

Québec, Canada

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Introduction

Language and Literacy

Elementary education in Québec is offered in French, English, or an Aboriginal language, and secondary education is offered in French or English. Some secondary schools offer Spanish as a third language in addition to the official curriculum, and some elementary and secondary schools offer students from other language communities instruction in their first language (e.g., Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Portuguese, German). Sometimes instruction in this language is offered to all students at a school.

Specialists provide instruction in a second language (English or French) in elementary and secondary school. Students receive instruction in English as a second language starting in the first year of elementary school for an average of one hour per week. Some schools provide intensive instruction in English as a second language in the fifth or sixth year of elementary school to meet the needs of the community. In secondary school, the Basic School Regulation suggests that students receive 100 hours of instruction per year in English as a second language in a core program or an enriched program.¹ French as a second language is taught in elementary school as a core program for one hour per day or as an immersion program. The Basic School Regulation suggests that students at the Secondary I, II, and III levels receive 150 hours of instruction per year in French as a second language, and that students at the Secondary IV and V levels receive 100 hours of instruction per year in French as a second language.²

Overview of Education System

In Québec, the education system offers a variety of educational programs and services to the public, from preschool through university. The *Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec* (Ministry of Education of Québec, or MEQ) fulfills different functions for each level of education. For the preschool, elementary, secondary, and college levels, in which schooling is free, MEQ develops programs and determines objectives and often content and standards. With regard to labor relations, it negotiates and signs provincial agreements. With regard to funding, it defines a normative framework and provides most of the education resources used in schools. At the university level, MEQ promotes the advancement of teaching and research by providing universities with the resources required

for operation and development while respecting their autonomy and fostering collaboration among their partners.

Preschool education is for 4- and 5-year-olds. Kindergarten for 4-year-olds has been offered full-time since 2013–2014. Preschool programs are available for 4-year-olds with disabilities at their parents' request. Accompanied by their parents, all 4-year-olds may benefit from the *Passe-Partout* program, which provides parents with tools to help foster their child's success in school and ensure that their child's transition to school life is positive and stimulating. Full-time Kindergarten for 4-year-olds has been implemented gradually across Québec since 2013–2014. In 2013–2014, 664 students were enrolled, while in 2020–2021, 11,361 children were enrolled.³ Full-time Kindergarten for 5-year-olds is not compulsory, but almost all children attend.

Elementary education is compulsory and comprises three learning cycles, each consisting of two years. Secondary education consists of five years of study divided into two cycles. Secondary Cycle One lasts two years and is a continuation of the Common Core education begun in elementary school; Secondary Cycle Two lasts three years. Some secondary schools offer vocational training programs. Secondary school is compulsory until the year students turn 16, normally during the fourth year of secondary school. After completing their secondary studies, students may continue on to *Collège d'enseignement général et professionnel* (CÉGEP) (a general and vocational college) to acquire two years of preuniversity training or three years of technical training, both of which lead to a Diploma of College Studies.

The public school system is administered by 72 linguistic school boards, of which 60 are French speaking, 9 are English speaking, and 3 have a special status (e.g., two school boards provide services mainly to Aboriginal students). Elementary and secondary education also are provided by private institutions, most of which are subsidized by MEQ. Private institutions are subject to the same regulations as public institutions and must implement the official curriculum. The private school system accounts for 6.2 percent of elementary students and 20.4 percent of secondary students in the youth sector.⁴

Use and Impact of PIRLS

Over the past 20 years, many briefs, reports, and studies produced primarily by UNESCO, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) have spurred discussions on how to adapt schools to new social and cultural realities. The Québec Education Program, as part of a project involving more than 500 teachers, school administrators, consultants, and other education professionals, has incorporated findings from this research into its objectives for students. The positive results of Québec students from PIRLS 2001 and subsequent cycles confirm the effectiveness of various initiatives taken in Québec over the last several years. However, there is still room for improvement when it comes to helping students with reading difficulties and reducing the achievement gap between boys and girls.

The Language/Reading Curriculum in Primary Grades

Summary of National Curriculum

The Québec Education Program (QEP) in preschool, elementary, and secondary education is based on the development of cross-curricular competencies on which students draw in broad areas of learning and subject-specific competencies. The QEP defines a competency as “a set of behaviors based on the effective mobilization and use of a range of resources.”⁵ One of the aims of a competency-based program is to ensure that knowledge serves as a tool for acting and thinking. Because competencies are complex and develop over time, they involve more than simply adding or juxtaposing certain elements; students can improve their mastery of a competency throughout their academic career and beyond. The QEP also produces complementary documents that provide additional information about the knowledge that students must acquire and be capable of using in each year of elementary and secondary school. A preschool cycle education program, for Kindergarten children ages 4 and 5, has been available since 2021.⁶ The elementary school programs came into effect in Québec schools in September 2000.⁷ The Secondary Cycle One program came into effect in September 2005, while the Secondary Cycle Two program was implemented gradually between September 2007 and September 2009.^{8,9}

