

July 9th, 2020

OCDSB Trustees
Special Board Meeting

Re: Proposed COVID-19 back to school measures

Dear trustees,

I write to you today as a parent, and as a concerned citizen who is aware that our best step to allow the economy to reopen is to allow schools to safely and consistently reopen with appropriate measures in place. It is best for students and for society as a whole. At the same time, I am of the opinion that our students should be among the highest priority for return to safely coordinated in-person activities.

I am grateful that you are taking the time to carefully consider proper procedures to help make this happen.

1. Weekly and not 2-1-2

I encourage you to consider a weekly format in order to maximize student instruction time and allow for easier parent planning. Especially with the directive from the provincial government to maximize student in class time, and not lose a school day for cleaning purposes. CHEO is also urging for a full return to school in September as well.

A weekly format compared to 2-1-2 results in an additional day of instruction time per week, adding up substantially over the school year. Cleaning can be undertaken on evenings or weekends, although I recognize that this may add to overall cost, it would also create jobs and allow those you previously held these custodial positions to return to work and earn a paycheck.

Such an approach also better allows for self-isolation of cohorts of students in case there is exposure to COVID-19. By simply missing one week of on-site instruction students could meet the 14-day isolation requirement. Meanwhile, it allows for a full weekend of deep cleaning of schools that would allow students in the off-week cohort to continue their regular scheduling without impact.

2. Off-Cycle Alternatives to Online Learning

A weekly approach to learning allows for more predictability and routine for students as well as easier coordination of off-cycle learning alternatives to online learning solutions. These alternatives would essentially be 1-week camps that would be permitted to replace online learning sessions for some or all students and ideally that could/would focus on specific areas of the curriculum and/or the development of other valuable skills. This would lessen the burden on the teachers, as well as the online platforms, and allow students to develop other various skills throughout the year.

I would encourage that planning be made (ideally in conjunction with community partners like those mentioned in the next section) on a range of possibilities that these could be, focusing potentially on soft skills and physical activity including:

- Outdoor education and activities (ie. snowshoeing, various sports (soccer, tennis, basketball), etc)
- Fitness activities either indoors or outside (ie. running, skating, stretching/yoga, etc)
- Learning trade skills (ie. carpentry)
- Targeted private tutoring and/or instruction
- Co-op placements, volunteer work, and/or other appropriate skill building activities, including (for high school students) potentially helping to run some of these off-cycle activities
- Interactive museum learning programs

I would ideally suggest that a number of these alternatives be provided at low or no cost in order to minimize the potential disproportionate impact on less wealthy students. There would need to be subsidies in some cases for parents to use, and this would need to be explored, in conjunction with city, provincial, and federal governments.

3. Out of School Innovations

This is a huge opportunity for cities and other local facilities to step into the space for non-school board activities and help provide the additional physical space required to get as many students engaged in in-person activities at a time.

Allowing such off-cycle alternatives to learning could both make use of currently underutilized spaces during the daytime and open up new opportunities for businesses to create new income streams and hire employees in these difficult times. I would encourage the OCDSB to reach out to a range of potential partners including:

- Museums
- City facilities (skating rinks, gymnasiums, community centres, etc)
- Girl Guides and Boy Scouts Canada
- Private gymnastics centres
- City, provincial, and national parks and their facilities
- Curling clubs
- Lawn bowling facilities
- Any range of local businesses (to create co-op placements for High School Students)
- Office buildings

When it comes to offices there is potential that a number of vacant offices could be transitioned into makeshift education centres - especially for high schoolers. This has precedent in the federal government's approach to transferring the use of the Asticou property for a high school in Gatineau. Currently the majority of Public Servants are required to work from home, and many of these office buildings are at a minimum capacity. Allowing parents to return to work into the same area that their high school aged child can attend a camp or classes in the same building would make it easier on the parents.

The use of socially-distanced desks in unused/underused office complexes for the goal of getting students back to in-person instruction could take precedent where those office activities can be done remotely. With staggered scheduled start and end times, concerns for the impact on elevators and distancing on transit can be minimized. With enough office buy-in the more resilient and independent high school students could be shifted to these temporary facilities, opening up high schools for use by elementary students for more traditional in-school instruction.

While yes, this could create a burden on students/parents with regards to not attending school close to their homes, there would need to be a partnership with city transportation. From my understanding with the social distancing measures that are being put into place for a return to school, there will be bus drivers who will be limited in their work, because they will only be able to escort a certain number of children to school each day. With staggered start and end times, we could help these employees make multiple trips in the morning and afternoon. There is also the opportunity for our public transportation system to step up and partner with the schools to help provide a low/no-cost option for high school students who are travelling to off-site learning opportunities.

4. Parents will require help

Parents will require help during whatever decision is made. This help will need to include government policy reform and subsidization. Recognizing that not all parents work typical 9-5 jobs, some parents may need to continue to receive a CERB type payment in order to help ensure that their rent/mortgage,

groceries and other basic needs can continue to be met while they are required to miss work due to the lack of school or child care options. I implore you to push for this and to recommend these types of programs at all levels of government.

5. Conclusion

I encourage you to be innovative and courageous in making for the best possible learning environments for our kids while reaching out to community partners for support in this unprecedented time. Our children's education is everyone's responsibility. We need to enhance and develop the partnerships between parents, educators and the community as a whole, to provide our children with the best education possible during these trying times. This is our opportunity to effect a positive change for the future.

Sincerely,
Jamie Piga
Barrhaven, ON