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Advocacy group calls for end to ‘streaming’ in Ontario high schools

Students who take applied courses are more likely to come from low-income homes and are less likely to graduate, says a new report from People for Education, which is calling on the provincial government to end the practice of streaming.



Bernard Weil / Toronto Star File Photo

Annie Kidder, executive director of advocacy group People for Education, says it's time to bite the bullet and get rid of streaming in Grade 9.

By: [Kristin Rushowy](#) Education Reporter, Published on Mon Apr 13 2015

Students who take even a few applied courses are much less likely to graduate from high school than those in academic ones — and enrolling in applied math in Grade 9 means there's almost no chance a teen will go to university, says a startling new report from an education advocacy group.

[People for Education](#) is demanding the Ontario government merge the two types of classes for at least the freshman year.

The group says the system, intended to put an end to [“streaming” high school students](#) when it was implemented in 1999, has instead perpetuated all of its problems — and again put low-income students at a disadvantage given they are more likely to be in the more practical, hands-on applied classes.

“The government has tinkered around with applied for years, and fixed bits of it,” said executive director Annie Kidder. “It's time to bite the bullet and get rid of it in Grade 9.”

The OECD, an international organization representing developed nations, has also repeatedly warned that offering applied-like courses leads to lower achievement, lower expectations of the

students by teachers and, at times, a “low quality learning experience,” usually for students from less affluent homes.

Even the head of Ontario’s own standardized testing body, Bruce Rodrigues — a former director of Toronto’s Catholic school board — said “it’s worth reviewing the intent of these courses and how they might better support student achievement.”

The applied and academic courses replaced the old workforce, college and university streams, and applied in particular was to “offer programming for students with different strengths, interests, needs and learning styles,” he also said in the report, to be released Monday. “Student achievement in these courses continues to lag.”

In Toronto, teens who were enrolled in applied classes in Grade 9 “were much less likely to have graduated in five years (40 per cent) than those in academic courses were (86 per cent),” says research conducted by the public board.

“Previous studies have also noted only 21 per cent of students taking applied math in Grade 9 went on to college, only 3 per cent went on to university.”

Applied courses are often promoted as easier, though they were intended to cover the same material, just in a different way.

Kidder says Grade 8 students receive little direction on their high school course choices — very few elementary schools have a full-time guidance counsellor — and they aren’t aware of the ramifications of taking applied courses.

“Grade 8 is a critical year for Ontario’s students,” notes the report. “It is not only a pivotal point in a young person’s emotional, social and physical development, but also a time when students much choose between taking applied and academic courses in high school.

“These course selections largely determine students’ educational pathways throughout high school and have the potential to influence their post-secondary options and career opportunities.”

Principals will say that Grade 9, and even Grade 10, are “tenuous years,” Kidder added. “They are struggling with so many things, it’s important to keep them there. Grade 8, 9 and 10 are when we ‘lose’ kids. And one of the ways to lose them is by streaming them.”

Ending streaming has proved successful for Granite Ridge school near Kingston, which merged applied and academic math and provided extra help for students who had trouble keeping up. It has since seen a jump in provincial standardized test scores.

“Even though the school told students they could transfer to the applied math program mid-year if they found the academic program too challenging, they all chose to remain in academic math,” says the report. “Notably, teachers reported improved student behaviour and time on task in the Grade 9 academic math class.”

The government’s plan for the current system was to keep options open for students, “but once they are in that applied stream, they are just as likely to take all courses in applied,” said Kidder. “And it’s very hard to get out.”

In a statement to the Star, Education Minister Liz Sandals said there has been “steady progress” in student achievement in applied courses.

“The gap in pass rates between applied and academic courses has narrowed over the last five years,” she said.

“Supporting the success of our students is a top priority for our government, and we will continue to develop further supports for our students, including those studying in applied courses,” Sandals added.