

## Ontario's double cohort: A government's experiment in education

In 1997, Ontario's Conservative government announced its plans for secondary school reform. These plans included the replacement of Ontario's five-year high school program with a four-year program, a new curriculum designed to cover the same amount of content as the five-year program in one year less, and more rigorous assessment and testing.

In 2003, students from the old 5-year and the new 4-year program will graduate together for the first time. This double cohort will be seeking placement in Ontario's colleges and universities, creating a dramatic increase in applications and undue pressure on students, parents and postsecondary institutions alike. Though teachers have been calling attention to the implications of this situation for some time, the confusion created by these government actions is only now becoming clear. Perhaps this explains the ministry's hesitation to release the full report of its initial survey on the double cohort – a survey that suggests troubling patterns ahead for Ontario secondary schools where higher failure rates, heavier work loads, and heightened anxiety over assessment are becoming all too common.

*It seems that we would rather look for after-the-fact solutions to the difficult problems we face than prevent our problems from becoming so difficult in the first place.*

*Thomas Homer-Dixon,  
The Ingenuity Gap*

High school students in the double cohort are worried. They worry about their grades and whether they will be high enough for admission to Ontario's colleges and universities. They worry about their curriculum and whether graduating from a four year streamed curriculum will be

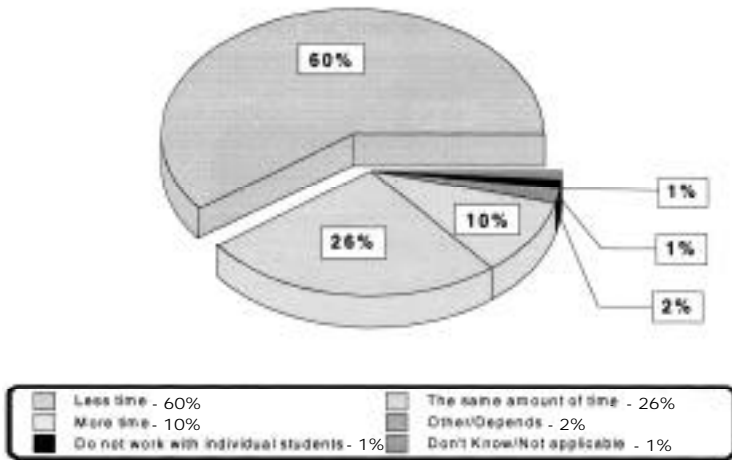
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judged as of the same quality as the former Ontario Academic Credits (OAC). They worry about applications and whether academic or extracurricular

achievements will make their applications more attractive to university and college registrars. But most of all they worry about their future and why the accident of birth has made their time in schools one of government experimentation.

Parents with children in the double cohort are also worried. They worry about the stiff competition their children will face for places in Ontario's postsecondary system and the effect this sustained pressure will have on the emotional lives of their children. They worry about admission standards. They want to know if universities will raise requirements to control the influx of additional students and, in doing

**Six in Ten Educators Surveyed Have Less Time to Give to Individual Students**



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so, prevent their children from choosing the university and program best suited to their needs. They worry about accommodations and tuition costs. They want to know if tuitions will continue to rise and whether there will be sufficient room in residences or whether their children will begin their post-secondary career in rental accommodation. But most of all they worry about the long-term impact the government's top-down reforms will have on their children's motivation to learn. Their children remind them daily of their stress over marks, the difficulty of learning a curriculum without resources, and learning conditions where personalized attention is rare due to the absence of resource teachers and librarians.

Universities and colleges are worried too. They worry about staffing and where they will find experienced faculty to fill the additional classrooms, especially given the number of retirements anticipated in the next few years. They worry about class size and whether the increased numbers created by the double cohort will mean larger classes even though Ontario already has the highest teacher-pupil ratio in Canada. They worry about program choice for students and whether the government will fund only those programs that are tied directly to economic performance and undervalue the humanities. They worry about resources and whether there will be enough funds for libraries, computers and lab equipment to ensure quality of instruction. But most of all they worry about the scale of delivery and whether they can continue to protect both program quality and universal access to postsecondary education given the government's current educational planning.

*Universities estimate that they will need to create 50,000 more spaces to accommodate an increase in enrolment of 20 per cent by 2004. Colleges expect an extra 33,000 applicants next year.*

*Toronto Star Newspaper*

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educational experimentation that has gone awry, one that serves political and ideological needs rather than those of students. Classroom teachers know first hand the crisis in program delivery created when the Conservative government first announced its secondary school reforms in 1997 and chose to implement these

reforms without adequate preparation and long term planning. The cost of these reforms include:

- Teaching new curriculum without textbooks – in many of the Grade 11 courses that are taken by students in the double cohort, there are no textbooks. Teachers have to scramble to find materials suitable for classroom instruction. Teachers of applied courses in grades 9 and 10 are still without adequate resources for program delivery.
- Implementing new assessment and evaluation policies without adequate support – few teachers have received the professional development required to translate the Ministry's new grading system and achievement charts into percentage grades and final marks. Students in the double cohort face administrative inconsistency in assessment practice between boards (e.g., To “peg marks or not to peg” is the question).

