



EDUCATION IN QUÉBEC

AN OVERVIEW





Background

Immense Territory

Nearly 7.5 million people live in Québec, a large continental peninsula with an area (1.7 million km²) three times the size of France or five times the size of Japan. A large part of Québec is covered by the northern boreal forest and dotted with thousands of lakes and rivers. The St. Lawrence River, one of the world's largest waterways and the most important in North America, runs across Québec from west to east. Approximately 80 per cent of Québec's population lives in the St. Lawrence valley. Almost half of all Quebecers reside in Montréal and the Greater Montréal region and 700 000 people live in and around the province's capital, Québec City. Both cities are located along the St. Lawrence River.

The People of Québec

First inhabited by Aboriginal peoples, Québec has gradually received immigrants from France and the British Isles, and more recently from an increasingly large number of other countries. Some 25,000 new immigrants settle in Québec annually. About a hundred cultural communities, concentrated mainly in the Montréal region, account for approximately 9 per cent of Québec's population.

French is the official language in Québec. Some 83 per cent of the population speaks French at home, while 11 per cent speaks English, and 6 per cent speaks another language. Half of the labour force uses both French and English, and 16 per cent fluently speaks a third language, typically, Italian, Spanish or Greek.

Most of the 11 Aboriginal nations speak their Native languages and use French or English as a second language.

Exclusive Jurisdiction

Québec is one of the 13 members of the Canadian federation, a British-style constitutional monarchy. Under the 1867 Canadian Constitution, Québec, along with the other Canadian provinces and territories, has the exclusive right to make its own laws in matters of education.

There is no ministry responsible for education at the federal level; ministries of education exist only at the provincial and territorial levels. In Québec, the Ministère de l'Éducation is the government body responsible for promoting access to all forms of education for all those who have the desire and ability to be educated. It also endeavours to coordinate the orientations and activities of the education community with government policies in general and with the economic, social and cultural needs of Québec society. Québec's education system is based on a sharing of responsibilities by the government, universities, colleges, school boards and schools.

French, the Language of Instruction

In most educational institutions in Québec, French is the language of instruction.

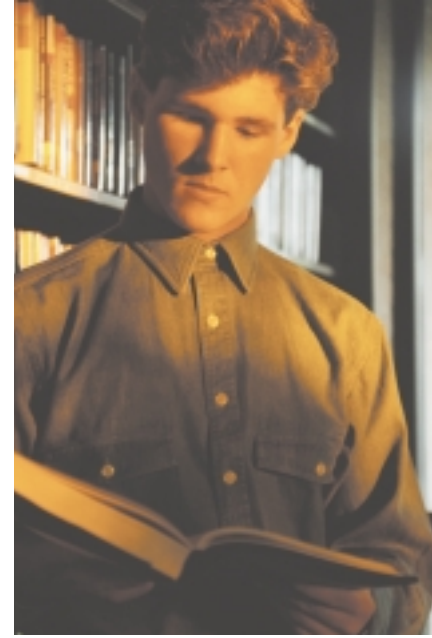
Under the Charter of the French Language, instruction is to be given in French at the preschool, elementary and secondary levels. However, some students who meet specific requirements of the Charter may receive their schooling in English. These students account for approximately 10 per cent of the total enrolment in Québec's elementary and secondary schools. As for college and university students, they can enroll in either English- or French-language institutions.

The Council of Education Ministers, Canada, established in 1967, allows the provincial and territorial ministers of education to coordinate their actions in areas where they have common interests.

