

Delegation – Joel Harden

Members of the OCDSB,

I will begin by thanking you for your public service. It is a challenging time to be responsible for making decisions in the governance of public education.

As the MPP for Ottawa Centre, and Ontario's Critic for People with Disabilities, I want to focus on one thing tonight: the rights of children with disabilities, and OCDSB staff with disabilities.

Last Thursday, I heard Minister Lecce remark on his government's plan for synchronous, online learning this Fall, at a minimum of 225 minutes per day. As a politician and parent of a special needs child in the OCDSB, my jaw dropped open.

Why? Because I've been the home school teacher in our family since March, and I've appreciated how challenging it is for a child with hyperactivity and impulsivity issues (rather like his father) to sit for even twenty minutes through non-synchronous platforms, away from the talented staff who know how to gain and hold his attention.

Given what Minister Lecce has proposed, what choice are we giving to students who can't go to school, but whose special needs prevents them from engaging in lengthy screen sessions?

For students with disabilities who will be returning to school, I am also worried about Ontario's policy for school exclusions given that there is no standard policy, and much is left to discretion of Principals. I fear that students with disabilities will not fare well in COVID19 learning conditions, and their behaviour will force many back into inadequate home learning options.

On a related note, I worry that OCDSB staff with disabilities are headed back into a precarious environment. If we maintain the large class sizes of grades 4-8, for example, what choice are we giving to staff with health or mobility conditions? It is the choice to miss work, draw down on sick leave allotments, or languish on disability leaves, if indeed those are afforded at all.

OCDSB colleagues, I urge you to insist on provincial funding for small class sizes that will help all students and staff, but notably those with disabilities. I know this is something Minister Lecce opposes, but we need you to be on record calling for this all the same. Small class sizes are a crucial goal identified by public health experts in Ottawa and elsewhere.

In closing, as disability rights advocates have [noted](#), I also ask you to be mindful of our obligations under the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act*. If we strive to be a society of equal opportunity, that means supporting those with significant challenges before them.

Again, I offer my thanks for your public service at a crucial time.

My very best,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Joel' followed by a stylized flourish and a period.

Joel Harden, MPP / député (Ottawa-Centre)

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