GRADE 9 ACHIEVEMENT DURING THE FIRST TWO YEARS OF COVID-19

Written in collaboration: Kelly Gallagher-Mackay, Robert S. Brown and Christine Corso with Rossana Bisceglia, David Cameron, Mitchell Childerhose, Lisa Collimore, Chris Conley, Lynne Hollingshead, Brad Kipfer and Amie Presley

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Introduction

There is an urgent need for educators, students, families and the public to understand the ongoing impact of COVID-19 on student outcomes and experiences. Between March 2020 and June 2022, Ontario schools were closed for a minimum of twenty-seven weeks, with students learning remotely during those times. There were enormous efforts to maintain some kind of educational continuity for students on the part of educators and system leaders working with public health authorities, but there are also serious concerns about short- and long-term educational, social and health impacts for students (e.g., Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2021; TDSB, 2022; Vaillancourt, 2021).

International data, using normed measures that allow year to year comparisons, has pointed to significant negative impacts on students' academic achievement and well-being (Centre on Reinventing Public Education, 2022; e.g., Howard et al., 2021; Kuhfeld et al., 2022). These studies have also been disaggregated in different ways, highlighting the disproportionately negative impacts of COVID-19 on students facing significant challenges in the schooling, including some groups of racialized students, students with disabilities, and students living in poverty. Unfortunately, however, in Canada there has been little public sharing of system-wide data to date, and almost no collection or aggregation of comparable data or examination of outcomes for subgroups (notable exceptions are Gallagher-Mackay & Brown, 2021a, 2021b; Georgiou, 2021; Ministry of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2022; TDSB, 2021a, 2021b, 2022).

In Ontario, a number of individual school boards have released data, particularly, student survey data that helps fill in part of the picture of student experiences during the pandemic (e.g., reports from Halton, Halton Catholic, Peel, Dufferin Peel Catholic, Toronto and Durham District School Boards). Provincial graduation rates, by board, for 2020-21 were released in autumn, 2022. Annual assessments from the Education Quality and Accountability Office were suspended in 2019-20, and occurred on a limited basis using all-new assessments in 2020-2021.

This report is part of an ongoing collaboration between a number of large school boards in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) to aggregate and share data. The main reason we have come together is to help contribute, in part, to an understanding of pandemic impacts in Ontario

schools. In fall 2021, the Greater Toronto and Hamilton School Board Collaborative on Schooling During COVID-19 released a report on models of schooling, kindergarten enrollment and pre- and post-pandemic absenteeism across 5 boards.

This second report from the collaboration is based on data from six school boards: Dufferin-Peel District School Board, Durham District School Board, Halton District School Board, Halton Catholic District School Board, Peel District School Board, and Toronto District School Board. Between them, these six school boards enroll 651,000 students – **almost a third of Ontario's two million students** in Kindergarten to Grade 12 – and operate 128 secondary schools.

This report focuses on one of the most powerful predictors of positive long-term educational outcomes, Grade 9 achievement. In this report, we look at two elements of Grade 9 achievement: credit accumulation and students' average grades across all courses. We examine credit accumulation and grades for three years:

- a pre-COVID-19 'Baseline year', the 2018-19,
- 'COVID Year 1', the 2019-20 school year, which included the period of full closures and emergency remote learning between March-June, and,
- 'COVID Year 2', the 2020-21 school year, in which there were numerous disruptions including months of school closures for all students, blended learning models in high school when in-person school happened, fully-remote schooling for some students, cohorting, quad/octomester scheduling, and hybrid instruction in some boards where teachers simultaneously taught students in-person and remotely.

Why focus on Grade 9 achievement?

There is long-standing and widespread evidence suggesting students' credit accumulation early in high school powerfully predicts the likelihood they will graduate and/or go on to post-secondary education (e.g., Allensworth & Easton, 2005; Bowers et al., 2013; Burke, 2015; Easton et al., 201 seven). Credit accumulation in early high school has been used effectively by the Government of Ontario as a key student success indicator, and is often employed by schools to identify students who may be at risk of not graduating and intervene, contributing to substantial improvements in graduation rates over time (Auditor General of Ontario, 2012). Recent research based on Toronto District School Board data has shown that a predictor based

on a combination of credit accumulation and student grades, 'the Grade 9 high achievement variable', is highly predictive not only of students' high school graduation but also their ultimate success graduating from postsecondary (Brown et al., 2019, 2021).

