

Is student potential being limited?

A look at how student streaming and credit caps are affecting how young people plan for their future

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says it's a bad idea to divide kids, particularly in that first grade of high school. It limits choices, it closes doors, it sometimes sets kids up for failure," said Annie Kidder, founder and executive director of advocacy group People for Education. "There are kids who either aren't graduating, or who are getting to Grade 12 and realizing that there are doors that are already closed to them that got closed when they made that choice in Grade 8."

The courses replaced vocational, college and university streams, and are meant to teach the same curriculum in different ways. Academic courses study essential and related concepts with a theoretical approach, while applied teach essential concepts in a more practical, hands-on way.

According to Ontario's Education Quality and Accountability Office, of students who demonstrate strong math skills in grades 3 and 6, those who take applied math courses in high school are less likely to continue earning high marks. Lowered expectations, and in turn, lowered effort, for kids in applied courses has been floated by education experts as one potential cause for the disparities.

It has been 13 years since Ontario eliminated its official 13th year of school - then known as OAC - amid a controversial curriculum change that was supposed to end student streaming.

The official 13th year, called Grade 13 until the 1980s when it was replaced by OAC (Ontario Academic Credit), was phased out in 2003 by the Progressive Conservative government.

But could another change made when OAC was eliminated - introducing applied and academic course options - be making it hard for students to finish in four years with the credits they need to succeed and decreasing the likelihood some students will excel, while effectively continuing to stream students?

Applied and academic credits are meant to be "mix and match," but most students take courses in one or the other. Academic credits are typically required for university.

"In a lot of cases, students pick applied because they think it will be easier, and then ironically they are much less likely to be successful in the applied stream. There's so much evidence that



Staff/Metroland

Grade 12 students work independently during teacher Hugh Tran's math class last month at Father John Redmond Catholic Secondary School.

In math, 83 per cent of Ontario Grade 9 students in academic courses met or exceeded the provincial standard this year, while only 45 per cent of applied students hit the mark. In English, 92 per cent of Grade 10 students successfully completed this year's Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test, while only 47 per cent of applied students were successful.

A study by the Toronto District School Board, Ontario's largest school board, suggests 60 per cent of students who take applied courses in Grade 9 don't graduate within five years, compared to 14 per cent of those who

choose academic.

It takes 30 credits to graduate high school. A 34-credit threshold was introduced by the provincial Liberals in 2013. After 34 credits, the government decreases funding to school boards for most students. Students wanting to earn more than 34 credits must get approval from their board, and may have to take courses through continuing education.

"Over a decade ago, Ontarians moved to four years of high school, but many students are still taking that additional fifth year, even after graduating," said a government statement at

the time. "We need to shift the culture in our schools and encourage students to graduate and move on to the next stage in their lives after four years."

Needing to replace applied credits with academic or raise marks in a completed course, or switching career paths and needing different courses, to get to post-secondary programs, can leave students wanting more than 34 credits.

"I think we need to allow for the vast amount of change that happens to young people," Kidder said. "Obviously it can't be unlimited and there have to be

boundaries in this, but the problem always with capping anything is are there people who lose from that, and I think in this case 34 may be too low."

Education Minister Mitzie Hunter and Education Critic Patrick Brown declined to be interviewed for this article, after weeks of correspondence with their representatives, with Hunter citing a lack of availability.

"When selecting their courses in Grades 9 and 10, students are not expected to make binding decisions about a particular educational or career pathway," said Ministry of Education spokesperson Heather Irwin. "However, they should try to ensure that they have the prerequisites required for future courses they plan to take. Schools must make provisions to allow students to make changes in direction and must clearly describe these provisions in their school program/course calendar."

But the provisions, which can include a half-credit summer course, seem to present a barrier. During the 2014-2015 school year, only three per cent of schools reported students often transfer from applied to academic courses, while 43 per cent reported transfers happen never or not very often, according to a People for Education study.

During a government announcement about child care Friday, Sept. 23, Metroland Media Central reporter Cynthia Reason asked Hunter if Ontario would consider reviewing the academic and applied separations in Grade 9. Hunter said the ministry is consulting with school boards, some of which, she noted, have requested the separations be eliminated.

ONTARIO HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES

% of students who failed to graduate within 5 years	32	26	29	25	23	21	19	18	17	17	15.7	14.5
% of students graduating in 5 years	12	11	10	9	8	9	9	9	9	8	8	7.2
% of students graduating in 4 years	56	60	63	66	69	70	72	73	74	75	76.3	78.3
Year	'04	'05	'06	'07	'08	'09	'10	'11	'12	'13	'14	'15

Source: Ministry of Education



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