

# Multilingual Student Achievement in Ontario’s English-Language Boards

## Research Brief

JUNE 2024

Have you ever thought about how well multilingual students do in Ontario’s English-language boards? How do you think they do in reading, writing and mathematics? This research brief explores the academic achievement of multilingual students in Ontario’s English-language boards between the 2009–2010 and 2018–2019 school years.

### What do we mean by “multilingual students”?

In Ontario, hundreds of thousands of students are multilingual—that is, they can speak multiple languages.

The focus of this research brief is the largest group of multilingual students in Ontario: students who attend schools in English-language boards and speak other languages at home with their families.<sup>1</sup> We know that students in English-language boards speak other languages with their families based on their responses to the following question on the EQAO English-language student questionnaire:<sup>2</sup>

#### What languages do you speak at home?

- A. Only English
- B. Mostly English
- C. Another language (or other languages) as often as English
- D. Mostly another language (or other languages)
- E. Only another language (or other languages)

In this study, if students selected options C, D or E, we categorized them as “multilingual.” On the 2018–2019 EQAO student questionnaires for Grades 3, 6 and 9 and the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) (which students first attempt in Grade 10), 143 192 students self-reported as multilingual.<sup>3</sup> Extrapolating these figures to all grades in Ontario (junior kindergarten to Grade 12), we can estimate that approximately 500 000 students attending schools in English-language boards in Ontario may self-report as multilingual in terms of regularly speaking languages other than English at home.<sup>4</sup>

Most of these multilingual students were born in Canada or have lived in Canada five years or longer. For example, in 2018–2019, 77% of students self-reporting as multilingual on the EQAO student questionnaire were born in Canada or had lived in Canada five years or longer. These students are likely (although not certain) to be proficient in English, and also regularly speak their one or more family languages.<sup>5</sup> In this research brief, these multilingual students are referred to as “long-term resident multilingual students.”

There is also a smaller subset of multilingual students who have recently arrived in Canada (i.e., within the past five years) and regularly speak with their family in one or more languages other than English. For example, in 2018–2019, 23% of students self-reporting as multilingual on the EQAO student questionnaire had lived in Canada less than five years.<sup>6</sup> Often (but not always), these students are acquiring English for the first time. In this research brief, these multilingual students are referred to as “newcomer multilingual students.”

It is worth clarifying that both long-term resident multilingual students and newcomer multilingual students can be identified as “English language learners” by school boards, but only if they require specific support in acquiring English. The Ministry of Education defines English language learners as

“Students in provincially funded English language schools whose first language is a language other than English, or is a variety of English that is significantly different from the variety used for instruction in Ontario’s schools, **and who may require focused educational supports to assist them in attaining proficiency in English.**” (bold added)

*Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007*

Multilingual students are more likely to be identified as English language learners by their boards if they are newcomer students. In the 2018–2019 data EQAO received from school boards, 57% of multilingual students who were newcomers were identified as English language learners, while 20% of multilingual students who were long-term residents were identified as English language learners.<sup>7</sup> This result is to be expected, as long-term residents of Canada are more likely to be proficient in English than newcomers, and additionally many multilingual newcomers will also either arrive proficient in English or gain proficiency in less than five years.

## How did we explore the academic achievement of multilingual students?

For this research brief, we investigated students’ academic achievement in terms of the percentage of students who met or exceeded provincial expectations on EQAO assessments. Meeting or exceeding provincial expectations on EQAO assessments means students achieved Level 3 or Level 4 on a Grade 3, Grade 6 or Grade 9 assessment component, or were successful on the OSSLT. This research brief reports student achievement on all EQAO assessments:

- primary (Grade 3) and junior (Grade 6) reading, writing and mathematics assessment components
- Grade 9 Assessment of Mathematics
- OSSLT

All students attending schools in English-language boards who received an EQAO level for an assessment and who participated in the student questionnaire were included in the analysis.<sup>8</sup>

In this research brief, we compare the academic achievement of **long-term resident multilingual** students (defined above) with that of **long-term resident monolingual** students. We define a “long-term resident monolingual student” as a student who was born in Canada or who has lived in Canada five years or longer *and* selected “only English” or “mostly English” in answer to the question “What languages do you speak at home?” on the EQAO student questionnaire.<sup>9</sup>

We omitted newcomer students, both multilingual and monolingual, from the analysis to ensure that students had had sufficient time to learn English and become familiar with Canadian schooling and curriculum expectations. This way, it was reasonable to expect that achievement on EQAO assessments should be comparable between the two groups. A discrepancy may indicate inequities.

