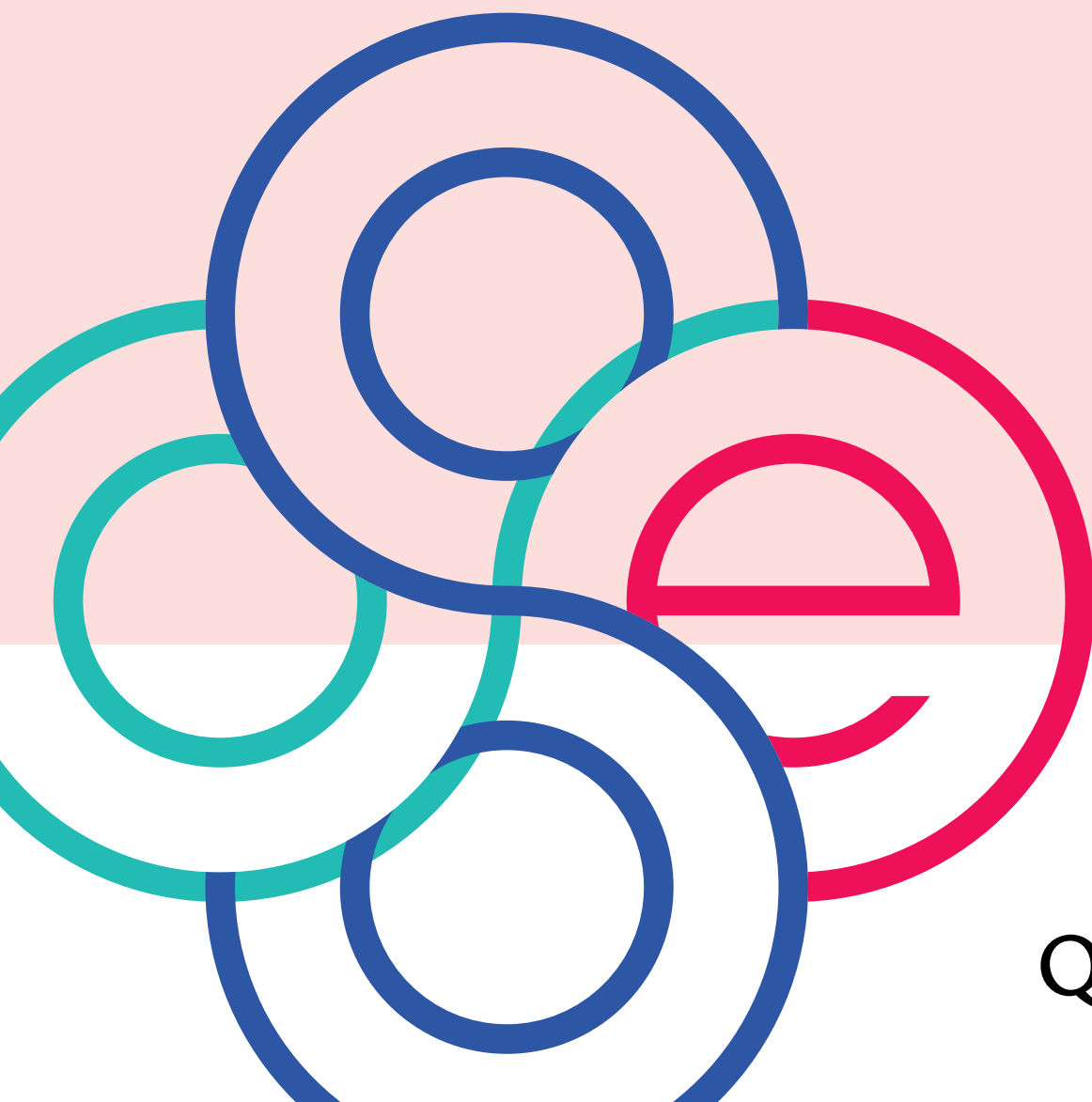


CONSEIL
SUPÉRIEUR
DE L'ÉDUCATION

Supporting Student Engagement in Secondary School: Combining Quality, Diversity and Accessibility

Summary

January 2025



Québec 

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In this brief, the Conseil supérieur de l'Éducation set out to explore what, within school organizations, fosters motivation, engagement, and educational success among secondary school students. To do so, it examined the main frameworks that structure school organizations and educational paths, as well as the scientific literature on motivation, engagement and students' actual educational paths.

