



**ETFO Submission to the  
Ministry of Education  
Expanding Student Access to Online  
and Remote Learning**

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The union represents 83,000 elementary public school teachers, occasional teachers and education professionals across the province. Its Building Better Schools education agenda can be viewed at **[BuildingBetterSchools.ca](https://BuildingBetterSchools.ca)**.

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## INTRODUCTION

The education system and everyone connected to it has experienced unprecedented stress this past year. The move to virtual learning was never intended to be permanent; it was a temporary measure designed to deliver emergency instruction during a global health crisis. That virtual learning continues during this pandemic is, in large part, due to this government’s failure to take the necessary measures to make in-person learning safe.

Now, in the midst of the third wave of the pandemic, the Ministry of Education has revealed that since at least the fall of 2020 — when it should have been focused exclusively on protecting and supporting everyone in our schools and communities — the Ministry was working behind closed doors with unidentified “stakeholders” on a plan to fundamentally change and undermine our public education system and outsource and privatize online learning.

Under the pretext of giving families the luxury of choosing between fully synchronous remote learning or in-person learning, the government’s *Expanding Student Access to Online and Remote Learning* plan essentially proposes an entirely new online education system that would function in parallel to the current public education system. This parallel online education system would be funded by redirecting resources away from an already underfunded public education system.

The Ministry has put forward this plan without any foresight on its impact or implications; without any evidence or research to support that this plan is in the best interests of students; and without any transparent, meaningful, and good faith consultations with the actual stakeholders in Ontario’s public education system — not just private interests who stand to profit from the government’s plans.

The Ministry’s proposal will negatively impact students’ health, well-being and learning outcomes, deepen existing inequities, undermine student privacy, lower standards in publicly-funded education, erode public confidence in Ontario’s public education system and put us firmly on the path to the privatization of public education.

ETFO firmly believes that the daily, in-person model of instruction and support best meets students’ educational, developmental, and social needs, provides the best learning experience, and is the most equitable learning model for all students. Throughout the pandemic, we have seen that remote learning and the hybrid model of learning have detrimental impacts on student health and well-being. In-person learning is critical to the social and emotional health of students. The government has repeatedly relied on this perspective to support their decision to keep schools open even during the height of the pandemic when the government failed to provide the appropriate safety protocols to protect students and educators.

This year has provided further evidence that students thrive in an in-person environment where they learn collaboratively and where their learning is assessed daily through formal and informal observations and assessments. While in-person learning is best for all students, it is especially imperative to those in elementary where so many of teachers’ assessment methods are based on observation and can simply not be replicated in a virtual setting.

ETFO does not support the outsourcing of online learning to TVO, TFO or any other external organization. Giving this broad mandate to TVO and TFO effectively outsources education delivery to an agency that, although experienced at creating content, does not have the expertise to meet the complex and varied needs of Ontario students.

Attempts to introduce a standardized programming approach to online learning devalues the responsive nature of education. Educators carefully plan and respond to students’ individualized

needs every day in authentic and culturally responsive ways. School boards are best positioned to make well-informed, thoughtful decisions based on consultation and dialogue with board staff and community stakeholders and are accountable to the communities they serve. The oversight of public education, including any online learning should remain with school boards.

ETFO is deeply concerned that redirecting funding from school boards to TVO, TFO or any other third-party agency will result in funding cuts that will impact elementary students. When facing fiscal pressures, school boards have often taken resources away from programs aimed at students in the elementary panel to fund budget shortfalls in the system at large. Those funding cuts will hurt students, particularly the most vulnerable students.

The timing chosen by the government to plan major changes to Ontario’s public education system is extremely troubling as is its reliance on pandemic statistics on the “uptake in online learning” to support its plan. Ontario is currently grappling with a third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The public health care system is being stretched increasingly thin and positive case counts of the virus and its variants in schools continue to climb across the province resulting in school closures and great uncertainty and fear.

In the midst of this crisis, on March 22, the government chose to reveal its plan to ETFO and other stakeholders at a hastily called Ministry Initiatives Meeting with an anticipated timeline of seeking legislative changes as early as April 2021. Though the changes are characterized as taking effect in September 2022 and no specific details about program implementation have been provided, the permanent remote learning option appears to come into effect in September 2021.

The government’s reliance on statistics collected during the pandemic, including enrollment numbers in remote learning to advocate for its plan is entirely inappropriate. Families are choosing

remote learning for a variety of reasons, including health and safety concerns resulting from the lack of adequate supports from the current government.

