

# POVERTY & INEQUALITY

From the People for Education Annual Report  
on Ontario's Publicly Funded Schools 2011



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*An imbalance between rich and poor is the oldest and most fatal ailment of all republics.*

Plutarch, Ancient Greek biographer (c. 46–120 CE)

Schools have the potential to change children’s lives, to overcome intergenerational cycles of poverty and to set young people on a trajectory for lifelong success.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, despite some real successes, poverty remains one of the most powerful factors affecting students’ chances for success in school.<sup>2</sup>

By international standards, Ontario can congratulate itself on being one of the jurisdictions where the effect of socioeconomic status on achievement is less than in many other countries.<sup>3</sup> But there remain stubborn gaps in outcomes and resources.

## **MORE THAN ONE IN SIX CHILDREN IN ONTARIO SCHOOLS LIVE IN POVERTY**

This year, for the first time, People for Education looked at the connection between the income of students’ families and the resources and supports available in their schools. School-by-school data from the People for Education surveys, when matched with data from the Ministry of Education’s [School Information Finder](#), reveal information about the distribution and impact of poverty in Ontario schools.

According to the School Information Finder, the average proportion of students living below the low income cut-off (approximately \$30,000 for a family of four)<sup>4</sup> is 16.5%, and almost every Ontario school has at least some of these students. However there are some schools that have a very high proportion of students from very low-income families. This is a concern because research shows students are less likely to overcome the impact of poverty when they attend economically segregated schools.<sup>5</sup>

For the purposes of analysis, this report looks at elementary schools at either end of the spectrum (see [Methodology](#)). These schools represent two kinds of populations. In the schools at one end of the spectrum, over 30% of the student population come from families below the low income cut-off. At the other end, *under 2%* of the students come from low-income families. People for Education calls these schools “high” and “low” poverty schools.

In those schools, the averages tell the story. In the high poverty schools, an average of 42% of the students come from low-income families. In the low poverty schools, the average is 0.6%. High poverty schools also had an above-average percentage of newcomer students.

## **FUNDRAISING**

Schools across the province raise millions of dollars per year through fundraising to augment school budgets. But the fundraising is not evenly distributed. High poverty schools raise, on average, less than half the amounts raised in low poverty schools. When this result is combined with the fact that the top 10% of fundraising schools raise as much as the bottom 78% put together, it is apparent that communities with the fewest resources also have the fewest opportunities for the enrichment provided by fundraising.

## **SPECIAL EDUCATION**

Inequities are also apparent in special education waiting lists and access to programs.

The average number of children on special education waiting lists in high poverty schools (10) is more than double the average number of children (4) per low poverty school. And 28% of high poverty schools report they have identified students who are not receiving recommended support, again, double the percentage of low poverty schools.

These differences in access and support may be caused by differences in parents’ capacity to either pay for outside assessments—which can cost as much as \$2,000—or to engage in the advocacy that is sometimes necessary to ensure students are receiving the support they are entitled to.

Surprisingly, the percentage of students receiving special education support is similar in schools at either end of the spectrum, despite the fact that research shows that children from low-income families have higher levels of disability.<sup>6</sup>

The only area that appears to favour high poverty schools is the ratio of special education students to special education teachers in high poverty schools, which is much lower than the provincial average (1:29, as opposed to 1:36).

#### **WHERE IS THE POLICY? THE DISAPPEARING LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES GRANT**

The Ministry of Education does provide funding to school boards to support students whose socio-economic status puts them at risk of struggling in school. This funding, known as the Learning Opportunities Grant (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.<sup>7</sup>

In 2002, the government review of the funding formula recommended an increase in the amount of the grant and better analysis of the programs and services being provided to students at risk.<sup>8</sup>

But over the years, and despite emphasizing education as a key part of the government anti-poverty strategy,<sup>9</sup> two things have happened: The number of programs the LOG is intended to cover has expanded, and the funding has been reduced. Since 2005, the per-pupil amount in the LOG has been reduced by 9%, and the grant is now intended to cover the costs of not only programs based on demographic needs, but also a range of literacy and numeracy programs, the [Specialist High Skills Major program](#), the [K-12 School Effectiveness Framework](#) and more.<sup>10</sup> The grant now gives more weight to boards' poverty demographics, but that has not overcome the loss of funding and the breadth of programs the grant is intended to cover.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The current Learning Opportunities Grant is neither protected, nor targeted at programs for disadvantaged students, and it is insufficient to support programs that would alleviate the effects of poverty.

People for Education recommends

- the provincial government develop a new Equity in Education Grant, designated solely for providing programs to mitigate socio-economic and ethno-racial factors affecting students, and
- further that the new Equity in Education Grant should be protected, and include a built-in accountability process to mandate that school boards report annually on the programs and services funded by the grant and on their effectiveness.

# NOTES

- 1 See e.g. Frempong, G., & Willms, J.D. (2002). Can school quality compensate for socioeconomic disadvantage? In J.D. Willms (Ed.), *Vulnerable children: Findings from Canada's National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth* (pp.277-303). Edmonton: University of Alberta Press.
- 2 Coleman, J. S., et al. (1966). *Equality of educational opportunity*. Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office; Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I., Taggart, B., Hunt, S., et al. (2008). *Final report from the primary phase: Preschool, school and family influences on children's development during key stage 2 (age 7-11)*. London: Department for Children, Schools, and Family.
- 3 Education Quality and Accountability Office. (2010). *Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA): Highlights of Ontario results*. Toronto, ON: Author. 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)
- 4 See e.g. Giles, P. (2004). *Low income measurement in Canada*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/75f0002m/75f0002m2004011-eng.pdf>
- 5 See e.g. *Teachers College Record* (2010) 112, which includes three special issues on the impact of school and class composition on educational achievement: 112(4) achievement in math and science; 112(5) verbal achievement and other academic outcomes; and 112(6) intergroup relations and other non-academic outcomes.
- 6 See e.g. Fujiura, G. T., & Yamaki, K. (2000). Trends in demography of child poverty and disability. *Exceptional Children*, 66, 187-199; Leitch, K. (2008). *Reaching for the top: A report by the Advisor on Healthy Children and Youth*. Ottawa, ON: Health Canada.
- 7 Expert Panel on Learning Opportunities Grant. (1997, August 29). *Panel report to Minister of Education and Training*. On file with author.
- 8 Education Equality Task Force, & Rozanski, M. (2002). *Investing in public education: Advancing the goal of continuous improvement in student learning and achievement* (Review). Toronto, ON: Ministry of Education.
- 9 Government of Ontario. (2009). *Breaking the cycle: Ontario's poverty reduction strategy*. Toronto, ON: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/breakingthecycle/report/index.aspx>
- 10 See Government of Ontario. (2010). *Education funding: Technical paper 2010-11*. Retrieved from <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/funding/1011/technical10.pdf>, page 59.



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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