



Office of the Chair of the Board

Sent Via Email

May 11, 2020

Honourable Stephen Lecce
Minister of Education
438 University Ave., 5th Floor
Toronto, ON
M5G 2K8

Dear Minister Lecce:

The Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB) remains committed to student achievement and well-being during these unusual circumstances. TCDSB staff have responded to many challenges since the start of distance learning and continue to support all students through “check and connect”, synchronous and asynchronous learning, and distance learning resources for educators.

Staff teams in the various TCDSB discipline groupings continue to work together with school communities and families to provide interdisciplinary supports to staff and students within the various categories of exceptionality. TCDSB Special Services team members continue to work closely with the central Curriculum Resource Team, Safe Schools, and Nurturing our Catholic Community teams to co-create and align curriculum resources and teaching strategies for teachers and other educators in the system.

As we continue our efforts to support students with special education needs, unfortunately challenges and inequities still exist for students with severe needs.

The Board of Trustees approved a motion that the Association Reports in respect to learning at home during the COVID-19 crisis be forwarded to the Ministry of Education on behalf of the Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC). It is our hope that you and your team will have an opportunity to review the information included in here to better understand some of the challenges our students with special education needs are facing.

We look forward to hearing more from you and the Ministry on how you will be supporting students with special education needs during these times.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Martino".

Joseph Martino
Chair of the Board

cc. All Trustees
N. Crawford, SEAC Chair
L. Maselli-Jackman, Superintendent of Education, Special Services

Helping Gifted Students Learn Online During COVID 19

(A) For **gifted students online learning** must offer:

- Project-based learning that is more learning activities-oriented, not content-oriented.
- Opportunities to interact with their instructor/teacher in a meaningful way as well as other gifted classmates.
- Activities should be designed to cultivate higher-level thinking and creative problem-solving skills.
- Allow students to move faster through the curriculum and at their own pace. Otherwise, gifted students might find online distractions more engaging and their interest in new and challenging materials might draw them away from slow paced coursework and into the vast amount of information at their fingertips on the Internet.
- Gifted students need to participate in a variety of activities including online discussions, collaborative projects and/or real-time interactive sessions with like-minded peers.
- Gifted students maybe unwilling to ask for help and teachers do not have the advantage of non-verbal clues to pick up on student confusion.
- Confident that they "know what to do," some gifted students may dive in and start working on an assignment before fully reading the directions. Students in classrooms aren't likely to get far down the wrong path before a teacher steps in to redirect. Teachers will need to check students' progress early on during an assignment to ensure this doesn't happen.
- A fully online learning environment can be challenging for all students including gifted students. Students need to be self-disciplined and experienced with working independently to be successful. Students need to be aware of what the differences and expectations are in their new learning environment.

(B) We are concerned about **accommodations and modifications provided to 2e students** (gifted student who also has another exceptionality, such as: a specific learning disability, ADHD, ADD, emotional and behavioral disability, or ASD, etc.).

How will the student's needs be sufficiently supported? Parents/guardians will need to know how and what accommodations are provided in the classroom so they might try to provide them at home. 2e students may need an area free of distracts for test taking. This may not be possible at home.

Some Accommodations/Modifications for 2e students:

- Minimize repetitive work.
- Frequent reminders of due dates.
- May need a private signal from the teacher to regain his/her attention.
- Provide notes to keep the student from getting distracted by taking notes.
- May need to be tested orally rather than written in some or all subjects.
- Allow extra time to complete tests.
- Give the student a checklist of tasks to be completed.
- Provide clear and concise directions, verbally as well as in writing.

(C) Existing successful **online learning opportunities** for gifted elementary and secondary students

1. The Center for Talented Youth (CTY) at Johns Hopkins University (pre-K – 12)
- <https://cty.jhu.edu/online/>
2. Talent Identification Program (TIP) at Duke University (grades 8 – 12)
- <https://tip.duke.edu/>
3. Center for Talent Development (CTD) at Northwestern University (grades 4 – 12)
- <https://www.ctd.northwestern.edu/program/online-enrichment?sort=alpha>
4. Stanford Online High School (OHS) (grades 7-university level)
- <https://onlinehighschool.stanford.edu/>

(D) Additional questions:

- Will "Reach Ahead", a program offering Grade 7 & 8 students the opportunity to earn credits early at a high school in their community, be available? And will Grade 8 students accessing Grade 9 courses receive a credit?

