

# Quick Study

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## Myths of Education Reform

by Malkin Dare

Greek mythology tells us the tragic story of Cassandra, a young woman who had the gift of prophecy but who was cursed never to be believed. The Trojans, for instance, didn't believe her warnings about a certain wooden horse and ended up regretting it.

Flash forward a couple of thousand years to Ontario and you will find the modern equivalent of Cassandra: education experts. For years, such experts have been warning about the failures of Ontario's public school system and nobody has listened. For years, Ontario governments have been ignoring research and the experience of other jurisdictions, rolling out dozens of costly measures all destined to fail.

As a result, the academic achievement of Ontario students, as measured by the provincial tests, has been improving at a glacial pace – a pace easily explained by test familiarity and more relaxed test conditions. This year, even the glacial improvement ceased. Student achievement in Ontario is now officially frozen at the same, very mediocre, level as last year.

With only 64% of the province's grade 6 students passing their reading test, an average class of 25 students would yield only 16 students who can read well enough for the work of the next grade. The results are even worse in writing, with only 61% of students passing, and math, with only 59% of students passing – down 2% from last year.

So how has the Ontario government been trying to improve academic achievement? And what does research and experience tell us about the likely success of each initiative?

### Summary

- The academic achievement of Ontario students is stalled at unacceptable levels.
- Most of the Ontario government's attempts to improve these results were doomed to failure.
- School choice gets works well in other jurisdictions and is relatively inexpensive.
- Ontario should introduce more school choice.

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## **More Spending**

Every year, the Ontario government makes generous increases to its funding of public education. Over the past 30 years, government spending per student in constant dollars has roughly tripled, during which time there has been little or no measurable improvement in academic achievement. The evidence overwhelmingly confirms there is very little correlation between spending and academic achievement except in cases of extreme deprivation – which is most emphatically not the case in Ontario.

## **Smaller Class Sizes**

The Ontario government capped primary class sizes at 20 in the belief that smaller classes would result in better student achievement. The research clearly shows there is little or no correlation between class size and academic achievement – unless class size is below 15 or over 45.

## **Longer School Year**

The Ontario government added five days to the school year, thinking that the extra instructional time would add to student achievement. However, the length of the school year in other countries varies greatly, and it has no correlation whatsoever with academic achievement.

## **Testing**

The Ontario government introduced provincial tests, but instead of using off-the-shelf standardized tests, it chose to develop its own tests, even though existing tests yield more and better information than the provincial tests, in a timelier fashion, and at a fraction of the cost.

## **Labour Peace**

The Ontario government bought labour peace by awarding its teachers huge pay increases, claiming happy teachers teach better. The research shows that no matter how happy teachers are, they will not improve their students' achievement until they start using better teaching methods.

There have been many other initiatives rolled out over the past ten years or so, and very few of them were based on solid research. The one thing that the research does support – more school choice – was tried only once, and that very briefly, when the ill-fated private school tuition tax credit was brought in.

School choice gives all parents the opportunity to choose the school – public or private – that is best for their children. Teachers benefit from school choice, because they can seek positions that capitalize on their particular strengths and values. School choice is much less costly than most initiatives, such as the wildly expensive provincial tests and the cap on class size, and it results in much more satisfied parents and teachers.

Each Canadian province offers a different amount of school choice, with Alberta enjoying the most and the Atlantic provinces the least. There is an almost exact correlation between the amount of school choice a province offers and how well its students do academically. Alberta students outperform the rest of Canada by a wide margin, while the students in Atlantic Canada do the worst. Ontario students place in about the middle in both categories.

Unless defenders of the status quo in Ontario can refute decades of test results or prove that Alberta children are smarter than Ontario children, we must conclude that Ontario's public schools are not teaching students as well as Alberta schools.

With the provincial tests frozen at unacceptable levels, it's time to bring more school choice to Ontario. And that's no myth!