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Council of  
Ministers  
of Education,  
Canada

# Education in Canada

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July 2008

Également offert en français sous le titre : *L'Éducation au Canada*.

Canada is the second largest country in the world — almost 10 million square kilometres (3.8 million square miles) — with a population of 33.1 million as of October 2007, a population density of 3.5 people per square kilometre, and a median income in 2005 of C\$41,401. However, Canada's population is not spread evenly over the territory as two out of three Canadians live within 100 kilometres of the southern border with the United States. In addition, more than 80 per cent of the population lives in urban centres; 45 per cent of the population lives in just six metropolitan areas.

## Responsibility for Education

**Responsibility:** In Canada, there is no federal department of education and no integrated national system of education. Within the federal system of shared powers, Canada's Constitution Act of 1867 provides that "[I]n and for each province, the legislature may exclusively make Laws in relation to Education." In the 13 jurisdictions — 10 provinces and 3 territories, departments or ministries of education are responsible for the organization, delivery, and assessment of education at the elementary and secondary levels, for technical and vocational education, and for postsecondary education. Some jurisdictions have two separate departments or ministries, one having responsibility for elementary-secondary education and the other for postsecondary education and skills training.

**Regional Differences:** While there are a great many similarities in the provincial and territorial education systems across Canada, there are significant differences in curriculum, assessment, and accountability policies among the jurisdictions that express the geography, history, language, culture, and corresponding specialized needs of the populations served. The comprehensive, diversified, and widely accessible nature of the education systems in Canada reflects the societal belief in the importance of education. Figure 1, Canada's Education Systems, illustrates the organization of the pre-elementary, elementary, secondary, and postsecondary education systems in each jurisdiction in Canada.

**Educational Funding:** In 2005-06, provincial, territorial, federal, and local governments spent \$75.7 billion on all levels of education, which represented 16.1 per cent of total public expenditures. (All dollar figures are taken from *Education Indicators in Canada: Report of the Pan-Canadian Education Indicators Program 2007* and are in 2001 constant Canadian dollars to allow for comparison across time periods.) Of this total, \$40.4 billion was for elementary and secondary education, \$30.6 billion for postsecondary education, and \$4.6 billion for other types of education such as special retraining and language training for newcomers. In 2002-03, combined public and private expenditure on education was \$72.3 billion, with \$42.7 billion on elementary and secondary education, \$5.2 billion on trade and vocational education, \$5.6 billion on colleges, and \$18.8 billion on universities. Public expenditure was 82.3 per cent of the total, with private spending at 17.7 per cent.

