

C O N S E I L   S U P É R I E U R   D E   L ' É D U C A T I O N

# Report

ON THE STATE AND NEEDS OF EDUCATION  
2008-2010

BALANCING EQUITY AND  
PERFORMANCE IN EDUCATION:  
A CHALLENGE FOR SOCIETY

## SUMMARY

Québec 

As in many other parts of the world, education and training represent an ongoing area of concern in Québec, for governments and citizens alike. The Conseil supérieur de l'éducation has reaffirmed the importance of making education— widely considered to be a shared asset—into a collective effort, one that embodies the building of a progressively more just, equitable and democratic society. With its 2008–2010 Report On The State and Needs Of Education, the Conseil seeks to enlighten the public debate on education by offering its perspective on the evolution of the education system and the key issues and challenges the latter must address in order to fully carry out its role, both for the public good and for the continued development of Québec society.

Since the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s, Québec has made great strides with its education system. Massive investments have improved not only access to education and training, but also access to success. Indeed these efforts have been rewarded, with significant achievements made over the past 50 years. As a result, the performance of Québec's education system currently ranks high among the world's more advanced societies.

Modern societies tend to exert heavy pressures on education systems, both in their demand for more advanced levels of education and more rigorous curricula and the need for a highly-skilled workforce. Today's education systems find themselves increasingly assessed on "performance"—in other words, on their ability to train and prepare an educated population to fully participate in a 21<sup>st</sup> century society. Starting from the principles of inclusive education primarily advocated by UNESCO—which has called for education systems and their frameworks to be adapted to individual needs—the Conseil thus studied the Québec education system for its ability to "include" more people in education or training efforts and support them on their paths to success.

For the Conseil, an inclusive education system is one that first and foremost encourages strong participation and creates interest in education or training, meets individual needs by adapting and updating educational frameworks and school organization as well as institutional and teaching practices, all while maintaining level- or sector-specific standards. Such a system thus ensures a high-quality education in keeping with a lifelong learning approach, through supporting individuals on their different paths to success, paths aligned with their interests, aspirations and potential. Simply put, an inclusive education system must allow individuals to realize their full potential while meeting the high standards of educational objectives. To be sure, developing an equitable and high-performing education system is an ambitious challenge, yet one well-aligned with the goal of a more democratic education system that Québec has been actively engaged in pursuing since the Quiet Revolution.

In its 2008–2010 Report, the Conseil therefore presents a comprehensive analysis of the Québec education system from the perspective of the latter's ability to balance success for a greater number of individuals and the fulfillment of each (equity) with the high standards set at every level or sector of instruction (performance). Despite the great accomplishments of the Québec education system, the Conseil calls for continued effort in removing persistent barriers and improving access to education and success, to uphold the principles of equity and social justice in Québec and better respond to challenges posed by current and future trends.

In its study, the Conseil has identified several areas of vulnerability within the Québec education system, notably conditions that for some segments of the population limit or hinder access to either education or educational success. The Conseil deems that these areas should be given greater focus and the subject of in-depth analyses and targeted initiatives in the coming years.

## Developing The Québec Education System: Areas of vulnerability

- In General Education in the Youth Sector

Elementary and secondary education is unique, due in large part to the scope of expectation placed upon it by society in general. Indeed, mandatory school attendance—a key lever for equity and democracy in education—requires as a corollary the obligation to support all school-age children in developing their full potential, irrespective of their wide range of individual characteristics and needs. For the Conseil, two areas of vulnerability in the education system attest to concerns in this regard: The first is the challenge of considering different learning patterns and needs to prevent cumulative and often irreversible learning delays in students. In fact, the Conseil notes that the incidence of learning delays are high, and appears to be strongly correlated with the likelihood of academic failure. Many advocates are calling for more flexibility both in school organization and in administrative and teaching practices to adequately address these issues. A second and equally important area of vulnerability involves the need for intervention among at-risk students or students with special needs, students whose potential for academic failure and dropping out of school is already well-documented. In the opinion of the Conseil, too many secondary students are leaving school without certification, even if some may eventually return to or resume their studies in adult education or vocational training.