Reading is at the heart of the QEP because it is seen as a tool for communication and the development of thinking, and it enables students to acquire cultural knowledge in order to construct their identity and worldview. A special connection exists between reading and the cross-curricular competencies Uses Information, Exercises Critical Judgment, and Uses Information and Communications Technologies. Because reading is essential to the development of competencies in other subject areas, teaching reading concerns all teachers. In French and English language programs, reading a variety of texts, writing, and communicating orally are among the competencies to be developed. In English Language Arts, reading texts from a variety of media sources has been added to the curriculum. As a complement to the programs of study, the *Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec* has produced a series of documents called *Progression of Learning* that detail what students are expected to learn in each year of elementary school and secondary school.^{10,11} The Basic School Regulation provides for nine hours of instruction per week of either language in Elementary Cycle One and seven hours per week in Cycles Two and Three. In secondary school, the Basic School Regulation provides for 200 hours of instruction in French or English per year during the first three years and 150 hours per year during the fourth and fifth years.

When children are introduced to reading and writing in Kindergarten, they discover the forms and functions of language and learn to use them in different communication situations. In elementary and secondary school, students read different types of texts in formats such as books, magazines, newspapers, and digital. From the beginning of elementary school until the end of their secondary studies, students gradually become critical readers by learning how to understand different types of texts and respond to them. Using various reading strategies and personal

experiences, students can gather information on different subjects, justify critical assessments, discover literature, and construct cultural references.

To develop an interest in reading and become good readers, students need to read regularly during a daily reading period and be exposed to a variety of books in the classroom and in the school library. These books must correspond to the preferences and interests of all students, regardless of their gender or their reading level. MEQ has created two websites to help teachers and librarians choose literary and informational resources: One contains a database of more than 7,200 French titles from Québec, Canada, and Europe;^a the second contains a database of more than 2,000 English titles from Québec and around the world.^b Using different search keys, teachers can find books that meet their own needs and those of the students in French and English language and second language classes.

Reading Instruction in the Primary Grades

Instructional Materials

French language teachers must use instructional materials that have been approved by MEQ. To be approved, materials must comply with the directions of the program of study, including those related to reading instruction. However, teachers may choose which texts they use to supplement instructional materials and how to use them without being limited to a single pedagogical approach. For example, they may choose to teach reading using authentic texts such as youth literature (e.g., novels, comic books, nonfiction).

English Language Arts teachers must use a variety of resources that include literary and informative texts. In the classroom and the library, students have access to computers and other resources such as books, comic books, magazines, and newspapers. Teachers of English and French as a second language often use authentic texts in their instruction.

Use of Technology

MEQ recognizes that the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) is essential for students in the 21st century. Depending on the decisions made by schools and teachers, students may work with technology such as computers, audiovisual tools, digital tablets, and SMART Boards (interactive whiteboards).

Role of Reading Specialists

Classrooms in Québec are not supported by reading specialists; rather, homeroom teachers are responsible for teaching reading and all other subjects except music and physical education and health. Students who are having reading difficulties may use the services of a resource teacher individually or in small groups. Services vary depending on the school's resources.

^a See <https://constellations.education.gouv.qc.ca/> for more information.

^b See <https://www.quebecreadingconnection.ca/> for more information.

Welcoming Services and French Learning Support Services

Some students who attend French elementary schools speak another language at home. Because all immigrant students whose parents did not study in English in Canada must attend school in French, welcoming services are offered to help these students learn French and integrate into regular classrooms. These services (e.g., welcoming classes, individualized instruction with a specialist) may include support in students' first language. Some multiethnic schools offer courses in students' first language as part of a local program or an extracurricular activity to emphasize the transfer of reading skills.

Accommodation Policies for Instruction and Teaching

Students with physical or other disabilities, social maladjustments, or learning difficulties often are integrated into regular classes in accordance with the Policy on Special Education and the Action Plan to Promote Success for Students with Handicaps, Social Maladjustments or Learning Difficulties.^{12,13} Differentiated instruction is the best way of fostering the success of all students, including those with special needs.¹⁴ The basic goal of the Policy on Special Education is “to help students with handicaps or social maladjustments or learning disabilities succeed in terms of knowledge, social development and qualifications by accepting that educational success has different meanings depending on the abilities and needs of different students.”¹⁵

For some students with disabilities, social maladjustments, or learning difficulties, adaptive measures can be adopted as part of their individualized education plan.¹⁶ These measures provide all students in a class with access to the same opportunities to learn and demonstrate their learning. The individualized education plan committee of educators, parents, and the student is responsible for implementing these measures and monitoring their suitability and efficacy.

