

Education to continue at home during pandemic

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By Nate Smelle

As a precautionary measure to protect the health and safety of students and staff, the provincial government announced on March 31 that upon the advice of the chief medical officer of health they had decided to extend the closure of schools and child care centres. Under this order of the government of Ontario all public schools will remain closed to teachers until Friday, May 1, and to students until Monday, May 4. Furthermore, following regulations defined under the province's Declaration of Emergency, which only allows closures to be extended for one 14-day period at a time, all private schools, licensed child care centres and EarlyON programs will remain closed until April 13. However, to support the families of frontline health care workers and first responders the government also indicated that some select centres would remain open throughout the province. Premier Doug Ford said "the decision to extend school closures was not made lightly. We know from the medical experts that the next two weeks will be critical in the fight against COVID-19 and that's why we're taking further action to keep our kids safe and healthy by having them stay home." To avoid jeopardizing the school year, Ford also announced that the province would be providing additional tools for at-home learning to ensure students from kindergarten to Grade 12 to post-secondary education can finish their academic year and earn the credits they need to graduate. Maintaining that "no student will have their graduation compromised by COVID-19," the province acknowledged that the Ministry of Education is continuing to collaborate with the Ministry of Colleges and Universities to ensure that "there will be no barriers to accessing post-secondary education." Ontario's Minister of Education Stephen Lecce, added "We will do whatever it takes to keep students safe from COVID-19" which is why we have extended the school closure period and why we have unveiled a teacher-led program that keeps students learning while at home. By providing clarity for parents, enhancing support for students and enabling the teacher-student relationship, we are ensuring our children continue to safely learn "providing some sense of stability and hope for them amid this difficulty." According to Hastings Prince Edward District School Board's communications manager Kerry Donnell, Phase-1 of the provincial government's Learn at Home program will take place between April 6 and April 17. During that time, she said the focus of the program will be on "meeting Ministry of Education-designated hours of work per student, per week, as well as developing learning tasks to meet the profiles of students, including supporting students with special education needs by providing appropriate accommodations and modifications." As part of the Learn at Home program, Donnell indicated that students will need to meet a series of expectations dependent upon their grade level. Explaining further, she said students from the Junior Kindergarten level to Grade 6 will be provided with five hours of work per student, per week; while youth currently in Grades 7 to 8 will be given 10 hours of work a week, per student; and, students from Grade 9 through Grade 12 will be provided with three hours per course, per student, per week. Providing insight regarding what parents/guardians can expect from school administrators during Phase-1 of the program, HPEDSB acknowledged that they will be communicating individually with families, speaking with a different sample of families each week. By means of this approach, the school board said administrators will be enabled to: support the connections and learning experiences to ensure continuity of learning; gain a school-based awareness of successes associated with this remote teaching approach; and, find out about any unanticipated challenges families are experiencing when accessing learning tasks provided by teachers. Addressing the teachers' role in the Learn at Home program and what parents/guardians can expect, the school board states that teachers will maintain weekly, two-way communication with students and families, and make learning tasks/plans available to families by Monday afternoons. To support students and families through any unanticipated challenges that may arise from the program, teachers will also be checking in on the progress of student learning via email, phone, text, or by the teacher posting to an already established online learning platform that students and families are familiar with. During the second phase of the program the government acknowledged that there will be a new set of expectations for the education community. At this point, children studying at the Kindergarten level up to Grade 3 will be required to complete five hours of schoolwork focused on literacy and math per student each week. Grades 4-6 students will each be provided with five hours of work a week, focused on literacy, math, science and social studies; while Grades 7 to 8 students will be provided with 10 hours of work per student each week, also focused on math, literacy, science and social studies. At the secondary school level, semestered students in Grades 9 to 12 will be expected to complete three hours of work per course each week; whereas non-semestered students are provided with 1.5 hours of work per course per week focused on achieving enough credits to complete their schooling and graduate. Phase-2 of Learn at Home will also focus on: reconnecting students with teachers and other school staff, including mental health

workers; leveraging digital resources and identifying alternative forms of teacher-student connectivity, such as phone and mail; developing a program of training for educators to support them in virtual learning delivery; issuing final report cards for all students; prioritizing and supporting students on track to graduate; distributing laptops and/or devices from schools as needed, while observing public health direction; maintaining a responsive posture for health care and community partner requests; and, establishing formal COVID-19 working groups with education sector unions to work together, share ideas and to find solutions in the support of students. In the past month, three of the four major unions representing teachers and education workers in Ontario – the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario; Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association and the Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens – moved closer to resolving the ongoing labour dispute, reaching a tentative deal with the province. Although the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation has yet to achieve such a deal, the union's District 29 local president Scott Marshall said both sides are now back at the table, conducting their meetings online through video-conferencing. In the meantime he said the OSSTF are working with HPEDSB within the framework provided to ensure that students can complete their academic school year. "Teachers here are reaching out to all of the students to assess their needs and will be providing educational programming for them," said Marshall. "Addressing the inequities that exist with distance learning is a challenge and one that the full education team is working on." HPEDSB plans to support students and families with educator curated and created at-home learning activities by providing them with access to over 250 online resources for anyone with access to technology and the internet, as well as 150 no-tech activities that can be done without screen time. The school board said both of these resources are available through the HPEDSB Learning at Home website, while they will be taking a "unique approach" with delivering the "no-tech" activities. Beginning on March 30, HPEDSB said they are running a full-page, colour advertisement in free, weekly community newspapers such as Bancroft This Week that features a series of language and mathematics activities for students from Kindergarten to Grade 12.