

OECTA POSITION PAPER ON DESTREAMING

ONTARIO ENGLISH
**Catholic
Teachers**
ASSOCIATION

The Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA) represents the 45,000 passionate and qualified teachers in Ontario's publicly funded English Catholic schools, from Kindergarten to Grade 12.

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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.01 On July 9, 2020, the Government of Ontario announced that, starting in the 2021-22 school year, the province's high school math curriculum would be "destreamed." At the announcement, Minister of Education Stephen Lecce pointed to research that suggests students from racialized communities, low-income households, and other marginalized groups are more likely to be steered away from "academic" courses and into the "applied" stream, which affects their medium- and long-term outcomes, from graduation rates to employment prospects.
- 1.02 Catholic teachers have always supported efforts to eliminate racism, discrimination, and all systemic barriers in our schools, and we will continue playing our part, including by offering our perspectives on how to implement destreaming successfully. The key to this is recognizing that to enhance equity in publicly funded education in a sustained way, the government must take a holistic and comprehensive approach to destreaming, by implementing it in a way that involves meaningful consultation and collaboration with education stakeholders, as well as robust supports for students and educators.
- 1.03 There are several considerations that are critical for the government to bear in mind. First, because destreaming has been presented as a means of eliminating inequity in publicly funded schools, particularly for Black, Indigenous, and other racialized students, it is important to acknowledge that destreaming alone will not eradicate some of the other causes of disadvantage, such as poverty and racial discrimination in the wider community. Destreaming should be part of a broader discourse on equity and inclusion, including wide-ranging educational reforms. This should involve a variety of supports, funded properly by the government, for students who are experiencing learning gaps in destreamed classes, as well as other measures to address inequities, such as though the Learning Opportunities Grant.
- 1.04 The government must also acknowledge that a transition toward destreaming will require appropriate teacher-led professional development opportunities, resources, release time, and other supports to ensure we are providing the best possible learning environment for all students. It will also be necessary to consider a range of associated factors that could undermine destreaming efforts, such as class size and composition, where research indicates that smaller class sizes better allow teachers to provide individual attention and differentiated instruction for all students.

- 1.05 Ultimately, the success of any destreaming policy will depend in no small measure on the government's willingness to engage in immediate, meaningful, and consistent consultation with education stakeholders. Any endeavours to write curriculum, support documents, or policy should be done in collaboration with teacher unions and classroom teachers, who are the frontline workers tasked with delivering curriculum. At the same time, there must be a focused effort on expanding current societal attitudes toward ideal educational outcomes, as well as greater student and parental understanding of the full range of post-secondary pathways.
- 1.06 The announcement to end academic streaming presents the government with a complex and multifaceted policy challenge. Our Association supports the move toward destreaming, but stresses that it cannot be oversimplified, underfunded, or rushed. Without proper consideration or funding to address issues at a systemic level, the transition to destreaming could inadvertently exacerbate existing problems and prove counterproductive to improving equity and diversity in Ontario's publicly funded schools.

2. RESEARCH

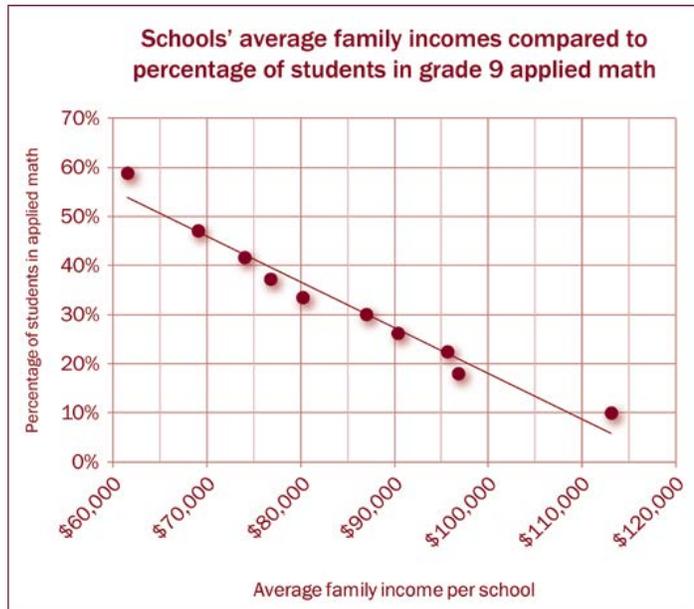
- 2.01 The arguments in favour of streaming contend that it better respects students' learning styles, abilities, and aspirations, enabling teachers to tailor instruction and students to move through curriculum materials at the same pace as their classmates (Barrington 2018). But there is also substantial evidence showing that streaming serves to produce or reinforce social inequities. Even the 2004 Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation study, *From Applied to Applause*, notes that "for the most part, articles pointing out the merits of streaming point out benefits only to higher achieving academic students and to teachers with respect to the organization of the classroom and the delivery of course material" (Antonelli 2004).
- 2.02 In their primer, the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and the Canadian Education Association say that studies on ability grouping show inequitable outcomes and social consequences (OISE and CEA 2010).
- It is very difficult to distinguish "ability" from "prior achievement."
 - Use of grouping by ability is associated with worse overall student performance.

