



Commentary on *Education at a Glance – OECD Indicators 2009*

Research & Information Services
Canadian Teachers' Federation

Background

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation & Development describes itself as a “unique forum where the governments of 30 market democracies work together to address the economic, social and governance challenges of globalization as well as to exploit its opportunities”. Established in 1961 the OECD has a membership of 30 wealthy countries (which as described in its 17 page brochure produce almost 60% of the world’s goods and services), an annual budget of about 340 million euros (the largest contributor being the U.S. which provides approx. 25% of the budget), a staff of 2,500 in the OECD secretariat in Paris working in a dozen directorates (including the Directorate for Education) providing research and analysis. The OECD releases 250 publications per year, one of which is an annual compendium of statistics and indicators called *Education at a Glance*.

In the most recent edition of the *Education at a Glance – OECD Indicators* report, released in September 2009, the OECD looks at who participates in education across OECD countries, what is spent on education, how education systems operate and what results are achieved; it covers education from the primary level to the post-secondary level in OECD member countries including Canada.

According to the report “the education indicators are presented within an organising framework that:

- distinguishes between the actors in education systems: individual learners and teachers, instructional settings and learning environments, educational service providers, and the education system as a whole;
- groups the indicators according to whether they speak to learning outcomes for individuals or countries, policy levers or circumstances that shape these outcomes, or to antecedents or constraints that set policy choices into context; and
- identifies the policy issues to which the indicators relate, with three major categories distinguishing between the quality of educational outcomes and educational provision, issues of equity in educational outcomes and educational opportunities, and the adequacy and effectiveness of resource management.”

It should be noted that conducting an analysis of the Canadian elementary/secondary education context is constrained by the limitations in some cases of obtaining internationally comparable education-related national data.

New material in this edition of the report includes the first results from the OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) on teacher beliefs, practices and job satisfaction, as well as the role of teacher appraisal and feedback. TALIS did not include Canada.

As the data is current to 2007 the impact on education systems of the global financial and economic crisis cannot be assessed, although the OECD notes that “its indicators provide insights about how investments in human capital can contribute to the recovery.”

At nearly 500 pages the report contains an enormous amount of statistical data. A summary of key findings from *Education at a Glance 2009* is available on the OECD website.

Coinciding with the release of the OECD's *Education at a Glance*, the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) issued a communiqué announcing the release of *Education Indicators in Canada: An International Perspective*, a product of the Pan-Canadian Education Indicators Program (PCEIP). PCEIP is an ongoing initiative of the Canadian Education Statistics Council, a partnership between CMEC and Statistics Canada formed in 1998. The release of the first PCEIP indicators in 1996 was followed by PCEIP reports in 1999, 2003, 2005 and 2007. The traditional PCEIP publication has since evolved into this new report, linked with the release of the OECD's *Education at a Glance*, with the objective of "facilitating the comparison of educational systems in Canada's provinces and territories with those of countries that belong to the OECD."

The *Education Indicators in Canada* report provides indicators on educational attainment, upper-secondary graduation, tertiary graduation, the academic performance of students, labour-market outcomes, the economic benefits of education, expenditures on education, international students, and transitions to the labour market, for Canada, its provinces and territories, and for OECD countries. These indicators, based on the availability of data for the provinces and territories, are aligned or harmonized with the definitions and methodologies of selected indicators in the OECD report.

It's also interesting to note the explicit harmonization that has taken place in large-scale external testing programs between the CMEC's Pan-Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP) and OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), another indication of the growing influence of the OECD on national education policy making (an issue that was raised at the CTF President's Forum on External Assessment held in Ottawa in July). Raising the issue of whether PISA is a pedagogical or a political tool, Education International has stated that "it is of grave concern to teacher trade unionists when they see national governments implementing education reforms with the stated objective of ranking higher on the PISA", and it questions "the OECD's underlying assumption that education systems must focus their objectives to meet labour market demands in the hyper-competitive global marketplace."

Issues raised by the OECD report

In its response to the OECD *Education at a Glance* report Education International welcomes the trend to increased participation in early childhood education across OECD countries, stressing the importance of ensuring there are sufficient numbers of well-educated pedagogical staff to meet this increased demand. It also calls on governments of OECD countries to acknowledge the broad social and economic benefits of educational attainment for improved health and other social outcomes.

Some of the policy directions drawn from the data are problematic.

