

# Can We Call Them Credit Mills?

## Assessing the Legitimacy of Some Independent Schools in Ontario

Joanna DeJong VanHof | June 2024

### Key Points

- Is there a way to distinguish a “credit mill” from a “legitimate” school? This paper proposes a framework of seventeen criteria by which a school’s legitimacy can be assessed.
- The framework is applied to a group of 272 independent schools in Ontario that previous research suggested may have some credit mills among them. (This group contains about one quarter of all independent schools in the province.) Many of these 272 schools tend to enrol international students.
- When scored according to the framework, 78 of the schools are found to have weak legitimacy, 156 schools have moderate legitimacy, and 38 schools have strong legitimacy.
- Yet almost all of the schools in the group (251 out of 272) are authorized by Ontario’s Ministry of Education to grant credits toward the Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD), a valuable credential.
- To better understand the inspection process and approval to grant OSSD credits in this group of schools, the researcher obtained copies of inspection reports from the Ministry of Education, through a Freedom of Information request.
- The concerns that inspectors mention most frequently relate to assessment and evaluation practices, and attendance and course hours. Concerns evidently exist regarding the academic quality of the schools and their degree of adherence to ministry requirements.
- The criteria in the legitimacy framework presented in this paper cast a broader net than the ministry’s inspections do, and raise additional concerns. For example, one school that is ministry-authorized to grant OSSD credits offers links to gambling sites on the school website.
- The state, the individual, and civil-society institutions (such as school associations) each have a role to play in the regulation and delivery of quality K–12 education. This paper concludes with policy suggestions for how Ontario can strengthen school accountability and regulation, to better ensure quality in education and the protection of international students in particular.

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For the full publication, see DeJong VanHof, Joanna. “Can We Call Them Credit Mills?: Assessing the Legitimacy of Some Independent Schools in Ontario.” Cardus, 2024. <https://www.cardus.ca/research/education/reports/can-we-call-them-credit-mills/>.