

SPECIAL EDUCATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE

**Wednesday, September 9, 2020, 7:00 pm
Zoom Meeting**

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Delegation Statement (2 mins) to OCDSB SEAC

September 9, 2020

Good evening.

My name is Claudine Santos. I am the parent of a 7-year old blind son and serve as President of the Ontario Parents of Visually Impaired Children, formally known as VIEWS for the Visually Impaired.

I thank the committee for the opportunity to appear before you this evening.

Public/Program Memorandum 164 on remote learning establishes minimum requirements for engaging students during remote learning and synchronous learning, as well as protocols for delivering remote learning; and protections for the student's privacy and online safety.

Outside of Kindergarten students, PPM 164 establishes a minimum of 225 minutes of synchronous learning for Grades 1-12 with some variation for secondary students.

Synchronous learning, as defined by the Ministry of Education, is

Learning that happens in real time. Synchronous learning involves using text, video, or voice communication in a way that enables educators and other members of the school- or board-based team to instruct and connect with students in real time. Synchronous learning supports the well-being and academic achievement of all students, including students with special education needs, by providing educators and students with an interactive and engaging way to learn. It helps teachers provide immediate feedback to students and enables students to interact with one another.

On September 1, teachers of specialized classes in OCDSB schools were informed that they will be required to concurrently teach the in-person and online classes for their students. Mainstream students will, in contrast have dedicated online teachers.

As a concerned parent and advocate, I ask: how can teachers be expected to provide the required 225 minutes of synchronous learning for online learners, while also providing the same level of support and instruction for their in-person students? Why are mainstream students given a dedicated online teacher, while the most at-risk students are left with a teacher whose attention is decidedly divided? Is this practice in line with the guarantee to fair and equal access to publicly-funded education as established under Ontario's *Education Act*, the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, and the *Ontario Human Rights Code*?

I have reached the end of my two minutes, but the accompanying email outlines my concerns further and I look forward to your questions and discussion.

From: Santos, Claudine
To: "snadon28@hotmail.com"; "rob.campbell@ocdsb.ca"
Cc: "president@viewson.ca"
Subject: **Urgent** Regarding direction given to teachers of specialized programs
Date: Saturday, September 5, 2020 8:18:57 AM
Attachments:

Good morning, Sonia and Rob;

I apologize for writing you on Saturday of a long weekend but there is an issue of great urgency to talk about.

I was made aware that teachers of specialized programs were informed this week that they would be expected to juggle in-class and online learning.

Immediately, this creates two distinct levels of education – so-called “typical” students will have access to dedicated teachers at online schools, while children in specialized programs (already needing a greater amount of attention) will be forced to have a teacher whose attention is unfairly divided. Teachers have told me that this would make meeting the requirements for daily synchronous and asynchronous learning under PPM 164 “impossible” to achieve.

The Board has suggested that the solution lies with live-streaming the in-class learning. However, this has major implications for the privacy of students and families. Under this new direction from OCDSB, we are potentially looking at private moments such as toileting accidents and behavioural flareups being exposed to an audience that could never be guaranteed to be controlled.

The students in these programs are the most at-risk students in the Board. Yet it seems that OCDSB has taken steps that could lead to their challenges being broadcast into the homes of their peers, with whomever is present bearing witness to their most private moments.

This is not fear-mongering or an overstatement, this is the truth as told to me by parents and teachers alike.

On Friday, September 4, 2020 at 9 p.m. I received a surprise call from Education Minister Stephen Lecce and we quickly added his Deputy Minister to the conversation. I explained that Boards need direction, support and funding from the Ministry. I have been invited to provide policy advice on meeting the needs of students and am hopeful that we will see some change on that front in the coming weeks.

However, I am keenly aware that the resumption of school is at hand and that there is

pressure to provide services. Yet, this pressure cannot be met with decisions that overly burden parents or put children at risk. Any discrepancy in the level of learning afforded to children with disabilities, and any policies or procedures that encroach on a student's right to privacy and security, is unacceptable.

I hope that you will join me in searching for solutions that enable teachers to do their jobs and assure parents of children with disabilities that their children matter just as much as any other child. This direction from the Board to all teachers of specialized programs to teach both the in-person and online classes needs to be reversed.

