



**ONTARIO PUBLIC
SCHOOL BOARDS'
ASSOCIATION**

Leading Education's Advocates

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To: Yael Ginsler, Assistant Deputy Minister, Student Achievement Division

Shannon Fuller, Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic Policy & Planning
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The Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA) was appreciative of the opportunity to attend and provide initial input to the proposed expanded mandate for TVO on November 18, 2020, in conjunction with OCSTA, Ministry staff and TVO representatives. Since this meeting, OPSBA staff have reviewed and discussed the presentation with our joint Education Program and Policy Development Work Teams and consulted and surveyed our member school boards and school authorities to gather further insight and frame a provincial perspective and response on this proposal. Thank you for the opportunity to provide additional feedback.

As a trustee organization, OPSBA recognizes the elected and legislated responsibility to support student achievement and well-being for all students. This includes ensuring adaptive learning conditions and appropriate educational settings that best meet the needs and pathways of each and every student in our care. OPSBA member boards understand that learning online is a skill and a collective responsibility to support students in this digital age in preparation for post-secondary settings, the workplace and to promote lifelong learning.

OPSBA does not support e-Learning/online learning becoming provincially centralized or outsourced to an external agency, which risks privatization with competing priorities and agendas. There is concern that this approach may open the door to further privatization, increasing commercially packaged programs for credits that do not have the necessary rigor and alignment to the Ontario curriculum and Growing Success practices.

The COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the importance of school and community, and an educator knowing their students and their students' learning needs has never been more strongly reinforced. Similarly reinforced is that there is no one-size-fits-all approach, especially as it relates to virtual learning. Any generalized or centralized approach for TVO runs the risk of devaluing existing e-Learning consortia that have evolved organically and collaboratively across a number of school boards, and overlooking the importance of local context and prior community input. There is strong

school board support for the continuation of the administration and governance by school boards of e-Learning consortia and e-Learning courses.

There are other jurisdictions that have tried a similar expanded mandate such as [Michigan Virtual](#) and the [Alberta Distance Learning Centre](#), which is slated to be closed. There is evidence and learning from these two examples that suggests a better approach would be a limited and targeted range of responsibilities for TVO to supplement school board leadership in e-Learning.

Regardless of how this expanded mandate proposal for TVO is finally resolved, it is important to note there is no equitable expansion of any form of digital learning without affordable internet, access to technology devices for every student and reliable broadband throughout Ontario. Even with school boards' best efforts during COVID-19, we have seen further marginalization and inequities exacerbated across the province. The two mandatory e-Learning credits for graduation is a non-starter if every student does not have the same ability and choice to fully and meaningfully engage in this learning option.

Rationale

Meeting Student Learning Needs

At the core of OPSBA member boards' moral compass and decision-making is always acting in the best interests of students and ensuring processes that maximize the opportunity for student success. It is the firm belief of school boards that e-Learning courses delivered through local schools or collaboratively across a school district(s), where teachers know their students' learning needs, is a far superior model of delivery. The rationale for this includes:

- Students having a bricks and mortar community-based school providing a sense of belonging and guided support as required
- Courses being developed and delivered by certified teachers, who are accessible and present
- Certified teachers adapting credit courses to meet the individual learning needs of students and make real time connections to local resources and supports
- A local school's ability to access other in-school learning supports such as Student Success teachers, Special Education staff, guidance counselors, and the Library Resource Centre as required
- School principals having the responsibility for granting credits and, as instructional leaders, ensuring that pedagogy, instruction, and assessment practices adhere to Ministry guidelines, the Ontario curriculum, collective agreements, Growing Success, and other required *Education Act* regulations
- Ability to inform and access parents/guardians as required to support student success and well being
- School-based teachers having ready access to a student's Ontario Student Record (OSR) and Individual Education Plans (IEPs) to support students with special needs to ensure that learning needs are

accommodated and that curriculum and assessment practices are fully accessible

- Certified teachers knowing their students ensures that cultural context is integrated into the delivery of program in order to create culturally relevant curricula that is reflective and responsive to student heritage, culture and identity to assist students in making connections between their learning and lived experience
- Student engagement, well-being and mental health and related supports are considerations that must be integrated into any online delivery model and this is best done as close to the student's home school as possible
- Not all students learn in the same way and there is no one-size-fits-all solution when it comes to e-Learning

It is in the best interest of students to keep the resources, supports and funding closest to the student's school and community. This generation of students will live the impact of COVID-19, which has resulted in greater isolation, mental health problems and learning loss and gaps. This is a time to focus on re-connection, and rebuilding a sense of belonging and relationships with peers and caring adults in schools. Building relationships has always been a strength of e-Learning models associated with school boards and consortia.

Benefits of the Existing e-Learning Consortia

The consortium model has been continually evolving since 2001 and in addition to the Ontario e-Learning Consortium; there are also two northern consortia – east and west. These are all not-for-profit and have developed organically to meet the academic needs of their students within a local context. Membership in the consortia represents a diverse range of school boards from across the province.

When surveyed, nearly three-quarters of school boards and provincial school authorities confirmed that they belonged to one or more of the consortia. Over time these consortium have experienced increased rates of participation, lower attrition rates and increased rates of success. These trends are a direct result of collaborative and collective expertise in the planning, development, design and delivery of a range of engaging e-Learning credit courses that are aligned to student pathways and interests.