- Counseling students who are frustrated and anxious – although some anxiety about what lies ahead is normal for secondary school students, guidance counselors are facing situations where students speak of high stress, burnout, and depression. Media reports that at least 21,000 "willing and qualified" students may not find a place at an Ontario university in 2003-04 only exacerbate the situation.
- Fewer department heads – in many schools, the lack of funding for department heads has meant fewer curriculum leaders to assist with the implementation of the new policy documents for students in the double cohort. In some cases, entire program areas have been collapsed into mega-departments where teachers are being asked to be curriculum leaders in areas outside their subject expertise.

Why has the Conservative government's planning regarding the double cohort created such an unprecedented strain on students, parents, and postsecondary institutions? As to be expected with this government, the answer has more to do with funding shortages and two-tiered delivery of services than it does with students' needs.

### Chronic Funding Shortages

Although the government has promised to fix the double cohort problem through its SuperBuild Project, Ontario's universities and colleges still question whether adequate resources will be in place when needed (i.e., 2003-04 through 2006-07, the years most affected by the double cohort) or will arrive in time. There is no doubt that most of the postsecondary institutions will have to:

- Increase class size and student/faculty ratios
- Hire unqualified staff given the large number of anticipated retirements at the postsecondary level
- Make cuts to program areas such as the humanities
- Schedule use of laboratories during evenings and weekends
- Offer more courses on-line and through distance education
- Increase user fees for athletic programs and student services

It is difficult to see how universities and colleges will be able to maintain the high quality of their programs when such shortages are everyday occurrences. Operating grants are already not keeping pace with inflation. Sadly, the government appears to be creating the same

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The failure to commit to increased funding makes it very difficult for both students and institutions to plan for

the future in any meaningful way. Little has been said about sufficient spaces for graduate and professional schools to accommodate the double cohort numbers. Even less has been said about the impact these numbers might have on the job market, especially given the fact that demographic patterns indicate that there will be a significant increase in students graduating from high schools until 2010. Moreover, many of the government announcements concerning new facilities at the postsecondary level favour science and information technology programs raising concerns that students who choose the humanities may find their educational experiences in aged and architecturally inadequate facilities not unlike those experienced in the portables still in use in many of Ontario's elementary and secondary schools.

## Two-tiered Delivery of Services

Ontario's Conservative government has more than a passing interest in the privatization of educational services. In addressing the problem of the double cohort, the following points need also to be considered:

- **Private Universities** – Legislation has already been passed to allow private universities to set up shop in Ontario.
- **Higher costs of professional schools** – Law schools such as the University of Toronto have introduced plans to increase tuition costs to over \$20,000.00 a year.
- **Tuition fee increases** – Students will continue to pay more for their postsecondary education. Queens University, for example, has requested an end to the cap on tuition fee increases. Although their request was denied, it is only a matter of time before other institutions ask for the same entitlement.
- **Rising student debt** – More and more students are graduating from universities and colleges with staggering amounts of debt. Students in the cohort years are already wondering how they will manage postsecondary debt loads in the range of \$40,000.00

There is no doubt that Ontario's Conservative government is charting a confusing course in its plan for students in the double cohort. On the one hand, it talks about ensuring a place for every willing and qualified student, about increasing operating funds, and improving student assistance. At the same time, it has done little to calm the growing anxiety of inadequate classroom space, inadequate number of experienced faculty, inadequate living accommodations and

inadequate long term operating grants even though it first announced the double cohort plan five years ago. To undermine confidence in the ability of postsecondary institutions to deliver quality programs and

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equal access to spaces is to open the door to private interests who are ready to offer these services at a fee. Together with health care, education finds itself on the slippery slope toward two-tiered delivery.

The double cohort did not need to be a problem of this magnitude. During the “consultation period” prior to the release of the new Ontario Secondary Schools program, teachers repeatedly urged and pleaded with the government to slow down and think through its action plan. The lack of government response to these cautions leads teachers to conclude that the real motivation behind secondary reform was cost cutting and not improved learning. Now, the Conservative government is trying to look for after-the-fact solutions to problems created not only by their experiments in education but their ideological agenda as well.

These current problems in education are not without solution. There are public policy alternatives in Ontario other than those of the Conservative government. Perhaps it is time to consider what these alternatives might be.

