in Ontario's Schools." Toronto, ON: People for Education, 2019.
https://peopleforeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Roadmaps_roadblocks_WEB.pdf.

³ Parekh, Gillian. "Structured Pathways: An Exploration of Programs of Study, School-Wide and In-School Programs, as Well as Promotion and Transference across Secondary Schools in the Toronto District School Board." Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Toronto District School Board, 2013. <https://www.tdsb.on.ca/Portals/research/docs/reports/StructuredPathways.pdf>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Boaler, Jo, William Dylan, and Margaret Brown. "Students' Experiences of Ability Grouping--Disaffection, Polarisation and the Construction of Failure." *British Educational Research Journal* 26, no. 5 (December 2000): 631–48.

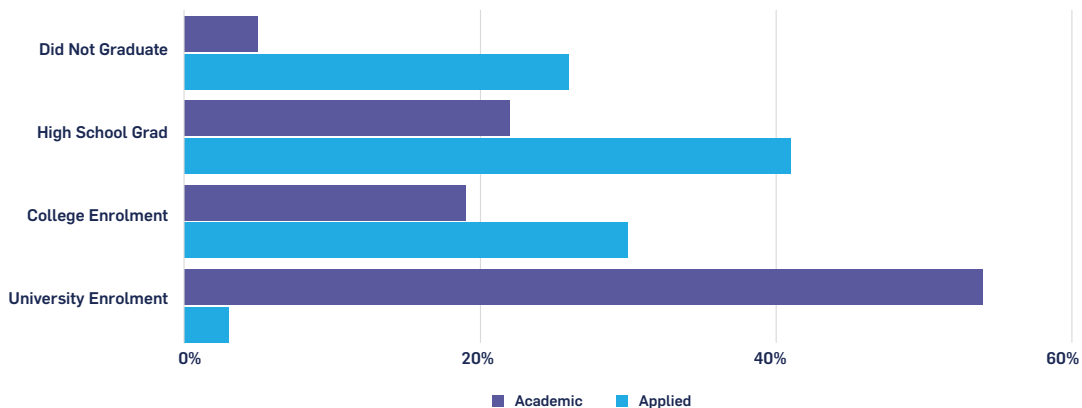
⁶ Education Quality and Accountability Office. "Ontario Student Achievement: Ontario's Provincial Secondary School Report." Toronto, ON: 2018.

⁷ Kinnon, Emily. "(In)Equity and Academic Streaming in Ontario: Effects on Students and Teachers and How to Overcome These." Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, 2016.
https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/72216/1/Kinnon_Emily_R_201606_MT_MTRP.pdf.

capabilities work as a self-fulfilling prophecy in which students internalize the low expectations set for them.⁸

The impacts of streaming become most salient in post-secondary pathways. Grade 9 students enrolled in lower-level courses rarely shift to higher tracks.^{9,10} Most students who take academic courses in Grades 9 transition into post-secondary preparatory courses in senior grades, and three-quarters directly transition to college or university. Students in the applied stream face significant barriers accessing post-secondary education and training, with less than one-third directly transitioning to college and just 3% to university (See Figure 1).¹¹ In essence, Ontario schools provide two tracks: one that channels students to higher education and another that more often leads to drop-outs and low-wage labour.

Figure 1: Post-Secondary Pathways for Ontario Students in Grade 9 Academic or Applied English and Math



Source: Ontario School Information System for Grade 9 students in 2010-11; graduation determined at five years as of 2014-15; direct post-secondary enrolment as of 2015-16 as reported by Ontario College Application Service and Ontario University Application Centre

⁸ Pichette, Jackie, Fiona Deller, and Julia Colyar. “Destreaming in Ontario: History, Evidence and Educator Reflections.” Toronto, ON: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2020. https://heqco.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Destreaming-in-Ontario_FORMATTED.pdf

⁹ Oakes, J. *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality*. 2nd ed. Yale University Press, 2005.

¹⁰ People for Education. “Ontario’s Schools: The Gap Between Policy and Reality.” Toronto, ON, 2015. <https://peopleforeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/P4E-Annual-Report-2015.pdf>

¹¹ Brown, R. S., and G. Tam. “Grade 9 Cohort Post-Secondary Pathways, 2011-2016.” Toronto, ON: Toronto District School Board, 2017. <https://www.tdsb.on.ca/Portals/research/docs/reports/FS3%20Grade%209%20Cohort%20Post-Sec%20Pathways%202011-16%20FINAL.pdf>

Streaming and its disproportionate impacts on people from racialized and low-income communities and those with special needs has been a point of contention for decades.¹² Governments have engaged the calls for provincial de-streaming to varying degrees, although there has been no successfully implemented and sustained systemic reform.

In July 2020, Ontario’s Minister of Education announced the intention to eliminate academic streaming across Grade 9 math classrooms in the fall of 2021. Relatively little has yet been revealed publicly about the Ministry’s implementation plan for September or how de-streaming may expand beyond Grade 9 math, but Ontarians are counting on a smooth and successful transition for students and educators alike.

De-streaming can serve to provide full and equitable access to programs of study aligned with students’ interests and career aspirations — regardless of race, class, ability or language. However, ending streaming in schools effectively necessitates more than just combining students with varying educational needs into a single classroom. It requires:

- a commitment to a long-term cultural and pedagogical shift informed by education and community stakeholders;
- investment in sufficient supports and training for educators; and
- ongoing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to ensure sustained success.

¹² Coalition for Alternatives to Streaming in Education. <https://www.endstreaming.org/>

