

# Ontario, Canada

Ministry of Education

## Introduction

Ontario is a province within Canada, one of 13 provinces and territories in the country. Ontario comprises about 38 percent of Canada’s population, has approximately 14 million inhabitants, and is multilingual.<sup>1</sup> The official language of the province is English, and the languages of instruction are English and French.<sup>a</sup> Approximately 67 percent of Ontarians have English as their mother tongue,<sup>b</sup> 4 percent have French, and 27 percent have a first language other than English or French.<sup>2</sup> First Nation, Métis, and Inuit populations comprise about 3 percent of Ontario’s population.<sup>3</sup> Within Canada, education is under the exclusive jurisdiction of each province or territory.

## Overview of Education System

In Ontario, education is governed by the Education Act and its regulations, which set out duties and responsibilities of the Minister and Ministry of Education, school boards, school board supervisory officers, principals, teachers, early childhood educators, parents, and students.<sup>4</sup> By law, the Ministry of Education has the overall responsibility for developing curricula; allocating funds to school boards; setting policies and guidelines; and setting requirements for student diplomas and certificates. Policy and program requirements are set out in a 2016 document called *Ontario Schools, Kindergarten to Grade 12: Policy and Program Requirements*.<sup>5</sup>

Elementary (Grades 1 to 8) and secondary (Grades 9 to 12) public education is free for all students who qualify as resident students of a school board. Students who turn 6 years old before December 31 can begin school in September of that year. Parents may choose to enroll their children in the publicly funded education system in Year One of Kindergarten (commonly known as junior Kindergarten) at age 4 and/or in the second year of Kindergarten (commonly known as senior Kindergarten) at age 5. Although Kindergarten is not mandatory, about 83 percent of eligible children were enrolled in the 2020–2021 academic year.<sup>c</sup> With the passage of the Education Amendment Act (Learning to 18) in 2006, the ages for compulsory education are 6 to 18.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>a</sup> As per the Education Act, English as a language of instruction may include American Sign Language, and French as a language of instruction may include Quebec Sign Language (*Langues des signes québécoise*).

<sup>b</sup> Statistics Canada defines “mother tongue” as the first language learned at home in childhood and still understood by the person at the time the data was collected. If the person no longer understands the first language learned, the mother tongue is the second language learned. For a person who learned two languages at the same time in early childhood, the mother tongue is the language this person spoke most often at home before starting school.

<sup>c</sup> As reported by schools through the Ontario School Information System, Preliminary 2020-2021 as of August 5, 2022, with all schools with completed data submissions.

Approximately 93 percent of Ontario’s students are enrolled in publicly funded schools.<sup>d</sup> Ontario has 72 district school boards: 31 English public, 29 English Catholic, 4 French public, and 8 French Catholic. During the 2020–2021 academic year, there were more than 2 million students in the publicly funded education system, enrolled in about 4,000 elementary and 900 secondary schools. There were approximately 89,000 full-time equivalent teachers employed in elementary schools and 42,000 full-time equivalent teachers employed in secondary schools.<sup>e</sup> Of the 2 million students, about one-third were enrolled in the province’s Catholic schools and two-thirds were enrolled in public schools. In 2020–2021, approximately 5.5 percent of all students across the publicly funded education system were enrolled in French-language schools.

Within Ontario, there are four English-language provincial schools and three English-language demonstration schools that serve students who are Deaf, hard of hearing, blind, Deafblind, or who have low vision or severe learning disabilities. Additionally, there is a French-language provincial school for children who are Deaf, hard of hearing, blind, Deafblind, or who have low vision, as well as a demonstration school for students who have severe learning disabilities.

Students who are unable to attend school settings because of their primary need for care or treatment, or because of a court order to serve a custody or detention sentence, may be enrolled in programs wherein education continues to be provided while the students receive treatment or care. In addition to publicly funded schools and programs, there are approximately 1,305 Ministry-recognized private schools that do not receive government funding.<sup>f</sup>

### Use and Impact of PIRLS

As a high-performing education jurisdiction, Ontario’s Ministry of Education recognizes the importance of being evidence-driven and data-informed. Ontario’s participation in PIRLS is part of the province’s effort to improve the education system’s ability to support student learning and achievement alongside valuable information gleaned from provincial and classroom assessments. Participation in PIRLS has given policymakers, curriculum specialists, and researchers a dynamic picture of how education policies and practices are implemented around the world, providing an invaluable perspective from which to consider ongoing education improvement. PIRLS’s comparative measures of reading achievement and related contextual data enable the Ministry to compare results over time in a consistent and objective manner and inform curriculum revisions to ensure international relevance and leadership. Collectively, Ontario’s participation in PIRLS, along with other international, national, provincial, and classroom assessments, help to build the public’s confidence in the Ontario public education system.