For example, EI observes that a key policy message in the OECD report has to do with the issue of funding for higher/tertiary education, specifically that "countries which devote a high proportion of public funding to education should allow for more private funding, while where private funding dominates, the opposite should occur." Emphasizing that education should be publicly funded, EI states that "evidence showing an increase in private funding should be interpreted as **a deficit of public funds, not as an excuse to limit them.**" [emphasis added]

At the risk of stating the obvious, the lens through which the OECD views education is clearly an economic one – specifically, fostering economic growth requires that education systems focus on producing the necessary "human capital". Angel Gurría, OECD Secretary-General, stated in his

remarks (entitled “The return to investment in education”) for the launch of *Education at a Glance* that “public and private investment in education is being increasingly scrutinised. That is inevitable, and healthy. OECD countries spend more than 6% of GDP in education. About a seventh of total public expenditures goes to education. Maintaining that level of spending will require a demonstration that education systems provide good value for money.”

Hence another concern cited by EI is that the OECD “makes a controversial argument (forgetting about social outcomes): in times of crisis, education must prove that it provides “value for money” in order to justify ever-increasing expenditure. The report does so by examining the choices countries make when investing their resources in primary and secondary education, such as trade-offs between the hours that students spend in classroom, the number of teaching hours of teachers, class sizes (proxy measure), teachers’ salaries and the proportion of teacher’s working time that is devoted to teaching”.

A new indicator, “salary cost per student”, was developed for this purpose which the EI analysis says “is rather dubious, as it doesn’t take into account some major determinants of teachers’ salaries, such as types of qualifications, career structures, teacher shortages and regional disparities. Moreover, this rather dangerous indicator might lead governments to resort to salary cuts or class-size increases to improve their relative scores.” Korea and Luxembourg are used to illustrate how “similar levels of expenditure among countries in primary and secondary education can mask a variety of contrasting policy choices.”

Education International notes that it “considers the report to be a valuable reference for policy makers and a useful snapshot of overall trends. However, its policies are based on an individualistic and opportunistic paradigm, which is at odds with EI’s philosophy of trade union solidarity and its broader mission to promote social justice through universal access to quality public education.” EI further emphasizes that the report “reveals a disturbing trend away from public funding and towards private investment in education, especially at early childhood and university levels.” This is consistent with the OECD’s promotion of public-private partnerships (PPPs) in education.

According to EI General Secretary Fred van Leewen, “While the OECD takes the view that education is primarily a matter of individual benefit, we at EI believe that investing in education is not only a sound economic choice, but a social and moral imperative crucial for democracy”.

In a similar vein Gwen Dueck, General Secretary of the Saskatchewan Teachers’ Federation, speaking at the 2009 CTF President’s Forum on External Assessment, reminds us that one of the goals of democratic nations is to improve their educational systems, stressing the importance of identifying the critical elements of a holistic, broad-based education and then determining how we measure those elements. A holistic approach can encompass various forms of development in children – artistic, cultural, intellectual, social, emotional, academic, physical, vocational.

Dueck noted that “a hundred years ago, John Dewey talked about furthering democracy through an education system that is focused on the fullness of children’s lives, about the depth of their learning across a broad spectrum of human endeavors, not just about the kind of learning that prepares a student for a test”, or, for that matter, a job in the globalized economy.

Sources

Canadian Education Statistics Council. *Education Indicators in Canada: An International Perspective*, Ottawa, Sept. 2009.

<http://www.cmec.ca/Publications/Lists/Publications/Attachments/212/education-indicators-canada-international-perspective-2009.pdf>

Dueck, Gwen. Panel Presentation, CTF President's Forum on External Assessment, Ottawa, July 2009.

Education International. *OECD Report: Education at a Glance 2009 – Education International Summary of Key Findings*, EI Research Unit, Brussels, Sept. 8, 2009.

http://download.ei-ie.org/Docs/WebDepot/20090910_EIAnalysisOfEducationAtAGlance_en.doc

Education International. "Greater public funding for education is essential for economic recovery", Sept. 10, 2009.

<http://www.ei-ie.org/en/news/show.php?id=1093&theme=policy&country=global>

Education International. "PISA 2006: Pedagogical or Political?" *PD Perspectives*, 2008, Vol. 7, Issue 2.

http://www.ctf-fce.ca/publications/pd_newsletter/PD2008_Volume7-2English_Article8.pdf

Education International. *Public Private Partnerships in Education*. 2009.

<http://download.ei-ie.org/docs/IRISDocuments/Research%20Website%20Documents/2009-00086-01-E.pdf>

OECD. *Education at a Glance – OECD Indicators*, Paris, Sept. 2009.

<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/41/25/43636332.pdf>

OECD. "Education at a Glance 2009 – Summary of Key Findings."

<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/1/28/43654482.pdf>

OECD. "The return to investment in education." Remarks by Angel Gurría, OECD Secretary-General, for the launch of Education at a Glance 2009, OECD Conference Centre, Paris, 8 September 2009.

http://www.oecd.org/document/43/0,3343,en_2649_39263238_43662571_1_1_1_1,00.html

OECD. *The OECD* (online brochure), 2008.

<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/15/33/34011915.pdf>