



Synthesis on school completion

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How Important Is It?

In recent years, the economies of advanced nations have become more dependent on an educated workforce. Students who fail to complete high school will find it more difficult to secure meaningful employment that leads to social well-being. [Drop-outs](#) are more likely to be recipients of welfare and unemployment insurance and experience more mental and physical health problems. They are also more likely to engage in illegal activities and substance abuse.

[Statistics](#) show that 11.4% of Canadian youth leave school early, with a greater proportion of male than female drop-outs (14.7% vs. 9.2%). Roughly one in five young people have not received their high school diploma by the age of 20, with males outnumbering females two to one in this respect. In economic terms, a single high-school drop-out can cost \$243,000 to \$388,000 (US\$) during their life-time.

What Do We Know?

Research suggests that the paths to academic success and school completion begin at conception and are likely attributable to many different factors, both biological and environmental. These factors follow two distinct perspectives:

- [individual factors](#), such as experiences, attitudes, behaviours, language and literacy skills, attention deficits and difficulties with recognizing and using the sounds of spoken words prior to the age of six, are predictors of academic difficulties and ultimately of premature departure from school, aggression and poor self-regulation — all associated with dropping out;
- [contextual factors](#) found in students' families (demographic characteristics, poverty, single-parent family with low educational attainment or belonging to an ethnic minority), schools (early education, quality of school), communities (using a second language) and peers.

We know that students who drop out:

- tend to be less intellectually competent and receive lower grades and achievement scores;
- are more likely to come from lower income and single-parent homes, with parents who are less involved in their education. Although drop-out rates are higher among lower income and single-parent families, the majority of drop-outs come from two-parent, middle-income homes;
- have difficulties in forming adult and peer relationships (socio-emotional competence). Being rejected or friendless or being aggressive places children at risk for poor academic performance, grade retention, absenteeism and truancy. Positive peer relationships can be a protective factor, supporting a child's academic pursuits. The relationship between socio-emotional and academic competence can be [reciprocal](#);

- fail to develop a sense of belonging to the school milieu.

Leading experts identify several well demonstrated outcomes regarding participation in quality preschool or early childhood programs and subsequent school success. The outcomes of such programs are far-reaching and the effects of some programs are known to persist through adulthood. Participants in these programs:

- especially children from low-income families, experience the greatest benefits;
- are more likely to graduate from high school and achieve higher education;
- have greater motivation to learn and are more ready to learn at school entry;
- score higher on IQ and achievement, reading and mathematics tests;
- have a lower drop-out rate in comparison to similar individuals who have not attended these programs; and
- benefit from the [lasting effects](#) of higher educational attainment and higher lifetime earnings and savings.

What Can Be Done?

[Early Childhood Education \(ECE\)](#) consists of *organized supervised programs with social and educational goals for children (of up to school entry age), in the temporary absence of their parents*, and encompasses a diversity of programs, varying in hours of operation, ages of children and socio-economic status (SES) of families. Examples include part-day preschools, child care centres, early intervention and family daycare programs. Sufficient research exists to support the expansion of preschool and early childhood programs.

The most effective programs are those that start as early as infancy, are the most intensive, last the longest, are comprehensive and [individualized](#), high-quality and continue in some form into the early school years. Early childhood programs and care that provide direct child interventions and promote close relationships with parents, as well as encourage effective parenting behaviours and promote children's language, [cognitive](#) and literacy skills, are among the most effective programs with the strongest cost-benefit ratios.

Research has demonstrated that [program quality](#) makes a difference to [cognitive development](#). *Structural quality* includes group size, staff-child ratios and teacher qualifications, staff wages and low teacher turnover. *Process quality* involves social relationships and interactions within early childhood settings.

- Resources must be available to ensure that [poor children](#) have access to high-quality care. Services must be adapted to [communities'](#) cultural and socio-economic characteristics;
- Programs should provide [services to parents](#) that can enhance parenting skills, parent-child communication strategies and parental efficacy for child-rearing and for interacting with educational institutions;
- In addition to parental training programs, other [interventions](#) will be needed to prevent early difficulties in children that lead to high school failure and early withdrawal. These include after-school programs, summer school programs and in-school programs. Many promising programs have been or are being conducted with children in [kindergarten](#) and early primary school. It is extremely important to keep continuity of services between the [preschool and school periods](#).

In order to prevent early difficulties in children that lead to high school failure and early withdrawal and in addition to early childhood programs, it has been proposed that:

- [long-term effects](#) of early preschool programs on school completion should be studied;
- [evaluation](#) of the existing pre-school educational programs is essential, knowing that [ineffective programs](#) may have a negative impact on children's academic achievement;
- more research is needed to determine the optimum age for program initiation as well as program length.