

EDUCATION

Report casts doubt on two curriculum streams for Ontario's Grade 9 students

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Ontario students should not have to choose between so-called applied and academic programs at the start of high school, an education lobby group said in a report released Monday.

People for Education said research it has done, as well as past studies by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, suggest splitting students into separate streams contributes to lacklustre grades for those from lower income families.

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“Dividing students in this way has only exacerbated inequality,” Annie Kidder, the executive director of People for Education said in an interview. Students starting in Grade 9 must choose either applied courses, which focus on essential concepts and practical applications, or the academic stream, which employs theory and abstract problems.

People for Education's report said Ontario students who opted for applied courses fared notably worse than those in academic courses in terms of test scores, graduation and postsecondary enrolment. It based its findings, in part, on a survey of some 241 high schools, about a quarter of secondary schools in Ontario.

For example it cited a finding by the Toronto District School Board that 88 per cent of students in academic math in Grade 9 go on to graduate, compared to only 59 per cent in the applied course.

The report's conclusions mirror global findings from the OECD, which has suggested a number of possible reasons for the results. They include lower expectations from both teachers and students, slower-paced and more fragmented instructions, a lower quality learning experience, stigmatization, and a decrease in self-esteem.

The OECD has advised education systems to defer making students choose between the two streams until the late high school years.

Over the next two weeks, many Grade 8 students in Ontario will be choosing between taking “hands-on” applied courses or “theoretical and abstract” academic courses as their core subjects for Grade 9.

However it’s unclear if students and their families are really getting all the information they need to understand the long-term implications of their choices, Kidder said.

“Those decisions are going to have an impact on their choices all the way through school, maybe even after they graduate – or in some cases, if they graduate,” she said.

In almost all cases in Ontario, students in applied courses study a different curriculum than those in academic courses. They are also in different classrooms with different teachers, according to the report.

Naomi Tejada and Norlan Quintanilla, a Mississauga couple who are both college graduates, said they have selected the applied stream for their 13-year-old son.

“I sat down with my son and told him that we have chosen all applied but that doesn’t mean anything. We don’t make a big deal out of that,” Tejada said.

“It’s a new environment for him, so we want him to start off with a less demanding workload,” she said, adding that to her, that’s the only difference between applied and academic.

Tejada says her plan is to later transfer her son to academic because they believe he can do it.

“We want him to be challenged and to go to university,” she said in a phone interview.

Suzy Marasigan, a Brampton mother of two children, isn’t sold on the notion of later streaming.

She opted for the academic stream for her 13-year-old daughter, as she did for her son who is now at Queen’s University.

But university was a struggle initially for her son, said Marasigan, who wonders if it would have been even tougher for him if streaming had been put off until the later grades.

“I’m afraid it might make the curriculum too easy and harder for kids when they go to university,” Marasigan said in a phone interview.

Education Minister Liz Sandals didn’t address People For Education’s call for later streaming, but in an emailed statement she acknowledged an achievement gap. She said the province would make resources available to more schools to help address the problem.

Ontario's graduation rates have increased from 68 per cent in 2003 to 83 per cent in 2012, she noted.

"We're confident we can build on the progress we have achieved and help our students reach new heights," she said.

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