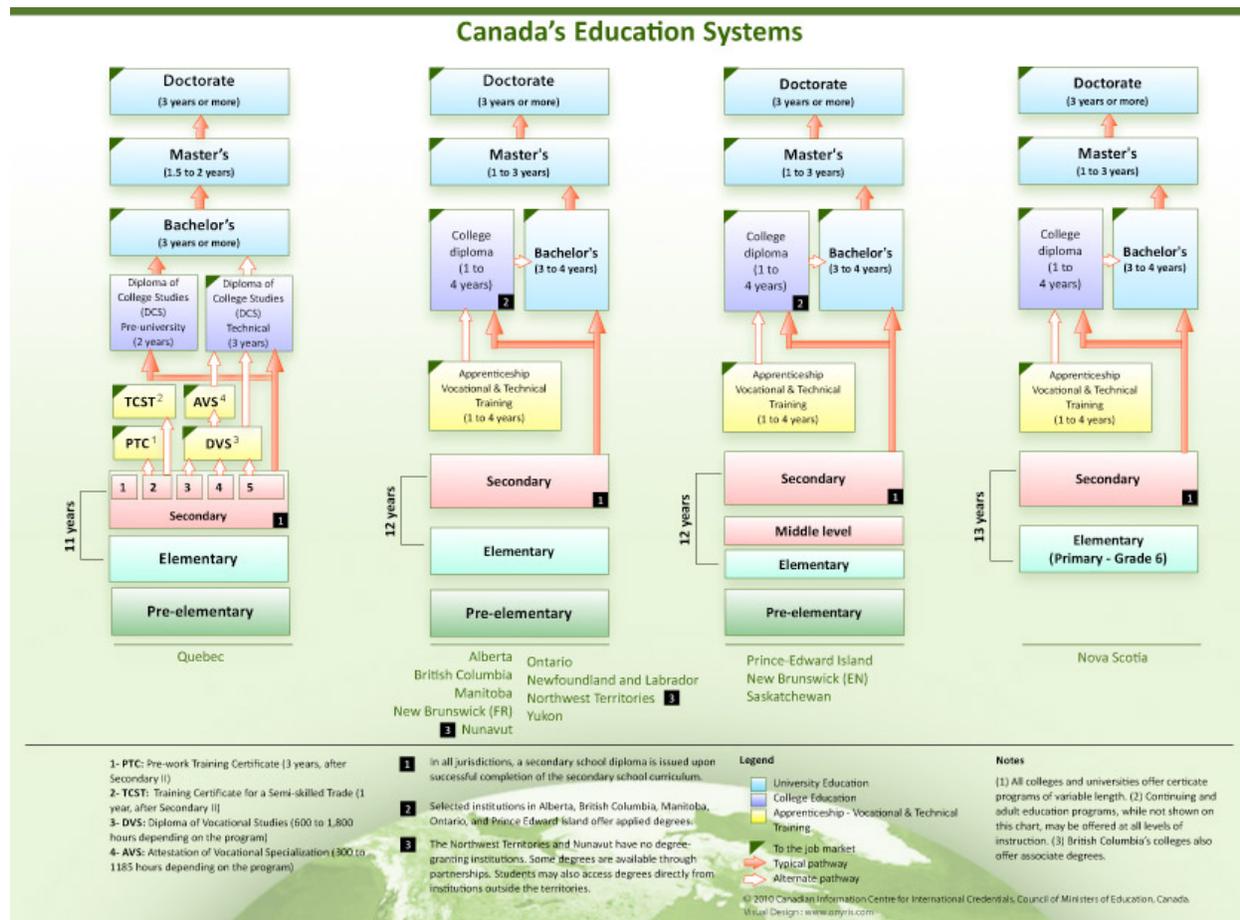


Figure 1 : Graphic updated September 21, 2010

## Elementary and Secondary Education

**Government Role:** Public education is provided free to all Canadians who meet various age and residence requirements. Each province and territory has one or two departments/ministries responsible for education, headed by a minister who is almost always an elected member of the legislature and appointed to the position by the government leader of the jurisdiction. Deputy ministers, who belong to the civil service, are responsible for the operation of the departments. The ministries and departments provide educational, administrative, and financial management and school support functions, and they define both the educational services to be provided and the policy and legislative frameworks.

**Local Governance:** Local governance of education is usually entrusted to school boards, school districts, school divisions, or district education councils. Their members are elected by public

ballot. The power delegated to the local authorities is at the discretion of the provincial and territorial governments and generally consists of the operation and administration (including financial) of the group of schools within their board or division, curriculum implementation, responsibility for personnel, enrolment of students, and initiation of proposals for new construction or other major capital expenditures. According to Statistics Canada data, there are approximately 15,500 schools in Canada — 10,100 elementary, 3,400 secondary, and 2,000 mixed elementary and secondary — with an overall average of 350 students per school. In 2004–05, provinces and territories reported that there were 5.3 million students enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools.

**Minority-Language Education:** Canada is a bilingual country, and the constitution recognizes French and English as its two official languages. According to the 2006 Census, more than 85 per cent of French-mother tongue Canadians live in the province of Quebec: the minority language rights of French-speaking students living outside the province of Quebec and English-speaking students living in the province of Quebec are protected in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. The Charter defines the conditions under which Canadians have the right to access publicly funded education in either minority language. Each province and territory has established French-language school boards to manage the network of French-first-language schools. In the province of Quebec, the same structure applies to education in English-first-language schools.

**Funding Sources:** Public funding for education comes either directly from the provincial or territorial government or through a mix of provincial transfers and local taxes collected either by the local government or by the boards with taxing powers. Provincial and territorial regulations, revised yearly, provide the grant structure that sets the level of funding for each school board based on factors such as the number of students, special needs, and location.

**Teachers:** In 2004–05, Canada’s elementary and secondary school systems employed close to 310,000 educators, most of whom had four or five years of postsecondary study. These educators are primarily teachers, but principals, vice-principals, and professional non-teaching staff such as consultants and counsellors are also included. They are licensed by the provincial and territorial departments or ministries of education. Most secondary school teachers have a subject specialization in the courses they teach.