I would appreciate the opportunity to discuss this further with you. I can be reached via email or via mobile at 613.601.1184.

Best,

Claudine



Claudine Santos

DIRECTOR OF PARLIAMENTARY AFFAIRS | DIRECTRICE DES AFFAIRES PARLEMENTAIRE

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SPECIAL EDUCATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE REPORT

Wednesday, August 19, 2020

7:00 p.m.

Zoom Meeting

Members:	Christine Boothby (Trustee), Chris Ellis (Trustee), Sonia Nadon-Campbell (Community Representative), Jim Harris (VOICE for Deaf and Hard of Hearing children), Susan Cowin (Community Representative), Rob Kirwan (Community Representative), Mark Wylie (Down Syndrome Association), Cathy Miedema (Association for Bright Children), Nicole Ullmark (Easter Seals Ontario), Dr. Maggie Mamen (Learning Disabilities Association of Ottawa-Carleton), Katie Ralph (Autism Ontario, Ottawa Chapter), Ian Morris (Ontario Association for Families of Children with Communication Disorders), Johnna MacCormick (VIEWS for the Visually Impaired), Michelle Berry (Ottawa-Carleton Assembly of School Councils)
Association Representatives (Non-Voting):	Connie Allen (Professional Student Services Personnel), Nancy Dlouhy (Ottawa-Carleton Elementary Operations Committee), Jean Trant (Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, SSP), Catherine Houlden (Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, Teachers)
Staff and Guests:	Lynn Scott (Trustee), Justine Bell (Trustee), Jennifer Jennekens (Trustee), Joy Lui (Student Trustee), Charles Chen (Student Trustee), Peter Symmonds (Superintendent of Learning Support Services), Christine Kessler (System Principal, Learning Support Services), Amy Hannah (System Principal Learning, Support Services), Stacey Kay (Manager, Learning Support Services), Dr. Petra Duscher (Manager of Mental Health and Critical Services), Nicole Guthrie (Manager, Board Services), Leigh Fenton (Board/Committee Coordinator)

1. Call to Order

Chair Nadon-Campbell called the meeting to order at 7:04 p.m. She acknowledged that the meeting is taking place on unceded Algonquin Territory and thanked the Algonquin people for hosting the meeting on their land.

Chair Nadon-Campbell recognized the incoming Student Trustees Joy Liu and Charles Chen for 2020-2021 school year. She welcomed meeting observer Sandi Reggler of Epilepsy Ottawa.

2. Approval of the Agenda

Moved by Christine Boothby,

THAT the agenda be approved.

Carried

3. Review of Special Education Advisory Committee Report

3.1 11 March 2020

Moved by Katie Ralph,

THAT the Special Education Advisory Committee Report dated 10 June 2020 be received.

Carried

4. Department Update

4.1 Superintendent's Report

Superintendent Symmonds explained that the landscape in planning the return to school is frequently shifting due to ongoing updates and new protocols from the Ministry of Education.

a. Summer Transition Program

Superintendent Symmonds highlighted that in June the Ministry allocated additional Partnership and Priorities Funds (PPF) to The District to support summer programs. In July, special education funding support was provided to the programs and offerings operated by Continuing Education. The influx of capital enabled continuity of mental health supports over the summer.

One source of funding was to provide continuity of mental health support for students.

Dr. Duschner reported that thirteen social workers and psychologists volunteered their time over the summer to provide the continuity of mental health virtual support. They were able to connect with approximately 200

highly engaged families. The support included parent consultations, direct therapy and urgent assistance. Most of the followed students were on the existing case load, as per the expectation with the funding from the Ministry, with some allowances for new families to join the program. The work will continue until the end of August.

The Summer Transition Program, currently in place, caters to students with high special education needs or mental health needs. Manager Kay mentioned that many members of the Learning Support Services (LSS) staff were a part of the success on the Summer Transition Program. This program was a tremendous support for many of the most vulnerable learners. At the end of June, a Google form was sent to all school leaders to identify students who would benefit from this level of support using the parameters of either high special education needs or high mental health needs. Working with Human Resources and Labour Relations, Memorandums of Agreement were created with the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO), Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF), Student Support Professional (SSP) and Professional Support Services Personnele (PSSP). The Summer Transition Team consists of approximately one hundred and eighty staff, serving school sites who identified students requiring this level of transition support. Over five hundred students from across The District were initially invited to participate in the program. The structure of the program built in flexibility to meet the needs of the students on an individual basis, offering a range of virtual and in-person activities.