Unlike standardized test scores, students' grades and credit accumulation are based on the professional judgment of educators in context. Classroom grading tends to reflect direct assessment of student work, assessment policies (such as *Growing Success*, in Ontario), and teachers' perceptions of 'non-academic' factors such as motivation or challenge (Brookhart et al., 2016; McMillan, 2005; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). Grades and credit accumulation are also likely to be responsive to shifting guidance and expectations in the context of COVID-19: for example, the freeze on marks between March 2020-June 2020, in the first months of the pandemic (Lecce, 2020) or shifts away from examination-based assessment in view of ongoing disruptions in 2020-21 (see e.g., Rushowy, 2020).

Strengths and limitations of grades and credit accumulation as measures

Grades and credit accumulation are excellent indicators of students' progress through the education system, and teachers' assessment of students' likelihood of success. In general, because they are more multifaceted, Grade 9 achievement indicators tend to be *more* predictive of long-term outcomes than standardized test scores. Grades reflect context and judgment, and are not exclusively 'norm' or 'criteria' based, which means that the same grade does not necessarily reflect the same level of underlying skill and knowledge from year to year, or school to school. These data **cannot** be used as a measure of how much students learned during school years affected by COVID-19 relative to earlier cohorts of students (i.e, the data in this report are *not* a measure of 'learning loss'). However, there are limits on comparability, the data are also less useful than more standardized measures for determining where there are the greatest educational needs for priority-setting with educational recovery funding.

Credit accumulation before and during COVID-19

Students who do not accumulate eight credits in Grade 9 are much less likely to graduate from secondary school, or transition to and succeed in college or university. Many students success supports in secondary schools are tied to this 'red flag'. A key concern associated with COVID-19 – particularly with the roll-out of destreaming in Ontario during the same period – was that

there might be a significant increase in the number of students who did not accumulate eight credits in Grade 9. That concern did not appear to have been realized.

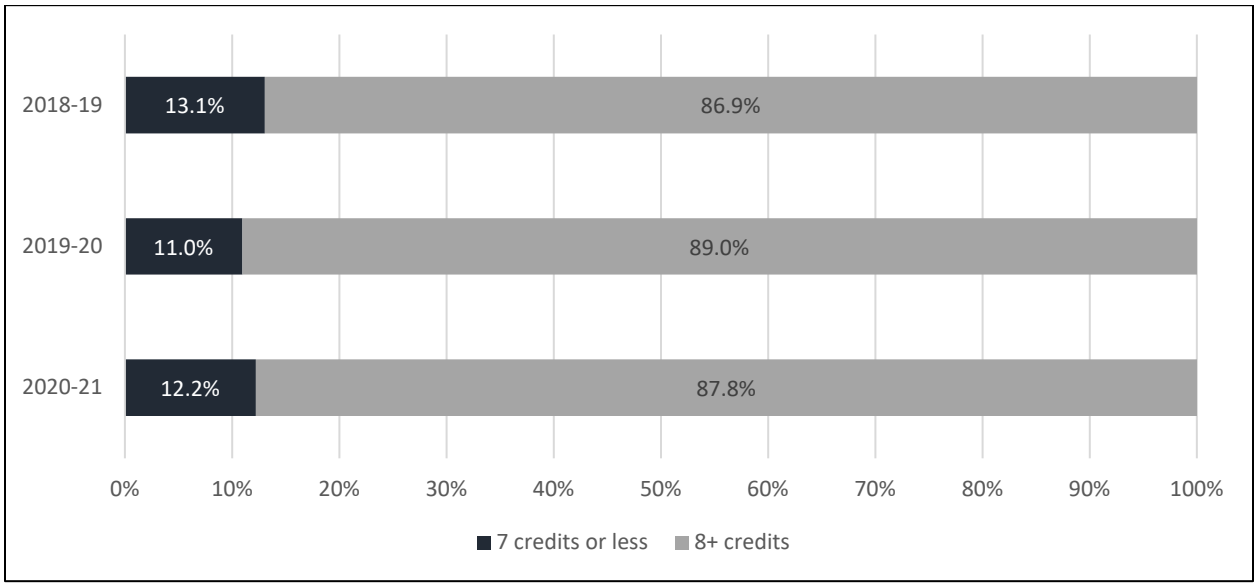

Figure 1: Number of credits earned by Grade 9s across GTA, Baseline Year and COVID School Years 1 and 2

