

JUST SIX
QUESTIONS

RESEARCH
SUMMARY



Applied or Academic: High Impact

Decisions for Ontario Students

Key Details

KEY WORDS

Applied courses, academic courses, student transfers, student achievement, education quality and accountability, Toronto District School Board, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development

POPULATION GROUP

All

STEPPING UP THEMES

Education, Training, and Apprenticeships

RESEARCH ORIGIN

Ontario, Canada

SOURCE

Institution

“There is also evidence that the applied/academic system may perpetuate current economic and educational disparities among families.”

1. What is the research about?

The Ontario Ministry of Education has a policy that enables Grade 9 and 10 students to take a combination of academic and applied courses. This flexibility is intended to spare students from having to choose a pathway (academic or applied) through high school in Grade 8. This study set out to investigate the implications of Grade 8 students' decisions about the choice of their courses of study in high school on their academic and career prospects. This research demonstrates that rather than providing flexibility, the early choices that young students make regarding academic course selection continues to have long-term consequences.

2. Where did the research take place?

This research took place in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Principals of English, French and Catholic schools within Ontario's public education system participated in this study.

3. Who is this research about?

This research is about high school age students attending Ontario's public schools.

4. How was the research done?

This study used mixed methods. Survey data for this report came from People for Education's 18th annual survey (2014-2015) and the 15th annual survey of school resources in Ontario's secondary schools. Principals of publicly funded schools within Ontario filled out the surveys. Data from studies undertaken by the EQAO, TDSB and OECD were also collated to gather further insights into the research study.

The qualitative data for the study was gathered from semi-structured interviews with school principals.

5. What are the key findings?

This research found that student achievement in Grade 8 has a greater influence on student course selection than student interests or career aspirations.

Schools with a higher percentage of students from low-income families have higher numbers of students taking Applied Math.

Parents and students receive inadequate support to navigate high school course selection. Many do not understand either the intended flexibility of the system or the short and long-term impacts of their decisions:

- 20% of parents and students make their decisions on course choices based on hand-outs provided to them by the school
- 54% base their decision on data they receive at Information Nights in school;
- 11% are guided by school counsellors
- 15% use other sources such as professional judgment and personal knowledge of students

Although 90% of schools report that they have systems in place to help students select appropriate courses, rates of student transfers from applied to academic courses were abysmally low-2% in 2013-14 and 3% in 2014-15.

Instances of delayed course selection by combining academic and applied courses in Grade 9 were indicative of greater student success.

6. Why does this research matter for youth work?

This study revealed that the level of support students receive in school for making course decisions is inadequate. Students in Grade 8 are entering adolescence and they are in the process of developing and understanding their talents, abilities and interests. They need help to understand themselves, explore opportunities, career trajectories, and pathways to success. Youth workers can support these youth by **developing programs** that address these needs.

Sometimes students may wish to **transfer from an applied to an academic** course. When this happens, they need help to advocate for the change, navigate the system, and access bridging supports that can help them make a smooth transition. Most schools do not have such initiatives in place. Youth workers can also support students and parents in understanding the implications of their course selection decisions and help them navigate the high school education system.



Hamlin, D. and Cameron, D. (2015). *Applied or Academic: High Impact Decisions for Ontario Students*. People for Education. Toronto, ON.

FIND IT ONLINE

<http://www.peopleforeducation.ca/pfe-news/applied-or-academic-high-impact-decisions-for-ontario-students/>