The program was launched on 17 August 2020 with a half-day training session for all staff involved in the program. Under the leadership of System Principal Kessler and Dr. Duschner, a resource guide was developed to support STP staff who were delivering the program. The focus included connecting, preparing and welcoming students back to school after this extended period of learning from home. A customized video for The District was made by Dr. David Tranter, co-author of “The Third Path”, where he presented ways to welcome back vulnerable students.

b. Additional Funding

Superintendent Symmonds shared that in addition to funding for the Summer Transition Program, more funds were allocated from the Ministry to support mental health and well-being. Part of this was included in the Grants for Student Needs (GSN) announcement in late June and a further amount was provided on behalf of a Priorities and Partnerships Fund (PPF) grant. Approximately \$400,000.00 is available to hire additional mental health professionals and to provide training and release time for professional development with community health care partners. In these allowances, the Ministry of Education provided ‘sweatered’ funding of \$19,900 which The District must use to support the mental health needs of students in kindergarten to grade three who are at risk of being suspended. Currently the

LSS team is in discussions on how to bolster the complement of mental health supports across The District.

Directed at special education specifically in school boards, a funding envelope of \$265,000 has been allocated by the Ministry to address supplementary staffing, interventions and resources. The District is still waiting for the specific funding details to be provided which will help determine the appropriate use of these funds.

Mr. Wylie requested clarity on whether mental health needs fall into the special education purview. Superintendent Symmonds responded that while special education and mental health are not always directly related, the organization has placed both under his portfolio, however, the funding announcements are separate.

c. Planning Support for Students and Staff

Planning Support for Students and Staff will be discussed under item 5. New Business.

d. Additional Items

Superintendent Symmonds announced that as part of The District Speaker Series programming, on 24 August 2020 at 7 p.m., Dr. David Tranter, professor of Social Work at Lakehead University and the author of 'The Third Path', will host an on-line interactive webinar on supporting your child at home and at school. He has been teaching and working in mental health for 30 years. His presentation is designed to help parents shift from the feeling of being worried to feeling well about the return to school. He encouraged the members of the committee to register for this event through The District website.

5. New Business

5.1 Current Challenges and Opportunities

a. The Return to School

Superintendent Symmonds shared a slideshow on the Return to School Plan from The District's website. He highlighted that this year a virtual school environment is being created with a school principal and guiding practices for this remote form of learning. It was noted that the Individual Education Plans (IEPs) will be honoured and supported through this new way of learning. The Ministry of Education has elected for a staggered start and training for new expectations around learning.

Dr. Duschner reviewed plans to offer support with health and well-being: it is a District priority to work with staff through professional training to ensure they feel calm and confident in their role as educators welcoming students back to school. For most of the students, the adjustment may be a bit stressful, but fairly smooth in general if they are welcomed into a safe and calm learning environment. Students will need time to debrief on the period of time when they were learning at home and time to re-build relationships with their peers and teachers. Multi-disciplinary teams in the realm of psychology and social work will monitor student needs on an ongoing basis to provide a flexible continuum of supports and services to students, both in-school and remote learning. Learning Support Services is working closely with School Mental Health Ontario to provide resources to support staff in the return to schools.

Ms. Allen expressed her gratitude to the LSS team for working continuously over these last six months under tight timelines with changing information from the Ministry. She raised the concern that some itinerant staff who move between schools, such as psychologists, speech language pathologists, board certified behaviour analysts, and social workers, may be more at risk to the spread of the virus. She requested more information about the scheduling of these types of workers who work in small rooms, shared with others, school to school. Superintendent Symmonds noted that limiting the transitions between multitudes of schools is being considered, where possible. Clear plastic dividers were purchased as part of the retrofitting considered necessary to keep staff and students safe where physical distancing could not be maintained. Travel logs are a part of the re-opening plans where staff discloses in writing who they have been in contact with. Multi-disciplinary team meetings will be done virtually wherever possible, as the parent community cannot access school buildings.