- Students placed in higher-ability groups may perform better, but students placed in lower-ability groups typically perform worse than in mixed-ability groups.
- There is a tendency for lower teacher expectation and lower quality of instruction in lower ability groups.
- For students assigned to low-ability groups, there are negative effects on their self-esteem, motivation, and attitudes toward schooling.

2.03 Much of the international literature is especially critical of streaming at younger ages, but there is mounting evidence that Ontario's streaming policies are not benefitting certain secondary students.

- Using data from 2000, Statistics Canada found that 15-year-olds in Ontario, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia from university-educated families (one or more parents with a university degree) were significantly more likely to have made course choices that left their post-secondary options open. Similarly, young people from more affluent families were more likely to be enrolled in Grade 10 courses that would keep their post-secondary options open (Krahn and Taylor 2007).
- A 2014 study from People for Education used Ministry of Education data to show that although students are technically no longer required to choose a "set" of courses, in reality they rarely mix-and-match: just 10 per cent of students take only applied math and no other applied courses, and very few students transfer from applied to academic courses.
- In 2015, People for Education used EQAO test scores and demographic data to argue that Ontario's streaming policies exacerbate inequalities in our schools, because students from low-income neighbourhoods, and/or those who have scored poorly on EQAO tests in elementary school, are much more likely to take applied courses than their wealthier and/or higher-achieving classmates. Furthermore, students in applied courses are less likely to graduate and rarely go on to post-secondary education – in part because they often make decisions about pathways with limited understanding and guidance, and find it difficult to transfer in later grades (Hamlin and Cameron 2015).
- In 2017, Professor Carl James of York University followed consultations with parents, students, educators, and administrators in the GTA, and used data from the Toronto District School Board, to show that Black students are disproportionately streamed into applied rather than academic programs. Only 53 per cent of Black students are in academic programs, compared to 81 per cent of white students and 80 per cent from other racialized groups. The report says that Black students' expectations and attitudes are "gradually worn down" by the education system (James and Turner 2017).

- In 2020, as part of a broader review of racism and discrimination in the Peel District School Board (PDSB), researchers identified disproportionate numbers of Black students being streamed into applied or locally developed credit courses. Although the overall percentage of Black students in the PDSB in Grades 9 and 10 in 2018-19 was approximately 10.1 per cent, Black students represented 7.7 per cent of students in the academic programs, while representation of Black students in applied and locally developed credit courses was 21.7 and 25.4 per cent, respectively (Chadha, Herbert, and Richard 2020).



Source: People for Education (2013)

2.04 The OECD has studied the impact of grouping by ability.

- Most instructive for a system such as ours, in which students are streamed according to their expected post-secondary destination, is the evidence showing that grouping and selecting students has a significant impact on *instrumental motivation*. In highly differentiated systems, the impact of a student's socio-economic status on their educational goals is stronger than in less differentiated systems (OECD 2015).
- In another report on supporting disadvantaged students, the OECD recommends that student selection be delayed until upper secondary, with limited numbers of subjects or durations of ability grouping, increased opportunities to change tracks or classrooms, and high curricular standards for students of all abilities (OECD 2012).

