

SYSTEMIC
GAPS IN
EDUCATION
PROJECT

**Report #1 : Student Outcomes
in Provincially Funded Schools**

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The Chiefs of Ontario (COO) acknowledges that it has used data provided by the Ontario Ministry of Education. The views expressed in this report and analysis are the views of the Chiefs of Ontario and do not necessarily reflect those of the Ontario Ministry of Education.

Executive Summary

This is the first report in a series commissioned by the Chiefs of Ontario, which will work towards fulfilling Calls to Action 7 to 10 of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. These reports also aim to support effective negotiations to ensure equitable funding that meets the real needs of First Nation students, and provide a baseline for progress.

The indicators used in this report – and those to follow – are based on important, comparable, and widely-collected data that can be tracked over time. The framework guiding data collection for this series of reports was adapted from the United States National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine’s commission on *Measuring Educational Equity* ((2019) – full citations in the main report). The purposes for monitoring educational equity are to identify disparities, highlight potential causes, and point to possibilities for improvement. The data in these reports can also serve as a baseline for intervention, and

support accountability to First Nations communities and families.

Report #1 focuses on educational outcomes in provincially funded schools, where the majority of First Nations children are educated (see below). Future reports will examine educational opportunities and resources in provincially-funded schools compared to those of First Nations schools, outcomes in First Nations schools, and the cost of inaction. Some key topics – such as school discipline – have been identified as particularly significant and warrant their own reports.

Engagement, Attendance and Absenteeism

Attendance is a well-recognized measure associated with student engagement and opportunity to learn. Chronic absenteeism is associated with disengagement and reduced graduation and long-term life outcomes.

- Among elementary students in Ontario, First Nations students are far more likely to be chronically absent than Ontario averages. In 2018-19, before the pandemic, 67% of Ontario students attended school at least 90% of the time, compared to 40% of First Nations overall and 24% of students living in First Nation communities.
- The effect of COVID-19 on attendance – even after the period of extended school closures – has been dramatic for all students. It has been worse for First Nations students overall and those living in First Nation communities. In 2021-22, only 53% of Ontario students, 26% of First Nations students and 10% of those living in First Nation communities were present in school at least 90% of the time.
- There are significant regional differences in absenteeism, a problem that is much more severe in Northern Ontario.

Learning Outcomes

Knowledge and Skills in Literacy and Numeracy

In 2018-19, First Nations students' performance on tests administered by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) in Grades 3 and 6 was substantially below provincial averages, with disparities between 18–25%. There was an improvement in reading and writing between Grades 3 and 6, but math scores got worse. These results pre-date the pandemic.

Grade 9 Achievement – Credit Accumulation and Grades

Credit accumulation in Grade 9 is a powerful predictor of graduation and postsecondary access.

- In 2019-20, 68% of First Nations students were “on track” for graduation with 8 credits earned in Grade 9, compared to 87% of Ontario students overall. Between 2016-17 and 2019-20, the gaps remained between 19 and 21 percentage points.

- Gaps in Grade 9 credit accumulation between First Nations students and Ontario averages grew dramatically during 2020-21, the second year of COVID-19, to 31%. This result is consistent with strong international research that points to much worse educational impacts of COVID-related disruptions on students with pre-existing vulnerabilities including poverty, marginalization and poor health.
- On average, COVID-19 had less adverse impacts on high-achieving First Nations students. The percentage of First Nations students with an A average in academic subjects in Grade 9 grew from 30% to 35% between 2016-17 and 2020-21, though still far below the Ontario average of 56% in 2020-21.
- EQAO scores from 2018-19 for Grade 9 math cannot be used to determine disparities, because of the impact of academic streaming. First Nations students were heavily overrepresented in applied math, associated with lower chances of graduation and postsecondary.

Graduation in Four and Five Years

- While 89% of Ontario students graduate with an Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) within five years, among First Nations students only 60% do. The Ontario government reports on the five year graduation rate as a success indicator, though the majority of students graduate in four years. Research indicates that four-year graduates are more likely to complete post-secondary, relative to those who complete high school in five or more years. A larger proportion of First Nations graduates (9%) take five years to graduate than the Ontario average (5%).
- There are considerable differences in the size of the “graduation gap” between regions and boards. In several Central Ontario boards, the gap is 5% or less.
- Self-identified First Nations students are three times more likely than the Ontario average to finish high school with a Certificate (OSSC) instead of an

OSSD (3% vs. 1%). A certificate represents partial completion of diploma requirements. The OSSC pathway significantly limits future opportunities.

Recommendations

The evidence provided in this report confirms the need to add the development of supports for improving attendance, achievement, credit accumulation and graduation rates to the activities of the First Nations Lifelong Learning Table (FNLLT). The FNLLT is a bilateral process established between First Nations in Ontario and the Ministry of Education to increase the success and well-being for First Nation learners in both the provincially and federally funded education systems through a balanced, respectful, and collaborative relationship whereby collaborative work is planned, designed, implemented and regularly evaluated.

The current priority areas of the FNLLT include: Relationships; Community and Student Well-being; Languages and Culture; Curriculum; Information,

Access and Accountability; and Policy Development. It is recommended that the FNLLT work with First Nations to develop supports for improving attendance, credit accumulation and graduation rates as focused areas of activity under the Community and Student Well-being priority area.

It is also recommended that the evidence provided in these reports be widely used by First Nations, provincial school board entities, the Ministry of Education and the general public to inform agreements and policy and program development to address the reported inequities for First Nation learners.

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Introduction: Chiefs of Ontario Systemic Gaps in Education Project

Call to action and mandates: Closing gaps in attainment within a generation

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission put forward a vision – and call to action – that First Nations and all levels of government would work together, with sufficient funding, to “close educational gaps within a generation” (Call to Action #10). To support that work, the Commission called for annual reports to be prepared and published to compare educational attainment of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada compared with non-Aboriginal peoples (Call to Action #9). This data was meant to inform a strategy, jointly developed by government and Aboriginal groups, to eliminate gaps in outcomes (Call to Action #7) and gaps in funding (Call to Action #8) (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). The degree to which such strategies have

been jointly negotiated varies across Canada and between First Nations.

The Chiefs of Ontario is a coordinating body for the 133 First Nations in Ontario and supports Ontario First Nations in negotiations with both federal and provincial governments on education.

First Nations have sovereignty over First Nations education. However, under the Canadian Constitution, the Federal Government has exclusive jurisdiction, relative to the provinces, for schooling on reserve and establishes frameworks for exercising that jurisdiction through treaties, funding programs and agreements, and other mechanisms. Accordingly, the Government of Canada has a fiduciary responsibility to ensure adequate supports for First Nations education. There is extensive documentation and discussion of lack of funding, policy problems and poor outcomes

arising from the historical relationship between the Crown and First Nations in regard to education (see e.g., Auditor General of Canada, 2011; National Indian Brotherhood, 1972).

In Resolution 15/18 (June 2018), the Chiefs tasked the Ontario Technical Table on the Interim Funding Approach (OTTIFA) to ensure that the Interim Funding Approach accurately reflects the specific needs of First Nations students, schools and communities. OTTIFA, in turn, established a Systemic Gaps Task Team, which commissioned and has overseen the research behind a series of reports examining educational outcomes and opportunities for First Nations students in Ontario.

The Systemic Gaps Task Team has identified the need to monitor educational attainment and opportunities for First Nations students in provincially-funded

schools relative to provincial averages, alongside gaps facing students in First Nations schools.

According to the 2021 Census, there are 61,230 First Nations children of school age in Ontario (Statistics Canada, 2021a). In 2021-22, 19,304 attended schools run by First Nations.¹ The rest, the majority, attend provincially funded schools, either because they live outside of their community or through an arrangement between First Nations and local district school boards or authorities.

An evidence-based framework for monitoring equity

The OTTIFA Systemic Gaps Task Team commissioned a research project and designated a Steering Committee to oversee the research. This is the first report in a series designed to monitor progress towards improved educational outcomes and opportunities for First Nations students. The purpose is to ensure

accountability to First Nations, identify priority areas of need, and provide baselines for assessing the impact of funding, policy changes, and specific interventions.

The Systemic Gaps in Education Project Team has adapted an evidence-based framework, originally developed by a multi-disciplinary Commission on *Monitoring Educational Equity* (2019) on behalf of the U.S. National Academies of Sciences. The Framework provides a set of indicators of educational equity that spans the K-12 education system. The indicators were selected by the Commission to be based on important, comparable, and widely-collected data that can be tracked over time. In *Monitoring Educational Equity* the Commission points to the ways in which carefully-chosen indicators of educational inequity “highlight disparities, provide a way to explore potential causes, and point towards possible improvements” (National Academies of Science Engineering and Medicine, 2019, p. 1).

These purposes are highly aligned with the mandates set out by Chiefs of Ontario.

The overall framework has been adapted by introducing comparable measures of student well-being and family engagement, and eliminating a variable related to economic and racial segregation in schools which did not seem to be consistent with principles of First Nations sovereignty.

The *Monitoring Educational Equity* framework emphasizes both educational opportunities (financial and more complex school resources) alongside student outcomes (see also Guiton & Oakes, 1995). This dual focus shines a light on the work of, and resource distribution within, education systems rather than focusing purely on unequal results for specific populations.

The use of various indicators throughout the K-12 progression is intended to draw attention to the

¹ According to summary Nominal Roll enrollment data provided to Chiefs of Ontario by Indigenous Services Canada under a data-sharing agreement. According to even more recent data, the number of children enrolled in First Nations students in 2022-23 had again increased to 20,221.

multiple opportunities for intensified engagement and support.

A summary of the indicators that will form the backbone for our series of reports is listed below. Adaptations to highlight particular concerns from First Nations communities are noted in red. The educational significance of the different indicators is discussed in the body of the reports.

**The data in this report:
Provincial data on outcomes**

This report focuses on key data available for First Nations students in provincially-funded schools. We are reporting on the relative progress of self-identified First Nations Students with a focus on engagement, learning and graduation.

The data in this report comes from a data-sharing agreement negotiated between the Chiefs of Ontario and the Government of Ontario. We report on students who have voluntarily self-identify as First Nations. In 2021, 34,583 students in Ontario’s provincially-funded schools self-identified as First Nations, relative to an estimated First

FIGURE 1: Opportunities and Outcomes Framework for Monitoring Educational Equity, from the U.S. National Academies of Science, Medicine and Engineering (Adapted for Chiefs of Ontario).

| Educational Opportunities | Educational Outcomes |
|--|--|
| <p>Equitable access to quality early education and care</p> | <p>Kindergarten readiness</p> |
| <p>Equitable access to high quality instruction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher experience and access to diverse educators | <p>Learning and engagement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achievement measures (normed) • Grades (teacher judgment) • Attendance |
| <p>Equitable access to high quality curriculum</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curricular breadth (availability of arts, science, physical & health education, etc.) • Enrollment in courses that prepare for postsecondary | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • *Self-reported well-being |
| <p>Equitable access to supportive school and classroom environments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Available special education & mental health supports • Caring adults in school • Suspensions and expulsions • *Parents/Caregivers participate in their children’s education • *Students have opportunities for well-being at school | |
| | <p>Educational attainment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Graduation • Postsecondary access |

Nations student population of 41,926 in provincially-funded Ontario schools.²

In this report, these students are referred to as “First Nations students”; it should, however, be noted that these students do *not* include those who attend First-Nations-run independent schools. On the other hand, the First Nations students referred to in this report *include* the relatively small number of students who live in First Nation communities while attending Ontario’s provincially-funded schools. These students’ education is paid for out of education funding of First Nations, which have tuition fee arrangements with local school boards. In this study, we call this sub-group of First Nations students “tuition-paying students.” Where numbers allow, findings on these students are reported separately.

Because we are interested in change over time, and progress towards the goal of closing gaps within a generation, we have reported on trends over the past five years for

most indicators. Moreover, a regional analysis allows us to understand patterns of variation without identifying individual schools.

This report – the first in our series – will focus on three of the fundamental outcomes from the *Monitoring Educational Equity* Report.