Stating her mindfulness of the feat to re-open school buildings, Ms. Allen advised that itinerant staff will feel calmer and safer once they have the information regarding their schedules. Superintendent Symmonds referred to The District website as an excellent source for new information and the Back to School 2020 Plan, released earlier in the evening, contains major announcements. Planning can be further developed when the enrollment details are finalized.

Ms. Cowin requested more information about remote learners should they require additional guidance with an IEP or mental health support. Superintendent Symmonds explained the creation of a virtual school model, where students belong to online classrooms. Students with an IEP receive support through one or more Learning Resource Teachers, a specialized special education teacher and Education Assistants. In the case of remote learners, there could be a need for greater communication by parents or caregivers to teachers for more assistance with the return to school transition.

Trustee Ellis sought clarification on the placement of Education Assistants (EAs) in schools and remotely. Superintendent Symmonds responded that school principals develop schedules for Educational Assistants for the students given

priority for support. LSS works with a liaison from Ottawa Public Health who has proposed EAs can move from cohort to cohort with the use of Personal Protection Equipment (PPEs). He noted that Ms. Trant reported in May on some of the positive ways in which EAs were able to support children in the Learn at Home phase of instruction.

Student Trustee Lui inquired whether the process of hiring has begun for the new mental health supports using the designated funding. Superintendent Symmonds confirmed that hiring is underway; however, the process is not yet complete as the District is awaiting final determinations from the Transfer Payment Agreement. He noted that not all of those funds were directed to the employment of more mental health workers; some funds will be used for accessing resources.

Student Trustee Lui highlighted that students feel more disconnected from their peers when they learn in a remote setting. To support the connection with classmates, Superintendent Symmonds cited the example of a platform such as 'Brightspace', where students can rapidly communicate and collaborate with their peers. When the virtual school is launched, communication around mental health supports will be prominently listed in a resource guide.

Trustee Boothby indicated that some students accessing special needs will benefit from seeing the full face of the instructors, such as deaf and hard of hearing students. Superintendent Symmonds echoed the importance of seeing facial features for some students accessing special education programs to aid in their ability to determine mood and tone of the messages in communication. He noted that clear face masks and face shields were ordered however this type of equipment poses a significant procurement challenge. In the case of teaching staff with hearing challenges, the Procurement Department has ordered clear masks for the entire class. System Principal Hannah reported that the transparent masks were not a part of the PPE required by the Ministry's directives however The District is making accommodations to better serve students and staff. Trustee Boothby requested an update on the procurement of these masks in the September meeting.

b. Other Questions

In advance of the meeting, the committee was invited to send questions to LSS representing concerns from their respective organizations. Listed below are the questions (Q) from the committee and answers (A) from the LSS team:

Q: What stops the teachers from acting as a vector for disease to the students?

A:

- Staff will use the OPH self-assessment on a daily basis before coming to school;
- Hand washing/sanitizing upon entry to school;
- Physical distancing whenever possible;

- Use of PPE. Masks will be provided to staff along with face shields; and
- Every effort will be made to minimize the number of student contacts for staff while respecting the Ministry of Education guidelines which allow a bubble of 50 for Elementary and a bubble of 100 direct and indirect contacts for Secondary.

Q: Governmental recommendations are for 10 people in an indoor setting. Why does the current school board and educational recommendation raise that number to 15?

A:

- The District has been working collaboratively with OPH since the pandemic began;
- The Ministry of Education and OPH have been clear that educational environments are not the same as those in the general population;
- The information under which The District is operating was provided in the Ministry of Education Guide to Opening Schools, along with information from public health officials as it relates to education;
- Students will be able to leave their classrooms for specific, targeted support, and body breaks; and
- Key partners are helping to develop our return to school plans and are supporting training, additional school health nurses, and resources.

Q: What prevents two children from separate classrooms from encountering one another in the hall or in the bathroom? How are recesses to be handled?

A:

- Schools are working on washroom routines to ensure physical distancing is maintained, explicitly teaching proper hand washing practices, and to track when children leave the classroom to use the washroom;
- Tape on the floors for directional flow;
- Recesses will be staggered to allow for physical distancing on the school yard
- Specific routines will vary from school to school; and
- Outbreak Management Protocol includes measures in place in the event of the discovery of positive COVID-19 cases.