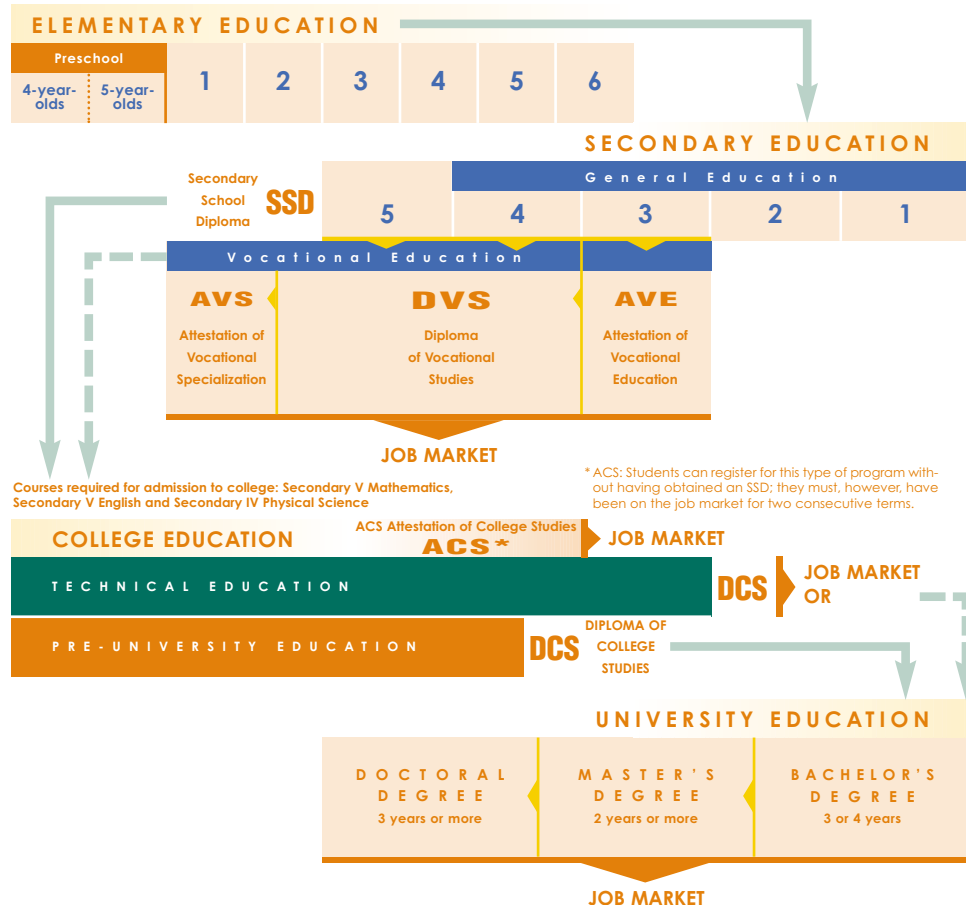
A VARIETY OF ACADEMIC AVENUES

The education system is made up of public and private French and English educational institutions. The Québec government allocates significant funding to education, which is considered of utmost importance. For example, 7.8 per cent of Québec's gross domestic product went to education in 1998-1999, compared to 6.6 per cent on average in the other Canadian provinces. After the health sector, education receives the most funding.

Québec's education system has four levels: elementary (which also includes preschool), secondary, college and university. Approximately 1.8 million people are enrolled in various full- and part-time studies. Education is free at the elementary, secondary and college levels. University students are required to pay tuition, which is relatively low by North American standards.



Québec's Education System



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Preschool and Elementary Education

Elementary education consists of six years of schooling divided into three cycles of two years each. Schooling begins at the age of 6, and is mandatory up to the age of 16. However, most children attend an optional year of full-time kindergarten; some children with handicaps or from low-income families can attend part-time kindergarten at the age of 4.

Elementary education focuses on the basic subjects and promotes the general development of the child. Its goal is to foster the progressive development of independence and to prepare students for secondary school. Public elementary and secondary schools fall under the jurisdiction of school boards managed by elected school commissioners.

Secondary Education

Secondary school offers five years of general education, divided into two cycles. Cycle One, which lasts three years, enables students to consolidate the learning acquired in elementary school and to begin to think about their career options. From the third year on, optional subjects are added to the general curriculum, giving students the opportunity to explore various subject areas (sciences, arts, etc.). At the end of the fifth year of secondary education, students are awarded a Secondary School Diploma (SSD) that provides access to college, but does not lead directly to university. It is worth noting that the proportion of students graduating with a first secondary school diploma in Québec in 1998-1999 was 83.6 per cent (young people and adults combined), compared with an average of 80 per cent in the member countries of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

Various vocational education programs leading to a trade are offered in Cycle Two. Some of these programs start in the third year of secondary school. Over 170 vocational education programs in 21 sectors allow young people and adults to earn a Diploma of Vocational Studies (DVS) and then, if they so choose, an Attestation of Vocational Specialization (AVS). After Secondary Three, students may also enroll in a program leading to an Attestation of Vocational Education (AVE) in order to prepare for a semi-skilled occupation.