- 1 Engagement at school: Attendance
- 2 Learning outcomes:
 - Literacy and Numeracy in Grades 3 and 6
 - Grade 9 achievement (Grades and Credit accumulation)
- 3 Educational attainment: four- and five-year graduation rate

Unfortunately, we cannot report on post-secondary access as this data is not tracked and reported on by the province. This is unfortunate, because it is clear from research that rates of postsecondary transition after graduation are lower for some marginalized groups of students. Rates of post-secondary access

matter, for the purposes of achieving the Calls to Action and future health and prosperity of First Nations communities and families.

Future reports will focus on educational opportunities based on administrative and survey data from provincially funded and First Nations schools, as well as the high cost of inaction.

2 This estimation was based on Statistics Canada’s 2021 Census figure of 61,230 First Nations children and youth (between 4 and 18 years), minus 19,304 students attending First Nations schools. The latter figure was extracted from 2021 Nominal Roll data aggregated by Indigenous Services Canada and shared with the Chiefs of Ontario.

Schooling Outcomes: Engagement – Attendance and Absenteeism

Students' capacity to engage with and participate in their education is a key element in their learning and success. The consequences of disengagement, erratic attendance patterns, and non-participation tend to be more acute for students who are relatively marginalized. Without a safety net of family privilege, they are less likely to graduate and more likely to experience adverse long-term consequences including poorer health and poverty (National Research Council Committee on Increasing High School Students' Engagement and Motivation to Learn, 2004).

In the National Academies of Sciences Report, *Monitoring Educational Equity*, there is an extensive discussion on engagement. It recognizes that academic engagement is a complex, multidimensional concept that includes both behaviours (e.g., persistence, effort, attention) and emotions (e.g., pride, enthusiasm,

sense of belonging). In this view, academic engagement arises out of and reflects the interactions of students with their classrooms and schools as well as factors linked to the determinants of health (National Academies of Science Engineering and Medicine, 2019 p. 59). Although there are direct, high-quality measures of engagement, the Monitoring Educational Equity Commission did not endorse any particular tool to assess engagement at scale; instead, they focused on one of the most fundamental units of school administration: attendance and absenteeism (ibid.).

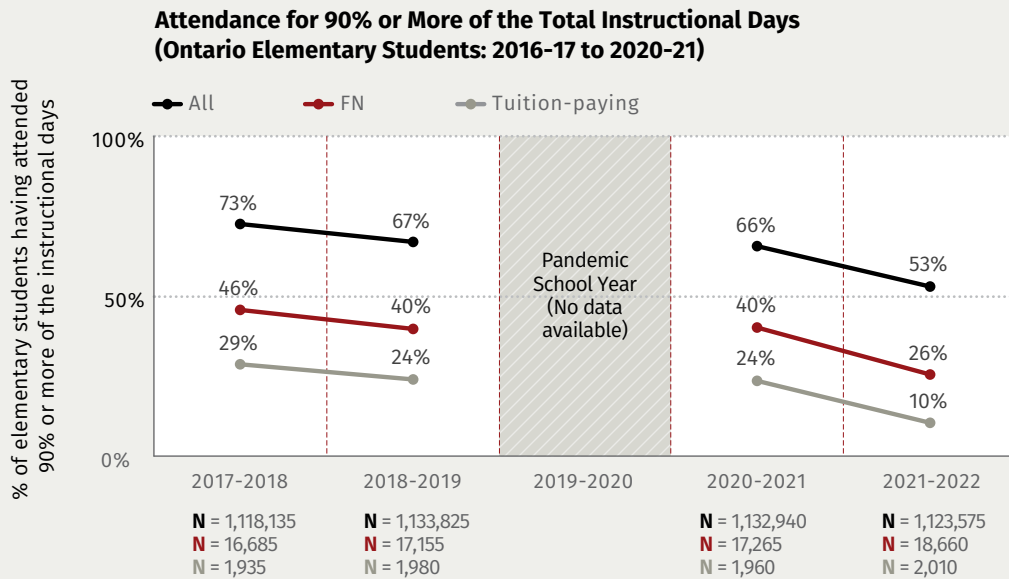
A strong body of research highlights the importance of attendance as a key factor influencing student success, as well as serving as an indirect measure of engagement and schools' ability to meet student needs (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Ginsburg et al., 2014; Kearney, 2008). Chronic absenteeism

is typically defined as missing at least 10% of days in a school year (about three weeks). It has been identified as a powerful predictor of drop-out and students' failure to progress to and succeed in post-secondary education (Balfanz et al., 2007; Hein et al., 2013). Toronto research found that missing 10% or more of days in one year of elementary school is a more powerful predictor of eventual post-secondary attendance than grades or test scores (Brown et al., 2020).

Major gaps in attendance considerably worse in wake of COVID-19

As indicated in Figure 2, chronic absenteeism in elementary school appears to be a significant problem across Ontario, one which has gotten much worse even after the extended closures and disruptions associated with COVID-19 (which had the most direct impact in 2019-20 and 2020-21).

FIGURE 2: Chronic absenteeism in elementary schools, 2016-17 to 2020-21: Ontario averages, First Nations students, and students supported through tuition agreements with First Nations (data missing for 2019-20)



For First Nations students, there are enormous disparities in the rates of chronic absenteeism. In 2021-22, only 26% of First Nations students had attendance that did not meet the definition of chronic absenteeism (i.e., only about a quarter of students were present at least 90% of the time). Among tuition-paying students, only

10% of students were not chronically absent.

The impact of COVID-19 on attendance has been complex. During the peak pandemic period, attendance record-keeping was deeply challenged with the mix of remote and hybrid schooling, students “ghosting” their

classes by signing in and tuning out (Abraham, 2021; Gallagher-Mackay, n.d.) In our data, this upheaval is reflected by the fact data is not available for the school year 2019-20 when COVID-19 first struck and there were no clear guidelines for how remote schooling was to operate.

However, as indicated in our data, the impact of COVID-19 on attendance went far beyond attendance record-keeping. Most of the time, chronic absenteeism is considered problematic behaviour, and often judged by educators to be a sign of non-compliance with school expectations (Kearney, 2008). That signal, however, was overturned during the pandemic when public health and education messaging *encouraged* students to protect themselves and their communities by “staying home” if there were any symptoms related to COVID-19. Moreover, entire classes of students were sent home as a precautionary measure in the case of COVID-19 exposures, a phenomenon that disproportionately affected low-income communities (Srivastava et al., 2022). Accordingly, higher

absenteeism in 2020-21 – while still representing lost opportunity to learn through in-class participation – may be less predictive of academic problems than under pre-pandemic circumstances. At the same time, there are major concerns that some students may have simply lost any connection to schooling due to the disruption associated with the pandemic (Alphonso, 2021). The fact that this pattern has continued and indeed, become more severe in 2021-22 suggests that this is a critical area for policy work for school boards generally, and particularly in support of First Nations students.

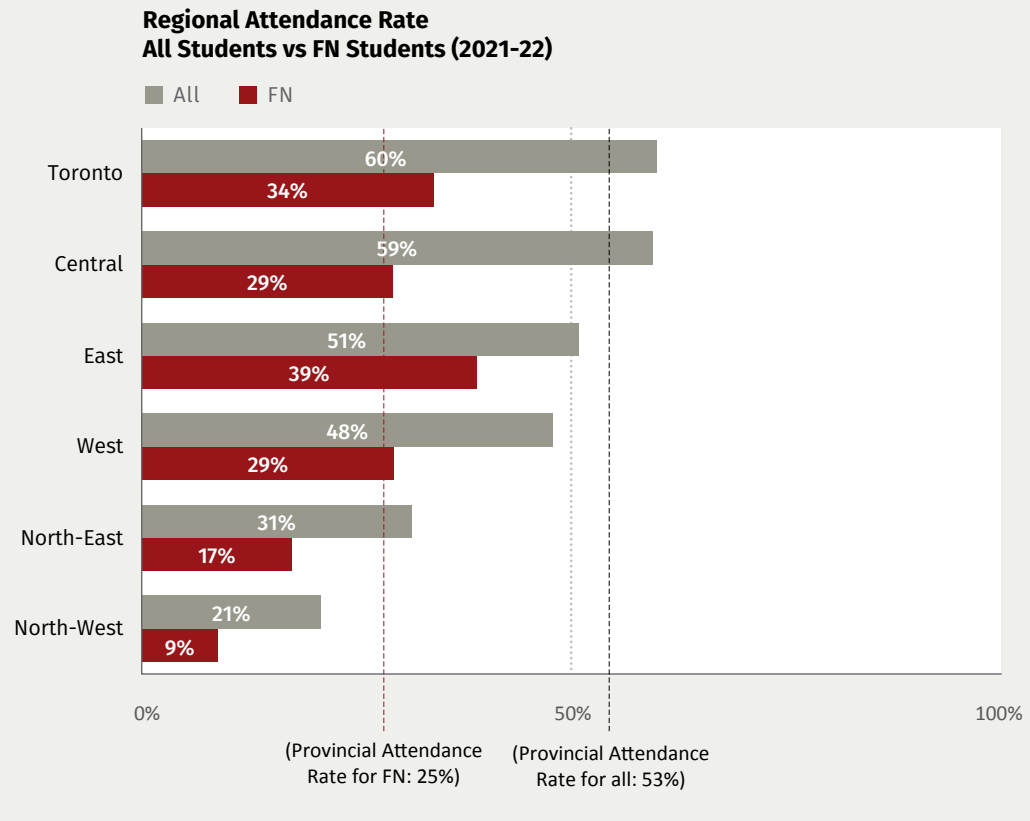
Regional differences in chronic absenteeism

There are considerable differences in the rates of chronic absenteeism between Ontario’s regions. As depicted in Figure 3, in 2021-22, Northern Boards had very low overall attendance (below one-third of students avoiding chronic absenteeism), and even lower rates of First Nations attendance. In other regions, rates of “normal” First Nations attendance were also about

half of that of their respective general populations, with the exception of East region with a relatively smaller gap. *For a board-by-board breakdown, please see Appendix B.*

It is worth noting that while the determinants of absenteeism are often beyond the direct control of educators, there is strong evidence which suggests schools and systems can intervene successfully to boost

FIGURE 3: Percentage of students attending at least 90% of classes, by region, 2021-22. Ontario and First Nations students.



attendance, including among the most marginalized students. Sometimes families and communities don't recognize the cumulative impact of chronic absenteeism. Often, successful collaborations involve schools working with public health. Successful strategies include low-effort measures such as post-card nudges and changed school office routines; site-specific changes such as school-based paediatric health centres; and jurisdiction-wide, interagency task forces which achieved major changes in patterns of problematic attendance (see e.g. Railsback, 2004; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013; Rogers et al, 2017; Webber, 2003; Schultz & Gandy, 2007).

Learning Outcomes: Grades 3 and 6 EQAO Performance and Grade 9 Achievement

An understanding of systemic gaps is most useful when issues are identified relatively early in students' school careers. Understanding there is a problem can be an "early warning signal" – and it can allow the possibility of doing something differently.

Grade 3 and 6 EQAO Performance

There is a detailed discussion on trends in EQAO scores available for First Nations in Ontario, up until 2016-17, reported in the Technical Report attached to the Third Progress Report on the First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education Strategy (Ministry of Education, 2021). Under the data sharing agreement between the Chiefs of Ontario and the Ministry of Education, disaggregated data on more recent scores (2018-19) were provided to us. Those scores continued to show significant differences in achievement

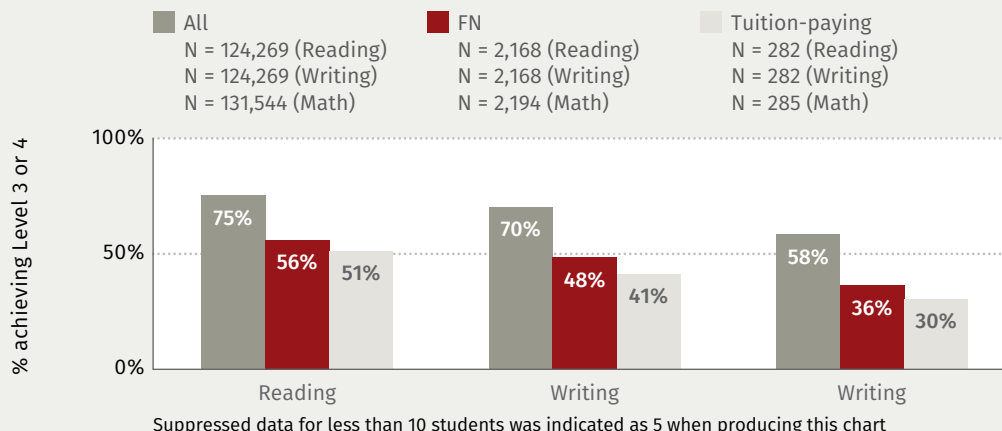
levels between First Nations students and Ontario averages, across all subjects.