Q: As multiple teachers cannot be rotated through the school in a supplemental manner how will teachers take breaks?

A:

- Teachers can rotate through the school. Recommendations from OPH include the use of PPE;
- Educators will move to different rooms rather than classes of students, most of the time;

- Collective agreements, including break times will be respected and managed by each school principal;
- Physical distancing in staff rooms;
- Additional spaces in the school may be available to use for staff breaks depending on the number of in-person students at the school; and
- Staggered break schedules

Q: Without the required enhanced training for teachers running online classrooms quality of education will continue to degrade. Will there be some sort of ad hoc auditing of teacher content and teaching performance to ensure it is appropriate for use and of minimum quality standards?

A:

- Training is planned and ongoing for teachers on synchronous learning. A series of professional training began in spring with the Learn at Home phase;
- Remote teaching materials were created by Planning and Learning (PAL) over the summer; and
- A new principal position is being created for remote learning, which would provide instructional leadership to the remote learning teachers.

Q: Children with respiratory illness have a right to education. What exact measures are being taken (and by whom) to ensure that these children maintain access to education without being exposed to undue risk?

A:

- LSS is working collaboratively with the team at CHEO, LHIN to determine the required parameters that need to be put into place to support medically fragile students. The recommendations that will be provided will support the work in all four districts in Ottawa; and
- OPH has also added 36 school nurses for the City who will be able to advise on individual circumstances and the unique needs of the student

Q: Is there a risk of perpetrating systematic racism and classism by unfairly exposing these communities to disease?

A:

Families and caregivers will have to assess their own needs and determine what is right for them and their children. People who have questions are encouraged to speak with their medical professionals. They can be referred to the OPH website to learn the correct information.

Q: Regarding confirmation of attendance situations may change. Quality of health and access to the internet may change as new challenges arise. For this reason, having parents and students committing to one stream (online or in- person) is unrealistic. What mechanism will be in place to allow

parents and students to change streams, and how will this be communicated to parents and students?

A:

The Plan is still evolving; more information will be communicated shortly. A range of programming options are being developed that reflect Ministry of Education guidelines and directives but also align with the work of Public Health Ontario. On a case-by-case basis requests for change in formats of instruction will be assessed.

Q: With the plan requesting students stay in their seats as much as possible how will this impact the students who require the use of the body break rooms?

A:

Body break rooms would be available for some students but perhaps not on as big a scale as prior to the pandemic. Some schools organize body break walks and routines in hallways which could be shifted to parts of the school with limited traffic. Some classes may be held outside, giving an opportunity for a body break. Presently, LSS is working closely with OPH and the Occupational Health and Safety (OH&S) Department to determine the appropriate protocols and required PPE. Scheduling body break room visits will be done at the school administration level and there will likely only be one student at a time with cleaning protocols pre and post visit. Some shared equipment may not be available and it may be necessary to provide individual equipment for personal use.

Q: I would like to know if the percentage of students opting for online learning in specialized programs is similar to the percentage of students in the general population. Trustees have been updating social media posts with the overall elementary and secondary percentages opting for online and I'm curious how that compares to the specialized program participants. Is it possible to specify this by specialized class type?

A:

The Research Evaluation & Analytics Division (READ) has been tasked to study this information. Presently, they are working to share with school administrators the students who will not be attending in person in September. Once the data is harvested, it will inform next steps for supporting learners in specialized program classes.

Q: I have a lot of parents with children in the congregated gifted program who are opting for the online program. They want to know what would

happen if they were to fully withdraw their child from the Board and opt to home school their children if the online program is not going well.

Specifically, they want to know if they would be required to

- a) retest their children
- b) start over in the regular classroom going through the tiers

Essentially, they are wondering if they would be allowed to reapply back into the congregated program that they left in these unusual times.

A:

Once a student leaves The District, for Home Schooling, for example, they no longer are a resident pupil of the Board and would not have a right of return to the Gifted Program. A reapplication process would be necessary and those situations would be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

Q: What is being done for students currently in specialized classes that opt for the full time online learning model so that they will:

- a) have access to teachers with special education training and experience either through what would have been their in school class or through the virtual school model.
- b) have access to peers that share their specialized class placement either through what would have been their in school class or perhaps combined with students that share the same placement but are in another class or even school if needed to make efficient use of resources.