For years, before this government’s mandate, the Ontario education system has been studied and sought after internationally for its innovation, and its evidenced-based structures and frameworks, including an exemplary Kindergarten program. Any government seeking drastic changes to Ontario’s public education system, such as making remote learning a permanent option for elementary students, needs to know how educational change happens.

It is clear to ETFO that this fundamental shift has not been developed by educators who are invested in the success, well-being and future of Ontario students. Changes of this magnitude require time, research, a genuine commitment to collaboration with education stakeholders, and an understanding that decisions should be informed by data gathered in the field.

ETFO refuses to be a bystander, allowing the integrity of teaching and learning to be fractured. The Ministry has not offered a plan that will improve student learning. As education workers, our members know this should always be the main priority. The time to study and consider these impacts is now, not after new legislative changes or a Policy/Program Memorandum is introduced.

## How Elementary Students Learn

Experience has shown that children flourish in brick-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 schools solely in terms of content and curriculum transmission diminishes the crucial ways children grow and learn in all development areas.

By being a part of a school community, students see themselves as belonging and connected to others. Schools create an environment in which children can learn by listening, exploring, taking risks and asking questions. Classroom environments are carefully and intentionally designed to foster inquiry, conversation and collaboration, and they evolve to respond to children's learning needs. These careful considerations include attention to hands-on materials, such as manipulatives, and resources that will respond to and extend the learning. Magic happens in classrooms that is hard to describe and yet unmistakable when witnessed.

Ontario’s early years programs are designed to help children reach their full potential through child-centred, developmentally appropriate programs based on the understanding that young children learn best through authentic play-based experiences. We know that play motivates, stimulates and supports children in all development areas. To suggest that these necessary experiences can be replicated in a virtual environment contradicts the knowledge that we have gained from extensive research and proven in practice. Play, for young learners, is the vehicle through which they make sense of the world, and it is essential to their development and well-being. Through hands-on play, they develop skills such as problem-solving, creativity, communication and co-operation. As stated in the internationally-recognized *The Kindergarten Program*: “Children's early experiences at school are of paramount importance. Quality early learning experiences have the potential to improve children's overall health and well-being for a lifetime.”<sup>1</sup> The excitement and anticipation in Ontario households as children start Kindergarten is due to the innovative program that features: two-years of full-day programming, play-based pedagogy, outdoor learning, the instructional team of a teacher and DECE and strong partnerships with families and communities. These hallmarks necessitate

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<sup>1</sup> Ontario Ministry of Education. (2016). *The Kindergarten Program*. Toronto. Retrieved from: [edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/success.html](http://edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/success.html)



being in an in-person learning environment. This transformative program leads to long-term benefits for social, academic and economic benefits for children, families, and society.

Multiple K-12 Ministry documents and resources, including *Learning for All<sup>2</sup>* and *The Kindergarten Program*, cite the foundational learning theories of Lev Vygotsky. The major theme of Vygotsky’s theoretical framework is that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition. Vygotsky states: “Every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals.”<sup>3</sup>

ETFO strongly believes that authentic social interaction, essential for all students to support new learning, is significantly diminished in a fully synchronous remote learning setting. In-person learning is critical for student dialogue to flourish. The caring adults who act as nurturers for students in our schools can listen carefully to students, observe other cues, have regular check-ins and use that information to determine how to best support them. Through research and anecdotally, we know the caring relationships that exist in schools that help students thrive. To suggest that these relationships can be as easily formed in remote learning is preposterous.

Positive relationships between students and the multitude of professional education workers physically connected to the school serve to help students manage difficulties, support them in crisis

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<sup>2</sup> Ontario Ministry of Education. (2013). *Learning for All: A Guide to Effective Assessment and Instruction for All Students, Kindergarten to Grade 12*. Toronto. Retrieved from: [edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/LearningforAll2013.pdf](http://edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/LearningforAll2013.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Vygotsky, L. (1978). pp.57. *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Boston: Harvard University Press.

and connect them to other resources. Brick-and-mortar schools are places where students and their families have access to resources, programs, and support services that address their needs.

## Teaching and Learning: Online vs. In-Person Instruction

Online instruction is an entirely different way of teaching from in-person instruction. The transition to teaching in an online environment is not easily performed, and not all skills are transferable from one mode of instruction to the other. Having access to innovative technologies, electronic resources and digital tools while also developing the skills to be digitally fluent does not require teaching and learning to happen in a remote synchronous environment.