For instance, as shown in Figure 4, while three quarters of the overall Grade 3 population in 2018-19 attained the expected Level 3 or 4 in reading,

the corresponding proportion for First Nations students was lower by 19 percentage points. The achievement gaps between the two groups in both the writing and the math tests were equally wide (22 percentage points).

FIGURE 4: Grade 3 EQAO Results (2018-2019) Ontario students, First Nations students, and students living in First Nations community and supported through tuition arrangements

Ontario 2018-19 EQAO Grade 3 Test Results: All, First Nations, and Tuition



With regard to the Grade 6 EQAO results, a higher proportion of students reached the expected level in reading and writing, relative to those of their counterparts in Grade 3. However, the reverse was true in math with fewer students attaining the expected level in this subject (see Figure 5). Regardless, compared to the Grade 3 achievement gap between the general population and the First Nations students, the disparity among the Grade 6s was about the same in reading

(18 percentage points), narrower in writing (17 percentage points), but wider in math (25 percentage points) than that of the Grade 3.

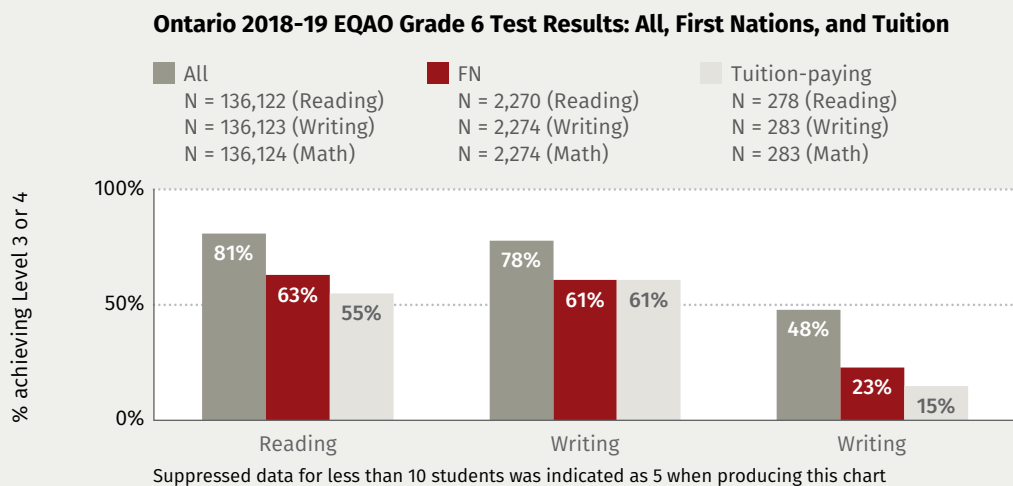
Grade 9 Achievement – Credit Accumulation and Grades

There is strong international evidence pointing to credit accumulation early in high school as a powerful predictor of graduation and postsecondary access (e.g., Allensworth & Easton,

2005; Bowers et al., 2013; Burke, 2015; Easton et al., 2017; Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2023). Credit accumulation in early high school is a key student success indicator for the Government of Ontario. Student success teams in schools often use it to identify and intervene with students facing greater obstacles to graduation; this practice has been credited with boosting 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).

Student grades and credit accumulation reflect professional judgment of educators, in context. Decades of research on classroom grading (Brookhart et al., 2016; McMillan, 2005; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019) show teachers’ grades tend to reflect direct assessment of student

FIGURE 5: Grade 6 EQAO Results (2018-2019) Ontario students, First Nations students, and students living in First Nations community and supported through tuition arrangements



work, and are shaped by assessment policies (in Ontario schools, *Growing Success* and various COVID-19-related policies between 2020–21). The same research also highlights ways in which teacher judgment incorporates “non-academic” factors such as perceived motivation and challenge. Recent research suggests teachers’ judgments about students’ non-academic “learning skills” on the part of teachers may reflect systemic biases on the basis of race and disability (Parekh et al., 2018). This concern is likely also relevant for First Nations students. The multifaceted, contextual and relatively long-term nature of classroom assessment means it tends to be *more* predictive of long-term outcomes than standardized test scores. However, because they are not exclusively “norm” or “criteria” based, in some cases the same grade may not be directly comparable over time or between classrooms or schools.

Grade 9 credit accumulation data over the past five years highlights significant – and dramatically worsening – gaps in achievement

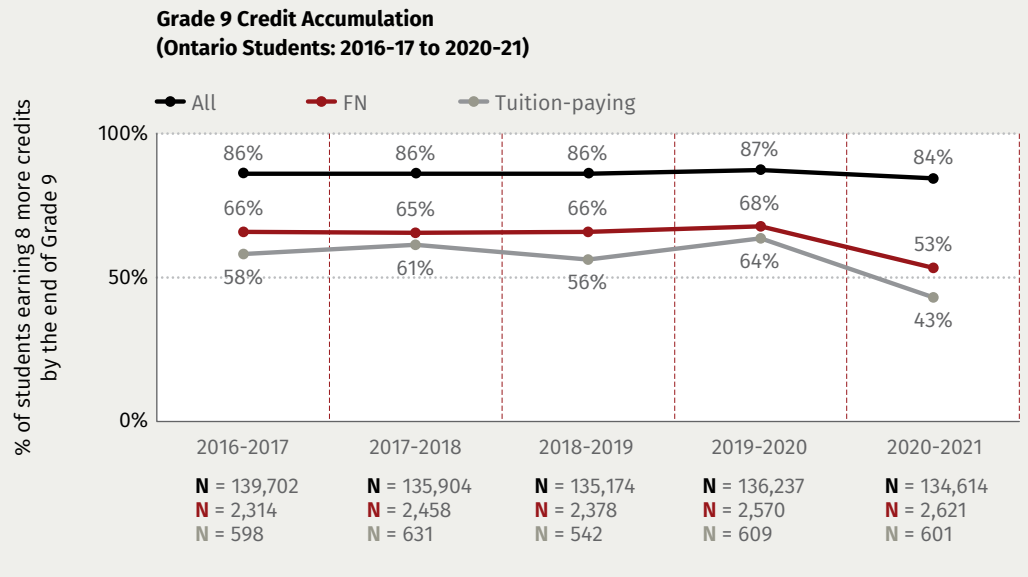
for First Nations students, especially during the pandemic years.

A sharp increase in credit accumulation disparities during COVID-19

As depicted in Figure 6, after four years of moderate improvement, there was a dramatic fall in the number of First Nations students who obtained 8 or

more credits in 2020-21, the first full year of COVID-19. The percentage of First Nations students “on track” in Grade 9 fell from 68% to 53%; the gap relative to Ontario averages expanded from 19 to 31 percentage points in one year. Among students living in First Nation communities, whose First Nations pay tuition to provincially funded school boards, the decline was even steeper, from 64% on track, to

FIGURE 6: Grade 9 credit accumulation, 2016-17 to 2020-21, Ontario students, First Nations students, and students living in First Nations community and supported through tuition arrangements



43%. This trend is the opposite of what is required to achieve the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Call to Action to “close gaps in a generation.”

The most likely explanation for this sudden drop is that First Nations students were dramatically impacted by COVID-19 and the resulting disruptions to schooling.

The overwhelming majority of international evidence has pointed to particularly harsh academic outcomes for marginalized students, including those living with low incomes, those facing disabilities, and those from disadvantaged racial or ethnic groups (Betthäuser et al., 2023; Hammerstein et al., 2021; Patrinos, 2022; Storey & Zhang, 2021). Large-scale studies indicate that longer school closures were associated with disproportionately worse outcomes (Goldhaber et al., 2022). Ontario had the longest school closures in Canada (Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2021). First Nations students were disproportionately likely to face a cluster of acute challenges to home-based learning – family and community poverty and COVID-

related economic hardships, such as crowded dwellings, limited broadband and access to devices, lower parental education, higher rates of disability and more limited access to supports (see e.g., Arriagada et al., 2021; Auditor General of Canada, 2023; Bougie et al., 2013; Greenwood et al., 2018; Statistics Canada, 2021b).

While not unexpected in light of international evidence, the severity of this drop and the dramatically worsened outcomes suggest the need for intensive, targeted and continuing supports for First Nation students in high school.

Test score results in Grade 9 – Disparities obscured because of streaming

Assessments of relative performance of First Nations students on Grade 9 EQAO math tests are difficult to interpret because of the operation of Grade 9 streaming, a process that was eliminated in Ontario. As was the case for many years, students in the academic program considerably outperform students in the applied

program, even though the academic program was widely considered “harder” and students wrote different assessments for academic vs. applied courses. First Nations students were highly over-represented in applied courses.

Students taking applied math in Grade 9 were far less likely to graduate and go on to postsecondary. In 2017-19, 25% of Ontario students were in applied; 55% of self-identified First Nations students, and 70% of students supported by tuition agreements were in applied.

See Appendix 4 for figures showing EQAO results in Grade 9 math (academic and applied) and on the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test.

High achieving students in Grade 9

Students who achieve averages of 80% or higher in Grade 9 are much more likely to go on to post-secondary. There are a significant number of high achieving First Nations students in Ontario.

Recent research and reporting have highlighted a trend showing a greater proportion of secondary school students with high marks in Ontario, that has persisted even through COVID-19 (Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2022; Gallagher-Mackay & Brown, 2023; Hurley, 2022). The international evidence has clearly showed that higher-achieving students, though they may have faced considerable pandemic-related hardships, were less likely to experience academic jeopardy during COVID-19 than their lower-achieving peers (e.g., Betthäuser et al., 2023; Patrinos, 2022).

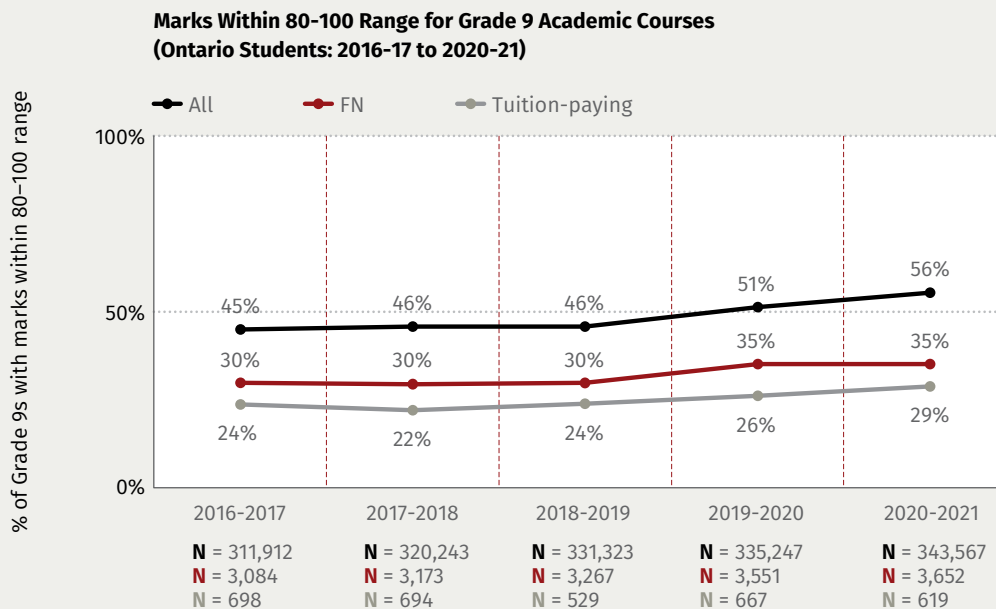
Five-year grade trends for high achieving students, First Nations and otherwise, reflect these patterns (see Figure 7).

