

RESPONSE TO PERMANENT REMOTE LEARNING FACT SHEET #1

Dear ETFO Member,

On Monday, March 22, 2021 ETFO was invited to a special meeting of the Ministry Initiatives Committee. During this meeting, ETFO was advised of the Ford government's proposal to continue virtual learning for all schools for K-12 students beyond the pandemic.

In order to do this, the Ford government would need to amend regulations and the *Education Act* to allow for virtual learning to be a permanent option.

ETFO has grave concerns about the proposed plan's negative impact on the quality of Ontario's world-class public education system and on the future of learning.

We have compiled some frequently asked questions below to assist you in understanding the government's new proposal:

What does the government's plan to make online and remote learning a permanent part of public education mean for elementary schools?

As a result of the pandemic, in the 2020-21 school year parents had the option to enroll their child in either an in-person model of learning at a physical school, or a remote learning class. The government's plan would make the choice for full-time remote synchronous learning (live teaching) a permanent option for all elementary students, including after the COVID-19 pandemic is over. Specific details regarding program implementation have not been shared. **This is not, however, being offered as an alternative programming option but, instead, as a permanent change to the delivery of publicly-funded education for all students across Ontario.**

Under the government's plan, wouldn't remote learning just occur on snow days and during emergencies?

No. The government is proposing a full-time remote learning option which would be for all days within the instructional year for families who so choose. Remote learning might also become an option for parents who opt to withdraw their students for long-term vacations or absences.

Will all educators need to teach/work online during snow days and emergencies?

Yes. Under this proposed plan, all teachers/educators would be expected to teach/work online during snow days and other school emergencies. There has been no indication that the Ministry understands the complexities of being able to pivot with short notice to an online environment, the realities for students and their families, or any other specific details about teaching/working online under these emergency circumstances.

Will remote teachers and other education workers be able to work from home?

No. Unlike the remote learning during the pandemic, there are no health restrictions that would prevent educators from reporting to work at a physical school location. Teachers and education workers would be required to perform supervision duties, participate in staff meetings, and engage in their school community, as they would in a traditional school setting.

Will hybrid remote learning be a part of this plan?

The Ministry has indicated that the choice to offer a hybrid learning model (teaching online and in-person students at the same time) during the pandemic was a decision made by individual school boards. There has been no indication that the Ministry would not allow a school board to continue with the hybrid model, if it chose to do so.

The risk is clear that hybrid models could continue as a standard mode of delivery as boards determine how to provide remote learning to all students who request it.

Would remote learning be available for any family who wants this option?

Yes. Any family will have the option to choose remote learning. Ultimately, parents and guardians will decide if they would like to enrol their child in remote learning. No consultation process with educators appears to be involved in the decision about whether students will attend in-person or remote learning.

Won't some students benefit from a remote learning option?

Educators have done an amazing job teaching remotely during the pandemic, and they have had significant successes under incredibly challenging circumstances this past year. However, we need to be cautious that we don't see individual anecdotal experiences as evidence that remote learning will work for any student who chooses it - and this is the plan the Ministry is proposing. We need to consider the long-term impacts on the mental health and wellness of students and teachers, the short-term and long-term funding implications, and how this will impact all students across Ontario.

The Ministry has provided no academic research or analysis on which to support its underlying claim of the benefits of full-time synchronous remote learning in the elementary grades. This permanent change is being undertaken without educational expertise and without considering any data about Ontario's richly diverse student population, the process of learning and the realities of schools and the communities in which they are situated.

This plan is an **experiment** in remote learning and one that will continue to deepen the digital and academic divide exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic in Ontario.

Why is the Ford government proposing this plan?

Since it was elected, the Ford government has made it clear it has an agenda to dismantle our world-renowned public education system. It is attempting to weaken public education by capitalizing on a global pandemic to redirect funding dollars, erode public confidence and present remote learning as an innovative opportunity. The current global pandemic has made emergency remote learning necessary, but the Ford government is capitalizing upon this necessity in an effort to normalize remote learning and push forward a political agenda.

Has additional funding been provided for this expanded plan for remote learning?

No. Even though all school boards will be required to offer remote learning for anyone who chooses it, no additional funding is being provided by the Ministry. This will significantly stretch the funding dollars that boards have in a time when they are already struggling to recover from the pandemic. Boards will be trying to do more with less money which will mean cuts to already vulnerable programs. This only serves to further erode public confidence in the system which is at the heart of the government's agenda.

How does the move to online learning for secondary students impact elementary students?

This plan has proposed significant changes to online learning at the secondary level. This will undoubtedly impact direct funding to elementary schools as money will need to be redirected to support the implementation of these sweeping changes at the secondary level. This will impact every student served by the board, including elementary students.

Isn't this proposal contradicting the consistent messaging of the Ford government that in-person learning is best for students?

Yes. Since the start of the pandemic in 2020, the Ford government has repeatedly taken the position that in-person learning is optimal for students and is essential to their mental health, well-being, and development. Minister Lecce himself said on his [December 29, 2020](#) Twitter feed that the “switch to virtual classes is meant to be a one-time, time-limited intervention to save lives”.

We know that children flourish in bricks and mortar schools. Beyond simply being a place to transmit knowledge, schools support students' development in their relationships, their sense of self, emotional skills, and well-being. Thinking about the purpose of school solely in terms of content and curriculum delivery diminishes the important ways students grow and learn in all areas of development by being in school and being a part of a learning community.