



Toronto District School Board

Pulse on Mandatory E-learning/Online Learning – Qualitative Results Summary

Introduction

Recently, the TDSB surveyed its student, parent, and secondary teacher communities to gauge support for the government's mandatory e-learning plan. The [results](#) of this survey indicate most students, secondary teachers, and parents do not support the government's plan to make e-learning a mandatory requirement for graduation.

The following report summarizes the reasons why most students, staff, and parents are not in favour of mandatory e-learning.

Methodology

All students, parents, and secondary teachers who responded to the survey were asked to provide explanations for the following two questions:

- In your opinion, would mandatory e-learning/online learning benefit students?
- Do you support the Ministry's decision to require all students to take two e-learning/online learning credits in secondary school in order to graduate?

In total, approximately 6,000 comments were received, including 662 student comments, 3,193 staff comments, and 2,356 parent comments. Comments were reviewed to develop coding categories and these codes were then applied as each comment was read. Coding continued until saturation was reached and no new codes emerged.

Key Findings

After analysing the student, teacher, and parent responses, five key themes emerged:

- Lack of Face to Face Interaction Necessary for Learning
- Inability to Meet the Needs of all Learners
- Inequitable Access to Technology
- Concerns with Online Format of Instruction
- Lack of Information and Research Evidence

Lack of Face to Face Interaction Necessary for Learning

Concern over the inability to interact face to face in online courses was the most prevalent theme across student, teacher, and parent comments.

Student comments pertained to the central role of the classroom teacher. They described the importance of the one-on-one support that teachers provide, and the benefits of face to face communication with teachers in terms of getting their questions answered, having concepts explained or demonstrated in different ways, and getting help when needed.

Face to face learning cannot compare to learning online. Teachers have many different ways of explaining content which helps students get much more depth in their learning.

Many students also talked about the importance of having time to interact with their peers, for academic and social reasons. From the social perspective, students talked about the importance of peer interaction for friendships and relationships, and their social skills development. Academically, students talked about peer support and the opportunities for collaboration and group work as important for their learning. They further noted how useful classroom discussions and the sharing of ideas were in supporting their learning.

I find it more effective to learn in a classroom filled with my peers and teacher so that way I can be more hands on and if I'm struggling I can talk to people around me and my teacher for help plus I'm more focused when in class.

The learning environment which you receive inside a classroom cannot be replaced by a computer. The usual class discussions, the sharing of ideas, the improvement of communication and self-confidence will all be hindered.

Students clearly expressed a preference for learning in a classroom, and did not like being forced to have increased screen time. Some students also said they could not sit at a screen for long, that it made them feel tired, and that it interfered with their sleep.

I like hands-on learning over just staring at a screen. And I can only be on a device for a short period of time before my vision gets weird.

Similar to students, teachers discussed the importance of in person interaction. They indicated that the immediate support, human relationships, and a live classroom

dynamic are essential components of students' education. They felt live interaction was necessary for academic achievement and socio-emotional development. For example, they shared that in a live class they are able to give students immediate feedback and help them with course topics right away, get to know students on a personal level to provide guidance and support, and create collaborative learning opportunities among their peers.

Many students find that they need the interaction with fellow students and teachers face-to-face because it is how they learn the best. Bouncing ideas off each other and their teachers in real time builds a level of trust unmatched.

Some educators also felt the lack of a classroom environment in an already hyper-digital world can create further isolation and mental health struggles and they felt students today already have too much screen time.

Many students with mental health concerns, including anxiety, benefit from a face-to-face classroom setting. Allowing them to stay home and encouraging more computer use does not benefit these students.

For parents, there is no substitute for a teacher and the guidance, support, and social interaction that a teacher in a classroom provides. Parents said their children learn best in the classroom, as they benefit from face to face individual support, as well as from the discussion, dialogue and exchange of ideas with their teachers and peers.

I think students do better with a teacher's supervision. Teaching/learning should not be impersonal! Teachers spark interest, lead by example, motivate. This is a very important part on learning and can't be done online!

It is very hard for many kids including mine to learn online. Kids need a real life teacher to engage them in the material, to see when they need more/different explanations, and respond to their questions.

Students at the high-school level benefit greatly from the dialogue and exchange of ideas that take place in a classroom setting. I can't imagine an exception to this.

In addition to the academic benefits of peer interaction, parents also noted its importance for socialization and expressed concern that students already spend too much time on screens to the detriment of their social skills, and if anything, need less screen time and more social contact.



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For students to fully learn a subject I believe the classroom is best where a teacher and classmates are present. The kids spend enough time online. We should think about the social impact this will have on kids.

Children are losing interactive social skills, let's not add to it with even more screen time.