In fact, looking at Grade 9 credit accumulation overall across Dufferin-Peel CDSB, Durham DSB, Halton DSB, Halton CDSB, Peel DSB, and Toronto DSB, slightly *more* students obtained eight or more credits in both COVID years than in the baseline year. The more significant gains in terms of the number of students obtaining eight credits were in COVID Year 1, when grades were frozen. 12.2% of Grade 9 students earned seven or fewer credits in the 2020/2021 school year, compared to 11.0% in 2019/2020 and 13.1% in 2018/2019.

There is some variation between boards in terms of the percentage of students who are not 'on track' in terms of credit accumulation. The broad trend of a significant increase in students earning at least eight credits during COVID Year 1 was consistent across all boards, as was the return to closer-to-pre-pandemic levels in COVID Year 2. The two Halton Boards and the TDSB seem to have had more persistent decreases in the proportion of students with fewer than eight credits. There are meaningful between- board differences in the percentage of students with fewer than eight credits. There are multiple factors that might contribute to these differences, including differences in student demographics and differences in policies and practices across boards; that inquiry is outside of the scope of this research. Between-board differences do not appear to have been noticeable aggravated (or mitigated) during COVID-19.

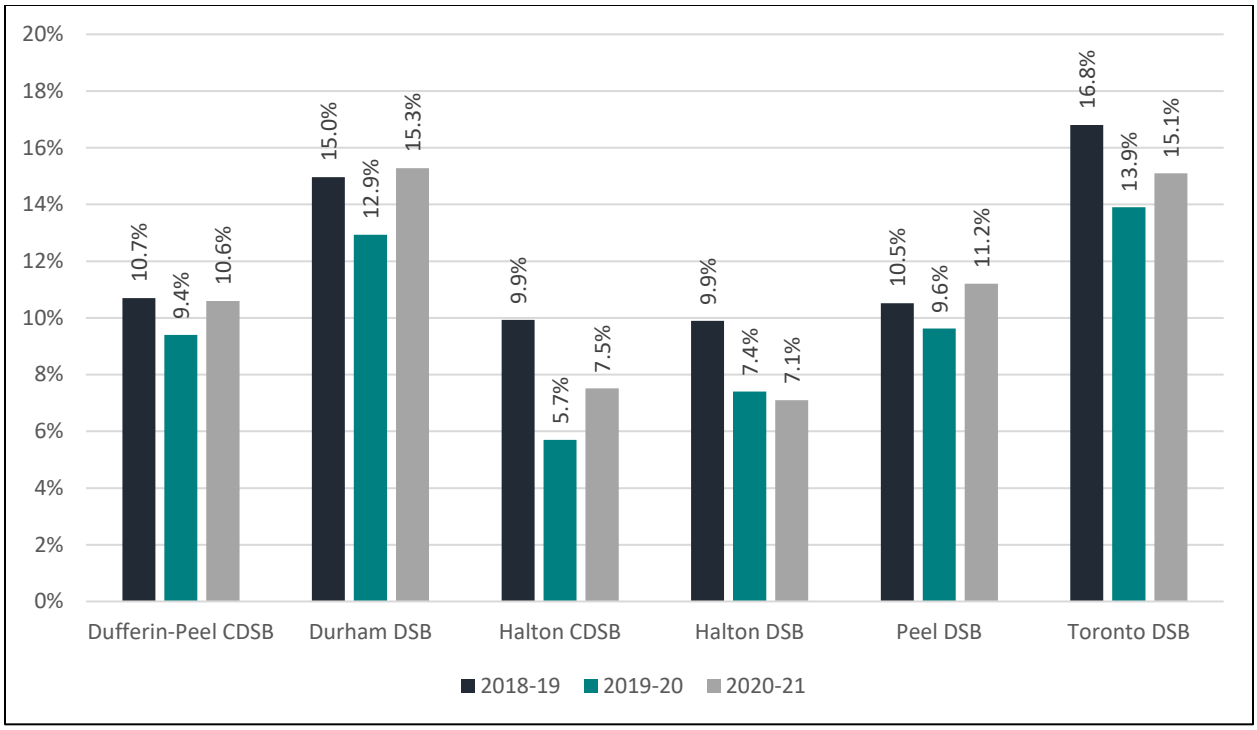

Figure 2: Percentage of Grade 9s earning seven credits or fewer, Baseline Year and COVID School Years 1 and 2

