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## Education of Elementary School Students Reaching New Heights

## Summary

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This document is a follow-up to leaflet n° 8 *Education Reform and Parents*, published by the *Fédération des comités de parents*. The first part introduces the Education Program as part of the reform; the second part emphasizes the student's place in the Programs' orientations. Then, it looks at the main components of the Program as well as its impacts on school organization. In the final pages of the document, the contributions made by parents to the success of this reform are examined.

## Resources

For answers to your questions, to learn more about a subject or to find the right tools or resources... contact the FCPPO.

We offer:

- Advice;
- Information brochures;
- References;
- Training workshops.

Visit our web site [www.fcppq.qc.ca](http://www.fcppq.qc.ca) or contact your regional association through the Parents' Committee at your School Board.

## Acknowledgement

Leaflet 8 "Education of Elementary School Students, Reaching New Heights" is published as part of the training program of the *Fédération des comités de parents de la province de Québec*, 389, boulevard Rochette, Beauport, Québec, G1C 1A4.

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May 2002

Legal deposit – 2002

Bibliothèque nationale du Québec

ISBN 2-921357-69-0

# Schools connected to their times



In the wake of the movement to reform education, which was undertaken in 1997, the education of preschool and elementary school students has certainly experienced the most significant changes.

Why reform education? We want to prepare students for the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is imperative that schools change to keep up with their times. Schools must meet the needs of their students by adapting to their reality and to that of the society in which they evolve. Over the last few decades, Quebec, like most Western societies, has undergone impressive changes. It is a multicultural and democratic society that is increasingly open to the world, where knowledge, information, and technology occupy a predominant place, and where the job market is constantly shifting. Schools must keep pace with these changes and ensure that every student develops a view of the world that will allow his or her full potential to be realized.

Over the last few years, a number of reports and studies stimulated considerable discussion and a rethinking of the education of students, both at the elementary and secondary levels. Undoubtedly, the turning point came in 1996 when the Commission for the Estates General on Education made an extensive tour of the province to listen to public opinion about the effectiveness of the education system and to determine society's expectations with respect to Quebec's school system.

The Commission's final report was one of the key documents – along with the report by the task force on the reform of the Education Program *Reaffirming the Mission of Our Schools*, published in 1997– that influenced the choice of the major orientations defined in the current Program.

In 2001, the *Ministère de l'Éducation*, which is responsible for the programs of study, published the *Québec Education Program – Preschool Education Elementary Education* that defined the objectives and the content of elementary school education.

# Taking care of the children first



## Ensuring their success

The primary intention of the education reform is to ensure the success of the greatest number of students and one of its principal actions, to overhaul the Education Program. Schools must give all children the opportunity to develop their full potential, throughout their years in school. Thus, the program of study has to offer students qualifications and experience that will serve them beyond the school walls, in other words learnings that will be useful in their day-to-day lives and for the rest of their lives.

## Providing instruction, socializing and providing qualification to students

The entire Program is in line with the school's mission which is to provide instruction, to socialize, and to provide qualifications to students. Providing instruction is self-evident since we all know that the acquisition of knowledge is the school's primary objective for its students. Other objectives concern teaching young people how to live together and become full citizens, and avoiding the risks of social exclusion of certain categories of people. These objectives can be found in several components of the Education Program.

Providing qualifications to all students using a variety of paths primarily means motivating and guiding all students to reach their full potential by offering them schooling that is adapted to their fields of interest and aptitudes.

## Respecting the learning rate

We know very well that children do not all learn at the same rate or in the same way. We also know that they come to school with different abilities and experiences, with different perceptions about school, and with extremely diversified social and family backgrounds. These realities have repercussions on students' attitudes, on their learning rates, on their ability to pay attention, and on their desire to learn.

One of the first changes that we notice in the Education Program concerns the organization of three two-year cycles which replace the traditional six years of elementary school. The principal reasons for this choice are student diversity and the desire to develop the students' competencies, a process that takes place over a longer period of time. Students have two years instead of one to complete their learnings and meet the requirements of the Program.



Throughout the cycle, the teaching staff accompanies and supports the children, giving them challenges that will enable them to move ahead in their learning. The staff helps students to recognize their strengths and weaknesses and encourages them to continue their own learning process. During the cycle, teachers can more easily locate the difficulties, preferences, and centres of interest of each of their students and plan a program that best meets the needs of the student. They must recognize that the class is a community in which all students evolve, help, and support each other, but also in which each student is unique and different.