**Pre-Elementary Education:** All jurisdictions have some form of pre-elementary (kindergarten) education, operated by the local education authorities and offering one year of pre-grade 1, non-compulsory education for five-year-olds. Depending on the jurisdiction, kindergarten may be compulsory or pre-school classes may be available from age four or even earlier. At a pan-Canadian level, 95 per cent of five-year-olds attend pre-elementary or elementary school, and over 40 per cent of four-year-olds are enrolled in junior kindergarten, with significant variations among the jurisdictions. In 2005–06, about 130,000 children were attending junior

kindergarten, with more than 312,000 in kindergarten. The intensity of the programs varies, with full-day and half-day programs, depending on the school board.

**Elementary Education:** The ages for compulsory schooling vary from one jurisdiction to another, but most require attendance in school from age 6 to age 16. In some cases, compulsory schooling starts at 5, and in others it extends to age 18 or graduation from secondary school. In most jurisdictions, elementary schools cover six to eight years of schooling. The elementary school curriculum emphasizes the basic subjects of language, mathematics, social studies, science, health and physical education, and introductory arts; some jurisdictions include second-language learning. In many provinces and territories, increased attention is being paid to literacy, especially in the case of boys, as test results have shown that their performance is falling behind that of girls in language. Almost 98 per cent of elementary students go on to the secondary level.

**Secondary Education:** Secondary school covers the final four to six years of compulsory education. In the first years, students take mostly compulsory courses, with some options. The proportion of options increases in the later years so that students may take specialized courses to prepare for the job market or to meet the differing entrance requirements of postsecondary institutions. Secondary school diplomas are awarded to students who complete the requisite number of compulsory and optional courses. In most cases, vocational and academic programs are offered within the same secondary schools; in others, technical and vocational programs are offered in separate, dedicated vocational training centres. For students with an interest in a specific trade, programs varying in length from less than one year to three years are offered, many of them leading to diplomas and certificates. The secondary school graduation rate in 2003 was 74 per cent, with 78 per cent of girls and 70 per cent of boys graduating. The overall graduation rate has remained relatively stable while the longer-term dropout rate has declined as older students complete their secondary education. In 2004–05, the dropout rate (defined as 20- to 24-year-olds without a secondary school diploma and not in school) had fallen to 10 per cent.

**Separate and Private Schools:** The legislation and practices concerning the establishment of separate educational systems and private educational institutions vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. Three jurisdictions provide for tax-supported separate school systems that include both elementary and secondary education. These separate school systems allow religious minorities to receive education in accordance with the tenets of their faiths, especially Roman Catholics and Protestants, some of whom have constitutionally protected rights in this area. Public and separate school systems that are publicly funded serve about 93 per cent of all students in Canada. Six jurisdictions provide partial funding for private schools if certain criteria, which vary among jurisdictions, are met. No funding for private schools is provided in the other jurisdictions, although they still may be regulated.

## Postsecondary Education

**Range of Institutions:** Postsecondary education is available in both government-supported and private institutions, which offer degrees, diplomas, certificates, and attestations depending on the nature of the institution and the length of the program. The postsecondary environment has evolved during the past few years, as universities are no longer the only degree-granting institutions in some jurisdictions. A recognized postsecondary institution is a private or public institution that has been given full authority to grant degrees, diplomas, and other credentials by a public or private act of the provincial or territorial legislature or through a government-mandated quality assurance mechanism. Canada has 163 recognized public and private universities (including theological schools) and 183 recognized public colleges and institutes, including those granting applied and bachelor's degrees. In addition to the recognized institutions, there are 68 university-level institutions and 51 college-level ones operating as authorized institutions, at which only selected programs are approved under provincially established quality assurance programs.

**Governance:** Publicly funded universities are largely autonomous; they set their own admissions standards and degree requirements and have considerable flexibility in the management of their financial affairs and program offerings. Government intervention is generally limited to funding, fee structures, and the introduction of new programs. Most Canadian universities have a two-tiered system of governance that includes a board of governors and a senate. Boards are generally charged with overall financial and policy concerns. Academic senates are responsible for programs, courses, admission requirements, qualifications for degrees, and academic planning. Their decisions are subject to board approval. Students are often represented on both bodies, as are alumni and representatives from the community at large. In colleges, government involvement can extend to admissions policies, program approval, curricula, institutional planning, and working conditions. Most colleges have boards of governors appointed by the provincial or territorial government, with representation from the public, students, and instructors. Program planning incorporates input from business, industry, and labour representatives on college advisory committees.

