

# Choosing Excellence

*This analyst asks why Alberta students do so much better than other Canadians.*

By Dennis Owens

The Canadian Education Statistics Program (CESP), a joint initiative of the Council of Ministers of Education and Statistics Canada, collects student achievement results in the subject areas of mathematics, language arts, and science across the country. The CESP uses three data sources.

- The OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is an international standardized assessment administered to 15-year-old students. Over 40 countries participate.
- The School Achievement Indicators Program (SAIP) is unique to Canada and assesses students aged 13 and 16 in the areas of math content and problem-solving, reading and writing, and science.
- The International Mathematics and Science Studies (TIMSS) is administered by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement and assesses grade 8 students. It currently has over 60 participating countries.

While all provinces participate in the PISA and SAIP assessments, only five provinces (Alberta, British Columbia, Newfoundland and Labrador, Ontario, and Quebec) elected to have a statistically-significant sample of students participate in TIMSS.

As one might expect, results vary quite widely across the country. However, one fact immediately stands out from the results. The province of Alberta comes out on top of each of the assessments.

Considering that the PISA, SAIP, and TIMSS assessments are independently designed and administered, it is highly improbable that one province would consistently have the highest results unless its education system were in some way superior. That conclusion is reinforced by the fact that the Alberta results were significantly higher than the Canadian average in every category.

It is reasonable to ask, therefore, what makes Alberta's public schools so uniquely successful that the province outperforms all others by a significant margin in each subject area.

Teachers' unions across Canada have long argued that a significant determinant of educational success is small class sizes. If this is the case, one would expect to find that Alberta has the lowest teacher-pupil ratios in the country. Here's how the provinces compare on this item.

Pupil-Teacher Ratios	
Nfld and Labrador	14.1
Manitoba	14.7
Quebec	15.0
Nova Scotia	15.9
Ontario	16.3
New Brunswick	16.7
Prince Education Island	16.8
British Columbia	16.9
Saskatchewan	16.9
Alberta	16.9

While Alberta students consistently score highest on various achievement tests, the province's classrooms have more students per teacher than every other province except BC and Saskatchewan (which are tied). Viewed from the reverse, Newfoundland and Labrador has the lowest pupil-teacher ratio, yet consistently has one of the worst academic rankings. Something other than pupil-teacher ratios must be responsible for Alberta's high achievement.

Alberta stands out from other provinces in two important respects. One of these is the level of **school choice**. Parents in Alberta have more choice in schooling than in any other province in Canada.

A number of public school districts in Alberta allow students to attend schools outside their neighbourhood. The Edmonton board goes even further, in that schools are encouraged to diversify in order to adapt to the needs of different parents and students.

This willingness to allow parents to exercise choice has led to an increase in the number of students remaining in Edmonton public schools, while the student achievement results on provincial exams have continued to show improvement.

In addition to encouraging regular public school districts to offer parental choice, Alberta is the only province with charter school legislation. While the legislation permits only a small number of these schools to exist simultaneously, student achievement in charter schools has been impressive.

For example, Foundations for the Future Charter Academy, a K-12 charter school with five campuses in Calgary, has had such impressive success that it has an enrolment of about 2000 students and a wait list of 5000.

Since research studies indicate that the provision of choice in other jurisdictions has a positive effect on student achievement, it is a reasonable conclusion that this dynamic is working for Alberta as well.

Along with allowing for the greatest amount of parental choice, Alberta also has the strongest level of **educational accountability**. Students in Alberta write more province-wide standardized exams than those in any other province.

Students in grades 3, 6, 9, and 12 are required to write annual standardized exams in four core subject areas: math, language arts, science, and social studies. In addition, grade 12 students write standardized exams in their core subject areas that count for 50% of their final marks.

It is probably no coincidence that the province with the most school choice and the most accountability also has the best student achievement.

*(Adapted with permission from "[Educational Achievement in Canada](#)". Mr. Owens is the senior policy analyst at the Frontier Centre for Public Policy. )*