### Placing students at the centre of the learning process

Research and experiments in education have demonstrated the importance of student-centred learning. Students must be actively involved in building their own knowledge. They will be called on to understand how and why they learn. Students will develop skills and strategies that can be used both in school and in daily life. In this way they acquire competencies that will be refined throughout their school years and for the rest of their lives: They will have learned how to learn.

### Relating to students' lives and centres of interest

To foster long-lasting and genuine learning, it is also extremely important to make learning meaningful. We must lead students to make connections between what they learn at school and how that learning can be used in daily life. We must enable them to examine their environment from different angles and improve their understanding of the world in which they live. What they learn must be related to real and meaningful situations. Therefore, schools must provide them with tasks to accomplish and problems to solve that become increasingly complex as the children grow but that are also closer to their concerns and centres of interest.

# Learnings for life



## Getting back to the basics

Let us now deal with the content of the Education Program for elementary school students. This Program is a continuation of what was already being done but differs primarily in its return to basics. It begins by promoting **fundamental learnings**, those that will enable students to continue to develop their competencies and to acquire knowledge that will be of use to them throughout their lives. Among these fundamental learnings are proficiency in the language of instruction and a second language, mastery of the principal elements of mathematics, knowledge of history, initiation to the arts, understanding of the basics in science, and acquisition of work methods.

In order to bring coherence and cohesion to the Program, the different disciplines were regrouped into **subject areas**: Languages, Mathematics, Science and Technology, Social Sciences, Arts Education, and Personal Development. The subjects themselves are always present within these areas. However, by grouping them under a single heading, it is easier to establish connections between them.

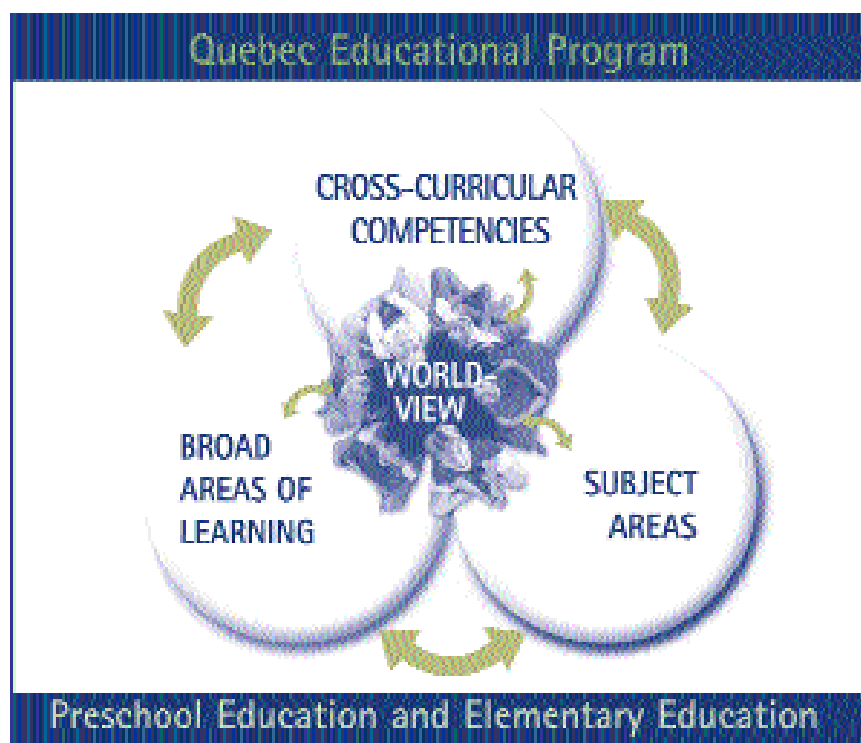
## Targeting the development of lasting competencies

How then do we foster lasting and genuine learnings?

The Education Program opted to develop competencies that will be transferable from one situation to another throughout the lives of these young people who will experience all of the innovations of the 21st century.

Unquestionably, one of the central aspects of the Program reform is the notion of competencies. They are divided into two categories. First, there are the subject-specific competencies. For example, in the English Language Arts program of study there are four competencies: To read and listen to literary, popular, and information-based texts; to write self-expressive, narrative, and information-based texts; to represent her/his literacy in different media; and to use language to communicate and learn. These same subject-specific competencies are found throughout the student's years in elementary school, but they become more complex from cycle to cycle. Then there are the cross-curricular competencies. More general in nature, they are common to all of the subjects. They will be integrated, developed and used by and through each subject, thus the description "cross-curricular." There are nine competencies outlined in the Education Program: To use information, to solve problems, to exercise critical judgment, to use creativity, to adopt effective work methods, to use information and communication technologies, to construct his/her identity, to cooperate with others, and to communicate appropriately.