**Funding:** Statistics Canada has reported that public expenditure on postsecondary education in 2005–06 was \$30.6 billion (in 2001 constant dollars). In 2004–05, federal, provincial, territorial, and municipal government funding, including funding for research, accounted for 54.2 per cent of the revenue, although this ranged from 38.4 per cent in Nova Scotia to 68.1 per cent in Quebec. Student fees accounted for over 20 per cent of the total, with bequests, donations, nongovernmental grants, sales of products and services, and investments bringing in another 25 per cent. Tuition costs at universities averaged \$4,524 in 2007–08, with international student fees for an undergraduate program averaging about \$14,000 annually. At colleges (in the nine provinces outside Quebec), the average tuition was about \$2,400 (Quebec residents do not pay college tuition). Education is also funded through the money that governments transfer to individual students through loans, grants, and education tax credits.

**Attendance and Graduation:** According to the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, in 2005, there were 806,000 full-time university students (an increase of nearly 150,000 in the previous four years), as well as 273,000 part-time students. In 2005, Canadian universities awarded an estimated 175,700 bachelor's degrees, 33,000 master's degrees, and 4,200 doctoral degrees. The Association of Canadian Community Colleges has reported that, in 2004–05, full-time public college and institute enrolment was almost 515,000 students in credit programs. Including both full- and part-time students, there were about one million students in credit programs and about 500,000 in non-credit programs. Just over 173,000 students graduated from public colleges and institutes in 2004–05. Participation in postsecondary education has grown significantly in the past few years, whether measured by numbers of enrolments or by the proportion of the population in any given age group who are attending college or university. While women continue to make up the majority of students on both university and college campuses, they are still in the minority in the skilled trades.

**University Activities:** Degree-granting institutions in Canada focus on teaching and research. In 2004–05, Canadian universities performed \$8.9 billion worth of research and development, close to 35 per cent of the national total. Teaching is the other key function, whether at the small liberal arts universities that grant only undergraduate degrees or at the large, comprehensive institutions. Registration varies from about 2,000 students at some institutions to a full-time enrolment of over 62,000 at the University of Toronto, Canada's largest university. There are more than 10,000 undergraduate and graduate degree programs offered in Canadian universities, as well as professional degree programs and certificates. Most institutions provide instruction in either English or French; others offer instruction in both official languages. In 2005, Canadian universities employed close to 40,000 full-time faculty members.

**University Degrees:** Universities and university colleges focus on degree programs but may also offer some diplomas and certificates, often in professional designations. University degrees are offered at three consecutive levels. Students enter at the bachelor's level after having successfully completed secondary school or the two-year cégep program in Quebec. Most universities also have special entrance requirements and paths for mature students. Bachelor's degrees normally require three or four years of full-time study, depending on the province and whether the program is general or specialized. A master's degree typically requires two years of study after the bachelor's degree. For a doctoral degree, three to five years of additional study and research plus a dissertation are the normal requirements. The *Canadian Degree Qualifications Framework* outlines the degree levels in more detail. In regulated professions, such as medicine, law, education, and social work, an internship is generally required in order to obtain a licence to practise.

**College Activities:** There are thousands of non-degree-granting institutions in Canada. Of these, over 150 are recognized public colleges and institutes. Whether they are called public colleges, specialized institutes, community colleges, institutes of technology, colleges of applied

arts and technology, or cégeps, they offer a range of vocation-oriented programs in a wide variety of professional and technical fields, including business, health, applied arts, technology, and social services. Some of the institutions are specialized and provide training in a single field such as fisheries, arts, paramedical technology, and agriculture. Colleges also provide literacy and academic upgrading programs, pre-employment and pre-apprenticeship programs, and the in-class portions of registered apprenticeship programs. As well, a wide variety of workshops, short programs, and upgrades for skilled workers and professionals are made available. At the college level, the focus is on teaching, but applied research is taking on greater importance.

***College Recognition and Cooperation:*** Diplomas are generally awarded for successful completion of two- and three-year college and institute programs, while certificate programs usually take up to one year. University degrees and applied degrees are offered in some colleges and institutes, and others provide university transfer programs. Les collèges d'enseignement général et professionnel (cégeps) in Quebec offer a choice of two-year academic programs that are prerequisite for university study or three-year technical programs that prepare students for the labour market or for further postsecondary study. Colleges work very closely with business, industry, labour, and the public service sectors to provide professional development services and specialized programs and, on a wider basis, with their communities to design programs reflecting local needs.

***Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition:*** About 80 per cent of colleges also recognize prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) in at least some of their programs. Some universities also recognize it, and a growing number of provinces offer PLAR to adults at the secondary school level. PLAR is a process that helps adults demonstrate and gain recognition for learning they have acquired outside of formal education settings.

## **Vocational Education and Training**

***Providers and Participation:*** Vocational education refers to a multi-year program or a series of courses providing specialized instruction in a skill or a trade intending to lead the student directly into a career or program based on that skill or trade. It is offered in secondary schools and at the postsecondary level in public colleges and institutes, private for-profit colleges, and in the workplace, through apprenticeship programs. At the secondary level, vocational programs may be offered at separate, specialized schools or as optional programs in schools offering both academic and vocational streams. The secondary school programs prepare the student for the workforce, a postsecondary program, or an apprenticeship. The role of public colleges has been described above. Private colleges may be licensed by provincial governments or may operate as unlicensed entities. They may receive some public funding but are largely funded through tuition fees and offer programs in such areas as business, health sciences, human services, applied arts, information technology, electronics, services, and trades. Programs usually require one or two years of study, although some private career colleges offer programs of shorter duration. Apprenticeship programs in Canada have been generally

geared toward adults, with youth becoming increasingly involved in some jurisdictions. The related industry is responsible for the practical training, delivered in the workplace, and the educational institution provides the theoretical components. Apprenticeship registrations have shown a steady increase, reaching almost 300,000 in 2005. The largest increases have been in the building construction trades.

## Adult Education

**Participation:** The 2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey shows that almost half of the adult population in Canada (aged 16 to 65, not including full-time students) were enrolled in organized forms of adult education and training, including programs, courses, workshops, seminars, and other organized educational offerings at some time during the year of the study. Each learner devoted about 290 hours to this learning over the year. Fifty-three per cent of participants were supported by their employers, while 41 per cent paid for their own education, and 8 per cent had government sponsorship, with more men than women getting access to employer funding for learning. Compared to the general population, participants in adult education tend to be younger, to be native-born rather than immigrants, to have higher literacy, education, and income levels, and to be in the labour force. Fifty-seven per cent of those in the labour force participated in adult education and training, compared to 31 per cent of the unemployed and 24 per cent of those not in the labour force. For all participants, the overwhelming reason for participation was job-related at 82 per cent; personal interest was the motivation for about 20 per cent. Participation in informal learning was also tracked in the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey, looking at activities related to daily living that result in learning, such as visits to museums, use of computers, and reading reference materials. Almost all Canadians (93 per cent) report having been involved in some form of informal learning over the year covered by the study.

**Literacy:** The 2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey, mentioned above, revealed that 58 per cent of adults in Canada possess literacy skills that indicate they could meet most everyday reading requirements. This leaves 42 per cent of adults with low levels of literacy skills. Those with lower levels of literacy also were shown to have lower levels of employment and lower earnings. The results varied among the provinces and territories across the country, but even in the top performing jurisdictions, at least three out of ten adults aged 16 and over performed at the lower levels in literacy. The literacy needs of Canadians are addressed through various collaborative efforts between the provincial and territorial educational authorities, the federal government, and the vast nongovernmental sector. This multi-group approach ensures that programs are designed for Canadians of all ages and all groups in society. Literacy is an educational priority, often framed within wider social and economic development initiatives.

**Providers:** Many institutions, governments, and groups are involved in the delivery of adult education programs, with the providers varying by jurisdiction. Colleges offer adult education

and training for the labour force; government departments responsible for literacy, skills training, second-language learning, and other adult programs may provide programs themselves or fund both formal and non-formal educational bodies to develop and deliver the programs. Some jurisdictions have established dedicated adult learning centres. Community-based, not-for-profit, and voluntary organizations, school boards, and some private companies, largely funded by the provincial, territorial, or federal governments, address literacy and other learning needs for all adults, with some of them focusing on specific groups such as rural populations, the Aboriginal communities, immigrants, displaced workers, and those with low levels of literacy or education.

The federal government works with the provincial and territorial governments to fund many of the skills training and English and French second-language programs.

## Technology in Education

**Schools:** In 2006, virtually all schools in Canada had computers, providing one computer for five students. Ninety-eight per cent of schools had an Internet connection. The computers were used for word processing, research, and individualized and on-line learning. Some provincial services and several school boards offer the provincial curriculum on-line for distance learning and for course enhancement in small and rural schools. In the 2006 Programme for International Student Assessment, 94 per cent of the 15-year-olds surveyed in Canada reported using a computer every day or often during the week at home, while 47 per cent reported the same amount of usage at school. A broad range of technology — television, print, teleconferencing and on-line — is used in classrooms and distance learning throughout Canada.

