



## Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association



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**TO:** Chairs and Directors of Education  
- Catholic District School Boards

**FROM:** Patrick Daly, Chair, Labour Relations Committee

**RE:** Continuity of Learning

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As we continue to navigate the on-going school closures due to COVID19, we know that school boards have been engaging with CPIC, SEACs and their local union leadership on a variety of issues. Recently, the Minister of Education released a memorandum to school boards that dealt with, among other things, the Ministry's views with respect to synchronous learning.

We know that Catholic boards have been engaged in on-going dialogue with their local teacher units on distance learning more generally, and, in many instances, synchronous learning specifically. OCSTA has also been engaged in constructive dialogue with OECTA at the provincial level. We encourage all boards to continue to engage in early and meaningful consultation with their local OECTA units and we too will continue to engage in dialogue for the betterment of our Catholic system during these challenging circumstances.

With respect to synchronous learning, there are a number of relevant considerations that OECTA provincial has highlighted as concerns at both the provincial and local level. OECTA has clearly and publically expressed opposition to mandated synchronous learning. We know that many teachers are already engaging in various forms of synchronous learning and have made great efforts to incorporate excellent practices into their distance learning. We further appreciate that there may be circumstances where synchronous learning is not possible for each and every teacher, student or family. We also, however, understand the importance of encouraging and supporting Catholic teachers to engage in synchronous learning, ensuring flexibility of instruction for students to allow them to have direct, in-the-moment interaction with their teacher to receive instruction and assessment/evaluation in an authentic and timely manner. This need not be prescriptive and can be delivered in any number of modalities (including for example live email chats, telephone calls, small group engagement, audio and video lessons), which may vary board by board, all consistent with the exercise of a teacher's professional judgment in

assessing what is best for his or her students. Regardless of the form of synchronous learning, key is seeking to engage the student in interaction with teacher and peers, to continue to foster a sense of our Catholic community.

Based on discussions with OECTA provincial, the following considerations should be reviewed by boards as our system continues to encourage greater engagement in synchronous learning in order to provide the best learning experience possible for our students in spite of the closure:

1. Potential for Inappropriate Behaviours/College of Teacher Complaints – on-line, or other synchronous learning platforms, provide a reduced ability for teachers to exercise control within their “classroom”. While many boards have provided expectations for parents and students participating in synchronous learning, teachers are not able to mitigate behaviours from participants, or external third parties, as effectively as they could in an in-person classroom. Accordingly, in addition to creating clear expectations for students and parents, boards should exercise a greater degree of caution when conducting investigations with respect to any parental complaints received regarding alleged behaviours exhibited in a synchronous environment. Existing board policies and procedures that contain codes of conduct and safeguards with respect to complaints and investigations continue to be applicable. It is further recommended that prior to any complaint being forwarded to the College of Teachers, board officials engage in a thorough investigation and, should it be deemed necessary to forward the complaint to the College of Teachers, the local unit be advised prior to the matter being forwarded.
2. Protection of Privacy – for both teachers and students synchronous learning may result in an infringement of privacy. Boards should clearly indicate which platforms are approved for synchronous learning and should, where applicable, provide appropriate licensing for use of these platforms. By way of example, while the popular on-line platform “Zoom” provides a free version of the software, it has been reported this free version is more prone to privacy breaches and what is colloquially known as “zoom-bombing”. Teachers should also be advised to utilize board-issued emails rather than personal ones and should be provided information on best practices for keeping their own personal information, as well as their on-line classroom, safe.
3. Equipment/Technology – some teachers may require access to technology to allow them to engage in approved synchronous learning platforms. While we know that many boards have already surveyed and provided both teachers and students with devices where these have been requested, consideration should be given to any additional needs as engagement with synchronous learning increases.
4. Accommodations – certain families may not want their children to engage in synchronous learning. Similarly, some teachers may find it particularly challenging to engage in synchronous learning as a result of family obligations. School boards are encouraged to work with administrators and teachers to provide supports for teachers who may not be comfortable engaging in a synchronous environment, as well as for those teachers whose family obligations may make it extremely difficult to do so. In some cases, accommodations to expectations with respect to synchronous learning may need to be tailored to reflect the reality of a particular teacher. While we know that teachers have been supporting one another throughout distance learning and that some teachers may agree to engage in “team-teaching” or some other form of joint curriculum delivery, certain collective agreement provisions may prohibit such practices without appropriate consultation and agreement.

5. Professional Development/Supports – school boards have been providing a vast amount of supports and professional development for teachers to enhance their knowledge and comfort with a variety of synchronous learning platforms. In addition many boards have offered sessions focused on assisting parents in understanding and facilitating distance learning for their children. Boards are encouraged to continue in these practices to assist in transitioning to greater engagement in synchronous learning for those teachers who are able.
6. Flexibility – no “one-size-fits-all” approach to synchronous learning will be right for each and every teacher or student. Synchronous learning is one manner of delivering instruction among many. Teachers, with the support of their board and administrators, are well positioned to assess what modalities will work well for their students and what mix of synchronous and asynchronous instruction will be effective.

We appreciate all the work and effort that trustees, board officials, administrators, teachers, education workers and local union leadership are undertaking to continuously improve the delivery of distance education to our students. We know what outstanding collaboration has taken place at the local level under very challenging circumstances for all involved. Please know that we continue to keep you and your boards, students and staff in our prayers.