Decision Context

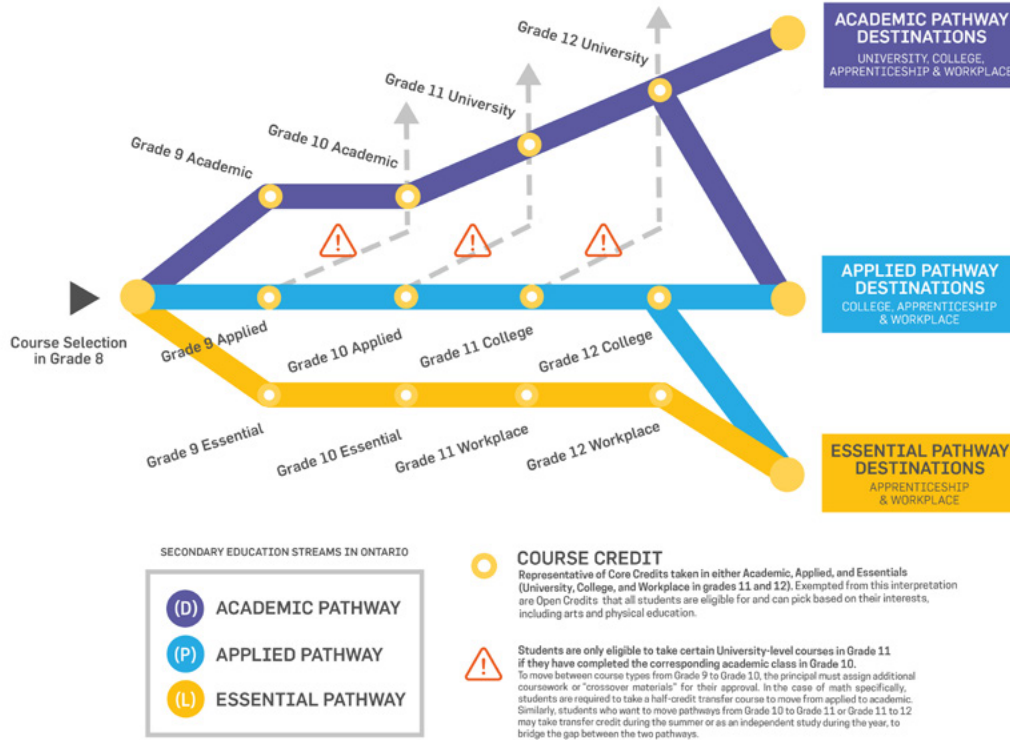
Students' educational attainment help predict several life outcomes, such as employment opportunities, income, social mobility, as well as housing and food security.¹³ As such, advancing equity through the education system must be a steadfast goal for policymakers committed to giving every child a chance to reach their full potential.

Ontario has the highest proportion of adults aged 25-64 with post-secondary education of all provinces in Canada (66%), and Canada's overall post-secondary attainment rate (59%) is the highest of all OECD countries (which average 39%). This impressive achievement, however, masks the distinct role that Ontario's public colleges play in our education and labour market. Overall, 29% of Ontario's adult population has a college credential, compared to 7% across the OECD. Our jurisdictional advantage fades away at the university level, where 37% of Ontario's adults have a university credential compared to 32% across the OECD and where 10 OECD countries have higher rates of university attainment, including the United Kingdom and United States.¹⁴

¹³ Olshansky, S. Jay, Toni Antonucci, Lisa Berkman, Robert H. Binstock, Axel Boersch-Supan, John T. Cacioppo, Bruce A. Carnes, et al. "Differences In Life Expectancy Due To Race And Educational Differences Are Widening, And Many May Not Catch Up." *Health Affairs* 31, no. 8 (August 2012): 1803–13. <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2011.0746>.

¹⁴ Statistics Canada and Council of Ministers of Education, Canada. "Education Indicators in Canada: An International Perspective." Ottawa, ON: 2020. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/81-604-x/81-604-x2020001-eng.pdf?st=vloQ-X_4

Figure 2: Map to Academic Streaming in Ontario



Course pathway planning begins in Ontario in Grades 7 and 8, when students create an Individual Pathways Plan, typically created using electronic tools such as myBlueprint in collaboration with their elementary teachers.¹⁵ Formal Grade 9 course selection by students and parents generally occurs in the winter of Grade 8, often based on the recommendations from students’ Grade 8 teacher or principal and open houses or visits to students’ new secondary school.

In Grades 9 and 10, students must choose between either academic or applied courses for their core courses which consist of English, French, math, science, geography and history. The Ministry of Education describes the core difference between applied and academic classes as the balance between “essential concepts and additional material” and “theory and application,” meaning academic classes are more abstract and applied classes are more practical.¹⁶ Students with special education needs can also be placed in partial or full credit “essential” classes that

¹⁵ Ontario Ministry of Education. “Creating Pathways to Success: An Education and Career/Life Planning Program for Ontario Schools.” Ontario: Ministry of Education, 2013. <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/policy/cps/creatingpathwayssuccess.pdf>

¹⁶ Ibid.

are developed based on local needs.¹⁷ The rest of students' schedules are made up of "open" courses that all students are eligible for and can select based on their interests, including arts and physical education.

In Grades 11 and 12, students then move into university or college level courses that fulfill prerequisites for entrance to post-secondary institutions. Once a student begins on a pathway in Grade 9, it becomes increasingly difficult to change because of how Ontario has designed and delivers its course curriculum. Students are only eligible to take certain university-level courses in Grade 11 if they have completed the corresponding academic class in Grade 10. To move between course types from Grade 9 to Grade 10, the principal must assign additional coursework or "crossover materials" for their approval.¹⁸ In the case of math specifically, students are required to take a half-credit transfer course to move from applied to academic. Similarly, students who want to move pathways from Grade 10 to Grade 11 or Grade 11 to 12 must take additional credits during the summer or as an independent study during the year, to take the prerequisites required to switch pathways.¹⁹

To avoid adverse impacts to student achievement and performance, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has long recommended the delay of stratification processes, like streaming, until "upper secondary."^{20,21,22} The OECD has highlighted research that early streaming provides little to no benefit for "high-achieving" students, while all students benefit from high expectations and classes of mixed strengths and interests.

While most provinces initiate streamed course selection in Grade 10 to begin differentiated post-secondary preparation, Ontario is the only province that streams students upon entry into Grade 9 (see Figure 3).²³ Little comparative research exists about streaming practices among Canadian provinces, although one study from

¹⁷ Ontario Ministry of Education. "The Ontario Curriculum Grades 9 to 12: Program Planning and Assessment." Ontario: Ministry of Education, p. 8, 2000. <https://www.tcdsb.org/FORSTAFF/NewTeacherInduction/Documents/curric912planning.pdf>

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ OECD. *Equity and Quality in Education: Supporting Disadvantaged Students and Schools*. OECD, 2012. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264130852-en>.

