

Toward the Continuous  
Improvement of the  
Curriculum and  
Programs of Study

# Report on the State and Needs of Education 2012-2014

## SUMMARY

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### SUMMARY

Reforming the curriculum and programs of study in Québec began just before the turn of the new millennium, two years after the Estates General on Education in 1995. What progress has been made with these reforms 15 years on? Can examining the development and implementation of curricular reform from the perspective of the processes and paths taken be useful in understanding where we are at today? These questions have led the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation to examine the current state of these reforms in general education—in both the youth and adult sectors—for its *Report on the State and Needs of Education 2012-2014*.

The report is divided into four sections. In **Section I**, the Conseil revisits the founding documents of the reforms and its own role in relation to the recommendations found therein. In carrying out its mission, the Conseil was instrumental in defining the key issues, challenges and shaping subsequent courses of action that emerged in the wake of the Estates General on Education. Throughout the process, the Conseil was not only a source of inspiration, but an independent observer and attentive supporter as well. Fully embraced, this triple role continues to guide the Conseil's approach in the present report.

Seeking to understand from within how school stakeholders took part in the development and implementation of these reforms, and identify the levers and barriers found along the way, the Conseil examined the past 15 years of educational policy, analyzing the views of the stakeholders as well as several aspects of pedagogical and administrative environments during the reforms.

This contextual analysis revealed that the curricular and program of study reforms that began in 1997 were part of a major overhaul of the Québec education system that ushered in significant change, seen in: the creation of full-time kindergarten for 5-year-olds and early education services; the amalgamation of school boards; the adoption of governing boards; modifications to the relationship between the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport (MELS), school boards and educational institutions; the implementation of a new policy on the integration of special needs students (i.e. those with handicaps, social maladjustments or learning disabilities); the development and legitimization of special education projects within the public secondary school network; the reform of the teacher education program for both elementary and secondary teachers; the introduction of new information and communications technologies in the classroom; the beginning of reasonable accommodation for students from immigrant or diverse cultural and/or religious backgrounds; not to mention the many initiatives undertaken to promote professional development and student retention. This long list of local and Québec-wide policies, action plans and initiatives form the backdrop against which the reforms unfurled, a context where the risk of collision between multiple priorities was so high it demanded the full attention of school stakeholders, forcing them to juggle a flood of available information, the need for change and local mobilization.

Detailing this context is important, as it illustrates that although as central as the reforms may have been, they were nevertheless implemented in conjunction—and often fighting for attention with—other projects launched around the same time.

For the Conseil, a reform is seldom predictable in its execution. Even the goals of a reform cannot be set in stone; rather they need to be revisited each time stakeholders—including those supporting the reform—carefully assess the cost and risks associated with the change. In addition, how a reform is carried out—from conception to implementation—can make a difference. For this report, the Conseil therefore focused its attention on both strategies key to developing and implementing the education reform and strategies for change adopted since the Estates General on Education.

In **Section II**, the Conseil compares reforms undertaken in France, French-speaking Belgium and French-speaking Switzerland, in three distinct education systems that all share adopting a competency-based approach in developing their respective curricula and programs of study. The Conseil noted these European reforms encountered challenges not unlike those observed in Québec: the new and polysemic nature of the concept of *competency*; rifts in the pedagogical culture for many teachers; major problems in the area of compliance, implementation and taking ownership; issues related to the evaluation of competencies, namely cross-curricular competencies; resistance to banning grade retention; ministerial stewardship marked by sudden changes of course; as well as piecemeal additions and amendments. While results to date are mixed, these three countries continue to stay the course in their competency-based approaches, fine-tuning certain areas where needed.

**Section III** provides a summary of stakeholder views on various aspects of the reforms in general education in both the youth and adult sectors. For the Conseil, this is, in essence, “the state and needs of education” as voiced by the stakeholders themselves. This section also offers an overview of how the reforms were implemented, and presents findings that can guide stakeholders and ministerial decision-makers alike in continuing this implementation.

