

Minister Stephen Lecce
Minister of Education

Monday April 6th 2020

Re: Special Education Pandemic Distance Learning Zoom Roundtable

Dear Minister,

My name is Matthew Dever, and we have met a few times as I served on the Ontario Autism Program Advisory Panel last summer, and I currently sit on the OAP Implementation Working Group. This morning, April 6th 2020, I moderated a [Roundtable on Special Education](#) during this pandemic. There was a lively discussion amongst parents as to what our struggles are right now, our concerns, and some clear direction we want provided by teachers, school boards and the Minister of Education.

We are on Day 1 of Phase 2 of this school shutdown, and we as parents feel that plans are being made very much ad-hoc with parents having different experiences with different teachers, school boards and no cohesive strategy for Special Education during this Pandemic.

The following is a summary of the concerns raised that we would like the Ministry of Education and the various school boards to consider and come together with a clear and cohesive approach for parents across the province.

Summary of Meeting

- There needs to be a cohesive strategy for Transition planning for children entering into school, transitioning from elementary to secondary (Gr.6->Gr.7 and Gr.8-> Gr.9), as well as secondary into post-secondary/adulthood. We cannot wait until August/September next school year for this work to be done.
- There are many families who are disadvantaged from participating in any kind of distance learning, whether by disability, by language of parents, by economic status.
 - Not every family has computing devices
 - Not every family has internet, or adequate internet
 - Not every family has a printer, or can even access printer paper, let alone afford it.
 - Office supply stores are now non-essential, so access to this is out of the reach of those who are already economically challenged.
- There are many families who are finding it difficult to manage just having their kids home all day every day, let alone trying to find the time to teach them or guide them to use their school connected eLearning environments.
- Families with multiple children, especially single parents who may also be trying to work from home, are finding it difficult to manage adding their child's education to the mix.

- Communication from teachers, and schools and school boards is unclear, inconsistent, and puts a lot of onus on parents to manage, or tell them what they need for their child.
- Many school boards do not allow Zoom, or other video based learning systems due to privacy concerns, yet many of our children need visual connection to understand what they are being taught.
- Some schools are arranging EAs to call families and the children to help them out, where video conferencing tool would be much more beneficial because of that visual/audial connection many require.
- There needs to be a consistent set of directions from the ministry of Education at this time setting broad policy on eLearning, video conferencing, access to special education resources during this pandemic. With 73 different school boards, as well as the thousands of private schools, there needs to be some clear central directives to avoid the chaos that many parents are feeling.
- The mental health of our children and their families is a top concern right now, even before we consider academics. There is a real need for the mental health supports available in schools and communities be made virtual to allow children to talk to their supports. This is a stressful time with stressed-out kids and stressed-out parents. This is more than just having Kids Help Line available.
- For many children they were receiving supports in school, such as Speech & Language, and Occupational Therapy. There needs to be a push for the Child Treatment Centres to offer the same services virtually at this time. Private providers are quickly moving online to find ways of meeting the needs of the children and families they serve. CTC's need to this now as well.
- We need to provide assistance to families as domestic violence is increasing at this time. Unsupported homes will have a greater risk of domestic violence, and we must reach out and support those marginalized.
- We know we are in a second phase that will close schools until at least May 4th, but realistically with the data released by the provincial government, there is an extreme likelihood that schools will remain closed for the remainder of the school year. Our focus right now is protecting our families and the health of our citizens – we are Lysol-ing our groceries now. We need to know earlier than later about the school year so we can adequately plan
- We are putting so much pressure on our teachers, educational assistants, schools, parents and students to try and make this work quickly. We need to focus on mental health first, academics second. The more “little plans” we have, the worse it gets.
- It would be better to go slow and work with all stakeholders, including parents, and parents with children with special needs to come up with a good plan that takes all these concerns in mind.
- We know we are in this for a long time, we need to support families as a whole.
- Grading children in this stressed out environment does not make any sense, nor is it fair to teachers, students and parents. There should be a pass/fail, or simply a pass with a plan next year to fill in the gaps missed this year. It is necessary for Gr.11/12 students to have grades because those are essential for entrance to post-secondary. For K-Gr.8, there should be no grades at all this term.

From this summary we have come up with several recommendations that we need the ministry and school boards to look at and consider as we face this unprecedented experience of staying home with our children and also trying to have education continue.

Recommendations to Minister and School Boards

1. Eliminate the need for recorded grades for K-Gr.10 or at least K-Gr.8
2. Provide virtual access to the mental health supports that are normally available in school and the community for parents and children.
3. School Based Rehabilitative Services need to be available at this time in an online format so there is continuity of service to those children currently receiving these services in-school.
4. The Ministry of Education should have clear directive to all school boards on
 1. Use of Video conferencing tools
 2. Accommodations for eLearning for students with special needs.
 3. Providing alternative methods for distance learning that take into account lack of access to technology, including printers.
 4. EA support available to students and their families in the format the student works in best (video/voice/text)
 5. Transition planning for new students and transitional years (Gr.6->7, Gr.8->9, Gr.12->post-secondary/adult careers) to begin as soon as possible and consistently throughout province.
5. Consult with a broader set of education stakeholders, including parents both with and without children with special needs, and those from rural, remote and northern communities.

Minister, I thank you for the time you have taken to read our concerns and recommendations, and we truly thank you for your leadership during this very chaotic and troubling time.

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