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To Reverse Canada's Freefalling Test Scores, Bring Back Traditional Education Methods

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Commentary

Boosting Canada's embarrassing education rankings doesn't necessarily require more funding—it requires jettisoning some of the newer teaching approaches that are not working and returning to the tried-and-true.

That is the message from a [report](#) published by the C.D. Howe Institute last month that zeroes in on rapidly declining math proficiency among Canadian students.

The report, authored by University of Winnipeg mathematics professor Anna Stokke, paints a truly dire picture. Since 2003, math scores in Canada have been swiftly falling, clearly shown by the Program of International Student Assessment (PISA) rankings.

Seven provinces saw drops of over 40 points on PISA, which is equivalent to roughly two years of lost learning. A 58-point drop in Manitoba and Newfoundland represents nearly three years of learning down the drain.

This abysmal showing is confirmed by the latest Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, which tests Grade 4 and Grade 8 students on skills like arithmetic and fractions. Here, too, Canada fell short.

Canadian Grade 4 students scored below their peers in the United States, Germany, and England—and we're not even close to Singapore, Korea, or Japan.

This is not for lack of trying on the part of Canada's provinces, which have jurisdiction over education—if throwing money at a problem counts as trying, that is.

The C.D. Howe report lays out how Canada actually spends more than the OECD average; our cumulative spending per student between ages 6 and 15 is US\$125,260. And yet, we are far outperformed by Japan, which spends 14 percent less per student.

According to Prof. Stokke, the main problem with the woeful test scores in Canada lies in teaching methods, not funding. She argues that much of our math teaching consists of trendy approaches like “inquiry-based or discovery-based learning, collaborative problem solving, or open-ended tasks”—methods she says are “not grounded in scientific evidence.”

[Inquiry-based learning](#) is a student-oriented approach that “starts by posing questions, problems or scenarios” rather than the more traditional method that centres on “the teacher presenting facts and their knowledge about the subject.”

Critics of this teaching method often question why students should be asked to discover their own knowledge instead of first learning from the teacher, who is much older and has been trained to teach.

This approach has been coming under fire increasingly in recent years, notably by the influential Australian education psychologist John Sweller.

In an August 2021 [paper](#), Sweller draws a link between Australia’s falling test scores and the rise of inquiry learning centred on students “discovering information for themselves rather than having the information explicitly presented to them.”

He says that although inquiry learning has become “increasingly popular,” there is “very limited empirical evidence for its efficacy.” That is how a polite academic says that your theory is bogus.

The logic behind Sweller’s critique is simple but incisive.

He says there are “two broad categories of information.” The first is “biologically primary information” that we acquire “unconsciously and effortlessly”—things like general problem solving. The second is “biologically secondary information” that we “have not specifically evolved to acquire” but have nevertheless decided is important to function in society.

Sweller argues that “schools were invented” to teach this second type of information, which is most quickly and rapidly learned “via explicit instruction from other people, such as teachers.”

In her C.D. Howe report, Prof. Stokke echoes this critique, citing “a large body of research” consisting of numerous studies that demonstrate the educational value of “explicit teacher-led instruction, which incorporates clear explanations, worked examples, purposeful practice, and feedback.”

Despite the paucity of evidence to support it, inquiry learning remains a predominant teaching method in schools. According to Stokke, some “popular Canadian math programs even actively discourage teacher-led demonstrations, disparaging explicit instruction as ‘mimicking.’”

Stokke calls for a sequence of reforms to strengthen Canadian math education, starting with ensuring that schools only use “evidence-based” teaching methods.

She further calls for the memorization of facts to be restored to its former prominent place in the classroom, suggesting the introduction of a “mandatory times tables check in primary school” and a ban on calculators in primary school provincial assessments.

Notably, Stokke seeks to dispel the idea that timed tests cause “math anxiety,” which she calls a myth. Instead of doing away with traditional assessments, she contends that “the best way to reduce math anxiety is to improve student achievement in math.”

These are just a few of the common sense suggestions in the report. Unfortunately, some provinces are going in the other direction.

British Columbia has gone so far as to [abolish](#) letter grades in K–9 report cards, ditching the old system of “A, B, C” for a new system that uses words like “developing” or “emerging.”

In 2024, Manitoba dramatically lowered training requirements for teachers, to the point that a teacher in that province can now teach math, science, or history to students without having taken a course in those subjects since they themselves were in high school.

At the time, Prof. Stokke [called](#) that move “probably the most alarming thing” she has seen in her entire time as a math education advocate.

Canada’s future success depends on how we educate our children today. At the moment, we are getting a failing grade.

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