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<sup>d</sup> All data in this paragraph are as reported by schools through the Ontario School Information System, Preliminary 2020-2021 as of August 5, 2022, with all schools with completed data submissions.

<sup>e</sup> Figures include long-term equivalent teachers.

<sup>f</sup> As reported by schools through the Ontario School Information System, Preliminary 2020-2021 as of August 5, 2022, with all schools with completed data submissions.

## The Language/Reading Curriculum in Primary Grades<sup>9</sup>

Ontario’s reading program is set out in Ontario’s provincial language curriculum policy: The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 1–8: Language (2006) for the English-language school system<sup>7</sup> and *Le curriculum de l’Ontario de la 1re à la 8e année, Français (2006)* for the French-language school system.<sup>8</sup> District school boards are responsible for the implementation of the provincial curriculum policy at the local level. The 2006 Ontario language curriculum documents for Grades 1 to 8 are based on the belief that literacy is critical to responsible and productive citizenship and that all students can become literate. The curriculum states that successful language learners:

- Understand that language learning is a necessary, life enhancing, and reflective process
- Communicate (e.g., read, listen, view, speak, write, and represent) effectively and with confidence
- Make meaningful connections with other students, the ideas they encounter in texts, and the world around them
- Think critically with an understanding that all texts advance a point of view that must be recognized, questioned, assessed, and evaluated
- Appreciate the cultural impact and aesthetic power of texts
- Use language to interact and connect with individuals and communities, for personal growth and for active participation as world citizens

For Ontario’s English-language school system, the Language curriculum is organized into four broad areas of learning, or strands:

- **Oral Communication.** This strand focuses on the identification and development of the skills and strategies effective listeners and speakers use to understand and interact with others. It also emphasizes the use of higher-order thinking skills to stimulate students’ interest and engage them in their own learning.
- **Reading.** This strand helps students learn to read with understanding, to read critically, to become familiar with various text forms and their characteristic elements, and to recognize the function and effects of various text features and stylistic devices. It helps students understand that reading is a process of constructing meaning and equips them with the strategies that good readers use to understand and appreciate what they read.
- **Writing.** This strand focuses on the elements of effective writing (ideas/content, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, language conventions, and presentation) and on the stages of the recursive writing process (planning for writing, drafting, revising, editing and proofreading, and publishing).
- **Media Literacy.** This strand focuses on helping students develop the skills required to understand, create, and critically interpret media texts. It examines how images (both moving and still), sound, and words are used, independently and in combination, to create meaning.

<sup>9</sup> In Ontario, “primary grades” refer to Grades 1 to 3. Fourth grade is part of the “junior grades,” which in Ontario refers to Grades 4 to 6.

It explores the use and significance of particular conventions and techniques in the media and considers the roles of the viewer and the producer in constructing meaning in media texts.

Two sets of expectations are listed for each grade in each strand—overall and specific expectations. The overall expectations describe in general terms the knowledge and skills that students are expected to demonstrate by the end of each grade. The specific expectations describe the expected knowledge and skills in greater detail for each of the overall expectations. The overall expectations remain the same from Grades 1 to 8, whereas the content of the specific expectations differs from grade to grade, reflecting the development of skills, knowledge, and understanding of students through the elementary years.

Of relevance to the PIRLS assessment are the expectations across the four strands for the junior division, Grades 4 to 6. These expectations focus on students' ability to use their knowledge and skills in listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing, and representing to understand, critically analyze, and communicate a broad range of information and ideas from and about their multicultural multimedia environment. Junior students' language knowledge comes from their life experiences and prior knowledge and from the foundational language knowledge and skills acquired in the primary school years (i.e., Grades 1 to 3). The expectations in the junior years build upon this foundation.

