

In the secondary or "high" schools, students have a choice of programs with either academic or technical and occupational orientations. There are also "special" programs for students who are unable to complete the regular secondary school program.

At one time, high schools were predominantly academic institutions, preparing students for university, while vocational schools were separate institutions. Today, in addition to technical and vocational high schools as such, most secondary schools are comprehensive or composite schools offering a variety of both academic and vocational choices. Depending on provincial requirements for graduation, a student may build a secondary program by selecting from a number of subject areas.

In general, however, high school programs provide two streams. One prepares students for university, the other for an occupation or further post-secondary education at a community college or institute of technology, although students from the university stream sometimes elect to attend community college.

In many areas, high school graduation by means of accumulating a requisite number of "credits" has replaced grade promotion. Provincial departments specify high school graduation requirements but the students and their parents decide, in consultation with the school, on the particular subjects a student takes, and their level. Thus a student registered in Grade 10 may be taking mostly Grade 10 subjects, but also some courses at other grade levels. In the final years the student may concentrate high school studies in a particular field — the physical and natural sciences, for example — to the almost total exclusion of others, such as the humanities and social sciences.

Most provinces have abolished graduation examinations administered by their departments of education, leaving individual schools to set, conduct and mark their own examinations. The elimination of centrally administered standards was intended to make high school graduation more universally accessible. High school graduation certificates, however, are still issued by provinces on the recommendation of individual schools.

Special programs

A number of strategies have been developed to educate Canadian children with special needs.

For academically gifted students, enriched or accelerated programs are generally available within the regular elementary-secondary system.