

**Education Matters: Insights on Education, Learning and Training in Canada**

**A Note on High School Graduation  
and School Attendance, by Age and  
Province, 2009/2010**



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- <sup>r</sup> revised
- X suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the *Statistics Act*
- <sup>E</sup> use with caution
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## A Note on High School Graduation and School Attendance, by Age and Province, 2009/2010

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The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) publishes a number of indicators that allow international comparisons on various aspects of education.<sup>1</sup> One of these measures the percentage of the population that is a high school graduate, relative to the population of 17 and 18 year-olds. Another provides an indicator of the high school dropout rate, defined as the percentage of 20 to 24 year-olds who have not graduated from high school and who are not attending school.

A comparison of these two indicators for Canada presents an apparent paradox. In some provinces, high school graduation rates and high school dropout rates both were higher in 2009/2010 than in other provinces. Similarly, some other provinces showed both low high school graduation rates and low high school dropout rates.

This article addresses this apparent paradox. Using data from the Labour Force Survey, it examines high school graduation status by age group for Canada and the provinces in 2009/2010.

At each age, young people may have one of three high school statuses: they are high school graduates; they have not graduated from high school and are still attending school (continuers); or they have not graduated from high school and they are not attending school (dropouts).

For ease of discussion, the tables in the following sections focus on each 'high school status' separately, presenting a subset of the summary data shown in [Appendix Table A.1](#).

### Typical age at graduation varies by province

There are significant differences in the institutional structure of educational systems across provinces. In Quebec, elementary/secondary education consists of 11 years of schooling. In the other provinces, elementary/secondary education consists of 12 years of schooling. As a result, the 'typical' high school graduate in Quebec will be one year younger than high school graduates in other provinces. Provinces also differ in terms of the compulsory school-attendance age for students who have not completed high school. In New Brunswick and Ontario, school attendance is compulsory to age 18 for those who have not graduated from high school. In other provinces, school attendance is compulsory to age 16.

As shown in Table 1, in 2009/2010, just over one-third of 16 to 17 year-olds in Quebec were high school graduates. This percentage was much higher in Quebec than in it was in any other province. At 8.2%, Ontario had the second highest proportion, while in the four Atlantic Provinces, the percentage of 16 and 17 year-olds who were high school graduates was negligible.

By the ages of 18 to 19, the great majority of young people in all provinces had graduated from high school, ranging from 80% or more in Newfoundland and Labrador, Quebec and British Columbia to 68.5% in Nova Scotia.

**Table 1**  
**Percentage of the population that is a high school graduate, by age group and province, 2009/2010**

	Age group		
	16 to 17 years old	18 to 19 years old	20 to 24 years old
	percent		
Canada	13.0	76.9	89.5
Newfoundland and Labrador	F	81.2	92.5
Prince Edward Island	F	78.6	91.2
Nova Scotia	F	68.5	88.7
New Brunswick	F	77.0	90.2
Quebec	34.3	80.6	85.4
Ontario	8.2	75.5	91.0
Manitoba	4.0	73.9	86.9
Saskatchewan	2.7	72.1	88.4
Alberta	5.6	73.7	89.0
British Columbia	7.8	80.5	92.7

E use with caution  
 F too unreliable to be published  
 Source: Statistics Canada. [Labour Force Survey](#).

In most provinces, further gains in the high school graduation rate are evident by the ages of 20 to 24. High school graduation rates for 20 to 24 year-olds were at 90% or more in a number of provinces in 2009/2010 – British Columbia, Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, Ontario and New Brunswick. High school graduation rates were lowest among 20 to 24 year-olds in Quebec, at 85.4%, and Manitoba, at 86.9%. Overall, the largest gains in the high school graduation rate when 20 to 24 year-olds are compared to 18 to 19 year-olds were observed in Nova Scotia, rising from 68.5% among 18 to 19 year olds to 88.7% among 20 to 24 year-olds, and in Saskatchewan, at 72.1% and 88.3%, respectively.

## Youth still attending school

In contrast to increases in the graduation rate with age, the percentage of youth who had not completed high school and who were still attending school (continuers) decreased dramatically with age. Again, differences are observed across provinces. Over 90% of 16 to 17 year-olds in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island, and close to 90% in all other provinces, had not graduated from high school and were still attending school in 2009/2010. The exception was Quebec, where that share was lower, 59.4%. As noted earlier, slightly more than one third of 16 to 17 year-olds in Quebec had already graduated from high school in 2009/2010.