While the overall expectations for the Reading strand are described below, all four areas of learning are interrelated. The overall expectations for Reading state that students will be able to:

- Read and demonstrate an understanding of a variety of literary, graphic, and informational texts using a range of strategies to construct meaning
- Recognize a variety of text forms, text features, and stylistic elements and demonstrate understanding of how they help communicate meaning
- Use knowledge of words and cueing systems to read fluently
- Reflect on and identify personal strengths as readers, areas for improvement, and helpful strategies before, during, and after reading a text

The corresponding curriculum for the French-language school system was developed, implemented, and revised in parallel with the English-language curriculum with some distinguishing characteristics. Like the English-language curriculum, *Le curriculum de l'Ontario de la 1re à la 8e année - Français* uses the three strands of *communication orale* (Oral Communication), *lecture* (Reading), and *écriture* (Writing); however, *l'étude des médias* (Media Literacy) is integrated within these three strands rather than be a distinct strand. Additionally, in the French-language curriculum, the process of reading is subdivided further into *prélecture* (before reading), *lecture* (during reading), and *réaction à la lecture* components (after reading), whereas in the English-language document, the concepts of before, during, and after reading are integrated into the overall expectation related to metacognition. The French-language education

system also has a distinct policy, *L'aménagement linguistique*,<sup>9</sup> for Ontario's French-language schools and Francophone community that, with respect to reading, focuses on achieving optimal oral and written language acquisition, and on integrating cultural experiences into daily life within the classroom and at school. Additionally, there is a distinct provincial curriculum policy, *Le curriculum de l'Ontario de la 1re à la 8e année, Actualisation linguistique en français, 2010 (ALF)*,<sup>10</sup> that is intended to promote, enhance, and expand the use of French language and culture in a minority setting in all spheres of activity.<sup>h</sup>

## Reading Instruction in the Elementary Grades

### Instructional Materials

Teachers in Ontario use different types of learning resources to support their instructional practice and meet the needs of students as they learn the provincial curriculum. Textbooks undergo a stringent evaluation process to determine whether they meet government requirements. Approved textbooks are added to the Trillium List, a compilation of titles that have been approved by the Ministry of Education for school board acquisition. Textbooks must support at least 85 percent of the curriculum in addition to the philosophy and intent of the curriculum to be approved.

### Use of Technology

The Ministry provides Ontario's publicly funded school boards access to secure learning management systems: the English-language Virtual Learning Environment and the French-language *Environnement d'Apprentissage Virtuel*. Learning management system tools, such as discussion boards, assignment folders, and portfolios, are used by educators to support virtual classrooms for online,<sup>i</sup> remote,<sup>j</sup> and blended<sup>k</sup> learning. The Ministry provides funding for a Technology Enabled Learning and Teaching (TELT) Contact for English-language school boards and a *Personne-Ressource en Apprentissage et Enseignement par la Technologie* (PRAET) for French-language school boards through the Program Leadership Grant of the Grants for Student Needs. The TELT Contact and PRAET support educators in effectively using the Virtual Learning Environment and *Environnement d'Apprentissage Virtuel*.

<sup>h</sup> Sample activities may include initiatives intended to enrich the lives of students by promoting and expanding the Francophone milieu in which the students are educated to meet their linguistic, educational, and cultural needs.

<sup>i</sup> Based on *Policy/Program Memorandum (PPM) 167: Online Learning Graduation Requirement*, online learning refers to learning that is delivered entirely using the internet and does not require students to be physically present with one another or with their educator in the school.

<sup>j</sup> Based on *Policy/Program Memorandum (PPM) 164: Requirements for Remote Learning*, remote learning refers to learning that occurs when classes are taught at a distance and when students and educators are not in a conventional classroom setting. Remote learning takes place in times of extended interruption to in-person learning, for example, as a result of a pandemic or natural disaster. Classes can be synchronous or asynchronous and can be taught online through a Learning Management System (LMS) or by using videoconferencing tools. In some cases, they may be delivered through emails, print materials, broadcast media, or telephone calls.

<sup>k</sup> According to *Ontario Schools* (2016), blended learning refers to the use of digital learning resources in a physical classroom setting where students are face to face with one another and with their teacher. Blended learning can involve the use of either just a few digital resources or a wide range of tools, games, and other digital resources to support learning.

Recognizing that broadband is foundational to supporting digital learning and the development of digital skills, the Ministry has made significant investments to improve internet access for all students and educators in publicly funded schools to enable access to materials not available locally, connect with subject matter experts, and collaborate on projects with students anywhere in the world.

### Second Language Instruction

English language learners are students whose first language is a language other than English or is a type of English that is significantly different from the type used for instruction in Ontario's schools.<sup>1</sup> The classroom teacher, the English as a Second Language or English Literacy Development teacher (where available), and other school staff share the responsibility for the English-language development of these students. Teachers adapt the instructional program to facilitate the success of English language learners (ELLs) in their classrooms by modifying some or all of the subject expectations using a variety of instructional strategies and learning resources and implementing appropriate assessment accommodations. Volunteers and peers also may help support these students.

