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In Ontario schools, money isn't everything

By Josh Wingrove From Wednesday's Globe and Mail

Students from rich neighbourhoods don't necessarily produce better results on standardized tests, study says

Good schools aren't necessarily in good neighbourhoods, according to [a new study](#).

Standardized test scores for Ontario elementary school students in similar socioeconomic neighbourhoods vary by as much as 20 per cent above or below the provincial average, the study by a Waterloo, Ont., professor suggests, raising questions about why schools in similar communities achieve such different results.

The study is being released months after the province, facing an outcry from educators, scrapped a searchable school database that included information such as socioeconomic backgrounds and test scores.

The study, titled Ontario's Best Public Schools, was compiled by Wilfrid Laurier University economics professor David Johnson and released Tuesday by the C.D. Howe Institute. It looks at standardized Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) testing of Grade 3 and Grade 6 students over the past three years in schools where at least 45 students are tested, adjusting them according to socioeconomic variables such as pupils' household income.

Knowing those socioeconomic factors allowed Prof. Johnson to compare EQAO results of similar schools – for instance, those in well-to-do neighbourhoods.

The **results** prove that money isn't the only factor in student success. Results vary significantly in schools with similar students and communities, Prof. Johnson said.

"It could have been that every school in the province would be on the upward line [suggesting that more money brings better test results]," he said. "It's not."

For example, test results from a group of schools that Prof. Johnson expected to do 5 per cent better than the provincial average based on socioeconomic factors, fell in a range of 20 per cent above or below the provincial average.

"The message here is there are variations in the quality of instruction across schools where students come from similar economic and social backgrounds, and we care about that variation," Prof. Johnson said. "If we get variations in outcome – big variations in outcome – from the same resources, we should be asking why."

The province's top two schools are Toronto's St. Michael's Choir and St. John Vianney Separate School in Barrie, according to the study.

The study is based on EQAO numbers, which some, including the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, say aren't a fair measure because they "don't assess the whole child or the whole curriculum," according to the union's website.

The Toronto District School Board, meanwhile, runs its own index, which ranks schools by community need, but doesn't compare them with the provincial testing results. Prof. Johnson said that amounts to determining need without considering results.

But TDSB chair John Campbell said the board won't change its approach because of the new study. "There's value in it [the study]. But do we spend a lot of time agonizing about it? No."

Prof. Johnson did similar studies in 2005 and 2007, but this year's study was the first to incorporate more complex socioeconomic data. For instance, he weighed factors such as a parent's education more heavily for the Grade 6 test than those in Grade 3.

Annie Kidder, founder of the advocacy group People for Education, is among those pushing for a revision of testing methodology, and believes studies miss the mark when relying on standardized data.

“They’re always interesting, these things,” she said. “This study may have lots of wonderful data and may be carefully done ... but I would argue, no, you cannot judge a school on this [standardized testing] basis.”

HIGHS AND LOWS

The 10 best and worst Toronto public and Catholic elementary schools, according to the report, with their percentile ratings for Grade 3 and Grade 6 test results based on averages from the past three school years. Top 10 schools have been placed in order of the highest cumulative percentile scores; bottom 10, in order of their lowest.

Name	Grade 3	Grade 6
St. Michael's Choir School	100	100
Blessed Margherita Catholic School	100	100
Cornell Public School	99	99
Seneca Hill Public School	98	99
St. Martha Catholic School	98	97
St. Sebastian Separate School	97	98
Prince of Peace Catholic School	99	93
Arbor Glen Public School	94	97
St. James Separate School	97	94
Ossington/Old Orchard Junior Public School	91	99
Courcellette Public School	98	92

Name	Grade 3	Grade 6
D'Arcy McGee Catholic School	1	3
Eastview Junior Public School	3	1
St. Angela Catholic School	4	0
St. John Vianney Catholic School	5	4
Blake Street Junior Public School	7	2
Heron Park Junior Public School	8	1
Alexander Sterling Public School	4	9
Market Lane Public School	11	3
Earl Beatty Junior and Senior Public School	4	14
Corvette Junior Public School	6	13