- 2.05 Other research has found that streaming impacts negatively on student learning outcomes (Johnston and Wildy 2016), results in a “self-fulfilling prophecy” with regard to students’ self confidence (Craig et al. 2020), and only benefits higher-achieving students (Adams 2014). This is differentiated from ability grouping *within* classes, which has been shown to benefit both high- and low-achieving students (Francis and Hodgen 2018).
- 2.06 There is limited research on the empirical effects of destreaming, but it is generally viewed as a positive development. European countries such as Finland and Poland have been cited as examples of countries where destreaming led to improvements in student performance, but it is important to note that these changes were implemented alongside much broader educational reforms (Jakubowski et al. 2016; OECD 2010). There has also been a push to end tracking in US schools, with the US Department of Education likening it to a form of segregation (Kohli 2014; Burris, Welner, and Bezoza 2010). Streaming continues in other Canadian provinces, such as Alberta, but the developments in Ontario have prompted calls for an end to these practices (Gavel 2020).
- 2.07 One study published in 2017 by a Master’s student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education examined destreaming initiatives in the Toronto District School Board. The qualitative research, which drew on semi-structured interviews with teachers in destreamed classes, did not specifically examine student outcomes, but rather looked at factors contributing to success. The study pointed to three key factors having the greatest impact on positive outcomes in destreamed classrooms: (1) the benefits of belonging to a positive learning community; (2) the positive impact of effective administrative support; and (3) the importance of positive teacher attitude (Fogliato 2017).

3. CONSIDERATIONS

- 3.01 These data, combined with the lived experiences of Black and other racialized students, as well as students from other equity-seeking groups, provide compelling reasons to reform the practice of streaming in Ontario’s publicly funded education system (Clandfield and Martell 2014). However, for this transition to be successful in improving equity and student success, the government must consider how students will be served in accordance to their abilities and learning styles, and how teachers will be supported in facilitating differentiated learning. Without adequate preparation

and a holistic approach that incorporates a range of resources, supports, collaboration, and funding, destreaming will not be effective. Below are several areas that should be addressed.

3.02 **Teacher Training and Supports**

Empirical and anecdotal research show that students thrive in environments where teaching strategies can be adapted to meet individual students' needs (Morgan 2014). It is therefore necessary that teachers be provided with teacher-led professional development opportunities on topics such as differentiated instruction, applying an equity lens to curriculum delivery, and more. Some pedagogical initiatives that should accompany destreaming prior to its introduction include:

- Adequate in-servicing for all staff, to create a climate supportive of change.
- An adequate resource base in all schools, consisting of new technologies to support varied destreamed modes of program delivery.
- Professional development and in-service training for teachers to leverage technology to facilitate and define program delivery, and meet the needs of all students.
- Development of broad-based integrated curriculum.

3.03 Funding for these professional learning opportunities must be provided by the Ministry of Education and should be accessible to all teachers across both panels, including educators in support roles.

3.04 There also need to be strict guidelines with respect to the size and composition of destreamed classes. Research has demonstrated the positive relationship between small class sizes and student success, which not only allows for greater frequency of teacher-student interaction, but also creates opportunity for teachers to employ a greater variety of instructional and differentiated strategies based on student needs (Schanzenbach 2014). The same holds true for the importance of class composition, which better enables teachers to adapt teaching strategies, as required (Manitoba Teachers' Society 2019). The related issues of class size and composition affect teachers' ability to plan and support student learning, and would be of heightened significance in destreamed classrooms – they must be addressed by the government in concert with any destreaming efforts.

- 3.05 The government will need to be mindful of another potential consequence. If classes are destreamed, teachers will be required to further engage in differentiated instructional strategies to meet students' diverse needs. This will inevitably involve teachers making choices about "grouping" students in particular ways. While research suggests that some forms of grouping, by "activity" for example, can be beneficial (Francis et al. 2018), attention must be paid to avoid these groupings from becoming sustained or permanent features of the classroom. If this were to occur, in addition to creating teacher workload issues, it could result in multiple in-class "streams." Rather than reducing the stigma associated with academic streaming, this would simply reconstitute it within classrooms. The government must think seriously and deliberately about how to avoid this potential, and must ensure that careful, measured, and comprehensive supports are part of any destreaming implementation plan.
- 3.06 **Wrap-around Student Supports**
Implementation of destreaming will not be effective without a robust suite of supports and community engagement to promote student success. Mental health and wellness must be a centrepiece of this approach. This will require the hiring of additional resource teachers, educational assistants, special education supports, and culturally responsive counsellors. There should also be expanded access to initiatives such as healthy breakfast programs, free school trips, health clinics, and after-school programs, as well as school infrastructure and technology upgrades. The government also must acknowledge that online learning is not suitable for all students, and abandon any notion of making participation in e-learning courses a requirement for graduation.
- 3.07 There also will be a significant curricular component, as the current curriculum will need to be rewritten to incorporate a universal approach to learning and student success that includes, but is not limited to, practical, theoretical, or experiential learning opportunities. Attention must be paid to integrating a destreamed curriculum into current Ministry initiatives, such as Specialist High Skills Major, Experiential Learning, Schools for the Performing Arts, International Baccalaureate, Advanced Placement, and other programs.
- 3.08 An often neglected, though critical, component in managing a transition to destreaming is the realization that "streaming" is not solely about Grade 9 students. Research shows that attitudes and self-perception form early in a student's life

(Davis-Kean et al. 2009). Therefore, it is imperative that school boards undertake a serious and robust examination of the attitudes and practices that negatively impact students starting in Kindergarten.