Specific Goals

The ultimate aim of elementary education is to prepare students to participate actively in a changing society by playing a constructive role as citizens. To this end, the focus is not only on the acquisition of knowledge, but also on the progressive development of competencies that will enable students to find answers to questions arising out of their everyday experience, to develop a personal and social value system and to adopt responsible and increasingly autonomous behaviour.





College Education

College education is a particular feature of Québec's education system. It constitutes an intermediary level between compulsory elementary and secondary education and university education.

There are some 50 public general and vocational colleges, known as CEGEPs, and 24 private colleges. All of these institutions offer two-year pre-university programs and three-year technical programs leading to a Diploma of College Studies (DCS) as well as shorter technical programs leading to an Attestation of College Studies (ACS).

A Diploma of College Studies (DCS) is required for admission to university. Pre-university programs lead directly to university, whereas technical programs generally lead to the labour market, but can, under certain conditions, also lead to university.

CEGEPs are governed by a separate, specific law. Each institution is administered by a board of directors made up of teachers, students, and community representatives.

Flexibility

At the end of secondary school, students who wish to pursue their studies choose between technical and pre-university education, both offered by CEGEPs.

Students often confirm their career choice during college.

This is made possible by the wide range of technical and pre-university programs available and by the fact that students can easily transfer from one type of program to the other.

An Important Role in Québec's Economy

Because CEGEPs are present in all regions of Québec and work closely with socioeconomic partners, they play an active role in Québec's economic development. Thus, 22 technology transfer centres have been created by CEGEPs to conduct applied research and provide technical assistance to businesses. These centres are active throughout Québec and around the world.

Relevant and Effective Vocational and Technical Education

In recent years, Québec has faced a growing demand in certain occupations, more specifically in skilled occupations. Particular attention has therefore been paid to vocational and technical education. Programs are developed in conjunction with industry to ensure that training is relevant and that programs are adapted to new needs.

There are a total of 300 vocational and technical education programs, divided into 21 sectors. These programs are offered at the secondary or college level, depending on the complexity of the occupation as well as the language, mathematical and scientific skills they require.

Vocational education programs are offered at the secondary level by institutions called vocational education centres. These centres prepare students to practise skilled or semi-skilled trades although, in certain cases, graduates with a Diploma of Vocational Studies may go on to college. College-level technical programs are offered by CEGEPs and private institutions. These programs involve longer and more diversified training and lead to jobs as technicians.



University Education and Research

There are nine universities in Québec, including the Université du Québec, which consists of a network of ten branches. These branches are located in seven regions, providing all Quebeckers with access to university education. The universities are independent legal entities and enjoy a great deal of autonomy.

Québec universities have faculties in all disciplines as well as professional schools (business, engineering, etc.). The organization of university education in Québec is similar to that of higher education in North America, the exception being that bachelor's degrees in Québec usually take three years to complete instead of four, which is the result of students' initial specialization in college.

University education is divided into three levels. The first leads to a bachelor's degree. The second involves two years of additional studies and leads to a master's degree. The third, which lasts approximately three years, leads to a doctoral degree. In addition, various undergraduate programs offer non-degree professional training. Tuition fees at Québec universities are among the lowest in North America.

The proportion of university graduates in Québec is one of the highest in the industrialized world. Out of 100 people in the same generation, over a quarter (26.6 per cent) can expect to earn their bachelor's degree.



Acting Together

The Québec government's efforts to coordinate vocational and technical education activities with industry are the result of cooperation between the Ministère de l'Éducation, the ministries in charge of labour and workforce planning and partners in the education system.

Student Financial Assistance

The Ministère de l'Éducation runs a financial assistance program to ensure that lack of funding is not an obstacle to formal education. Each year, this program allows roughly 140 000 applicants to pursue secondary-level vocational studies or a postsecondary education. This program is one of the most comprehensive in Canada and North America; however, only Québec residents enrolled full-time at recognized institutions are eligible for financial assistance.

Meeting Regional Needs

In order to maximize the use of regional potential, certain technical and university programs are offered only outside of large cities. Seafood processing and marine resource harvesting and production, for example, are taught at the Cégep de la Gaspésie et des Îles, located on the shores of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Another example is the furniture and architectural woodworking program, offered by the Cégep de Victoriaville in the Bois-Francs region. In most of Québec's regions, the Université du Québec has set up schools reflecting regional economic profiles. For instance, one would study oceanography in Rimouski, pulp and paper in Trois-Rivières and mining in Rouyn-Noranda.

