

دليل شامل بالانجليزية يشرح نظام التعليم في كندا



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Canada

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Introduction

Overview of Education System

In Canada, provinces and territories hold exclusive constitutional jurisdiction over education. As a result, Canada does not operate under a single centralized education system or a national curriculum. Rather, school systems are overseen by a Ministry or Department of Education in each of the 10 provinces and three territories. The roles, rights, and responsibilities for parents, students, and the education system are outlined in the School Act for each province and the Education Act for each territory.

Education systems across Canada consist of various school settings: public, separate, charter, on-reserve, private, and homeschool. In public school systems across Canada, school boards/districts are demarcated by geography and language (i.e., anglophone and francophone). It is a constitutional right in three provinces (Ontario, Alberta, and Saskatchewan) and a statutory right in the three territories for students to attend a publicly funded, separate, religious-minority school. Charter schools exist only in Alberta. Indigenous student populations can also attend on-reserve schools. In private school systems, funding is usually fee-based, with some provinces providing partial funding that is typically conditional upon certain criteria (e.g., employment of certified teachers). Alternatively, instead of choosing institutional forms of schooling, parents may opt to have their children complete homeschooling. Kindergarten to twelfth grade in Canada generally is divided into two levels: elementary (primary) and secondary. Although Kindergarten attendance is only mandated in three provinces (British Columbia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island), a large majority of students begin schooling in either Junior Kindergarten (JK) at the age of 4, or Senior Kindergarten (SK) at the age of 5. Formal elementary schooling begins in first grade, typically at the age of 6. Students transition to secondary school in either seventh grade (in Quebec, Secondary I) or ninth grade (in Quebec, Secondary II), normally at the age of 12 or 14. Although most provinces and territories mandate schooling until age 16, some provinces and territories require schooling until the age of 18, which marks the end of secondary school. In Quebec, there is an additional level of publicly funded postsecondary nontertiary schooling: *Collège d'enseignement général et professionnel* (CÉGEP), or in English, the College of General and Vocational Education. This level of schooling is unique to Quebec and is a prerequisite for

university studies. Despite this structural difference between Quebec and the rest of Canada, students typically have a comparable number of years of compulsory schooling.

Streaming (i.e., tracking) is implemented only in certain provinces. Alberta, Quebec, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Prince Edward Island begin streaming students in tenth grade, while New Brunswick begins in eleventh grade.¹ Ontario will end streaming ninth grade students as of September 2022.² Curriculum content is tailored to meet the demands of each academic stream and can differ in content and purpose. For instance, in the lower secondary level, courses may be differentiated between “applied” or “academic” categories, with applied courses generally centered on practical applications and concrete examples while academic courses tend to focus on theory and abstract problem solving. At the upper secondary level, courses normally are characterized by destination-based streaming, leading to university, college, or the workplace.

Languages and Literacy

Canada’s two official languages, English and French, are the most common languages of instruction, with students normally enrolled in schooling in their first language. For students interested in learning French as a second official language, French immersion programming is offered widely in the public school system. Students in immersion programs learn French through the delivery of other subjects in the French language. In the 2019–2020 academic year, a total of 487,185 students were enrolled in French immersion programming.³

In addition to programming for both official languages, there has been increasing focus on developing Indigenous language education in Canada. Specifically, as a response to Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s calls to action to support Indigenous language learning, provinces and territories have created, and expanded upon, Indigenous languages curricula and teaching resources, with Manitoba, Nunavut, Yukon, and the Northwest Territories formally recognizing Indigenous languages.⁴

Finally, in Canada, other languages can be offered through alternative programs. For instance, the Ministry of Education in Alberta offers provincewide programs from Kindergarten to sixth grade in eight international languages: Arabic, Chinese, German, Italian, Japanese, Punjabi, Spanish, and Ukrainian. These programs provide students with an opportunity to learn an international language and culture, with the goal of building communication and intercultural skills. Instruction in other subject areas is provided using the international language for up to 50 percent of the school day.

