

# Intelligence MEMOS



From: Andrew Parkin  
To: Provincial Ministries of Education and Advanced Education  
Date: July 21, 2016  
Re: LEAPFROGGED

Canadians are used to seeing themselves outclassed in international learning assessments such as PISA (the Programme for International Student Assessment) by East Asian countries and city-regions such as Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong, Shanghai and Taipei. That's why, when the latest results from the OECD's survey of adult skills were published last month, it was surprising to learn that Canada actually performs better than Singapore in both literacy and numeracy. And in the domain of problem-solving on computers, the two countries posted the same average score.

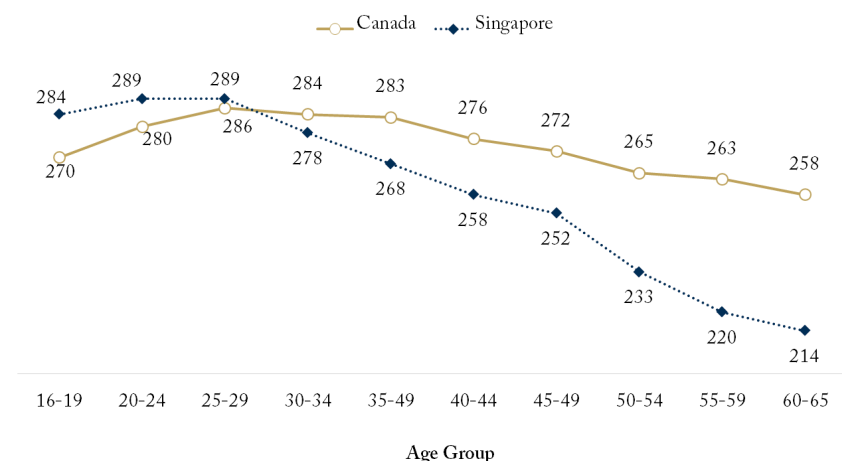
The full story, however, is revealed when we look beyond each country's average and map out the scores by age cohort. As is the case with most countries, the literacy and numeracy scores of Canadians are highest among young adults, and decline with age thereafter. However, as the chart below shows, the same pattern holds for Singapore, only the extent of the difference between age cohorts is much more dramatic. The difference in literacy and numeracy between an average 25 year-old and an average 50 year-old is about three times greater in Singapore than it is in Canada.

The overall advantage that we hold over Singapore in literacy and numeracy is clearly driven by the performance of our older population: scores for Canadians are higher above the ages of about 30 to 35, and the gap widens with age. This is the legacy of a historically strong public education system and of the rapid expansion of educational opportunities in Canada during the immediate post-war decades – opportunities that arose faster than in other countries devastated by the war.

The picture for those under age 30, however, is drastically different. Here, Singapore holds a striking advantage. Singapore is a society that has transformed itself over a relatively short period of time, in terms of the production of human capital. This is what leapfrogging looks like, and Singapore has accomplished by moving away from traditional pedagogies and adopting more innovative approaches to teaching and learning.

With each passing year, the advantage that Canada holds will erode as our older workers and citizens are replaced with younger ones, who do not significantly outperform their global counterparts. Fortunately, few provinces are resting on their laurels: eight provinces are conducting or implementing comprehensive reviews of education policy or school curricula. In doing so, we should be sure to learn from the successes of other countries.

## Literacy Scores by Age Group



Source: OECD, PLAAC International Data Explorer (calculations by author).

*Andrew Parkin is an independent public policy analyst and consultant based in Oakville, Ontario. He is the former Director General of the Council of Ministers of Education.*