The Conseil also wanted to hear the **views of young people themselves and of various school stakeholders on what can help and motivate students during their schooling**, to encourage their engagement in secondary school and the beginnings of a professional or educational project that will enable them to flourish. Indeed, studies show a correlation between this engagement and academic success, which the Conseil includes in its concept of educational success. The Conseil **also asked them about the means available to schools, to take this into account**.

Why undertake this reflection? Since the 1960s, several educational policies in Québec have tried to combine two aims while explicitly adhering to the principle of equal opportunity: provide a common basic education, and gradually diversify training according to the interests and pace of each student. Over the past few decades, schools have tried out various organizational solutions, as shown in the brief. Yet challenges remain, such as school retention for certain groups of students, student motivation in school subjects and equal opportunities in education.

The Conseil also notes a number of troubling cases, both among students with learning difficulties and among those who do well within the current school framework (CSE, 2017). These examples reveal that many secondary school students are not very engaged in their educational path, or that schools are failing to adapt to students' pedagogical or support needs. Faced with these observations, many education stakeholders are calling for greater flexibility in the frameworks and school organization to allow for more elasticity in this path.

This summary presents the main highlights of the brief.

Some manoeuvring room in existing frameworks

In applying the existing frameworks, such as the *Basic school regulation for preschool, elementary and secondary education*, schools can adapt, up to a certain point, the duration of students' paths, school schedules and elective subject offerings. Margins for manoeuvre exist for the time devoted to compulsory and elective subjects at both cycles in general education, and during the last two years of secondary school in applied general education. Exemptions for certification are also possible under certain conditions, so that students in special situations can obtain their secondary school diploma and pursue post-secondary studies. In short, an analysis of the frameworks shows that there is some manoeuvring room. Some schools use this to diversify their service offering.

A few issues in real pathways

The work carried out for this brief shows that access to courses or pathways depends on criteria other than students' interest in these options.

For example, **the presence of special pedagogical projects is often accompanied by a selection and ranking process.** These processes have an impact on the composition of student populations in schools, on the composition of the class groups within them, on the curriculum actually taught, on academic success and on students' academic aspirations (Lessard & LeVasseur, 2007; Maroy & Kamanzi, 2017; Marcotte-Fournier et al., 2016; Doray, Lessard & Roy-Vallières, 2023). **Certain groups of students are more likely to suffer the negative effects of this selection process than others.**

Although Québec's education system is quite flexible, offering some bridges and allowing students following a more winding path to pursue their studies according to their career project, in actual fact, the secondary education level contains **two orientation stages** that limit or delay future possibilities: transition to Secondary Cycle Two, and Secondary 4, given the impact of the mathematics and science sequences (Picard et al., 2016).

Finally, adolescents are generally not ready to make choices that will determine their professional future, as adolescence is a time of learning and exploration (Picard, 2016). **For example, depending on whether they follow a straight or winding path, and depending on their socioeconomic background, students tend to make their choices in different ways.**

- Among students who postpone their career choice are those who do best within the current framework.
- Among students who make career choices at an earlier age are those who are experiencing or have experienced more difficulties at school or less motivation to study, and students who live in places with a more limited and less varied post-secondary offer and labour market (Guichard, 2012; Doray, 2012; Litalien, 2008).

Increasing flexibility and diversity with a goal toward greater equity and inclusion: some practices, issues and challenges experienced in secondary schools

Our consultations revealed that **some schools** have demonstrated creativity in their implementation of the existing frameworks.

Some **have adopted practices** or are in the process of transforming their educational offering **to take account of students' varied interests and needs, while striving for equity and inclusion.** Their school organization includes inspiring strategies to encourage many of their students to explore their interests and skills. Some manage to preserve heterogeneity in their class groups or school activities, and to adopt admission practices that are less or not at all selective. **For example, some schools offer a variety of options to all students at common times in the school timetable.** This type of organization **seems to make it easier to create heterogeneous groups,** fostering a diversity of genders and of students belonging to various special pedagogical projects in other subjects. Moreover, **it appears to facilitate exploration**

throughout secondary school for students who wish to switch options from one year to the next. Other schools, school service centres or school boards offer a certain number of special pedagogical projects, from which all students must choose.

