

May 17, 2021

The Honourable Stephen Lecce, Minister of Education
Ministry of Education
315 Front Street West, 14th Floor
Toronto, ON, M7A 0B8

Dear Minister Lecce,

In late March, media outlets began reporting on a proposal that was shared confidentially with a Ministry-led committee. The proposal included plans to expand the mandate of TVO/TFO, including offering independent remote learning opportunities for both elementary and secondary students.

At its meeting on April 19, 2021, the Board of Trustees for the Waterloo Region District School Board (WRDSB) agreed to write to you to express our board's emphatic objection to the rushed and radical changes to remote learning that we understand the government is proposing.

We are concerned with the lack of research showing that this proposal will improve student achievement and wellbeing. While Boards shifted to a remote learning format during the pandemic, this was done on an emergency basis. Any significant and permanent changes to remote learning must be extensively researched and developed by educators to avoid the risk of causing harm to students.

Minister, we have heard your statements that in person learning is the best option for students. The WRDSB and our families agree. Our board has gathered data which shows a marked increase in mental health concerns and feelings of isolation among students learning remotely during the pandemic. We also know, through registrations, that students and parents in our community prefer in person learning. Families have told us that remote learning lacks the social emotional development and sense of community that children gain through in person learning. This reinforces our belief that public education is not limited to student achievement, but also supports the whole child through their stages of development, cognitively, socially, emotionally and physically. Educating the whole child is especially important for at-risk students who benefit from having direct access to caring adults in schools.

The [Ontario Student Trustees' Association](#) (OSTA-AECO) and the [Ontario Public School Boards' Association](#) (OPSBA) have also expressed concerns that the proposed plan would present many negative impacts for the student body and does not prioritize the success and wellbeing of students.

The WRDSB supports modernization and online learning, when it is best for students. We respectfully remind the Minister that the WRDSB already had, pre-pandemic, and continues to have, a functioning online learning program which is utilized by secondary students and

supported by the Ontario e-Learning Consortia (OeLC). Currently, local school boards work with OeLC allowing for local input into the needs of our students and community. The OeLC allows students to choose online learning courses to fit their timetable while remaining part of their local school community. We see an opportunity here to use this already established consortium and scale up in a more cost-effective way than recreating systems at TVO/TFO.

As we continue to navigate through the pandemic, with shifts back and forth from in-person to online remote learning, we must learn from this experience and use the data to make evidence based decisions.

We join [OPSBA](#), [OSTA-AECO](#) and many other Boards in calling for the Minister to halt implementation of this TVO/TFO-based, independent online learning proposal until data on the impacts of remote learning on student achievement and wellbeing can be analyzed. Like you, Minister Lecce, we also value student voice and parent engagement. As such, we ask the Minister to meaningfully consult all stakeholders, including educators, trustees, students and parents before considering this proposal further. We look forward to being a part of this consultation to enhance public education in Ontario, in a way that puts students at the forefront of any changes.

Sincerely,



Joanne Weston
Chairperson of the Board of Trustees
Waterloo Region District School Board

CC:
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