Ontario has a policy for ELLs and two programs to support them.<sup>11</sup> The English as a Second Language program provides support to students in Kindergarten to twelfth grade, and the English Literacy Development program is for students in Grades 3 to 12 with limited prior schooling. The Ministry also has developed three research-based resources to support ELLs: *Supporting English Language Learners in Kindergarten: A Practical Guide for Ontario Educators*;<sup>12</sup> *Supporting English Language Learners: A Practical Guide for Ontario Educators, Grades 1 to 8*;<sup>13</sup> and, for students requiring an English Literacy Development program, *Supporting English Language Learners with Limited Prior Schooling: A Practical Guide for Ontario Educators, Grades 3 to 12*.<sup>14</sup> These guides assist educators in understanding the needs of ELLs. Additionally, a guide called *Steps to English Proficiency* is a framework for assessing and monitoring the language acquisition and literacy development of ELLs across the Ontario curriculum.<sup>15</sup> This research-based resource supports educators in assessing students, making appropriate decisions regarding student placement, and adapting the Ontario curriculum expectations in response to students' learning progress.

A distinct set of documents and resources support French language learners in French-language schools. French language learners are students from families where English or another language is the predominant language of communication at home. The Kindergarten program, developed in 2016, provides specific expectations that support differentiated instruction for all French-language students, including French language learners.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> English language learners may require focused education supports to assist them in attaining proficiency in English. These students may be Canadian born or may have recently arrived from other countries. They come from diverse backgrounds and school experiences and have a wide variety of strengths and needs.

The curriculum policy *Actualisation linguistique en français* (ALF) program is based on the linguistic and cultural diversity of students attending French-language schools in Ontario.<sup>17</sup> This student population includes French language learners who often have limited abilities to communicate in French. This program maintains high expectations and rigorous learning content for each grade and outlines the skills to be assessed in all French-language schools in the province for students learning the French language. The purpose of this curriculum is to facilitate planning, teaching, and learning for students who need to acquire the language skills necessary to succeed in French-language schools.

The curriculum policy *Programme d'appui aux nouveau arrivants* (PANA) has language-specific expectations to support students who have little or no communication skills in French. This program allows newcomer students to acquire strong language skills in mathematics, science, and technology, and is an introduction to Canadian society and interpersonal communication skills, all of which are intended to facilitate integration into the mainstream curriculum.<sup>18</sup>

### Accommodation Policies for Instruction and Testing

In the education context, the term “accommodations” refers to the special teaching and assessment strategies, human supports, and/or individualized equipment required by students with special education needs to enable them to learn and demonstrate learning. The provision of accommodations in no way alters the curriculum expectations for the grade or course. The accommodations, which are likely to apply to all of the student’s subjects or courses, must be described in the designated section of the Individual Education Plan (IEP) form.<sup>m</sup>

Students who have an IEP must be given the opportunity to participate and demonstrate the full extent of their knowledge and skills in provincial assessments, and school boards are required to provide accommodations to facilitate their participation. Accommodations must not affect the level or content of the assessment, the performance criteria, or the reliability or validity of the assessment. They also must comply with other related policies of the Ministry and the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), a provincial agency that develops and administers provincial large-scale assessments.<sup>19</sup> (See the Monitoring Student Progress in Reading section for more information on provincial assessments.)

Any accommodations recommended to facilitate a student’s participation in provincial assessments must already be identified in the IEP as accommodations required in the classroom. These accommodations must be:

- Appropriate to the student’s particular needs, as identified in the IEP
- Included among the strategies, resources, and other accommodations identified in the IEP as necessary for facilitating the student’s learning and demonstration of achievement in regular classroom assessments

<sup>m</sup> For more information about IEPs, please see <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/guide/resource/iepresguid.pdf>. For information about types of accommodations, see <https://files.ontario.ca/edu-special-education-policy-resource-guide-en-2022-05-30.pdf>

- Described in specific rather than general terms (e.g., “use of a word processor” rather than “answers recorded in another manner”)<sup>20</sup>

Information on permitted accommodations for provincewide assessments can be found in the guides that EQAO publishes annually.<sup>n</sup>

