

# Intelligence MEMOS



From: John Richards and Tingting Zhang  
To: Education Watchers  
Date: April 9, 2025  
Re: **TIME TO ADDRESS CANADA'S FALLING MATH SCORES**

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Canada's declining K-12 education system is sending out worrying warning signals.

In the [latest](#) Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), Canadian students ranked in the top 10 among OECD countries. But that doesn't mean all is well, and the most alarming signs are in mathematics.

Math was the only subject where Canada's national average slipped below the benchmark score of 500. For the first time one of our provinces – Newfoundland and Labrador – scored significantly below the OECD average. Math is fundamental to future economic competitiveness, yet we are failing to equip students with basic numeracy skills.

This is not a new development, unfortunately, as outlined in a new C.D. Howe Institute [report](#). Canadian scores have been slipping for some time. In the first round of PISA testing in 2000, reading performance was benchmarked across all participating countries, with an OECD average score set at 500. The same approach was applied to math in 2003 and science in 2006. In each of these benchmark years, Canadian students scored well above 500. But, since then, Canada has experienced statistically significant declines in all three subjects.

Another problem is that regional gaps are widening. Across our country's four most populous provinces – British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario and Quebec – the declines from the benchmark year to 2022 are 34 points for math, 26 for reading and 19 for science. In Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Atlantic Canada, however, the decline is even bigger: math scores fell 50 points, reading 38 and science 27. A 20-point drop in PISA scores is equivalent to losing a year of schooling, meaning students in our smaller provinces have effectively lost two and a half years of math education since 2003 – nearly a full year more than students in large provinces.

A recent [survey](#) found that more than half of Canadians believe the public education system has been heading in the wrong direction over the past two decades, with Albertans and Atlantic Canadians most likely to think so. Changes in how subjects are taught, such as new approaches to teaching math and reading, were among the top three concerns.

We don't want to ignore this problem until it is too late. In Sweden, PISA scores declined slowly and no one paid attention – until a 16-point math decline between 2009 and 2012 sparked a national outcry. Journalists wrote critical op-eds, ministers scrambled to act and the education ministry implemented major reforms – revising curricula, increasing school-level accountability and mandating more exams. By 2018, Sweden's math scores had rebounded to 502.

Canada needs its own moment of reckoning. Newfoundland and Labrador, as the first province to drop significantly below the OECD average, could spark it. The nine other provinces could likely learn from Quebec, which consistently ranks first in math. One potential reform, as the University of Winnipeg's [Anna Stokke](#) argues, is to make future math teachers take more math courses in their training and do more direct instruction rather than “discovery-based learning,” in which students supposedly somehow teach themselves.

The Canadian education establishment needs to review and reform curricula and teaching methods to ensure students are actually learning. Ministries of education and others need to promote best practices and reverse these declines – and if they don't, hand over responsibility to others who will.

The combination of learning loss during COVID-19 and long-term PISA declines should be a wake-up call for urgent action. It's time to stop acting like frogs on the stovetop – ignoring the rising temperature until it's too late. Canada needs education reform before we fall any further behind.

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