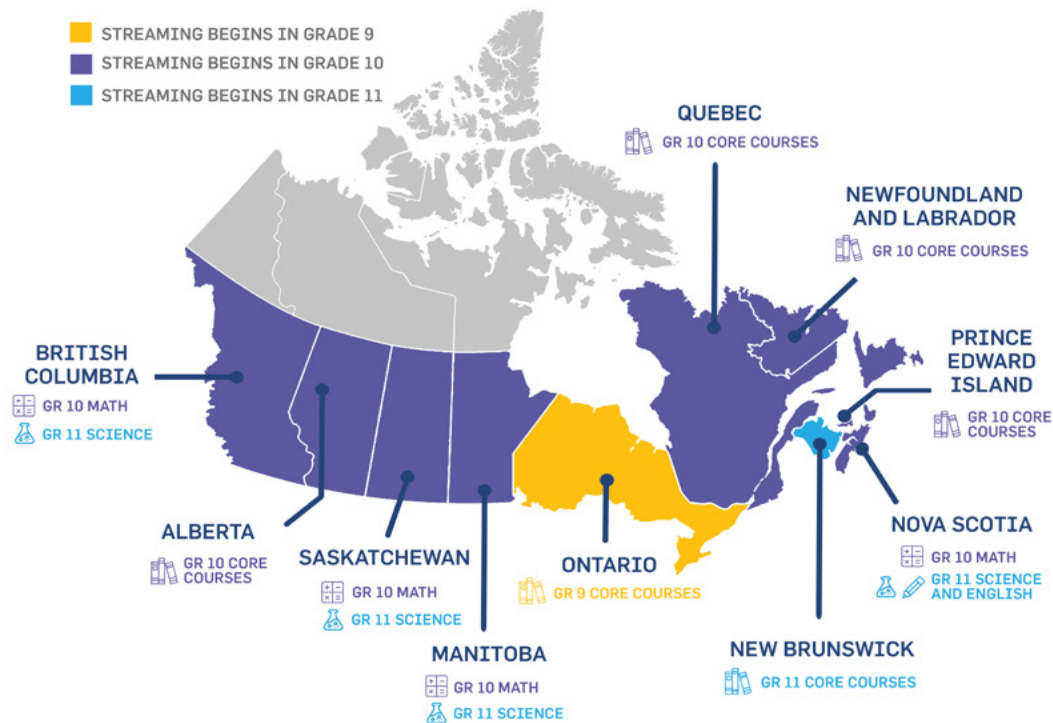
²¹ OECD. *PISA 2015 Results (Volume III): Students' Well-Being*. PISA. OECD, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264273856-en>.

²² OECD. *Equity in Education: Breaking Down Barriers to Social Mobility*. PISA. OECD, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264073234-en>.

²³ Ontario Ministry of Education. "Ontario's Education Equity Action Plan." Ontario: Ministry of Education, 2017. http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/about/education_equity_plan_en.pdf.

2000 examined the impact of social background on course selection and found Ontario to have among the lowest proportion of Grade 10 students with “open” post-secondary options.²⁴

Figure 3: Provincial Academic Streaming



Data from the Education Quality and Accountability Office shows that the status quo is doing little to advance equity of outcomes. In 2019, 84% of Grade 9 students in academic math earned a score equal to or above the provincial standard, compared to only 44% of Grade 9 students in applied math.²⁵ The gap is even larger in the Grade 10 Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test, where 89% of students in academic language classes met the provincial literacy standard, compared to 36% of those in applied classes.

²⁴ Krahn, Harvey, and Alison Taylor. “‘Streaming’ in the 10th Grade in Four Canadian Provinces in 2000.” *Education Matters*, Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 81-004-XIE, 4, no. 2 (2007): 16–26.

²⁵ Education Quality and Accountability Office. “EQAO’s Provincial Secondary School Report: Results of the Grade 9 Assessment of Mathematics and the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test, 2018–2019.” Toronto: EQAO, 2019.

Ontario’s announcement of de-streaming of Grade 9 math coincides with a swell of activism regarding the Black Lives Matter movement that has launched conversations across institutions about systemic racism in Canada and beyond. Education has been identified as a critical point for intervention — not only as a space to learn about systemic inequity, but as a space to mitigate its harmful impacts. Ontario’s social and economic prosperity relies on public education to prepare students with the confidence and skills required to succeed but that reality is not reflected for many marginalized students. Black students²⁶, Indigenous students²⁷, students from low-income families²⁸, students learning English as a second language²⁹, and students with special education needs³⁰ are all overrepresented in non-academic streams. The Province’s plan to de-stream is explicitly intended to address systemic racism and barriers³¹ in education by tackling the heavily race-based and class-based effects of streaming.

De-streaming brings us one step closer to providing full and equitable access to programs of study aligned with students’ interests and career aspirations. This is an urgent responsibility of the provincial government in order to address the disproportionate number of students being misdirected and pushed out of the education system.

²⁶ James, Carl E., and T. Turner. “Towards Race Equity in Education: The Schooling of Black Students in the Greater Toronto Area.” Toronto, Ontario, Canada: York University, 2017. <https://youthrex.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Towards-Race-Equity-in-Education-April-20172.pdf>.

²⁷ People for Education. “The Trouble with Course Choices in Ontario High Schools.” Toronto, ON: People for Education, 2013. <https://peopleforeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/People-for-Education-report-on-Applied-and-Academic-streaming.pdf>.

²⁸ Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017.

²⁹ People for Education, 2013.

³⁰ Parekh, Gillian. “Structured Pathways: An Exploration of Programs of Study, School-Wide and In-School Programs, as Well as Promotion and Transference across Secondary Schools in the Toronto District School Board.” Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Toronto District School Board, 2013. <https://www.tdsb.on.ca/Portals/research/docs/reports/StructuredPathways.pdf>.

³¹ Office of the Premier. “Ontario Taking Bold Action to Address Racism and Inequity in Schools,” July 9, 2020. <https://news.ontario.ca/en/release/57543/ontario-taking-bold-action-to-address-racism-and-inequity-in-schools-1>.

Decision Considerations

The most successful alternatives to streaming come from changes that go beyond just putting classrooms of different abilities together.³² In addition to promoting equity among students, the elimination of streaming creates opportunities for broader cultural and systemic improvements to Ontario's education system. To yield the best results possible, there are a number of social and economic factors to consider.

Community-specific impacts

Community-specific impacts must be explicitly considered for policy efforts to address the unique challenges of those currently most affected by streaming.³³ For example, students in low-income communities are significantly more likely (38%) to be enrolled in Grade 9 applied math than high-income communities (26%).³⁴ Another study found a disproportionate number of Indigenous and English-language learners in schools with the highest rates of Grade 9 applied math enrolment.³⁵

The Greater Toronto Area remains the epicentre of streaming research in Ontario, in large part due to the comprehensive sets of disaggregated student data collected by the province's largest school board. This data has allowed researchers to analyze trends across a large and diverse student population. What we have learned from this research is that streaming negatively impacts some groups of students more than others — particularly those already marginalized by race, class, ability, and/or language.