(E) Accommodations to Provide at Home for Online Learning and Gifted students

For gifted students the curriculum is modified by increasing depth and complexity in some or all subjects and it is important that this continues, even during these challenging times. 2e students will also have accommodations.

While all students will need an uncluttered work area free of distractions, this is especially true for 2e students. Parents will need to review their child's IEP. Know what accommodations are provided in the classroom, so you can try to provide them at home. Your child may also know what they are.

Here are a few **Accommodations** that parents/guardians can provide or help with at home:

- Using headphones will help create a quieter workspace.
- Make time to organize materials and store them in a designated location. Provide a specific location for completed work.
- Record assignments or ask the teacher to provide notes so your child doesn't get distracted by taking notes.
- Use visual organizers, post a calendar on the wall to record the daily schedule and assignment due dates. Create a checklist of tasks to be completed and use check points for long-term assignments and monitoring progress.
- Gifted students might find online distractions more engaging than the lesson, especially if they're unable to move at their own pace. Students may need a signal from the parent to regain his/her attention.
- Gifted students maybe unwilling to ask for help and teachers do not have the advantage of non-verbal clues to pick up on a student's confusion. Encourage your child to ask questions regarding unclear directions and assignments.
- Confident that they "know what to do," some gifted students may dive in and start working on an assignment before fully reading the directions. In a classroom, students aren't likely to get far down the wrong path before a teacher steps in to redirect. At home parents may need to check their child's progress early on during an assignment to ensure this doesn't happen.
- Gifted students need to participate in a variety of activities including online discussions, collaborative projects and/or real-time interactive sessions with like-minded peers.

A fully online learning environment will be challenging for teachers and students, including gifted students. To be successful students need to be aware of what the differences and expectations are in their new learning environment. Gifted children who are not self-disciplined and able to work independently are more likely to experience stress or perhaps even depression. This is especially true in unfamiliar situations such as these. Parents will need to help them to accept and understand these new circumstances and be resilient in the face of adversity. Encourage them to advocate for themselves, reach out to others for help and have compassion for and acceptance of themselves and others. Remind them this is only a temporary situation.

(F) More resources to help while schools are closed

Ontario Ministry of Education portal to educational resources, for all students from Kindergarten through to Grade 12. <https://www.ontario.ca/page/learn-at-home>

Nelson is supporting the education community during COVID-19 <https://www.nelson.com/learningonline/parents.html>

MathPickle free online resource of mathematical puzzles, games and more. <https://mathpickle.com>

Problem of the Week offered by University of Waterloo, provides students with an opportunity to solve mathematical problems. <https://www.cemc.uwaterloo.ca/resources/potw.php>

Would You Rather - Students make choices based on mathematical reasoning. <https://www.wouldyourathermath.com>

NRICH offered by University of Cambridge is a free online mathematics resources for ages 3 to 18. <https://nrich.maths.org/frontpage>

Education Place - Grade 1–6 resources for teachers, students, and families to support instruction in the classroom and at home. <http://www.eduplace.com>

Edutopia **Inquiry-Based Learning** <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/what-heck-inquiry-based-learning-heather-wolpert-gawron>

NAGC - Resources for Educators & Parents During COVID-19 <https://www.nagc.org/resources-publications/resources/resources-educators-parents-during-covid-19>

It's a good idea to check the TCDSB website for resources.

Kahn Academy - Self-teach a variety of subjects <https://www.khanacademy.org>

Mathletics - <https://www.mathletics.com/ca/resources/lessonplans/ontario>

<https://ca.ixl.com>

Math Games Inspire Young Minds

<https://www.edc.org/5-math-games-inspire-young-minds>

(G) Books on Parenting gifted Children

Parenting Gifted Kids, Dr. James Delisle

Homeschooling Gifted and Advanced Learners by Cindy West

Learning@Home

The Impact on Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

April 22, 2020 -- During this unprecedented time, the widespread effect of the COVID-19 pandemic and the closures of schools across the province has caused a monumental impact on students and families in ways not limited to academics. Aside from reinforcing the essential role of special services on ensuring student success and well-being for special education needs students; this new form of learning has also shed light on a variety of other challenges including those outlined below.