## Summary of results

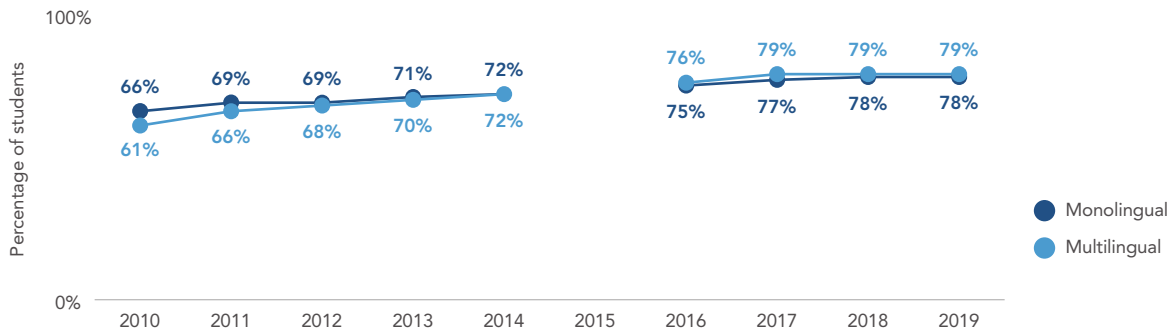
The analysis results showed that long-term resident multilingual students in Ontario who wrote EQAO assessments between 2009–2010 and 2018–2019 had the same or higher rates of achievement as long-term resident students who spoke only or mostly English at home (i.e., long-term monolingual students). The trends were consistent across the decade for all assessments, although arguably there was a slight increase during the decade in the percentage of long-term resident multilingual students meeting provincial expectations compared to long-term resident monolingual students. The results are discussed below.

## Reading and writing achievement

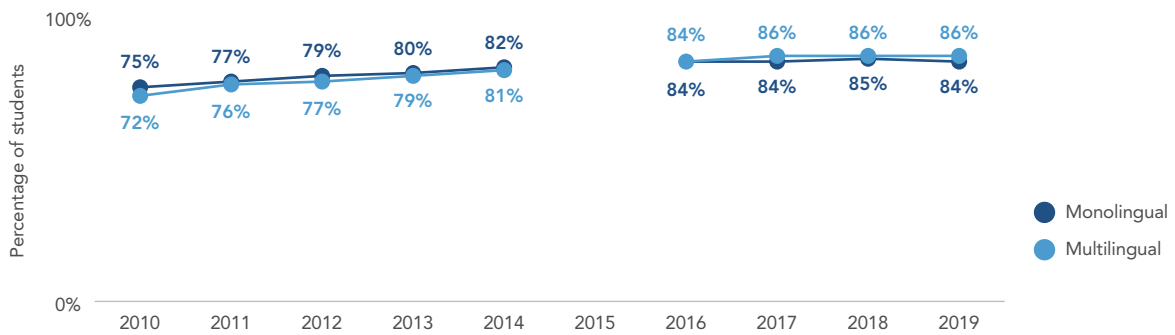
On the reading components of the primary (Grade 3) and junior (Grade 6) assessments, approximately the same percentage of long-term resident multilingual students achieved the provincial standard as did long-term resident monolingual students (see Figure 1). For example, in the 2018–2019 primary EQAO assessments, 78% of long-term resident monolingual Grade 3 students and 79% of long-term resident multilingual Grade 3 students met provincial expectations for reading (that is, achieved Level 3 or Level 4). On the junior EQAO assessments the same year, 84% of long-term resident monolingual Grade 6 students and 86% of long-term resident multilingual Grade 6 students met provincial expectations for reading.

**Figure 1. Percentage of students who achieved Level 3 or Level 4 on primary- and junior-division reading assessment components<sup>10</sup>**

