

2021 May 4

The Honourable Stephen Lecce
Minister of Education
438 University Avenue, 5th Floor
Toronto, Ontario M7A 2A5

Dear Minister Lecce:

I wanted to bring to your attention a current proposal by the Ministry of Education regarding online and remote learning that also includes an expanded mandate of TVO/TFO. This proposal was shared confidentially with stakeholder members of a ministry-led committee. The consultation materials were leaked to the media, and many of the details of the proposal have since been published in a variety of publications, including but not limited to the Globe and Mail and the Toronto Star.

The Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA), of which we are a member, and other education sector stakeholders including the Ontario Student Trustees' Association, the Federations who represent Teachers and Educations Workers, and others, have issued public statements raising concerns about several elements of the proposal. The Thames Valley District School Board is extremely concerned with the contents of this proposal and potential legislation, especially since it comes at a time when our province continues to struggle with the pandemic, and plans for the return to school this September are unclear.

As you know, the past year has been unprecedented in many ways, including multiple shifts to remote learning as schools were forced to close based on province wide and local public health recommendations. Our school board met its responsibilities every day to students and their families by quickly pivoting to various online formats. These herculean efforts were aided by the collaborative relationships that exist between all stakeholders in our board, and most importantly, we were able to leverage existing infrastructures and staff expertise in our schools and e-learning consortium.

Like the other members of OPSBA, the Thames Valley District School Board supports modernization, as well as student and parental choice, when it makes sense, for student success. We have promoted and implemented learning online in various formats for many years, and understand the importance of preparing students for postsecondary settings, the workplace, and lifelong learning. With that said, while remote learning over the past year may have been a positive experience for some students, we have also seen marked increases in mental health concerns, and feelings of isolation among students. We are concerned that the current proposal may be promoting the online learning option to the detriment of student well-being and the overall integrity of our education system.

Thames Valley is a long-time member of the Ontario eLearning Consortium, a grassroots partnership of Ontario School Boards that began 2001. Thames Valley understands the value of e-learning and the opportunities it provides our students.

However, this current proposal considers allowing online and remote learning as a permanent option and gives the responsibility for online course content to TVO/TFO. I'm sure you can agree that for the vast majority of our students, remote or independent learning opportunities cannot replace the in-person school experience that has been shown to effectively support the developmental, physical and social well-being of students.

This proposal will have significant implications for public education and our local schools including:

- Threatening the viability and diversity of course offerings in small, rural and remote schools. Over time this proposal will result in closed or diminished schools that are currently at the heart of our small communities.
- Reducing support for in-school learning by reassigning Student Success Teachers, Guidance Counsellors and others whose current mandate is to support students who require additional instruction to be successful.
- Leading to unnecessary duplication and additional expenses, while still being unlikely to effectively address local needs. School boards and their consortia have developed the infrastructure and level of expertise to support remote learning that reflects the requirements of their specific learners.
- Undermining the ability of school boards to have direct and local influence over the logistics and programming linked to online learning as well as associated services and supports in their community schools.

OPSBA has always offered to work in partnership with the government to ensure that policies and legislation can be effectively implemented to maximize the success of each and every student in our care. In December 2020, the Association submitted its position on an expanded role for TVO to the government.

OPSBA and the Thames Valley District School Board are prepared to work with the government and education partners to create a workable vision that is mutually beneficial, which does not undermine school board and school board consortia leadership, and does not eliminate the positive online approaches that have long proven effective for student engagement and success.

We believe that school boards and TVO should continue to do what they each do best and work to find opportunities to work collaboratively in areas that would continue to grow and enhance the quality of online credit courses.

OPSBA and the Thames Valley District School Board are concerned with regard to the accelerated timelines and lack of reflection and understanding of the short and long-term ramifications. OPSBA continues to recommend a working table with school board consortia, school board representatives and online learning experts, along with TVO staff, to co-create a vision that is mutually beneficial and does not undermine school board and consortium leadership or eliminate the positive online learning approaches that have long been effective for student engagement and success.

We would appreciate the opportunity to meet with you to discuss this issue further, and we encourage you to raise these concerns with your caucus colleagues.

Sincerely,



Meagan Ruddock, Vice-Chair
Thames Valley District School Board

cc: Trustees
M. Fisher, Director of Education
Hon. E. Hardeman, MPP Oxford
Hon. J. Yurek, MPP Elgin-Middlesex-London
T. Armstrong, MPP London-Fanshawe
T. Kernaghan, MPP London North Centre
P. Sattler, MPP London West
M. McNaughton, MPP Lambton-Kent-Middlesex
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