Despite these seemingly inspirational practices, stakeholders consulted noted that, in some cases, **maintaining a balance is difficult**. They point to the **complexity** involved **for school organizations to meet several objectives simultaneously**, such as responding to the interest areas of all students while achieving pedagogical objectives. School stakeholders give the example of content that is seen from a cross-curricular perspective within different subjects, or the *Culture and Citizenship in Québec* course, which may see its time cut despite the importance of its content.

Moreover, constraints related to time, human resources, space, finances and the number of students can limit the diversity of the school's offer. Other challenges may concern using reserved periods or profiles to provide support to students as well as the ability to take all students' areas of interest into consideration, through the offer of courses or different types of special pedagogical projects.

Some schools have adopted different practices to make the school experience meaningful and motivating, other than offering options, profiles, concentrations or special pedagogical projects. These are described in the brief.

Students' needs in secondary school

For students, the attitudes, aptitudes and practices of teachers and other school staff play a major role in their motivation, engagement and success in school. Among desired attitudes and aptitudes, students emphasize staff dynamism, motivation, encouragement, the teacher's mastery of the subject and communicative passion for it, willingness to help, empathy, humour, etc. Supportive teaching practices include varying teaching strategies, using examples, explaining in different ways, knowing how to manage the class, proposing learning that is meaningful and useful to everyday life, and so on.

Students also highlight other aspects of their school experience that foster motivation. For example, several mentioned the positive atmosphere in the school and their sense of belonging. Some pointed to participation in an activity or a special pedagogical project that interests them and that allows them to develop or explore different fields of interest. Others said that it was the fact of having clear educational or career goals, as they had developed many of their interests and skills outside of school.

The consultations also suggest that, while many parents are enthusiastic about the options, profiles, concentrations or special pedagogical projects, many have other concerns about the school. Parents cite the importance of flexible, supportive supervision that is adapted to their child, of their child's feeling of well-being within a positive social climate at school, the staff's commitment to the students, explicit affirmation of the values of inclusion, and recognition by school staff of the academic efforts their child is making despite any difficulties they may be having.

These testimonies encourage us to focus on the quality of the educational experience at school and students' well-being as much as their academic success. What the young people expressed shows the importance they attach to the quality of teaching and to the meaningful nature of the curriculum, in which the teacher plays a central role by exercising their pedagogical competencies. Young people also stress the importance of positive relationships within the school, both with staff and other students.

Levers developed by the Ministère de l'Éducation over the years to promote students' academic and educational success, while supporting their motivation and engagement in school, seem to meet many of these needs. These include the aims of both the Québec Education Program and the *Reference Framework for Professional Competencies for Teachers*.

Orientations to support student engagement in school

In this brief, the Conseil reiterates the principle of **an inclusive school that adapts to its students** to meet their needs for support and to respect their pace of learning, while maintaining a high level of standards. However, there must be adequate support when required for the student's success (CSE, 2017). This adaptation demands a certain flexibility in the school organization and teaching practices.

The Conseil also believes that it is **important to stimulate students' interests and encourage them to develop specific skills**. Thus, it would like all students to be able to attend a school where they feel motivated and engaged, in the classroom and in other teaching-learning spaces, giving priority to subjects in the Basic school regulation. They must also have opportunities to explore and develop a variety of interests and skills.

The Conseil considers that special pedagogical projects, or concentrations and options, can contribute to students' motivation and engagement throughout secondary school (CSE, 2007; CSE, 2009). However, it is concerned with the consequences of implementing more flexibility in pathways and in options, profiles, concentrations and special pedagogical projects, if certain conditions are not deployed upstream (CSE, 2023). In particular, it is concerned about **equitable access to a quality education within common basic education, and the well-being of students and school staff** (CSE, 2016; CSE, 2020; Vlasie, 2021).

