



School Policies: How Do They Differ across Canadian Provinces?

Over the past two decades, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) has become an important benchmark for jurisdictions worldwide to assess and compare the quality, effectiveness, and equity of their education systems. Since Canada is an OECD country, and because education in Canada is exclusively within provincial/territorial jurisdiction, all 10 provinces participate in PISA. The assessment measures the knowledge and skills of random samples of 15-year-old students in three domains: reading literacy, mathematical literacy, and scientific literacy. PISA is conducted every three years; in each assessment year, one of the three domains is the major domain — that is, the primary focus of the assessment — while the other two are minor domains. In 2015, which was the sixth round of PISA, science was the major domain; mathematics and reading were minor domains. During PISA assessments, background questionnaires are administered to students and principals to obtain contextual information (CMEC, 2018).

It is not possible to interpret cause-and-effect relationships between policies/practices and student achievement from large-scale international assessments. However, by identifying the characteristics of high-performing education systems, educators and other education decision makers can identify policies/practices they may wish to consider employing or adapting for their jurisdictions' purposes (OECD, 2016). Canada — together with Australia, Ireland, Singapore, Slovenia, and the United Kingdom — was a high performer in science on PISA 2015 (OECD, 2016). Given that education is a provincial/territorial responsibility in Canada, there is a great deal of interest in reporting on the policy similarities and differences across the provinces, by the language of the school systems (French and English), as well as by type of school (public and private).¹

¹ In the PISA context, “a public school is managed directly or indirectly by a public education authority, government agency, or governing board appointed by government or elected by public franchise. A private school is managed directly or indirectly by a non-government organization (e.g., a church, trade union, business or other private institution)” (OECD, 2016, p. 340).

The chapter on the background questionnaire framework in *PISA 2015 Assessment and Analytical Framework* (OECD, 2017) discusses the foundation for the policy-related topics and questions in the school questionnaire:

To meet policy requests directly, PISA ... needs to address issues related to governance on the system level (Hanushek and Wößmann, 2011; Wößmann et al., 2007). “Locus of decision making” measures and accountability practices describe main aspects of governance, namely the distribution of power and control between central and local stakeholders. Allocation, selection, and assessment and evaluation are the basic processes that policy makers and/or school administrators use to control school quality, and to monitor and foster school improvement. (p. 106)

With these considerations in mind, the PISA 2015 school questionnaire included a series of items about a number of school-level policies, including the following:

- student admissions
- ability groupings
- course offerings
- student discipline
- uses of student assessment
- accountability, quality assurance, and improvement

This research brief surveys the results from the PISA 2015 school questionnaire with respect to educational policies in these six areas. It surveys findings at the pan-Canadian and provincial levels, and summarizes pan-Canadian trends by language of the school system and school type.

Student admissions

The PISA 2015 school questionnaire asked principals the following question: “Regarding your school, who has a considerable responsibility for the following tasks?” Among the tasks was approving students for admission to the school. Table 1 presents the results for this task. At the pan-Canadian level and for most of the provinces, the principal was identified most often (86 percent, for Canada overall) as the person responsible for this task. Other authorities identified by principals as responsible for student admissions were, in order of importance in Canada overall, the regional/local education authority² (43 percent), the provincial education authority (10 percent), the school governing board (6 percent), and teachers (2 percent). Among the provinces, Newfoundland and Labrador and Nova Scotia identified the role of principals in admissions least often (66 percent and 64 percent, respectively). At the same time, they, along with the other Atlantic provinces, identified the role of regional/local education authorities in the student admissions process at a rate much higher than that in the other provinces (the responses in the four Atlantic provinces ranged from 57 to 72 percent, compared to the Canadian average of 43 percent). Nearly one-quarter of Newfoundland and Labrador principals also indicated that the provincial education authority was involved in student admissions. The overall data pattern on this question was similar for English- and French-language schools. Unsurprisingly, nearly all principals reported that, for private schools, principals held considerable responsibility for student admissions, together with, to a more limited extent, school governing boards and teachers.

² A regional/local education authority is equivalent to a school board or a school district.

TABLE 1 Percentage of principals responding to questionnaire items about who has responsibility for student admissions*

	NL	PE	NS	NB	QC	ON	MB	SK	AB	BC	CAN
Principal	66	97	64	75	85	90	88	84	87	83	86
Regional/local education authority	60	57	68	72	29	48	29	34	49	36	43
Provincial education authority	22	17	15	9	5	11	12	10	15	4	10
School governing board	-	-	1	-	6	5	17	5	6	10	6
Teachers	-	-	-	-	1	2	2	3	4	3	2

* Respondents could select more than one item.