Overall, Canada continues to offer schooling in different languages through various programs to meet the diverse needs of students.

Use and Impact of PIRLS

Canada has participated consistently in PIRLS, from the first administration in 2001 to the most recent administration in 2021. Some administrations consisted of participation from a greater number of provinces (see Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1: Canada’s Participation in PIRLS by Province

PIRLS 2001	PIRLS 2006	PIRLS 2011	PIRLS 2016	PIRLS 2021
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ontario ▪ Quebec 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ British Columbia ▪ Alberta ▪ Ontario ▪ Quebec ▪ Nova Scotia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ British Columbia ▪ Alberta ▪ Saskatchewan ▪ Ontario ▪ Quebec ▪ New Brunswick (French) ▪ Nova Scotia ▪ Newfoundland and Labrador 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ British Columbia ▪ Alberta ▪ Saskatchewan ▪ Ontario ▪ Quebec ▪ New Brunswick (French) ▪ Newfoundland and Labrador 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ British Columbia ▪ Alberta ▪ Ontario ▪ Quebec ▪ Newfoundland and Labrador

As the only international assessment of reading skills and knowledge in students’ early years, PIRLS data provide valuable cognitive and contextual information on student achievement in Canada. Findings from PIRLS—along with the Pan-Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)—help to inform Ministries/ Departments on the program implementation of the language curriculum in their respective provinces or territories. Moreover, PIRLS also provides researchers with data to assess student progress—both within and across provinces—for various student population subgroups.

The Language/Reading Curriculum in Primary Grades

Policies on Reading Literacy

In each province or territory, the language arts curriculum specifies the official policy on reading literacy, along with other strands such as writing, speaking, and listening. Language arts curricula do not normally prescribe instruction methods (i.e., pedagogy); rather, they outline the expectations for outcomes that students should achieve by the end of each grade. Moreover, there may be separate language arts curriculum documents for each language of instruction. For instance, in Nova Scotia, the province has a distinct curriculum document for English language arts, French Immersion, and French First Language from Grades 1 to 12. To supplement curriculum documents, Ministries or Departments of Education typically offer additional supporting guides, reports, and resources to bolster program planning for reading instruction at various grade levels. For example, in Ontario, a list of such documents is provided within the Grade 1 to 8 language curriculum for teachers’ reference.

Moreover, certain Canadian regions have constructed curriculum frameworks to build a common set of curricula to guide provincial/territorial curriculum development and implementation. Until 2014, the Western and Northern Canadian Protocol (WNCP) created frameworks to guide learning outcomes, including learning outcomes in the language arts for four western provinces (Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan) and the three territories (Northwest Territories, Nunavut, and Yukon). Currently, the Foundation for the Atlantic Canada English Language Arts Curriculum sees a partnership among the provinces of New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island. By organizing general curriculum outcomes for three strands (speaking and listening; reading and viewing; and writing and other ways of representing), the framework continues to strengthen the quality and equity of programming for K–12 students.

Curriculum Content

Most provinces and territories place some, or major, emphasis on the following reading processes:

- Focusing on, and retrieving, explicitly stated information
- Making straightforward inferences
- Interpreting and integrating ideas and information
- Examining and evaluating content, language, and textual elements

Most provinces and territories also place major emphasis on the following purposes of reading:

- To improve reading skills and comprehension
- For literary experience
- To acquire information
- For enjoyment

In addition to the processes and purposes of reading, curriculum documents also might provide expectations for digital media skills. For instance, in Ontario’s English language arts curriculum, there is a separate strand for media literacy in addition to oral communication, reading, and writing. Ontario’s *Policy/Program Memorandum 164* also addresses the standards, recommendations, and mandates for digital literacy, resources, and safety. In general, most provinces and territories also place some emphasis on the following digital reading skills:

- Strategizing reading digital texts
- Looking up information to research a topic
- Critically evaluating information on the internet

Curriculum Competencies

Competencies also are specified in the curriculum. For instance, in Quebec, there are four reading competencies at the fourth grade level: reading a variety of texts, writing a variety of texts, communicating orally, and appreciating literary works.