Grade 9 grades before and during COVID-19

In addition to credit accumulation, student grades in Grade 9 are often a strong indicator of their likely progress through and beyond secondary school. Grades are also a signal to students the extent to which their work meets the learning expectations for the courses they are taking, and an important basis for parent-teacher communication about student progress. There were significant differences in grading patterns during the first two years affected by COVID-19, relative to the baseline year. Although international, standardized measures of achievement went down during this period, grades for classwork across the GTA improved in all boards. Provincial data from EQAO, based on assessments that had changed between cycles, showed a significant drop in grade 9 math achievement: 52% of students met the provincial standard (roughly, a B) for mathematics, compared to 75% in 2018-19. Since the assessments changed, this data cannot fairly be compared between pre-pandemic and the pandemic years. During the COVID-19 years, fewer students had very low marks and the median grade range increased from the 70s to the 80s. The upward trend continued for both 2019-20 (when marks were frozen midterm in the second semester) and through into 2020-21. In COVID Year 2, nearly a

quarter of grade 9 students had averages in the 90s (22.5%, up from 12.1% in Baseline year 2018-19).

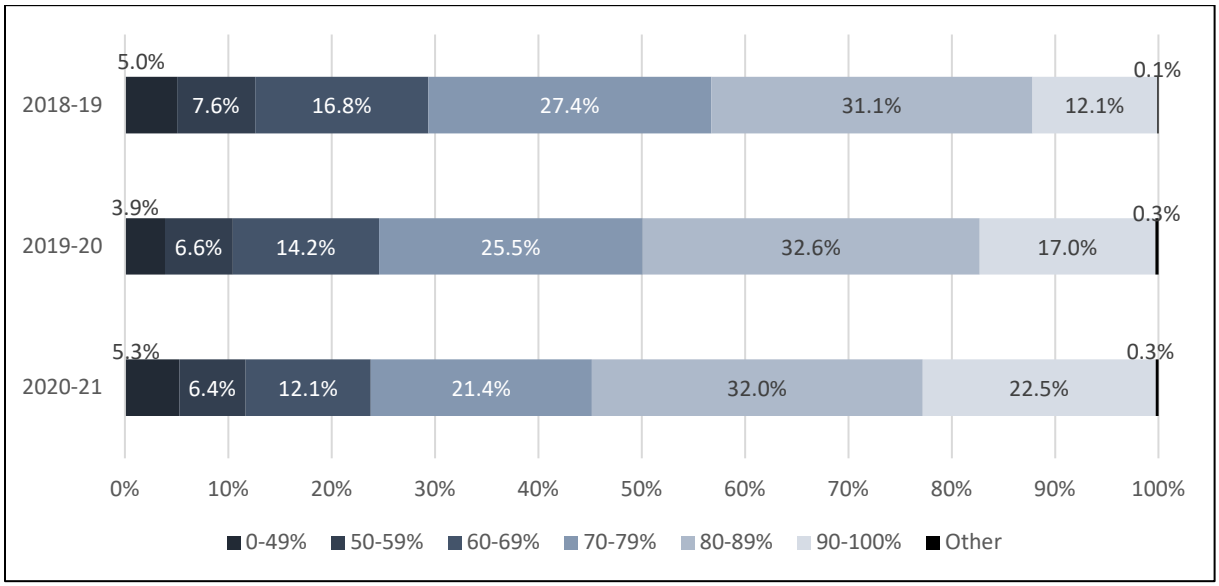

Figure 3: Distribution of Grade 9s' mean marks across GTA, Baseline Year and COVID School Years 1 and 2

The trend of a dramatic increase in the percentage of students achieving very high averages, appears to have been consistent across all participating boards, although the magnitude of the change varied between boards.

