

ASSESSMENT MATTERS!



4

How Important Are Educational Expectations?

All parents want what's best for their children, but the support they provide varies significantly depending on the level of their expectations. If expectations are high, parents may encourage their child to take higher-level courses, provide help for homework and tests, assist in researching colleges and universities, or make sure that the school coursework is in line with the admissions criteria for postsecondary education. This kind of support often plays a key role in getting the children future-ready and determining successful career decisions.

Research has shown that there is a clear relationship between what parents expect and the achievement scores of students. Thus, parental expectations for educational attainment strongly predict students' scores across a variety of subjects (e.g., mathematics, language), and this relationship remains stable even after controlling for socioeconomic status (Fan, 2001; Neuenschwander et al., 2007). Moreover, the effects of early parental expectations (formed as early as Grade 1) tend to persist throughout the years of schooling, influencing children's performance and self-concept at later grades (Entwisle et al., 2005).

Interestingly, research shows that this relationship is bidirectional, which means that the better children do in school, the higher the expectations, and the higher the expectations, the better children do (Englund et al., 2004). Parental and student expectations mutually influence each other, but this influence may also be moderated by gender. For instance, a recent multiple-group analysis revealed that the effects of parental expectations on student expectations were stronger among boys than girls (Zhang et al., 2011).

This brief synopsis investigates the effects of parental and student expectations on student achievement in Canada, using data from two programs: the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS 2011), which assesses reading literacy at the Grade 4 level, and the Pan-Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP-2010), which focuses on mathematics performance at the Grade 8 level.

Canadian parents have very high expectations, even for children at an early age

In order to collect information on home factors, PIRLS administered the Learning to Read Survey. In this questionnaire, parents and primary caregivers of each participating student were asked "How far in his/her education do you expect your child to go?" Overall, compared to the international average, Canada has a higher proportion of parents who expect their child

to complete a higher-education diploma, be it from a university or a non-university institution (97 per cent vs. 81 per cent for Canada and internationally, respectively). However, there is a lot of variation in parental aspirations across Canadian jurisdictions, with francophone parents tending to have lower expectations than their anglophone counterparts. As shown in Table 1, the largest difference

can be found in the “postgraduate” category: over one-third of English-speaking parents across Canada expect their children to complete a master’s or doctoral degree, whereas less than one-fifth of French-speaking parents expect their children to do so. Interestingly, this inversely mirrors the “non-university higher education” category: over one-third of French-speaking parents expect their children to attend a college, cégep, or vocational school, whereas less than one-fifth of English-speaking parents expect their children to do so.

At the jurisdictional level, New Brunswick-French stands out for having only 4 per cent of parents who expect their children to complete postgraduate studies, while Ontario-English parents are at 43 per cent (with a Canadian average of 32 per cent). Differences between language groups are observed in all provinces except British Columbia. In the province of Quebec in particular, over 40 per cent of francophone parents *do not expect* their children to go to university; this is two times higher than in the anglophone population.

TABLE 1 Parents’ educational expectations for their Grade 4 children in PIRLS 2011

	University (Postgraduate)	University (Bachelor)	Non-university higher education*	High school
ONe	43%	38%	17%	2%
QCe	38%	40%	19%	3%
NSe	37%	37%	22%	4%
BCf	37%	45%	16%	2%
BCe	36%	42%	18%	4%
NLe	35%	41%	21%	3%
ABe	31%	42%	22%	5%
ONf	30%	47%	22%	2%
NSf	22%	57%	18%	3%
QCf	16%	43%	35%	6%
NBf	4%	61%	30%	6%
CANe	38%	40%	19%	3%
CANf	17%	44%	34%	6%
CAN	32%	41%	23%	3%
INT	31%	34%	16%	19%

* Non-university higher education refers to college, cégep, and vocational studies.

Higher parental expectations are linked to higher achievement, even in the early years

As shown in Chart 1, there is a clear connection between parental expectations and student performance: the higher the expectations, the higher the reading scores. This pattern is observed internationally and in all provinces.

