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More than one first language? Ontario school boards' understanding of bilingual first language acquisition

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Introduction

- Globally, there has been an increased recognition that being bilingual or multilingual is more common than being monolingual, and that monolingualism should be considered an exception rather than a norm (Baker 2011; Crystal 1987; Dewaele et al. 2003; Romaine 1995).
- Current research (De Houwer 2009, 2011; Meisel 1989, a.o.) distinguishes between two types of childhood bilingualism: Bilingual First Language Acquisition (BFLA) and Early Second Language Acquisition (ESLA). BFLA children are exposed to the two languages from birth, while ESLA children are initial monolinguals who become exposed to a second language under the age of 6, and thus have the potential of becoming bilingual.
- The traditional concept of a single *first or native language* has been challenged by research on BFLA. That is, children who grow up acquiring more than one language from birth may have a stronger and a weaker language, but it is theoretically and empirically inaccurate to identify only one language as native in such cases.
- The distinction between BFLA and ESLA is particularly applicable to a Canadian context where exposure to the two official languages or a combination of official and heritage languages may occur from birth or during early childhood.

Objectives

- This project examines to what extent public school boards in Ontario differentiate between ESLA and BFLA, whether they recognize the concept of having more than one native language, or whether they subscribe to the more traditional view of a single native language.
- The project also investigates how much variation exists in the linguistic profiling of students across Ontario.

Methods & Materials

- 64 English school boards, public and Catholic, across the province of Ontario were contacted in order to collect a sample of student registration forms.
- All questions about students' language background, or any other language-related questions, were extracted from the forms.
- The data was analyzed with regards to the notions of first language used, and the number and type of language-related questions asked.
- Each question was coded and grouped into one of thirteen categories, based on the similarities of the questions' wording and purpose.
- Comparisons of the number of questions asked by each school board were also drawn.

Acknowledgements

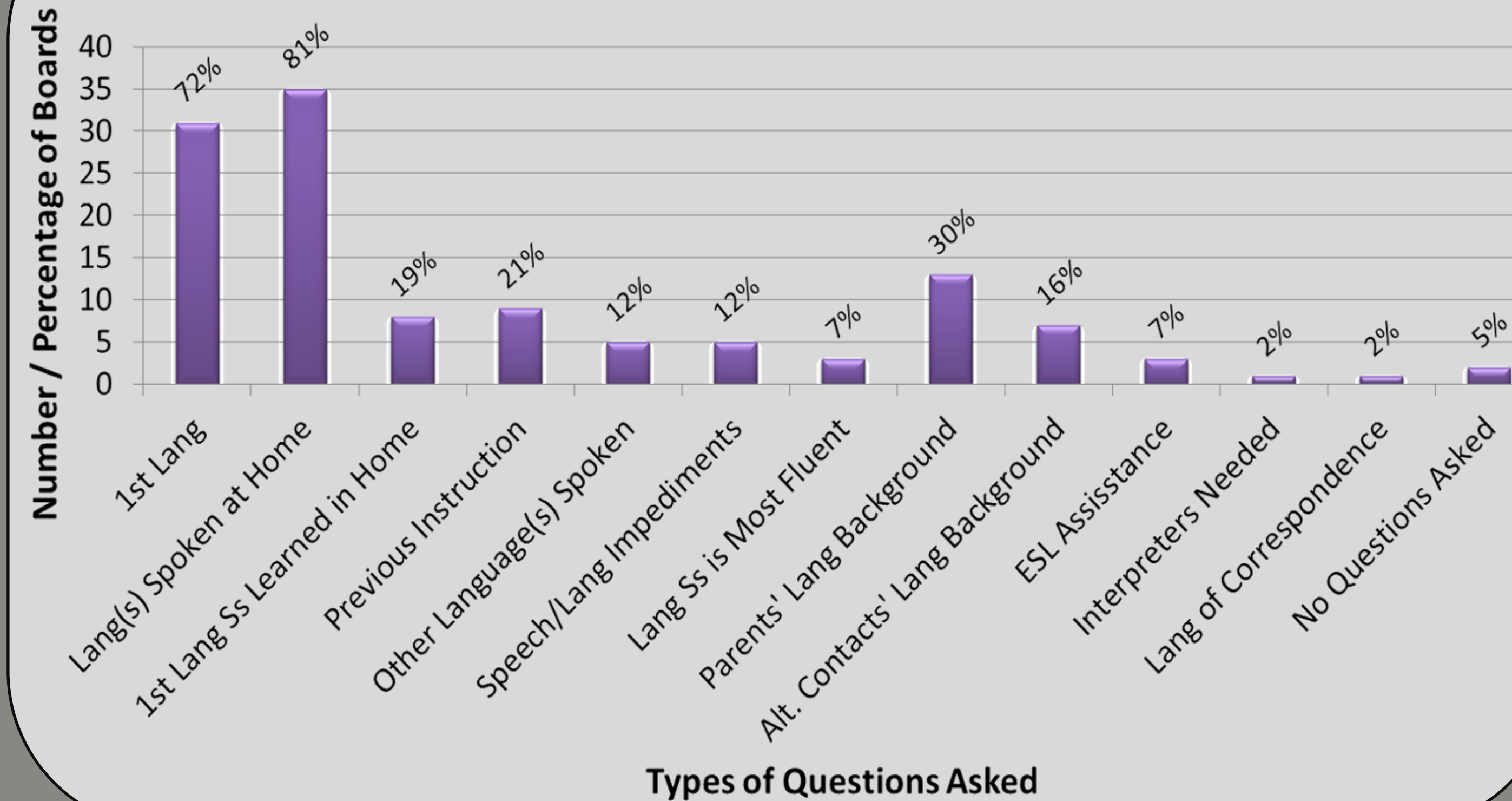
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Results

