

Effective implementation of de-streaming in Ontario threatened by lack of time and resources

November 2023



Only 20% of Ontario high school principals say they have enough support to implement de-streaming.

Ontario began introducing de-streaming in the fall of 2021 in response to [multiple reports](#) showing that streaming students into applied and academic courses in Grades 9 and 10 disproportionately disadvantages [Black students](#), Indigenous students, students with special education needs, [students with disabilities](#), and [students from lower income families](#). Students in the applied stream were less likely than students in academic courses to complete all their credits by the end of Grade 10, less likely to graduate, and less likely to go on to college or university.

The goal of de-streaming is to reverse these trends, create equitable academic pathways for students, and ensure that

all students graduate from high school with multiple options open to them either for post-secondary education or the labour market.

Overall, teachers' federations, school principals, and researchers support de-streaming. In 2020, when the province first announced its plan to end streaming in Grade 9, [People for Education](#) and others, including the [Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario](#) (HEQCO) supported the change, while cautioning that effective de-streaming would require a comprehensive implementation plan and a commitment to provide adequate resources, including smaller class sizes, increased support staff, team teaching, and changes to teacher education.

Findings from People for Education's 2022-23 Annual Ontario School Survey (AOSS) based on responses from 1,044 principals from across all of Ontario's 72 publicly funded school boards, suggest that not all the necessary planning and resources are in place to ensure the effective implementation of this vital policy.

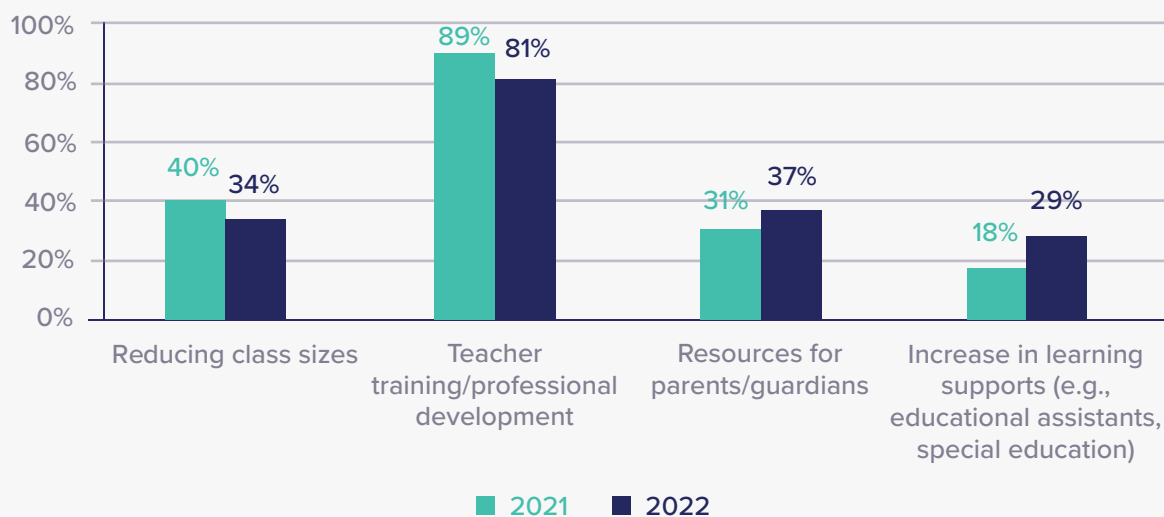
Fewer schools offering smaller class sizes and teacher training to support de-streaming

“There was a lot of information and support last year, but this year as the balance of the Grade 9 courses become de-streamed, there really seems to be nothing.”

Secondary school principal, Northern Ontario

Figure 1

Change in proportion of secondary schools offering supports for de-streamed Grade 9 courses



Source: People for Education's 2021-22 and 2022-23 Annual Ontario School Survey

While the 2022-23 survey results show an increase from 2021-22 in the proportion of schools with resources for parents and learning supports such as educational assistants, there has been a decrease in the proportion of schools reporting they are able to reduce class sizes and provide teacher professional development to support de-streaming.

“Despite the school board providing some opportunities for paid planning, implementation of the de-streamed Grade 9 programs was left largely up to teaching staff. If not for the leadership within departments at the school, there would have been virtually no direction.”