Summary table of the preschool and elementary school Education program as presented by the Ministère de l'éducation



## PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

### Competencies

- To perform sensorimotor actions effectively in indifferent contexts
- To affirm his/her personality
- To interact harmoniously with others
- To communicate using the resources of language
- To construct his/her understanding of the world
- To complete an activity or project

## CROSS-CURRICULAR COMPETENCIES

### Intellectual Competencies

- To use information
- To solve problems
- To exercise critical judgment
- To use creativity

### Methodological Competencies

- To adopt effective work methods
- To use information and communication technologies (ICT)

### Personal and Social Competencies

- To construct his/her identity
- To cooperate with others

### Communication-related Competencies

- To communicate appropriately

## BROAD AREAS OF LEARNING

- Health and Well-being
- Personal and Career Planning
- Environmental Awareness and Consumer Rights and Responsibilities
- Media Literacy
- Citizenship and Community Life

## SUBJECT AREAS

### Subject-specific Competencies

#### Languages

- English Language Arts
- French Second Language
- French Immersion

#### Mathematics, Science and Technology

- Mathematics
- Science and Technology

#### Social Sciences

- Geography, History and Citizenship Education

#### Arts Education

- Drama
- Visual Arts
- Music
- Dance

#### Personal Development

- Physical Education and Health
- Moral Education
- Catholic Religious and Moral Instruction
- Protestant Moral and Religious Education



A program based on competencies does not rule out the need for students to acquire knowledge. They will always have to learn grammar rules and math operations! They will also have to learn to read maps, recognize primary and secondary colours, and memorize math tables. In fact, the Education Program includes a list of essential knowledges that must be acquired by the students during the study of each subject. Competencies and knowledge complement each other. They support each other so students can not only accumulate knowledge, but, more importantly, know how to use it.

One final section was included in the elementary level Education Program in order to make it easier for schools to be closer to real life. This section is called the broad areas of learning. This group of major issues concerns the dimensions of life that young people have to face. The five broad areas of learning are Health and Well-being, Personal and Career Planning, Environmental Awareness and Consumer Rights and Responsibilities, Media Literacy, Citizenship and Community Life.

## Emphasizing the cultural dimension

The elementary level Education Program aims to enhance the cultural dimension throughout all the subjects. In particular, the teaching of Languages, Arts, and History will promote the cultural approach. For example, besides learning to play a musical instrument, students will be introduced to the great musicians, different musical styles, the classics of all ages, and so on.

## Integrating information and communication technologies

In today's society, proficiency in information and communication technologies (ICTs) is a must. Schools must prepare young people to take their place in this knowledge- and technology- based society. Therefore, the Education Program includes suggestions for promoting the integration of ICTs into students' learnings.

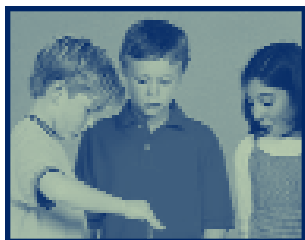
## Promoting integrated learning

For a long time, subjects were taught in a vacuum, each confined to its own time period. But that is not how things work in real life. Each situation, project, or problem calls on a multitude of competencies and knowledge from several areas. That is why the reform advocates integrating the different subjects and learning areas.

During a project on the Inca for example, students will develop their competencies in English as they read the documentation and write a text on the subject; in Mathematics, as they interpret statistics; in Geography, as they locate the territory and discover its characteristics; in History, as they learn about the way of life; in Religious or Moral Education, as they learn about Inca beliefs; in Art, as they draw the costumes that were worn, and so on.

It is the interrelationships between these knowledges and elements that enable students to better understand the world around them. School staff members are required to work more closely together in order to integrate learning.

# The impacts on the schools



## Subject-time allocation

All of these changes to the Education Program led to modifications in how schools are organized, particularly as regards subject-time allocations. Note for instance the importance placed on the fundamental learnings and on the subjects naturally associated with culture, integrated learning, the teaching of a second language starting in the 2nd cycle (Editor's note: this applies to French-language schools, French second language is taught in Kindergarten in English schools), the formation of two-year learning cycles, and differentiated instruction. All of these modifications have changed the stakes in education!

## Evaluation that supports learnings

The arrival of competencies in the Education Program transformed evaluation, since evaluating the development of competencies is a task that has to be done from day to day. With respect to everything that students undertake, teachers must be aware of the process as much as the finished product. Teachers are constantly evaluating. They observe, take notes, keep records, and determine the progress that has been made. They use a wide range of instruments such as tests, assignments, portfolios, and so on. Evaluation thus enables teachers to monitor the students' progress step by step, to quickly detect successes and difficulties, and in this way, ensure that students receive better support and attention.