Ontario-wide, the percentage of students with averages between 80–100% in four academic courses (English, French, Math, and Science) has increased for all students and for First Nations students between 2016-17 and 2020-21. However, the increase is greater for the province overall (11 percentage points), than for First Nations students (5 percentage

points), leading to an increased gap over time. Overall, more than half of Ontario students have averages between 80–100%, and just over one-third of First Nations students do. It should, however, be noted that

unlike credit accumulation, a measure that focuses on students who are struggling, there was not a significant COVID-related drop in the proportion of high achieving First Nations students in 2020-21.

FIGURE 7: Percentage of students with averages above 80% in Grade 9, 2016-17 to 2020-21, Ontario average, self-identified First Nations, and students supported through Education Services Agreement*



* This chart was produced by aggregating board-level data. In some cases, data privacy rules required suppression of data where there are fewer than 10 students in a board who meet the required characteristics. For those boards in this chart, where Ns were “<10,” we took the middle number and estimated it as 5.

Educational Attainment: Four- and Five-Year Graduation

A central measure of student success – and the success of school systems – is graduation from high school. High school graduation is deeply linked to a range of long-term outcomes for individuals: well-being (Canadian Council on Social Determinants of Health, 2015), earnings and employment (Card, 1999; “Post-Secondary Graduate Earnings,” n.d.; Statistics Canada, 2017). Higher graduation rates are also associated with many social goods, including stronger economies (Becker, 1993; Schultz, 1961) and higher levels of civic engagement (Turcotte, 2015). This critical measure of academic success is a primary indicator of academic achievement identified by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It is also a key progress indicator for the Government of Ontario.

In Ontario, a student is considered an on-time graduate if they receive an Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) within four or five years of starting Grade 9. However, Toronto-

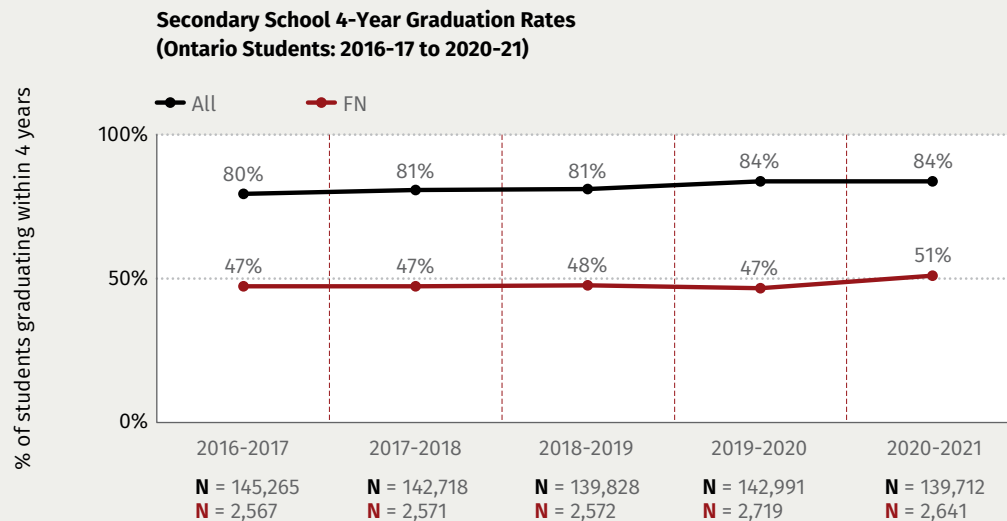
based research has found that students who graduate after five years are more likely to go on to college than to university, and are less likely to complete post-secondary (Brown et al., 2021; Brown & Tam, 2016).

Figure 8 compares the four-year graduation rates of First Nations students relative to provincial averages over the past five years. While there was a gradual growth between 2016-17 and 2020-21 in the proportion of

students graduating within four years of high school for both the overall population (from 80% to 84%) and First Nations students (from 47% to 51%), the gap between the two groups has remained significant and consistent (33 percentage points).

As shown in Figure 9, compared to the general population, a greater proportion of First Nations students graduate after five years rather than four years (9% versus 5% for the Ontario average).

FIGURE 8: Four-year graduation rate 2017-21, self-identified First Nations students and all Ontario students



Thus, according to the provincial standard for on-time graduation, the disparity between First Nations student graduation and Ontario averages is somewhat smaller, 29%.

Significant differences between regions and across boards

While the overall pattern of disparities in graduation between First Nations students and provincial averages is very clear, there are also significant differences between boards and

regions. As indicated in Figure 9, for example, in 2020-21, the gap was “only” 14 percentage points in Ontario’s Central region, where 79% of First Nations students (versus 93% of the Central Region average) graduate in five years. Similarly, if we examine one school board at a time, there are even greater significant differences. In 2020-21 in York Region, Halton, and Dufferin-Peel Catholic Boards, for example, the graduation rate for First Nations students was within five percentage points of board-wide

averages. For board-level data, please see Appendix 3.

Other schooling outcomes: Graduation after more than five years, and certificates

Some students will eventually graduate after more than five years, or achieve high school equivalency through adult education programs. It is clear that many educators of First Nations students work hard to develop a plan that leads to successful completion over a longer timeframe; these results are not routinely tracked for purposes of analyzing systemic gaps. This pattern appears to be more common in First Nations communities. It would be very interesting to understand the post-graduation pathways of those students.

There is a significant and worrying disproportionality in the rate at which First Nations students graduate with certificates rather than full diplomas. Ontario Secondary School Certificate can be granted, upon request, to students 18 years or older who are leaving school without having met all

FIGURE 9: Four- vs. five-year graduation rate, 2020-21, First Nations students vs. Ontario average

Secondary School Graduation Rates: 4-Year vs. 5-Year (Ontario Students: 2020-21)

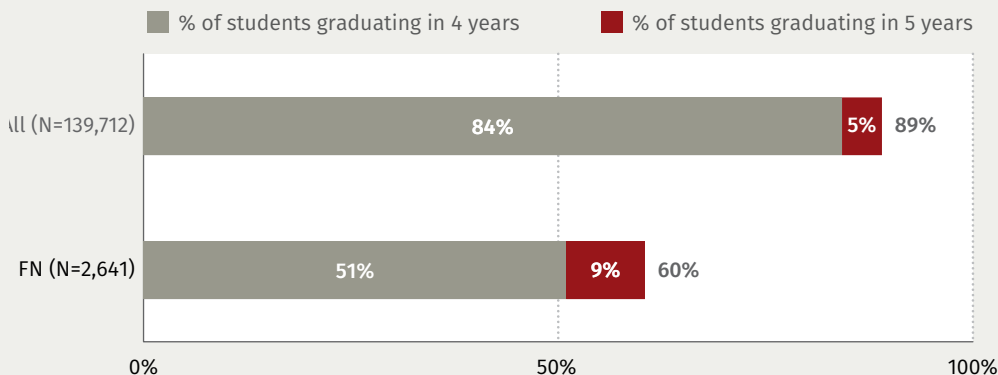
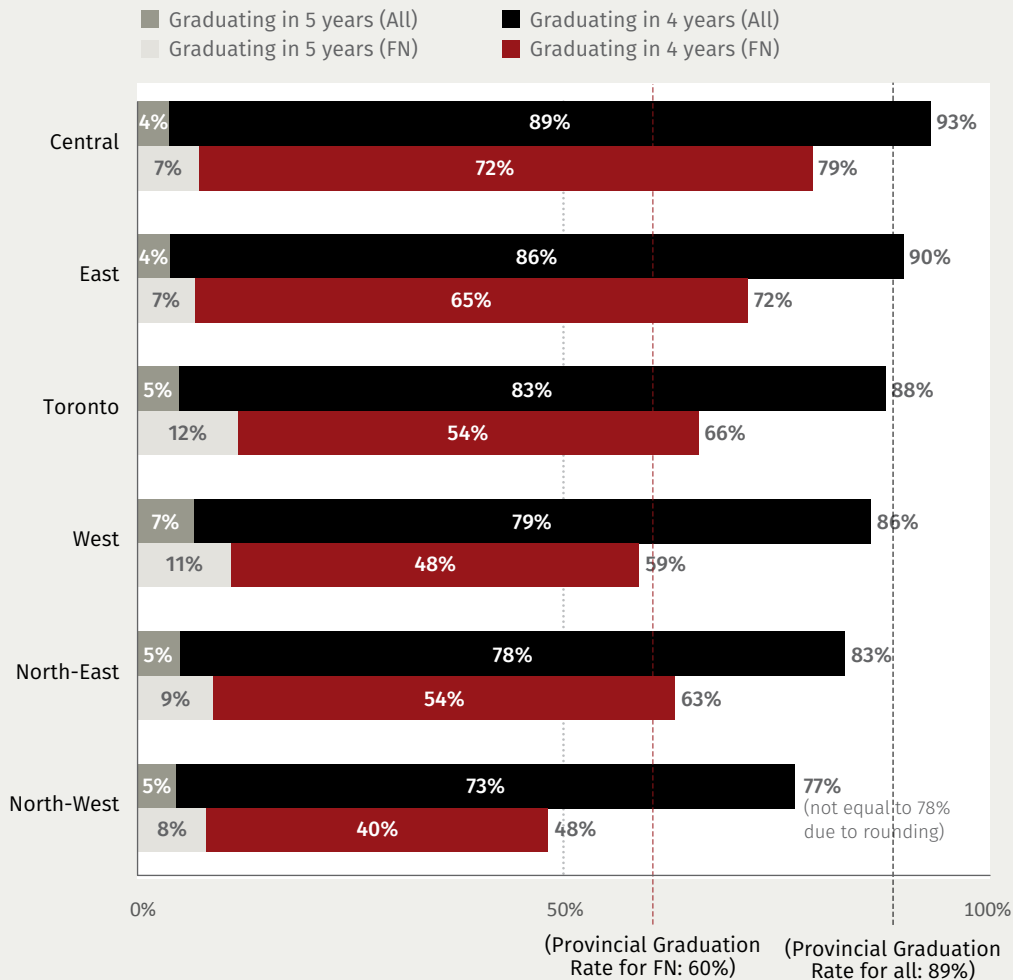


FIGURE 10. Four- and five-year graduation rate, 2020-21, First Nations students vs. Ontario average, by region

**Four-year and Five-year Graduation Rates by Region
All Students vs FN Students (2020-21)**



the requirements for a diploma but who have met some requirements in English, math, science, and history. It is likely that those graduating with certificates would be at a disadvantage in considering post-secondary programs and/or in the types of employment they could enter.

Self-identified First Nations students in provincially-funded schools are three times more likely to finish high school with a certificate than a diploma than the Ontario average (3% vs. 1%). The disparity has gotten worse, and is a matter of urgent concern.

Conclusions and Questions for Advocacy and Partnership

The data in this report – unsurprisingly – highlight major systemic gaps in outcomes for First Nations children in Ontario’s publicly funded schools. Eight years after the Truth and Reconciliation called for changes that would lead to gaps being closed in a generation, progress has been slow at best. With respect to many of the measures in this report, progress by First Nations students has been outstripped by progress for all Ontario students. This ongoing challenge has been exacerbated by the unequal educational devastation associated with COVID-19.

While there has been important work to expand Indigenous learning opportunities throughout the Ontario school system, including more responsive curriculum and new programs as well as renewed efforts to engage families and communities (Hodgson-Bautista & Hopson, 2023;

Ministry of Education, 2021), it is clear that more must be done to identify and overcome systemic barriers – especially the types of routine and taken-for-granted practices that constitute systemic discrimination. Further work is also required to improve relationships with families and communities. Akin to our understanding of the determinants of health, the determinants of educational success are also complex and interrelated; even the best schools are not a silver bullet, and schools cannot close these gaps alone. But they must play a leadership role within their span of control.

Achieving change will likely require additional resources, both financial and more complex ones, and greater accountability to First Nations communities.

This report is intended to start conversations. First Nations communities – and parents and caregivers of First Nations children and their allies – may want to consider asking the following questions with their local school boards and the provincial government.