## Students with Reading Difficulties

### Diagnostic Testing

The Education Act requires district school boards to implement procedures for early and ongoing identification of the learning abilities and needs of students. *Policy/Program Memorandum (PPM) No. 8: Identification of and Program Planning for Students with Learning Disabilities* emphasizes the importance of early and ongoing screening and encourages school boards to use a multidisciplinary approach to assess and identify learning disabilities in students by considering education history, medical information, parental observations, test results, and other professional assessments (e.g., psychoeducational or psychological assessments).<sup>21</sup> Additionally, *Policy/Program Memorandum (PPM) No. 59: Psychological Testing and Assessment of Pupils* was issued to address psychological testing and assessment of students and to guide school boards regarding the provision of psychological services for students.<sup>22</sup>

During the 2019–2020 academic year, school boards reported that approximately 60,670 students with learning disabilities had been identified by school board Identification, Placement, and Review Committees (IPRCs). Some students who have learning disabilities are not identified by an IPRC and therefore are not reported; under existing policy, all students who demonstrate difficulties in learning and who would benefit from special education programs and/or services are to be provided with such programs/services. The determining factor for the provision of special education programs or services is not any specific diagnosed or undiagnosed condition, but rather the needs of individual students based on the individual assessment of strengths and needs. Many of these students with learning disabilities, constituting the largest exceptionality group in Ontario, have difficulties in reading.

### Instruction for Children with Reading Difficulties

Under the Education Act, school boards are required to provide special education programs and special education services for exceptional students. School boards also have obligations under other legislation, such as the Human Rights Code, to accommodate the disability-related needs of students.

Through its policies, resources, and capacity-building measures, the Ministry promotes an integrated process of assessment and instruction, as well as research-informed and evidence-based approaches such as universal design for learning, differentiated instruction, and a tiered approach. These approaches systematically facilitate early identification of students who may be at risk for

<sup>n</sup> EQAO documents are available on the EQAO website: <https://www.eqao.com/>



developing reading difficulties and support the provision of high-quality evidence-based assessment, instruction, and interventions that respond to students' individual literacy needs. PPM 8 sets out requirements for school boards for the identification of and program planning for students who have learning disabilities.<sup>23</sup>

Most students with learning disabilities are placed in regular classrooms for more than half of the instructional day. In the regular classroom they may receive supports such as indirect support, resource assistance, and withdrawal assistance. School boards may provide additional supports to students with reading difficulties both in a regular class as well as in congregated classroom settings. Through in-school withdrawal assistance, students may receive intensive remedial instruction outside the classroom for less than 50 percent of the school day from a qualified teacher with expertise in reading.

From 2016 to 2020, the Ministry piloted intensive reading intervention projects in eight selected school boards. The pilots were designed to test the efficacy of intensive reading interventions for students with learning disabilities in reading. As the pilot included a research, evaluation, and knowledge mobilization component, its findings and recommendations inform the Ministry's guidance on the use of evidence-based assessment and reading programs. The Ministry supports school boards with implementing evidence-based assessment and reading intervention programs so that all Ontario students have equal opportunities to learn foundational reading skills as early as possible. Additional funding was provided to school boards in 2020–2021 for the delivery of evidence-based reading intervention programs or programs that have been shown to be efficacious in improving student outcomes for struggling readers.

## Professional Development Requirements and Programs

After completion of their initial teacher education program, teachers can expand their teaching credentials by taking additional qualification (AQ) courses. AQ courses are accredited by the Ontario College of Teachers and are offered by approved providers such as faculties of education, colleges, school boards, teacher federations, First Nation, Métis or Inuit institutions, and professional organizations whose membership includes Ontario-certified teachers. Each provider offers its own version of AQ courses.

The requirements for AQ accreditation by the Ontario College of Teachers can be found in *Ontario Regulation 347/02: Accreditation of Teacher Education Programs*. The Reading Specialist AQ is a three-part AQ found in schedule D of *Ontario Regulation 176/10: Teachers' Qualifications*. Each AQ has a guideline that is designed for providers and instructors to support their development and facilitation of an AQ course. According to the Reading, Specialist AQ guideline,<sup>o</sup> the course is designed to critically and collaboratively cultivate professional efficacy and

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<sup>o</sup> For more information about the specialist qualification in reading, please see [https://www.oct.ca/-/media/PDF/Additional%20Qualifications/EN/Schedule%20D/Specialist/spec\\_reading\\_e.pdf](https://www.oct.ca/-/media/PDF/Additional%20Qualifications/EN/Schedule%20D/Specialist/spec_reading_e.pdf)

emancipatory leadership practices, and advance the scholarship of teaching by fostering cultures of critical reflection and inquiry.