One study found a clear bias in teachers' evaluation and assessment of students that favours white students, girls, students without a disability and those whose parents have university education.³⁶ Even among students who were performing at or above the provincial average, only 19% of Black students received 'Excellent'

³² Mehan, H. "Detracking: A Promising Strategy to Increase Social Mobility for Underserved Youth." Washington, D.C.: American Institutes for Research, 2015. <https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/OpeningTheDoors-EquityProject-Jan2015.pdf>

³³ Jeannie Oakes and Martin Lipton, "Detracking Schools: Early Lessons from the Field," *The Phi Delta Kappan* 73, no. 6 (1992): 448–54.

³⁴ Based on the lower and upper quartiles of the school population proportion below the Low-Income Measure of 50% of median adjusted household income: Ontario Ministry of Education as reported by schools in Ontario School Information System 2014-2015 and Tax Filer (Statistics Canada TI Family File), 2013

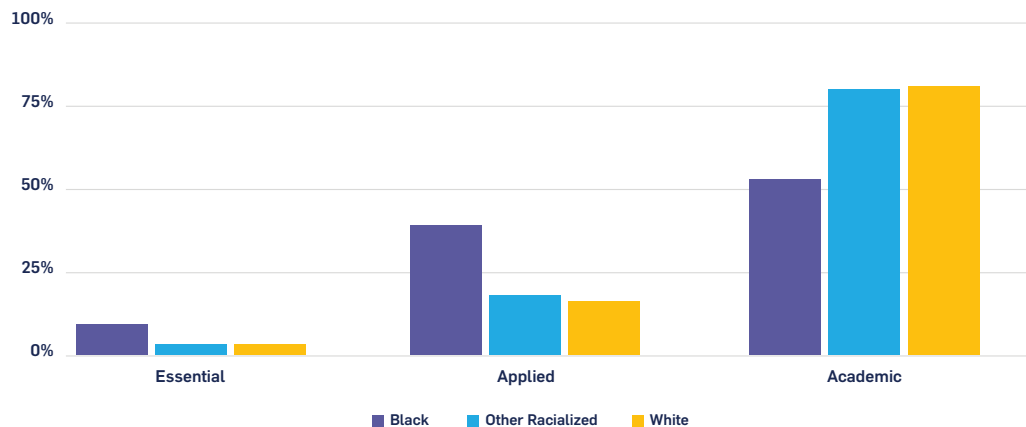
³⁵ People for Education, 2015

³⁶ Gillian Parekh, Robert S. Brown, and Samuel Zheng, "Learning Skills, System Equity, and Implicit Bias Within Ontario, Canada," *Educational Policy*, December 2, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904818813303>.

on their Learning Skills, compared to 39% of white students.³⁷ As key performance indicators, Learning Skills are often used by teachers and guidance counsellors to recommend students’ high school and post-secondary pathways.

The figure below captures the impact of these processes for Black students who, in 2006-2011, accounted for nearly 40% of the students in applied classrooms³⁸ despite representing only 12% of the TDSB population.³⁹ A recent review at Peel District School Board found similar rates of overrepresentation of Black, Indigenous and Latin American students.⁴⁰ Another study found that students placed in one of TDSB’s largest special education programs ensured “almost direct placement into non-academic programming at the secondary level, regardless of student achievement.”⁴¹

Figure 4: Programs of Study by Race at Toronto District School Board (2006-2011)



Source: York Centre for Education and Community/Toronto District School Board, 2015; program of study based on majority of courses taken in Grades 9 and 10

³⁷ Ibid, 11.

³⁸ James and Turner, “Towards Race Equity in Education: The Schooling of Black Students in the Greater Toronto Area.” Figure 5.

³⁹ Ibid, 26-27.

⁴⁰ Ena Chadha, Suzanne Herbert, and Shawn Richard. “Review of the Peel District School Board.” Toronto, ON: 2020. <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/new/review-peel-district-school-board-report-en.pdf>

⁴¹ Gillian Parekh and Robert S. Brown. “Changing Lanes: The Relationship Between Special Education Placement and Students’ Academic Futures.” *Educational Policy*, 2019, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0895904818812772>

Ontario has mandated that all school boards must collect race-based data by 2023 in accordance with the *Anti-Racism Act* and Anti-Racism Data Standards.⁴² A strong commitment to collecting and publicly reporting analyses of these data will prove useful in tracking the current reality, as well as the effectiveness of provincial, school board and school-level policy and program changes. Transparency around how data are being used to inform policy and programming will support a relationship of trust between the government, school boards, and marginalized families advocating for improved education outcomes for their children.

To support improved outcomes for a diverse range of students, programming must be created to meet the specific needs of communities facing systemic barriers. An example of this is the Black and Indigenous graduation coach programs, which the provincial government committed a total of \$3.5 million to support in a select number of schools last year.⁴³ However, there is a growing desire for province-wide implementation. The Simcoe County District School Board, for example, has created and funded its own pilot of the program to benefit their Black students.⁴⁴

As a best practice when it comes to working with marginalized and vulnerable populations, community consultation is critical to getting de-streaming right. Without the input from families and students that are Black, Indigenous, low-income or have a disability, policymakers risk increasing alienation and causing more harm to these groups. Prioritizing community consultations in provincial and school board plans to eliminate streaming can also show the government's willingness to engage with public demand and advocacy around disrupting inequity in education. Neglecting to involve marginalized communities in the planning, decision-making, and implementation of de-streaming poses a significant risk to public buy-in.

⁴² Office of the Premier, "Ontario Taking Bold Action to Address Racism and Inequity in Schools."

⁴³ Office of the Premier, "Ontario Taking Bold Action to Address Racism and Inequity in Schools."

⁴⁴ Jessica Owen, "New Graduation Coaches for Black Students 'a Game-Changer,' Say Board Officials," *Collingwood Today*, March 22, 2021, <https://www.collingwoodtoday.ca/local-news/new-graduation-coaches-for-black-students-a-game-changer-say-board-officials-3565199>.

Educator training and staffing support

A large part of the success of policy implementation in education rests in the hands of educators and the vital role that they play in student success. According to Ontario's Ministry of Education, "leadership is second only to teaching in its impact on student outcomes."⁴⁵ For de-streaming to work, teachers and principals need the appropriate training, resources and support to nurture the personal and academic growth of students at all levels of academic readiness.