Secondary school principal, GTA

In 2022-23:

- ◆ 81% of secondary schools reported offering teacher training/professional development on de-streaming, down from 89% in 2021-22.
- ◆ Only 34% of secondary schools reported having lower class sizes to support de-streaming, compared to 40% in 2021-22.
- ◆ The proportion of secondary schools providing resources for parents/guardians increased to 37% this year, from 31% in 2021-22.
- ◆ 29% of secondary schools reported having learning supports for de-streaming such as educational assistants and special education supports, an increase from 18% in 2021-22.
- ◆ 83% of secondary schools provide students with a chance to speak one-on-one with a guidance counsellor.

Majority of principals say increased supports are needed for effective de-streaming

“De-streaming is a significant shift in the way we teach students in Grade 9. We need ongoing support from the Ministry around reducing and maintaining smaller class sizes. We also would benefit from additional EA support and other learning supports.”

Secondary school principal, Southwestern Ontario

Many secondary school principals reported that implementing de-streamed Grade 9 courses so soon after the COVID-19 pandemic was a challenge because students and teachers were still struggling with the impacts of the pandemic.

“We are implementing de-streaming and core curriculum courses in Grade 9 to students coming out of a pandemic with the highest ever social/emotional needs, and teachers are exhausted with preparation or supports needed to make this an effective change.”

Secondary school principal, GTA

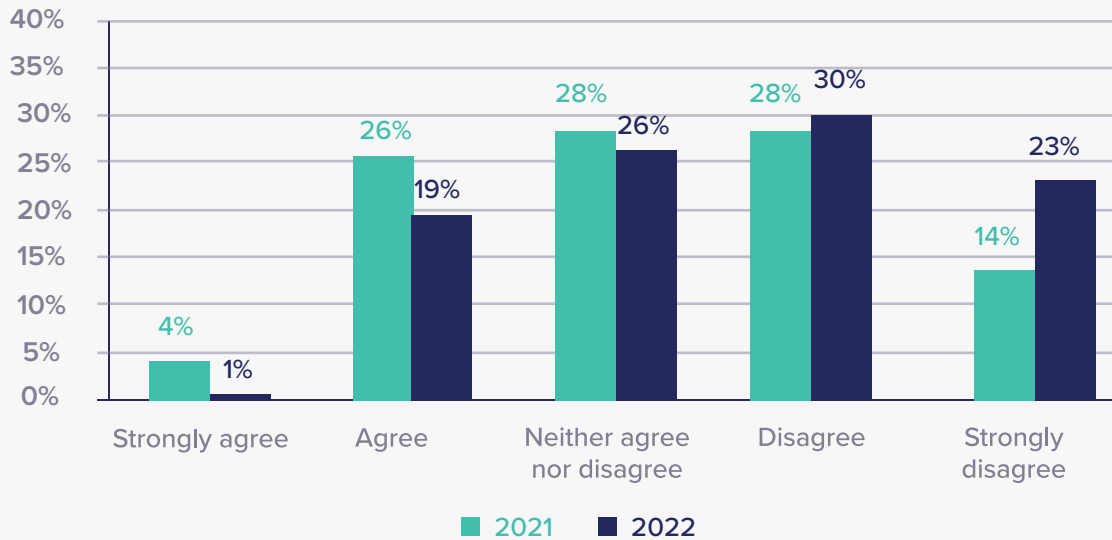
Principals said it was difficult for teachers to support struggling students without having access to smaller class sizes, and time and resources for both professional development and curriculum planning. Principals also noted that because applied-level courses often had higher proportions of students receiving special education support, de-streamed classes were especially challenging without the addition of special education supports and/or educational assistants.

“Teachers were not prepared for de-streaming. They voluntarily participated in a session last spring but to do this correctly, they need multiple full-day sessions where practical examples of instructional and assessment are presented.”

Secondary school principal, Southwestern Ontario

Figure 2

“My school staff and I have received sufficient support from the Ministry and my school board to implement de-streaming”



Source: People for Education’s 2021-22 and 2022-23 Annual Ontario School Survey

“Teachers have received minimal information and opportunities for collaborative professional development to build a robust and differentiated program that supports all students.”

Secondary school principal, Eastern Ontario

Neighbourhood income influences availability of some de-streaming supports

Findings from the survey show that secondary schools in neighbourhoods with higher median family incomes were more likely to have de-streaming supports such as smaller class sizes, teacher professional development, and opportunities for students to speak one-on-one with guidance counsellors. These findings raise particular concerns because People for Education’s research has shown that it is [schools in low-income neighbourhoods](#) that have had disproportionate numbers of students negatively affected by streaming and are thus most in need of de-streaming supports.