**Postsecondary Education:** Postsecondary students in all jurisdictions have access to technological resources for learning, both on campus and through distributed learning. Three provinces have open universities, and all have colleges and universities that offer distance courses. Consortia at the provincial and pan-Canadian levels also provide access to university and college programs.

**Home Access:** During 2005, about 26 per cent of adult Canadians went on-line for education, training, or school work. These education users reported going on-line on a daily basis and spending more than five hours a week on-line. Of this group, two-thirds used the Internet to research information for project assignments, and 26 per cent did so for distance education, self-directed learning, or correspondence courses. Nearly 80 per cent of full- and part-time students used the Internet for educational purposes.

## Activities of the Government of Canada

**The Federal Contribution:** The federal government of Canada provides financial support for postsecondary education and the teaching of the two official languages. In addition, the federal

government is responsible for the education of Registered Indian people on reserve, personnel in the armed forces and the coast guard, and inmates in federal correctional facilities.

**Aboriginal Education:** The federal government shares responsibility with First Nations for the provision of education to children ordinarily resident on reserve and attending provincial, federal, or band-operated schools. In 2006-07, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada supported the education of 120,000 First Nations K–12 students living on reserves across Canada. Band-operated schools located on reserves educate approximately 60 per cent of the students living on reserves, while 40 per cent go off reserve to schools under provincial authority, usually for secondary school (First Nations children living off reserve are educated in the public elementary and secondary schools in their cities, towns, and communities, with the provinces and territories providing the majority of educational services for Aboriginal students.) Funding is also provided for postsecondary assistance and programs for Status Indian students residing on or off reserve, as Indian and Northern Affairs Canada supports approximately 23,000 students annually for tuition, books, and living allowances. The department also provides support to some postsecondary institutions for the development and delivery of college- and university-level courses designed to enhance the postsecondary educational achievement of Status Indians and Inuit students.

**Postsecondary Education:** In addition to providing revenue for universities and colleges through transfer payments, the federal government offers direct student support. Every year, the Canada Student Loans Program and related provincial and territorial programs provide loans, grants, and interest forgiveness to over 350,000 postsecondary students. The Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation awards \$350 million in bursaries and scholarships each year to about 100,000 students throughout Canada. In 2009-10, the Canada Student Grant Program will replace the foundation, providing income-based grants to postsecondary students. For parents, the Canada Education Savings Grant program supplements their savings for postsecondary education. These programs, and many similar ones offered by the provinces and territories, are designed to make postsecondary education more widely accessible and to reduce student debt.

**Language Education:** Reflecting its history and culture, Canada adopted the Official Languages Act (first passed in 1969 and revised in 1988), which established both French and English as the official languages of Canada and provided for the support of English and French minority populations. According to the 2006 Census, 67.6 per cent of the population speak English only, 13.3 per cent speak French only, and 17.4 per cent speak both French and English. The French-speaking population is concentrated in Quebec, while each of the other provinces and territories has a French-speaking minority population; Quebec has an English-speaking minority population. The federal government's official-language policy and funding programs include making contributions to two education-related components — minority-language education and second-language education. Through the Official Languages in Education Program, the federal government transfers funding for these activities to the provinces and territories based

on bilateral and general agreements that respect areas of responsibility and the unique needs of each jurisdiction. The bilateral agreements related to these contributions are negotiated under a protocol worked out through the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC). Two national federally funded programs, coordinated by CMEC, provide youth with opportunities for exchange and summer study to enhance their second-language skills.

## **The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada**

**Role of CMEC:** The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) was formed in 1967 by the provincial and territorial ministers responsible for education to provide a forum in which they could discuss matters of mutual interest, undertake educational initiatives cooperatively, and represent the interests of the provinces and territories with national educational organizations, the federal government, foreign governments, and international organizations. CMEC is the national voice for education in Canada and, through CMEC, the provinces and territories work collectively on common objectives in a broad range of activities at the elementary, secondary, and postsecondary levels.

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Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada

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Canadian Education Association

[www.cea-ace.ca](http://www.cea-ace.ca)

Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials

[www.cicic.ca](http://www.cicic.ca)

Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, with links to the Web sites of the provincial and territorial ministries and departments responsible for education

[www.cmec.ca](http://www.cmec.ca)

Statistics Canada

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