Existing research shows that this requires both an organizational, pedagogical and cultural shift in the classroom. Fixed mindsets about students' academic ability based on stream placement can impact the quality of students' learning experiences and instruction. Even when performing at similar standards to their academic-level peers, applied students are often perceived as badly behaved, less focused, incapable of working independently, and lacking in motivation and work ethic.^{46,47}

Some hesitation toward de-streaming stems from the underlying assumption that grouping students by ability makes curriculum delivery and classroom management easier.⁴⁸ However, the stigma associated with non-academic streams, in combination with teachers' differential treatment and instruction toward applied-stream students, perpetuates a depression in academic performance and outcomes.⁴⁹

Research from de-streaming initiatives in Ontario and beyond has shown that, in addition to support from colleagues and school leadership⁵⁰, lower teacher efficacy can be mitigated by developing new methods of curriculum delivery that

⁴⁵ Ministry of Education, "Policy/Program Memorandum No. 119, Developing and Implementing Equity and Inclusive Education Policies in Ontario Schools" (Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2013), <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/extra/eng/ppm/119.pdf>.

⁴⁶ Hornby, Garry, and Chrystal Witte. "Ability Grouping in New Zealand High Schools: Are Practices Evidence-Based?" *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth* 58, no. 2 (2014): 90–95. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1045988X.2013.782531>.

⁴⁷ Wilkinson, Shaun D., and Dawn Penney. "The Effects of Setting on Classroom Teaching and Student Learning in Mainstream Mathematics, English and Science Lessons: A Critical Review of the Literature in England." *Educational Review* 66, no. 4 (October 2, 2014): 411–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2013.787971>.

⁴⁸ Jackson, Colin. "All-Attainment Secondary Mathematics Teaching in England: How Some Teachers Make It Work," 2020.

⁴⁹ Oakes, J. *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality*. 2nd ed. Yale University Press, 2005.

⁵⁰ Robertson, C. L., B. Cowell, and J. Olsen. "A Case Study of Integration and Destreaming: Teachers and Students in an Ontario Secondary School Respond." *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 30, no. 6 (1998): 691–717. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0022027981833396>.

encourage creativity and collaboration among educators⁵¹. To effectively teach mixed-ability classes and set universally high expectations for all learners, teachers need to feel confident in their ability to support students using their skills, training, and network of resources, including support to revise assessments, lesson plans and learning materials.

In place of systematic streaming processes, some students will need more personalized supports to address their unique educational needs. This means that sufficient staffing will be a key component to the success of de-streaming. There is limited research in the Ontario context about the impacts of class size or mixed-ability classes on secondary achievement, though evidence from other jurisdictions suggests that lower-achieving students benefit more from smaller class sizes resulting in additional individual attention and engagement in learning.⁵²

The secondary student-to-teacher funded ratio in Ontario was increased from 22 to 23, beginning in the 2019-20 school year.⁵³ How this overall funding is used to determine class sizes by grade and program of study is up to individual school boards, their local collective agreements with teachers' unions and overall need for smaller classes for special education students. For example, the TDSB's collective agreement targets class sizes of 30 in academic classes and 23 in applied classes, with caps of 33 and 25 respectively.⁵⁴ As TDSB phased out applied offerings over the last several years, it has attempted to target class sizes at 26 by redeploying other resources, such as assigning Student Success Teachers to teach classes rather than their typical role of assisting individual students in need of support.⁵⁵

Beyond classroom teachers, elementary schools typically have limited staffing resources to support students' academic planning and decision making and have

⁵¹ Ross, John A., Sharon McKeiver, and Anne Hogaboam-Gray. "Fluctuations in Teacher Efficacy during Implementation of Destreaming." *Canadian Journal of Education / Revue Canadienne de l'éducation* 22, no. 3 (1997): 283–96. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1585831>.

⁵² Peter Blatchford, Paul Bassett and Penelope Brown. "Examining the effect of class size on classroom engagement and teacher-pupil interaction: Differences in relation to pupil prior attainment and primary vs. secondary schools." *Learning and Instruction*, 21 (2011), <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.469.8472&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.

⁵³ Ontario Ministry of Education. "Education Funding Technical Paper." Toronto, ON: 2020. <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/funding/2021/2020-21-technical-paper.pdf>.

⁵⁴ Toronto District School Board. "School-Based Staff Allocation 2019-20: Classroom Q & A #3." Special Finance, Budget and Enrolment Committee, 2019. <https://www.tdsb.on.ca/Portals/0/aboutus/docs/QA3-19Mar19-School-Based%20Staff%20Allocation%202019-20-%20Classroom-v3.pdf>.

⁵⁵ Toronto District School Board. "Academic Pathways – Grades 9 and 10 – Class Size Guidelines and Teacher Supports for 2021-2022." Toronto, ON: 2021. <https://osstforonto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Academic-Pathways-Memo-March-25-2021.pdf>.

larger average class sizes in Grades 4-8 than in secondary schools.⁵⁶ Some have advocated a more systematized connection between guidance counsellors and students be established to support pathway planning.⁵⁷ In the 2017-18 school year, an additional \$46 million was allocated to fund guidance counsellors for Grades 7 and 8 at a ratio of 385:1⁵⁸ — a significant change from previous years funded at a 1000:1 ratio.⁵⁹ The average guidance counsellor to student ratio in Ontario’s high schools is 375:1. However, in 10% of schools this can climb to 687:1.⁶⁰

In addition to changes in curriculum and staffing, de-streaming involves a cultural change in the attitudes and beliefs of K-12 teachers.⁶¹ Institutional racism must be treated as a pressing issue and policymakers should understand that managing difference through passive policies of multiculturalism do not do enough to ensure racial equity in formal education spaces.⁶² While de-streaming is a step in the right direction, it should be understood as one component of a broader equity approach and commitment recommended by researchers and education advocates that must engage educators, administrators and parents.⁶³ Systemic racism and discrimination often prevent educators from seeing the potential in all students. One way to mediate these harmful beliefs, stereotypes and biases is to provide professional development through anti-racism and anti-oppression training.

⁵⁶ People for Education, “Roadmaps and Roadblocks: Career and Life Planning, Guidance, and Streaming in Ontario’s Schools” (Toronto, ON: People for Education, 2019), https://peopleforeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Roadmaps_roadblocks_WEB.pdf.