- What percentage of school days have our children missed this year? Does your school and board have an attendance strategy in the wake of COVID-19? Has there been outreach to families and communities? Are there community partners who are working to help improve attendance? How can we help? We have identified an obstacle to attendance – can we work on it together?
- Are our children “on track” for graduation and post-secondary? If no, are there evidence-based

resources in this school that would support learning acceleration? Some of the most effective academic interventions are school-based, high frequency tutoring (Deitrichson et al., 2017; Nickow et al., 2020). There are tutoring funds available. Are those funds going to effective programs and to serve students with the greatest needs? Will they be extended until we are out of “educational long COVID”?

- Are our children on academic pathways that will allow the best chance to access post-secondary and/or good quality workplace opportunities?
- Are there lessons we could learn from school boards that are having greater success with graduation, credit accumulation and attendance?

Recommendations

The evidence provided in this report confirms the need to add the development of supports for improving attendance, achievement, credit accumulation and graduation rates to the activities of the First Nations Lifelong Learning Table (FNLLT).

The FNLLT is a bilateral process established between First Nations in Ontario and the Ministry of Education to increase the success and well-being for First Nation learners in both the provincially and federally funded education systems through a balanced, respectful, and collaborative relationship whereby collaborative work is planned, designed, implemented and regularly evaluated.

The current priority areas of the FNLLT include: Relationships; Community and Student Well-being; Languages and Culture; Curriculum; Information, Access and Accountability; and Policy Development. It is recommended that the FNLLT work with First Nations to develop supports for improving

attendance, credit accumulation and graduation rates as focused areas of activity under the Community and Student Well-being priority area.

It is also recommended that the evidence provided in these reports be widely used by First Nations, provincial school board entities, the Ministry of Education and the general public to inform agreements and policy and program development to address the reported inequities for First Nation learners.

APPENDIX 1:

Ontario Public School Enrolment Figures

TABLE 1: Ontario Public School Enrollment by Region and by Panel: All Students, First Nations Students, and Students Supported through Tuition Agreements with First Nations (2020-21)

| Ontario School Board Region | Total Student Population (Elementary and Secondary) | Total Number of Self-Identified First Nations Students | Total Number of Students Supported through Tuition Agreements with First Nations |
|--------------------------------|---|--|--|
| Central | 604,913 | 3,202 (0.5%) | 162 |
| East | 412,620 | 7,512 (1.8%) | 611-635 |
| North-East | 75,961 | 6,894 (9.1%) | 1,984-2,000 |
| North-West | 27,567 | 6,610 (24.0%) | 1,545 |
| Toronto | 359,561 | 1,847 (0.5%) | 1-9 |
| West | 544,641 | 8,518 (1.6%) | 1,388 |
| Provincial Total | 2,025,263 | 34,583 (1.7%) | ~5,715 (0.3%) |
| ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PANEL | | | |
| Central | 429,204 | 570-594 | 71-79 |
| East | 303,358 | 1,207-1,231 | 297-305 |
| North-East | 55,126 | 2,134-2,158 | 1,060-1,084 |
| North-West | 20,390 | 2,580 | 1,066 |
| Toronto | 271,400 | 95-111 | 2-18 |
| West | 393,835 | 1,398-1,422 | 437-445 |
| Provincial Total | 1,473,313 | ~8,042 (0.5%) | ~2,961 (0.2%) |

TABLE 1: Ontario Public School Enrollment by Region and by Panel: All Students, First Nations Students, and Students Supported through Tuition Agreements with First Nations (2020-21) *(continued)*

| Ontario School Board Region | Total Student Population (Elementary and Secondary) | Total Number of Self-Identified First Nations Students | Total Number of Students Supported through Tuition Agreements with First Nations |
|-------------------------------|--|--|--|
| SECONDARY SCHOOL PANEL | | | |
| Central | 199,926 | 728 | 148-156 |
| East | 133,290 | 1,429-1,445 | 538-554 |
| North-East | 23,632 | 1,980-1,996 | 677-693 |
| North-West | 9,020 | 1,446 | 878 |
| Toronto | 109,791 | 38 | 0 |
| West | 178,077 | 2,347-2,355 | 1,383-1,391 |
| Provincial Total | 653,736 | ~7,998 (1.2%) | ~3,638 (0.5%) |

TABLE 2: Ontario Grade 9 Students and Graduates (4–5 Years) by Region: All students, and First Nations Students (2020-21)

| Ontario School Board Region | Grade 9 Students (2020-21) | | Students from 2016-17 Cohort Who Have Graduated | |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------|--|---|--|
| | Total Population | Total Number of Self-Identified First Nations Students | Total Population | Total Number of Self-Identified First Nations Students |
| Central | 40,496 | 218–232 | 43,731 | 234–250 |
| East | 27,909 | 561–601 | 27,621 | 523–563 |
| North-East | 5,266 | 475–491 | 5,097 | 464–504 |
| North-West | 1,965 | 472 | 2,104 | 564 |
| Toronto | 21,329 | 111–127 | 23,795 | 88–104 |
| West | 37,649 | 725–765 | 37,364 | 786–818 |
| Provincial Total | 134,614 | ~2,621 (1.9%) | 125,440 | 2,339 (1.9%) |

APPENDIX 2:

**Ontario Public Elementary School Attendance
by School Board and Region: All Students and
First Nations Students (2021-22)**

FIGURE 11: Elementary Attendance Rates for School Boards in Central and Toronto Regions (2021-22)

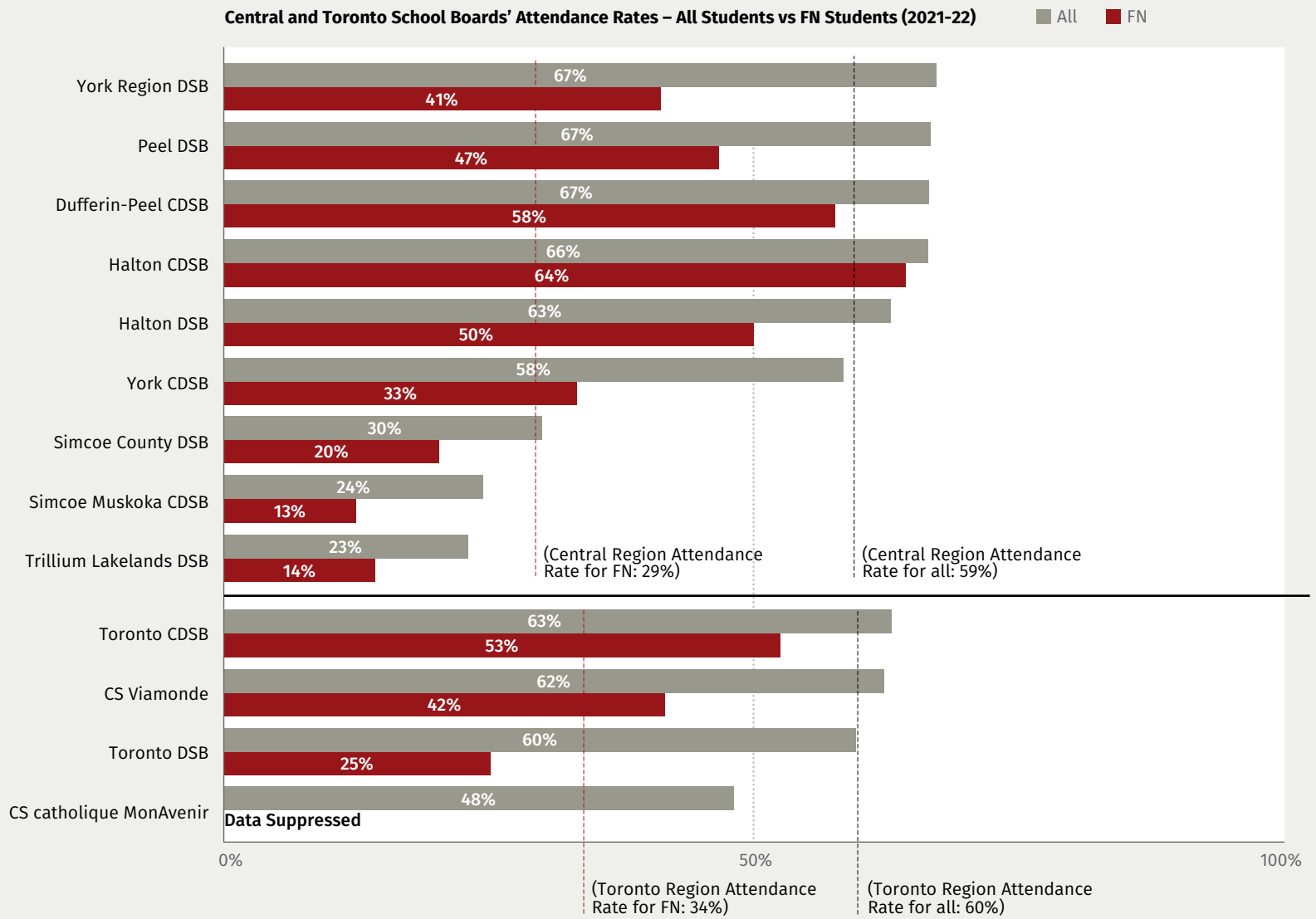


FIGURE 12: Elementary Attendance Rates for School Boards in East Region (2021-22)

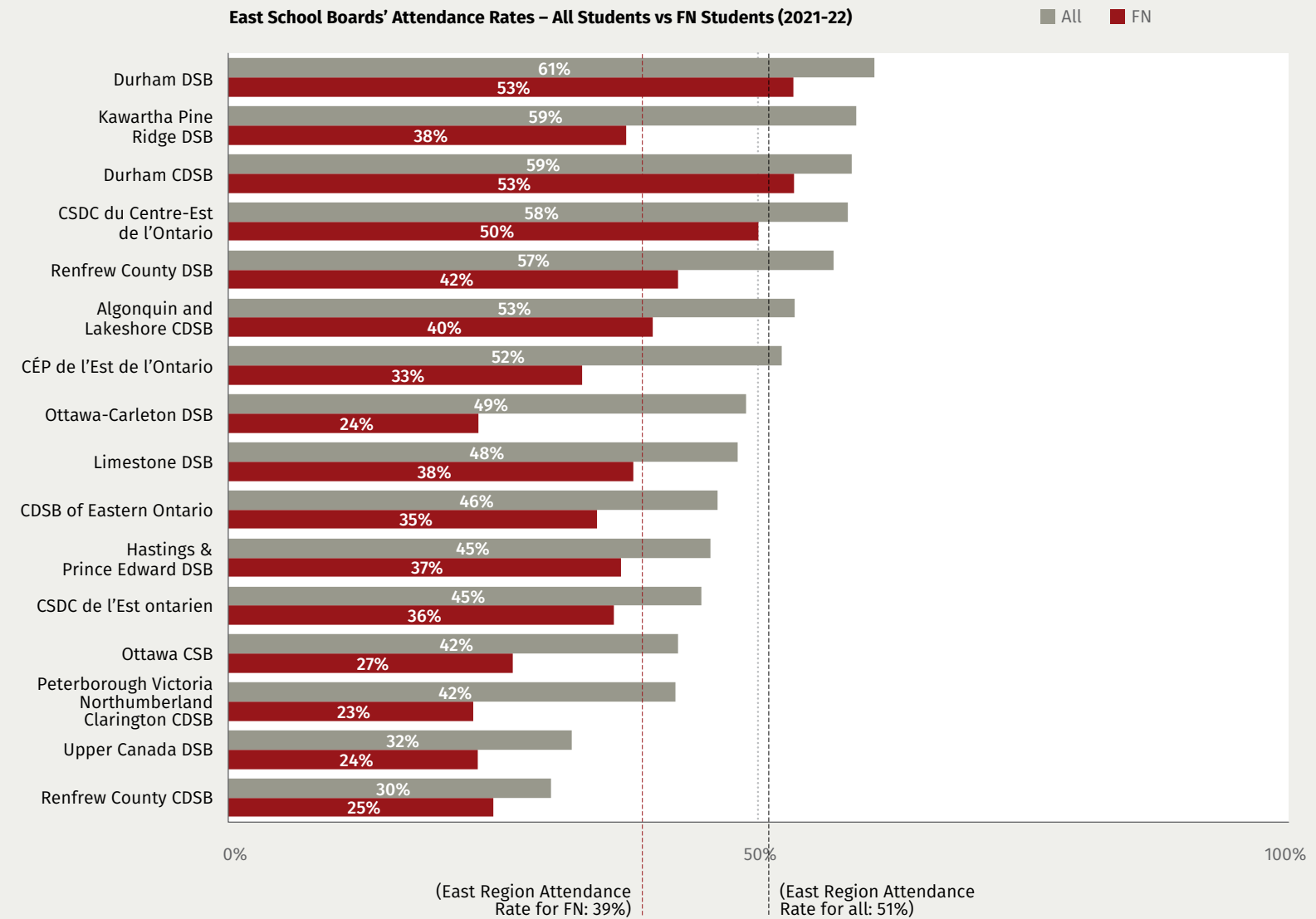


FIGURE 13: Elementary Attendance Rates for School Boards in North-East Region (2021-22)

