



Bluewater District School Board

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March 9, 2020

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

Dear Minister Lecce:

On behalf of Bluewater District School Board, we wish to express our concern over the possibility of mandatory online courses for secondary school students, beginning in 2024. Bluewater District School Board is a rural school board with approximately 17,000 students spread over 8,600 square kilometers. We have nine secondary schools, seven of which are part of grades JK-12 or 7-12 configurations.

Our board has been utilizing Ontario's Virtual Learning Environment (vLE) for the delivery of eLearning courses and blended learning opportunities for our students for many years. Given our complex geography in Bluewater District School Board, we have been a proponent of eLearning opportunities for our students as an alternative curriculum delivery model, to ensure our students have equitable access to a variety of programs. Our eLearning programs are taken voluntarily by students and taught voluntarily by our teachers.

When the eLearning student achievement data for our students from the past six years was reviewed, it was clear that when students chose to take an Ontario credit course through an online or blended learning model, they were more successful in completing the course and less likely to leave (i.e. 'drop') part way through. When students could not get the classroom delivered course in their own school and/or the credit was mandatory for graduation, students were less likely to pass and more likely to leave or 'drop' the eLearning course. In other words, 92 percent¹ of our students successfully completed the eLearning courses when they voluntarily completed the program, whereas 46 percent of students were not successful or did not complete the course when it was not their choice, or the online delivery method did not suit their learning needs. We echo the concerns shared by other school boards regarding the shift to a mandatory requirement for all students to take online courses by the end of high school.

We support the Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA) position that teaching and learning in the digital age requires²,

....a purposeful cultural shift in our education system that focuses on engaging and inspiring our students, that fosters creative and innovative minds and embraces the enabling role of technology in expanding how, when and where learning takes place.

We, however, do not support legislated mandatory online learning graduation requirements for students. Our multi-year strategic vision is *Learning Today, Leading Tomorrow*, and our priorities of student and staff well-being, quality instruction, community engagement, and responsible stewardship of resources are founded on the principles of equity of access and equity of opportunity. We further support OPSBA's vision that "schools are more than a collection of buildings – they represent a system of learning and a culture where learning and teaching reciprocally drive the use of technology."³ Living in rural Ontario means, for many families, that they have precarious or limited access to high speed reliable internet at home. In a recent eLearning student survey completed by the Ontario Student Trustees' Association in May-June 2019, approximately five percent of students who responded indicated they were not able to take eLearning courses because they did not have access to technology required to complete online courses. This is also true in rural Bruce and Grey counties. This would

create an equity of access and opportunity issue for us in Bluewater District School Board if online courses were mandatory for all students to graduate.

Bluewater District School Board's mission is to provide a quality education for every student in a safe, accepting, and caring environment. We aim to ensure our students graduate with the qualities of resilience, self-direction, adaptability, innovation, and advocacy. We acknowledge that our students need to be able to compete in a global environment. We agree with the Canadian Council of Ministers of Education that "a clear and relevant definition of global competencies for students in the pan-Canadian context is absolutely essential to support future discussions on fostering and measuring these competencies across provincial and territorial education systems."⁴ As with the ministers, we endorse the six pan-Canadian global competencies:

- critical thinking and problem solving
- innovation, creativity, and entrepreneurship
- learning to learn/self-awareness and self-direction
- collaboration
- communication
- global citizenship and sustainability

We think that these global competencies are best developed in students through positive and flexible learning models that are responsive to the differentiated needs of learners, and where one size does not fit all.

In conclusion, we appreciate the government's intention to introduce all students to technology-enabled learning as an essential skill in today's world but strongly oppose a mandatory one size fits all approach to online credit requirements for graduation. Our local student data clearly shows to us that, when given the choice, students prefer to be in a classroom with a teacher they know and trust supporting their learning, and not forced into a learning model that is only accessible and successful for some but not for all.

As always, our commitment remains focused on providing a quality education for every student in a safe, accepting, and caring environment.

Sincerely,



Jan Johnstone
Chair



Jane Thomson
Vice-Chair

cc: The Honourable Doug Ford, Premier of Ontario
The Honourable Bill Walker, MPP, Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound
The Honourable Lisa Thompson, MPP, Huron-Bruce
The Honourable Jim Wilson, MPP, Simcoe-Grey
The Honourable Marit Stiles, NDP Education Critic
Ontario Public School Boards' Association
Chairs of Ontario English Public School Boards

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¹ OPSBA's paper [A Vision for Learning and Teaching in a Digital Age](#), February 2013, p2.

² Weighted average over 6 years of data.

³ OPSBA's paper [A Vision for Learning and Teaching in a Digital Age](#), February 2013, p2.

⁴ https://www.cmec.ca/682/Global_Competencies.html.