

Winner of the Carl Bertelsmann Prize 2008

Toronto District School Board: Comprehensive commitment to integration through education



1. Migration – status and policies in Canada

Cultural diversity has been recognized as an important social resource in Canada since the 1970s. This multicultural understanding was set down in the Canadian Multiculturalism Act in 1988, which also led to reform of the immigration laws: For the first time, Canada opened its borders to immigrants from non-European countries. Since then, qualified migrants from all over the world have been recruited through systematic policies to strengthen the Canadian economy by immigration.

19.1 percent of the 32 million total population were born outside Canada. Annual immigration currently amounts to more than 260,000 individuals. About half of these immigrants settle in the Province of Ontario, mostly in the Toronto region. Consequently, 49.9 percent of Toronto residents were born abroad. For half of them, neither English nor French is their native language, and these are the immigrants mostly populating Toronto's social "problem groups" or identified as "problem immigrants". The City of Toronto has accepted the challenge by declaring, "diversity is our strength". This fundamentally positive attitude towards immigrants is also expressed by the habit of describing them as "new Canadians".

2. Education system and policies

Canada's education system is distinctly federal in its structure. All competence rests with the ministries of education of the ten provinces and three territories. In many cases, the ministries have transferred their responsibility for primary and secondary schools to local school boards, which are in charge of school administration, the recruitment of teaching staff and the drafting of curricula within given guidelines.

Most Canadian schools are all-day comprehensives without any differentiation into various school types. Children enter primary school at the age of six and usually stay there for eight years. Only at the subsequent secondary stage of the school system there is internal differentiation into courses preparing for university and others guiding towards vocational qualifications. The prolonged periods of communal learning with

native children and young people show positive effects for children and adolescents from immigrant families.

3. Integration through education

Canada is achieving successful integration of children and young people from immigrant families in the education system. The PISA studies have shown that there are no differences in attainment between second-generation immigrant children and native students. The immigrant children in Canada achieve much better than average learning results among the OECD countries. This must be partly due to Canadian immigration policies focused on human capital, but also to the integrative school system and the efforts of the regional education authorities in Canada.

At the schools in Toronto, the proportion of “new Canadians” is as high as 80 to 95 percent, depending on the catchment area, with new arrivals being enrolled every day. More than 36 percent of these students come from economically disadvantaged families, whose income is less than 70 percent of the median income.

As the regional school authority, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) reacts to these challenges in exemplary fashion: According to experts, and in the judgment of the Ontario Ministry of Education, the TDSB is a “world leader in equity”. The reading competence of students in Toronto tested in grade 9 is as high as the overall reading performance for Ontario, which, with its much lower proportion of immigrants, is ranking among the best in the PISA study. The equity policy of the TDSB represents a holistic, systemic approach to ensuring equal participation and chances especially for students of migrant origin.

4. Principal integrative elements implemented by the TDSB

- *Principle of participation and equal chances:* The TDSB is committed to a comprehensive “Equity Foundation Statement”, which serves as the guiding principle for ensuring participation and equal chances. All stakeholders see their role in achieving integration through a mainstreaming approach informing everyday school practice, rather than in offering additional services. The result is an open school culture impressively supported by every stakeholder, from the School Board through school principals and teachers to children, parents and migrant associations.
- *Leadership:* The principle outlined above is actively implemented from the top of the School Board. The TDSB is the only regional school authority in Canada to employ a high-ranking Executive Officer of Student and Community Equity.

- *Learning Opportunity Index – fair control of resources:* The schools facing the greatest challenges are provided with most support. The TDSB developed a point index system ranking and supporting all schools according to the socioeconomic background of their students. In this way it is ensured that resources are distributed fairly.
- *Integrative learning culture:* Curricula and learning methods have been adjusted to the multicultural composition of the student body. The learning culture is characterized by cooperative learning arrangements and individual support. Everyday school practice reflects the ethnic diversity of the students through its commemoration and festival culture. The TDSB makes every effort to ensure that this diversity is also present in the composition of the teaching staff.
- *Regional support systems for schools and teaching staff:* The School Board provides exemplary qualification support for teaching staff and special resources for English as a second language and other challenges.
- *Opening schools to the community:* The TDSB supports schools in their efforts to involve parents, neighborhoods and ethnic communities. In neighborhoods with particularly high numbers of immigrants, integration advisers (“*settlement workers*”) at the schools are helping parents with education and other issues concerning integration. Many schools also offer qualification measures for parents. Partnerships with civic organizations and enterprises outside school are standard among schools in Toronto.
- *Innovative measures to tackle specific issues:* To reduce the dropout rate among certain “problem groups”, the TDSB recently started the “Inner City Model School” initiative, which supports particularly disadvantaged students and their parents in deprived neighborhoods. Moreover, at the urging of the Afro-Canadian community, the School Board started the “Africentric School” initiative, which is guided by the special requirements of Afro-Canadian students.

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