

April 25, 2019

The Honorable Doug Ford
Premier of Ontario

The Honorable Lisa Thompson
Minister of Education

Re: E-Learning as identified in March 15, 2019 B08 Memorandum

Dear Premier Ford and Minister Thompson:

I write to you on behalf of the Board of Trustees of the Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board (DPCDSB), regarding Deputy Minister Nancy Naylor's March 15, 2019: B08 Memorandum to Directors of Education, in which the government's "New Vision for Education" is articulated. Specifically, the Board of Trustees wishes to address the government's plan to implement mandatory e-learning credits for secondary students commencing September 2020, and expanding broadband width across all school districts in Ontario.

In the B08 Memorandum, Deputy Minister Naylor states "the government is committed to modernizing education and supporting students and families in innovative ways that enhance their success." The memo further goes on to identify that:

- Starting in 2020-2021, the government will centralize all e-learning course delivery;
- The adjusted average class size for e-learning courses will be 35 students;
- Secondary students will take a minimum of four e-learning courses to be counted toward the required 30 credits to attain an Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD); equivalent to one credit per year; and
- With these additional modernizations, the secondary programming amount in the Pupil Foundation Grant will no longer be provided, effective September 2019.

Noting that the Ministry of Education is still in the early stages of planning for the implementation of e-learning, and that to date, the education community has not been apprised of any opportunities to provide input with respect to e-learning, the Board of Trustees hopes that the following concerns will be considered.

The Board of Trustees which, as per *The Education Act*, is charged with ensuring the achievement and well-being of all students, acknowledge that an e-learning environment already exists and is an option of learning that positively suits some learners and some curriculum content areas. However, there will be some students, particularly students who require more support with their learning, for whom this strategy, in our view, will present a significant challenge to their well-being, achievement and success. During a stage of adolescent development, where many students feel isolated from each other and from the broader community, mandating e-learning through a 100% on-line platform has the potential to

further perpetuate feelings of isolation among some students, particularly those who are vulnerable to begin with in this regard. The e-learning strategy has the potential to exacerbate further the challenges some students face with mental health and well-being. While we note the memorandum does indicate the ability to exempt students from e-learning courses, please consider the diverse learning needs of students when finalizing the details of the e-learning strategy by affording flexibility to school boards to offer blended e-learning opportunities in addition to the ability to exempt students.

As a Catholic educational system, we are committed to maintaining and preserving the Catholic nature of our curriculum offered at the secondary level and the context in which it is offered, particularly as related to Religious Education courses. As Catholics, we are called to live in community, and, as such, it is imperative that the personal connection between teacher and student be an integral part of any course or student program, but particularly, in Religious Education courses. An important component of Religious Education courses is the opportunity for students to participate in retreats, characterized by a day of reflection, whereby all students engage in face-to-face interaction with one another together as a faith community of learners. Moreover, specific curriculum expectations and pedagogical content in courses rely heavily on the ability of the teacher to facilitate discourse, ideally in a face-to-face learning context. We are concerned with the extent to which this critical element of the learning process, particularly in Religious Education courses, will be supported and maintained when the predominant form of interaction will be through an online platform, potentially limiting face-to-face interactions with peers and the teacher. We hope there will be options for blended e-learning opportunities for certain courses that do not lend themselves to a 100% on-line learning environment delivery model.

The Board of Trustees has serious concerns regarding equitable and sustainable access to technology for all students, particularly those students who may face socio-economic challenges, and the impact this will have on their accessibility to program delivery, and ultimately, their success. We acknowledge that access to technology is not just limited to e-learning. In fact, DPCDSB has invested in learning technologies, through the support of Ministry funding in previous years, to assist diverse learner needs, student engagement and student success. We are grateful to the Ministry of Education for such funding. Our students, teachers and parents report positive results due to the introduction of hardware and software into the learning environment.

However, Ministry of Education funding has significantly decreased in this area and the sustainability of refreshing hardware and software licenses on a three to five year cycle presents a significant financial burden going forward. In fact, we believe it to be unsustainable and worry that gains made in this area may be compromised. We note the recent introduction of funding to provide a standard of broadband width across all school districts and we applaud the Ministry of Education for their visionary approach to modernizing learning. However, we anticipate the DPCDSB, based on the announced criteria, will not qualify for this funding. The Board has already achieved the broadband width standard as a result of considerable investments in this area to assist the proliferation of devices across the system in support of student learning and engagement and teachers' ability to bring the most up-to-date learning experiences into the classroom. We hope the Ministry of Education will broaden the criteria for learning technologies infrastructure funding to permit Boards that have already achieved the broadband width standard, access to funding to put toward ongoing costs associated with sustaining and enhancing learning technologies.

Finally, the Board of Trustees wishes to pose questions as related to the logistics of implementation of mandatory e-learning courses commencing the 2020-2021 school year. For example, where will students access the e-learning course? Will this be a scheduled period in the regular school day? How will students be supervised and what accommodation issues will this place on schools? Will the students access the e-learning courses at home?

Furthermore, will devices be provided for students who do not own one? Will access to the course at home require access to internet? If so, will students who may not have access to internet at home be disadvantaged in that they will have to travel to facilities that provide free access to internet? What training will be provided to all teachers to assist them in understanding how they can support students in their e-learning choices and course work?

In conclusion, the DPCDSB has a long history of collaborating with the Ministry of Education in support of the well-being and success of our students. We provide this information for you with hopes that it will be contemplated when finalizing plans for the implementation of mandatory e-learning credits and determining school board funding allocation to support broadband width. Along with our student trustees, we look forward to further consultation in this regard.

Sincerely,



Sharon Hobin

Chair of the Board of Trustees

cc: Nancy Naylor, Deputy Minister of Education
cc: Members of Provincial Parliament in the Dufferin-Peel CDSB
cc: Marit Stiles, MPP for Davenport
cc: Kathleen Wynne, MPP Don Valley West
cc: Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board of Trustees
cc: Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board Student Trustees
cc: Marianne Mazzorato, Director of Education, Ed. D., Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board
cc: DPCDSB Central Committee for Catholic School Councils
cc: DPCDSB Special Education Advisory Committee