Curriculum Coverage

While some provinces and territories do not specify a percentage of total instruction time to devote to language/reading instruction in their fourth grade curriculum, some provinces and territories do. Among those who do are Ontario (20 percent), Newfoundland and Labrador (24 percent), Quebec (28 percent), Prince Edward Island (30 percent), New Brunswick (35 percent), Saskatchewan (37 percent), and Nova Scotia (50 percent).

In addition to curricular content, competencies, and coverage, some provincial resources and guides may specify teaching and learning methods that are expected in the delivery of the curriculum. As such, teachers are encouraged to incorporate a variety of methods to meet the global needs of their diverse students, and also to design their reading programming effectively and equitably. The following examples demonstrate how the curriculum documents across Canada guide the pedagogical practice of teachers to promote deep learning in reading literacy, among other subjects:

- **Cross-Curricular and Integrated Learning.** Opportunities to learn may go beyond one subject area so that students may acquire knowledge and skills in two or more subject areas during any given activity. As such, the cross-curricular learning approach is typically also indicated in curriculum documents, which may present opportunities and examples to integrate specific language expectations with other subject expectations. This enables teachers to plan instructional programs that simultaneously meet expected outcomes of two or more subject areas. For reading, this means that opportunities for teaching and learning reading literacy may be provided through the delivery of other subject matter. Quebec, for instance, specifies that “cross-curricular competencies” should go beyond a specific subject area, and that all teachers, regardless of their teaching specialization, are expected to help students achieve their potential.⁵
- **Alternative Programming.** To promote equitable opportunities to learn, the curriculum may be tailored to the unique needs of students. For example, if a student demonstrates certain individualized needs, Ontario teachers—with the support of other stakeholders—may create an Individual Education Plan (IEP) for the student. The IEP can prescribe two main forms of alternative programming: accommodations or modifications. Accommodations result in adjustments to the instruction, environment, or assessment of the student without changing the grade level at which the student is expected to perform; modifications, however, may specify learning expectations from a different grade level (i.e., a higher or lower grade). Modified curriculum expectations may result in changes to the number and complexity of assigned tasks.

- **Indigenous Perspectives.** For example, embedded in Manitoba’s curriculum is the belief that student learning in reading must incorporate First Nations, Métis, and Inuit perspectives.⁶
- **Gradual Release of Responsibility.** To ensure that students are learning and applying knowledge and skills with the appropriate amount of support, teachers scaffold their instruction. With this pedagogical practice, teachers first model the work before mentoring and, ultimately, monitoring it. This pedagogical practice is outlined, for instance, in Newfoundland and Labrador’s curriculum.⁷

Overall, reading curriculum documents across Canada may transcend the prescription of subject-specific knowledge and skills that students are expected to achieve by the end of the academic year, and therefore also may include expectations of higher-order learning and thinking processes.

Professional Development Requirements and Programs

Professional development requirements and programs are determined by organizational bodies, which differ by province/territory. In most provinces and territories, professional requirements for teachers are regulated by a Ministry or Department of Education. However, in Saskatchewan and Ontario, a regulatory body of teachers oversees the teaching profession, including the necessary requirements to enter and remain in the profession. Regardless of the organization responsible for teacher regulation, teaching in the public school system in any province or territory normally requires certification, which entails completion of an undergraduate degree and a separate degree in education (bachelor’s of education, master’s of teaching, etc.).

In addition to the theoretical and practical coursework, a teacher’s education program includes an in-class practicum period under the supervision of a mentor teacher. The supervised practicum can last anywhere from a minimum of 9 weeks up to 20 weeks, depending on the province/territory. Furthermore, several provinces/territories have their own requirements to become fully certified, such as through an examination, probation period, or a mentoring or induction program. For instance, in Alberta, once preservice teachers finish their initial teachers’ education, they may only hold an Interim Professional Certificate. Teachers must teach for an equivalent of two full-time years and pass two successful evaluations before they are recommended for a Permanent Professional Certificate to become fully qualified.