Providing for ongoing professional learning is a shared responsibility in Ontario. The Ministry, the Ontario College of Teachers, teachers' federations, and school boards play roles in this process. The Ministry mandates three "professional activity" days for schools and school boards, which are to be used to work on provincial education priorities identified by the Minister of Education, and up to four more professional activity days for other professional development activities consistent with the definition of "professional activity" in *Ontario Regulation 304: School Year Calendar, Professional Activity Days*. The Ministry also supports professional learning at all stages of a teacher's career through program supports such as the New Teacher Induction Program (a continuum of professional learning for new teachers that builds on and complements initial teacher education programs) and the Learning and Innovation Fund for Teachers.

The Ontario College of Teachers provides for teachers' ongoing learning through its Professional Learning Framework. In addition to its formal accredited AQ courses, the Ontario College of Teachers provides informal learning opportunities, programs, and activities such as mentoring, research, networking, and curriculum development.

## Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

In 2010, the Ministry released the provincial assessment policy *Growing Success: Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting in Ontario's Schools*, covering Grades 1 to 12 to guide the English-language school system,<sup>24</sup> and *Faire croître le succès: Évaluation et communication du rendement des élèves fréquentant les écoles de l'Ontario (1re-12e année)* to guide the French-language school system.<sup>25</sup> In 2016, an addendum focused on Kindergarten was released. Together, these policies provide guidance on assessment, evaluation, and reporting from Kindergarten to twelfth grade, endeavoring to move the province toward greater consistency in practice and greater levels of fairness, transparency, and equity. These policies are designed to ensure that assessment, evaluation, and reporting are valid and reliable, and that they lead to the improvement of learning for all students, help inform instruction decisions, and promote student engagement in the assessment process. The philosophy behind them is rooted in the tenet that educators have a responsibility to develop students' assessment skills so students can monitor and direct their own learning, set specific goals, and plan next steps for achievement. In the French-language version of the assessment policy, there is an added principle referring to language and culture.

The different purposes and uses of assessment information are emphasized through the processes of assessment **for**, **as**, and **of** learning, which the Ministry considers an integral part of teaching and learning. To support these processes, educators plan lessons that are responsive to the needs of all students, provide descriptive feedback to learners during the learning process, and explicitly teach students to apply criteria to determine their progress toward learning goals so

students can decide where to focus their efforts. Educators consider multiple sources to ensure the validity and reliability of reading assessments. Classroom assessment and evaluation are based on the overall expectations of the provincial curriculum. All curricula have achievement charts with four levels of achievement and four categories of knowledge and skills. The provincial standard or expected level of achievement is Level 3, the level at which teachers and parents can be confident that students are well prepared for work in the next grade or the next course.

The Education Quality and Accountability Office is a provincial agency funded by the Ministry that develops and administers provincial large-scale assessments. In elementary schools, assessments are administered annually in the English or French language to all students in Grades 3 and 6 in reading, writing, and mathematics. In the 2021–2022 academic year, the full complement of EQAO provincial assessments were administered for the first time since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. All provincial assessments; the Grades 3 and 6 reading, writing, and mathematics assessments; and the secondary assessments<sup>p</sup> were administered digitally. More information on provincial assessments can be found on the EQAO website.<sup>q</sup>

## Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

### Teaching and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the delivery of education in Ontario. School boards, educators, students, and their families demonstrated resiliency and flexibility in responding to changes in their learning environments and embracing new ways of teaching, learning, and connecting. The following is an overview of teaching and learning in Ontario during the COVID-19 pandemic that spans March 2020, when publicly funded schools in the province first closed to in-person learning in response to COVID-19, to November 2021, when Ontario’s administration of the PIRLS 2021 assessment was completed.

In response to the pandemic, emergency remote learning in Ontario began in March 2020 and continued until the end of the 2019–2020 academic year in June 2020. In the following academic year (2020–2021), the delivery of education included three models: remote learning,<sup>r</sup> conventional in-person, and varied combinations of remote and in-person instruction.<sup>26</sup> In-person school attendance was optional in all schools, based on parental choice.

