

COVID-19 and Online Learning in Ontario, Canada

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Within days of closing all schools in Ontario on March 14, the provincial government introduced an online learning plan that required educators to continue to work with their students. However, the plan came with very little support from the provincial government. Local school boards and educators were to their own devices to make it work.

The conservative provincial government promoted their online learning plan as “continuing education” for students. In reality, it was emergency remote learning. The government pushed for more synchronous, livestreamed learning sessions with students, rather than allowing students to work at their own pace in an asynchronous way.

The Ontario government, like many other provincial governments in Canada, were praising their ability to

deliver high quality education using online tools to students across the province. What we discovered was that many students disengaged from online learning as inequities emerged, and became exacerbated by moving to a fully online format. Many students lacked access to reliable internet connections, or did not possess the devices needed to work online. Many students were not familiar with the online tools used by educators, while others did not have a quiet space to work in their homes with many parents forced to work from home themselves.

Teachers, as well as education workers who support students with special needs or who provided mental health supports, struggled to balance their work and lives. Like many of their students, some lacked access to reliable internet, especially in rural and northern areas of the province, especially when it came to attempting to connect with students with livestreaming tools (i.e. Zoom, Microsoft Teams). Many were caring for their

1. Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF-FEE-SO)



own children who were at home with them. Educators had many of the same issues that their students faced when it came to accessing online learning. Despite these challenges, many educators were able to provide creative learning opportunities for their students under the most difficult of circumstances.

However, this was emergency remote learning and did not match a true, in-person learning experience that students would receive in a typical classroom. While some students persevered through the emergency remote learning experience, many disengaged from learning or struggled through it. Despite these challenges, the Ontario government continued a publicity campaign to promote how well their plan was working and that every student should have access to online learning tools.

The Ontario government continues to use the pandemic to promote its agenda of increasing online learning opportunities for students at the secondary / high school level, increasing the threat of greater privatization of publicly-funded education. This issue emerged in the last round of collective bargaining between the government, local school boards, and the education unions. The Ontario government declared that all students would need to complete FOUR high school courses online, known in Ontario as e-Learning courses, in order to graduate. Unions forced this proposal to become a

bargaining issue, and the parents raised their objections to this change in the graduation requirement.

While the Ontario government has the power to unilaterally change graduation requirements, public pressure forced them to rethink their plans. Students will now need to complete TWO e-Learning courses, but there are a number of ways for students to opt out of being forced to take these courses, including parental consent, or a recommendation from a teacher. Before full implementation of this plan, there will be a provincial election in Ontario.

In conclusion, many provincial governments in Canada have tried to promote online learning during the pandemic as an alternative to learning in a classroom. Parents, students and educators saw it and experienced it very differently. Despite this, many governments are using the pandemic as an opportunity to promote a permanent increase in online learning for students, heightening the threat of greater privatization of education. The Ontario government appears to be starting down that path with increasing the use of online courses, and other provinces are following close behind. It will take significant public pressure to get governments to stop thinking of education as a cost, and instead see it as an investment in the social and economic future of the country.