At regular intervals, teachers have to inform parents of their observations and the students' progress and difficulties. They can use various methods, but the report card is the most popular. Nevertheless, other items can be presented to parents such as progress sheets, academic records, assignments, portfolios, and so on. In short, parents should receive all the information they need to monitor their children's progress.

At the end of each cycle, teachers who have worked with the student must now work together to evaluate whether or not, through their development of competencies, students have satisfied the requirements set out in the Education Program. This is the assessment of learnings. During the cycle, these teachers will have made provisions for support measures to be offered to the students who need them. These measures will help avoid the accumulation of academic delays that, often, lead to grade-repeating, failure or dropout at the secondary level.

## The professional nature of teaching

The points that have been discussed so far testify to the need for the community to recognize teaching as a highly professional responsibility in respect to the children that parents entrust to the school.

# Parents: Indispensable partners in the success of the students



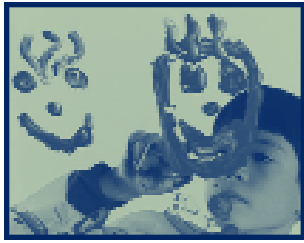
Consult other information  
leaflets by the FCPPO on participation,  
the Educational Project,  
Governing Boards, the PPO,  
and the Parents' Committee.

We cannot emphasize enough the indispensable role of the family in a student's educational success. There is not a parent who does not want his or her child to succeed in life. Most parents invest the energy needed to ensure this success. But too many parents still feel insecure as far as school is concerned.

With the implementation of the reform and its focus on the development of competencies, the parents' role has never been so important. Aren't parents in the best position to monitor and support their children in the development of their competencies in communication or to encourage them to apply the knowledge they have acquired in English or Math?

How can the school help parents to fully assume their role in the educational success of their children? How can the family and the school join forces to take on the enormous challenge of educating all children? These are questions that each community must answer by, for example, working out a plan to encourage parental participation. Without this contribution by parents, the efforts made to ensure success for all students are just a waste of time.

This privileged relationship between the school and the family requires that parents become involved in the structures of participation. There are, in fact, strategic places where parents can actively work toward defining the orientations of the school. First, there is the **Governing Board**, where parents hold an equal number of seats as staff members.



On many occasions (surveys, opinion polls, consultations) parents' opinions are solicited on a variety of questions related to school life, particularly when the major orientations of the Educational Project are being decided. By participating in large numbers, parents increase the influence of the parents' representatives who sit on the various committees. This is an excellent way for parents to make their voices heard.

This board has the right to review many issues relating to the school. For instance, it adopts the Educational Project and sees that its major orientations are implemented. It has a say about several aspects of the educational services before the school adopts these.

The role of the Governing Board in the success of the reform is undeniable. Teachers have to feel they are supported in the enormous task of reviewing their pedagogical practices in light of the new Education Program for students. This board has the right to review many issues relating to the school. For instance, it adopts the Educational Project and sees that its major orientations are implemented. It has a say about several aspects of the educational services before the school adopts these.

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**The Parent Participation Organization (PPO)** can become a major asset in this development. One of the roles given to the PPO in the Education Act is to promote parents' participation in the educational success of their children. Imagine for a moment the boost a school could receive from parents who had been convinced by the PPO of the merits of the main orientations in the reform! If they were in agreement with the changes that teachers were making in their teaching, a great many parents would participate in the activities set up to that end.

The annual **General Assembly** offers an ideal opportunity to inform parents of what is going on in Education and to introduce the school's orientations with respect to the reform. It would be most advantageous at this assembly to present the challenges the school is facing and allow those present to state their expectations concerning each issue.

For its part, the **Parents' Committee**, which brings together parent representatives, one from each school and one for special needs students, acts in an advisory capacity to the school board. Because of its political strength, this committee can make an outstanding contribution to the success of the reform through the quality of the advice it gives and especially through its interventions in support of parent participation at all levels.

# Some questions

Are parents well informed about the profound changes introduced by the Education Program so they can effectively help their child?

Have parents been told enough about the issues of the current reform to make them indispensable allies?

What is the role of parents involved in the structures of participation with relation to the education reform that is taking place? Are they merely spectators, or can they contribute to the success of the reform?

Are all those involved in the school convinced that parent participation is a major asset to achieving the objectives of the reform?

As parents, can we take advantage of this major reform to finally assume our rightful place and become full partners in the education network?

