

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE EDUCATIONAL REFORM AND PEDAGOGICAL RENEWAL IN QUEBEC



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This article presents an overview of the changes generated by what was initially referred to as the “Educational Reform” and which has been recently implemented in preschool, elementary and secondary schools. It is now referred to as the “Pedagogical Renewal”.

THE ORIGINS

The Educational Reform began in the mid-nineties when the Quebec government invited its citizens and educational institutions to participate in the Estates General on Education in order to provide an assessment of the state of the Quebec educational system. The two main findings established by the *Commission des états généraux* referred to the need to reform our educational system which was judged to be obsolete and to review the students’ curriculum in order to prepare them for a knowledge and technology-based society.

In light of the *Commission’s* recommendations and after examining several expert¹ reports, in 1997 the *ministre de l’Éducation* published two documents that were crucial in setting out the general guidelines for reforming the Quebec education system. Emphasizing success is a way to describe the orientation of this reform and a Plan of Action was established based on seven major guiding principles. The first two were quite revealing: they involved, “Teaching essential subjects” and “Giving greater autonomy to the schools”. A document entitled *L’école tout un programme* defined the mission of the school and set the guidelines for developing the new programs of study.

THE GOALS

The objective of the change was to refocus the school on its main mission: to educate, socialize and qualify today’s youth. For this to happen, programs of study needed to be reviewed in order to return to the essential knowledge to be passed on, to raise the cultural level of programs, to avoid the compartmentalization of knowledge and to introduce more rigorous evaluation. Based on the established findings, the ultimate goal was to improve the success rate of all students and increase their academic perseverance.

THE AXES OF CHANGE

Initially the government enacted legislation to define the mission of the school and to decentralize certain powers in its favour. The *ministère de l’Éducation* then began developing a new Quebec Education Program. The government also introduced regulations modifying the *régime pédagogique* as it pertained to preschool, elementary and secondary schools. In addition, the *Ministère* adopted supporting policies, in particular with regard to the evaluation of learning, to special needs students and to complementary services.

LEGISLATIVE CHANGES

As of 2001, the government modified the Education Act to define the mission of the school as follows: to educate, to socialize and to qualify all of Quebec’s youth. A series of modifications were also made to the law to decentralize giving power to the school thereby providing it with the necessary latitude to succeed in its mission. In addition, all schools were required to equip themselves with an Educational Project and a Success Plan, both of which were to be designed to promote success for the greatest possible number of students.

MODIFICATIONS TO THE RÉGIME PÉDAGOGIQUE

From 2001 to 2008, the government made major changes to the regulations governing schools and school boards with regard to the educational services they provide. First of all, the regulations established two-year teaching cycles for the elementary school and for the first cycle of secondary school² and it required each cycle to be completed prior to a formal assessment of student learning. During a cycle, eight communications to parents are stipulated (including five report cards, in addition to the end-of-cycle assessment) to inform them of the student’s progress, and, ultimately, to decide whether or not the student moves on to the next cycle. Initially, the possibility of repeating a year within a cycle was not contemplated; this was incorporated into the regulation later on.

¹ Notably: *Réaffirmer l’école*, Inchauspé Report, 1997.

² The senior secondary school cycle lasts three years.



The subject list for elementary and secondary schools was reviewed in order to emphasize “basic” subjects and, based on the principle of communicating vessels, this revision led to the elimination of some subjects considered to be less important. Thus, the time allotted to teaching both French (as the language of instruction) and the History and Citizenship Education program was considerably increased. New subjects were added, including Ethics and Religious Culture at elementary and secondary levels, the *Projet intégrateur* (the Integrative Project) in Secondary 5, the *Monde contemporain* (the Contemporary World) program in Secondary 5 as well as the *Projet personnel d'orientation* (the Personal Orientation Project) program in Secondary 3. Other subjects underwent major modifications. In this way, from Secondary 1 to Secondary 4, older disciplines such as Ecology, Biology and Physics were replaced by the Science and Technology program which includes and enriches the essential elements of the old programs.

Evaluation of learning was renewed in keeping with the evaluation policy adopted by the *Ministère* in 2003. Each disciplinary competency was henceforth to be evaluated using a percentage based on a competency scale level developed by the *Ministère*. Furthermore, students were to be attributed an overall grade for the discipline based on an established weighting. In elementary school and in the first cycle of secondary school, the progression from one level to the next was to be based on the student's end-of-cycle comprehensive assessment and on rules established by the school or the school board. For the second cycle of secondary school, students were to be promoted on the basis of each subject. For example, a student would be required to pass the Secondary 3 mathematics course in order to be admitted to the Secondary 4 mathematics course. Also, ministerial matriculation tests were renewed. These standardized tests were considered to be much more demanding than the old tests. In order to successfully pass them, students must demonstrate a mastery of the competencies required by the program and therefore, their ability to judiciously apply the knowledge they have acquired.

