

How Ontario Transitions Struggling High School Students Into College-Ready Learners

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Ontario ranks [among Canada's top-performing provinces](#) on equity of outcomes in kindergarten to Grade 12 education and high school attainment.¹ The province also earns an “A+” for college attainment in the Conference Board of Canada’s How Canada Performs rankings.² What makes Ontario such a strong performer in these areas?

In part, these good results are due to special programs targeting individuals who are at high risk of dropping out of school. One such initiative is the School Within a College (SWAC) program. SWAC helps struggling students complete high school and get a head start on a college or apprenticeship credential. Other jurisdictions can take a page from the SWAC program’s model of transitioning struggling students into college-ready learners.

How School Within a College Works

SWAC is targeted to high school students facing significant difficulties that impede their prospects of finishing high school and progressing to PSE. Students admitted into SWAC have been identified as unlikely to succeed if they remain in their traditional high school setting—in fact, some local SWAC initiatives, including one based out of St. Clair College in Windsor, admit only students who had previously dropped out of high school. Even so, these students demonstrate a commitment to completing high school and an interest in pursuing a college or apprenticeship credential.

SWAC requires students to work toward the credits they need to obtain their Ontario Secondary School Diploma, but removes them from the high school setting and places them on a college campus. Some of the credits they earn—through dual credit courses—count toward a college program or apprenticeship, thereby allowing them to get a head start on a post-secondary credential. In addition to a program of studies that intermingles secondary school and college curriculum, SWAC students attend special workshops that teach time management, study skills, and learning strategies. Curriculum often includes hands-on activities and career exploration, and some SWAC initiatives include field trips, cooperative education placements, and community service.

Clear Benefits for SWAC Students

The SWAC program has recorded strong results over the years. Figures from the 2012–13 school year show that 86 per cent of students [completed their SWAC program](#), earning dual high school and post-secondary credits.³ Other outcomes for students include feeling [better prepared for college](#) than students in control groups,⁴ and being

[more likely to enrol in college or apprenticeship programs](#) than the general Ontario high school population.⁵ Although most participants in SWAC successfully complete their dual credits, student retention remains a challenge for School Within a College. This is hardly a surprise, given that many students in the program start out disenchanted with formal education and continue to face significant personal challenges while in the program. Each local SWAC initiative closely evaluates student engagement and implements solutions, such as customized courses and workshops, classroom bonding exercises, and community-based activities.

Learning From the SWAC Model

SWAC employs strategies that other jurisdictions can learn from in implementing programs to improve transitions from secondary to post-secondary education:

- Focus on underperforming, struggling, or disengaged students, and implement the resources and programming necessary to support these learners.
- Establish centralized funding, policies, and guidelines to achieve a cohesive program of sufficient scale.
- Incorporate local-level priorities in determining resource allocation and programming.
- Leverage the existing resources of local school boards and colleges.

Other jurisdictions interested in raising high school and college attainment and making their education outcomes more equitable can find lessons in this model. Read our full briefing on Ontario's SWAC program here: [School Within a College: Supporting Transitions from Secondary School to Higher Education](#)

This work is part of The Conference Board of Canada's [Centre for Skills and Post-Secondary Education](#).

For more information, contact Liz Martin at martinel@conferenceboard.ca.

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