Also with regard to student admissions, principals were asked about factors that were considered when students were admitted to school (response options were on a three-point scale, from “always” to “never”). Table 2 provides the percentage of principals who responded either “always” or “sometimes” to these factors. Across Canada, the most common student admission factor was residence in a particular area (86 percent). This finding is not surprising, because most students attend a particular secondary school because they live within the school’s catchment area. In the provinces of central and western Canada, a large proportion of principals (79 to 90 percent) indicated that students’ need or interest in a special program was a factor that was considered in student admissions. At the pan-Canadian level, recommendations from feeder schools and students’ records of academic performance were identified as school admission factors by 72 percent and 63 percent of principals, respectively. At the other end of the spectrum, more than half of principals in Atlantic Canada (except in Prince Edward Island) reported that students’ records of academic performance are “never” factors in school admissions. Overall, there is a similar pattern of data for English- and French-language schools. Generally, the vast majority of principals reported that, for private schools, the following factors were considered when admitting students (in decreasing order of importance): preference given to family members of current or former students, students’ record of academic performance, students’ need or interest in special programs, recommendations of feeder schools, and parents’ endorsement of school instruction or religious philosophy. As may be expected, private schools considered residence location to be less important than did public schools. In PISA 2015, there were no open-response opportunities for principals to provide details about the factors constituting the “other” category, which was selected by numerous respondents. In the future, further investigation is needed in order to gain a better understanding of other admission criteria.

TABLE 2 Percentage of principals responding to questionnaire items about the factors that are considered when admitting students*

	NL	PE	NS	NB	QC	ON	MB	SK	AB	BC	CAN
Students’ record of academic performance	47	56	38	47	83	62	54	63	61	54	63
Recommendation of feeder school	57	72	57	67	84	72	72	73	70	61	72
Parents’ endorsement of school instruction or religious philosophy	14	18	23	12	36	49	40	41	62	29	43
Students’ need or interest in special program	61	72	77	45	90	82	84	79	86	84	83
Preference given to family members of current or former students	19	16	40	8	58	43	44	23	59	68	49
Residence in a particular area	76	94	92	89	75	88	88	71	92	88	86
Other	52	78	74	55	58	65	79	65	77	83	68

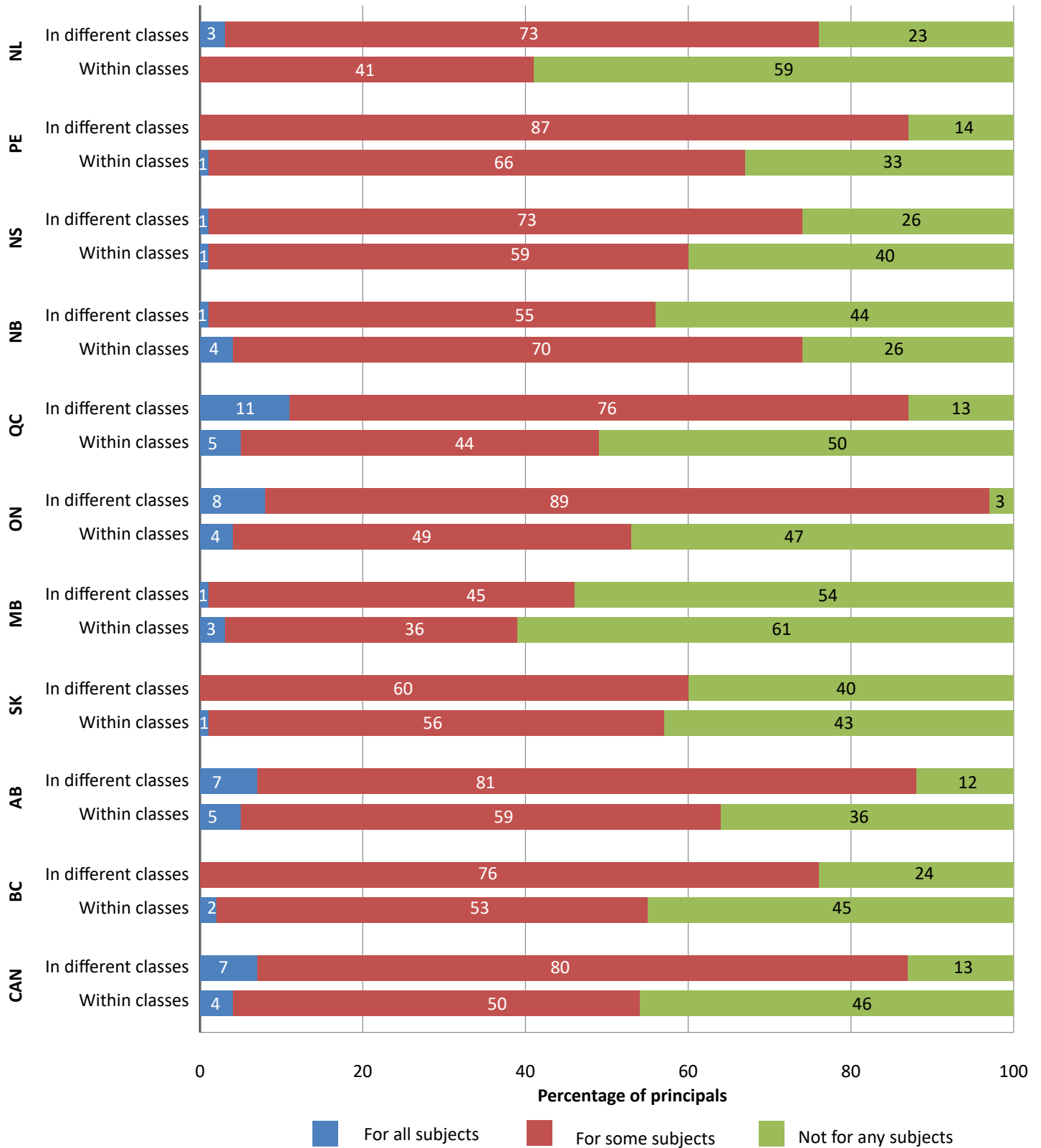
* Respondents could select more than one item.