Kids do not need more screen time - they need real interactions with real people.

Inability to Meet the Needs of all Learners

Another common theme across students, teachers, and parents was the concern that online learning is not suitable for all students due to different learning styles and needs.

Students noted the importance of being self-directed and having strong independent learning skills in an online learning environment. While a few students said the format would suit them as they were self-directed, many worried that most students would struggle with online learning due to a lack of these skills.

Online courses require a high amount of discipline to complete work on your own without teacher supervision. This is why I wouldn't recommend it.

Most students can't self-manage, so a self-guided course definitely wouldn't benefit them.

Students described challenges with distractions, trying to remain focused, procrastination, and motivation. Students also discussed the potential for misuse of technology during online learning (e.g., watching videos, surfing the web) due to a lack of discipline.

Besides getting frequently distracted, I tend to work less efficiently online. The lessons also seem to be less informative and engaging.

Not everyone learns the same way. It's hard for most people as well as myself to understand courses if it was taught online. Also, I have a hard time focusing when using electronic devices.

I will have a hard time not having structure because I procrastinate and I may not do my work.

I would not feel as motivated to persevere through academic obstacles.

Students with Special Education Needs were also concerned that the extra and/or specialized supports that they currently receive could not be provided in an online course.

Because of my learning disability the fact that I would have little help (if at all) from a teacher would greatly decrease my chances of successfully completing the course.

I am a student with ADHD. I find it better for myself to learn at school where I get less distracted than my own home and with a teacher I can interact with face to face.

Teachers reported concerns that mandatory e-learning would not equitably support the needs of all students. Like students, many educators, including veteran teachers who had previously taught e-learning, felt students who are successful in online courses tend to have a specific profile of skills: high motivation, self-directedness, independence, etc. Educators said most students need a live adult to help them stay focused on their learning.

I have taught e-learning. Most students need to be highly motivated and self-directed. It is not a good format for those needing more one-on-one instruction, scaffolding, or needing extra support.

Furthermore, educators were also worried mandatory e-learning would negatively impact students with Special Education Needs and English Language Learners. They worried mandatory e-learning could further marginalize these students.

E-learning cannot meet the learning needs of all students, such as English language learners who may have difficulty with the amount and level of reading content, or students with special needs who prefer individualized instruction.

Similar to students and staff, most parents also reported that online learning may not be suitable for all children because only highly independent and self-directed learners could be successful in this environment. They connected this with the need for live interaction because they felt in person educators are better able to help students stay focused and learn concepts.



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E-learning works for students who are highly motivated; it's not flexible enough to accommodate the different learning styles of individuals. When it comes to learning, there is no substitute for personal interaction from an engaged, caring teacher.

My son has taken a course online, he really didn't have the same level of interest, connections, attentive amongst other things he would when in a class. If the child does not have self-discipline then the student would fail.

Similar to students and staff, parents of students with Special Education Needs were worried mandatory e-learning would further marginalize their children.

The self-discipline it takes for online learning is not something my children would be able to master. Additionally, one of my children has an IEP and requires a teacher that is aware/sensitive/skilled to address his specific learning styles.

At least one of my children (the oldest for sure) would not be able to complete a mandatory e-learning course. He has dyslexia and ADHD and requires face to face learning for him to be successful. Mandatory e-learning would be a disaster for him.

Inequitable Access to Technology

Inequitable access to technology was frequently raised by students, teachers and parents as a problem with mandatory e-learning.

Students noted that many of their peers do not have internet access and/or access to a computer device at home. They expressed concern that this was unfair and would disadvantage some students.

It would be harder for me to focus because of my surroundings and I have financial problems where my Wi-Fi wouldn't be on for [a] couple of days.

In order to complete my assignments I would need access to the internet readily, something that I find is not always available for me personally.

Educators also felt a key challenge with implementing mandatory e-learning is lack of robust infrastructure. Not all communities in Ontario (i.e., Northern and rural Ontario)



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have reliable internet access. Within the TDSB as well, not all families or schools have sufficient digital equipment for every student. In this context, educators were unsure how it would be possible to implement mandatory e-learning – if students are required to have access to technology at home, this would further marginalize low socioeconomic families. A few respondents also feared technology and e-learning platforms are currently not seamless enough to provide an optimal learning experience.

Not all schools are properly equipped with enough working computers, internet is too slow and many students do not have access to computers and internet at home.

I work in a low income area and some of our students do not have access to computers, smart phones or Internet at home...

Many students do not have access to technology outside of school. Mandatory e-learning is an equity issue EVEN if schools provide the technology because the advantage is given to those who have access at home.

