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Ontario e-learning plan unique in North America

In its new vision for education, *Education that Works for You,* Ontario's Ministry of Education announced a plan to make it mandatory that high school students take four online courses in order to graduate.

Traditionally, in Ontario, students have enrolled in e-learning courses for a number of reasons: to fast-track and get to graduation early, to catch up in credits, to accommodate their learning needs, or because particular courses are not offered in their communities. E-learning has benefits for many students, and for some it is challenging.

An examination of research and e-learning in other jurisdictions shows there are a number of important factors to be considered before introducing new online learning requirements.

This is a significant policy change in a complex and emerging area of education. The decisions of the government on how to implement the e-learning policy will have a direct impact on every secondary student in Ontario.

In order to be implemented fully and successfully, policy changes must be accompanied by appropriate communication with stakeholders, capacity building and resources for practitioners and students, and support for troubleshooting. However, a first step will be to explicitly state the purpose of the policy move.

No one else requires four online courses

Michigan, **Florida**, **Alabama**, **Virgina**, and **Arkansas** require one e-learning credit in high school, but nowhere in North America are students required to take four online courses.

Currently, Ontario has not articulated the purpose of the online learning policy decision. In other jurisdictions, the goals of the policy are wide ranging and include things like teaching students how to learn effectively in new environments, preparing students for online training in the workplace, and alleviating the shortage of qualified teachers.

Different goals lead to different policies and practices.

Learning management systems can make or break a course

According to **a study of rural US e-learning**, one of the main reasons students drop courses is due to technical issues.

E-learning courses share many characteristics with face-to-face courses. An important difference, however, is that online classes are facilitated through some sort of learning management system, or LMS. A **crucial factor** in the success of online courses is the LMS and online organization of the course materials. Interaction with the LMS has a **strong correlation with achievement**, therefore if they interface is not user-friendly or appealing, it can limit how a student performs in the course.

Online learning is a skill

According to **one study**, students had similar post-secondary participation rates whether they took a course online or in-person. But students who chose to take the course online said that they felt more prepared for post-secondary learning because they were prepared to be independent learners.

Some research has found that students in grades 9 and 10 struggle more with online learning than their older peers. Grade 9 and 10 students had the lowest pass rate in online courses in a study of K-12 students in **Michigan**. Similarly, a different **US study** the authors reported that a school district stopped offering online courses to grades 9 and 10 students because they felt they were struggling so much. The authors attributed this discrepancy to grade 9 and 10 students' lack of motivation and maturity in comparison to their grade 11 and 12 peers.

Another **US study** found that students who are more comfortable with technology and the online interface of the learning management system are more likely to be motivated, satisfied with the course, and learn more. The same study states that the more online courses students take, the more confident they are in the system, and that teachers should pay particular attention to first-timer students in order to give them the confidence and supports they need to succeed. Some **regions** suggest that students limit their online course-load to one or two classes at a time until they are able to demonstrate success online.

Community is essential

It was evident that to support learning in an online course, teachers need to intentionally **foster a sense of community** and establish a strong teaching presence. Relationships that may come more naturally in a physical classroom environment must be explicitly built. **One report** found that students from rural communities who were accustomed to tight-knit learning communities felt isolated when participating in e-learning.

At the same time, online learning has the potential to broaden a learning community beyond the students who would normally attend the same high school. For example, **Indigenous students in rural Newfoundland and Labrador** reported gaining confidence from completing and succeeding in the same course as other students across the province, and they felt that more post-secondary paths were open to them based on this experience.

Teachers need to know their students

Students have raised concerns about the difference in teacher-student relationships in online vs. in-person classes. One of the reasons identified by students for dropping online courses was **lack of teacher immediacy**.

In some studies, teachers have raised similar concerns, and **have reported** that they find it harder to get to know their students and gauge whether they need support. In addition, some of the teachers in online environments reported feeling disconnected from the teaching profession.

For **students with exceptionalities**, e-learning may allow for more flexible and individualized learning, which can improve the likelihood of these students reaching graduation. However, the needs of students must be communicated to teachers in order to capitalize on the opportunities afforded by online learning. In **some cases**, e-learning teachers struggle to accommodate the learning needs of students with Individual Education Plans due to a lack of communication.

Even online, class size matters

A **special report** published in 2019 by the *State of the Nation: K-12 e-Learning in Canada* project identified that class sizes matter even in virtual classroom environments, because students still require support even if resources are available online. Online learning can be supported through different models of staffing, for example:

- One teacher online with local course facilitators in schools

- One teacher online and a local teacher who supports students while they are completing their individual work in a designated part of the school, like a Learning Commons

- One teacher online who is available to students who have individual questions and needs throughout the course

In all of these models, the key is to have teacher/student ratios that ensure that students are able to access individualized support when needed.

Until this year, e-learning class size limits were the same as face-to-face class size limits. In 2019, the **Ontario government**announced that in addition to increasing the class size to 28 students for grades 9-12 students in brick and mortar schools, online classes will be increased to 35 students.

It would be a big change for Ontario – important to implement policy carefully and with support

According to the Annual Ontario School Survey conducted by People for Education, **in 2019**, an average of only 5% of students per high school participate earn credits through e-learning. The **new requirement** for all students to complete four online courses beginning in

2020-2021 represents a substantial increase in e-learning across the province.

Alberta provides a **guide for educators** to implement e-learning, as do several states where online learning is mandated. For example, Michigan provides supports for all stakeholders included in virtual learning, including a **Teacher Guide** and a **Student Guide**. Ontario currently has a **user agreement** available as a resource to support online learning. However, more tailored guides and capacity building may be needed in order to fully realize Ontario's new e-learning policy.

This is a significant policy change in a complex and emerging area of education. The decisions of the government on how to implement the e-learning policy will have a direct impact on every secondary student in Ontario.

In order to be implemented fully and successfully, policy changes must be accompanied by appropriate communication with stakeholders, capacity building and resources for practitioners and students, and support for troubleshooting. However, a first step will be to explicitly state the purpose of the policy move.

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