Depending on the intended grade level, professional preparation and/or development may be required to teach language arts. For instance, in Ontario, a preservice teacher who wishes to teach at the Junior or Intermediate level (Grades 4 to 10) must possess a specialty subject, which can include language, among other subjects. Obtaining basic qualification in a teachable subject typically requires university-level coursework in addition to a degree in teaching. Moreover, in-service teachers may further hone their pedagogical skills and knowledge in a particular subject, such as reading, through professional development in the form of credentialed upgrading courses.⁸

Aside from formal credential-granting courses (i.e., additional qualifications, certificates, or graduate studies), a number of professional development opportunities exist for in-service teachers; teachers may or may not attend these programs during allocated professional development days. Professional development may occur in the form of workshops, conferences, professional learning communities, and more, and may be organized at the school, board/district, provincial/territorial, or pan-Canadian level.

Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

Student progress in reading literacy is monitored at different levels and for different purposes. Assessments may be administered either at the local level, such as in the classroom, or at the provincial/territorial, pan-Canadian, or international level through a large-scale assessment. At the local level, teachers evaluate students through classroom-based assessments and report their students' achievement outcomes of curricular expectations through progress report cards.

Provincial assessments typically are administered at transitional times of student pathways, such as at the midpoints and endpoints of elementary school education (e.g., third grade and sixth grade), and in the Intermediate years (e.g., ninth grade). Some provinces/territories require successful completion of the assessment in order to graduate secondary school. For instance, in Ontario, tenth grade students are required to successfully complete the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT). In Newfoundland and Labrador, the provincial government administers twelfth grade certification examinations in language arts (English, French), mathematics, social studies (geography, history), and science (biology, chemistry, Earth systems, physics). Successful completion of at least one course in each area is a requirement to graduate from secondary school with an academic/honors distinction, and also to enter university.

At the pan-Canadian level, eighth grade classes across the country may be selected to participate in the Pan-Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP), which assesses students with respect to their achievement of the curriculum expectations that are common to all provinces and territories in three core learning domains: reading, mathematics, and science. The information gained from this pan-Canadian assessment provides ministers of education and other stakeholders with a basis for examining the provincial curriculum, student progress, and other aspects of student and school systems.⁹ At the international level, assessments such as PIRLS, the Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), and PISA also are used to gain insight into areas of improvement in Canadian education systems.

Beyond assessments, students' progress in reading is measured outside of test settings. Indeed, Newfoundland and Labrador's curriculum specifies the many ways that teachers employ methods and tools to evaluate the progress of their students' learning. Depending on the grade level and the activity, teachers may assess student understanding using anecdotal records, audio/video clips, case studies, checklists, conferences, debates, demonstrations, exemplars, graphic organizers,

journals, literacy profiles, photographic documentation, podcasts, portfolios, presentations, projects, questions, quizzes, role-play, rubrics, self-assessments, tests, observations, and Wikis.¹⁰

In Canada, evaluation is conceptualized as **for** learning, **as** learning, and **of** learning.¹¹ Assessment **for** learning is diagnostic in nature; it is meant to provide an opportunity to measure student learning to formulate more appropriate future learning and teaching. Assessment **as** learning is formative in nature, as it provides students the chance to assess their own progress, as well as that of their peers. Finally, assessment **of** learning is summative and typically is used to measure a student's cumulative knowledge.¹²

Special Reading Initiatives

A variety of special reading initiatives exist in Canada. In addition to local programs at the classroom, school, and district levels, certain provinces offer support through the use of specialists and intervention resources:

- In New Brunswick, Educational Support Services, which is a branch of the Department of Education, utilizes individualized, intervention strategies–based English language learning resources that are developed by the province.
- In Quebec, a reading intervention guide is utilized, which proposes ways to help students ages 10 to 15 who have difficulty reading.
- In Manitoba, Reading Recovery is offered in first grade, and school divisions and schools provide their own supports for struggling readers beyond this grade by using a variety of other approaches. The province provides support resources and professional development opportunities for teachers.