Attitudinal Barriers – Media or public discussion that devalues the right to an equitable education and the necessary programs, services, accommodations and/or modifications to the delivery of same. Media or public discussion which identifies the accessibility needs and necessary program, service, accommodation and/or modification needs of special education needs students as laborious and unnecessary.

Disability Related Barriers – Special education needs students; particularly students on the autism spectrum are greatly affected by change to their daily routine and tend to suffer a much higher grade of anxiety when faced with uncertainty and fear. In an inclusive classroom, teachers will have access daily to support personnel who can help to provide any instructional or environmental accommodations and sensory breaks to help redirect the student's focus and attention to the task at hand. Student behaviour plans when not working to de-escalate inappropriate behaviour at school often include an exit strategy that involves calling parents or caregivers to come and pick up their child and take them home. Parents and caregivers in a state of self-isolation cannot provide the breadth of accommodations or sensory breaks required to help their child overcome the large and complex emotions they are feeling during the COVID 19 pandemic. These disability barriers are especially difficult when parents are working from home, also have a disability or are struggling with mental health and well-being challenges of their own.. During this uncertain and scary time, any child will look to their parent or guardian as a source of comfort, stability and safety and a child with a disability will take much more time and effort to console, de-escalate and redirect to the *learning@home* program. These barriers are much more pronounced for students who have a developmental disability, delay or are developmentally immature for their age.

Caregiver Stress – Many parents and caregivers are suffering from “caregiver burnout” as they are experiencing the loss of mental health and overall health and well being services for their special education needs children and for their families. Parents and caregivers are tasked with providing the majority of care to their child which requires significant time and energy and this severely impacts on their capacity to support *learning@home*.

- Many health and community services, supports, therapies, etc., are closed or are delivered in a manner which is inaccessible for many families and their children on the autism spectrum.
- Many parents/caregivers are juggling work along with the complex, high needs of their children while also trying to deliver the *learning@home* content.
- Many parents/caregivers, due to COVID-19 have lost their jobs and the income necessary to support their child's health and well-being needs.
- Some parents/caregivers are single-parents, are battling illness (covid-19 or non-covid related) or are caring for ill or aging family members.

Possible Solution:

Coordinate through the TCDSB psychology and social work department to provide small group teleconference circle of care mini-sessions for those families and students that have been identified as at risk during the "check and connect" phase.

Social Isolation – Autism Ontario, Toronto Chapter recognizes and supports the need for strict adherence to social distancing and self-isolation rules during this time as a collaborative means to slow down and stop the spread of COVID-19. We would also like to bring awareness to the fact that individuals with disabilities and their families often struggle with the ability to "stay connected". The consequential loss of adequate and accessible support can lead to a steep rise in mental health crises requiring immediate intervention and/or hospitalization for this already marginalized and isolated demographic.

- Parents and caregivers of children with special education needs reflect a demographic of families that are already experiencing social isolation and feelings of loneliness within our communities.
- Autism is a neuro-developmental disorder characterized by impairments in social communication which inherently places limitations on the ability of children, youth and young adults to develop friendships and social relationships to which they can stay connected with. The friendship circle for children, youth and young adults on the autism spectrum is often limited to one to two friends during their time at school and/or to any social activities facilitated by school special services staff.
- A heightened rate of post-traumatic stress disorder has already been documented in recent research as a common outcome of quarantine and self-isolation¹

Possible Solution:

Develop peer support programs and new initiatives to connect students with disabilities with their peers by using a variety of different methods such as email, phone and video. Note that students with severe physical disabilities or communication impairments may need creative approaches to connect socially with school friends and peers.

¹ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30460-8/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30460-8/fulltext)

Loss of Health & Personal Care Supports – Although these services have been deemed as essential services during this time by the government of Ontario, the restructured model which encompasses a stricter health & safety regime may not provide the same level of service and may not provide accessible care for some..