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<sup>p</sup> In secondary schools, EQAO administers the ninth grade mathematics test and the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT)/*Test provincial de compétences linguistiques (TPCL)*, which is first administered in tenth grade. Ninth grade teachers have the option of scoring all or a portion of the ninth grade mathematics test and including the result as a portion of the course grade. To obtain an Ontario Secondary School Diploma, all students must meet a graduation literacy requirement by passing the OSSLT/TPCL. Students who are not successful on this test may retake it or meet the requirement by passing the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Course.

<sup>q</sup> For more information on EQAO assessments, please see <https://www.eqao.com/>

<sup>r</sup> See footnote i on page 6 for a description of remote learning.

Health, safety, and operational guidance was provided to support the reopening of schools.<sup>5</sup> Ministry investments were made to improve air quality in schools and support staffing for smaller cohorts of students, physical distancing, enhanced school cleaning, and enabling the delivery of remote learning. Schools employed multiple protective strategies to support healthier and safer environments that included wearing masks on school property, self-screening, and the cohorting of students. Elementary students remained in one cohort for the full day, with one teacher where possible, and secondary schools adopted timetabling measures such as quadesters to limit cohorts.

In the 2020–2021 academic year, following the winter break, schools were again closed to in-person learning due to the pandemic, and all publicly funded schools transitioned to remote learning. In-person learning fully resumed in February 2021 until mid-April when all schools reverted to remote learning for the remainder of the school year.<sup>27</sup>

For the following academic year (2021–2022), schools resumed in-person learning while offering parents the choice for their child(ren) to attend school remotely. Similar health and safety measures remained during the PIRLS administration in November 2021. Most schools reverted to regular timetables by the second half of the school year (January 2022) and lifted restrictions on cohorting.

### **Impact of the Pandemic on Student Learning**

Over the past two years, the collective focus in the province has been on delivering the best education experience while protecting students, staff, and families against the spread of COVID-19. Despite these efforts, the pandemic has had far-reaching impacts on the learning development and mental health of students, staff, and families across Ontario. To understand the impact of learning disruptions within Ontario, the Ministry has reviewed Ontario data, looked to other jurisdictions, and has received feedback from stakeholders, including school board leaders, teachers, principals, parents, students, and community partners. The disengagement of students from learning or school for a variety of reasons emerged as a key concern, as did a decline in Kindergarten enrollment. Research, including that conducted by the Ontario COVID-19 Science Advisory Table, identified specific groups and communities that have been disproportionately impacted during the pandemic, including Indigenous, Black, and racialized students; students from low-income households; students with disabilities and/or special education needs; and English/French language learners.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> To access the health, safety, and operational guidance for schools in 2020–2021, please see <https://www.ontario.ca/page/guide-reopening-ontarios-schools#section-0>; for 2021–2022, see <https://www.ontario.ca/document/covid-19-health-safety-and-operational-guidance-schools-2021-2022>

## Policy and Practice Changes

School closures rendered access to digital learning resources, devices, and internet connectivity critically important. Procuring and supporting the distribution of devices for learning at home became a key priority early in the pandemic. Thousands of computers were purchased and the government's pre-pandemic work to expand provincial broadband connectivity moved forward. Learn at Home,<sup>t</sup> a new online portal that offered made-in-Ontario mathematics and literacy resources, was launched to support students and their families in accessing educational resources.

Mental health and well-being are integral to student success. Students who report feeling mentally well are more ready to learn and perform better academically. The Ministry made unprecedented investments in student mental health to address the increased need for mental health supports since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Focused on mental health promotion, prevention, and early intervention, targeted student mental health funding is used by school boards to promote mentally healthy schools and classrooms across the province for all students, and to provide students with mild to moderate mental health issues with increased access to school-based regulated mental health professionals and culturally relevant mental health resources. The Ministry ensured that school boards were able to provide mental health services to students remotely/virtually, when needed, especially during school closures, using a secure provincial health network. In addition, the Ministry's implementation partner, School Mental Health Ontario, developed and provided to school boards an extensive Mentally Healthy Back to School Support Package of mental health resources for leaders, educators, parents, and students for the 2021–2022 academic year, in addition to ongoing supports to school boards.<sup>u</sup>

With a focus on core subjects like reading and mathematics, evidence-based reading intervention programs and reading assessment supports were implemented to identify and meet the learning needs of early and struggling readers. Online 1-to-1 tutoring programs were also available and efforts to re-engage students who had disengaged from learning or school altogether were initiated.