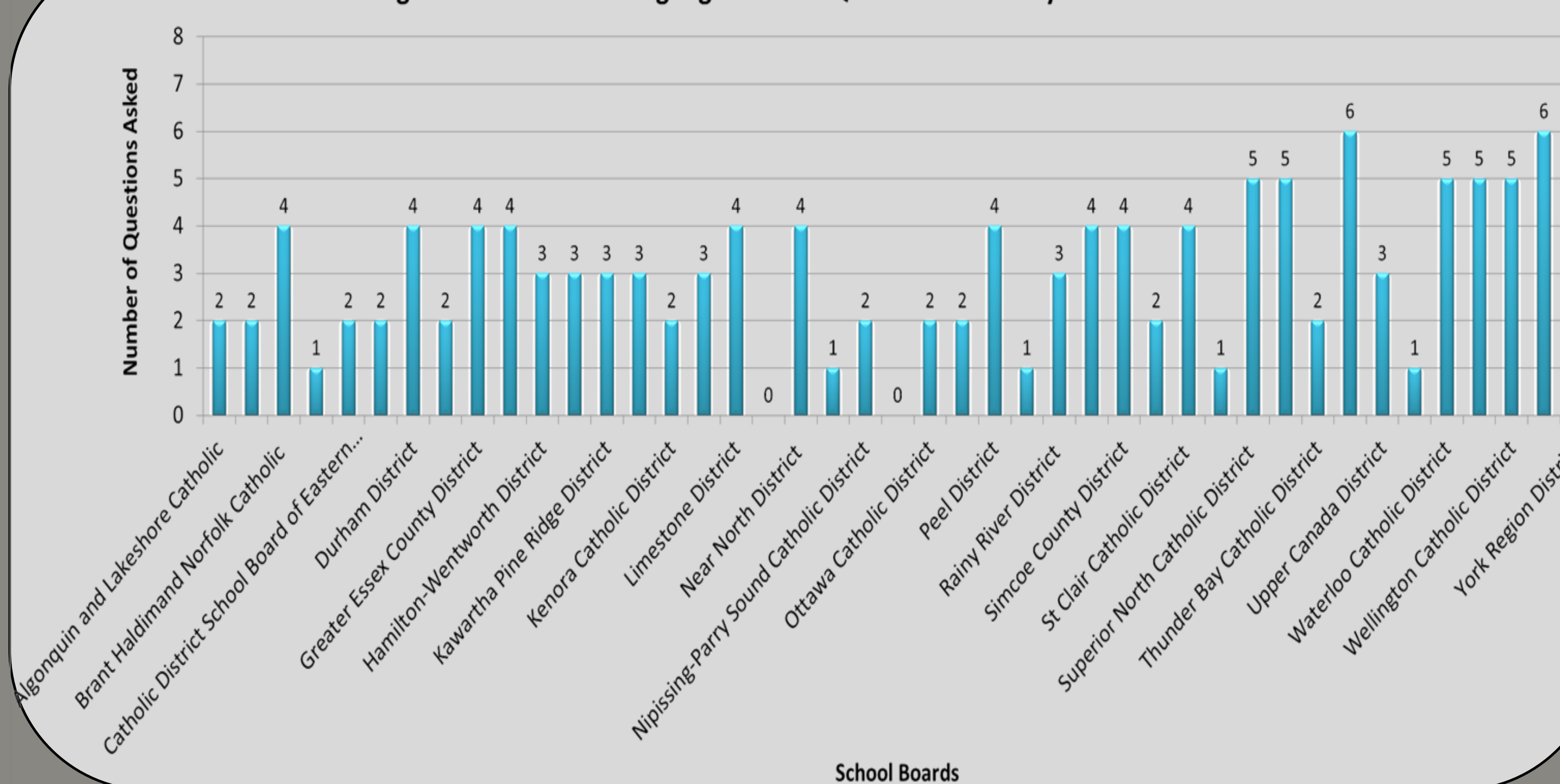
- 43 of the 64 school boards contacted responded (67% response rate).
- The total number of language-related questions extracted was 132 and these were grouped into 13 different categories, as indicated in Figure 1.
- Highest occurring categories: "Language(s) Spoken at Home" (81%) and "First Language" (72%).
- Categories compatible with the concept of ESLA: "First Language" (72%), "First Language Student Learned in the Home" (19%).
- Categories compatible with the concept of BFLA: "Language Student is Most Fluent" (7%).