In order to understand provincial policies regarding the organization of instruction for students with different abilities, principals were asked about school policies for students in Grade 10 (or its equivalent).³ For each of two statements — “students are grouped by ability into different classes” and “students are grouped by ability within their classes” — principals were asked to select one response from among three options: “for all subjects,” “for some subjects,” and “not for any subjects.” Figure 1 demonstrates that, across the country, grouping students into different classes by ability for all subjects was relatively rare. More frequently, this type of ability grouping occurred in only some subject areas, with approximately 80 percent of principals overall reporting this approach to organizing instruction. In three provinces (New Brunswick, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan), a large proportion of principals (approximately 40 to 54 percent) indicated that there was no student ability grouping in different classes in their schools. The patterns by language of the school system (English and French) and for public and private schools were similar to those for Canada overall.

Ability grouping in different classes was considerably more common than grouping within classes. As shown in Figure 1, for Canada overall, 87 percent of principals reported ability grouping in different classes for some or all subjects, while just over half of principals reported such grouping within classes. For English-language schools, approximately 52 percent of principals reported ability grouping within classes for some subjects, compared with 43 percent in French-language schools. Compared with the results for Canada overall, there were no significant differences in the data by school type (public/private schools).

³ Most Canadian students are 15 years of age in Grade 10, which is the target age for PISA.

FIGURE 1 Percentage of principals responding to questionnaire items on whether students are grouped by ability



Principals were asked a series of questions regarding who had responsibility for course offerings in the school. Among the tasks was deciding which courses are offered. As shown in Table 3, the principal was identified most often as having this responsibility, both in Canada overall (91 percent) and in each of the provinces. In central and western Canada, more than half of principals reported that teachers had considerable responsibility for this task as well. In Canada overall, regional/local and provincial education authorities were identified by about 28 percent of principals as having such responsibility. Twenty percent and 32 percent of principals in Alberta and Quebec, respectively, identified school governing boards as having responsibility for course offerings, a figure considerably above the pan-Canadian average of 11 percent. There were some differences between language systems. Whereas about 95 percent of English-language school respondents identified principals as having considerable responsibility for course selection, just over three-quarters held this view in French-language schools. The differences were evident in other categories as well: nearly two-thirds of principals in French-language schools identified teachers as responsible for course offerings, while about half of their counterparts in English-language schools did so; school governing boards were identified by approximately 30 percent of principals in French-language schools, and about 6 percent of principals in English-language schools; regional/local education authorities were identified by about one-third of principals in English-language schools, and about 13 percent of those in French-language schools. The percentages of principals reporting that the provincial education authority had a role in course offerings were similar (29 to 30 percent) for both language groups and for Canada overall. The pattern of responses was generally similar for school type — the responses of private school principals were similar to those of principals in the public system with respect to the role of principals, teachers, and the provincial education authority regarding responsibility for course offerings. Not surprisingly, school governing boards were selected more often by private school than public school principals as having considerable authority for course offerings.