⁵⁷ Social Planning Toronto. *Still Streamed: How High Impact Decisions Are Shaping Students’ Futures*. Toronto, ON, 2017. <http://www.deslibris.ca/ID/10092408>.

⁵⁸ People for Education, “Roadmaps and Roadblocks: Career and Life Planning, Guidance, and Streaming in Ontario’s Schools.”

⁵⁹ A. Davis, *Grants for Student Needs (GSN) for 2018-19 (Memorandum to Directors of Education, Secretary/Treasurers of School Authorities)* (Toronto, ON: Government of Ontario, 2018), <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/extra/eng/ppm/119.pdf>.

⁶⁰ People for Education, “Roadmaps and Roadblocks: Career and Life Planning, Guidance, and Streaming in Ontario’s Schools.”

⁶¹ Mehan, “Detracking: A Promising Strategy to Increase Social Mobility for Underserved Youth.”

⁶² George, Rhonda C., Reana Maier, and Karen Robson. “Ignoring Race: A Comparative Analysis of Education Policy in British Columbia and Ontario.” *Race Ethnicity and Education* 23, no. 2 (2020): 159–79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2019.1679754>.

⁶³ Carl James, “Ending ‘Streaming’ Is Only the First Step to Dismantling Systemic Racism in Ontario Schools,” *The Conversation* (blog), July 15, 2020, <http://theconversation.com/ending-streaming-is-only-the-first-step-to-dismantling-systemic-racism-in-ontario-schools-142617>.

Closing labour gaps

Rather than approaching streaming as a stand-alone education issue, policymakers should be mindful of the broader implications that streaming has on the future workforce and labour market. With Ontario's aging population, our eligible workforce is estimated to continue shrinking over the next two decades from 65.5% of our population in 2021 to 59.8% by 2041.⁶⁴ Sustaining the provincial economy means ensuring the workforce is both highly skilled and distributed as required across various sectors. A recent analysis of the occupations projected to grow in demand by 2030 are concentrated among those that require university education, followed by college education, such as jobs in health, science and those that require a high degree of technical expertise, such as graphic designers, chefs, statisticians, and technical IT roles.⁶⁵

One benefit of successful de-streaming may be greater and more equitable participation in post-secondary pathways by keeping options open for longer. One study found that many students make their post-secondary pathway decisions early on and even more so for those who enrol in university.⁶⁶ The study using the Canadian Youth in Transition Survey found that 40% of university-bound students had "always known" they would go to university, 14% decided before Grade 9 and 25% decided in Grade 9 or 10, leaving only 20% who decided later. By contrast, 27% of college-bound students had "always known," 10% decided before Grade 9, 22% in Grades 9 and 10 and 40% later.

A common argument against de-streaming is that the applied stream acts as an important vehicle for those most comfortable with hands-on learning and those interested in the skilled trades. But it is worth pointing out that Ontario is the only province to begin streaming in Grade 9, and yet has the lowest number of registered apprentices per capita of all the provinces, at a rate of 6.7 per 1,000 people compared to 10.5 nationally in 2018.⁶⁷ While there is no provincial data to explore the relationship between apprenticeship registration and secondary program of study, still more than one in four students in the applied stream

⁶⁴ The Premier's Highly Skilled Workforce Expert Panel, "Building the Workforce of Tomorrow: A Shared Responsibility" (Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2016).

⁶⁵ Diana Rivera, Yasmin Rajabi, Joshua Zachariah and Rob Willoughby. Ahead by a Decade: Employment in 2030. Brookfield Institute for Innovation + Entrepreneurship and Nesta. <https://brookfieldinstitute.ca/wp-content/uploads/Ahead-by-a-Decade-EN-Final.pdf>

⁶⁶ Finnie, Ross. "Access to post-secondary education: The importance of culture." *Children and Youth Services Review*. No. 34:6. 2012.

⁶⁷ Statistics Canada Table: 37-10-0118-01

do not graduate from high school after five years (a common requirement for apprenticeships), compared to just 5% in the academic stream (see Figure 1). In the hierarchy of post-secondary pathways, vocational and trade-based programs are often looked down upon and seen as being reserved for lower performing students who are poor and/or racialized. These kinds of classist tropes undermine skilled trades as not only viable, but secure and high-earning career paths.

Potential benefits to the implementation of de-streaming include lessening the class bias associated with trades and apprenticeships to create a more attractive pathway for all students. In 2016, Ontario's Highly Skilled Workforce Expert Panel advocated for an Ontario in which youth are fully aware of the opportunities available to them and are given "opportunities to develop competencies, and skills, and to have hands-on experiences that allow them to pursue their passion."⁶⁸ Students pursuing trades should do so because it aligns with their career goals, not because streaming closes the door to other post-secondary education options. Recommendations made by the Panel included the development of metrics and targets regarding pathways into apprenticeship programming and education outcomes.⁶⁹

Learning from past policy interventions

The attempt to de-stream will, for some Ontarians, harken back to a contentious period in the province in the early 1990s. In 1993, school boards were provided a three-year period to de-stream and de-credit the Grade 9 curriculum, meaning credits for individual courses were to be removed and successful Grade 9 students would be moved to Grade 10 with an undifferentiated total of eight credits, similar to grade promotion in elementary.⁷⁰ Ultimately, the Province had hoped to eliminate the Advanced, General and Basic course level distinctions in place across grade levels since 1969 by offering "only two sets of differentiated courses, one geared to meeting university requirements and the other of equally high quality, designed to emphasize applications...outside the classroom. Beyond that, as many subjects as feasible would be offered at a [common] level".⁷¹ In practice, students

⁶⁸ The Premier's Highly Skilled Workforce Expert Panel, "Building the Workforce of Tomorrow: A Shared Responsibility" (Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2016), p. 10.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 43.

⁷⁰ Robert S. Brown, "Tracking of Grade 9 and 10 Students in the Toronto Board. September 1991-September 1995" (Toronto: Toronto District School Board, March 1996), <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED404757>.

⁷¹ Gidney, *From Hope to Harris*, 228.

would be expected to take a mix of these courses, making selections based on specific career aspirations or interdisciplinary interests.