- Since it has been determined by health officials that [it is possible for asymptomatic individuals to spread the virus](#) and that a person may be contagious for three to 14 days before exhibiting symptoms; families are also opting out of having paraprofessionals/PSWs enter the family home for fear of community contagion of COVID – 19.
- Many families are also choosing not to attend clinic appointments (where available) in order to mitigate the same risk as children may be immune-compromised and there may be developmental barriers making social distancing difficult.

Loss of Access to Therapeutic Services – Many service providers like SLP, OT, PT and ABA/IBI have closed, reduced service provision or are providing services which are not accessible to all.

- Where therapeutic services are available in person; families are also choosing not to attend clinic appointments in order to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 contagion as many children are immune-compromised and social distancing may be difficult.

Possible Solution:

Many CTCs are setting up on-line platforms and reaching out to individual families with suggestions for therapeutic exercises and activities that can be carried out at home. This should be required for all students on the School Health Support Program. Exercises and activities should be individualized to the student needs and family capacity. See more information regarding COVID-19 changes to service delivery on the [Children's Treatment Network](#) website.

Differentiated Learning – *Learning@home* has become an awakening for parents and caregivers to the belief that systemically, educational goals for students with disabilities are often gauged on low expectations. Being fully engaged and informed now on what the general class expectations are in comparison to what was previously modified for their special education needs child is eye opening. Absent or inconsistent differentiated, accommodated or modified and accessible curriculum provided to meet the learning needs of special education needs students.

- Curriculum content and assignment expectations are often sent to students and parents in a manner tailored to typically developing students only.
- Parents and caregivers of students on the autism spectrum, unless certified in the implementation of Applied Behaviour Analysis techniques, are unable to apply these effective principles when helping their children with *learning@home* (PPM 140 - Incorporating Methods of Applied Behaviour Analysis into Programs for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders²).

² <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/extra/eng/ppm/140.html>

Possible Solution:

Parents and caregivers should not be expected to differentiate their child's learning. All homework and learning expectations for students with special education needs should be clearly provided by teachers according to the student's IEP and individual learning profile.

Any additional special education resources that are used by teachers or support staff should be shared with parents and caregivers to support *learning@home*.

Individual Education Plan – *Learning@home*, which has essentially transferred all aspects of the school instructional day to the parent or caregiver, does not include any at home support or guidance on how the IEP, which is a living and legal document will be applied.

- How will necessary accommodations or modifications be applied to the curriculum expectations provided through *learning@home*?
- How will learning goals be monitored?
- How will alternative goals be applied and/or monitored?

Possible Solution:

An IEP review should be included as part of weekly check-ins with students, parents and caregivers to ensure that any *learning@home* student or parent/caregiver concerns are met and resolved in a timely manner.

Accessibility features for on-line learning – Students with disabilities often require a wide range of accessibility features for learning, and some of the *learning@home* recommended learning websites do not provide these features.

Possible Solutions:

All recommended websites should be reviewed to ensure that they have the accessibility features that may be required. The available accessibility features for each site should be clearly identified.

Access to Equipment at school – Families need access to the Special Equipment Amount (SEA) funded equipment that supports learning as well as health and safety, such as and not limited to laptops, walkers, standers, and Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) devices. Although best efforts have been made by local school staff, families have not been able to retrieve devices which were not taken home at the start of March break.

Possible Solution:

Arrangements to be made to have equipment delivered to student's home.

Transition Planning – Students who are transitioning in the fall to FDLK, a new grade or division, a new school or placement, to post-secondary or even from class to class (PPM 156 –Supporting

Transitions for Students with Special Education Needs³) need to know how planning will occur along with additional support while learning at home.

- Many FDLK students do not and will not have had access to IBI, ABA, Rehabilitative therapies or transition planning during this critical time. This loss of services negatively impacts on ASD student development during *learning@home* and in preparation for September entry/re-entry to school.
- Due to the inherently rigid nature of ASD, the immense difficulty with transitioning smoothly during times of change or unfamiliarity, coupled with the commonality of co-morbid mental health disorders which accompany ASD; students on the spectrum and their families are experiencing extremely high levels of anxiety, stress and multiple barriers to student success during this time.