Figure 1: Types of Language-Related Questions Asked by 43 English School Boards in Ontario



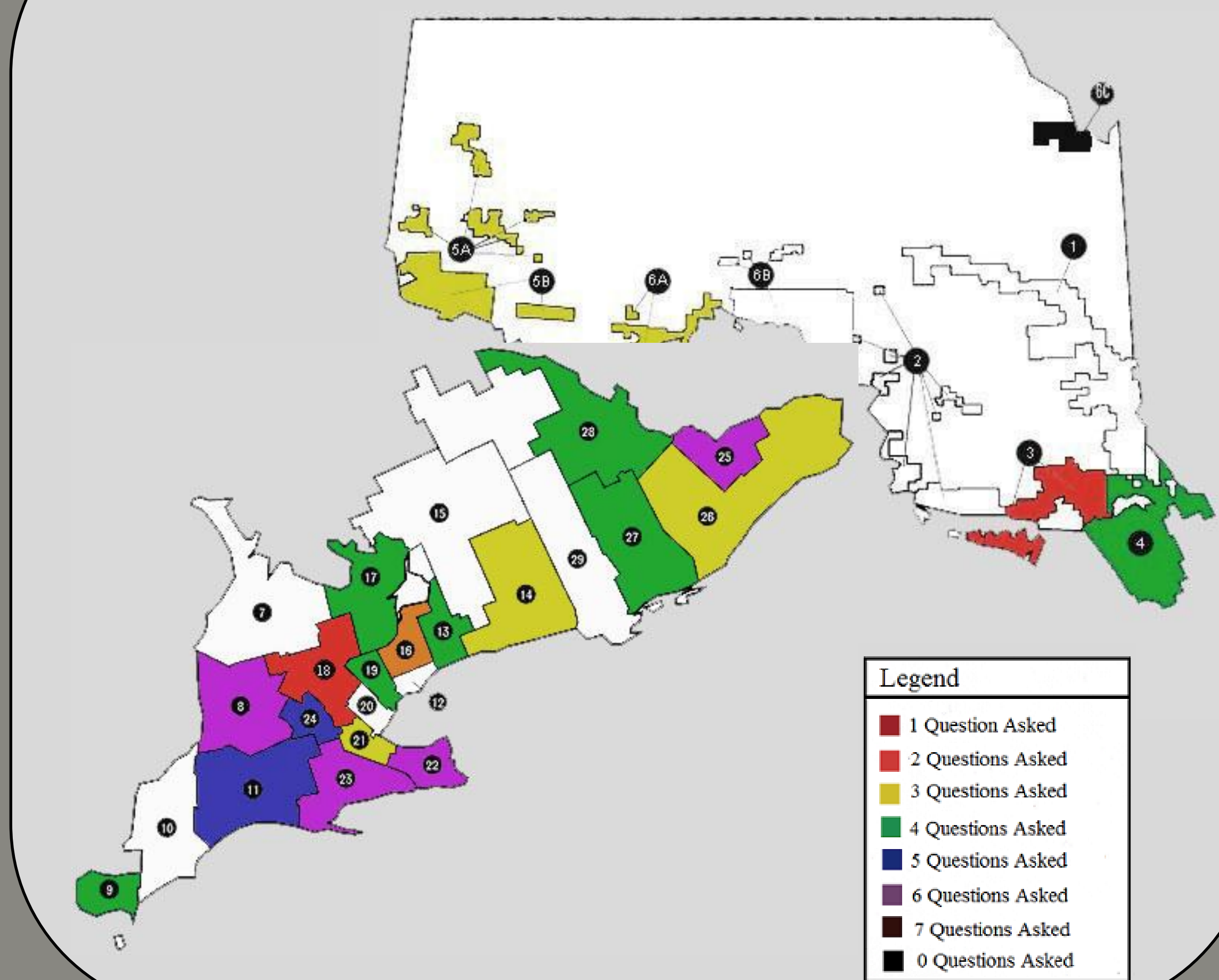
- The number of questions asked by each school board is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Number of Language-Related Questions Asked By Each School Board