TABLE 3 Percentage of principals responding to questionnaire items about who has responsibility for course offerings*

	NL	PE	NS	NB	QC	ON	MB	SK	AB	BC	CAN
Principal	82	97	72	84	76	96	100	91	98	96	91
Regional/local education authority	41	35	46	24	13	32	24	42	44	20	28
Provincial education authority	43	55	57	47	32	25	37	30	36	17	29
School governing board	-	-	-	1	32	3	12	6	20	1	11
Teachers	23	23	25	34	62	51	57	51	63	54	54

* Respondents could select more than one item.

In order to explore disciplinary practices, principals were asked who was responsible for policy related to student discipline. As shown in Table 4, principals were identified most commonly as having considerable responsibility for establishing student disciplinary policies in Canada as a whole (85 percent) and in most of the provinces. As well, for Canada overall and in almost all provinces, teachers and regional/local education authorities were viewed as playing a considerable role (53 percent and 51 percent, respectively). Principals in Nova Scotia were less likely to identify themselves as responsible for student disciplinary policy (38 percent), compared to principals in Canada overall (85 percent); at the same time, they saw provincial education authorities (76 percent) and regional/local education authorities (58 percent) as playing a more significant role. In Quebec, nearly half of principals identified school governing boards as having considerable responsibility for disciplinary policies. The pattern of results by language group was similar for the roles of principals and teachers. For French-language schools, a higher proportion of principals identified the role of school governing boards, while in English-language schools, higher proportions of principals reported that regional/local and provincial education authorities had a considerable role in establishing student disciplinary policies. The response patterns of principals of public and private schools were similar with regard to the role of principals, teachers, and school governing boards.

TABLE 4 Percentage of principals responding to questionnaire items about who has responsibility for disciplinary policies*

	NL	PE	NS	NB	QC	ON	MB	SK	AB	BC	CAN
Principal	76	70	38	89	83	84	83	89	98	93	85
Regional/local education authority	63	80	58	46	4	77	53	48	50	38	51
Provincial education authority	14	11	76	8	2	34	21	7	13	8	21
School governing board	14	1	15	9	46	21	34	11	16	11	24
Teachers	60	68	21	62	62	48	52	55	61	50	53

* Respondents could select more than one item.

In order to obtain information about how different types of student assessments were used in schools, the school questionnaire asked principals about the use of both standardized tests⁴ and teacher-developed tests. The questionnaire listed 11 purposes for tests, and asked principals to select either “yes” or “no” for each. Table 5 presents the response data related to standardized tests; Table 6 provides the data associated with teacher-developed tests. Both tables display the percentage of principals who selected “yes” for each of the purposes.

With regard to standardized tests, the most predominant uses for the student assessment results (supported by approximately three-quarters or more of principals) were to compare the school with other schools; to compare the school’s performance with school district, provincial, or national performance; and to monitor the school’s progress from year to year. In Canada overall, few principals (less than 30 percent) indicated that standardized tests were used to group students for instruction, to make judgments about teachers’ effectiveness, or to award certificates to students. About half to two-thirds of principals reported that standardized tests were used to guide student learning, to inform parents about their child’s progress, to make decisions about student retention or promotion, to identify aspects of instruction or curriculum that could be improved, or to adapt teaching to students’ needs. Principals in three western provinces — Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta — were less likely than their colleagues in the other provinces to select any of the options for the use of standardized tests that were provided in the school questionnaire.

TABLE 5 Percentage of principals responding to questionnaire items about how standardized tests are used

	NL	PE	NS	NB	QC	ON	MB	SK	AB	BC	CAN
Guide student learning	66	56	76	42	72	61	23	39	33	50	57
Inform parents about their child’s progress	72	58	95	44	56	77	27	40	33	78	65
Make decisions about student retention or promotion	53	27	60	29	85	35	12	7	31	81	49
Group students for instructional purposes	39	20	25	37	51	22	8	23	28	26	29
Compare school to district, provincial, or national performance	67	56	92	85	82	93	28	56	33	93	81
Monitor school’s progress from year to year	73	59	86	73	91	95	27	50	37	85	83
Make judgments about teachers’ effectiveness	19	22	16	13	33	9	4	5	13	24	16
Identify aspects of instruction or curriculum to be improved	67	73	91	60	72	77	32	41	39	61	68
Adapt teaching to students’ needs	58	26	55	46	46	64	30	37	35	30	51
Compare the school with other schools	59	68	87	78	71	88	16	32	26	86	73
Award certificates to students	38	17	11	8	55	18	9	-	27	51	29

⁴ Standardized tests include tests mandated by national, provincial, or district authorities, as well as standardized, non-mandatory, commercially/publicly available tests. Standardized tests are consistent in design, content, administration, and scoring, and the results can be compared across students and schools (OECD, 2016, p. 136).

