

Director's Message – June 23, 2020

It is with a whirlwind of mixed emotions that I share this year-end message with our students, staff, families, and communities. In addition to my usual sentiments brought on by the completion of the school year, there is a profound sense of finality for me as I bid farewell with my last message as Director of Education. After more than 38 years, this Friday is my last day “in the office” at Bluewater District School Board.

As I prepare for the bittersweet moment of retirement, I feel tremendous gratitude in my quiet reflections of the many adventures and rewards that I have been so fortunate to experience during my career. It has been an amazing honour serving the students and families of Bruce and Grey counties, and to have been in a position to witness the growth and transition of so many young lives. I think about the former students I have known and taught, and their progression from kindergarten and elementary, to secondary and eventual career success. Many of them have become parents of a new generation of Bluewater students.

I also think of the colleagues I have been privileged to work and learn with over the years. While the list is far too long for the purposes of this message, I acknowledge all of them for their support and expertise in a vast range of capacities, which has helped to shape, guide, and inspire my path. This extends to the wonderful families, volunteers, trustees, and partners who have made a positive difference, not only on a personal level, but especially in the lives of our students through their contributions to local public education. I could not be more thankful.

Moving forward, it is an absolute pleasure for me to pass the torch to Lori Wilder, my successor as Director of Education. A longtime colleague and dedicated member of Bluewater's senior team, Lori will be a great leader and advocate for ensuring our students continue to have the best opportunities for their success and well-being.

Without question, the next few months will be anything but ordinary as Ontario proceeds with caution in attempting to slowly reopen the economy and lift restrictions related to COVID-19. I know there are many questions surrounding the return to school in September. While we do not have all the answers at this time, I can say that we are following the [provincial government's directives](#) in planning for a few possible scenarios (please also see below the attached parent/guardian letter from Minister of Education Stephen Lecce). These could include a modified routine with smaller class sizes (limit of 15 students) where cohorts of students attend on alternate days or weeks, a hybrid format of in-person and/or remote learning, or a full reentry plan that follows a normal school day routine with enhanced public health protocols. We must be prepared for these various models and have the flexibility to shift between them, based on the advice of our public health officials. At this particular point in time in Bluewater District School Board, we are focusing our reentry planning on a hybrid model that would combine face-to-face and online learning opportunities for the month of September, depending on local public health approval.

Other considerations being discussed provincially involve ways in which to strengthen online learning, solutions for those with limited access to technology and/or internet connectivity, and child care for families and staff during a possible phased in reentry. Where we land will depend on where we are at in the province in terms of the severity of COVID-19 cases. Over the

summer, Bluewater will be maintaining close contact with other school boards in the province and Ministry of Education representatives to help inform reentry planning. As always, new information will be shared with our school communities as it becomes available.

In the span of my entire career, I have never encountered anything quite like what we have seen over the past several months. I want to express my heartfelt gratitude and deepest respect to all our students, families, and staff for stepping up to the challenge in the face of a very difficult situation and adapting to this new reality. Everyone's experience and personal circumstances are different, and I fully understand that not everyone was able to engage in remote learning in the same way. I stand by my earlier statements in that our plan in Bluewater was always meant to be flexible without adding unnecessary pressure to families. Students will not be penalized if they were unable to fully participate, and no one should feel the slightest bit of shame or guilt over this. Our students are a very resilient bunch, and I am fully confident that our staff will meet them where they are at and work to narrow any gaps when school resumes.

It has also been a difficult end to the school year due to the postponement of elementary and secondary formal graduation ceremonies until the fall, or when it is safe to proceed. Despite this setback, I know that when the time comes, these events will be meaningful and well worth the wait for our deserving graduates. That said, please join me in congratulating those students celebrating special milestones as they prepare to make exciting new transitions, whether they are entering Grade 1, Grade 9, or pursuing post-secondary for the first time in September.

At this time, we extend our goodbyes to our retiring staff and share thanks for their years of service and dedication to enriching the lives of the students of Bluewater. I wish them all the enjoyment, rewards, and continued learning opportunities that retirement offers. This year, it feels surreal for me to address this particular cohort as I get ready to join them!

In closing, it only seems fair that every student, staff, and family receives special accolades in the wake of an unprecedented school year. While this is not quite how I envisioned ending my career in public education, I am deeply humbled by the resilience, support, and collaboration shown by so many over the past several months. I also personally thank our trustees, my senior team colleagues, and Corporate Services staff, whose daily encouragement and support in my role as Director of Education have brought great fulfillment during my final years in Bluewater. You are all in my thoughts and deserve the very best.