Possible Solution:

That students, parents/caregivers be provided with staff resources and staff support through a variety of means to support transition planning at home.

Graduation Planning – Students with disabilities who are hoping to graduate in June, are concerned about marks and requirements to graduate or for admission to post secondary. Families and students are concerned about how planning for graduation will be supported.

Possible Solution:

That local Guidance department staff check in with all graduating special education needs students and their families where appropriate to provide support for their chosen pathway.

The understanding that education cannot be a “one-size-fits-all” model is evident. Online learning is not an effective or an accessible means to learn for all students. The spectrum of strengths and needs reflected in every student with autism should be mirrored in the spectrum of services and support readily available to them creating opportunities for a successful future for every student. Special education needs students would strongly benefit from a cross-ministerial strategic plan developed in close collaboration with all provincial and local partners and in particular with our students and their families.

³ <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/extra/eng/ppm/ppm156.pdf>

Key Issues for Students with Physical Disabilities and Learning At Home

The following issues have been identified by families of students with physical disabilities:

- **Attitudes** – Any media or public discussion that devalues the life of people with disabilities and their right to health care in the Covid crisis.
- **Loss of Health and Personal Care supports** – Many families are electing to decline personal care supports because of the risk from workers entering multiple homes. Agency providers are using best practices for safety and hygiene, but the children are very vulnerable.
- **Health and physical care of students** – Parents are providing the majority of care to their child and this requires significant time and energy. It impacts the capacity of the parents to support learning. Single parent led families are even more impacted without additional help in the home.
- **Loss of therapy as it has been deemed a non-essential service** – Children's Treatment Centers who provide rehabilitation services at school are currently closed. Parents are trying to follow therapy recommendations and work with their child at home, but it is challenging.
- **Access to Equipment at school** – Special Equipment Amount (SEA) funded equipment that supports learning as well as health and safety, such as walkers, standers, Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) devices, were not taken home at the start of March break. Families need this equipment for the health, safety and learning of students.
- **Accessibility features for on-line learning** – Students with disabilities require a wide range of accessibility features for learning, and some of the recommended learning website do not provide these features.
- **Graduation Planning** – Students with disabilities who are hoping to graduate in June, are concerned about marks and requirements to graduate or for admission to post secondary. Families and students are concerned about how planning for graduation be supported.
- **Transition Planning** – Students who are transitioning in the fall to a new grade, school or placement need to know how planning will occur while learning at home.
- **Social isolation** – Many children with disabilities have few friends and rely on school for all of their social connections. The absence of school leads to further isolation.

- **Family feelings of isolation and stress** – Families face the additional stress of caring for a student with disabilities at home to ensure their health and safety, while trying to work from home, or if employment and income has been impacted with limited resources, creates an incredibly difficult situation for families.

Solutions:

Access to equipment at school – Arrangements to have equipment delivered to the student's home.

Accessibility features for on-line learning – All recommended websites should be reviewed to ensure that they have the accessibility features that may be required. The available accessibility features for each site should be clearly identified.

Access to Therapists – Many CTCs are setting up on-line platforms and reaching out to individual families with suggestions for therapeutic exercises and activities that can be carried out at home. This should be required for all students on the School Health Support Program. Exercises and activities should be individualized to the student needs and family capacity.

Social Isolation – Peer support programs and the development of new initiatives to connect students with disabilities could use a variety of methods to reach out to the students using, mail, phone and video. Students with severe physical disabilities or communication impairments may need creative approaches to connect socially with school friends and peers.

Issues related to other Ministries

- **Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services** - Children's Treatment Centers who provide rehabilitation services at school are currently closed.
- **Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services** – Direct funding programs such as Special Services at Home (SSAH) and Passport rely on support workers and in many cases the family or workers are not comfortable entering the home or interacting directly with the child. This vital support provided on a daily or weekly basis has been an additional loss of respite, support and socialization for students with disabilities.
- **Ministry of Health Assistive Devices Program (ADP) is closed and not accepting any more applications** – This is a barrier for families who need additional mobility or accessibility equipment in their homes.
- **Ministry of Health Local Health Integration Networks (LHIN)** who provide health care and personal supports in homes, have not been flexible in allowing family members to be hired to provide personal care support.