- In Adult Education, Continuing Education and Vocational Training

Adult education, continuing education and vocational training deliver services to a great number of people—an extremely heterogeneous group with a vast array of different education and training needs—as well as an offer of services shared by multiple institutions and organizations. In its study, the Conseil noted tensions in adult education centres carrying out their mission while serving an increasingly diverse population. It also noted the ever-present challenge of improving access to vocational training for youth and the need to bolster adult participation in adult education and continuing education. For the Conseil, the key challenge transcending all identified areas of vulnerability lies in increasing participation in education and training and diversifying the offer of services to meet the gamut of education plans and expressed needs.

- In Post-Secondary Education

Post-secondary education is also characterized by an increasingly heterogeneous population with a gamut of educational plans and needs that manifest themselves in a variety of education paths. One of the areas of vulnerability noted by the Conseil at this level concerns the issue of embracing diversity, an openness that calls for a greater adaptability on the part of institutions and players. Indeed, an analysis of completion rates among college and university students reveals that despite considerable gains in the past 40 years, there is still room for improvement in some individual post-secondary sectors. At the college level, progress could be made in increasing certification rates in technical programs, while at the university level a more comprehensive study of certification rates by discipline could help isolate specific disciplines or initiatives where more efforts are needed. To be sure, socio-economic factors always play a role in accessibility to post-secondary education, and institutions must address any barriers—individual or institutional—that limit access to this level of education or training. Lastly, the funding of post-secondary institutions is always topical, particularly with regard to cost-sharing between the Government and the student. In the opinion of the Conseil, however, such sharing must always safeguard any advancements made in the area of access to post-secondary education.

- Developing Synergy Between Services Providing Access to an Initial Qualification Training

A fairly clear consensus has emerged among the organizations consulted by the Conseil on the need for greater synergy between initiatives targeting access to education and those targeting access to success in completing an initial qualification training. To be sure, this synergy should extend to children and adults across all levels and sectors of instruction. However, the challenge of educational success for a greater number of individuals seen as access to an initial qualification training, the significant impact of non-certification and the scope of the human and financial resources invested in this mandate appear to make this synergy essential. Beyond the rhetoric and determination, creating real partnerships in the field can often prove difficult. The challenge ultimately lies in developing a true synergy of services among all involved, to strengthen their ability to work together toward a common objective in a structured, sustainable and cohesive manner.

### **Six Approaches for Developing a More Inclusive Education System**

The goal of an inclusive education system founded on principles of equity and social justice is the fulfillment of each and every individual, regardless of personal skills, interests or characteristics. Such a system must therefore be able to balance success for a greater number of individuals and the fulfillment of each (equity) with the high standards set at every level or sector of instruction (performance). The development of the education system must therefore be carried out in light of persistent barriers to learning and necessary adaptation to individual needs, while simultaneously maintaining high standards. With this in mind, the Conseil has formulated six approaches drawn from its analysis of areas of vulnerability in the education system. In its opinion, these approaches would support the contribution of all in a system of shared responsibilities, much like the Québec education system.

- APPROACH 1: Upholding a Societal Choice for a More Inclusive Education System

The development of a more inclusive education system that balances equity and performance is founded as much on the demands of modern society as the principles of equity and social justice consistent with any broader vision of a more just, equitable and democratic society. To be sure, the Conseil recognizes that such a vision does come at a cost. However, as education is a key lever in personal, cultural, social and economic development, it must therefore be considered as both an investment whose benefits are weighed over the medium and long terms and a legacy for future generations that would enable Québec society to continue to grow culturally, socially and economically. This societal choice will require concrete and collective actions on the part of education players as well as their partners in other sectors and in civil society.

- APPROACH 2: Placing Education at the Heart of the Fight Against Poverty

While education and training are key levers in the development of both the individual and society, socio-economic status remains a major factor in educational success at every level and sector of the instruction today. Indeed, low socio-economic and cultural factors can significantly hinder access to education and success. To a certain extent, the issues dominating both education and training and the fight against poverty stem from a shared desire for equity and social justice, as well as for the social and economic development of Québec as a whole. Because of the close links between the fight against poverty and access to education and success, the Conseil deems that both must be an integral part of any common strategy or concerted effort, regardless of level or sector of instruction.

