



Education

Strategic overview

Immigrants are motivated by the prospects of a better life for themselves and their children. While they understand that they themselves are likely to encounter certain hardships, their hopes and expectations are that their children will face a level playing field in which their opportunities will be on a par with those of native-born Canadians.

Few elements are as central to the realization of a productive future as is education. For this reason, education is classed by newcomers as being among the top five factors in terms of what they most like about Canada. Similarly, access to education is identified by newcomers as a key determinant of their satisfaction with life in Canada.

Numerous studies have confirmed the importance of inclusion and engagement for academic success and overall educational attainment, expressed as higher rates of graduation and a greater proclivity to continue learning. These factors are, in turn, important drivers of economic and social success, and hence of overall integration.

The priorities developed in the original Ottawa Immigration Strategy were consolidated by the Education Sector Table. The result was three broad strategic priorities:

1. Improving the cultural “fit” between schools, teachers, immigrant students and communities, particularly in neighbourhoods with a high concentration of immigrants;
2. Working with schools to foster greater involvement by immigrant parents in school activities, in student academic participation, and in school governance; and
3. Building trust among schools, immigrant students and minority communities; raising awareness of newcomer educational successes; and promoting a nuanced and shared understanding of newcomer educational challenges and solution pathways.

Five discrete actions – described below - are being pursued by the Education Sector Table. These are consistent with the main factors identified by research as being responsible for high levels of education attainment, notably parent engagement, creation of a diverse and inclusive school environment, and the development of trust and understanding between minority communities and schools in order to foster collaborative approaches to problem diagnoses and

solutions. The actions agreed by the Sector Table enjoy widespread support from the Sector's institutional partners and community stakeholders.

Some financial investments from the Ontario Ministry of Education and school boards support two collaborative initiatives of the education sector: paid newcomer internships and parent engagement. A sum of \$14,000.00 was acquired for the parent engagement initiative to undertake a pilot project which concludes in June 2105. Far more extensive in-kind resources were committed to the full range of Sector projects by Table members and community stakeholders. The Sector membership includes the four Ottawa school boards, OLIP, the Ottawa Community Immigrant Services Organization – OCISO (which is funded to deliver the award-winning Multicultural Liaison Officer Program in Ottawa schools), the Somali Mothers Association, a provincial organization with the mandate of building parent's capacity to support student success (Parents Partenaires en Education), representatives from Community Health and Resource Centres, private citizens, and researchers.

Activities

This section identifies and details the specific actions that were conducted under the Sector Table's three priorities. It bears mention that an important part of the Table's accomplishments involved convening the four school boards and creating a shared strategic focus. This point will be elaborated in the final section under sector achievements.

Priority 1: Improving the cultural “fit” between schools, teachers, immigrant students and communities, particularly in neighbourhoods with a high concentration of immigrants

Action 1: Increasing immigrant recruitment and hiring within the educational system

There are currently pronounced differences between the profiles of Ottawa's school workforce and its student population. This project combines several measures that seek to alter this reality by promoting immigrant recruitment and diversity at various levels within the school system. The most developed of these measures is a paid internship pilot program that was promoted by OLIP and the Economic Sector Table, the City of Ottawa and service provider organizations with access to internationally trained professionals. The areas covered by the pilot include the trades, high skilled technical professions, and low skilled occupations such as janitorial positions.

In its initial phase, the pilot intends to place paid interns in jobs with the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board for a six to eighteen month period in order to demonstrate the program's viability for tap into immigrant labour pool for hard-to-fill

jobs and increasing diversity within a unionized environment. Despite its modest placement numbers so far, the project required a considerable investment of time in terms of meetings and discussions with stakeholders, management and staff representatives. It is regarded by the Table as an investment in trust and credibility with considerable promise for growth.

In parallel with the internship program, the Sector Table is also attempting to promote newcomer recruitment for teaching positions. This latter measure is singularly important because teacher diversity would provide an important boost to efforts by the Sector Table to increase student, parent and community engagement in the education process ... an essential instrument for combating the many difficulties that confront both school and immigrant students, including cultural translation difficulties, language gaps, and limited access to contacts and institutions that can help with counselling and jobs.

Notwithstanding the importance of increasing teacher diversity, it will prove difficult to achieve because of stagnant growth in teaching positions and regulatory impediments (Ontario Regulation 274/12: Hiring Practices - Education Act) that require school boards to rely on a seniority-based roster system to hire teachers for occasional (temporary) employment – a traditional route for teachers to secure permanent jobs. The length of the queue for teaching assignments has discouraged immigrants from applying, thus perpetuating the problem of limited teacher diversity.

Priority 2: Working with schools to foster greater involvement by immigrant parents in school activities, in student academic participation, and in school governance

Action 1: Parent, school and neighbourhood engagement to promote academic achievement by immigrant students

This project is being developed by the Education Sector Table's engagement subgroup. It aims to increase parental engagement throughout the school system and to shore up these increases by means of a shared framework to guide supportive measures by the four Ottawa School Boards, community organizations and schools. The ultimate goal is to enhance the academic success and wellbeing of immigrant and refugee children. The Ontario Ministry of Education provided initial seed funding.