Greater provincial variability in the percentage of youth who had not graduated from high school and were still attending school in 2009/2010 is evident among 18 to 19 year-olds. This percentage was highest in Nova Scotia, at 20% and lowest in Quebec, at 8.8%.

**Table 2**  
Percentage of the population that is not a high school graduate and is attending school, by age group, Canada and provinces, 2009/2010

	Age group		
	16 to 17 years old	18 to 19 years old	20 to 24 years old
	percent		
Canada	82.0	14.7	2.0
Newfoundland and Labrador	90.4	10.7	F
Prince Edward Island	91.4	15.9	F
Nova Scotia	94.2	20.0	1.6 <sup>F</sup>
New Brunswick	92.3	14.9	1.6 <sup>F</sup>
Quebec	59.4	8.8	3.5
Ontario	87.1	17.8	1.8
Manitoba	89.8	15.9	2.2
Saskatchewan	90.2	19.2	1.9
Alberta	90.2	15.9	1.4 <sup>F</sup>
British Columbia	88.1	13.4	1.0 <sup>F</sup>

<sup>E</sup> use with caution  
<sup>F</sup> too unreliable to be published  
**Source:** Statistics Canada. [Labour Force Survey](#).

Finally, very few students who had not graduated from high school were still attending school by the ages of 20 to 24. This rate was highest in Quebec, at 3.5%, and Manitoba, at 2.2%, while rates were negligible in the other provinces.

## Non-high school graduates not attending school

The third 'high school status' that young adults may hold is that of non-high school graduate, not attending school (dropouts).

Official statistics on high school dropout rates note that, while the typical high school graduate will graduate from high school at the age of 18, others do not, for a variety of reasons. Some of these younger school leavers later return to school, taking advantage of 'second chance' opportunities for completing high school. However, by the ages of 20 to 24, young people usually have decided to return to complete their high school diploma or not. As a result, dropout rates are commonly calculated using this age group; to estimate dropout rates on any younger group might be to count as a "dropout" someone taking a break from school. As a result, the dropout rate is calculated as the share of 20-to-24-year-olds who are not attending school and who have not graduated from high school.

The percentage of 16 to 17 year-olds who were not high school graduates and who were not attending school in 2009/2010 was relatively low, ranging from just over 6% in Quebec and Manitoba to negligible proportions in the Atlantic provinces.

The percentage of young people who had not completed high school and who were not attending school in 2009/2010 was higher among 18 and 19 year-olds. This rate was highest in Nova Scotia, at 11.5%, and in Quebec, Manitoba and Alberta, each at 10% or more. The rate was lowest in Prince Edward Island and British Columbia.

**Table 3**  
Percentage of the population that is not a high school graduate and not attending school, by age group and province, 2009/2010

	Age group		
	16 to 17 years old	18 to 19 years old	20 to 24 years old
	percent		
Canada	5.0	8.4	8.5
Newfoundland and Labrador	F	8.0	F
Prince Edward Island	F	5.5	F
Nova Scotia	F	11.5	9.7
New Brunswick	F	8.1	8.2
Quebec	6.4	10.7	11.2
Ontario	4.8	6.9	7.2
Manitoba	6.3	10.2	10.9

Saskatchewan	4.3	8.6	9.9
Alberta	4.3	10.4	9.5
British Columbia	4.1	6.1	6.3
<sup>E</sup> use with caution <sup>F</sup> too unreliable to be published <b>Source:</b> Statistics Canada. <a href="#">Labour Force Survey</a> .			

As noted earlier, some young people who leave high school between the ages of 16 and 19 later return to complete the requirements for high school graduation. This is the case in Alberta, for example, where the dropout decreased from 10.4% among 18 to 19 year-olds to 9.5% among 20 to 24 year-olds and in Nova Scotia, where it fell from 11.5% to 9.7%.

However, some other provinces saw an increase in the dropout rate among 20 to 24 year-olds compared to 18 to 19 year-olds. This was the case in Quebec and Manitoba. In the remaining provinces, the rate changed little between the two age groups.

Applying the standard definition of a dropout rate to 20 to 24 year-olds, then, dropout rates in Canada in 2009/2010 were highest in Quebec, at 11.2% and in Manitoba, at 10.9%.

## Conclusion

High school graduation rates and high school dropout rates present an apparent paradox, in that both are high in some provinces, but low in other provinces.

