

Report gives failing grades to Canada's education system

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OTTAWA — Troubling trends in the Canadian education system can be reversed if the country adopts national standards for learning, a report released Tuesday suggests.

The Canadian Council on Learning, in its final report before it ceases to exist, says without a national oversight body for education, student achievement will continue to decline and undermine Canada's economic competitiveness in the years to come.

"Canada is the only country that doesn't have a national ministry," says Paul Cappon, the council's CEO.

And the principal reason for this, the report says, is "that our governments have failed to work together to develop the necessary policies and failed to exhibit the required collective political leadership."

Education falls under the responsibility of provincial governments, with limited federal involvement, but Cappon says that relationship shouldn't get in the way of what's good for Canadians, which, he says, is similar to the dynamics of Canadian health care.

"The dysfunctionality of the health-care system costs lives, every week and every month," says Cappon. "And the dysfunctionality in the education and learning systems costs Canada prosperity, costs opportunities for the young and the not-so-young: so of course, you can only overcome (the divide) if you want to and if there is political will do it."

The federal-provincial dynamic decreases the quality of education in Canada from early childhood education through to post-secondary schools, aboriginal and adult learning, the council argues. A change is needed to get governments of all levels to work together to avoid further declines in student outcomes, the council says.

"Canada is slipping down the international learning curve," says the report, titled *What is the Future of Learning in Canada?*

It says there currently is no way to measure the quality of services offered by post-secondary institutions; and that 42 per cent of adult

Canadians fall below the standard in literacy required internationally to be productive in an older society, according international standardized testing, in which Canada has been participating. The council estimates there will be three million more Canadians below that level in 20 years, Cappon adds.

"To do something about it, you have to have a strategy. You have to say: 'This is what our goal is. To see (only) a proportion of people who should be below that level. This is how we're going to go about it,'" Cappon says.

The CCL is calling for a council of ministers on learning, represented by federal, provincial and territorial governments and overseen by a national monitoring body on Canadian learning progress, which would be independent and would report to the council and to the public.

Cappon says if the European Union — with its 27 diverse countries — can work together to monitor and attempt to improve its citizens' education, Canada, with its distinct provinces and territories should be able to do the same.

"Every five years, they set goals that each country should achieve and they score how well they achieve those goals both for the EU, as a whole, and for each of the countries."

The Paul Martin Liberals created the Canada Council on Learning in 2004 with the help of federal funding. Last year, the Conservative government informed the council it was cutting its funding.

Its last report before the council closes its downtown Ottawa doors in March, is a swansong that must be heard, Cappon says.

"This is our legacy report and therefore, a very important one in which we summarized our main findings over seven years of work."

The report ends with a plea for a similar-styled organization to become a national voice for education.

The report says problems in the education system begin at age five, with research indicating that one-quarter of children enter school without the skills needed to learn to read, write and perform math.

Issues continue to arise from kindergarten to Grade 12, the report says. Francophone students score worse than their anglophone counterparts; a growing number of boys are failing and dropping out of school; and there is a decline in international test scores. All this,

the report says, can be traced back to a lack of national co-ordination on education.

"The absence of common, or shared learning outcomes among Canadian provinces and territories is the most important weakness of K-12 education in Canada — and is the single most-important reason for which our international standardized test scores will continue their decline," the report says.

The most scathing critique in the report is saved for the post-secondary education system in Canada, which the council describes as highly "dysfunctional."

According to the report, provinces prevent any federal involvement in developing national standards for a university and college education. National groups representing colleges and universities fill this "national policy vacuum," the report says, and take the opportunity to advocate the interest of their members that "may or may not represent the public interest."

Federal involvement in post-secondary education is limited to funding of research that has skewed the mission of universities and colleges, the report says, leaving schools able to focus on promoting the research profiles of their faculty rather than focusing on teaching students.

The result are schools with no quality assurance system, the report says.

"Canada is unique in the developed world for having no national strategy for (post-secondary education), no acknowledged and accepted goals, no benchmarks, and no public reporting of resulting based on widely accepted measures," the report says.

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