Accessible Continuing Education

Adult education is well developed in Québec and seen as part of continuing education. It allows adults to complete their basic elementary or secondary education or to enroll in college or university programs.

At a time when knowledge is rapidly evolving, continuing education provides adults with opportunities to update technical and technological skills or to study new subjects and acquire new occupational skills. It also meets various individual needs as regards cultural interests and social advancement. Easy access to continuing education has allowed many Quebecers to make education an ongoing part of their life.

French language training and literacy services are also offered to the general public either by educational institutions or publicly funded community groups.



Government Orientations and Priorities in Education

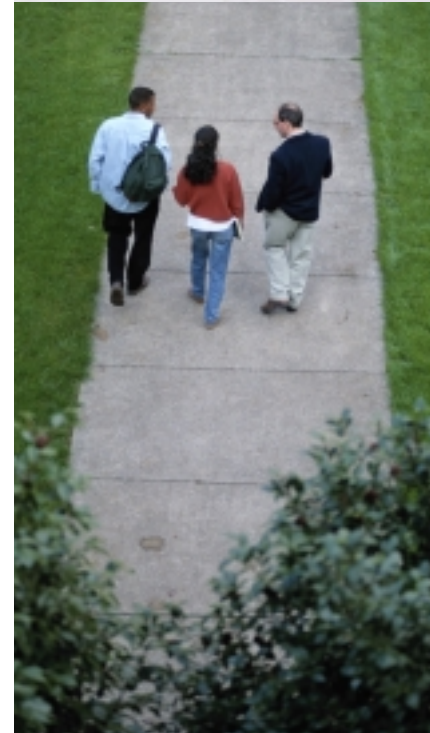
For the coming years, the priorities of the Québec government in education are as follows:

- improve the educational achievement of students by encouraging them to learn as much as they can and to stay in school until they graduate
- ensure that academic programs reflect the realities of today's world and the changing labour market
- provide individuals with qualifications in keeping with their aptitudes, with a view to helping them enter and stay in the labour force
- improve the performance of universities as regards the quality of teaching, management efficiency and responsiveness to the needs of society

Moreover, the Québec government amended the *Education Act* in order to give more power and autonomy to elementary and secondary schools, in particular by creating governing boards. These boards, consisting of an equal number of parents and school staff, are now key partners of school administrators, which now have more power to make decisions with regard to pedagogical and budgetary issues.

The Ministère de l'Éducation has also implemented a major reform of the curriculum aimed at reinforcing basic subjects, enhancing cultural literacy across all subjects and giving students a more active role in their own learning.

Finally, the Ministère de l'Éducation has recently introduced a mechanism for strategic planning throughout the education system. Its purpose is to identify concrete means of further improving the quality of Québec's schools and promoting the academic success of the greatest possible number of students.





International Dimension

At this point in history when the global village is growing at an ever-increasing rate, opening up to other cultures and learning about other countries is an essential element of civic education. That is why Québec's elementary and secondary schools are emphasizing citizenship and cross-cultural education that is based on the great diversity of their students' geographical origins, mother tongues and cultural roots.

Within this context, increasing student mobility and student exchanges with a particular emphasis on language learning has become a priority of the Québec government; educational institutions are being encouraged in their efforts to globalize. Thus, a number of programs have been developed to allow Québec students to study abroad and foreign students to study in Québec. Especially active in this respect are universities that have concluded agreements with their counterparts from across the globe. Over 14 000 foreign students and over 11 000 students from other Canadian provinces study at Québec's universities each year.

Foreign students are enrolled in college, as well. Many colleges are very active in the international arena in technical education, particularly in South America and North Africa.

Finally, the Ministère de l'Éducation is involved in numerous international activities, either through bilateral cooperation agreements or through participation in the projects and forums of international organizations such as the Francophonie.



Education: A Major Investment in Our Collective Future

The great diversity and quality of Québec's education system are valuable assets for a society that wishes to open up to the world in a spirit of respect, cooperation and dynamic interaction. Québec now has an excellent education system and some of the highest enrolment and graduation rates among OECD countries. Young Quebecers perform well in international mathematics and science assessments, with results that are typically above the OECD and Canadian average. Although these results are very encouraging, Québec has the ambition and the willingness to face new challenges in order to continue to improve its education system.

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