Overall, although provinces and territories hold exclusive constitutional jurisdiction over education in Canada—which results in differences in the curricular/cross-curricular content, competencies, and coverage of reading literacy—there is a shared convergence in the commitment for quality and equitable language education in Canada.

Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

Teaching and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in mid-March 2020, schools across Canada pivoted to online learning. In two provinces, schools reopened for in-person learning for a few weeks in May and June 2020; however, schools generally were closed for in-person learning until the following academic year, beginning in September 2020. In the 2020–2021 and 2021–2022 academic years, some schools closed for in-person learning for periods of time as mandated by provincial regulations and based on the recommendation of health officials. Authority was also generally

relegated to individual schools to determine school, grade, or class closures to reduce community spread of COVID-19.

Provincial and territorial Ministries/Departments of Education worked with school boards to develop and implement appropriate plans for continued instruction. In terms of remote learning, these plans included the provision of guidelines for schools, and resources for students and teachers. Learning options for Kindergarten to twelfth grade included in-person learning, remote learning, or a hybrid model in which the student attended a blend of in-person learning and remote learning. The availability of options depended on the various provinces/territories. Moreover, some provinces/territories opted to cancel some—or all—of their provincial examinations, while others kept them to measure student learning pre- and postpandemic.

In Canada, the pivot to reliable remote learning was inhibited by some technology-based challenges such as insufficient internet connectivity, a lack of devices, and unequal access to digital infrastructure (e.g., broadband), particularly in rural areas. As a response to these issues, local or provincial/territorial bodies provided additional supports to students, teachers, and families. The following PIRLS-participating provinces used a combination of public, nongovernmental organization (NGO), and private resources and partnerships to equitably meet the needs of remote learners from Kindergarten to twelfth grade:

- Alberta: Online tutoring services were launched on January 11, 2022, with free prerecorded video tutoring sessions for students in Grades 4 to 9 to strengthen literacy and numeracy skills. The free online tutoring resources will be expanded to cover more grades and subjects, including live tutoring, later in the academic year.¹³
- British Columbia: School districts loaned equipment to students and/or staff, with 23,000 pieces loaned—or made available for loan—as of April 2020. For students living in remote regions with little or no internet or cell phone access, education assistants delivered printed learning packages or USB key drives so that students could continue learning at home.
- Newfoundland and Labrador: As of May 2020, the Department of Education distributed devices such as Chromebooks, iPads, and laptops to 2,500 students. For students who experienced connectivity issues, MiFi devices, home internet installation, or the use of iPads with data cards were provided.¹⁴
- Ontario: The Ontario government partnered with Rogers Communications and Apple to procure iPad devices that were preloaded with learning software and free wireless data. The devices were distributed to students who did not have sufficient equipment or internet connectivity required to access remote learning. Over 21,000 iPads were sent to the homes of disadvantaged families.¹⁵

- Quebec: In partnership with Université de Montreal, the Ministry of Education offered the Open School website,^a which provided educational content to students from preschool to secondary school across most subject areas.¹⁶

Policy and Practice Changes

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, New Brunswick (anglophone sector) developed a prioritized curriculum to identify the learning standards for the 2020–2021 academic year based on the most important learning from the standard curriculum.¹⁷ The prioritized curriculum allowed for teaching and learning within the constrained instruction time due to circumstances caused by COVID-19. Curriculum reform is ongoing.

Impact of the Pandemic on PIRLS 2021

Due to the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, Canada held two administrations for PIRLS 2021. In spring 2021, PIRLS was administered for fourth grade students in schools across British Columbia, Alberta, and Newfoundland and Labrador. In fall 2021, PIRLS was administered for fifth grade students in schools across Ontario and Quebec.

The challenges of school closures and the pressures of meeting student learning demands during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic have meant that, ultimately, some schools that were selected to take part in the assessment were unable to participate; however, the majority of selected schools in participating provinces were able to administer PIRLS 2021 successfully to their students.

Suggested Readings

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