The Conseil noted a consensus among stakeholders on the importance of both the foundations of the reforms and keeping them up to date. While the vast majority stated being committed to these foundations, nuancing is still needed. In fact, the Conseil feels this commitment is greatly weakened, and according to some stakeholders consulted, even questioned in day-to-day practice. Indeed, a large number of proposals brought forth by the reforms should have fulfilled the promise of these foundations, for example working by cycle, the *Policy on the Evaluation of Learning*, inter-disciplinary learning and differentiated instruction. Yet whether for lack of knowledge or inadequate resources, these have not been able to fully meet their objectives, and ultimately promote reaching the key goals of the education reform.

The Conseil believes that the consensus that emerged from the Estates General on Education may not have been as clear or broad as expected by those authorities responsible for the implementation of the reforms. Indeed, the views collected reveal some surprising facts on the awareness and understanding of the purpose of the reforms. For some, they were designed primarily to boost cultural content (filling gaps in core subjects and in general culture), for others, they were first and foremost psycho-cognitive in nature (filling gaps in the area of knowledge transfers and learning strategies). Still others view them as economic

(acquiring the necessary skills for tomorrow's economy) or sociological (meeting the needs of an increasingly large number of unmotivated or disengaged students). This divergence of views is evidence that consensus among stakeholders is less than firm.

### ***General Education in the Youth Sector: Key Findings***

In elementary and secondary education alike, changes to subject time allocation have not been questioned by many school stakeholders. At the elementary level, the key concern reported was the manoeuvring room governing boards have in allocating time for elective subjects. At the secondary level, the Conseil noted that the intended diversification proposed by the allocation tends to conflict with organizational issues, particularly in small-sized schools.

The significant challenges experienced in the production of the Québec Education Program itself (development, implementation and adoption) appear to have been resolved within the process of taking ownership of the program and subsequent amendments, yet some important challenges remain.

The evaluation of competencies is still an important hurdle for school players. The ongoing debate over a standardized report card clearly signals the uneasiness surrounding this issue, just as in exercising professional judgement or adapting the evaluation in some cases.

Cycles are not yet fully established, both at elementary and secondary levels.

Pedagogical leadership continues to be a daunting task for most school principals. However, where it has been demonstrated it is without question a key component of successfully implementing the reforms.

Teacher initial training and ongoing professional development also remain an issue, given the complex nature of the reforms and new skills required.

Teachers must be able to maintain their professional autonomy, however this comes with the responsibility of ongoing professional development and training.

Steering both change and the reforms has been problematic in a number of areas and has lacked consistency and transparency.

### ***General Education in the Adult Sector: Key Findings***

The Conseil noted that since the implementation of the reforms began, the difficulties experienced in the adult sector largely mirror those observed in the youth sector.

Indeed, there have been serious issues surrounding the steering of these reforms in the adult sector, linked primarily to delays in implementing common core basic education programs and the lack of a working timeline and deadlines for all stakeholders.

An increasingly younger student population in adult education centres has posed its own set of challenges, given student services are poorly adapted to the needs and reality of this

group. The manner in which adult education institutions are organized (flexible entry and exit, multi-level and multi-subject groups, etc.) has also created difficulties in implementing the reforms. In addition, the precarious job status of the majority of teachers is such that any work related to taking ownership of the reforms, ongoing training and development, and working in cycle-teams becomes much more involved.

Lastly, new programs of study, the competency-based approach, broad areas of learning, transferable skills as well as evaluation of learning are all facing similar headwinds as in the youth sector.

In **Section IV**, the Conseil analyzes all the data collected from a perspective of legitimacy.

Developing a curriculum is ultimately a political act, insofar as it expresses a society's vision of the world and what it wishes to pass down to younger generations. It's not at all surprising that such an act can generate controversy in a society as diverse and pluralistic as ours. However, working in any field to produce desired results calls for coherence and continuity in any action undertaken.

### ***Strengthening Legitimacy***

In the opinion of the Conseil, *legitimacy* is a key element of the curricular and program of study reforms and an essential condition for their success. This legitimacy needs to be strong from the outset, maintained throughout the implementation process, and adapted to real and tangible situations. Indeed, it is often only along this process that challenges, conflicting values, interest and ideas begin to become clear. As a curricular reform can take years if not decades before producing results, its legitimacy becomes all the more vital, and requires ongoing reassertion and renewal. The Conseil maintains that there is a need to strengthen three kinds of legitimacy: *moral* (knowing and evaluating whether what is being undertaken is good and whether it reflects shared societal values and beliefs); *pragmatic* (the feasibility of the undertaking and the value of its implementation); and *cognitive* (the comprehensible nature of the undertaking).