For other students, it is possible to apply in certain subjects an individualized progression of learning approach or an approach that differs from the one presented in the Québec Education Program. This exceptional measure is applied jointly by the members of the student's individualized education plan committee, who decide to modify the requirements of the Québec Education Program based on the student's abilities and needs. The objective of this support measure is to ensure the continuous progression of learning and the student's optimal development.

Adaptive measures to facilitate the integration of students with disabilities, social maladjustments, or learning difficulties can involve the working environment; the conditions under which activities are carried out; and support for reading, writing, or arithmetic. This assistance enables students to perform the cognitive and metacognitive actions that allow them to acquire the required learning and demonstrate their learning autonomously. Adaptive measures taken during a ministerial examination may include allowing students to:¹⁷

- Have additional time for the examination
- Receive the support of a testing attendant (e.g., interpreter, invigilator)

- Use reading aids (e.g., voice synthesizers) or writing aids (e.g., grammar and spelling software, word prediction software)
- Use a computer that meets certain criteria
- Use various writing implements
- Use a voice recording device to register their answers verbally
- Use a reading aid (e.g., monitor, magnifying glass, inclined reading stand)
- Take the examination in an isolated location with supervision

Students with Reading Difficulties

Diagnostic Testing

Assessment of students with learning difficulties in reading is done mainly through observation of the knowledge and strategies that they use, and the means by which they remedy their comprehension difficulties. Information is gathered from school personnel and parents. Measuring instruments may be used to validate hypotheses concerning the type of difficulty. Teachers may call on specialists such as resource teachers and speech therapists when necessary.

Instruction for Students with Reading Difficulties

Instruction for students who have difficulties in reading involves developing their desire to read by giving books a prominent place in the classroom and encouraging reading in these students' presence. Teachers may encourage unmotivated students to participate in a reading club, research group, or poetry workshop. Other activities for students with reading difficulties focus on specific knowledge or help them to use cognitive and metacognitive strategies effectively when reading. These interventions are carried out regularly as part of regular classroom instruction.

Integration into regular classes is the preferred method of promoting success for students with special needs. These students may be grouped with other students who have similar needs during class activities or benefit from one-on-one help from a homeroom or resource teacher or a specialist (e.g., resource teacher, speech therapist), depending on school policy. Students with reading difficulties also may benefit from classes for students with special needs and specialized technological tools that support their learning of reading (e.g., voice synthesizers, audiobooks). The decision to opt for services or specialized tools is supported by an individualized education plan that specifies the actions, implementation conditions, and follow-up procedures required to accommodate each student.

Professional Development Requirements and Programs

Teacher Education Specific to Reading

Completion of a four-year bachelor's degree program in preschool and elementary education is required to teach at the preschool and elementary school levels. These programs train generalists (who do not teach subjects that require specialists, such as music, physical education and health, and second languages). An additional diploma is not required to teach reading in elementary school. To teach in the languages subject area at the secondary level, teachers must hold a bachelor's degree in teaching the specific subject.

Requirements for Ongoing Professional Development in Reading for Teachers

The most common forms of professional development for teachers are university studies, training provided by school boards or the *Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec*, and conferences. Teachers are increasingly taking advantage of peer training and action research projects. Additionally, the English school board system has developed centers that offer training and support to teachers of students with language difficulties.

Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

At the end of elementary school, students take a compulsory ministerial examination in French or English, depending on their language of instruction.^c These examinations are graded by teachers using a guide. For certification purposes, students also take compulsory ministerial uniform examinations at the end of secondary school. The writing examination in French language classes is graded by MEQ. Student evaluation is the responsibility of schools, which must implement an evaluation policy that complies with the ministerial directive stipulating that reading must account for 40 percent of students' final grades. Although MEQ administers only one compulsory reading examination at the end of elementary school, elementary and secondary school students are required to read several texts in preparation for writing examinations. As part of the *Plan d'action pour l'amélioration du français* (Action Plan for Improving French), MEQ administers writing examinations and publishes reports on the results of students in the fourth and sixth years of elementary school, and in the second and fifth years of secondary school.

Special Reading Initiatives

In 2005, the *Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport* (Ministry of Education, Recreation, and Sports) initiated the Action Plan on Reading in School with the aim of contributing to the success of students, and boys in particular. One component of the plan involves subsidizing schools for

^c Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all ministerial examinations (primary and secondary grades) were canceled during the 2019–2020 and 2020–2021 academic years. These examinations resumed during the 2021–2022 academic year.

the purchase of literary and documentary resources (in digital or printed format) for their libraries; the other involves offering training activities and implementing projects to promote reading, particularly through the Reading Recognition Awards. In 2008, the Action Plan on Reading in School was extended to allow for the hiring of school librarians. These initiatives aim to encourage students to become lifelong readers.

Suggested Readings

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