Furthermore, the conditions for obtaining a Diploma of Secondary Studies (*diplôme d'études secondaires, DES*) were made to be more stringent. In the past, all that was required to obtain a *DES* was the successful completion of Secondary 5 French, Secondary 4 English (as a second language) and Secondary 4 History as well as the accumulation of a total of 54 units. Once the reform implementation has been completed, in addition to the required 54 units, success (60%) in all fields of learning will be required, as can be seen in Figure 1 presented on the following page.

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In an effort to diversify training and to be responsive to student learning profiles, the regulation introduced three training³ paths for students at the second-cycle secondary level. It is up to the students to choose their paths based on their own learning profiles. As a result, students are offered two equally demanding learning paths: the General Education path and the Applied General Education path, both of which lead to obtaining a diploma of secondary studies (*DES*) thereby providing access to college-level studies. As a replacement for the Science and Technology

Program, the Applied General Education path necessarily includes the Applied Science and Technology program as well as the Personal Orientation Project program. It is addressed to students who have a stronger need for hands-on experience in order to understand. A third path, this time involving training that leads to employment, targets students who are experiencing major difficulties and who are preparing to enter the workforce in the short term. It does not lead to a *DES*, but it does provide a certificate that can be used to gain non-specialized employment.

THE QUEBEC EDUCATION PROGRAM (QEP)

A key element of this reform consists in establishing, in a prescriptive manner, a new Quebec Education Program (QEP) for all students in elementary and secondary schools. To a certain extent, this program constitutes the game plan for guiding the educative action directed at Quebec's youth. Designed as a system, the Quebec Education Program is a dynamic whole the scope of which is based on the complementarity and intersection of its components.

From preschool to the end of secondary school, the Quebec Education Program:

- targets the development of student competencies, generic competencies (cross-curricular) and more specific ones (disciplinary) without neglecting the role of knowledge in the development of these competencies;
- targets the development of these three same competencies in a compulsory discipline, from the start of elementary school to the end of secondary school (with some exceptions);

³ Regarding the diversification of paths in the youth sector, see Figure 2.



- is designed around contemporary world problems;
- accords major importance to mastering the language of instruction;
- is intended to be a student gateway to culture;
- addresses all students, taking into account the heterogeneity that is characteristic of all groups;
- is based on the expertise of all school personnel and allows for individual and collective professional choices.

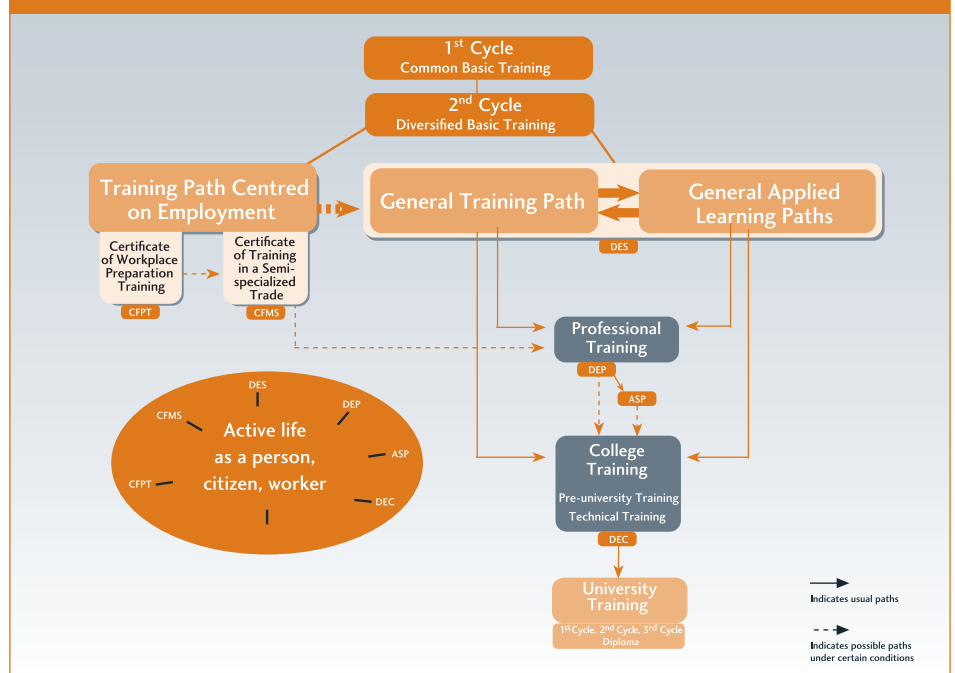
The structure of the Quebec Education Program makes it possible to position learning that is traditionally included in disciplinary programs of study into a larger framework of training objectives for all school interveners. This structure comprises three essential elements⁴:

- the General Education Fields that lead students to examine, from various angles, the different problems they will face in life, such as health and the environment;
- the Learning Fields that serve as the reference points for each discipline and that make it possible to determine the individual contributions of each one to the development of specific competencies by students;
- the Cross-curricular Competencies which are the generic competencies that are useful in all education fields as well as in daily life such as being able to: make use of information, develop effective work habits, or be able to communicate in an appropriate manner.

FIGURE 1: REQUIREMENTS FOR OBTAINING A SECONDARY SCHOOL DIPLOMA

FROM JULY 1 ST 2005 TO APRIL 30 TH 2007	FROM MAY 1 ST 2007 TO APRIL 30 TH 2010	AS OF MAY 1 ST 2010
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6 credits in the Language of Instruction, in Secondary 5 level • 4 credits in French as a Second Language, in Secondary 5 or 4 credits in English as a Second Language, in Secondary 4 • 4 credits in the History of Quebec and Canada, in Secondary 4 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6 credits in the Language of Instruction, in Secondary 5 level • 4 credits in the Second Language, in Secondary 5 • 6 credits in Mathematics, in Secondary 4 • 6 credits in Physical Science, in Secondary 4 • 4 credits in the History of Quebec and Canada, in Secondary 4 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6 credits in the Language of Instruction, in Secondary 5 • 4 credits in the Second Language, in Secondary 5 • 4 credits in Mathematics, in Secondary 4 • 4 credits in Science and Technology or 6 credits in Applied Technologies, in Secondary 4 • 4 credits in the History and Citizenship Program, in Secondary 4 • 2 credits in Arts, in Secondary 4 • 2 credits in Ethics and Religious Culture Education or Physical Education and Health, in Secondary 5

FIGURE 2: EDUCATIONAL PATHS IN THE YOUTH SECTOR*

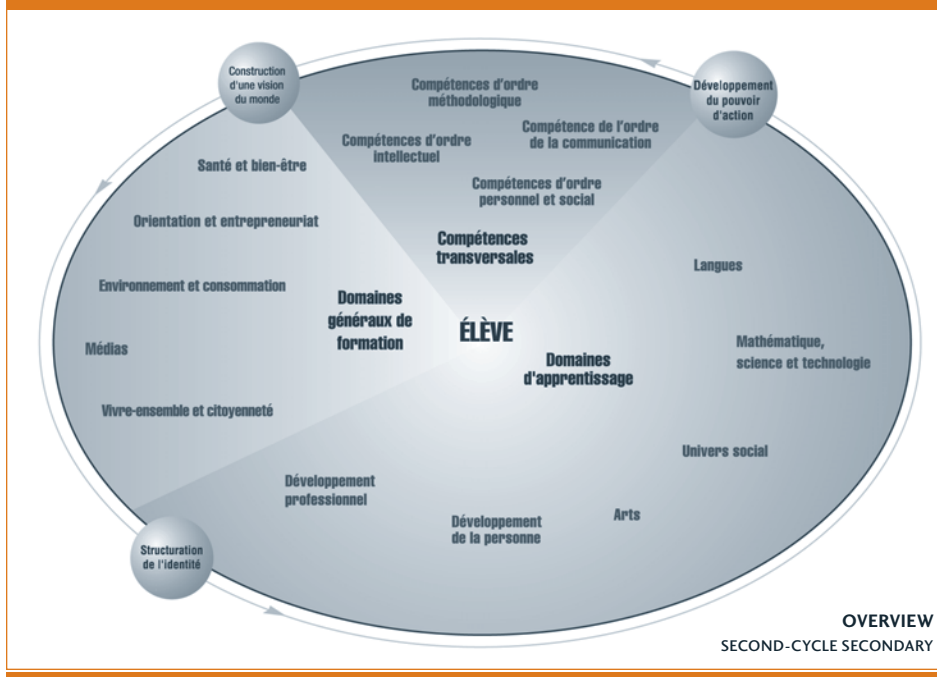


⁴ See Figure 3.

* Quebec Education Program, second-cycle secondary, p.26.



