



TITLE: Grade 9 achievement during the first two years of COVID-19

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## Introduction

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schools In fall 2021, the Greater Toronto and Hamilton School Boa-2( a] TJ oCo

on a combination of credit accumulation and student grades, 'the Grade 9 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, student 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](#) Ontario), and teachers' perceptions of 'non-academic' factors such as motivation or challenge (Brookhart et al., 2016; McMillan, 2005; Olsen & Buchanan, 2009). 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 and 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 'cri

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.

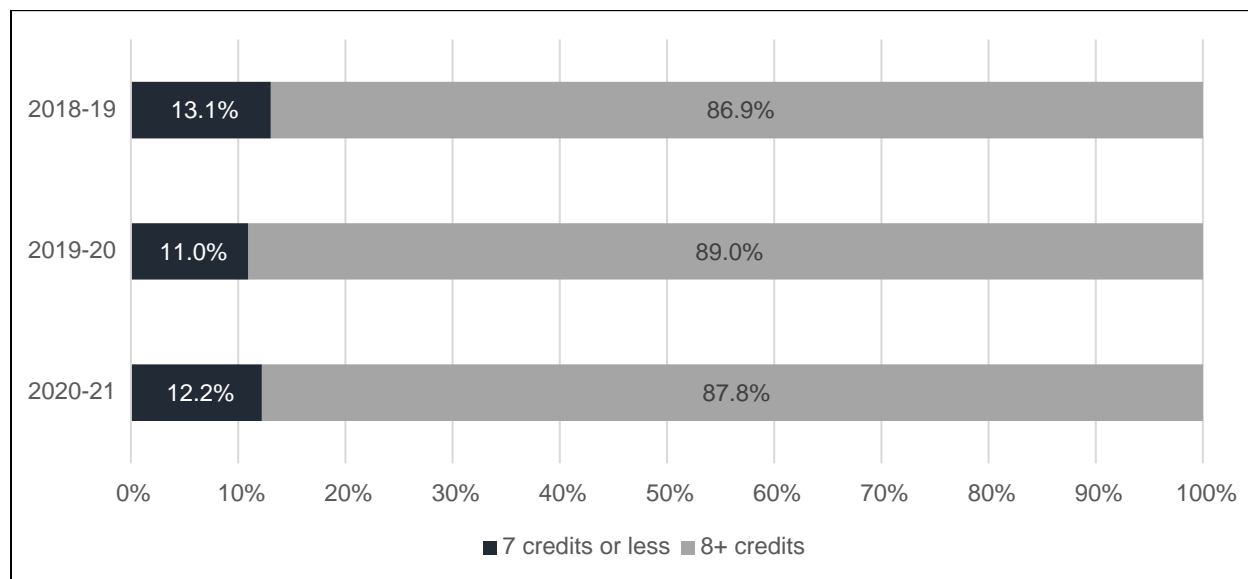


Figure 1: Number of credits earned by Grade 9s across GTA, Baseline Year and COVID School Years 1 and 2

In fact, looking at Grade 9 credit accumulation overall across the GTA, including 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 '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 close-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 noticeably aggravated (or mitigated) during COVID.

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

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 ~~part~~ work





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-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.

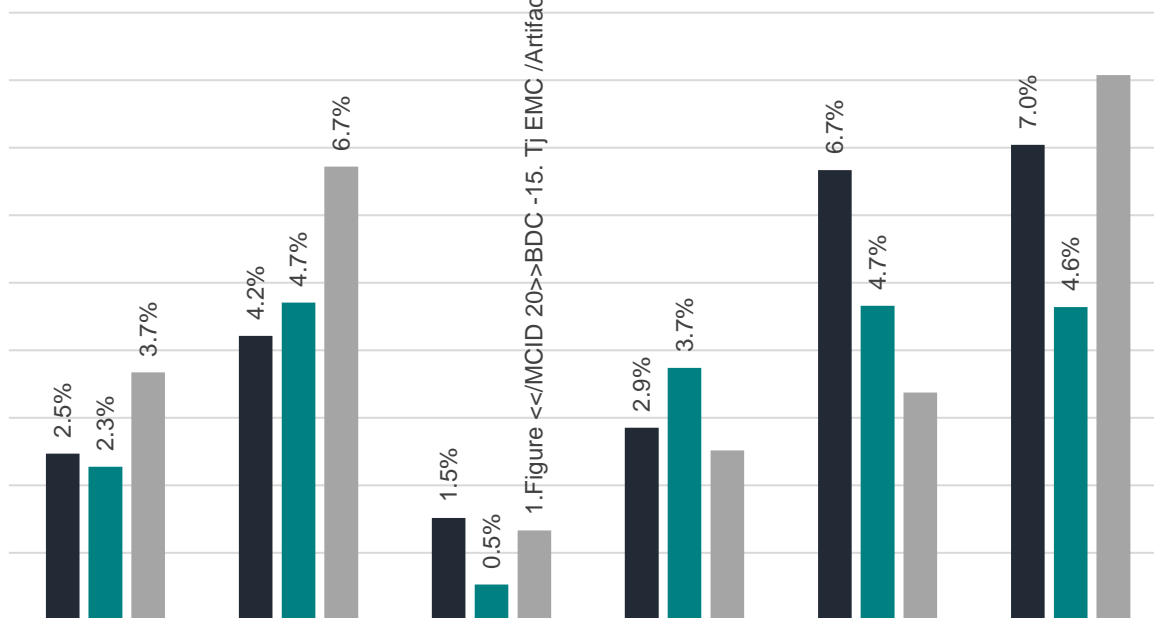


Figure 5: Percentage of Grade 9s with mean marks below 50% in Baseline Year and COVID School Years 1 and 2

## 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 2020 and many boards suspending final examinations in 2020). 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 fo

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