

The Vast Disparity in Canada's High School Graduation Rates

By [Arik Motskin](#) and [Zack Gallinger](#)

August 12, 2015

<http://www.the10and3.com/the-vast-disparity-in-canadas-high-school-graduation-rates-00016/>

Compared to their counterparts around the world, Canadian students graduate high school at a respectable, though not spectacular, rate. With [85% of Canadians](#) receiving their high school diploma over the course of their life, Canada manages to slip in just above the [OECD average](#) of 84%, well behind education stalwarts like Korea, Japan and the Netherlands, but ahead of other developed nations like the United States, Sweden and Italy.

But taking a closer look at [Statistics Canada's numbers](#) reveals a huge disparity *within* the country. While the eastern and western ends of Canada (including high population provinces like Ontario and British Columbia) maintain solid graduation rates, much of the centre and north — including education laggards like Alberta, Manitoba and the territories — graduate their students at rates equal to or below those of developing nations like Turkey and Mexico. We dig into a few of these cases below to understand what's going on.

Ontario (86%)

While now one of the country's top performers, Ontario has only recently been running up the numbers. In the last decade, Ontario's high school graduation rate has [soared a remarkable 15 percentage points](#). The province's education department attributes the gains to its so-called Student Success Strategy, which encourages a variety of vocational and technical experiences to count as progress toward a high school diploma. For instance, the [Specialist High Skills Majors](#) program allows grade 11 and 12 students to formulate a specialized industry-focused major (like agriculture, food processing or manufacturing) to help them graduate; moreover, [dual credits](#) and an expanded [co-op program](#) have made it easier for on-the-job vocational training and post-secondary classes to count toward high school credit.

Alberta (69%)

In 2006, Alberta and Ontario faced [similarly disappointing](#) secondary school graduation rates in the high 60s. But while the next decade saw Ontario quickly zoom ahead, Alberta's rates stagnated and remain below 70% today (similar to low-performing European nations like Austria and Greece). The main culprit appears to be the province's red hot oil industry, with its [well-paying jobs that require little-to-no education](#). Maclean's Magazine's 2008 headline "[Dropping out for oil](#)" seemed to summarize the feeling best: why complete an extra year or two of high school when you can start earning the big bucks now? But with a [prolonged bust](#) in the energy cycle now a real possibility, the chickens may be coming home to roost. What will happen to all those unemployed kids who never got a diploma?

Nova Scotia (87%)

Nova Scotia, along with fellow Maritime provinces New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island, have been among the top performing provinces in Canada in terms of graduation rates for [well over a decade](#). Perhaps the most exciting aspect of Nova Scotia's education system is the remarkably high graduation rates of the province's Mi'kmaq First Nations community, who graduate over 88% of students that [begin Grade 12 on reserves](#) (compared to just 35% for First Nations communities across the country). Nova Scotia uses an [innovative system](#) for its Mi'kmaq population, where schools are run not by the province, but by the community itself (an education authority known as the Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey). Set up in 1999 by the federal Mi'kmaw Education Act, the authority boasts over 50% Mi'kmaq teachers, and a curriculum that stresses Mi'kmaq culture and language.

Nunavut (35%)

Nunavut's high school graduation rates are shockingly low. At 35%, the fraction of Nunavut adults with a high school diploma is 20 points less than the next lowest province or territory (Northwest Territories), and more than 10 points less than the worst-performing OECD country (Mexico). Nunavut's social problems are well documented, but contributing to

the poor graduation rates in particular is a combination of [rampant truancy](#) and an insidious culture of “[social promotion](#),” which encourages passing students from one grade to the next even when they are not ready. As a result, kids who just can’t keep up are simply dropping out of high school (at an astonishing [50% rate](#)).

Quebec (74%)

Quebec’s secondary education system is unique in the country. After Grade 11, students may attend CEGEP, a two-year pre-university college program that one must attend if planning to go to university. CEGEP roughly corresponds to the years that students in other provinces would attend Grade 12 and the first year of university. Moreover, Quebec has a well-developed adult education system that aids those over the age of 16 to complete their high school (i.e. pre-CEGEP) diploma (in every other province, these adult high-school dropouts would instead attend college and would not be counted towards their provincial high school graduation rates). As such, the graduation rate [commonly reported by Statistics Canada](#) (93%) overstates the ability of the Quebec education system to graduate its students in a timely manner. Instead, the province’s [own 74% estimate](#) (counting percent of youths under 20 that have graduated) shows that Quebec is actually near the *bottom* of all provinces. One out of five girls, and shockingly, one out of three boys, [quit school in Quebec](#) before they graduate.

Methodology Notes

Why look at graduation rates — why not performance? Of course, while graduation rates explain how many people a country manages to usher through its education system, it doesn’t tell the whole story: namely, how ready are students once they’re done? On that measure, on the national level (where data is most reliable), Canada again tends to fall [toward the the middle](#) among OECD nations, behind Asian powerhouses like Singapore, Korea and Japan, but ahead of other developed nations like the Australia, Spain and the United States.

How does Statistics Canada define graduation rate? From the [Statistics Canada site](#): “Upper secondary graduation rates are the sum of graduation rates by age, and the latter are obtained by dividing graduates of a specific age by the population of the corresponding specific age. Rates without duplication only count individuals who had obtained, during a given year, a diploma at this level for the first time. In general, a graduate of upper secondary education is considered to have successfully completed the last year of education at this level, regardless of his or her age.”

Why do provincial and Statistics Canada numbers sometimes differ? The numbers computed by provinces and by Statistics Canada may differ for a number of reasons including age of the data. We are using data from 2011 as it is the last year for which Statistics Canada has released a dataset that include high school graduation rates across all provinces and territories. It is important to use a single data source when comparing different regions as the definition of graduation rate varies significantly depending on the specific education ministry. For instance, there are different ways of defining the cohort of students being examined, e.g., if someone moves out of province, some calculations will treat this person as if he/she dropped out, and different end points, i.e., when do you officially determine that someone is a drop out? Statistics Canada tries to normalize all of these arbitrary decisions so that the numbers can be meaningfully compared across provinces.