In addition the Ontario e-Learning Consortium has developed sophisticated registration, communication, tracking and reporting systems. The PRISM data analysis system provides ongoing data that individual and groups of school boards use to inform their practice.

School boards who participate in the consortia report the following strengths.

Belonging to a consortium provides:

- support for students with diverse needs and pathways
- opportunities for students to take courses with other school boards through established consortium processes
- higher rates of success, less student disengagement and failure

- a communication system that ensures the well-being and appropriate supports for students
- access to a greater pool of course offerings, including summer courses
- support for small and rural schools, and students who require courses to graduate
- access to an organization that helps to solve problems with economies of scale
- shared development and implementation including course content, supports, resources, teaching practices, processes for assessment and evaluation and opportunities for professional development and mentorship
- support for inter-board collaboration in providing professional learning for teachers
- an online registration tool that facilitates the seamless sharing of students from board to board
- no requirement for transfer payments or invoices between school boards

Out of the 29 school boards and provincial school authorities that responded to the OPSBA survey, only 26.6% of respondents identified that they are not members of a consortium. School boards that currently do not belong to a consortium are generally larger school boards possessing the internal capacity to offer a range of e-Learning courses to meet the needs of their students.

Recommended Role for TVO

In the OPSBA survey, school boards and provincial school authorities were asked if they accessed TVO resources to supplement student learning options, and if so, to what degree. Of the 61% of school boards and provincial school authorities that said they accessed TVO resources, nearly 90% stated that TVO was either used rarely or moderately. For those who responded that they accessed TVO it was primarily for Independent Learning Courses (ILCs), as well as Mathify, online tutoring, mPower and in some cases to supplement a student's program with an ILC when timetable conflicts were difficult to resolve.

School boards identified issues related to current TVO offerings as not reflecting Universal Design for Learning, differentiated instruction and not meeting accessibility standards. These are essential elements to enable a student with special needs or a disability to fully engage in e-Learning courses.

These issues are understandable, as TVO was never envisioned as an educational institution. TVO is a media production agency with a volunteer board, which is not elected, but appointed by the government and as such is not directly accountable to local families and community stakeholders. It has also been noted that TVO receives charitable donations that could potentially influence areas of emphasis and unintentionally create conflicting agendas and approaches.

OPSBA member boards recognize and respect TVO's current niche strengths including Independent Learning Courses (ILCs) as well as its media production expertise in creating engaging and interactive content.

TVO's role could be beneficial in the following areas to:

- Expand and refresh ILC offerings to improve student engagement and overall success rates. Establish indicators and standards linked to ILC completion rates, attrition, student engagement and success.
- Provide a supplemental resource to school board consortia and e-Learning course development by collaboratively identifying and co-creating interactive enhanced media segments/content that could be incorporated into existing and future course content. This would require an in-house production team.
- Create and organize a repository of high quality related content that could be added to course shells.
- Co-develop an authentic course review process that ensures the incorporation of universal design, AODA standards and the principles of equity and inclusion (anti-racist, anti-oppression, anti-bias, culturally relevant and responsive, ability to accommodate or modify for learning needs, etc.).
- Create and provide high quality and engaging professional learning opportunities for teachers and administrators to support effective online pedagogy.
- Expand the Mathify program and math/tutoring help to senior math courses and other curriculum areas and grade levels outside of the school day.
- Work with consortia and school boards to identify and help to bridge gaps in e-Learning offerings such as French immersion, technology courses and Grade 9 and 10 curricular areas.

Potential Impact on School Boards

Any centralization of the delivery of e-Learning credits away from school boards will have implications for enrolment, funding and staffing. The staffing implications will be especially challenging in smaller schools, which use e-Learning courses to ensure sufficient access to programming for students.

A fair and equitable funding model for the delivery of the two mandatory e-Learning credits is important to school boards to support their students to graduation. This will be an OPSBA recommendation for the 2021-2022 Grants for Student Needs.

Summary

OPSBA believes that school boards and TVO should continue to do what they each do best and work to find opportunities to work collaboratively in areas that could continue to grow and enhance the quality of e-Learning credit courses.

Although OPSBA appreciates the consultation process, we were not included in a broad partnership discussion table to hear other perspectives and feedback. It is

recommended that a working table be created with consortia and school board representatives and e-Learning experts, along with TVO staff, to co-create a vision that is mutually beneficial, which does not undermine school board and consortium leadership or eliminate the positive e-Learning approaches that have been effective for student engagement and success.

OPSBA staff would be pleased to be included in such a working table and are prepared to discuss and answer any questions regarding the feedback provided.

Note re: Terminology

OPSBA recommends that the terminology being used to describe various delivery models of virtual learning be clearly defined. As mentioned at the consultation meeting, several terms are being used interchangeably (e.g. online learning, e-Learning, remote learning, digital learning, independent learning). Clarity to these terms will allow for a more informed discussion and lead to a distinction between the roles and responsibilities of school boards and that of TVO/TFO.

Best Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Cathy Abraham". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Cathy Abraham
President

CC: Minister of Education Stephen Lecce
Nancy Naylor, Deputy Minister, Education
Jeff Brennan, Director of Stakeholder Relations, Minister's Office
Jennifer Hinshelwood, Chief Operating Officer, TVO
Rashmi Swarup, Vice President, Digital Learning