3.09 For example, research has pointed to improving literacy among younger students as a key to promoting long-term success (Antilla 2013). As such, additional funding should be dedicated to Reading Recovery and Early Literacy programs. But also it is important that students and parents be aware of the various pathways, both academic and employment-related, that are available. This will require a broader attitudinal change, and a widening of our collective definition of success. Irrespective of academic streaming, there is a persistent stigma associated with non-university pathways, such as the skilled trades (St. Esprit 2019). This is to the detriment of a healthy, fully functioning society. We must continue to educate and promote these avenues to students at a young age. This effort will need to involve educators, universities, colleges, trades, and employers.

3.10 Collaboration

It did not go unnoticed that the destreaming announcement in Ontario came without the government having consulted, or even informed, education partners. The Ford government's tendency to ignore the expertise of frontline educators is not conducive to policy success. For destreaming to have any measure of effectiveness, it is imperative the government engage the entire education community in discussions, so we can ensure changes are effective in helping every student realize their potential.

3.11 Any endeavours to write curriculum, support documents, or policy should leverage the expertise of classroom teachers and their representatives, to ensure a range of diverse perspectives and experiences are included.

3.12 Logistical Considerations

The government will need to consider how destreaming efforts could affect certain kinds of streamed schools, including:

- Special art or arts schools
- Schools for athletically gifted students

- Schools offering special technological programs
- French immersion schools
- Schools offering academic enrichment programs
- Vocational schools

4. CONCLUSION

- 4.01 Catholic teachers will continue to do our part to eliminate prejudice and discrimination from our schools and our society, including collaborating on efforts to successfully implement destreaming in Ontario’s publicly funded schools. The considerations outlined in this report are not exhaustive, but speak to some of the areas the government must address in a holistic and comprehensive approach.
- 4.02 The Ford government has made a great show of casting their destreaming plans as a panacea for systemic racism and discrimination. However, this approach is neither prudent nor sufficient. For destreaming to be beneficial for students and society, it must be accompanied by proper funding, collaboration, and a wide range of supports and resources that assist educators and allow students to reach their full potential.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 5.01 Destreaming cannot be looked at in isolation from other educational reforms. The effectiveness of destreaming will be contingent on taking a holistic approach that provides robust, wrap-around supports for students, and integrates efforts with initiatives such as Specialist High Skills Major, Experiential Learning, Schools for the Performing Arts, International Baccalaureate, Advanced Placement, and other programs.
- 5.02 The Ministry of Education must provide funding for professional development, support resources, release time, and other supports needed to transition to full implementation.
- 5.03 The government needs to establish adequate staffing and resources to make destreaming effective. This must take into consideration that affiliates that have long-established class size provisions in collective agreements will need to

be addressed. Class composition will also need to be examined in the formation of destreamed classrooms.

- 5.04 The government must ensure there are appropriate supports for all students in the early years, to narrow learning gaps that can grow over time if not attended to.
- 5.05 No change will be effective without changing current societal attitudes toward ideal educational outcomes. There must be a sustained effort to raise awareness of various post-secondary pathways, and widen our collective definitions of success. Streaming contributes to stigmatization of non-university pathways; countering this will require a concerted effort involving educators, universities, colleges, trades, and employers.
- 5.06 The government must engage education partners in sustained, meaningful consultation and collaboration in developing destreaming policy.
- 5.07 The current curriculum will need to be rewritten to incorporate a universal approach to learning and student success that includes, but is not limited to, practical, theoretical, or experiential learning opportunities.
- 5.08 Any endeavours to write curriculum, support documents, or policy should be done in collaboration with the education affiliates, and classroom teachers from across the province, representing schools from a diversity of geographic and socio-economic profiles.
- 5.09 A pilot program should be established in small, medium, and large districts with feedback from all stakeholders collected and shared with the affiliates and OTF. Any pilot should take place over a minimum of a three-year period before full-scale implementation.

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