The Ministry’s plan to establish permanent remote synchronous learning offers no empirical evidence to support the claim that it will benefit students. There is little to no research on the long-term impacts of full-time virtual learning. The Ministry of Education and this plan have provided no academic study or analysis to support its underlying claim of the benefits of synchronous remote learning in the elementary grades.

This permanent change is being proposed without educational expertise and without 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.

If implemented, this plan would amount to an experiment in remote learning that uses Ontario’s elementary students as unknowing participants, without regard to the long-term impact on their health, well-being or learning outcomes.

ETFO educators have done exceptionally well this year in adapting their instruction to attain survival levels of continuous learning to address student needs during a pandemic. However,

quality remote learning incorporates much more than just a chair in front of a laptop for 180 or 225 minutes a day. Quality remote learning requires:

- locally-developed professional learning based on research and best practice offered through a variety of delivery models to educators;
- access to high-quality digital learning resources vetted with a critical equity lens to ensure issues of equity, social justice, diversity, inclusiveness and the needs of Black and Indigenous students and 2SLGBTQ+ students are addressed; and
- learning that is built on a sound pedagogical foundation including, but not limited to, Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogy, Universal Design for Learning, and sound assessment and evaluation practices.

The Ministry’s current plan to expand online and remote learning on a permanent basis, with no additional funding, will mean that high-quality online instruction will not be possible. This shift will also impact the quality of in-person instruction as resources will be siphoned away from the public education system to support a parallel online system.

The Ontario Curriculum<sup>4</sup> and Growing Success<sup>5</sup> are the central policies that inform instruction, assessment, evaluation and reporting in publicly funded schools. The delivery of the depth and breadth of the elementary curriculum while developing student learning skills, physical, active, and social experiences cannot be replicated in an online environment. The Ministry must recognize that the curriculum will be significantly modified in a permanent virtual setting for elementary students. This will create further inequities in students’ learning experiences, between those learning virtually and those learning in-person.

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<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Education (2020). *Curriculum and Resources*. Toronto. Available at: [dcp.edu.gov.on.ca/en/](https://dcp.edu.gov.on.ca/en/)

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Education (2010). *Growing Success – Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting in Ontario Schools*. Toronto. Available at: [edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/success.html](https://edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/success.html)

An essential learning mode that underpins elementary curriculum design is collaborative exploration and inquiry, hands-on learning and performance-based learning to achieve a desired curricular outcome. Curriculum expectations that require opportunities to build, paint, catch, throw, dance, sing, measure, and count in a collaborative, safe and social learning environment cannot be as easily achieved in an isolated online environment where students have access to limited materials and perform hands-on tasks alone, with little to no supervision by an educator.

Student learning requires hands-on, kinesthetic learning experiences to construct new learning, including interacting with others while using tactile materials, including physical manipulatives that they can use to form solutions, solve problems and represent their learning. All these skills are expectations that are thoroughly integrated throughout every elementary Ontario curriculum document.

### **Teaching and Learning: Assessment and Evaluation**

Remote learning during the pandemic has highlighted the significant challenges in assessment and evaluation practices in all curriculum areas. By the very nature of the technology, teachers’ observation strategies of students and their learning process become limited in the remote setting. The teacher’s ability to sit beside the student to observe, notice, name and document evidence is more challenging than interacting with and assessing students in an in-person environment.

The daily observation of student learning that happens when educators circulate in a face-to-face classroom is a critical assessment tool that helps inform instruction and individualized student support and interventions. This essential assessment strategy will never be as robust through a computer screen by the very nature of the technology. As articulated in Ministry policy and guidelines, the whole learning process, not just the final product, is observed by educators and informs moment-to-moment decisions related to instruction and assessment.

Furthermore, remote learning will always put into question the authenticity of student work. How do we ensure that the work being assessed and evaluated is that of the students themselves?

Because demonstration of work is so challenging online, the focus becomes that of work completion, getting the “right answer,” and demonstrating knowledge of the content area.

Similarly, the observation of a student’s learning skills and work habits is limited by the technology tools. The development of learning skills and work habits is an integral part of a student’s learning.

Because many skills and habits involve peer interactions within an in-person learning environment, teaching, assessing and evaluating these skills in a virtual setting becomes challenging, and in some circumstances, impossible for the teacher.