Summer learning opportunities were expanded in 2020 and 2021 to support learning recovery. Over the two summers, more than 500,000 students took part in summer literacy and numeracy programs, transition programs, and targeted programming for underserved students. In addition to these practice changes and temporary policy shifts that enabled flexibility for school board operations during the pandemic, two key policy changes were instituted to support the health, safety, and achievement of all students.

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<sup>t</sup> To learn more about Learn at Home, see <https://www.ontario.ca/page/learn-at-home>

<sup>u</sup> The Mentally Healthy Back to School Support Package is available on the School Mental Health Ontario website: <https://smho-smso.ca/mentally-health-back-to-school-support-package/>. The package has more than 80 resources including the Student Mental Health Action Kit, Educator Resource Guide to Support Student Mental Health and Well-Being, Health & Physical Lesson Plans (Grades 1 to 8), and the Mentally Healthy Classroom Reflection Tool.

In August 2020, *Policy/Program Memorandum (PPM) 164: Requirements for Remote Learning* was released to ensure that Ontario students receive a consistent approach to remote learning. This policy outlines requirements and effective practices for school boards during periods of remote learning that include providing students with access to devices, daily instruction and opportunities for feedback, and minimum requirements for synchronous learning.

In January 2021, temporary teaching certificates were introduced as a time-limited emergency measure to respond to severe Occasional Teacher (OT) shortages in Ontario school boards due to COVID-19. Temporary certificates allow eligible teacher candidates to be employed as OTs and complete required practicum days at the same time, providing school boards with an expanded pool of eligible OTs while supporting teacher candidates in completing their degree requirements.

### Additional Resources to Support Remote Instruction to Elementary Students

Complementing the portals Learn at Home and *Apprendre à la maison*, and the availability of online tutoring for students, educators participated in professional activity days and Ministry-led webinars to support their professional learning for remote instruction. Resources also were developed to support educators as they prepared for remote learning that included customizable training slide decks, synchronous learning tip sheets, and self-assessment checklists.

To help families offset the costs of learning remotely during the pandemic, the Ministry also provided financial support directly to families in 2019–2020 and 2020–2021 through the Support for Families, Support for Learners, and Ontario COVID-19 Child Benefit programs. Through these programs, approximately 5.9 million applications were processed providing over \$1.6 billion to Ontario families.

### Special Provisions for Particular Groups of Elementary Students

PPM 164 includes provisions for specific groups of students, including directing school boards to support students who are unable to attend school settings because of their primary need for care or treatment or because of a court order. Pertinent to the French-language education system, PPM 164 states that the implementation of remote and synchronous learning should support the vitality of the French-language culture in a minority setting and consider Ontario’s *aménagement linguistique* policy.

For students with special education needs, PPM 164 outlines that, where appropriate, educators should provide more opportunities than the minimum requirements for synchronous learning based on individual strengths and needs, as well as provide differentiated support and instruction. The policy affirms that during remote learning, educators are to continue to provide accommodations, modified expectations, and alternative programming as detailed in each student’s Individual Education Plan. During periods of provincially directed school closures in the winter and spring of 2021, school boards were permitted to continue to operate in-person learning with health and safety measures for students with special education needs who could not be accommodated through remote learning.

## Impact of the Pandemic on PIRLS 2021

The pandemic presented several challenges to Ontario’s participation in PIRLS 2021, beginning with the province’s participation in the field study that was scheduled to take place in spring 2020. With emergency remote learning in place from March 2020 to the end of the 2019–2020 academic year, Ontario was unable to participate in the field study. The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement permitted Ontario to proceed to the PIRLS main study in 2021, understanding the extraordinary circumstances presented by the pandemic and with the expectation of collecting sufficient data from other countries able to carry out the field study.

Ontario was scheduled to participate in the PIRLS main study in spring 2021. However, sampling for PIRLS was challenged by the three modes of education delivery in place in 2020–2021, as only students participating in in-person learning could take part in the assessment. Sampling was complicated further by unplanned local classroom and school closures due to COVID-19 outbreaks, and in April 2021, the Ontario-wide closure of all publicly funded schools solidified the province’s inability to participate in PIRLS in spring 2021. It was decided that Ontario would therefore partake in the main study in fall 2021. Ontario participated in PIRLS 2021 within an administration window of October 18 to November 26, 2021. Classroom and school closures due to COVID-19 continued amid high rates of staff absenteeism and a shortage of available certified teachers.<sup>29</sup> These pandemic-related burdens on families, schools, and school boards created challenges that constrained Ontario’s full participation in PIRLS 2021.

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