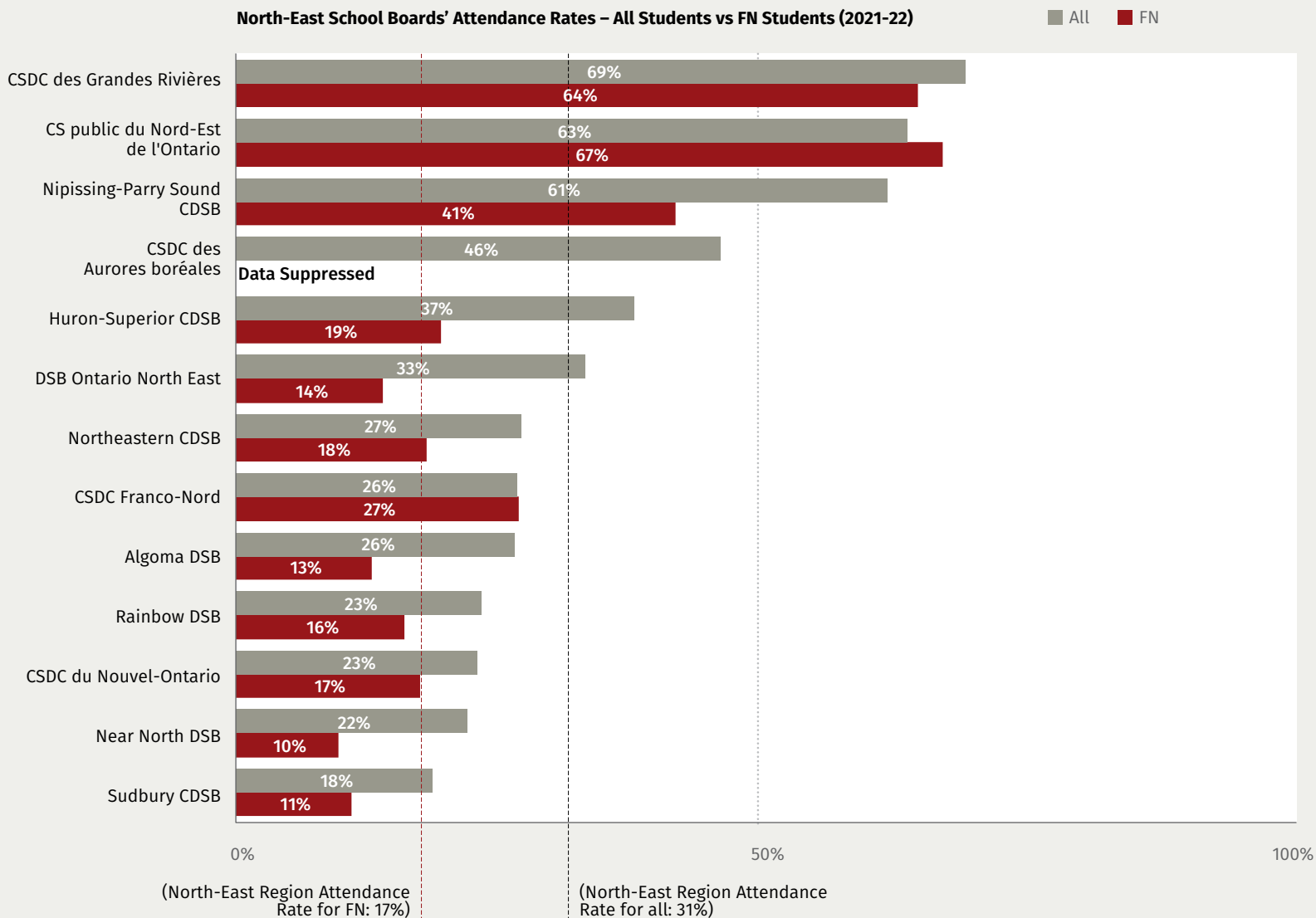


FIGURE 14: Elementary Attendance Rates for School Boards in North-West Region (2021-22)

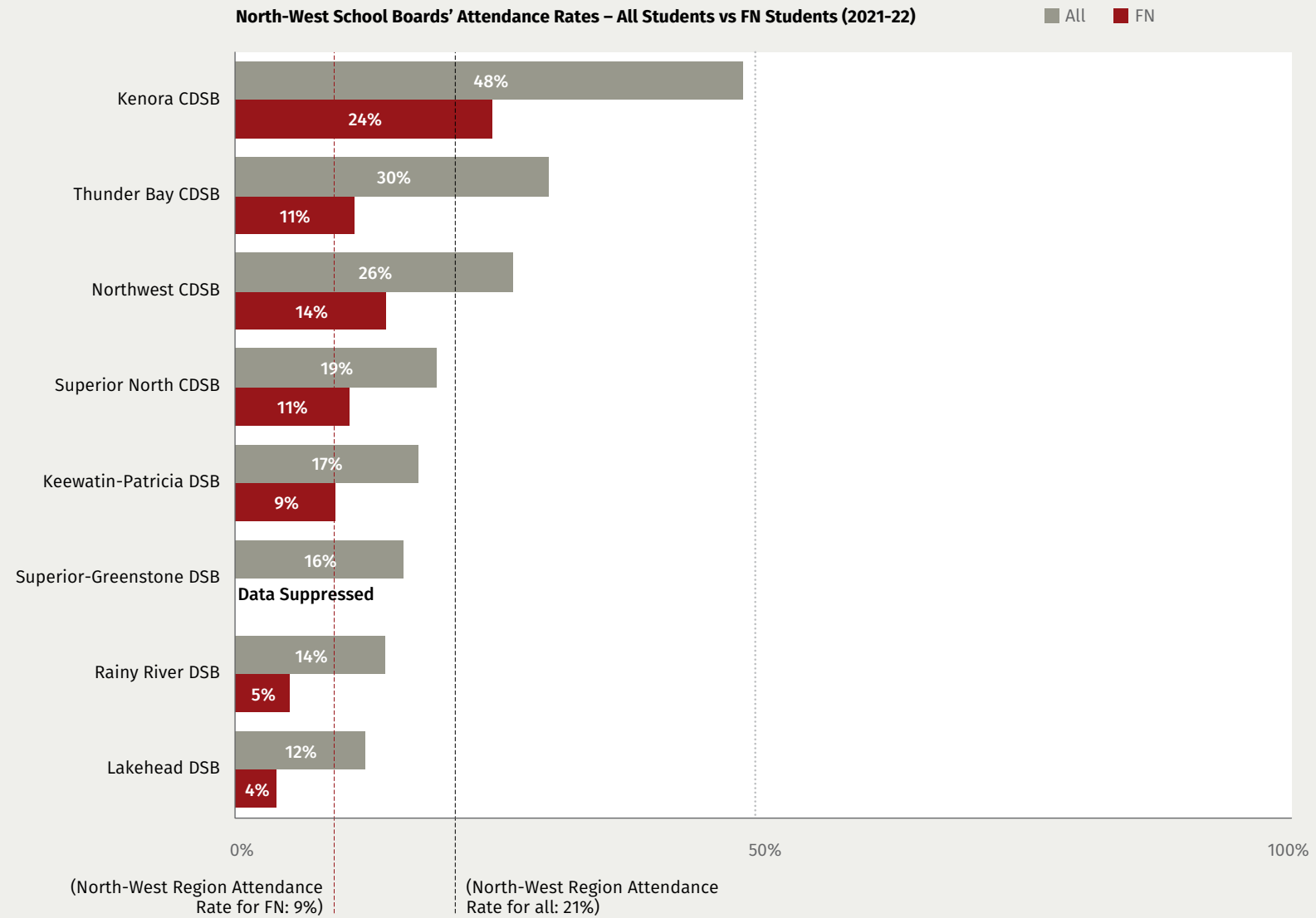
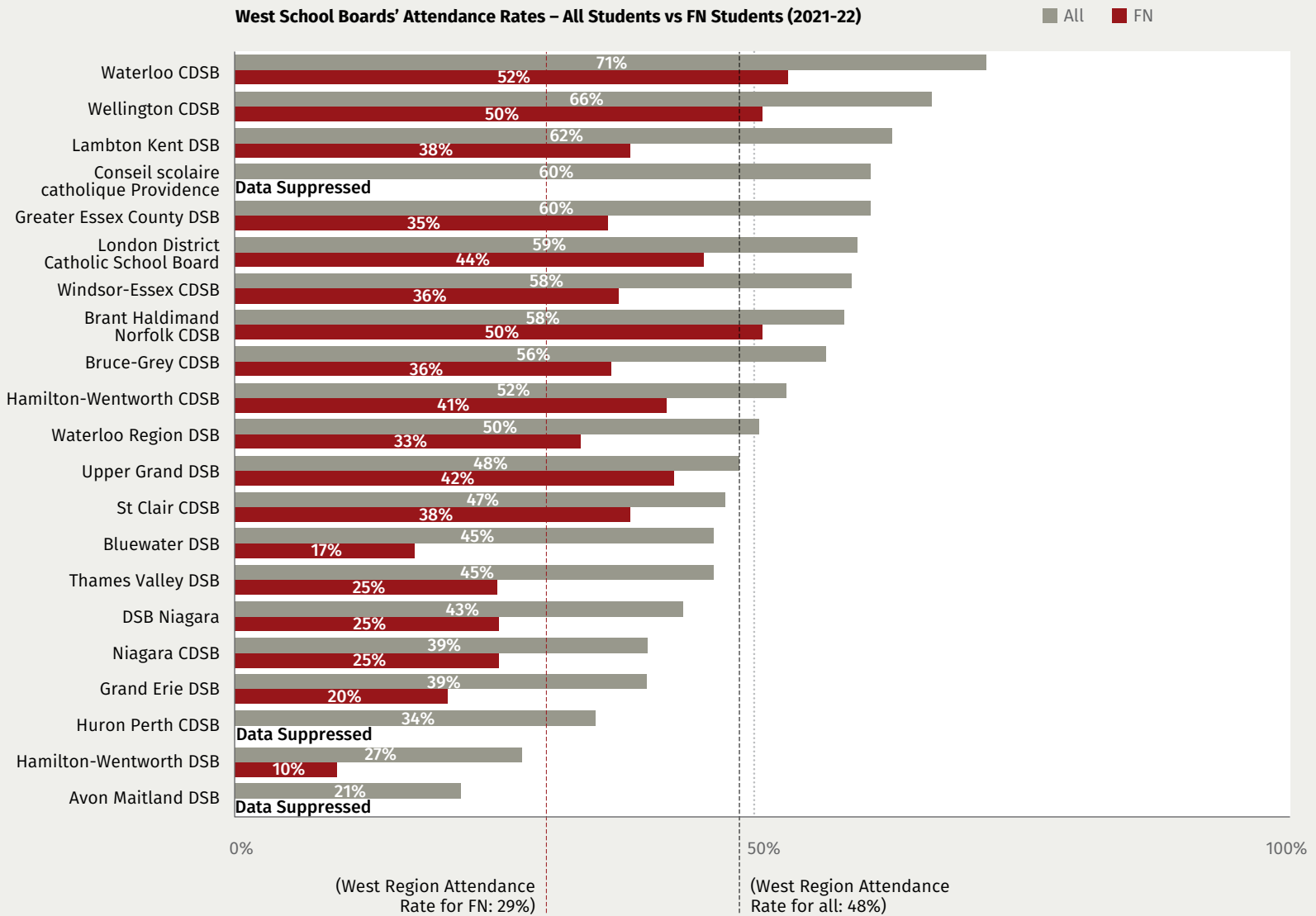