At the time, the NDP government was embarking on a major curriculum overhaul; the integration of special needs students into regular classrooms, and the mandatory provision of kindergarten. There were whispers of additional initiatives that included ending Grade 13, de-streaming Grade 10 classrooms, and the establishment of mandatory parent advisory councils.⁷² Despite the long list of proposed reforms, government responses to the economic recession were thought to create poor conditions for such systemic changes. Educators were asked to do more with less — facing a three-year pay freeze and mandatory unpaid leave in accordance with provincial austerity measures.⁷³ When it came to de-streaming, some teachers were against the idea entirely, while others were unsure how they would manage to effectively teach mixed-ability classes given the limited and unclear guidance from the government.^{74,75}

In 1995, the new PC government effectively discontinued the Grade 9 de-streaming efforts based in part on “negative reaction from the education community,” while also removing anti-racism and equity-related content from the curriculum.⁷⁶ By 1999, Ontario formally recognized the elimination of streaming — on paper. Students were no longer required to choose a singular level of Advanced, General and Basic for all courses, but rather, encouraged to take a mix of the new levels of Academic, Applied and Essential courses across subjects. In practice however, streaming has effectively continued through systematic course structuring that limits applied students’ flexibility to switch to academic courses. The sustained underlying assumptions about the purpose of streaming

⁷² Gidney, R. D. *From Hope to Harris: The Reshaping of Ontario's Schools*. University of Toronto Press, 1999. viii+362 Pp. University of Toronto Press, 1999. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/59809698/64074525278443A7PQ/1>.

⁷³ Lawton, Stephen B. “Ontario’s ‘Social Contract’: Tightening the Screws on Education.” *Journal of Education Finance* 20, no. 3 (1995).

⁷⁴ C. L. Robertson, B. Cowell, and J. Olsen, “A Case Study of Integration and Destreaming: Teachers and Students in an Ontario Secondary School Respond,” *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 30, no. 6 (1998): 691–717, <https://doi.org/10.1080/002202798183396>.

⁷⁵ John A. Ross, Sharon McKeiver, and Anne Hogaboam-Gray, “Fluctuations in Teacher Efficacy during Implementation of Destreaming,” *Canadian Journal of Education / Revue Canadienne de l'éducation* 22, no. 3 (1997): 283–96, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1585831>.

⁷⁶ Gidney, *From Hope to Harris*.

Anderson, S. E., & Jaafar, S. B. (2003). Policy Trends in Ontario Education, 1990–2003. Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. <http://fcis.oise.utoronto.ca/~icec/policytrends.pdf>.

(i.e., each stream is built for a particular type of learner) and lack of training of different perspectives for elementary teachers means that the majority of students take classes at the same level. For example, 62% of students in Ontario who take applied math take three or more applied courses, with only 11% enrolled in no other applied courses.⁷⁷

While implemented only briefly in the 1993-94 period, research from that time suggests that de-streaming produced moderately positive changes, including reduced student transfer and drop-out, lower rates of absenteeism and increased credit accumulation.⁷⁸ The challenges to this policy implementation can be traced back to inadequate support, poor consultation, planning and stakeholder buy-in, and the significant scale of the systemic changes proposed.

Nearly two decades passed without changes to secondary streaming structures. It was not until 2017 that the Ministry of Education acknowledged community concerns with streaming through the Ontario Education Equity Action Plan, which proposed a plan to “work with education partners, students, parents and communities to examine and address systemic barriers that limit students’ ability to achieve and to pursue their chosen pathways after graduation [and] on collaboration with education partners, introduce a renewed approach to Grade 9 in which all students are supported in achieving their maximum potential and choosing appropriate pathways to work, college, apprenticeship, or university.” The plan also included a number of proposed changes to leadership and governance practices to further equity, as well as initiated the consistent collection of student identity data by all school boards.

Based on mounting international research evidence and the desire to address inequity while meeting student needs, some Ontario school boards have developed their own de-streaming initiatives. In 2017, the TDSB introduced a three-year plan to discontinue streaming in Grades 9 and 10 by only offering academic classes. Limestone District School Board in Kingston and the Durham District School Board have also launched similar de-streaming pilots to examine the impact on student outcomes. Each of these local pilots, while supported with additional

⁷⁷ People for Education, 2015

⁷⁸ Robert S. Brown, “Tracking of Grade 9 and 10 Students in the Toronto Board. September 1991-September 1995” (Toronto: Toronto District School Board, March 1996), <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED404757>.

personnel and resources, have seen positive results that indicate greater academic performance and persistence among marginalized learners, including improved EQAO scores.^{79,80}

There has been notable success in de-streaming pilots in the U.S. that can be learned from as well. Two California schools, serving predominantly racialized and low-income students, have implemented new supports alongside structural changes to academic pathways. Between 2004 and 2015, the schools were able to increase the university enrolment rate of their graduates (82% and 100%, respectively) through a combination of⁸¹:

- post-secondary education preparation courses for all students in Grades 6-12;
- a 3.5-week extension to the school year;
- mentorship and tutoring programs and access to school counsellors; and
- ongoing professional development.

⁷⁹ Pichette, 2020.

⁸⁰ Marija Glisic and Paul Favro, “Destreaming Research Report,” (Mississauga, ON: Peel District School Board, 2017).

⁸¹ Mehan, H. “Detracking: A Promising Strategy to Increase Social Mobility for Underserved Youth.” Washington, D.C.: American Institutes for Research, 2015. <https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/OpeningTheDoors-EquityProject-Jan2015.pdf>.

Policy Recommendations

While de-streaming Grade 9 math classrooms is a promising starting point, our provincial education system needs a thoroughly planned, multi-year implementation plan developed collaboratively among education stakeholders to end discriminatory streaming practices that begin in elementary and extend beyond Grade 9. De-streaming presents an opportunity to address systemic inequity, labour and data gaps, and to improve student outcomes.

1. Expand de-streaming to all core Grade 9 and 10 students with oversight from a de-streaming taskforce

Given the mixed history of de-streaming efforts and the entrenched biases of some educators, parents and students, there is significant risk of losing critical stakeholder buy-in if reform is poorly implemented. Of particular concern is the geographic concentration of provincial de-streaming advocacy located in the Greater Toronto Area. While school boards across the province will be responsible for implementation this September, communities with fewer students, or less diversity in their student cohort, may be more resistant to these proposed changes without a thoroughly considered implementation plan. However, Ontario's equity-seeking groups have waited decades for de-streamed education and the province cannot afford for this effort to fail again.

In order to best manage the planning and implementation of de-streaming, it is recommended that the Ministry of Education establish a province-wide de-streaming taskforce made up of members representative of key stakeholder groups from different regions of the Province, including: trustees, superintendents, principals, teachers, unions, students, parents, employers, post-secondary institutions, community members, researchers and organizations committed to education advocacy. This group would be responsible for ensuring a direct line between stakeholders and the Ministry to inform the design, implementation and monitoring of the initiative, including local planning and engagement at all school boards and individual schools.