In light of these observations, the Conseil has formulated **three interdependent orientations**:

- Enhance the value of common basic education by ensuring that it is rich, solid and meaningful, while leaving room for exploration
- Consolidate consistency in the school system's aims and practices
- Foster greater accessibility to educational services likely to support students' engagement in their schooling

Orientation 1: Enhance the value of common basic education by ensuring that it is rich, solid and meaningful, while leaving room for exploration

According to the Québec Education Program, the **mission of secondary school is to provide instruction, to socialize and to provide qualifications, while its aim is to promote the overall development of the student**. This development presupposes the learning of fundamental knowledge and greater self-knowledge, through the deepening or exploration of particular areas of interest and skills. However, **students have varying motivations with regard to school subjects, despite their importance** for their education and future social and professional integration.

The various types of special pedagogical projects offered can contribute to students' motivation and self-discovery. However, not everyone has access to them or is necessarily interested in them, regardless of their level of academic performance. Offering special pedagogical projects that meet the needs and interests of all students therefore presents challenges.

Some school organizations are implementing practices other than offering multiple paths to meet students' needs for education, motivation and exploration, among other things by taking advantage of the leeway provided by existing frameworks such as the *Basic school regulation for preschool, elementary and secondary education*.

Orientation 2: Consolidate consistency in the school system's aims and practices

In the Conseil's opinion, **it is important to help school staff and organizations become more familiar with existing frameworks and levers**, so that they can:

- Help students grasp the importance and meaning of their learning, including for compulsory subjects
- Include practical knowledge for all students from the start of secondary school, helping to develop their autonomy and allowing them to explore their interest in vocational training, and more broadly developing their self-awareness
- Set aside adequate time for teaching and learning in subject areas such as personal development
- Offer all students the opportunity to explore their talents and interests, regardless of whether or not they had the opportunity or desire to develop passions before entering secondary school

The introduction or addition of options or special pedagogical projects can make achieving these objectives more complex. **The Conseil therefore invites the Minister to take account of experience in the field**, as school actors have a better knowledge of the realities of their environment and the various resources available to them. **The response to these needs can take many forms**, as shown by the variety of experiences and practices shared by those consulted.

The Conseil welcomes the sharing of experiences between schools and school authorities. This could take the form of discussion and cooperation meetings between establishments to share common challenges and experiences, and the publication of guides that could illustrate successful actions, placing them in their context. **Such tools would show examples of schools that may be inspiring in some respects**, and others that may be so for other reasons.

Orientation 3: Foster greater accessibility to educational services likely to support students' engagement in their schooling

Le Conseil advocates diversity for equitable and inclusive access to activities that can support students' commitment to pursuing their studies, in particular to obtain a qualification or access a post-secondary program. This diversity constitutes a **social project** to ensure that all students are stimulated and benefit from the emulation effect of their peers. Carrying out this project involves challenges and can be beneficial if the diversity is genuine, meaning:

- it truly reflects a heterogeneity of social and cultural backgrounds and academic performance among students, who have benefited from the support they needed to succeed during their previous schooling
- students continue to receive the support they may need and make progress in their learning, regardless of their academic performance

In cases where schools offer options, profiles, concentrations, special pedagogical projects or activities, the Conseil believes they should give priority to timetable and class-group compositions that make it possible to offer them to all students who so desire, without selection or additional costs, in a context of school diversity.

It also encourages schools to create bridges and make them visible to students, their parents and all school stakeholders. Should there be staff shortages or an insufficient number of students to open a group, the Conseil invites schools to consider the possibilities of using digital technology to keep the courses accessible.

As already mentioned, some schools are adopting other approaches to reach or develop students' interests. These approaches should also be harnessed or made better known.

The Conseil's orientations and recommendations

Orientation 1	Enhance the value of common basic education by ensuring that it is rich, solid and meaningful, while leaving room for exploration
	To keep students engaged throughout secondary school, by ensuring their overall development, their learning of fundamental knowledge and the development of special interests and skills.
Actors concerned	Recommendations
Ministère de l'Éducation	1. Bring the aims of the Québec Education Program back to the forefront, possibly in an updated version in the light of evolving knowledge.
Education departments and faculties	2. Increase collaboration with schools to promote the transfer of knowledge from research to practice, in line with their needs.
Other fields concerned at Québec universities	
School principals or directors of educational services	3. Exercise their pedagogical leadership to encourage the adoption of practices that engage students, drawing in particular on the most recent version of the <i>Reference Framework for Professional Competencies for Teachers</i> , where applicable.
Teachers	4. Pursue their professional development by seeking out teaching practices that support student engagement, drawing in particular on the most recent version of the <i>Reference Framework for Professional Competencies for Teachers</i> , where applicable.
School service centres	5. Update the reflections on school organization and educational paths, through regular consultations with students and education actors.
School boards	
Secondary schools in general education in the youth sector	
All school staff concerned	