To this end, the Conseil proposes to the Minister of Education, Recreation and Sports and Minister of Higher Education, Science and Research as well as all school stakeholders three recommendations on courses of action, which, in its opinion, could be useful in the followup of the reforms. These rest on the Conseil's vision for educational change in the coming years. The Conseil believes it is not prudent to conceive the reforms as wall-to-wall, uniform, and top-down, forcing each subject into a standardized mould, widening gaps in continuity and having school stakeholders effect paradigmatic change at break-neck speed. As the past few years have shown, this vision of change leads not only to counterproductive results, controversy and fruitless debate, but to strong resistance and uneven implementation as well. For the Conseil, the solution does not lie in continually reinventing the wheel, as Québec has had the tendency to do every 15 years or so since the Quiet Revolution, first with the framework curriculum of the 1960s replacing the catalogue curricula of a decade earlier, only to follow it a decade later with a results-based curriculum, and eventually introduce competency-based programs of study, themselves hailed as radically different than the programs of study in the 1980s.

### **Recommendation I**

#### **COLLECTIVELY RECLAIM THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE CURRICULUM AND PROGRAMS OF STUDY**

From the perspective of *moral* legitimacy, an in-depth consideration of the foundations of the reforms in question can no longer be ignored. The Conseil thus calls on the Minister of Education, Recreation and Sports and Minister of Higher Education, Science and Research as well as all school stakeholders to revisit the foundations of the reforms, update and—where necessary—reclaim them. This recommendation is highly demanding, as it hinges on a considerable effort in understanding the significance of the changes desired and agreeing to clearly establish intentions, openly and dispassionately debate the issues at stake, avoid fragmentation, set priorities, and reiterate commitment and adherence to the foundations of the education, curricular and program of study reforms.

The Conseil urges the Minister to continually review consensus on the foundations of the reforms and maintain an ongoing dialogue with school stakeholders on the needs and issues at stake. When policies and the significance of changes are clearly defined, local authorities can remain fully in charge—while respecting institutional cultures and dynamics—of choosing the necessary means and initiatives. Regularly taking stock to ensure the consistency and cohesiveness of the system is also important. Simply put, stewardship of the reforms entails being one step ahead of the team of partners responsible for their implementation, at every level of the system.

In this respect, the Conseil thus deems it essential to monitor the state of consensus in a number of foundational areas:

- Support for basic education for all children, success for the greatest number, and equality of opportunity;
- Promotion of a quality education for all, through more stringent requirements, boosting cultural content in programs of study, and an education plan that can meet broad societal expectations;
- Support for decentralization and local empowerment;
- Recognition of parents as partners in education.

### **Recommendation II**

#### **OVERCOME DEADLOCKS PARALYZING PROGRESS ON EDUCATIONAL ISSUES**

Issues such as educational success for all, integration of special needs students, knowledge and cross-curricular competencies, the perceived value of some disciplines and the very purpose of education itself (utilitarianism vs. developing critical citizens) are bound to generate controversy. As such, we must respect the democratic process inherent in ongoing and constructive debate: school stakeholders considering the interests and prospects of students; dialogue respectful of divergent opinions and professional practices; a willingness to reach a meaningful rather than a superficial or facile consensus on concrete courses of action and their ongoing followup and rigorous evaluation. In this process, controversy and conflicting values would not be completely jettisoned, but would be diminished or even stimulate positive change.

With regard to *pragmatic* legitimacy, the Conseil calls on all school stakeholders to dispassionately debate issues that periodically sweep through the Québec education system. When major problems or controversial issues lead to deadlock, stakeholders must not remain passive bystanders or stay entrenched in their positions, impeding progress. Rather they all need to engage in finding solutions and reaching compromise. Addressing issues calls for unwavering will and support, and resolution can be reached in a number of ways: consensus-building, research-action and small-scale experiments such as pilot projects all appear to be effective tools for determining feasibility or finding compromise. The Conseil has noted deadlocks in a number of educational areas, namely:

*The evaluation of learning*

- How can the expectations of all stakeholder groups on the evaluation of learning be met? How can the public perception of evaluation be changed and reconciled with these often clashing expectations?