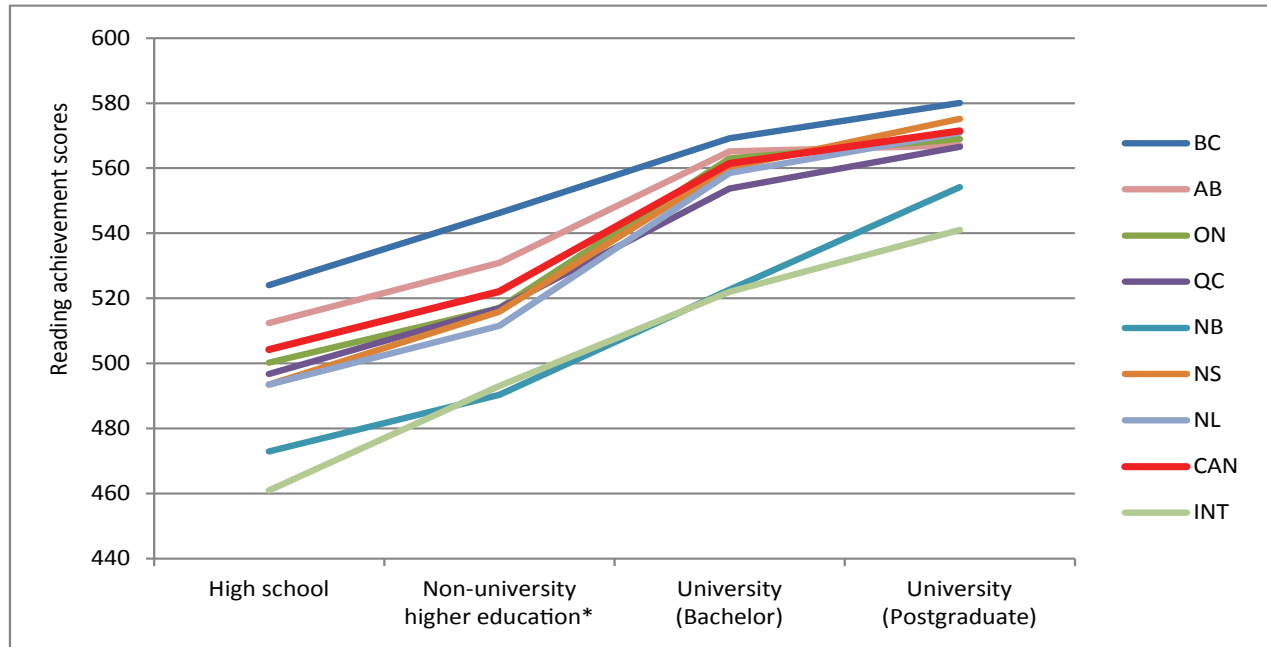
In Canada overall, the average performance gap between students whose parents expect them to complete

postgraduate studies and those who expect them to complete high school only is 67 points (or almost a full proficiency level in reading literacy). Across Canada, this gap ranges from 55 points in Alberta to 82 points in Nova Scotia. Internationally, the average performance difference is 80 points.

These results are in line with the Canadian Youth in Transition Survey (YITS), in which parental valuation of education was found to be the major determinant in whether or not a student drops out of school; moreover,

its impact was equivalent to the student's cognitive ability (for low- and medium-ability teenagers; Foley et al., 2010).

CHART 1 Student reading scores by level of educational attainment, as expected by their parents (PIRLS 2011)