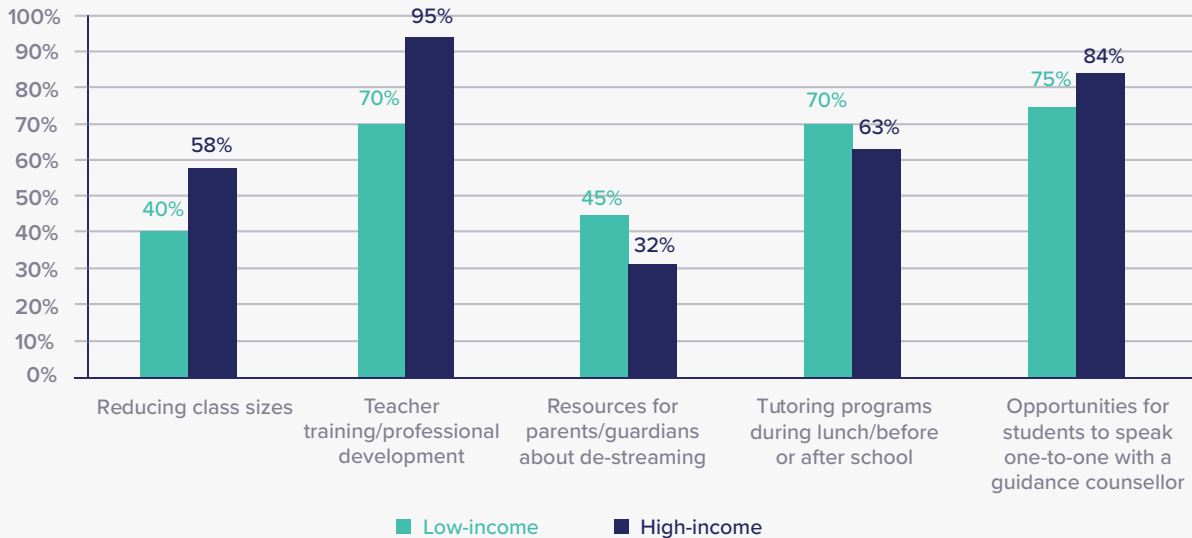
On the other hand, schools in lower-income neighbourhoods were more likely to provide tutoring programs and de-streaming resources for parents/guardians.

In 2022-23:

- ◆ 53% of secondary principals disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement “My school staff and I have received sufficient support from the Ministry and my school board to implement de-streaming.” This is an increase from 42% last year.
- ◆ 96% of secondary principals reported they needed an increase in learning supports, such as educational assistants and special education supports.
- ◆ 93% of secondary principals said they needed support to provide teacher training/professional development on de-streaming.
- ◆ 85% of secondary principals said they needed support to reduce class size.

Figure 3

Proportion of secondary schools offering supports for the implementation of de-streamed Grade 9 courses, by income



Source: People for Education's 2022-23 Annual Ontario School Survey

Delays in access to new curriculum adds to pressure

“Delays in staff getting access to curriculum materials to design courses has been challenging. Limited time for staff to develop materials, and limited resources have been challenging for some departments.”

Secondary school principal, Southwestern Ontario

The province introduced new de-streamed Grade 9 mathematics curriculum in 2021, followed by a new de-streamed Grade 9 science curriculum in 2022 and de-streamed Grade 9 English curriculum in fall of 2023. In all these cases, teachers were given access to the new curricula in late spring – just months before they had to implement it. For Grade 9 Geography and French, teachers have had to adapt existing academic curricula to make it

In 2022-23:

- ◆ 95% of secondary schools in high-income areas provided training/professional development for teachers on de-streaming, compared to 70% of schools in low-income areas.
- ◆ 58% of secondary schools in high-income areas reported reducing class sizes, compared to 40% of schools in low-income areas.
- ◆ 84% of secondary schools in high-income areas provided opportunities for students to speak one-on-one with a guidance counsellor compared to 75% of schools in low-income areas.
- ◆ 40% of schools in low-income areas reported having increased learning supports (e.g., educational assistants, special education supports) compared to 11% of schools in high-income areas.
- ◆ 45% of schools in low-income areas reported having resources for parents about de-streaming compared to 32% of schools in high-income areas.

work for the range of students in their de-streamed classes.