**Primary (Grade 3)**



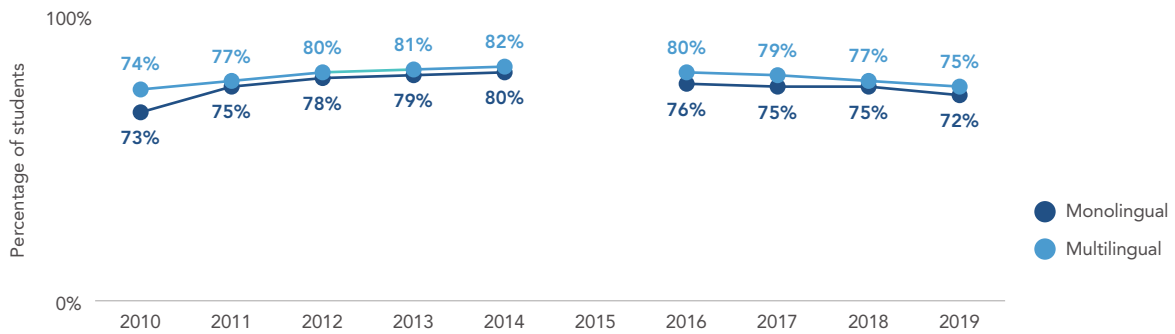
**Junior (Grade 6)**



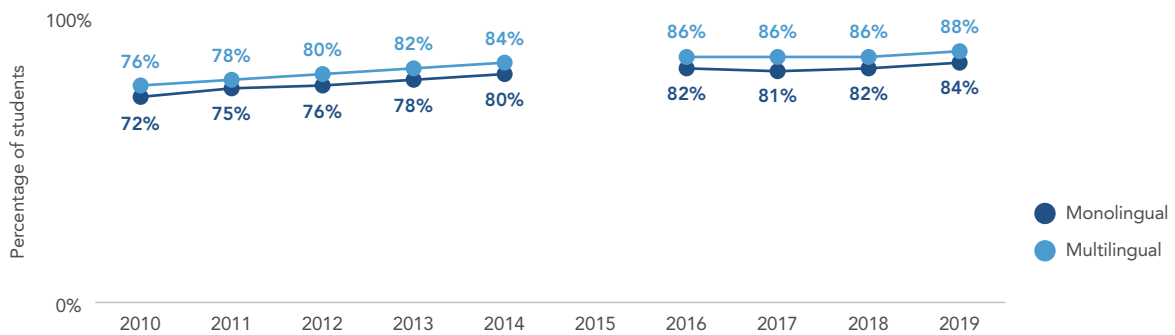
On the writing components of the primary (Grade 3) and junior (Grade 6) assessments, a slightly higher percentage of long-term resident multilingual students achieved the provincial standard than did long-term resident monolingual students (see Figure 2). For example, on the 2018–2019 primary EQAO assessments, 72% of long-term resident monolingual Grade 3 students and 75% of long-term resident multilingual Grade 3 students met provincial expectations for writing. On the junior EQAO assessment the same year, 84% of long-term resident monolingual Grade 6 students and 88% of long-term resident multilingual Grade 6 students met provincial expectations for writing. These were differences of three and four percentage points, respectively.

**Figure 2. Percentage of students who achieved Level 3 or Level 4 on primary- and junior-division writing assessment components**

**Primary (Grade 3)**

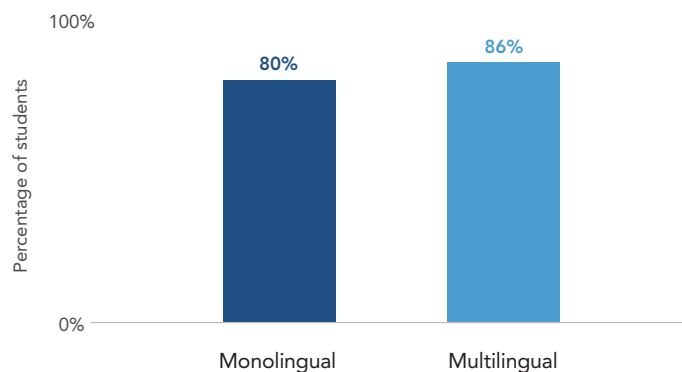


**Junior (Grade 6)**



For the OSSLT, information on length of time in Canada was available only for 2018–2019. In this year, among Grade 10 students, more long-term resident multilingual students were successful on the OSSLT than long-term resident monolingual students (see Figure 3). Specifically, 86% of long-term resident multilingual students were successful, compared to the 80% of long-term resident monolingual students who were.