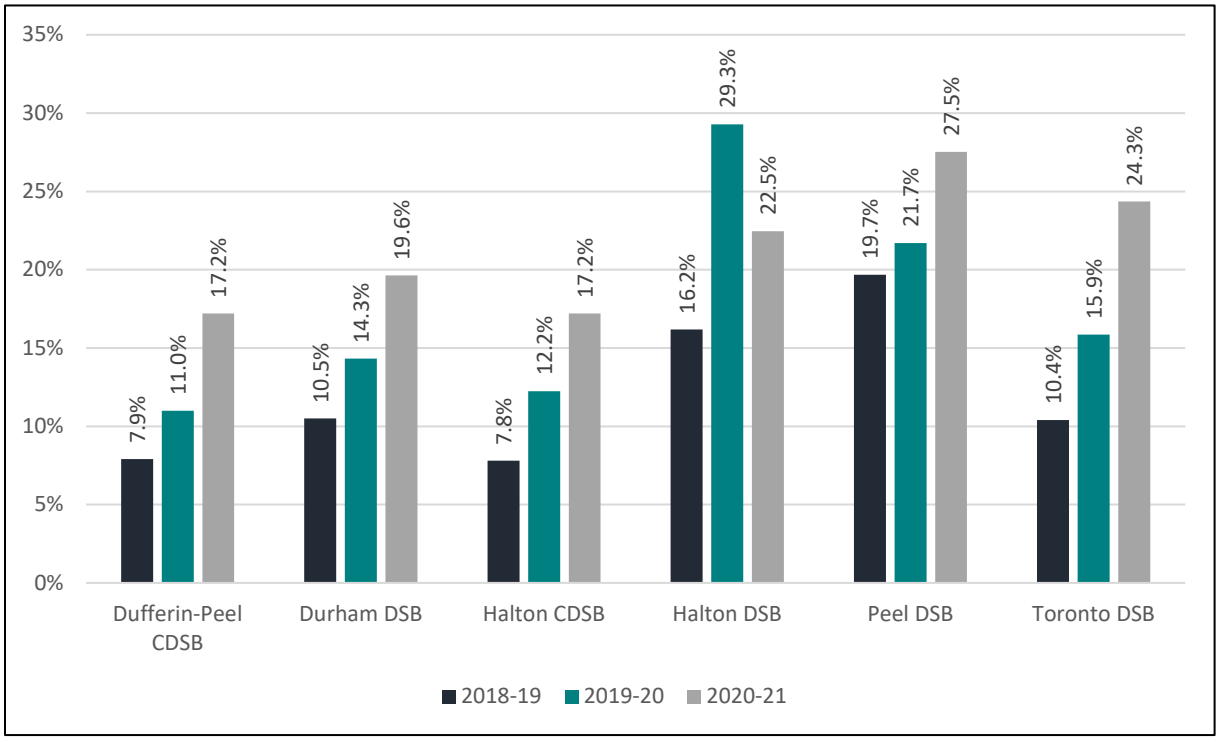

Figure 4: Percentage of Grade 9s with mean marks 90% and above, Baseline Year and COVID School Years 1 and 2

Looking at students at the very low end of the achievement scale, there was less consistency in the patterns across boards. Toronto, Durham, and Dufferin-Peel Catholic saw substantial increases in the number of students with failing averages; the percentage fell slightly in the two Halton Boards, and fell fairly substantially in Peel.