To implement the project, a part-time coordinator was hired and an outreach plan was created to engage parents linked to all four Ottawa boards. Material for contacting the

parents was translated so as to increase uptake by newcomer communities. As the project matures, the partners will track parental recommendations and their adoption by school boards in the form of concrete initiatives. The work of tracking and assessing these initiatives will be aided by Multicultural Liaison Officers (MLOs) who currently operate in more than one hundred Ottawa schools. Follow-up discussions with parent groups are planned and the measures will feature in OLIP's new measurement framework that is currently under development.

The first round of the engagement involved two formative meetings with immigrant and refugee parents. Also in attendance were representatives from schools and school boards, as well as community organizations. OLIP and OCISO played a key role in facilitating the meetings which sought to obtain a solid understanding of the barriers that prevented newcomer parents from becoming more engaged in school activities and their children's education.

The forums attracted sixty, very engaged parents. This was regarded as a considerable success by the project lead who described the events as extremely successful in the subsequent evaluation. According to the respondent, all the partners collaborated well and contributed to the project and the initiative is well supported by all members of the Education Sector table. Also, newcomer parents supported the project by participating in the forums in good numbers and sharing their experiences and ideas on newcomer parental engagement.

Priority 3: Building trust among schools, immigrant students and minority communities; raising awareness of newcomer educational successes; and promoting a nuanced and shared understanding of newcomer educational challenges and solution pathways

Action 1: Establishment of an Education Sector Table communications subgroup

The goals of the communications subgroup are to build trust between schools and communities; to raise awareness of successes and promote a more nuanced understanding of the challenges that need to be overcome; and to leverage the support of OLIP partners in other sectors. The first collaborative initiative of the communications subgroup will be a social media campaign during the 2015 Welcoming Ottawa Week. This will target school board members and stakeholders with a view to raising awareness and support for the collaborative development of a welcoming community for newcomers.

Achievements, challenges and future directions

Achievements

The major achievement of the Sector Table, to date, has been to assemble the principal educational stakeholders and to concentrate their attention on important problems confronting newcomer students, families, and communities. This was described by one of the Table members as follows:

“ One of the most important accomplishment of our table is sort of a meta achievement - that is, we have a large diverse body of people who come together regularly to discuss these important issues and, because of that we’re all learning from each other about different types of solutions [and] ... different types of challenges, we’re building a momentum and understanding how to go forward with changes which, hopefully, our individual members will bring back to their individual organizations. So our mere existence and our open discussion is a vehicle for bringing change in these areas to the organizations that have the resources to make change [happen]... ”

Education Sector Table member

In regard to its two major collaborative initiatives – parental engagement and paid internships for newcomers, the Education Sector Table has also successfully demonstrated that progress can be achieved. The possibility of success, referred to above and eloquently described in the earlier quote, was also reflected in the comments by a member of the Economic Table concerning the paid internship project:

“... we believe [that the OCDSB Paid Internship Project has] ...opened our partner's eyes to the possibility of the education sector's contribution to the economic viability of Ottawa, both as an employer and as a key stakeholder in preparing the city's future labour force”

Economic Integration Sector Table member

Challenges

Among the challenges facing Ottawa are the number of refugee students coming to Ottawa schools and the related need for trauma counselling and other forms of support to assist their integration and academic participation. The challenge of helping newcomer children achieve academic excellence is a complex issue that cannot be isolated from socio-economic realities, cultural, racial and religious backgrounds, and the experiences of newcomer families, both in their countries of origin and in their struggles to adapt and make a life for themselves in Canada. It will require patience, a concerted effort by stakeholders (and there are many), a supportive environment, and effective engagement of parents and communities.

Three challenges stand out: First, the need to elevate and level expectations between

parents and school boards and persuade both that they are allies in Ottawa's school system in the academic and social success of students; second, to enhance newcomer engagement by enhancing their representation within the larger school system (so parents and communities recognize themselves in the workings of that system); and, third, to convert small-scale pilot projects into effective mainstream programs.

Future directions for discussion

Identifying, evaluating and scaling up promising practices is an important direction that the Education Sector Table aims to pursue. This has already been noted in relation to the Table's major collaborative initiatives – parental engagement and paid internships – however, there are numerous other projects and programs that have yielded promising results. These include the Multicultural Liaison Officers (MLOs) who play a crucial role in helping newcomer students integrate into schools; and OCISO's counseling model on student mental health.

To make the case for mainstreaming these promising practices (and others), the Education Table recognizes the importance of establishing a solid evidence base to underpin its recommendations and advocacy. To address this, there is a vision that the sector will leverage and bolster the analytic capacity that exists within school boards and link it with community knowledge and data. OLIP may play an important role in this process.

In addition to these program measures, several other directions have been identified by the Education Table. The first of these involves closer collaboration with other sector tables. Positive exchanges have already taken place with the Economic Sector and the Language Table. These will be expanded. Another direction that appears likely is the development of closer links between teacher education programs (and educational institutions) and immigrant serving organizations - in order to better acquaint teachers with immigration cultural and cultural diversity, at a practical level. These links could be operationalized through teacher internships or placements with the service provider organizations. The final measure concerns governance and originates with the Ministry of Education. The Ministry now requires the formation of Parent Involvement Committees to advise school boards on parent engagement. There is also interest by the Table in getting immigrant parents more involved in the work of Boards of Trustees.