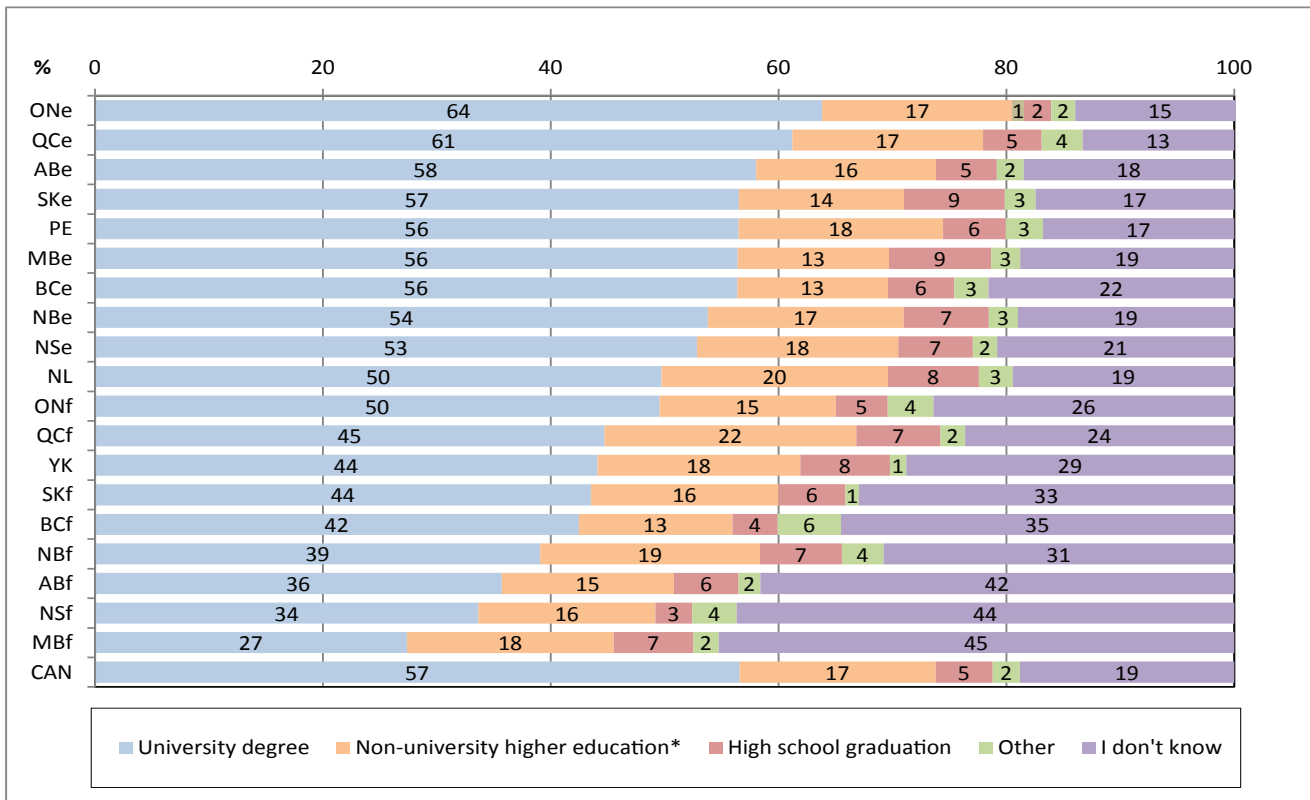
* Non-university higher education refers to college, cégep, and vocational studies.

Many Canadian teenagers do not have clear educational expectations

In the PCAP-2010 student questionnaire, Grade 8 students were asked about the highest level of education they expect to reach. As shown in Chart 2, on average, Canadian students have high expectations, with more than half aspiring to university graduation, and only 5 per cent planning not to pursue studies after high-school graduation. However, as was the case with parents in PIRLS 2011, there is a difference between language groups in PCAP-2010: francophone students clearly have lower expectations than anglophone students of the

same province. Moreover, francophone students show a higher level of uncertainty in regard to their educational future (“do not know” response ranges from 24 per cent to 45 per cent in francophone jurisdictions, as compared to a national average of 19 per cent). Manitoba-French stands out for having only 27 per cent of Grade 8 students hoping to complete a university degree and 45 per cent not knowing which educational path to choose at this stage of their school career.

CHART 2 Student educational expectations by jurisdiction in PCAP-2010



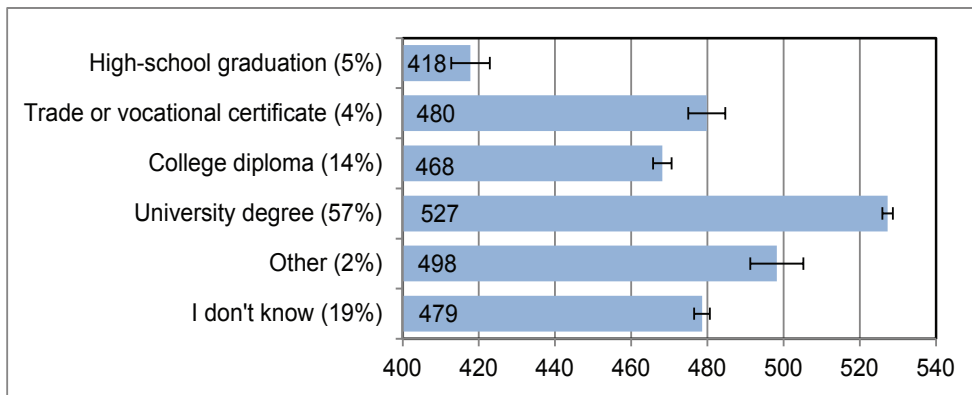
* Non-university higher education refers to college, trade, or vocational certificate.