*The use of research findings*

- How can experiential knowledge and research findings foster dialogue that brings greater consensus leading to change in perception and action?

*Professional autonomy and collegiality*

- How can multiple interpretations of professional autonomy be aligned with the objectives of collaborative work and collegiality pursued by the two reforms? Is the current organization of work conducive to exercising professional autonomy?

*The mission of adult education centres*

- How can adult education centres and their traditional and unique mission be reconciled with the increasingly younger population of students attending these institutions? In a context of diminishing resources, will the growing influx of youth 16 years and older in these centres stifle the demand of an adult population with different, albeit equally important needs (literacy, social reintegration, etc.)?

*Secondary Cycle 2*

- How can implementing curricular and program of study reforms be aligned with the pivotal nature of Cycle 2 in secondary schools?

***Recommendation III***

***ADOPT A GRADUAL AND ITERATIVE APPROACH TO DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING THE CURRICULUM AND PROGRAMS OF STUDY***

The Conseil believes that the State, in fulfilling its responsibility as stewards of the education system—which includes the development and implementation of an official curriculum comprised of Québec-wide programs of study—must do things differently and better. In establishing objectives as a legal authority, the State should conceive the curriculum and programs as a living process, that changes as society evolves and transforms its vision of the future, with advances in curricular and pedagogical expertise, and with the experience of teachers and student characteristics. Continuous improvement in education is by definition both varied and program-specific. For the curriculum to be conceived as an ongoing work to be continuously perfected, tools for followup and sharing data become indispensable. The

Conseil was surprised to learn of a shortage of data on what is really being taught in Québec classrooms. While decisions on the objectives and framework of the official curriculum may be of the utmost importance, it is the curriculum taught in the classroom—the one learned by students—that ultimately counts.

With respect to *cognitive* legitimacy, the Conseil submits that school stakeholders consider foregoing a fundamental and radical retooling of the curriculum every 15 years in favour of a more gradual and iterative approach. This could be accomplished by leveraging broad and varied expertise built on the contribution of stakeholders (notably teachers' associations), supported and facilitated by credible and effective mechanisms that are both stable and sustainable, able to rigorously and transparently validate programs and maximize taking ownership of the curriculum by teachers, students and parents. Although current budgetary restraints remain unfavourable to creating additional entities, the Conseil believes that the time has come for the Québec education system to have a centre for the curriculum. Recognized as a credible body, this centre would be quasi-independent and would provide analyses and assessments of the curriculum taught and learned.

In formulating this third recommendation, the Conseil urges the Minister of Education, Recreation and Sports and Minister of Higher Education, Science and Research as well as all school stakeholders to not only *do things differently* when it comes to developing and implementing the curriculum and programs of study, but also to *adopt a gradual approach* in consolidating their implementation.

## **Conclusion**

In this report on the state and needs of education, the Conseil has sought to provide the current status of the development and implementation of curricular and program of study reforms, identify the key challenges and levers, and detail what has been achieved and what remains to be done.

To promote continuous improvement of the curriculum and programs of study, the Conseil deems that the time has come for better defined and agreed-upon goals, more explicitly expressed priorities, clear and tangible amendments and corrective actions as suggested by frontline players to be undertaken where needed, more coherent and better communicated evaluations, as well as exit routes out of deadlocks in educational issues. While these are by no means insignificant and no small feat to accomplish, they could be catalysts of a true improvement in the quality of learning for Québec students. All of this requires a steady ministerial hand at the wheel, firm on the objectives and flexible on the means, constant, unwavering, and in partnership with all stakeholders. This, in brief, is the central message of the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation in its report.

The full version of this report, entitled *Rapport sur l'état et les besoins de l'éducation 2012-2014 : Pour l'amélioration continue du curriculum et des programmes d'études* (in French only) is available for download on the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation's website at [www.cse.gouv.qc.ca](http://www.cse.gouv.qc.ca).