FIGURE 15: Elementary Attendance Rates for School Boards in West Region (2021-22)



APPENDIX 3:

**Graduation Rates (4-5 Year) by School Board
and Region: All Students and First Nations
Students (2020-21)**

FIGURE 16: Ontario Graduation Rates for School Boards in Central and Toronto Regions (2020-21)

Central and Toronto School Boards' Graduation Rates (4 and 5 Years) – All Students vs FN Students (2020-21)

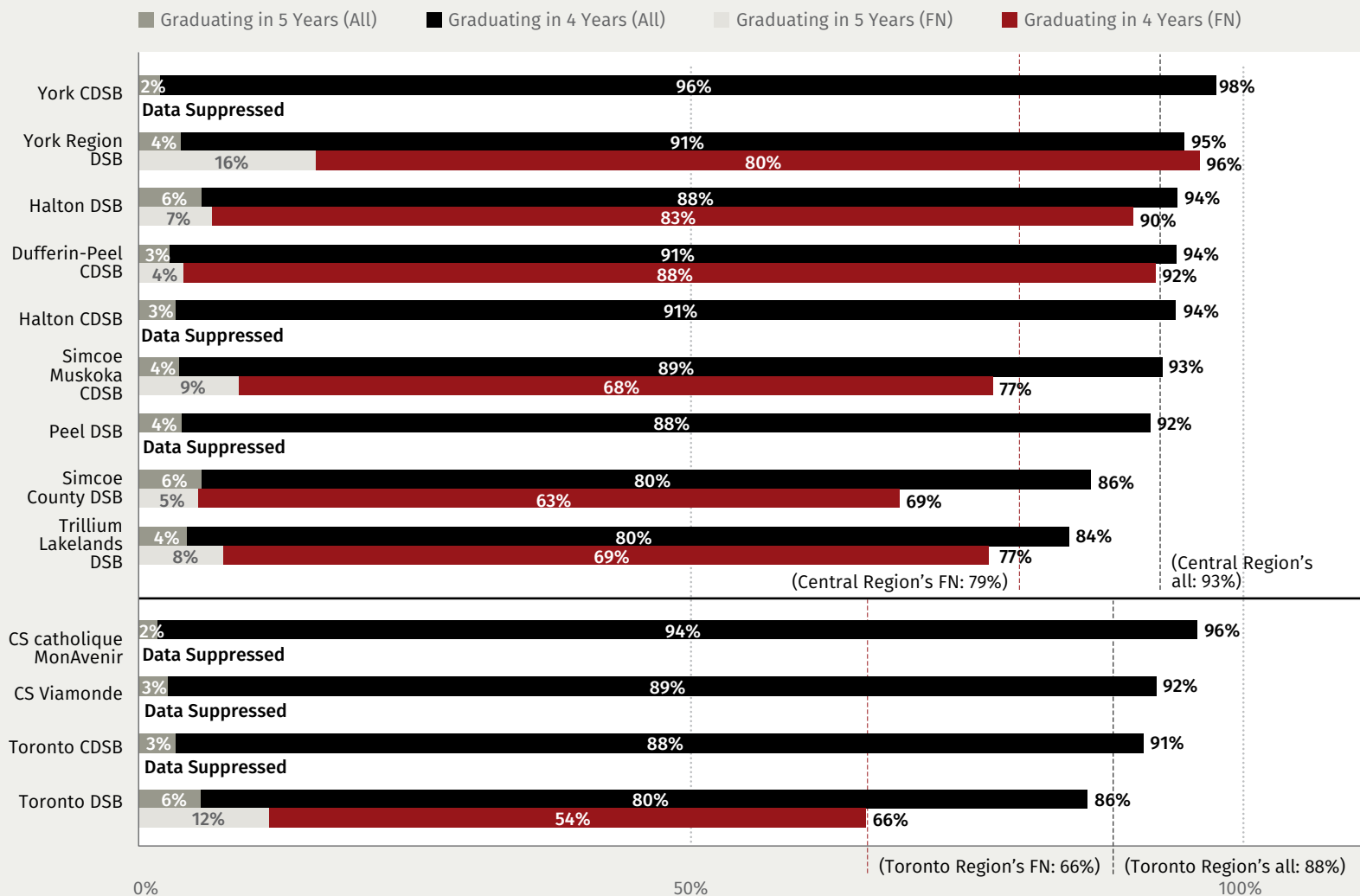


FIGURE 17: Ontario Graduation Rates for School Boards in East Region (2020-21)

East School Boards' Graduation Rates (4 and 5 Years) – All Students vs FN Students (2020-21)

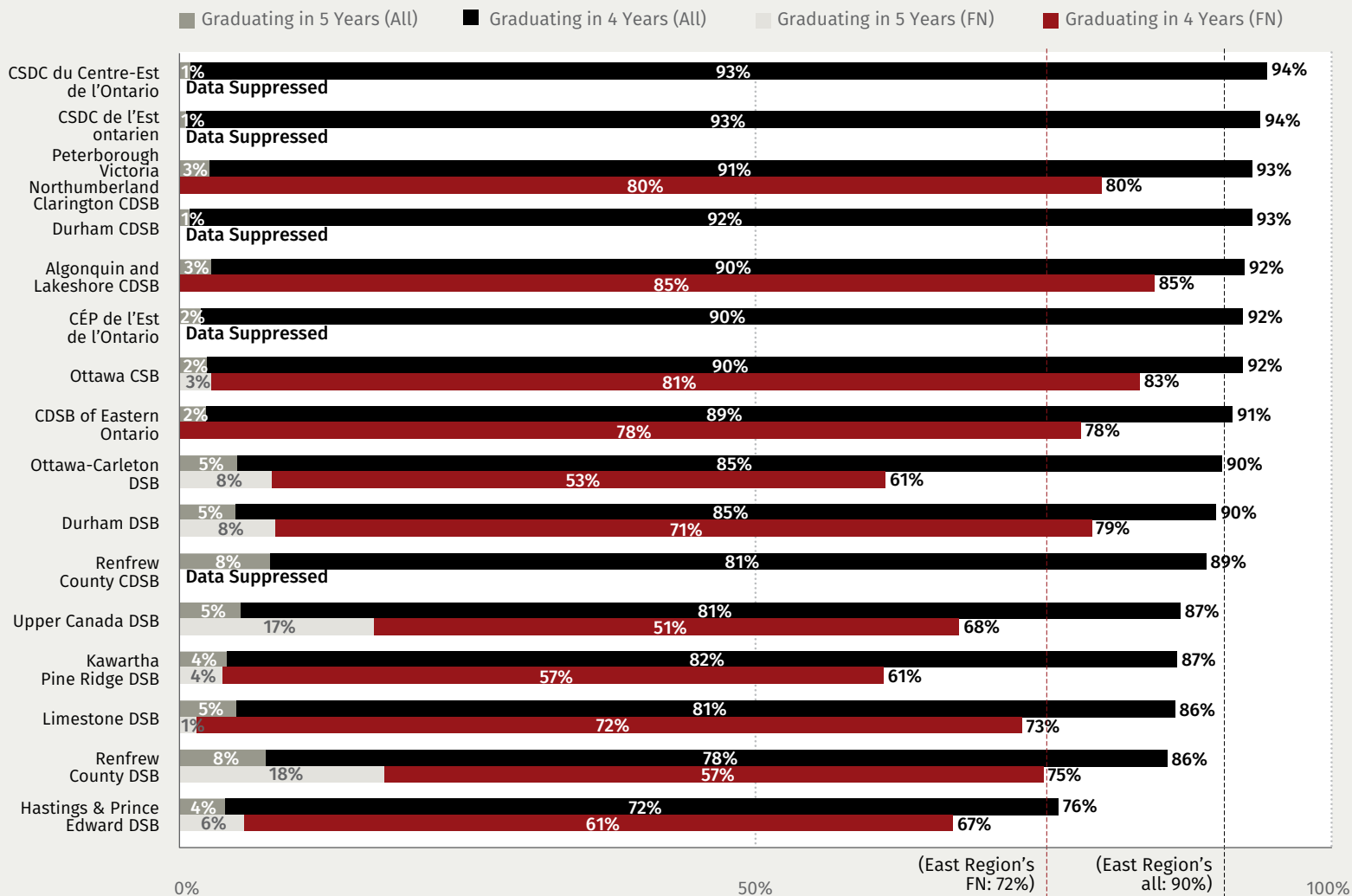


FIGURE 18: Ontario Graduation Rates for School Boards in North-East Region (2020-21)

North-East School Boards' Graduation Rates (4 and 5 Years) – All Students vs FN Students (2020-21)

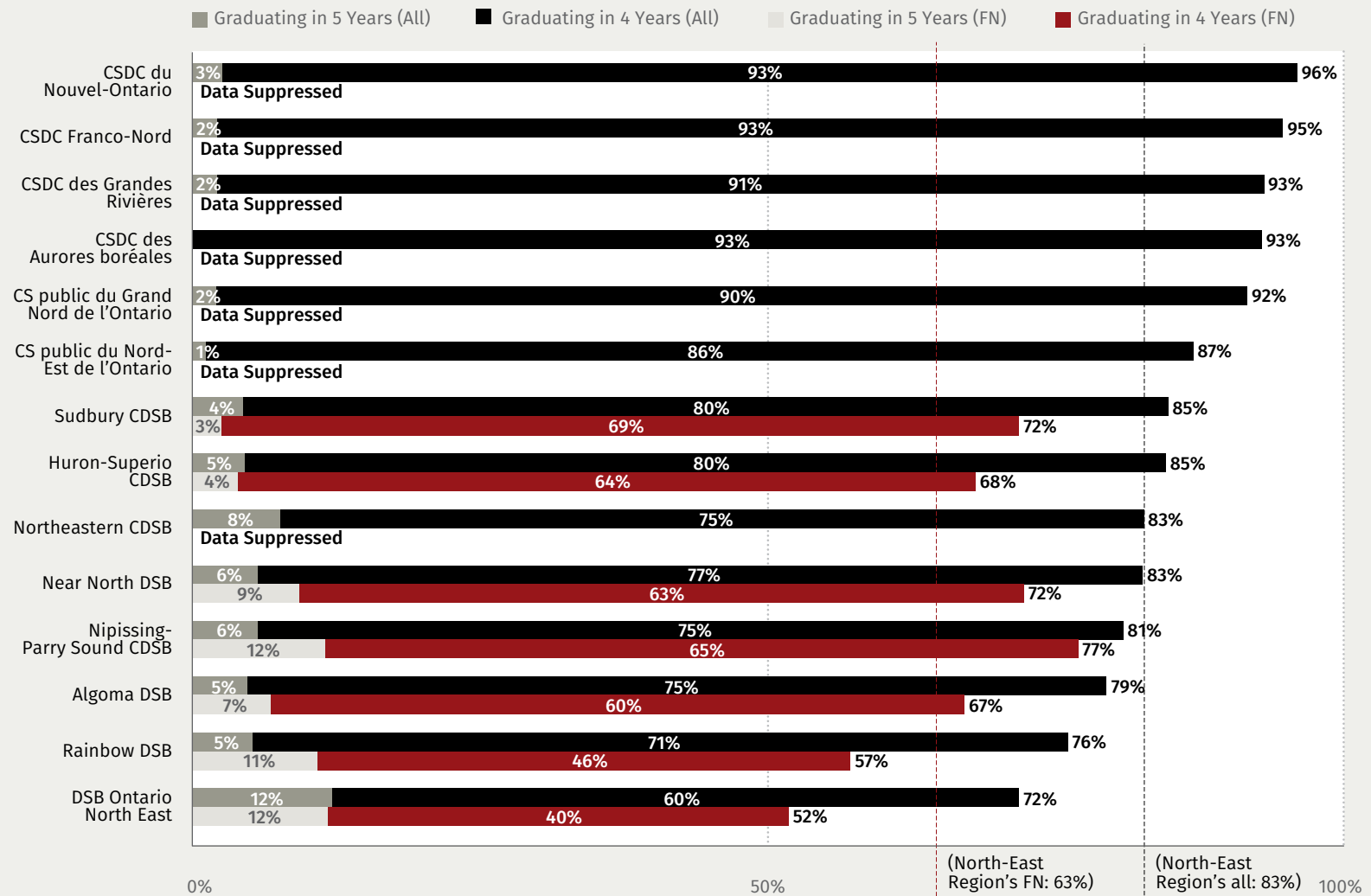


FIGURE 19: Ontario Graduation Rates for School Boards in North-West Region (2020-21)