**Figure 3. Percentage of Grade 10 students who were successful on the OSSLT, 2018–2019**



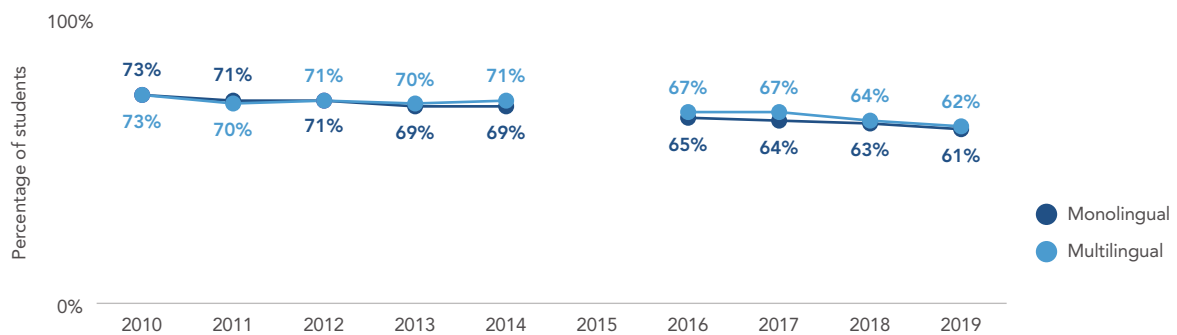
## Mathematics achievement

On the mathematics component of the primary (Grade 3) assessment, approximately the same percentage of long-term resident multilingual students achieved the provincial standard as did long-term resident monolingual students (see Figure 4). For example, on the 2018–2019 primary EQAO assessment, 61% of long-term resident monolingual Grade 3 students and 62% of long-term resident multilingual Grade 3 students met provincial expectations for mathematics.

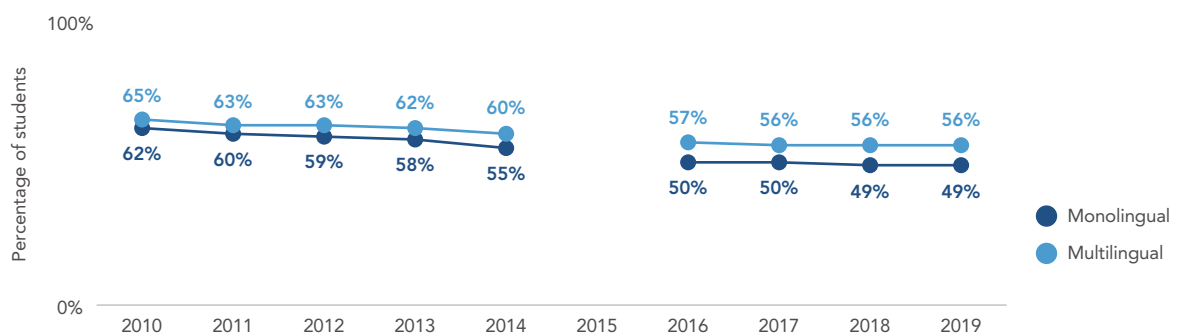
However, on the mathematics component of the junior (Grade 6) assessment, more long-term resident multilingual students met the provincial standard than did long-term resident monolingual students (see Figure 4). For example, in the 2018–2019 junior EQAO assessments, 49% of long-term resident monolingual Grade 6 students and 56% of long-term resident multilingual Grade 6 students met provincial expectations for mathematics. This was a difference of seven percentage points.

**Figure 4. Percentage of students who achieved Level 3 or Level 4 on primary- and junior-division mathematics assessment components**

### Primary (Grade 3)



### Junior (Grade 6)

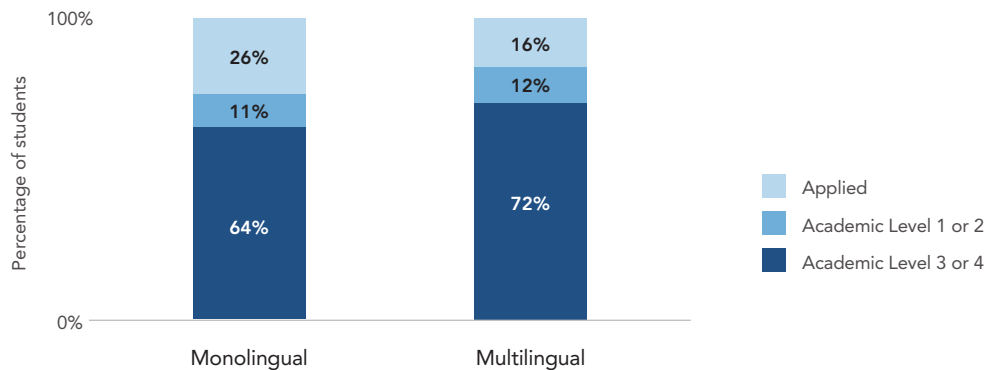


Finally, on the Grade 9 mathematics assessment, information on length of time in Canada was available only for 2018–2019. In this year, long-term resident multilingual students were more likely to take the academic course than were long-term resident monolingual students. For example, 86% of long-term resident multilingual students wrote the academic assessment, compared to the only 75% of long-term resident monolingual students who did.