- Highest number of questions asked: York Region District (7) and York Catholic District (6)
- Average number of questions: 3; mode: 2.
- Boards that did not ask any language-related questions: Moosonee District and Northeastern Catholic District

Figure 3: Number of Language Related Questions Asked By Northern and Southern Ontario School Boards



- Boards that ask a higher number of language-related questions tend to be in areas with higher urban density and ethnic diversity.

- The number of questions asked by each school board, and the geographic location of the boards across the province is shown in Figure 3 (public school boards only).

District School Boards' Region Legend

- District School Board Ontario North East (Timmins)
- Algoma District School Board (Sault Ste. Marie)
- Rainbow District School Board (Sudbury)
- Near North District School Board (Parry Sound)
- Keewatin-Patricia District School Board (Dryden)
- Rainy River District School Board (Fort Frances)
- Lakehead District School Board (Thunder Bay)
- Superior-Greenstone District School Board (Marathon)
- Moosonee District (Moosonee)
- Bluewater District School Board (Owen Sound)
- Avon Maitland District School Board (Stratford)
- Greater Essex County District School Board (Windsor)
- Lambton Kent District School Board (Sarnia)
- Thames Valley District School Board (London)
- Toronto District School Board (Toronto)
- Durham District School Board (Oshawa)
- Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board (Peterborough)
- Trillium Lakelands District School Board (Muskoka)
- York Region District School Board (Markham)
- Simcoe County District School Board (Barrie)
- Upper Grand District School Board (Guelph)
- Peel District School Board (Brampton)
- Halton District School Board (Burlington)
- Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (Hamilton)
- District School Board of Niagara (St. Catharines)
- Grand Erie District School Board (Brantford)
- Waterloo Region District School Board (Waterloo)
- Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (Ottawa)
- Upper Canada District School Board (Brockville)
- Limestone District School Board (Kingston)
- Renfrew County District School Board (Pembroke)
- Hastings and Prince Edward District School Board (Belleville)

Conclusion

- Do school boards in Ontario recognize the idea of having more than one native language, or do they subscribe to the more traditional view of a single native language?
 - 91% of the boards ask questions compatible with a traditional view of a single native language or ESLA, but not with BFLA. Although it is evident that school boards are well aware of the potentially diverse linguistic backgrounds of incoming students, they may not be conceptually or methodologically equipped to recognize the full spectrum of linguistic complexity associated with bilingualism.
- Is there variation in the extent of linguistic profiling of students across Ontario?
 - Variation does occur among school boards as some ask as many as 7 language-related questions while others ask as few as 0. This variation may be related to some degree to difference in population density and diversity in various parts of the province.
- What's next?
 - Continue acquiring data from English school boards; add French school boards across Ontario to the study and draw comparisons with the results from the English school boards; add data from other provinces.
 - Analyze forms as clusters of questions as opposed to by individual questions.
 - Collect additional language-related data through other publicly available resources (e.g. analyze language-related questions asked by province-wide tests at the primary and secondary school levels").

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