With respect to teacher-developed tests, 80 percent or more of principals reported that such tests were most frequently used to guide student learning, to inform parents about their child’s progress, to make decisions about student retention or promotion, to identify aspects of instruction or curriculum that could be improved, and to adapt teaching to students’ needs (Table 6). Less frequent responses were comparing the school with other schools; comparing the school’s performance with school district, provincial, or national performance; and making judgments about teachers’ effectiveness. Approximately half to two-thirds of principals reported that teacher-developed tests were used for grouping students for instructional purposes, monitoring the school’s progress from year to year, and awarding certificates to students.

TABLE 6 Percentage of principals responding to questionnaire items about how teacher-developed tests are used

	NL	PE	NS	NB	QC	ON	MB	SK	AB	BC	CAN
Guide student learning	100	96	99	97	93	100	97	100	100	96	98
Inform parents about their child’s progress	100	100	99	97	97	100	97	100	100	98	99
Make decisions about student retention or promotion	94	91	75	93	89	98	84	84	93	84	93
Group students for instructional purposes	69	71	52	79	68	66	45	79	79	60	67
Compare school to district, provincial, or national performance	55	20	10	17	34	21	3	20	20	18	22
Monitor school’s progress from year to year	96	62	45	54	67	48	33	61	72	37	54
Make judgments about teachers’ effectiveness	40	51	21	30	24	30	20	21	33	23	28
Identify aspects of instruction or curriculum to be improved	91	74	88	82	64	90	82	68	90	72	82
Adapt teaching to students’ needs	100	100	92	97	87	97	93	97	100	97	95
Compare the school with other schools	40	28	9	11	27	13	4	8	19	7	15
Award certificates to students	75	91	33	53	73	58	52	57	75	66	63

Principals’ responses for French- and English-language schools about the uses of standardized and teacher-developed tests were generally similar to those for Canada overall. It was interesting to note, however, that about twice as many principals of French-language schools, compared to English-language schools, indicated that standardized tests were used to make decisions about retention or promotion (80 percent versus 41 percent), to group students for instructional purposes (47 percent versus 25 percent), and to award certificates to students (51 percent versus 24 percent). Principals’ responses from public and private schools were quite similar to each other regarding the uses of standardized and teacher-developed tests. That said, private school principals indicated greater use of standardized tests to make decisions about student retention or promotion and to make judgments about teachers’ effectiveness than was the case for public school principals.

The school questionnaire asked principals about the use of achievement data⁵ for three accountability procedures. Principals responded either “yes” or “no” to indicate the use of achievement data for each of these procedures. Table 7 shows the percentage of principals who responded in the affirmative regarding each procedure. The data reveal that an overwhelming proportion of principals reported that data were tracked over time by the administrative authority (93 percent for Canada as a whole). Overall, almost four out of five principals indicated that achievement data were provided directly to parents (the most notable exceptions being Manitoba and Saskatchewan). A smaller proportion (57 percent in Canada overall) reported that achievement data were publicly posted, with the smallest proportion of principals (less than one-third) reporting this use of achievement data in Prince Edward Island, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan. Similar response patterns can be seen for English- and French-language school systems and for public and private schools.

TABLE 7 Percentage of principals responding to questionnaire items about the use of achievement data for accountability procedures

	NL	PE	NS	NB	QC	ON	MB	SK	AB	BC	CAN
Achievement data are posted publicly	38	28	62	63	41	62	9	24	72	73	57
Achievement data are tracked over time by administrative authority	100	100	96	91	96	93	76	86	96	93	93
Achievement data are provided directly to parents	93	95	86	77	81	78	53	62	93	74	79

Principals were also asked policy-related questions regarding arrangements related to quality assurance and school improvement. The questionnaire listed ten arrangements, and principals were asked to select one of three possible responses for each: “yes, this is mandatory, e.g., based on district or ministry policies”; “yes, based on school initiative”; or “no.” Table 8 presents the proportion of principals who responded “yes” to this question.

