

Keep math in the career equation

Canada's recent fall in math education ranking sets off alarm bells

A national organization that launched an awareness campaign about the importance of essential skills for young people seeking careers in the skilled trades is once again sounding the alarm after an international study revealed Canada's continued decline in math scores.



Aircraft maintenance mechanic Ryan Gomes found his math skills helped him in his field.

It's a concern because numeracy is among the nine skills identified by Employment and Social Development Canada as critical to a successful career in every job, including skilled trades and technology, says Shaun Thorson, CEO of Skills Canada.

According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's Program for International Student Assessment — released in December — there has been a noticeable decline over the years in math and science scores among Canadian students. But many high school students are opting out of foundational courses — such as math, science and literature — because they incorrectly believe they're necessary only if planning to attend university.

“If they want to pursue a skilled trade such as an electrician, carpenter, steamfitter or pipefitter they need good math skills to be successful,” Thorson says.

The same holds true in many service industries, says a representative from the International Dermal Institute. A long-term Skills Canada partner, it promotes essential skills among aspiring beauty therapists, many of whom don’t realize they need math and science to be successful.

Education manager Holly Sherrard points to numeracy skills as an example. “If running your own business, you need to figure out things like return on investment on promotions and how to pay employees. Even non-owners need to do inventory and understand how much product to stock,” she says.

As part of its mandate to promote careers in skilled trades and technologies, Skills Canada offers competitions at the regional, provincial/ territorial, national and international levels. The national competition attracts hundreds of students from across the country and features events in construction, employment, information and technology, manufacturing, service and transportation.

Students studying a skilled trade or technology are tested against industry standards and vie for the honour of being named the best in their chosen discipline. Competitors at the 20th annual Skills Canada National Competition — to be held in Toronto in June — will also aim for a coveted spot on WorldSkills Team Canada 2015 when it heads to São Paulo, Brazil.

Aircraft maintenance mechanic Ryan Gomes competed in the international competition in London, England, in 2011.

“Preparing for the international competition was no easy task. It took a year-and-a-half of intensive training,” he says.

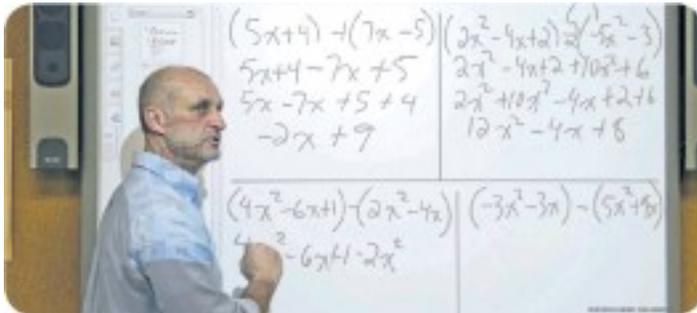
Gomes initially planned to become an architect. “Once I started working with my hands and doing skilled trade tasks like welding and general fabrication, I fell in love with it,” he says. “Seeing the finished product made me quite happy so I pursued it as a career choice.”

The national Skills Canada competition also invites young career seekers and visitors to take part in try-a-trade and technology activities in such areas as construction, mobile robotics,

cabinetmaking, fashion technology, mechatronics and aircraft maintenance.

“Our focus was initially on the competitors,” Thorson says. “We wanted to make sure competitors understand that what they valued and liked to do could be a valuable career if they decide to pursue that.”

By placing more emphasis on the visitor experience, Skills Canada hopes to encourage more educators and students to consider skilled trades as a viable career option.



But still more needs to be done. Among other initiatives, Skills Canada plans to build on its connections with industry through job shadowing opportunities and host more conferences that profile women working in skilled trades and technology occupations.

Essential skills

EDUCATION

Employment and Social Development Canada lists the following skills as essential for the workplace because they're used in nearly every job and provide the foundation for learning all other skills:

- Reading
- Writing
- Document use
- Numeracy
- Computer use