Among students who wrote the academic assessment, approximately the same percentage of long-term resident multilingual students achieved the provincial standard as did long-term resident monolingual students: 86% of long-term resident monolingual and 87% of long-term resident multilingual students met provincial expectations for the academic assessment. However, among students who wrote the applied assessment, a lower percentage of long-term resident multilingual students achieved the provincial standard: 53% of long-term resident monolingual and 43% of long-term resident multilingual students met provincial expectations for the applied assessment.

Due to the larger proportion of long-term resident multilingual students writing the academic assessment, overall, long-term resident multilingual students were more likely than long-term resident monolingual students to demonstrate the provincial expectations in mathematics required for advanced mathematics studies (see Figure 5): of all Grade 9 students who wrote either the academic or the applied assessment, 64% of long-term resident monolingual and 73% of long-term resident multilingual students in Ontario demonstrated the provincial expectations in mathematics required for advanced mathematics studies by taking the academic course *and then* meeting provincial expectations on the academic assessment.

**Figure 5. Percentage of Grade 9 students meeting the provincial expectations in mathematics required for advanced mathematics studies, and the percentages not yet meeting these expectations, 2018–2019<sup>11</sup>**



## Conclusion

In conclusion, long-term resident multilingual students in Ontario who wrote EQAO assessments between 2009–2010 and 2018–2019 while attending schools in English-language boards had the same rate of achievement or higher than long-term resident students who spoke only or mostly English at home.

- On the elementary school reading assessment components, achievement was comparable between the two groups, while long-term resident multilingual students slightly outperformed long-term resident monolingual students in writing.
- For the OSSLT, which is a high school minimum competency literacy test, long-term resident multilingual students outperformed long-term resident monolingual students.
- In mathematics, achievement was comparable between the two groups in Grade 3, but long-term resident multilingual students outperformed long-term resident monolingual students by Grade 6, and the achievement gap was even larger in Grade 9.

It is good news that long-term resident multilingual students achieve provincial expectations at the same rate as long-term resident monolingual students. This finding differs from those in some other jurisdictions in North America and worldwide and might be attributable to factors such as relatively comprehensive and effective education policies for newcomers and other students who need to learn English at school (Lara & Volante, 2019).

Achievement differences may also be due to socioeconomic factors such as high rates of university-level education among adults in multilingual families in Ontario. These rates could be due to Canadian federal immigration policies that encourage a relatively large number of highly educated economic migrants to move to Canada annually (Haque, 2017). These policies have resulted in demographic trends that skew educational achievement higher among immigrant populations (Kim et al., 2020; Sinclair et al., 2019). Parental educational achievement is known to impact children's educational achievement (Chatoor et al., 2019; Davis-Kean et al., 2021; Dubow et al., 2009).

Finally, the cognitive and academic advantages associated with multilingualism in children and adolescents (Bialystok, 2018; Cummins, 2021) may be visible in these achievement trends.

Further research would be useful to investigate how students' use of multiple languages evolves over time and their relationship with academic achievement, particularly as some students switch to speaking mostly or only English at home as they grow older. For example, it would be informative to look at the achievement of students who are still multilingual from Grade 3 to Grade 9. Additionally, it would be useful to look at the achievement of students in Grade 9 who were multilingual in Grade 3, regardless of whether they are still multilingual in Grade 9. While this area of inquiry has begun to be explored (e.g., Kim et al., 2020), continued research in this area would be beneficial.<sup>12</sup>

## Reflection questions for educators

- Do you know your students' home language practices?
- What are the implications of this study for how multilingual students (both English language learners and non-English language learners) are supported at your school?
- What are the implications of this study for how monolingual English-using students are supported at your school?