Stay safe, be well, and enjoy your summer! Signing off [@BWDSBDirector](#).

Alana Murray
Director of Education

Ministry of Education

Minister

315 Front Street West
Toronto ON M7A 0B8

Ministère de l'Éducation

Ministre

315, rue Front Ouest
Toronto ON M7A 0B8



Dear Parents—

I write to you as we are just a couple weeks away from the official end to the 2019-2020 school year. Despite the challenges that we have all faced in responding to the COVID-19 outbreak, I have been inspired by your determination and spirit. I know that it has not been easy, but your commitment to supporting your children over the last several months has been reaffirming, constructive and exceptionally encouraging. We will continue to safeguard the well-being of your children and preserve the continuation of learning. Your role as parents and guardians is critical to making this a reality.

We know that the start to the next school year **may not** look or feel the same as it did just 10 months ago.

Earlier today, I announced our government's plan for the safe reopening of schools. While Ontario is clearly on a positive trajectory in terms of our response to the COVID-19 outbreak, **my objective is to make sure that the education system is safely prepared for all potential scenarios come September**. With that in mind, I have directed all school boards to plan for three scenarios:

- A return to conventional, regular classroom instruction, with health and safety requirements,
- A continuation of remote learning, including the use of live, synchronous online instruction, and;
- An adapted delivery model that enables students to return to class with blended virtual learning, that includes health and safety requirements that will limit the maximum number of students to 15 per class.

We hope that public health situation will continue to improve and allow school boards to enter a conventional classroom experience, once it is safe to do so. Local and regional health authorities – in conjunction with a Ministry of Education established table of medical experts – will help shape the way forward, to ensure the realities on the ground within your communities are best reflected.

While school boards will develop their plans based on the ministry's guidance, I want to express some of the underlying principles that we used in issuing these instructions to boards.

First, we must recognize that choice that you as parents must have. You made this clear to me, and we are ensuring you get to make that choice. Any participation in in-person class will be voluntary. We will strengthen our Learn At Home program, provide greater access to technology for more families, and stand-up for regularized, synchronous live learning that clearly benefits your child. Our government will continue to stand up for parents and insist on this impactful experience.

Second, this plan was developed with the **health and safety of your child, staff, and your families as our top priority.** It is why the government announced net new funding for cleaning, cleaning protocols, and financial support to hire additional custodial staff in September, to ensure schools are safe. It is also why our plan was created following extensive consultation with the Chief Medical Officer of Health, health experts on the COVID-19 Command Table, medical experts at The Hospital for Sick Children, education sector partners, front-line workers, parents and students.

Third, our government is investing in record levels to support student mental health. **We are investing \$10 million in new additional funding for the coming school year alone,** to help school boards ensure they are proactively supporting students given the impact of COVID-19 on mental health and well-being. This year, students will have unprecedented direct access to regulated mental health professionals, as our government invests a record nearly \$50 million in support of student well-being. Medical experts have been clear, there is a need for enhanced mental health supports to respond to COVID-19. This funding can be used by school boards to hire additional mental health workers to support students through this adversity, reduce wait times, and improve access to critical services, that we know students deserve.

The school restart plan also prioritizes supports for students with special education needs, including advance planning for a smooth transition to school, a requirement that Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and Identification, Placement and Review Committees (IPRCs) are followed, along with the direction that boards plan for full-time in-class instruction for students with the most significant levels of needs. We are also asking boards to work with local partners including Children's Treatment Centres so that students have access to the supports they need to succeed.

Fourth, we saw families rise to the challenge and adapt quickly while we rolled out the Learn at Home program. This plan will provide new online course content and digital tools, and provide other resources for educators to support continuous learning for students in the coming school year. We also know that we must do more to so that all students have greater access to technology, and for all schools have access to internet.

This week, I announced \$15 million to assist school boards in purchasing devices and further embracing the digital age. This new funding will be directed to securing up to 35,000 classroom computers and ensuring students have the tools to succeed in the upcoming school year.

Fifth, today I announced that the government is spending more in education than ever before. This year, the Grants for Student Needs has increased by a record \$736 million. We are investing record amounts in mental health, special education, technology, and overall – **every school board will benefit from a funding increase** – as we prepare for the year ahead.

We will never waver in our commitment to Ontario's students – to their health and safety – to supporting them on their learning journey – and to set them up to succeed for the future.

Thank you to Ontario parents, education staff, and communities for your support, ideas, and commitment to the safety of our schools and the success of students.

Have a positive summer,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Lecce', written in a cursive style.

The Honourable Stephen Lecce
Minister of Education