If the answer is - that they will not be grouped with students with the same exceptionality, who exactly will they be grouped with or will they be taught individually or in small groups?

A.

With the shift to a virtual school model, students from specialized program classes will be placed on class lists in the virtual school. The goal is to try for some form of congregation but without knowing numbers, it is difficult to be certain. The plan is to have the range of special education supports and services available for the virtual school. Some accommodations that are available in-person are not practical in a remote learning environment. When that happens, school teams will collaborate with families to develop reasonable accommodations to support students.

6. Breakout Group Discussion

Superintendent Symmonds highlighted that planning for the return to schools is on-going. LSS sought the input of committee members for suggestions and

important matters to consider in supporting learners in a remote learning environment.

The committee was divided into three discussion groups. Key considerations were summarized in the following points:

- Families expressed concerns that 225 minutes of online learning will not be manageable for their children with special needs. Consider offering flexibility for less synchronous time;
- Clear learning objectives are to be communicated to parents and instructions distributed on how to support students at home;
- More involvement is needed from the classroom teacher in this new model;
- As teaching successes emerge share them with other boards;
- Operate from an understanding that students are not going to get the same level of interaction as in-person instruction;
- From the Learn at Home Program there was not enough experiential learning with the asynchronous model;
- Build some spaces for opportunities outside classroom time where students could contribute collaborative or investigative ideas as to incorporate into the curriculum and the teacher could act as the facilitator;
- Help students to build relationships with other on-line learners;
- Virtual recess and socializing stations: Talk about casual things with teachers and friends;
- Organized “icebreaking” activities, feature on-line collaborative games;
- There are limitations as to what platforms can be used since The District uses the G-Suite;
- Youth are often using ‘Discord’, a platform designed for creating communities;
- Create a Thought Exchange for teachers to share tips and successes;
- Consider how Tier 1 expertise can be developed for teachers in the online environment;
- Consider staggered learning start times for each child per family;
- Remote learning continues to present challenges for students who are blind or have low vision;
- EAs played an important role in supporting students with online learning in the spring (e.g., music groups, breakout sessions, body breaks). This role requires a definition for remote learning. Describe how will EA support look in a virtual school learning environment;
- Consider the possibility of grouping families with an EA. It was suggested the EA might be able to visit the group in a home or in an outdoor space to further student learning. EAs could be deployed in a similar fashion as Personnel Support Workers; and
- Consider the role of the EA and other professional supports and continue to deploy staff as appropriate with the needs of students prioritized.

A member noted that while remote learning does not work for medically fragile and complex students, the Local Health Integration Network (LHIN) has indicated

that nursing hours would be denied if families chose the remote option. Manager Kay could not provide comment on the matter of nursing support but noted it is a priority within the LHIN. She added that physicians from the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO), who specialize in infectious control, are creating guidance documents to help mitigate risk in different learning environments.

Chair Nadon-Campbell stated that further specific feedback on any of the subjects discussed can be sent via email to both her and Superintendent Symmonds.

Trustee Ellis queried whether or not a full-time return to school would be an option for students of the Ottawa Technical Secondary School (OTSS) as their class sizes tend to be smaller and within the OPH and Ministry guidelines. LSS will make these inquiries.

7. Committee Reports

7.1 Advisory Committee on Equity

Chair Nadon-Campbell reported that in the fall, Superintendent Baker will be bringing the Indigenous, Human Rights and Equity Roadmap to SEAC for consultation.

7.2 Board

Deferred

7.3 Committee of the Whole - Budget

Mr. Kirwan reported that Committee of the Whole – Budget meetings have been numerous. Another meeting is scheduled to be held next week. He expressed the opinion that he would have appreciated more consultation with SEAC in this process.

8. Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 9:25 p.m.