Remote learning for elementary students removes vital opportunities for students to develop both academically and socially-emotionally. The full range of a student’s learning profile and skills are not accessible in the same way as they are in a face-to-face classroom that still can integrate technology into the learning environment.

Observing elementary students during the process of learning is a fundamental aspect of assessment for learning. It is the “process” of learning that teachers need to see to give timely feedback to students and record important assessment data. These observations inform the next steps for instruction and provide the next steps for students to use for self-assessment purposes.

In a virtual setting, the teacher cannot easily observe students while problem-solving, inquiring, or doing any “active” learning. Therefore, timely feedback is often limited in scope and timing. Not being able to interact in person also dramatically impacts the teacher’s ability to “know the learner” in a deep and meaningful way. As assessors, teachers acquire vast amounts of information about their students that help build caring relationships and become vital in their ability to identify the

correct next steps for students. Assessing student learning in a full-time synchronous remote setting diminishes the impact on student learning.

## **An Equitable Environment for All Students to Learn**

While offering remote learning as a permanent option within the elementary school system is being suggested to provide choice and address inequitable access to online learning, this plan will continue to deepen the digital and academic divide exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic in Ontario.

Remote learning will increase educators’ barriers to truly “know the learner.” This is especially true with students with complex learning profiles, including students at-risk and children with learning gaps. In face-to-face classrooms, educators observe students over time and in various social and academic situations. Educators can observe students when they struggle with an academic task, are disengaged from learning, struggle with social interactions with their peers during recess or are isolated and sitting alone every day at the lunch table. Educators cannot observe students’ academic and social behaviour in the same detail and understand these pertinent nuances when teaching remotely.

### **Students with Special Education Needs**

Students requiring special education programs and supports require a level of differentiated learning and accommodations that do not transfer appropriately in virtual learning spaces.

Challenges are further compounded for students with special needs, as clearly evidenced during the current pandemic. A growing number of students in Ontario classrooms require some form of direct, special education support from a variety of specialized education workers. Such supports in classrooms include the provision of program modifications outlined in Individual Education Plans (IEP) and often relate directly to interpersonal skill development, self-regulation and scaffolding of

learning. This often requires in-person adult direction, instruction, supervision, redirection/re-teaching, assessment and evaluation, and cannot be done remotely. Permanent full-time synchronous remote learning would only exacerbate the divide between students who require special education supports and those who do not.

### **English Language Learners (ELLs)**

According to the Ministry, “the first language of approximately 28 per cent of the students in Ontario’s English-language schools is a language other than English.” The government’s proposed plan to expand remote learning disregards the fluid programming needs of linguistically diverse students in Ontario, namely English language learners (ELLs).

The current funding model for English as a Second Language (ESL) and English Literacy Development (ELD) programs is insufficient given the level of support ELLs require in person, let alone would require online. Although technology in the classroom can be a powerful tool for ELLs’ learning, English language acquisition requires rich experiential learning through multiple points of interaction (with peers and educators, in various groupings) to support the development of social language and academic language proficiency. Moreover, social-emotional aspects cannot be adequately addressed for newly arrived students in Canada, who may be beginner ELLs or those coming with significant gaps in education due to limited or interrupted prior schooling<sup>6</sup>.

These examples highlight multiple contradictions in the mandate to develop equitable and inclusive classrooms. In the long term, remote learning will very quickly create two tiers. In doing so, the Ministry is essentially adopting a new way of streaming students, which contradicts its own goals

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<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Education (2020). *Planning for English Language Learners*. Toronto. Retrieved from: <https://www.dcp.edu.gov.on.ca/en/program-planning/considerations-for-program-planning/planning-for-english-language-learners>

expressed at the first meeting of the Ministry Initiatives Committees as part of their de-streaming plan.

## Supporting All Families

The pandemic has shown that parents and guardians have had to take on much larger responsibilities with their children when it comes to remote learning. This model cannot work without a high level of family support.

The students who are more likely to excel in a remote learning are those who currently have robust at-home support systems in place. Families with an adult fluent in the language of instruction who is available to provide support and supervision, who can afford high-quality devices and reliable internet access, can provide a quiet and private space within the home for learning, can problem-solve technical issues at home, have immediate access to resources including books, school supplies and sports equipment, are better positioned than others and will benefit more from this plan than those that this plan claims to support.