Overall, across Canada, the vast majority of principals reported that their schools implemented the following quality assurance and improvement policies/initiatives:

- internal evaluation⁶/self-evaluation (86 percent)
- written specifications of the school’s curricular profile and educational goals (93 percent)
- written specifications of student performance standards (83 percent)
- systematic recording of data (e.g., teacher/student attendance and professional development) (86 percent)
- systematic recording of student test results and graduation rates (96 percent)
- teacher mentoring (88 percent)

⁵ Achievement data include aggregated school- or grade-level results (e.g., test scores, grades, graduation rates).

⁶ Internal school evaluation is a process controlled by the school, in which the school defines the areas to be judged, and the evaluation may be conducted by members of the school or by persons/institutions commissioned by the school (OECD, 2016, p. 137).

Many principals also indicated that their schools implemented standardized policy for science subjects (e.g., school curriculum, shared instructional material, staff development and training) (72 percent) and had regular consultations aimed at school improvement with one or more experts over at least a six-month period (69 percent). Fewer principals reported implementing external evaluation⁷ or seeking written feedback from students (e.g., regarding lessons, teachers, and resources) (64 percent and 56 percent, respectively) (Table 8).

TABLE 8 Percentage of principals responding to questionnaire items related to quality assurance and improvement arrangements in schools

Do the following quality assurance and improvement arrangements exist in your school?	Mandatory district/ ministry policy	School initiative
Internal evaluation/self-evaluation	41	45
External evaluation	51	13
Written specification of school’s curricular profile and educational goals	65	27
Written specification of student performance standards	53	30
Systematic recording of data	57	29
Systematic recording of student test results and graduation rates	78	18
Seeking written feedback from students	9	47
Teacher mentoring	36	52
Regular consultation aimed at school improvement with one or more experts over at least a six-month period	31	37
Implementation of standardized policy for science subjects	42	30

In general, across the provinces, certain quality assurance and improvement policies or arrangements, such as written specification of the school’s curricular profile and educational goals and the systematic recording of students’ test results and graduation rates, were more often mandated by school district or ministry policy than implemented by school initiative. Other policies/arrangements, such as teacher mentoring and seeking written feedback from students (e.g., regarding lessons, teachers, and resources) were more often implemented via school initiative. The rest of the quality assurance and improvement policies/arrangements were a blend of mandatory and school-based initiatives and varied from province to province. Principals’ response data by English- and French-language school systems followed the same patterns as the results for Canada overall. Although there were similar overall response patterns by school type, there were predictable differences associated with whether the policy/initiative was mandated at a higher level or was school-based. For instance, private schools reported that arrangements related to internal/self-evaluation, student performance standards, recording of student outcome data, teacher mentoring, and expert consultations regarding school improvement were predominantly school-based.

⁷ External school evaluation is a process controlled and led by an external body. The school does not define the areas to be judged (OECD, 2016, p. 137).

The overall results of the PISA 2015 international study show that school policies can potentially have an impact on student achievement. For instance, across OECD countries (after controlling for socioeconomic status), higher student performance in science is associated with:

- schools that require students to attend at least one science lesson per week and that offer science competitions;
- the amount of time students spend in regular science lessons;
- how teachers teach science (e.g., frequently explaining and demonstrating scientific concepts, supporting student learning, and adopting more inquiry-based instruction);
- fewer instances of student truancy;
- school principals holding greater responsibility for school governance;
- teacher professional development (e.g., in-service training, teacher collaboration);
- student achievement being tracked over time and posted publicly;
- delaying the age at which students are selected for different educational programs; and
- student attendance in pre-primary school for more than one year.

Interestingly, whereas, in previous PISA administrations, students in private schools had displayed higher performance than public school students, this is no longer true, when controlling for socioeconomic status. Similarly, there is only a modest relationship between different school admission criteria and student achievement in science, after socioeconomic status is taken into account (OECD, 2016).

Conclusion

PISA is an important student assessment tool that enables jurisdictions worldwide to compare their school systems in terms of quality, effectiveness, and equity. Although the assessment focuses to a large degree on academic performance, PISA also provides important contextual information about school policies and practices and their relationship to school success. It must be recognized that policies found to be successful in some jurisdictions are not necessarily transferable to others; however, it is important that education decision makers at the provincial, district, and school levels have access to this type of information for their consideration as they endeavour to enhance their school systems.

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