Sonia Nadon-Campbell, Chair, Special Education Advisory Committee

Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) Meetings 2020-2021		
Date	Time	Location
September 9	7-9 pm	Zoom Meeting
October 7	7-9 pm	Zoom Meeting
November 4	7-9 pm	Zoom Meeting
December 9	7-9 pm	Zoom Meeting
January 6	7-9 pm	TBD
February 3	7-9 pm	TBD
March 3	7-9 pm	TBD
April 7	7-9 pm	TBD
May 5	7-9 pm	TBD
June 2	7-9 pm	TBD



Leigh Fenton <leigh.fenton@ocdsb.ca>

Input on return to learning (Easter Seals Ontario representative)

1 message

Nicole Ullmark <nicole.ullmark@gmail.com>

Wed, Sep 2, 2020 at 6:40 PM

To: sonia nadon <snadon28@hotmail.com>, Leigh Fenton <leigh.fenton@ocdsb.ca>

Hi Sonia and Leigh,

Here is my (lengthy) input on return to school. Could you please distribute it to the LSS team and other SEAC members?

Thanks,
Nicole Ullmark

Dear Learning Support Services Team and fellow SEAC Members,

First of all, thank you for the tremendous efforts you have all put in over the last several months to help prepare the staff and students for a safe return to school. It is truly appreciated.

As you are well aware, families with disabilities and medical fragile members are often isolated both physically and socially. A pandemic made the rest of the world experience some of this isolation. As the general population slowly returns to some level of normalcy living with covid, these families remain the most vulnerable, and will be isolated much longer, and to a greater degree, than others. They have not had access to most of the help or respite they previously had for the past six plus months and caregivers are exhausted and burnt out.

Easter Seals was founded in 1922 and their mandate remains to support children and young adults who live with a disability. All of the families that I represent on behalf of Easter Seals (including my own) have a student with a physical disability but, I think we would also represent most medically fragile kids as well.

Concerns with returning to in person learning

Schools previously accommodated the attendance of these at risk students, so there is a comfort in knowing that they could return with some tweaks to maximize safety, but remember we are dealing with the most medically fragile students in OCDSB and therefore potentially those with the highest risk of covid infection and its complications. Students with physical disabilities will not be physically distanced from their source of support, and this places them at increased risk according to public health guidance. PPE will certainly help, but again, by the nature of their disabilities, this may not be used in the optimal manner either (for example: difficulties with placement of their own masks, drooling that soils masks). Some schools may offer to physically segregate these vulnerable students for their safety, but at what cost to their mental health? Getting students to school will look different as well, with many parents and caregivers opting to bring their students. This is concerning for students with physical disabilities as accessing the school and accessible parking spots was often compromised pre-covid and school staff can't always be available to police this issue. This group of students also have many medical absences. The way the secondary curriculum is being presented will make getting caught up even more challenging for those students that are absent for a prolonged period of time. This group of students also uses many itinerant teachers and therapists that travel between schools. While public health is saying that this movement of staff is safe, the cohort they are exposed to will increase substantially for this group of students.

Concerns with remote learning

Most people would think the obvious choice for students with physical disabilities, especially if they are also medically vulnerable, would be remote learning. As of right now, families and caregivers have been told there is no idea if any nursing support their student received at school will occur if the student chooses remote learning. The same uncertainties remain around therapies. Some opportunities for access to virtual appointments will likely be available, but this leaves the sole burden of implementing the therapies to the families/caregivers once again. At this point, the use of educational assistants for those who choose remote learning is also not clear and they are often the key staff delivering therapies to the students, while at school. Many of these therapies that are

in fact part of the IEP goals for the student. Remote learning will be unable to accommodate many common IEP accommodations (for example: scribing) and parents are concerned about how remote learning can be geared to offer other accommodations such as extended time for some of the class work during synchronous learning. These IEPs have been carefully developed for most of the students over years but there still may be subtleties not listed, as the education team knows the student so well, they are simply implemented, not listed. This loss of student knowledge with minimal connection to the home school team is concerning for many parents. Many are frankly just worried about the amount of screen time with the remote learning choice. To summarize, if a family or caregiver chooses the remote learning opportunity for their student's safety, or as recommended by their healthcare professional, as of this moment, they are expected to do so without any of the support the student would require at school. This isn't an actual choice, at least it wasn't for us.

Our story

I'm going to share our family's personal story because, while unique, we are not alone. Also, the decisions parents and caregivers are making right now are very personal and we all need to remember that.