The taskforce should also be responsible for recommending how and when to expand the de-streaming efforts to all Grade 9 and 10 courses as soon as possible — particularly those that are core curriculum requirements, such as English and Science. These classes, as prerequisites for senior grades, act as key gatekeepers to pathway mobility and higher education entrance.

By Grades 11 and 12, the need for differentiation in curriculum is clearer as students prepare for their chosen post-secondary pathway; different pursuits require different prerequisite knowledge and skills. However, Ontario’s current streaming practices produce a number of negative effects due to 1) how early streaming practices take place, 2) the use of arbitrary perceptions of student ability as stream placement indicators, and 3) the inflexibility to move between streams, ultimately limiting post-secondary access to students in applied or essential pathways. For senior grades, the province should prioritize differentiation by discipline, rather than ability, for senior high school grades to keep post-secondary destinations open longer for students. For example, the majority of Canadian provinces do not stream Grade 10 science by ability, but rather begin differentiation in Grade 11 in biology, chemistry, physics and earth sciences.

While a number of elective courses are offered as “open” and operate as mixed-ability learning environments, they are typically perceived as lower stakes (e.g., physical education and the arts). The taskforce would also be wise to follow the lead of the TDSB where de-streamed classes were intentionally labelled “academic” rather than “open” to reassure teachers, students and parents that de-streaming would not sacrifice rigour or quality of instruction.

2. Accelerate provincial student identity data collection and reporting

To effectively understand and identify the trends of inequity between students within the education system, it is recommended that the province accelerate implementation of school boards’ collecting, analyzing and reporting disaggregated student data, including by race and ethnicity, to this school year. These data should be used to inform evidenced-based policy aimed at creating equitable outcomes and evaluating education practices. The current timetable of 2023 for initial data collection means several school years will go by without an accurate picture of the impact of de-streaming by student identity. This evidence will be an important

bulwark against skeptical stakeholders. It will also be important to monitor for the risk of “re-streaming” or the practice of still separating students based on prior achievement in de-streamed classes.

It also recommended that the provincial government take a collaborative approach to data collection and sharing alongside other provinces and Statistics Canada to unlock greater understanding about our school systems across the country⁸², and to provide support for longitudinal and comparative research on de-streaming efforts.

3. Educator training

Ontario’s implementation of de-streaming policy in the 1990s left the majority of teachers dissatisfied.⁸³ Many felt unprepared for the changes and overwhelmed by the task of instructing mixed-ability classrooms.⁸⁴ Over time, educators gained confidence in teaching de-streamed classes through differentiated instruction, but not without the support of curricular changes, shifts in organizational culture, and professional development.

To equip educators with the necessary tools to effectively lead classrooms of diverse learners, investment in ongoing and job-embedded professional development and training should be a priority led by the Province, including training on how to best support students missing essential foundational numeracy and literacy concepts. This learning should not be limited to Grade 9 teachers alone, but made routinely available to Grade 7-12 teachers, principals, guidance counselors, school and executive staff, as well as board trustees and teacher candidates. It should also include training that challenges racism, discrimination, ableism, classism and oppression and contributes to a K-12 culture of universally high expectations and open pathway mobility as students learn and hone their passions, strengths and interests over time.

⁸² Karen Robson et al., “A Comparison of Factors Determining the Transition to Postsecondary Education in Toronto and Chicago,” *Research in Comparative and International Education* 14, no. 3 (September 1, 2019): 338–56, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745499919865140>

⁸³ D. Rawcliffe, “Summary of OSSTF Responses to the Implementation of Destreaming Survey” (Toronto: Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation Education, 1994).

⁸⁴ John A. Ross, Sharon McKeiver, and Anne Hogaboam-Gray, “Fluctuations in Teacher Efficacy during Implementation of Destreaming,” *Canadian Journal of Education / Revue Canadienne de l’éducation* 22, no. 3 (1997): 283–96, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1585831>.

4. Staffing schools and creating programs for success

Structural changes to secondary curriculum must be appropriately resourced and thoroughly monitored to avoid unintended consequences that further strain educators and limit student success, particularly in light of the considerable learning disruptions through the pandemic. Average class sizes, for example, run the risk of expansion without appropriate planning by school boards when moving from applied and academic to de-streamed courses. Supporting inclusion of some students with significant learning gaps from elementary school will come with additional needs — gaps which have been exacerbated by the pandemic.⁸⁵ A report from the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario offers two suggested models for de-streaming in the province.⁸⁶ One focuses on providing additional secondary resources to meet the diverse needs of students (e.g., smaller classes, after school tutoring supports, committed special education resources in classrooms), while the other proposes bridging support programs between key transitional grades for those with academic challenges (e.g., summer programs offered between Grades 8, 9, and 10; greater offerings of general learning strategies and electives). Both prioritize rigorous curriculum and “[address] biases in curriculum and among individual [teachers and staff].”⁸⁷

Ontario allocated \$3 million of the federal pandemic funding for schools to provide targeted math and literacy supports for Grade 8 students transitioning into the de-streamed Grade 9 math course this coming school year.⁸⁸ However, expecting school boards to implement such a significant structural, pedagogical, and cultural change without additional investment next year and the years to come in training, supports and parent and community engagement will mean school boards will either pull resources from elsewhere to support Grade 9 transition or, more likely, under-resource the de-streaming effort. The provincial government can learn from the successes and missteps of past de-streaming initiatives and prioritize investment in targeted supports for training and staff dedicated to support learning recovery in the Grade 8 to 9 transition. In order for de-streaming to be successful, we must ensure that school leaders and educators are equipped with the necessary engagement, resources, training and planning to support sustainable implementation.

⁸⁵ Kristin Rushowy, “‘Devastating effects’: Student learning gaps due to fallout of COVID-19 must be addressed, pediatricians say,” *Toronto Star*, April 25, 2021, <https://www.thestar.com/politics/provincial/2021/04/25/devastating-effects-student-learning-gaps-due-to-fallout-of-covid-19-must-be-addressed-pediatricians-say.html>

⁸⁶ Pichette, 2020.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁸⁸ Yael Ginsler, Denys Giguère and Andrew Davis, “Federal Safe Return to Class Fund: 2020-21 Spring and Summer Learning Opportunities for School Boards” (Toronto: Ontario Ministry of Education, 2021).



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