There is a strong relationship between student educational expectations in the middle grades and student performance

PCAP-2010 results show that student expectations are clearly reflected in their relative mathematics performance: those expecting to complete high school only have the lowest achievement scores, and those

expecting to complete university have the highest. The performance gap between these two extremes is striking; it is more than 100 points (or almost two proficiency levels in mathematics).

CHART 3 Mean mathematics scores by educational expectations in PCAP-2010



Conclusion

Results presented in this brief synopsis show that, on average in Canada, both parents and students have high educational expectations, with more than half aspiring to university graduation. In our knowledge economy, this is very encouraging, given the fact that there is a clear connection between educational expectations and student achievement. However, there is considerable variation in expectations across and within provinces, with francophone populations having lower expectations than anglophone ones (at both student and parental levels). Also, many francophone teenagers still have not made up their minds about their future education. Although we cannot expect Grade 8 students to decide on their professional career at this early stage, we may want them to think about the general level of education they wish to achieve, so that they can prepare for their future path in advance (e.g., choose the appropriate courses or seek early career information). Although some jurisdictions have already implemented mandatory career explorations as a requirement for high-school graduation, others may consider moving in this direction (see also Looker & Thiessen, 2004; Ford et al., 2012).

Further results are available in the:

- **PIRLS 2011 Canada in Context** report at: http://cmec.ca/Publications/Lists/Publications/Attachments/294/PIRLS_2011_EN.pdf
- **PCAP-2010 Contextual Report on Student Achievement in Mathematics** which is available at: <http://www.cmec.ca/Publications/Lists/Publications/Attachments/287/PCAP-Context-Report-EN.pdf>

References

- Englund, M., Luckner, A., Whaley G., & Egeland, B. (2004). Children's achievement in early elementary school: Longitudinal effects of parental involvement, expectations, and quality of assistance. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 96*(4), 723–730.
- Entwisle, D. R., Alexander, K. L., & Olson, L. S. (2005). First grade and educational attainment by age 22: A new story. *American Journal of Sociology, 110*(5), 1458–1502.
- Fan, X.T. (2001). Parental involvement and students' academic achievement: A growth modeling analysis. *Journal of Experimental Education, 70*(1), 27–61.
- Foley, K., Gallipoli, V., & Green, D. (2010). "Ability, parental valuation of education and the high school dropout decision." Canadian Labour Market and Skills Researcher Network Working Paper, N° 60.
- Ford, R., Frenette, M., Nicholson, C., Kwakye, I., Hui, T. S.-W., Hutchison, J., Dobrer, S., Smith Fowler, H., & Hébert, S. (2012). *Future to Discover – Post-secondary Impacts Report*. Ottawa: Social Research and Demonstration Corporation. Retrieved from: <http://www.srdc.org/publications/Future-to-Discover-FTD--Post-secondary-Impacts-Report-details.aspx>
- Looker, D., & Thiessen, V. (2004). *Aspirations of Canadian youth for higher education*. Final report. Gatineau, Quebec: Human Resources and Skills Development Canada Publicentre. Retrieved from: <http://www.pisa.gc.ca/eng/pdf/SP-600-05-04E.pdf>
- Neuenschwander, M. P., Vida, M., Garrett, J. L., & Eccles, J. S. (2007). Parents' expectations and students' achievement in two western nations. *International Journal of Behavioral Development, 31*, 594–602.
- Zhang, Y., Haddad, E., Torres, B., & Chen, C. (2011). The reciprocal relationships among parents' expectations, adolescents' expectations, and adolescents' achievement: A two-wave longitudinal analysis of the NELS data. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 40*, 479–489.