- APPROACH 3: Increasing the Education System’s Ability to Consider Diverse Learning Needs

Balancing equity and performance in the education system inevitably requires better consideration of heterogeneity, both in terms of individual characteristics and the scope and nature of individual needs. The areas of vulnerability identified in the Conseil’s Report clearly indicate the importance of flexibility and adaptability of both school organization and teaching practices to better respond to individual needs. For the Conseil, a more inclusive education system is one that allows each and every individual—regardless of interests, aspirations and potential—to access the highest possible level of education without diluting curricular standards at any level or sector of instruction: elementary or secondary, post-secondary, adult education, continuing education or vocational training. Such a system would therefore require ongoing adaptation and upgrading of school organization, as well as prioritized development and implementation of diversified institutional and educational practices, to better respond to individual learning needs. To ensure the adequate guidance and support, the Conseil also calls for improved coordination of service delivery across sectors. This would optimize the continuity and consistency of these services from the perspective of the individual and encourage increased participation of civil society and communities.

- APPROACH 4: Enhancing the Education System’s Ability to Support Differentiated and Forward-Looking Educational Success

Developing a more inclusive education system means working toward both the success of all and realizing the full potential of each and every individual. The resulting gamut of interests, aspirations and potential make a multiplicity of paths possible, as well as a variety of educational plans individuals can accomplish at different stages of their lives. In other words, the very definition of educational success needs to be broadened to consider other possible types of education path and success. To do so, the Conseil deems that diversifying educational and support services has become necessary.

- APPROACH 5: Ensuring Greater Continuity in Educational and Training Services as Part of a Lifelong Learning Approach

The Conseil noted areas of vulnerability in the continuity of services between different levels and sectors of instruction, as well as between the education sector and other sectors (e.g., health and social services, labour). Yet a more inclusive education system—one that provides greater support for children, youth and adults—requires more than merely supporting individuals already in the education system on their path to success. It must also attract, reintegrate, retain and provide support for even more youth and adults in their educational plans. This calls for greater continuity and consistency between partners, particularly for individuals in transitional periods and those most at risk in the area of educational success. The Conseil recommends, however, that any tangible and sustainable mechanisms developed in this regard must also be able to foster synergy and promote consistency between the different support services.

- APPROACH 6: Providing Essential Stewardship

Developing a more inclusive education system must inevitably involve some degree of government oversight. The Conseil believes stewardship on the Government’s part would help to ensure that any implementation of such a system moves forward in the desired direction. This role, however, must be carried out so as to facilitate monitoring at the Québec and regional levels, and to ensure system-wide standards are maintained at the regional and local levels. In essence this means the Government would act as guardian of the principles of inclusive education, through regular assessment of the

various components of the system in sustaining an adaptive response to the needs of individuals while simultaneously ensuring high standards. Stewardship at the regional level would also be required, as community engagement in education and training issues is crucial. Moreover, the Conseil deems that the Government must ensure the dissemination of information on the state of education and training at the community level, so that local players may all pool resources toward the achievement of shared goals.

## **Conclusion**

Developing a more inclusive education system that balances equity and performance is the central theme of the 2008–2010 Report On The State and Needs Of Education. As in many other countries, the social and economic demands of modern society exert heavy pressures on Québec’s education system. In this context, education and lifelong learning have become two major challenges. Increasingly, individuals who do not obtain qualification or those who do not—or cannot—continue their learning at later stages in life may find themselves at risk, with all the consequences this entails, both for them and Québec society as a whole. It is from this perspective that the Conseil reaffirms the importance of an inclusive education system: a system that not only embraces and supports individuals in accomplishing their education plans, but in a broader sense one that would also attract, engage, retain and support an even greater number of individuals, a system that would thus enable each and every individual—regardless of goals or ambitions—to realize his or her full potential and become active participants in society.