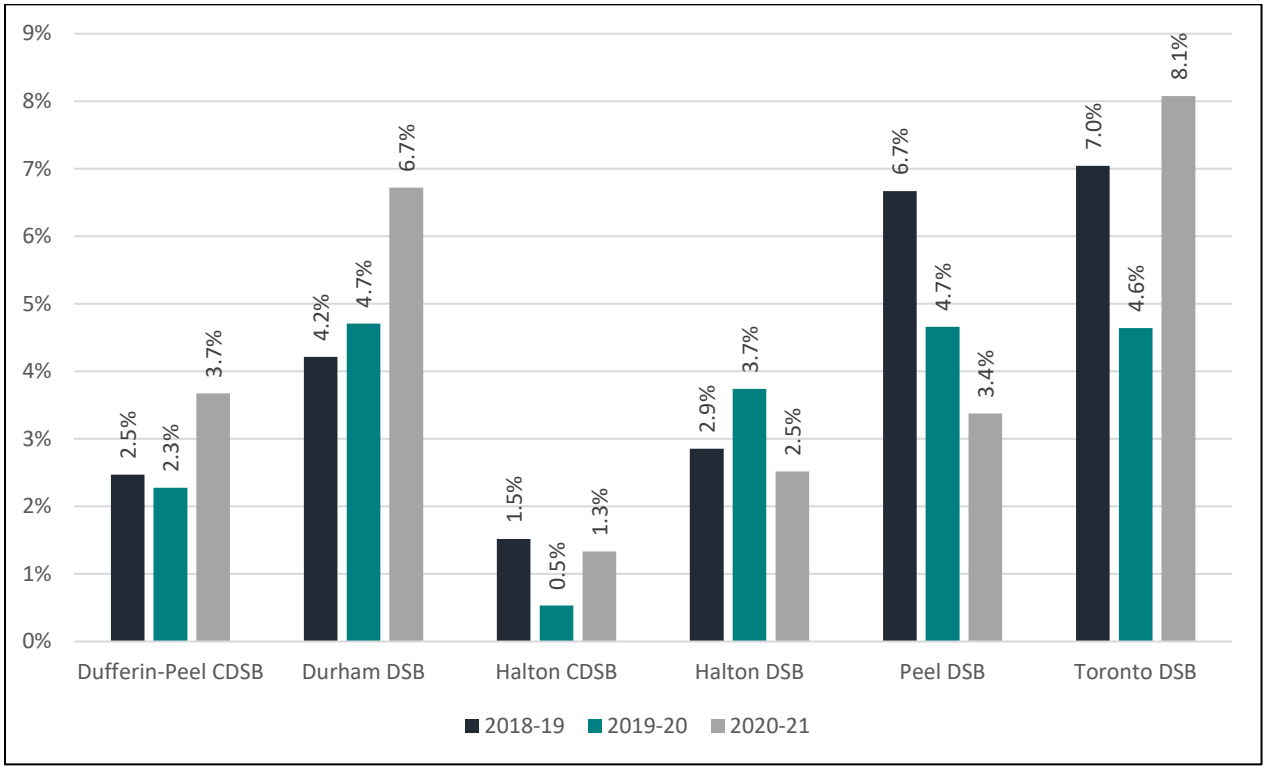

Figure 5: Percentage of Grade 9s with mean marks below 50%, Baseline Year and COVID School Years 1 and 2

Concluding Reflections

This report highlights the commitment of educators to supporting student progress through the hardships of the pandemic. There were some changes in assessment policy (notably, a freeze on marks in 2019-20 and many boards suspending final examinations in 2020-21). Official provincial policy was that the assessment policy, *Growing Success* applied as normal during the 2020-21 school year under pandemic-adapted learning conditions (Ministry of Education, 2020). Given the substantial changes to both credit accumulation and grading highlighted here, however, it appears that there was a widespread, unofficial consensus of adapting expectations to the challenging conditions of the pandemic.

Given continuing concerns about student learning through the pandemic's many disruptions, the findings in this report suggest that school authorities will need to identify different red flags – e.g., attendance – to correctly identify students who may need the most intensive support as they progress through high school. One of the clearest messages from the pandemic is that any focus on student achievement must be integrated with a focus on well-being and equity (e.g., Gallagher-Mackay & Sider, 2022; Toronto District School Board, 2022; Vaillancourt, 2021).

To understand the overall picture of the impact on student achievement – in terms of underlying skills and knowledge -- as we enter the fourth COVID-affected school year, it would be useful to have normed data which allows comparability with earlier cohorts, and particularly, to track learning needs of vulnerable groups. The OECD, for example, recently highlighted efforts by member countries to use tools such as aggregate diagnostic assessment by teachers to report on learning impacts (a practice in place in two thirds of countries); their recommendation was to use such assessments to transparently align resources to reflect social needs and ensure targeted supports for learning recovery (OECD, 2021). Other Canadian provinces have effectively used teacher-administered achievement assessments to target in-school resources to schools where there is demonstrated need (Government of Alberta, n.d.) as have some boards in Ontario (e.g., Toronto District School Board, 2022). Normed assessments also provide the fairest way of assessing the impact of government-supported COVID-relief interventions (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022).

The report highlights the importance of presenting at least snapshots of student progress to the public and to transparently inform policy decisions, particularly under times of such change and stress as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and associated recovery efforts. Between-board differences highlighted here make it clear that it is problematic to rely on data from one school board, however large. Ideally, regular snapshots would provide a provincial picture; be tied to indicators known to be significant to students' long-term outcomes (such as Grade 9 achievement); and be linked to key learning 'inputs'. This type of reporting – however useful – requires resources investment in research capacity in school boards.

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