Secondary schools in general education in the youth sector	6. Allow and facilitate the development of a variety of interests and competencies in students as well as self-knowledge by:
School service centres	→ giving priority to this possibility within the classroom, which refers to all types of teaching-learning spaces dedicated to the subjects covered by the Basic school regulation
School boards	→ drawing on the support of school staff to consider the best ways of offering students this possibility within the timetable, while preserving common basic education and student heterogeneity
	→ making use of resources available in the surrounding community, while respecting existing frameworks
	7. Make parents aware of the levers already in place to encourage school engagement and the educational success of all students, using means of communication that give them access to this information.
Parents, as supporters of their child's schooling	8. Take into account the existence of levers that foster school engagement and educational success for all students.
Orientation 2 Consolidate consistency in the school system's aims and practices	
Actors concerned	Recommendations
Ministère de l'Éducation	9. Preserve a margin of autonomy for schools, school service centres and school boards in the definition of local colour:
	→ enabling them to ensure that common basic education is rich, solid and meaningful
	→ while respecting existing frameworks and levers
	→ while maintaining high standards for their students.
Ministère de l'Éducation	10. Support the creation of mechanisms that encourage schools to share their experiences and strategies, with the aim of reducing the competitive logic that may exist and promoting the development of a cooperative logic for the benefit of all students.
Secondary schools	
School service centres	
School boards	

Orientation 3 Foster greater accessibility to educational services likely to support students' engagement in their schooling	
Actors concerned	Recommendations
Secondary schools School service centres School boards	<p>11. Begin or continue efforts to improve access to activities, options and, where applicable, profiles, concentrations or special pedagogical projects, in particular by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → promoting inclusive admission practices, based on students' areas of interest, instead of random picks or selective practices (including admission on the basis of students' academic or other performance, family resources or a profile of aptitudes, interests or motivation demonstrated by the student at the start of secondary school) → adopting a school organization that, when it offers activities, options, profiles, concentrations or special pedagogical projects: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - promotes student diversity - aims to be accessible to all students → providing more bridges between the different pathways → examining the possibilities offered by digital technology
Ministère de l'Éducation Secondary schools School service centres School boards	<p>12. Ensure that there are professional resources to support, encourage and inform all students throughout their schooling by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → making visible to students, parents and all school stakeholders the different possible trajectories and the bridges between them → providing information on the characteristics of the different pathways or options, where applicable, and their consequences for the rest of the educational path.
Ministère de l'Éducation	<p>13. Continue its support measure for extracurricular activities to ensure they are accessible to all students.</p>

Conclusion

This brief calls for promoting, in school organization, the mission of Québec schools, the aims of the Québec Education Program, and that which fosters school engagement and educational success for all students, in a perspective of equity and inclusion.

Fundamental knowledge and holistic development of the student are at the heart of the mission of Québec schools. At the same time, all students should have opportunities for self-fulfillment within the school, with access to learning activities that enable them to explore or develop specific skills. The school, as a place of qualification and socialization for living together, must also help students develop their autonomy and participate in society.

Options, profiles, concentrations and special pedagogical projects can help motivate students and develop their interests. They are not the only means, however, as not all students necessarily seek these opportunities, and not all of those who do have access to them at present.

Nonetheless, some school organizations seem able to go some way toward reconciling the desire to take account of student heterogeneity while striving for equity and inclusion. The Conseil invites schools to draw inspiration from this, following a process of in-depth reflection on what is appropriate for them, while respecting existing frameworks.

For all students, meaningful and positive relationships with school staff and their peer groups, the perception of high levels of competence, quality pedagogy that takes their learning pace into account, interest and meaning found in learning, and a positive social climate in the school foster motivation and engagement in their schooling, as well as educational success.

All in all, this brief proposes some promising avenues that are already being explored in schools. They can guide others in improving their practices to support students' motivation and engagement in school and, ultimately, their educational success.

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