

# Immigrant youth help to build nations

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Immigrants and refugees, especially those from developing nations, are often portrayed by segments of the media and policy makers as an economic burden, a threat to our social cohesion and "our way of life."

However, immigrants and [immigrant youth](#) can help build nations like Canada. They are a great source of economic potential, while also contributing to a rich cultural mosaic. But immigrants must be supported with appropriate education and training policies.

## Collaboration needed for collective impact

The future success of nations, including Canada, is ultimately determined by its youth. This means as a society, we need to understand how to contribute to their success.

It's vital to have a clear understanding of how well [immigrant](#) students perform in education systems in order to best serve them.

Education policies should not be divorced from broader social programs and economic policies. Governments need to work collaboratively in order to effectively impact school environments and education opportunities for immigrant youth.

In other words, the success of immigrant students is influenced by the success of the social and economic integration of their parents.

Refugees often come from the most challenging economic situations. Consider the recent influx of more than 40,000 Syrian refugees to Canada who have come from a country devastated by war. Policies that integrate social, economic and educational issues will have the most impact.

## Education impacts economic prosperity

While sovereign nations take their lead from their voting constituents on how to approach immigration issues, it is important for governments to promote policies based on evidence rather than political rhetoric.

Populist movements in the West tend to characterize immigration as a threat to [social cohesion](#) and economic stability. The Canadian government, to date, has taken a different approach with respect to the

"value-added" by immigrants. Canada's official multiculturalism [policy](#), which has existed since the early 1970s, is a model designed to celebrate and support the ethnic diversity of its citizens.

Ultimately, the success (or lack thereof) of immigrant student populations has profound implications for the [economic prosperity](#) and the social cohesion of countries around the world.

## **Immigrant students are often at a disadvantage**

The [Programme for International Student Assessment](#) (PISA), administered by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), has quickly become the global benchmark used to judge the effectiveness of education systems.

PISA is well established in both research and policy spheres and has even been likened to the "Olympics of education." The large national and international samples of students who participate in the PISA triennial assessments across three learning domains (reading, mathematics and science literacy) provide comparable data used to tell a story of student literacies across the world.

Immigrant students often have a significant performance disadvantage in relation to their non-migrant peers. For example, only two out of 25 European countries (Slovakia and Hungary) had PISA 2012 mathematics results where immigrants outperformed non-migrants.

## **Migrant students perform better with diverse peers**

This performance disadvantage however does not characterize all countries across Western Europe. For example, the mathematics performance of immigrant and non-migrant students across the United

Kingdom was almost identical.

All other things being equal, students in Australia, Canada, Israel and the United States perform equally well regardless of migrant status. The OECD argues the reason for this is because immigrant populations are high in those countries —approximately 25 per cent. The belief is that immigrant students perform better when they are not surrounded by peers with socio-economic disadvantages.

Unique country examples support this argument. For example, Finland is one of the highest performing countries on PISA —and the highest performing nation from Europe. However, it also had one of the largest reported performance disadvantages between its non-migrant and immigrant student populations in the PISA 2012 mathematics domain.

Finland also has one of the most homogeneous student populations in the world. Given that immigrant students perform better in school systems with relatively large [immigrant populations](#), ethnic and cultural diversity may be an important way to reduce immigrant students' performance gaps.

Overall, Canadian students perform similarly to students in Finland on the PISA assessments. In contrast to the low proportion of immigrants in Finland, Canada has a higher share of the percentage of first- and second-generation students at 29.6 per cent - making it second to Luxembourg (46 per cent) among OECD countries.

## **Poor policy impacts children's lives**

Our research has shown Canada is one of the few educational jurisdictions in the world where immigrant students significantly outperform their non-migrant counterparts.

However, even in Canada, the relative performance of immigrant students varies across provinces. This variability suggests an even greater complexity among factors that impact educational outcomes for immigrant students —and the likelihood educational policies, a provincial responsibility in Canada, may also play a role.

A [recent report](#) noted education emerged as the greatest weakness in integration policies in most countries. This report examined integration in a variety of area including education, labour market mobility, political participation, access to nationality, family reunion, health, permanent residence and anti-discrimination.

## **Support to immigrant students goes a long way**

In education, the majority of immigrant students around the world have little support to catch up if they are behind. They often have to quickly learn a new language.

Poor outcomes of [immigrant students](#) are often accompanied with many new but weak targeted policies. Research shows targeted education policies, such as language support and intercultural mediators, help to improve immigrant [student](#) achievement gaps.

Collectively, the available research suggests immigrant youth have the potential to make significant strides in [education](#) systems if they are provided with appropriate support. Their success is inextricably intertwined with the success of nations.

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