When my daughter took an e-learning summer course the technology had a lot of problems. Information was scattered and hard to find. The learning site was shut down for 2 weekends out of the 4 for the course.

Parents shared these concerns about equity, noting that students with less access to technology would be disadvantaged. Parents asked if schools would be able to ensure all students had access to a computer and the internet.

Our computer and internet access at home is spotty and competitive (with 5 of us sharing).

Will computers be available at school during the school day for students to use?

This policy will exacerbate inequality in education for students without high speed internet & latest model computers. The Ministry should be planning for the benefit of all students.

Concerns with Online Format of Instruction

A few students noted the potential flexibility and convenience of online learning, as well as the opportunity to develop technology skills. However, most students noted that they

already have sufficient access to online learning as part of their current learning experience in classrooms.

E-learning isn't necessary for learning how to use tech for today's generation. We're already using tech every day; we use additional resources online, whether because it's embedded in our work or need extra materials to further our understanding.

Being taught in-person is a much more effective way of teaching than learning online. A lot of school work is already done online (i.e., writing essays, demo labs for science, digital art).

Students were worried about what courses would be offered online. Some students felt certain subjects required hands on experience in the classroom. They were concerned that difficult or complex subjects could not be adequately taught online, and could negatively impact their success in high school and post-secondary.

The courses I would like to take are very difficult and complex. I would rather have more time to receive help from a teacher in my school.

I will be taking math and all sciences, and I do not see how I am supposed to learn these subjects online. I will not be able to learn the topics well which will affect how I do in University.

I am taking multiple courses in grade 11 that require hands on experience in a classroom so it would not be ideal for me to pursue e-learning.

Students reported that that some of their peers might not take the courses as seriously as their in-class courses, would not learn as much, and only be concerned with passing the course. They also cautioned that it would be easier to cheat in an online course.

A small number of educators also felt e-learning could support students' future readiness and provide more digital exposure. Some educators felt this policy may be useful but it would be course and age dependent. For example, a few felt core subjects (i.e., English, Math, Science, Arts) should not be offered online while a few felt the courses may be offered to senior students.

I believe that the option should be provided for senior courses only. Students at the junior level don't have the knowledge, experience to use online platforms and should be taught by teachers in classrooms to support their learning needs.

That said, teachers expressed concerns with credit integrity in e-learning and worried it would diminish education quality. For example, teachers worried about plagiarism, and the richness of material learned.

There is no guarantee that the student is engaged in the subject and/or if the student actually is doing the work.

Similar to students, teachers mentioned students are also currently being exposed to online learning in many other classes as is, so students do not necessarily need mandatory e-learning to get more digital exposure.

Many courses already include and teach the skills that this initiative is supposed to nurture...

Students currently have access to use of technology (i.e., Google Classroom) that will prepare them for online courses in university...

Similar to students and teachers, parents appreciated the importance of technological skills, and recognized that online learning could provide some exposure, as well as offer convenience and flexibility to students.

Learning online is an important skill that will help students in the future.

Again, everywhere you go to receive service, you are expected to navigate and learn the interface. Employers routinely expect employees to learn new skills via online learning.

However, like students and teachers, parents also expressed that students were already getting current exposure to technology in their classrooms.

While I am in favour of online school work, I oppose entire courses being conducted online, and also oppose them being mandatory.

Blended learning with some online components is beneficial. Many teachers already use online learning tools to supplement their classroom teaching. But shouldn't [be] turned into mandatory coursework.

Finally, some parents also felt the success of e-learning would depend on the courses being offered and the age of students, while others felt e-learning is better suited to

adult learners as high school students are still developing the skills needed to be successful in e-learning.

Lack of Information and Research Evidence

Students, teachers, and parents had many questions about the implementation of mandatory e-learning and did not feel enough information or evidence of its benefits had been provided.

Some students had questions about e-learning as they did not have enough information about how it would be implemented. They wondered about how online courses would be taught, how many hours they would have to put in online, if the courses would take place during the school day, what homework would be like, and how access to technology at school and home would be supported.

Other students said they were happy learning in classrooms and did not need online learning, and wondered about the rationale for the policy. Some students expressed their belief that the policy had little to do with benefit for students, and was just a way to save money by not hiring as many teachers. Students also noted research that shows e-learning courses have a lower overall success rate, and suggested that studies are needed demonstrating its effectiveness or benefits for student learning.

I think that mandatory e-learning would benefit the government more than it would benefit students.

It's been proven that e-learning lowers overall success rate. It would be a detriment to the academics of students all around the Board.

Why do it online when we can do it in class? How does doing it online benefit us? What we need isn't more school work and online courses, what we need is more personal help from teachers and staff.