Several principals, in their responses to the survey, pointed to the late introduction of new curricula and the expectation of teachers to manage the adaptation of existing academic curricula as key challenges school staff are facing.

“The new science curriculum was shared very late last year, as it had been for the math curriculum the year before. No time to prepare properly. The preparation was done gradually and was not as effective. It was difficult on the staff.”

Secondary school principal, Eastern Ontario

Preparing elementary school students for de-streamed Grade 9 courses

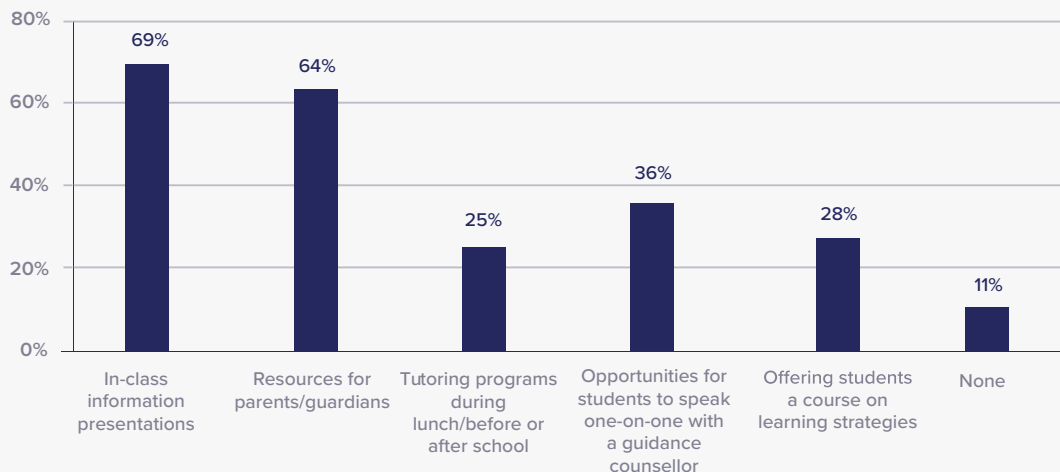
“The [elementary] schools have a great relationship with the high school. This allows a team approach working towards transitioning our Grade 8 students into Grade 9 in a seamless manner. This is also advantageous for Grade 8 students who are on an IEP going into Grade 9. The school team is able to communicate and work with the high school team to ensure the students are going to have success in Grade 9.”

Elementary school principal, Southwestern Ontario

While streaming technically begins in secondary school, there is ample evidence to show that [the process of dividing students begins in elementary school](#). It is vital to prepare students in Grades 7 and 8 for the transition to high school as well as de-streamed courses.

Figure 4

Proportion of elementary schools offering supports to prepare students for de-streamed Grade 9 courses



Source: People for Education’s 2022-23 Annual Ontario School Survey

In 2022-23, most elementary schools offered supports to prepare students for de-streamed Grade 9 courses. However, just as in secondary school, access was affected by schools' median neighbourhood income. For example, 31% of elementary schools in high-income areas offered tutoring, compared to 21% of schools in low-income areas.

“The challenges are starting to surface. Students that have had gaps from previous years cannot just be brought up to a level of the course expectations. As a result, a number of students are beginning to fall behind even more. It is suggested that there be Math and Science teacher specialists delivering the course content starting as early as Grade 2.”

Secondary school principal, GTA

What about de-streaming Grade 10?

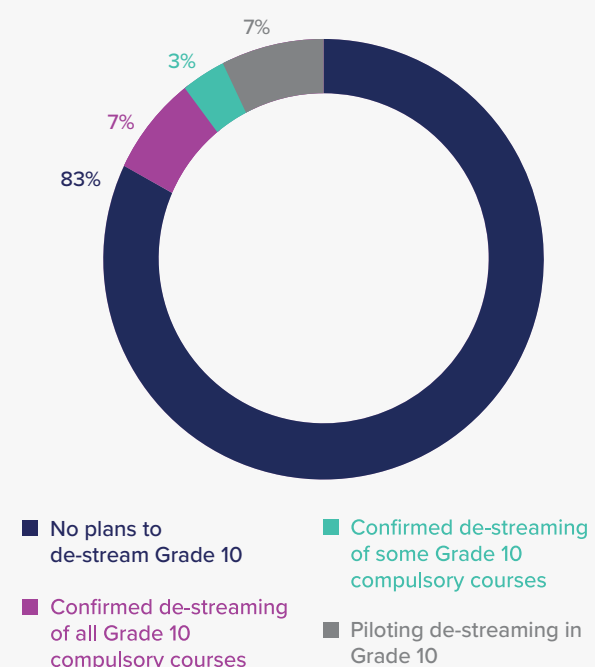
While the province has de-streamed Grade 9 compulsory courses, no plan has been announced to de-stream Grade 10. As a result, students finishing Grade 9 in most school boards will be faced with deciding between academic and applied courses in Grade 10, which may result in inequities like those that existed with streaming in Grade 9.

