

Student achievement depends on reducing poverty now and after COVID-19

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There is no doubt that COVID-19 has significantly impacted our lives, including schools and education. Temporary closures of [school buildings](#)

[have highlighted how](#) factors outside school systems affect schools' capacity to meet students' needs and support academic achievement. For example, elementary schools can only successfully deliver online education if children have an [adult or responsible caregiver with them](#) or they have a reliable internet connection.

There is [a large body of research](#) that underscores the importance of particular [policies that can support low socio-economic students](#) as well as policies that align with the most effective education systems globally.

These areas include investing in quality [early childhood education](#), providing adequate mental health and technology support to benefit children in primary and [secondary school](#) and funding for post-secondary students. Policy in all these areas can be considered [social protection](#) policies. According to UNICEF, such [policy](#) reduces "the lifelong consequences of poverty and exclusion."

Early childhood education

A national child-care strategy has been [hotly debated within Canada](#) for some time. Yet despite its detractors, we do know that [countries such as Finland](#) —where all children under the school age are provided with the option of early childhood education and care—are consistently [lauded globally](#) for high [student](#) achievement and post-secondary attendance.

In general, [countries with the most family-friendly policies](#), such as paid maternity/paternity leave and subsidized or free early childhood education, recoup these initial investments through a better-educated citizenry. They also tend to have [smaller achievement gaps](#) between the highest and lowest performing students, or are trending in a positive direction —a result that bodes well for policy-makers interested in promoting equity.

Mental health, technology infrastructure

COVID-19 has accentuated the challenges that many students face in kindergarten to Grade 12. The shift to [remote learning](#) and the increased need for [mental health supports](#) have impacted children and families.

Added to this, those children who lack access to [appropriate technology or a stable internet connection](#) or a [quiet place to study](#) at home face even further unprecedented hardships.

Not surprisingly, these types of challenges are exacerbated for students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Their families require direct [social protection policy interventions](#).

In Canada, power over social policy is divided between the federal and [provincial governments](#), but [municipalities also play an important role in the fight against poverty](#). They provide the infrastructure that ensures that students and their families have an opportunity to succeed: social housing, emergency shelters, subsidized child care, transit passes, and library and recreation services.

Some municipalities have advocated for issues around [reducing poverty](#), [affordable housing and homelessness](#), and [broadband connectivity](#) for smaller communities, and helped put these on the national agenda.

Higher education

Canada boasts one of the highest post-secondary enrolment rates in the world. Indeed, the proportion of adults aged 25 to 64 who completed college or university [increased to 57 percent in 2017 from 46 percent in 2005, the highest rate among OECD countries](#).

While these results should be celebrated, the ongoing challenges posed by COVID-19 and the child [poverty gap](#), which has increased incrementally between 2015 and 2018, should cause urgent concern. These factors will directly threaten the prospect of university and college attendance for students from lower socio-economic homes and families.

Even prior to the pandemic, the [significant decrease in government funding](#) for Canadian universities and colleges over the last decade has resulted in increased costs and [student debt](#), and deterred many students from pursuing a post-secondary education. The latter is in stark contrast to Nordic countries such as Finland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Iceland—where post-secondary education is free or at a low cost. As a consequence, these countries are seen as [desirable places for business](#).

While many may bemoan tax dollars being used to fund post-secondary students, the economic and social benefits are clearly justified—particularly given the increasing human capital demands of a knowledge economy.

The [negative effects](#) of reduced [government funding](#) have been growing for some time in Canada. We must continually monitor and address how financial challenges exacerbated by COVID-19 in the long-term affect post-secondary education.

It is essential for governments to adopt effective policies far beyond schooling to ensure that the most vulnerable student populations are given a realistic opportunity to excel from kindergarten to Grade 12 and in post-secondary [education](#) settings.

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