A small number of students shared their prior experience with e-learning and though a few noted having had a positive experience, more students described struggling. Students said they found it more difficult to learn without in-person teacher support, and that they did not feel they had learned as much as they would have in a classroom environment. Some students said they ended up dropping the course as a result. They also said that e-learning will have a negative impact on students' mental health due to increased stress.

I have done an e-learning summer course, and it was useful in the sense that I got to learn to be independent and I learned new tech skills, however, I feel as though it was more difficult as I couldn't communicate with the teacher in person.

I have done e-learning before, twice. I don't feel I learnt as much as I have in similar classes in person. Also, doing semestered e-learning was very hard when I go to a non-semestered school.

E-learning can make classes extremely difficult. The lack of personal assistance and amount of work shifted upon students is unreasonable and detrimental to learning and marks. E-learning courses add a large amount of stress into student's lives.

For all of these reasons, most students do not support *mandatory* e-learning, but many noted they support e-learning as an *option* and would like to be given the choice to decide if it is right for them.

I do not think it should be mandatory for students to take e-learning courses. It is a great option to have for those who learn best in a self-directed environment...

E-learning should not be forced on students and their diplomas especially should not depend on it.

I would like to have the choice on whether to take e-learning courses or not.

Educators were confused about how the policy would be implemented, who will teach these courses, how students would choose e-learning courses given course selection for next year is already taking place, and how the equity concerns highlighted above would be addressed. They also wondered if these courses would mean students would have spares during the school day, and what that would mean for supervision, particularly of younger students in Grade 9 or 10.

Educators wondered about the rationale for this policy and asked for more evidence based research citing success of e-learning in a public education context such as Ontario's. Educators instead talked about research that highlighted concerns with e-learning. Some educators also discussed how this policy removes funding from public education and leads to fewer teachers in the classroom.

Educators who had prior experience with e-learning talked about the high attrition rates in existing e-learning courses and how very few students chose this model of learning.

Other educators mentioned that students are stressed about a mandatory e-learning policy.

Like students, many educators were in support of an optional e-learning program that allows students to choose whether or not to take online courses, but educators were opposed to mandatory e-learning for all students.

At our school e-learning success rates are poor. Students rarely complete the course work. It works as an option for highly engaged students. However, for the majority of students it is not working.

I have had many students come to me panicking about having to take e-learning. This is not good for their mental health. Not all students want to learn via a computer and should be able to choose not to be told.

Parents too had questions about e-learning and did not feel the government had provided enough information about the implementation to parents. They wondered who was developing the courses, what types of projects or assignments would be expected, how students would be assessed, what supports would be in place, and whether the course would be timetabled in their child's schedule. They also had questions about what subjects might be chosen for an online course, and at what grade level.

We would need to learn a lot more about how it would work for learning, assessment, interaction with a teacher.

I don't think they have thoroughly or thoughtfully planned for implementation. I'd like to see evidence-based plans for design, execution and evaluation BEFORE it gets rolled out.

Parents questioned the rationale for the policy and expressed their belief that the policy was about cutting costs. Parents also noted that the decision was not based on evidence, and suggested that its benefits for student learning are not proven.

There is no evidence that online learning will benefit anyone except the budget officer. The government didn't even bother to quote any evidence before introducing the proposal, so they (you) obviously don't care.

It is not based on best practice understanding of learning. It is short sighted and not well thought out. It is a wrong way to go. It is not about education for youth is it simply a cost cutting at the expense of student education.



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This decision is not based in any research, it is purely motivated by a desire to cut costs, using our students to subsidize corporate tax cuts.

No other jurisdiction in the world is requiring such online learning. It is untested. Why would you use my child as a test case?

Some parents also shared that their child had tried online learning and had found it difficult, mostly due to a lack of support. Other issues raised included lack of engagement, poor quality of courses, and technical issues with the platform (i.e., system crashing, poor sound, difficulty uploading homework). Parents said students do not need more stress.

My eldest who is a very strong student had to drop an online course because she was learning nothing and felt totally unsupported.

I have an older son who took some high school classes online and they were all of much lower quality than the courses offered by real teachers in real schools!

Having seen my daughter do her Grade 10 Civics Course online, I know that it puts kids who aren't highly organized or have parental supervision at a disadvantage. And it is in no way better than classroom learning, she got very little out of it.

Like students and staff, parents were supportive of optional e-learning, and said that whether or not to take an online course should be a decision made by students and their parents.

Students should not be forced to take e-learning.

I don't think it should be mandatory, but if properly rolled out could be an attractive option for students who can't get or fit a course in their schedule to be able to complete it on their own time.

While I believe having an option for e-learning as an elective is fine, I don't feel my child needs to be forced into that decision.