People for Education conducted a scan in the fall of 2023 to understand how many school boards were moving ahead with de-streaming Grade 10 despite the lack of provincial policy. The scan examined the 70 Ontario school boards that have secondary schools. Twelve school boards have begun the process of de-streaming Grade 10. Of these 12 boards, 5 have de-streamed all Grade 10 courses or confirmed plans to do so by September 2024; 2 boards have de-streamed some Grade 10 courses; and the remaining 5 are in the process of piloting de-streaming Grade 10 courses in various ways. For example, piloting could mean de-streaming Grade 10 in some but not all secondary schools in a school board, or alternatively, another school board

In 2022-23:

- ◆ 69% of elementary schools provided in-class information on de-streaming to students.
- ◆ 64% of elementary schools provided resources on de-streaming for parents and guardians.
- ◆ 36% of elementary schools provided opportunities for students to speak one-on-one with guidance counsellors.
- ◆ 25% of elementary schools provided tutoring before or after school or during lunch.

Figure 5
Ontario school boards de-streaming Grade 10



Source: People for Education's scan of Ontario's publicly funded school boards, fall 2023

is automatically enrolling all Grade 10 students into the academic stream unless student-teacher consultations recommend otherwise.

Funding to support de-streaming

When de-streaming was first introduced in 2021, there was no specific funding allocated to support the change. Instead, funding for de-streaming was rolled into overall funding for the province's new Math Strategy. In 2022-23, when de-streaming was expanded to include all compulsory courses, funding for supports such as additional teachers was integrated into the [COVID-19 Learning Recovery Fund](#).

For the 2023-24 school year, the province announced a \$103 Million [Supporting Student Potential Fund](#) to cover the costs of additional teachers in Grades 7 through 10 to “work directly with students to provide early and ongoing supports for students to be successful in de-streamed classes”; supports for Grade 8 students transitioning to a de-streamed Grade 9 program; and supports for Grade 9 students in de-streamed classes. The funding is [allocated to school boards on a per pupil basis](#).

It is not yet clear whether the funding announced for the 2023-24 school year will address ongoing challenges including supporting more schools to provide smaller class sizes, more special education support, and more time for teachers to engage in professional development.

However, a statement released on November 2, 2023, by the [Ontario Principals' Council](#) points to ongoing concerns about staffing shortages in all employee groups, which raises concerns about whether funding for de-streaming is having the desired impact. The OPC statement says that principals are “...extremely concerned about the shortages and the negative impact they have on learning and safety for our students and our schools. Short-term solutions have not resolved the problem. This crisis must be addressed immediately, with long-term and sustainable solutions.”

Learning from the past

Streaming has been recognized as a problematic and discriminatory practice by experts ranging from the [OECD](#) in multiple reports to Bob Rae in a [1992 report](#) on anti-racism written for the Ontario government. However, attempts at de-streaming in Ontario have historically failed. The primary causes of those failures appears to have been a lack of recognition of the how important it is to address systemic issues of racism and discrimination in children's early years, as well as a lack of long-term commitment to providing the resources necessary to ensure that de-streaming is a success.

There has already been some evaluation of the province's current de-streaming program. [The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario](#) surveyed 1,500 Grade 9 students in two Ontario school boards to understand more about students' experiences in de-streamed courses and to find out how well additional supports were working. The HEQCO report concluded that “Ontario is moving in the right direction with its de-streaming policy and targeted investments.” However, the researchers also found that students continued to be “uninformed about the implications of their course selections and feel unsupported when making course selections.” The HEQCO report recommends continued evaluation to understand if de-streaming supports are working as intended.

Recommendations for the future

It is critical not to mistake the challenges arising from the implementation of de-streaming for justification not to move forward. De-streaming has demonstrated the potential to unlock improved equitable outcomes for historically marginalized students, but it cannot happen without the adequate policy, planning, and funding to support its long-term success.

