



**Quebec Provincial Association of Teachers**  
**l'Association provinciale des enseignantes et enseignants du Québec**

---

---

**QPAT Brief Regarding the Creation of a Provincial Institute for  
Excellence in Education**

---

**Presented to the Working Group Established to Examine the  
Creation of a Provincial Institute for Excellence in Education**

**November 2017**

## **Introduction**

It is with interest that the Quebec Provincial Association of Teachers (QPAT) takes this opportunity to respond to the call for briefs for the creation of the Institute of Excellence in Education. QPAT represents the 8,000 teachers of the Anglophone public sector of Quebec.

QPAT is skeptical about the value of an institute of excellence in education. The consultation document provides insufficient information, offering little insight as to its purpose. Further, the notion that it may be a good idea since a similar institute has been established in the health sector fails to recognize the fundamental differences between the two sectors.

In addition to this general skepticism, QPAT's views and concerns regarding a potential Institute of Excellence in Education fall into three categories. First, research in education has to have a broad view of all facets of an education system. Second, research in education is important, but it has inherent limitations that need to be clearly understood by all. Third, research in education should lead to reflection but cannot lead to easy solutions.

### **Research in education must have a broad view of all facets of an education system**

In the discussion that has taken place around the establishment of an institute of excellence, the focus has been on the identification of pedagogical practices that research suggests are the most effective. This is far too narrow a view of what educational research has to offer. As will be explained later, research in education has limitations. Consequently, it is essential to be aware of a wide range of educational research in order to develop a more rounded and balanced view of the entire education system. This will allow for better identification of all the areas that need to be examined as opposed to focusing on only one area of the system.

In light of this, the institute must promote good research in education that meets proper standards in methodology at both the micro and the macro level. In other words, it must promote and examine research that is not only based on specific pedagogical practices and approaches but also research that examines larger scale systemic questions that can assist policy-makers in their own decision-making process. It is essential to understand not only what is done in a classroom, but the entire educational context and impact of actions and decisions at all levels. For example, research regarding the socioeconomic realities and the effect of government policies on these in the education system should be examined. The institute should promote more independent research in education and promote better educational research in Quebec, including research of a systemic nature.

The institute's work should serve in part as a basis for the evaluation and revision of the Quebec Education Program (QEP). It is at the heart of what is done in schools and centres. It is a fundamental element of the entire education system. However, the current program, since the beginning of its implementation nearly twenty years ago, has been altered and has been subject to various criticisms

over the years. The findings presented by the institute should be used to help with an overall evaluation of the program and to help distinguish between the theoretical impact of the program when it was conceived and the actual impact. This would help with an understanding of the kinds of changes that could be brought to the QEP.

The institute's work should also be considered by universities in the development of their teacher training programs as well as the practices and approaches which are promoted within. Similarly to the QEP, the work of the institute would be useful for universities and the education system when determining the nature and structure of teacher training programs. Universities are expected to design these programs on the basis of teacher competencies, but research may indicate that there are other elements that need to be considered in designing the programs. Further, research may help universities better understand the validity and limitations of the approaches that they teach in their programs.

Finally, the Institute must examine a variety of research from various jurisdictions and various languages. In order to draw on the widest range of ideas possible, the institute should examine research that has taken place elsewhere in Canada and around the world. QPAT recognizes that there is a challenge in making some of the findings accessible when research is not written in French or English, but there is a great deal of research that could be of interest and the institute should look into ways to make it accessible to those in the Quebec education system. Otherwise, we may be missing out on opportunities to learn from what has happened in other countries and enrich our greater discussion about pedagogical matters.

### **Research in education has inherent limits that need to be clearly understood and accepted**

QPAT is highly favourable to broad research in education. Research that does its best to follow the scientific method allows societies to acquire new understanding and ideas. However, QPAT is also very aware of the implicit limitations to research in education; it is limited by the fact that it is impossible to control all variables except for the ones being studied. Consequently, all research in education should be treated with great caution; the results of research can illuminate and offer avenues of exploration, reflection, analysis and experimentation. It cannot offer absolute, simplistic answers. Regardless of the rigour of any specific piece of research, research in education has its limits and these limits must be recognized.

The institute must be careful to state the limitations of research findings by indicating the context in which each study was done. Research in education is constrained by the imperfections inherent to studying any social system or construct. Research is very much dependent on context, where different variables are at play from one research situation to another. In order to ensure that any research results, no matter how interesting they may seem, are evaluated and interpreted in a balanced and nuanced way, the information that the institute provides must clearly show the circumstances under which the research was conducted and indicate the inherent limitations of the conclusions that are presented.

Research in education can be of variable quality and reliability. The institute must carefully evaluate the research that it wishes to disseminate by establishing a framework for evaluating research prior to making any results public or attaching its imprimatur to any particular findings. This will also help reveal the limitations of the research at the same time. Failure to do so could result in inaccurate information being made available which could also lead to flawed decision-making at all levels of the system.

As we have suggested above, there is a great variety of research from all over the world that may be of interest. A wide variety of research findings needs to be accessible to all practitioners and policy-makers. QPAT recommends that summaries of such research be available and translated, as need be, into English and French. These summaries could also indicate the original source or sources of research so that those who wish to read the complete original research can access it.