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- <sup>1</sup> Other groups of multilingual students in Ontario include students who have had the opportunity to learn foreign languages fluently, students attending schools in French-language boards (n = 111 025 in 2018–2019, Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022) and students attending French immersion programs in English-language boards (n = 246 165 in 2018–2019, Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022).
- <sup>2</sup> This version of the question is asked to students attending schools in English-language boards. (Students attending schools at French-language boards are asked a similar question about French at home.) This question was asked up until the 2018–2019 school year and was reintroduced for the 2023–2024 school year. The OSSLT version of this question until 2018–2019 was slightly different. It was “What languages do you speak at home (choose one only)?” Only or mostly English | Another language (or other languages) as often as English | Only or mostly another language (or other languages).
- <sup>3</sup> On the 2018–2019 EQAO student questionnaire, 35 996 Grade 3 students (28% of students), 35 105 Grade 6 students (27%), 32 761 Grade 9 students (28%) and 39 330 Grade 10 students (30%) self-reported as multilingual.
- <sup>4</sup> This calculation assumes the number of multilingual students is the same in junior kindergarten to Grade 3 (using the Grade 3 figure), Grades 4 to 6 (using the Grade 6 figure), Grades 7 to 9 (using the Grade 9 figure) and Grades 10 to 12 (using the Grade 10 figure). This estimate does not take into account the fact that children in lower grades are more likely to speak their family’s languages at home (Kim et al., 2020), or the decreasing overall enrollment in lower grades due to the decreasing number of children in Ontario over time (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022). These factors may, however, approximately balance out. We can estimate that 501 568 students in Ontario would report speaking languages other than English with their families and would therefore be multilingual. As there were 1 929 455 students enrolled in English-language boards in 2018–2019 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022), this would represent approximately 26% of all students in English-language boards. The percentage could be higher, as some students do not participate in the EQAO questionnaire. In addition, there are students who hear or comprehend other languages at home but speak only English—these students are also multilingual.
- <sup>5</sup> According to the 2018–2019 EQAO student questionnaire, 82% of the 35 996 Grade 3 multilingual students, 83% of the 35 105 Grade 6 multilingual students, 66% of the 32 761 Grade 9 multilingual students and 77% of the 39 330 Grade 10 multilingual students were long-term residents.
- <sup>6</sup> According to the 2018–2019 EQAO student questionnaire, 18% of the 35 996 Grade 3 multilingual students, 17% of the 35 105 Grade 6 multilingual students, 34% of the 32 761 Grade 9 multilingual students and 23% of the 39 330 Grade 10 multilingual students were newcomers.
- <sup>7</sup> Note that some monolingual English-using students (both long-term residents and newcomers) are also identified as English language learners, perhaps because of the clause in the English language learner definition that such learners may have a first language that is “a variety of English that is significantly different from the variety used for instruction in Ontario’s schools,” or possibly due to an identification error. For example, in 2018–2019, monolingual English-using students were identified as English language learners at the following rates: Grade 3 = 6%; Grade 6 = 4%; Grade 9 = 2%; Grade 10 = 1%.
- <sup>8</sup> The possible EQAO achievement levels on the primary (Grade 3), junior (Grade 6) and Grade 9 assessments were Below Level 1, Level 1, Level 2, Level 3 and Level 4. On the OSSLT, students can receive a result of “successful” or “not yet successful.”
- <sup>9</sup> Exact numbers of long-term resident multilingual students and long-term resident monolingual students vary somewhat from year to year. For example, the following are the 2018–2019 numbers of students included in the analysis: Grade 3 reading multilingual n = 26 589 and monolingual n = 81 698. Grade 6 reading multilingual n = 28 127 and monolingual n = 93 484. Grade 3 writing multilingual n = 26 614 and monolingual n = 81 759. Grade 6 writing multilingual n = 28 131 and monolingual n = 93 446. Grade 3 mathematics multilingual n = 28 720 and monolingual n = 86 383. Grade 6 mathematics multilingual n = 28 115 and monolingual n = 93 390. Grade 9 applied mathematics multilingual n = 3438 and monolingual n = 20 666. Grade 9 academic mathematics multilingual n = 17 888 and monolingual n = 60 048. OSSLT Grade 10 students multilingual n = 28 773 and monolingual n = 83 022.
- <sup>10</sup> Achieving Level 3 or 4 indicates that a student met or exceeded provincial expectations on the assessment. A labour dispute during the 2015–2016 school year meant that primary and junior EQAO assessment data was not collected in English-language public school boards, so the 2015–2016 provincial trends for English-language boards cannot be reported.
- <sup>11</sup> Percentages do not add up to exactly 100%, due to rounding percentages to whole numbers.
- <sup>12</sup> To support this line of research, EQAO has, as noted earlier, reinstated the home language questions on the student questionnaires from 2023–2024 onward.