In 2022, People for Education made three overarching recommendations to ensure the effectiveness of de-streaming in the province, all of which remain relevant today:

1 Plan in consultation with students, educators, education support staff, and families.

People for Education continues to call on the province to convene an Education Task Force to provide advice on recovery and renewal post-pandemic, and on vital policy areas such as the implementation of de-streaming.

2 Provide learning supports for de-streaming that meet schools' diverse needs.

De-streaming is a significant structural, pedagogical, and cultural change for schools and school boards. To support the introduction of full de-streaming, the province must provide sufficient and ongoing resources to support reduced class sizes, greater opportunities for professional development, accessible information for families, and additional staff.

3 Monitor and evaluate implementation as frequently as possible.

Simply de-streaming curriculum is not enough. The province must implement a comprehensive evaluation plan to ensure successful outcomes, in particular for the students who have been disproportionately disadvantaged by streaming in the past. The evaluation plan should be aligned with the new Board Improvement and Equity Plan, which mandates the collection of disaggregated demographic data to support school boards in tracking student achievement, equity, well-being, and transitions.



Methodology

Findings from this report are based on 1,044 responses to People for Education’s 2022-23 Annual Ontario School Survey (AOSS) collected from principals across all 72 publicly funded school boards in the province. Longitudinal data comparisons are based on the data collected from the secondary schools that participated in our 2021-22 AOSS. Unless cited from other sources, the statistics and quoted material in this report originate from People for Education’s 2022-23 AOSS, the 26th annual survey of elementary schools, and the 23rd annual survey of secondary schools in Ontario. Surveys from the 2022-23 AOSS were completed online via SurveyMonkey in both English and French in the fall of 2022. Survey responses were disaggregated to examine survey representation across provincial regions (see table below). Schools were sorted into geographical regions based on the first letter of their postal code. The GTA region includes schools with M postal codes as well as those with L postal codes located in [GTA municipalities](#).

Region (by postal code)	Percentage of schools in sample	Percentage of schools in province
Northern (P)	18%	11%
Central (L exclud. GTA)	9%	11%
Eastern (K)	18%	18%
Southwestern (N)	23%	20%
GTA	33%	40%

During analysis, data collected from the survey were matched with the Median Census Family Income of Schools based on School Enrolment by Student Residential Postal Code, Preliminary 2021-2022, which was accessed through a Request for Information from the Ontario Ministry of Education’s Education Statistics and Analysis Branch. The Median Census Family Income information was derived from the 2021 Census for all the dissemination areas associated to a school based on the weighted enrolment by residential postal code of its students. Schools were then sorted from highest to lowest income based on this measure. For this report, income analysis only included elementary schools with Grades 7 and 8 with student enrollments between 197 and 445 students and secondary schools with student enrollments between 410 and 1222 students. In this report, the top 25% of schools based on Weighted Census Family Income are considered “high-income” (elementary schools: n = 64, average income = \$127,126; secondary schools: n = 23, average income = \$125,560) and the bottom 25% are considered “low-income” (elementary schools: n = 57, average income = \$71,746; secondary schools: n = 22, average income = \$75,351), unless otherwise specified.

Qualitative data analysis was conducted using inductive analysis. Researchers read responses and coded emergent themes in each set of data (i.e., the responses to each of the survey’s open-ended questions). The quantitative analyses in this report are based on descriptive statistics. The primary objective of the descriptive analyses is to present numerical information in a format that is accessible to a broad public readership. All data were analyzed using SPSS statistical software. All calculations have been rounded to the nearest whole number and may not total 100% in displays of disaggregated categories. All survey responses and data are kept confidential and stored in conjunction with TriCouncil recommendations for the safeguarding of data.

In fall 2023, People for Education’s research team completed a scan of school board websites in addition to phone/email communications to confirm plans, if any, to de-stream Grade 10 courses in each of Ontario’s 70 publicly funded school boards with secondary schools. School boards were asked whether: all Grade 10 compulsory courses are only offered using the Locally Developed or Academic curriculum; some Grade 10 compulsory courses are only offered using the Locally Developed or Academic curriculum; they are piloting de-streaming Grade 10 courses in some of their secondary schools; or they have not begun de-streaming Grade 10 courses.

For questions about the methodology used in this report, please contact the research team at PFE: research@peopleforeducation.ca.

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