North-East School Boards' Graduation Rates (4 and 5 Years) – All Students vs FN Students (2020-21)

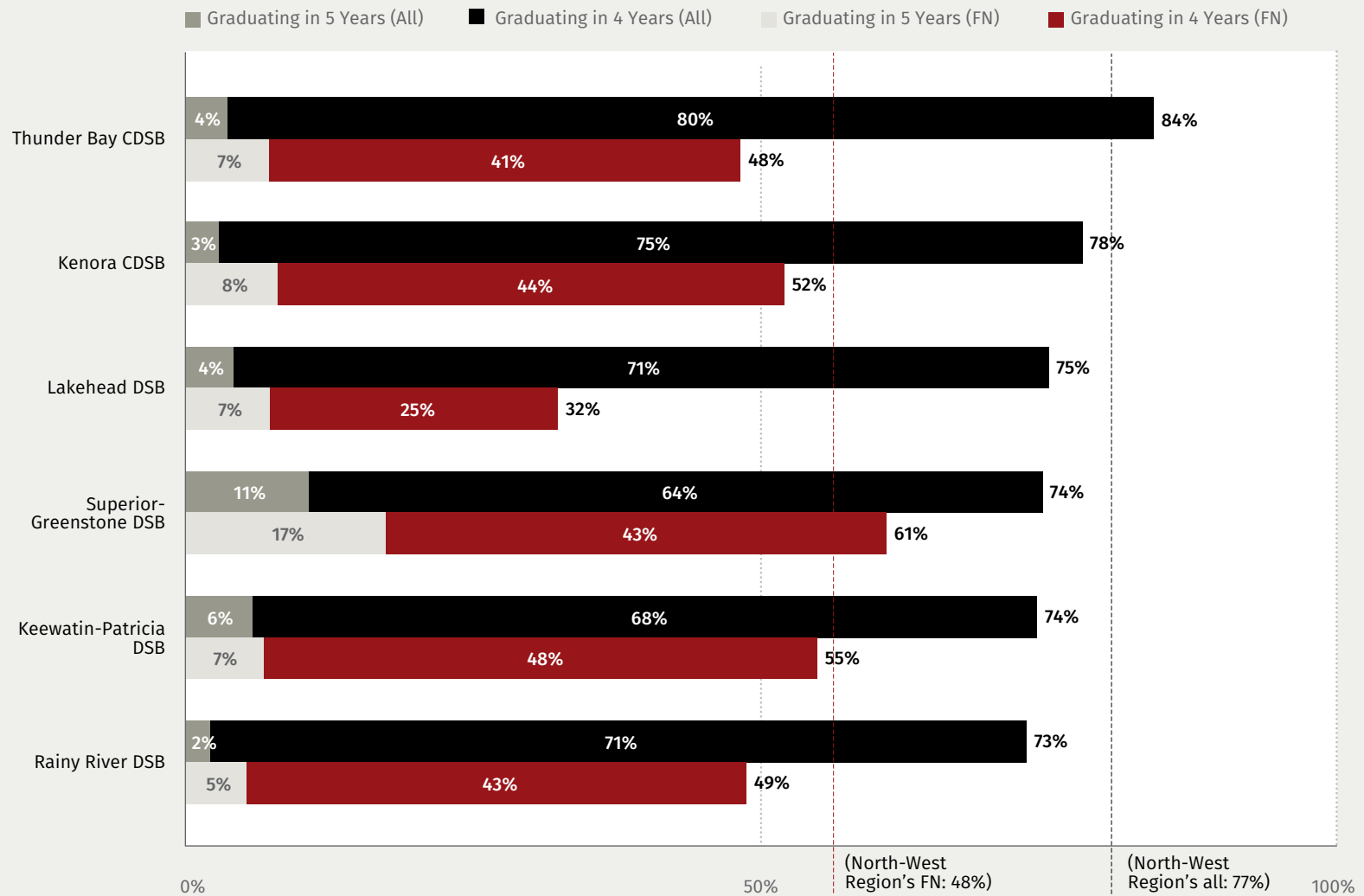
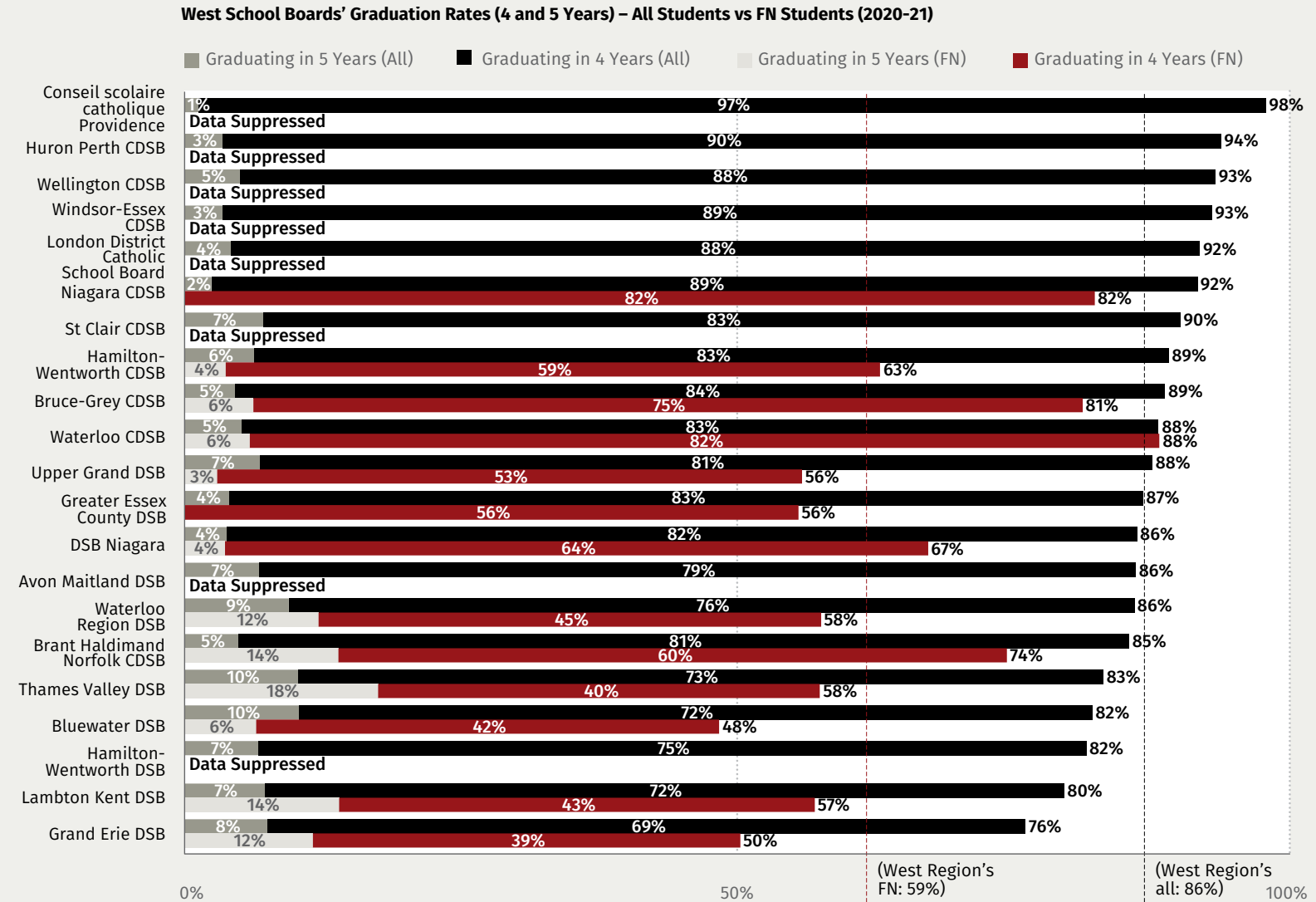


FIGURE 20: Ontario Graduation Rates for School Boards in West Region (2020-21)



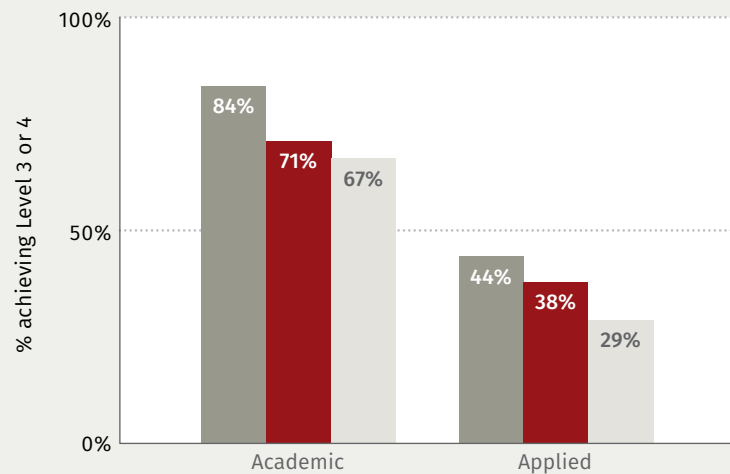
Appendix 4:

Grade 9 and 10 EQAO scores in 2018-19

FIGURE 21: Percentage of students meeting the provincial standard in EQAO Grade 9 mathematics assessment, 2018-19 – academic and applied, Ontario, First Nations, and Tuition-paying students

Ontario 2018-19 EQAO Grade 9 Math Test Results: All, First Nations, and Tuition-paying

| | | |
|------------------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| ■ All | ■ FN | ■ Tuition-paying |
| N = 100,425 (Academic) | N = 912 (Academic) | N = 136 (Academic) |
| N = 33,573 (Applied) | N = 1,137 (Applied) | N = 318 (Applied) |

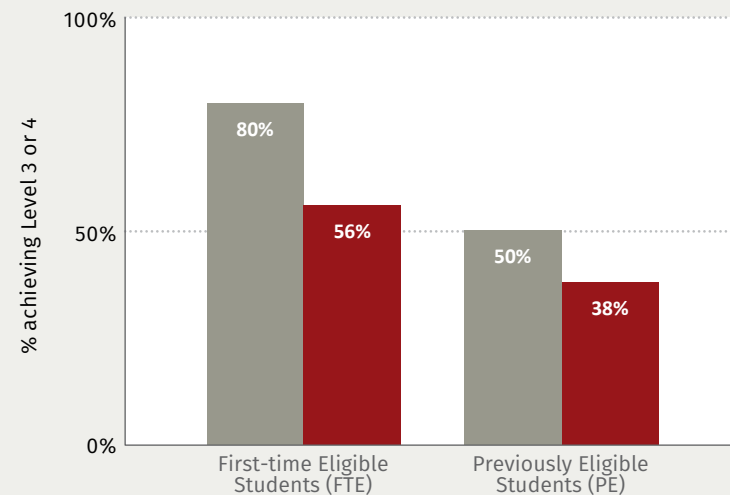


Suppressed data for less than 10 students was indicated as 5 when producing this chart

FIGURE 22: Percentage of students meeting the provincial standard in EQAO Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test, 2018-19, Ontario and First Nations students

Ontario 2018-19 EQAO OSSLT Test Results: All and First Nations

| | |
|-------------------|-----------------|
| ■ All | ■ FN |
| N = 124,251 (FTE) | N = 1,954 (FTE) |
| N = 26,499 (PE) | N = 765 (PE) |



Suppressed data for less than 10 students was indicated as 5 when producing this chart

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