My son is starting grade 5 this year. This will be his last year at the school and he has been there since junior kindergarten. He has a progressive neurodegenerative condition, diagnosed just before he started school. When he first started at the school, he was just a kid who fell (a lot). He was otherwise independent at home and at school. He is now completely reliant on a wheelchair, unable to walk even a few steps, needs 100% assistance for all transfers, lacks the fine motor skills to feed himself or brush his teeth (let alone write, type or navigate a mouse) and has had such a deterioration in speech that even I struggle to understand him at times. His lack of coordination also affects his ability to track things visually in addition to significantly reduced vision. His condition also comes with a primary immune deficiency and he receives weekly infusions of antibodies from donated plasma to survive even before the pandemic. Unfortunately, he also has a few other chronic medical diagnoses, unrelated to this condition, that we know have been associated with worse covid infection outcomes. His deteriorating condition has meant that the school has needed to constantly adapt to his changing needs and while it's amazing now, it wasn't always this way and it has taken six years of hard work by all involved to get him where he is presently. He has the most wonderful, caring, creative and supportive team, including his own 1:1 EA, 100% of the time, that he has worked with for the past six years.

I reviewed CHEO's "Guidance to Healthcare Practitioners for Children with Chronic Medical Conditions Returning to School". Each one of my son's many conditions lands in the "yellow" zone, as to the suitability to return to in person learning. How many yellow conditions together equal a red? No medical professional would be able to actually predict what might happen to my son should he get covid, given his unique array of conditions. So, many would assume as a family we would choose remote learning for him this fall, given this uncertainty. With his particular and profound disabilities, he needs assistance for every aspect of school. The spring saw us constantly searching for new tech solutions and liaising with his classroom and blind low vision itinerant teacher just to find ways for him to be able to see any visual problems. We read all school work to him and we also 100% scribed all answers (speech to text doesn't work with the dysarthria he has, it's also not helpful for the many google slides projects he had over the spring). This school work was in addition to managing his medications, medical conditions, appointments, all transfers, all feeding, all toileting and all his therapies (vision training, eye patching, cough assist machine, physiotherapy exercises and more recently, post-operative dressing changes and gtube feedings), never mind the rest of the family's needs or trying (rather unsuccessfully) to work in and manage my consulting business. To add 225-300 minutes of synchronous (or asynchronous) learning to school days, that requires 100% assistance with no support is simply unsustainable. Also, due to his speech issues, he is very shy on virtual platforms, even when he knows the people he's talking to. Many often cannot understand him unless they have spent significant time with him. His disabilities have made socialization extremely challenging for him, but his current peer group and the teaching staff have been by his side as he has deteriorated and their support and understanding have been invaluable and the reason we have him at school to begin with.

The night before OCDSB asked for our decision about returning to school, we sat as a family and discussed the options available with both our children. When we asked our son with disabilities what his preference was, he simply said, "neither". That one word so eloquently summed up our feelings and subsequent decision for his return to learning. The remote learning option as offered just doesn't work for him, but neither does the in person learning, due to his and our fears of covid infection. He needs the home school team expertise and peer group, as much as possible, in the safest way possible and remote learning without support isn't actually a choice. Then it occurred to me that this was like every other problem we'd ever encountered during his education to date and the solution was the same. No "off the shelf" solution works for my son, or any of these other students with physical disabilities and medical fragility. The solution for each of these students needs to be as

unique as they are and finding these solutions is something the teaching (and even administrative) staff have been doing with excellence all along.

Suggestions

Parents are craving communication. These families of exceptional students are feeling left out of the conversation but I also don't believe there is any one statement from the board that could adequately address this unique population. My suggestion is for the message from the board to be that they see this unique student population and realize the options available may not be ideal for them, as is. I'd like you to encourage and empower the school staff to reach out to each of these families, that they know very well already, and see how everyone can work together to come up with the best solution for these students - be flexible and adjust as often as needed in this ever changing situation. When I spoke to my son's principal yesterday, the messaging she has from her superintendent and the board is very clear, "your son's support (EA) is assigned to him when he's at school" and she has not been given the flexibility to offer us that support on the days when he cannot be physically attend school. Everyone involved realizes there will be constraints, but these families are very used to dealing with constraints, are some of the best problem solvers, and also know their students the best. We need to offer educational support to these students, regardless of where they choose to learn in these unusual times.

Thanks again for all you have done and for the opportunity to express concerns on behalf of this student population.

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