



ONTARIO PUBLIC
SCHOOL BOARDS'
ASSOCIATION

Leading Education's Advocates

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Cathy Abraham
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October 27, 2020

The Honourable Minister of Education Stephen Lecce
Ministry of Education

Dear Minister,

As a result of the pandemic, OPSBA member boards have experienced approximately eight months of disruption to the delivery of programming to the students they serve. School boards and their staff have made every effort to ensure the health and safety of their students and staff and understand the important role that school plays in re-opening the economy. PPM 164 Requirements for Remote Learning was issued without prior consultation and contains elements that have had some unintended consequences for school boards, families, and students, as well as teaching and learning in general.

It is understandable that the government wanted to provide families with the option of in-person classes in school or to opt for an online/hybrid learning opportunity. Providing this level of choice for parents has not been without significant challenges, yet school boards have continued their commitment to keeping schools open.

OPSBA believes that it is important to reflect on the impact of current approaches to teaching and learning under PPM 164 guidelines in order to influence future decisions, and most importantly to lay the groundwork for what online/e-Learning should look like in a future beyond the pandemic.

The Purpose of PPM 164

This letter acknowledges the government's commitment that PPM 164 was created specifically to address emergent issues related to the pandemic and that there is no intention that this PPM will have standing beyond the resolution to the pandemic situation. OPSBA strongly supports a collaborative approach with all education stakeholders should any follow-up PPM be developed to guide e-Learning/digital learning in the future.

Student Engagement

A key component to supporting and improving student achievement is creating a learning environment that maximizes student engagement and well-being. There has been a concerning trend noted by school boards of student disengagement from virtual learning platforms over time.

Parent feedback has consistently indicated that the PPM 164 time requirement of 180 minutes for Kindergarten (K) students and 225 minutes for the other grades is too much daily screen time and difficult to manage and support, even with frequent breaks built in. This has been especially true for the early years and primary grades. There is Ontario-based research to support these claims. The most extreme trend has been the move of families toward home schooling with a number of school boards reporting a doubling of home-schooled students since September 2020 as compared to previous years. This trend has resulted in significant concern for the health and safety of students that are no longer integrally connected to a school system and a potential funding shortfall for school boards. This has been mentioned in recent weekly teleconferences with school board chairs.

Parent perception of screen time impacts, as well as the rising and falling COVID-19 case numbers in local communities, has brought about regular parent requests for changes and modifications to the selected mode of students' program delivery and/or to the amount of synchronous learning time. This has placed significant pressure on board/school planning, projections, resources and staffing available to support student learning.

School boards and staff have exhibited significant flexibility and responsiveness in an effort to provide choice to meet parental requests, but it has not been easy on staff and administration. There are complicating factors that include:

- Continuous access to reliable internet – this is especially problematic in northern, rural and remote school boards and in homes with multiple student and parent needs to access the internet;
- Funding for sufficient numbers of digital devices both in-school and at home;
- IT support for staff, students and families, which has increased exponentially;
- Parent availability and technological savvy to support students during synchronous learning – especially with multiple children at home and multiple teachers;
- Supporting students with complex special needs;
- Cybersecurity;
- Ongoing teacher training;
- Exemption requests and the issues associated with this (e.g., reporting, assessment);
- Finding and funding sufficient numbers of qualified teachers; and

- Additional staffing and allocation to the virtual/remote school has resulted in less availability of supply teachers for in-person classrooms resulting in daily shortages.

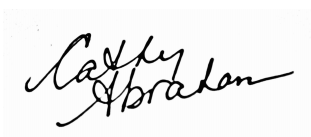
The importance of school has never been more evident than through the months of the pandemic. Virtual learning has highlighted the vital importance of in-person teacher-student relationships and social and peer interaction for supporting student well-being. There has been a corresponding negative impact on student mental health, physical well-being, and an inability to provide a safe and secure sense of belonging, community and inclusion.

Not unexpected are the results from the recent study published by McKinsey and Company ([June 2020](#)), which validated the concern of increased learning gaps and the compounding of existing learning disparities with students when involved in remote learning options. Virtual learning can never replace the in-school experience and this has been well recognized and part of the consistent feedback provided by parents and students. It is understood that everyone is doing the best they can during these unpredictable times. Expectations need to be managed for what school boards can realistically offer during this timeframe.

School boards have gained much learned experience with implementing virtual learning options. They have shown ingenuity in responding, adapting, modifying, pivoting and managing the complex issues as they have arisen throughout the pandemic. It is essential that any subsequent PPM related to virtual learning/e-Learning build from this foundational experience and expertise to ensure that student well being and engagement are paramount, supported and maximized.

OPSBA looks forward to continuing the dialogue as we all try to make the best of the current circumstances to support students, their families and our communities.

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: Nancy Naylor, Deputy Minister, Education
Yael Ginsler, Assistant Deputy Minister, Student Achievement Division
Shannon Fuller, Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic Policy & Planning Division
Jeff Brennan, Director of Stakeholder Relations, Minister's Office
Andrew Davis, Assistant Deputy Minister, Education Labour and Finance Division