

10. Ontario school system ranks among best in world, report says

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Ontario's education system emerges as a model, and an example of prudent pedagogical spending, in a report prepared by the consulting firm McKinsey and Co., which will release its findings on Monday.

The report, entitled "How the World's Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better," looked at 20 school systems from across the globe that have achieved significant and sustained gains in student outcomes, as measured by national and international assessments, including those conducted by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. In ranking education systems, experts often compare those of countries to smaller entities such as provinces or even cities; provinces control education in Canada, so they are ranked individually. Some developing nations were included for showing early signs of improvement, while the school systems in Ontario, Finland, Singapore and South Korea, among others, were identified as top performers with a history of sustained improvement.

Through the analysis of hundreds of reforms in these model systems, the authors identified elements that can be applied across the globe. They include focusing reforms on process, such as the way teachers teach, leadership continuity and engaging stakeholders, including parents, teachers and principals.

"The world needs to become much more wise about what lessons to extract for systems at different starting points, both with regards to the 'what' and 'how' of system reform," Michael Fullan, an emeritus professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and an adviser to Premier Dalton McGuinty, wrote in a foreword to the report.

Although Ontario earned one of the highest rankings – it's school system is rated as "great" – the province manages to spend thousands of dollars less per pupil than countries including the United States, Denmark and Iceland, which all earned a rating of "good."

Canada's largest province is also cited for announcing ambitious achievement targets publicly, testing regularly and then promoting discussions on how to improve scores. Mr. McGuinty has set a lofty goal of 85-per-cent graduation by 2011, and is still pushing for a missed target of 75 per cent of Grade 6 students meeting standards on provincial tests by 2008.

"In contrast, the Asian and Eastern European systems ... refrain from setting quantitative targets, preferring to share performance data with individual schools, engaging them in a private dialogue about how they can improve," the report notes.

An Ontario initiative mentioned in the report is the Ministry of Education's Parent Reaching Out fund, which provides grants to school councils or parent groups with ideas for ways to improve parent engagement in student achievement. Since the program was introduced in 2006, the province has provided more than \$12-million toward more than 7,000 grants.

"That's different in that it is not a school board-driven decision, it's directly parents trying to communicate better about student achievement in their school," said an Ontario government source who requested anonymity because the report has not been released.