### **Research in education can inspire, but cannot prescribe**

As we have stated above, research in education should be encouraged and promoted. It can provide useful ideas to those working in the field, be they teachers or policy-makers. At its best, research in education stimulates professional reflection. This inspirational quality of research should be fostered in order to allow those working in the field to think more deeply about their work and about education in general. What research in education cannot do is offer simplistic formulations of how learning happens and how teaching should be done; each context is different, as are each region, each school, each classroom. Consequently, research should not be used to dictate or prescribe formulaic approaches, particularly given the inherent limitations to such research as we described above. Far too often in education there is a new fad, a new “flavour of the month” that promises to revolutionize teaching and learning. Sometimes, these elements can converge, as with John Hattie’s facile presentation of effect sizes in order to buttress his promotion of his “visible learning” approach<sup>1</sup>. In reality, these ideas often come and go and are largely unfounded. It is important that the veneer of research not be used to legitimize them, particularly when there is great fervor on the part of a number of educational leaders to be seen to be taking action rather than carefully considering what is being presented.

It seems that a key mandate for the institute will be to promote the most promising practices based on research. QPAT does not think that such an approach is as simple as it seems on the surface. Consequently, the institute must not promote specific pedagogical practices in such a way that it prevents or limits teachers in the use of their professional judgement in a way that is relevant to their specific situation. The institute must always ensure that the messages it sends respect the professional judgement of teachers and do not seek to direct them to implement a practice or approach that is not necessarily appropriate to their teaching situation. The institute must also ensure that it does not provide overzealous educational leaders with tools to impose matters on teachers. Realities, such as the socio-economic level of the students, how many of them have special needs, the level of education of their parents, to name but a few examples, all have an impact on the choices teachers make in their

---

<sup>1</sup> For a more complete critique of John Hattie’s work, see the QPAT publication “John Hattie and Visible Learning: Holy Grail of Teaching or Latest Edu-business Package?” available at <http://gpat-apeq.qc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/pedagogical-news-visible-learning-1.pdf>. The articles cited in the publication are also of interest.

classrooms. These realities may or may not fit with the research results that are put forth by the institute. As such, the institute must be careful with how it presents its messages.

In order to help protect the professional autonomy of teachers, the institute must unambiguously state that research results are meant to stimulate and promote professional reflection and are not formulas for standardized teaching. It is essential that the institute clearly articulate and build into its culture an understanding that research results are meant to provide tools to teachers that will allow them to continue their professional reflection about their practice. These tools should help teachers determine what will be most useful and relevant in their situation. It is vital that the institute make it clear that it is not providing these research results in an effort to develop a formula with standardized teaching practices. To do so would be to reduce the act of teaching to a technical application.

Any individual who has been in education for an extended period of time has seen new ideas or approaches be developed, marketed as the “dernier cri” of education that promise to fix all sorts of problems and then be implemented in many milieus with great enthusiasm. Invariably, enthusiasm wanes, the limitations of the new idea or approach are revealed, problems are not fixed, and new ideas are developed in an effort to address the problems not addressed by the previous idea, and the cycle begins anew. The institute must recognize the tendency in education to latch on to the latest “flavour of the month” approach and adjust its presentation of research results in order to ensure that the research results it presents are not misused.

The research presented by the institute will likely be aimed at education professionals. However, it is not clear whether or not the general public would also have access to its work. The problem is that there may be a tendency on the part of some, particularly some parents, to look at the research findings and then criticize or attack teachers or schools that do not appear to be putting into the place the practices that they have read about from the institute. Apart from the extra stress this places on teachers or schools, it would be problematic because these individuals may not understand the limitations of the research or the context in which it was done or the context of the classroom or the school. Consequently, they could be causing a great deal of difficulty based on a lack of understanding on their part. If the institute’s work is to be publicly available, it must act carefully to avoid presenting results that can be misunderstood and misused.

### **Structure and composition of the proposed institute**

It is QPAT’s view that the institute should be a body that is separate from the *Conseil supérieur de l’éducation* (CSE) as they have different mandates. The focus of the institute should be on research that is objective, balanced and nuanced and that is intended primarily to help those in the field of education have access to research. The CSE has a very different mandate, notably that of advising the minister. While the CSE may use the work of the institute in developing its ideas, the two functions should remain separate to allow for each body to act independently within its mandate.

The institute’s independence must be recognized by the MEES and the minister so that it is free from any pressure to give preference to views or results that advance political agendas. However, in conjunction with this, the members of the institute’s various bodies must be composed with a

significant number of practitioners, notably teachers, as well as other experts, such as those from universities in order to make sure that there is a broad range of expertise and experience and that it is not only university interests that are represented.

## **Summary**

In addition to QPAT's general skepticism about the value of the proposed institute of excellence, it is clear that there are certain areas that any such institute would have to address to be of potential benefit.

It has to be understood that research is valuable, but that there cannot be a narrow focus on certain types of research or certain types of sources. Research needs to look at a wide range of educational issues from many different perspectives.

The limitations of research need to be understood and clearly articulated to anyone who wants to try to use it. Issues of quality and reliability need to be addressed prior to the dissemination of results.

The limitations of educational research make it impossible to seek simple, standardized, one-size-fits-all approaches to teaching and education. The value of this research lies in its ability to help people think, not in its ability to tell them what to do.

Independence with balance is essential to ensure that an institute will not serve any particular set of interests, but the various educational interests of all.