Further examination of these indicators shows that both scenarios are possible. What matters in interpreting data like these is an understanding of the institutional structure of educational systems and how these differ across provinces. What also matters is the age at which such indicators are measured.

Given the structure of the educational system in Quebec, the typical student will graduate from high school one year younger than a typical student in other provinces. In some other provinces, notably Nova Scotia and Saskatchewan, relatively high proportions of 18 and 19 year-olds have not graduated from high school and are still attending school. Therefore, when measuring graduation rates, it is important to select age groups that are representative of the situation in each province.

High school dropout rates provide an indicator of student retention to high school graduation, but, when measured at ages 20 to 24, also capture those students who return to school to complete the requirements for graduation. In the cases of Nova Scotia and Alberta in 2009/2010, the high school dropout rate at ages 18 to 19 was higher than it was in some other provinces; however, by the ages of 20 to 24, those dropout rates had decreased, so that those two provinces had lower rates than observed in some other provinces.

## Appendix

**Table A.1**  
**High school graduation status, by age group, Canada and provinces, 2009/2010**

	Age group		
	16 to 17 years old	18 to 19 years old	20 to 24 years old
	percent		
<b>Canada</b>			
High school graduate	13.0	76.9	89.5
Not a high school graduate, attending school	81.9	14.7	2.0
Not a high school graduate, not attending school	5.0	8.4	8.5
Total	99.9	100.0	100.0
<b>Newfoundland and Labrador</b>			
High school graduate	<sup>F</sup>	81.2	92.5
Not a high school graduate, attending school	90.4	10.7	<sup>F</sup>
Not a high school graduate, not attending school	<sup>F</sup>	8.0	<sup>F</sup>
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
<b>Prince Edward Island</b>			
High school graduate	<sup>F</sup>	78.6	91.2
Not a high school graduate, attending school	91.4	15.9	<sup>F</sup>
Not a high school graduate, not attending school	<sup>F</sup>	5.5	<sup>F</sup>
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
<b>Nova Scotia</b>			
High school graduate	<sup>F</sup>	68.5	88.7
Not a high school graduate, attending school	94.2	20.0	1.6 <sup>F</sup>
Not a high school graduate, not attending school	<sup>F</sup>	11.5	9.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
<b>New Brunswick</b>			
High school graduate	<sup>F</sup>	77.0	90.2
Not a high school graduate, attending school	92.3	14.9	1.6 <sup>F</sup>
Not a high school graduate, not attending school	<sup>F</sup>	8.1	8.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
<b>Quebec</b>			
High school graduate	34.3	80.6	85.4
Not a high school graduate, attending school	59.4	8.7	3.4

Not a high school graduate, not attending school	6.4	10.7	11.2
Total	100.1	100.0	100.0
<b>Ontario</b>			
High school graduate	8.2	75.5	91.0
Not a high school graduate, attending school	87.1	17.7	1.8
Not a high school graduate, not attending school	4.8	6.9	7.2
Total	100.1	100.1	100.0
<b>Manitoba</b>			
High school graduate	4.0 <sup>E</sup>	73.9	86.9
Not a high school graduate, attending school	89.8	15.9	2.2
Not a high school graduate, not attending school	6.3	10.2	10.9
Total	100.1	100.0	100.0
<b>Saskatchewan</b>			
High school graduate	2.7 <sup>E</sup>	72.1	88.3
Not a high school graduate, attending school	90.2	19.2	1.8
Not a high school graduate, not attending school	4.3	8.6	9.9
Total	97.2	99.9	100.0
<b>Alberta</b>			
High school graduate	5.6	73.7	89.0
Not a high school graduate, attending school	90.1	15.9	1.4 <sup>E</sup>
Not a high school graduate, not attending school	4.3	10.4	9.5
Total	100.0	100.0	99.9
<b>British Columbia</b>			
High school graduate	7.8	80.5	92.7
Not a high school graduate, attending school	88.1	13.4	1.0 <sup>E</sup>
Not a high school graduate, not attending school	4.1	6.1	6.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
<sup>E</sup> use with caution			
<sup>F</sup> too unreliable to be published			
Source: Statistics Canada. <a href="#">Labour Force Survey</a> .			

## Notes

1. See Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. 2010. Education at a Glance. Paris: [OECD](#). Also see, Statistics Canada and Council of Ministers of Education, Canada . 2010. [Education Indicators in Canada – An International Perspective](#). Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 81-604-X.