FIGURE 3: EDUCATION PROGRAM FOR QUEBEC SCHOOLS*



* Quebec Education Program, second-cycle secondary, p. 27.

We should emphasize that grouping the different school disciplines into Learning Fields is a significant development since it makes it possible to observe the interdependence of these fields of knowledge.

To be more precise, as college teachers whose programs have already been revised according to the competency-based approach well know, the development of competencies that are characteristic of a discipline is not carried out to the detriment of the knowledge and methods to be acquired in that discipline. It is up to the students, and this is quite a challenge, to learn how to apply judiciously and in the proper context the knowledge and techniques they have learned in order to carry out complex tasks. This can unfold in several ways. For example, the student may have to write an argumentative text, resolve a mathematical problem, interpret a musical work, analyze a historical event, etc. Moreover, the established programs contain substantial sections devoted to the knowledge, concepts and techniques to be mastered.

Let us also underscore the complementary role of the General Education Fields (GEF) in relation to the Learning Fields themselves. Most countries that have reviewed or are in the process of reviewing their school curricula are faced with taking into account learning that is considered to be essential for preparing today's youth for life in society but that may lie outside the boundaries of individual disciplines. Thus, in French-speaking Switzerland, they will be inserting a general education field into the study plan that is still under development. This field will include learning related to health and to the prevention of risky behaviour, to citizenship education, to media literacy as well as to academic and professional guidance.

For Quebec, integrating the GEFs into the curriculum:

“is a way of reaffirming that life is at the centre of academic learning and that school must help students prepare for it. The general education fields make it possible to determine learning that is essential for developing a lucid understanding of the major components of current reality⁵”.

The impact of including the GEFs in learning situations developed by teachers will probably result in training youth to understand, analyze and take a stand on topics that human beings face on a daily basis (health, the environment, consumption, etc.) which, due to their complexity, are beyond the basic logic of a single discipline (mathematics, science, geography, ethics, etc.). The systemic dimension of reality is therefore highlighted and the fact of taking it into consideration implies resorting to interdisciplinary approaches. The entire school team becomes responsible for taking the GEFs into account.

Concerning the development of Cross-cultural Competencies, this is justified by the fact that it is necessary to educate students so that they acquire generic abilities that go beyond the boundaries of a single discipline. Therefore, it is crucial for students to progressively acquire rigorous work habits, critical thinking, communication skills and cooperation with others; all these tools are indispensable for success not only in any discipline, but also for success in living in society.

It goes without saying that having teachers take into consideration the three dimensions of the education program mentioned above implies a major adaptation on the pedagogic level.

⁵ Education Program for Quebec Schools, Chapter 1, p. 2.



Of course, the Education Act confirms teachers' rights to choose the appropriate methods to use in their classrooms and in their particular contexts. However, the Quebec Education Program encourages teaching personnel to vary their educational approaches, without prescribing any one in particular. It also encourages them to resort to coaching practices for students and to favour pedagogical differentiation and collegiality.

Let us end this short overview of the Quebec Education Program by stating that its application began in 2001, in elementary schools. At the secondary level, this implementation began in September 2005 for the first year of secondary school and continues until the 2009-2010 school year, the last year of its implementation in Secondary 5.

CONCLUSION AND PERSPECTIVES

It is quite difficult to measure with any certainty the combined effect of changes made to the Quebec educational system with regard to teaching at the elementary and secondary levels, since the changes are numerous and cover a number of domains.

Thus, the Education Act was revised to give more power to educational establishments and also to provide a better definition of the school's mission. The educational system has been modified by the implementation of a new training program, by the addition of diversified paths at the secondary level, by a new evaluation policy and practices and by new rules for the official recognition of studies. Teaching is also affected by the many changes made to the structure and content of each program of study stipulated by the *régime pédagogique*. Finally, the implementation of programs of study designed to develop students'

competencies, both disciplinary and cross-curricular, is expected to have a definite impact on the learning modes that students will favour.

The full extent and the importance of these changes foreshadows the definite effects they are anticipated to have on the learning profiles of students finishing secondary school as of June 2010.

We should however keep in mind that changes of such magnitude cannot be implemented into a network as vast as the educational network over a short period of time or without experiencing some difficulties. The approach prescribed by the Quebec Education Program allows for a certain amount of time for appropriating the approach as well as for ongoing in-service training before teachers can feel at ease with it and can develop the competencies required to apply it in daily practice. All this will take several years. In this respect, we must not expect this first cohort of graduates to be radically different from previous students. However, over time, significant changes should be observed in students who have come through the pedagogical renewal currently taking place. ●

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