It is well known that this pandemic has increased the marginalization of certain communities, including Black, Indigenous, racialized and low-income communities. Not all families have fared the same way with remote learning due to pre-existing equity gaps that have only been deepened by the pandemic.

The Ministry’s plan does not recognize the narratives and many unique circumstances faced by underserved families and that for some children, school is their safest place. The ‘User Journeys’ shared in *Expanding Student Access to Online and Remote Learning* (slide 20) tokenize the complexities, lived and varied experiences of real Ontario students and their families. This is counterintuitive to the information and data the Ministry is encouraging school boards to collect to



respond with an equity action plan suited to the demographic profiles of the communities they serve. Where are the considerations for Black, Indigenous and racialized students and families in this Ministry’s vision?

Families from marginalized communities, including Black, Indigenous, racialized, low-income, and those recently resettled to Canada face many socioeconomic barriers that may encourage them to choose full-time synchronous remote learning for their children, even in circumstances when their children would be better supported directly in-person. Schools have the benefit of resources, supports and services connected to social workers, interpreters and settlement workers.

The lack of adequate access to devices and reliable internet connectivity continue to disadvantage students across Ontario, particularly in rural communities. In some parts of the province inadequate access to cell towers, lack of proper technology devices, and unavailability or unaffordability of high-speed internet access create additional barriers to online and remote learning for students, parents and caregivers, and educators during the pandemic. While these gaps in access are not new, they highlight socio-economic, class and regional disparities. These inequities will persist in any remote learning plan, whether is intended for full-time attendance or for temporary closures or snow days.

### **Concerns about Children’s Mental and Physical Health and Wellness in Remote Learning**

Medical experts agree that in-person learning is the best option for children of all ages from an overall health and learning perspective. In a report titled *COVID-19: Guidance for School Operation during the Pandemic* released by The Hospital For Sick Children (SickKids), the authors state that “full-time remote learning is insufficient to meet the needs of the majority of Ontario children and

youth, leads to increased screen time and is likely detrimental to overall health.”<sup>7</sup> They go on to say that the “daily in-person school model is best for the educational and developmental needs of children as it allows for consistency, stability and equity, regardless of the region in which children and youth live.”<sup>8</sup>

Making virtual learning for early learners permanent contradicts the Canadian Paediatric Society’s position that children’s screen time needs to be minimized.<sup>9</sup> In the United States, The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released a recent study on the association between the mode of instruction with child and parent experiences and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic for which “findings suggest that virtual instruction might present more risks than does in-person instruction related to child and parental mental and emotional health and some health-supporting behaviours.”<sup>10</sup>

Prolonged screen time has many documented side effects, including sleep disturbances, obesity, isolation and depression. The impact of increased screen time on mental health has also been documented in the recent SickKids research report, *Mostly Worse, Occasionally Better: Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on the Mental Health of Canadian Children and Adolescents*, which states: “One concerning finding for the study team was the significant proportion of otherwise healthy school-aged children who experienced deterioration in many mental health domains, including

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<sup>7</sup> The Hospital for Sick Children (2021). *COVID-19: Guidance for School Operation during the Pandemic*. Toronto. Retrieved from: [sickkids.ca/siteassets/news/news-archive/2021/covid19-guidance-for-school-operation-sickkids.pdf](https://sickkids.ca/siteassets/news/news-archive/2021/covid19-guidance-for-school-operation-sickkids.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Canadian Paediatric Society (2019). *Digital media: Promoting healthy screen use in school-aged children and adolescents*. Position Statement. Retrieved from: [cps.ca/en/documents/position/digital-media](https://cps.ca/en/documents/position/digital-media)

<sup>10</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021). *Association of Children’s Mode of School Instruction with Child and Parent Experiences and Well-Being During the COVID-19 Pandemic*. COVID Experiences Survey, United States, October 8–November 13, 2020. Retrieved from: [cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7011a1.htm](https://cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7011a1.htm)

depression, anxiety, irritability and attention span.”<sup>11</sup> Too much time in front of a screen can lead to lasting effects on vision, especially in children. Potential effects include eye fatigue, nearsightedness, and retinal damage, as evidenced in a recent study released by the Centre for Ocular Research and Education.<sup>12</sup>

The full-time synchronous remote learning option presents many risks and will contribute to greater isolation and mental health challenges for some students. In-person learning at school is the place for all students to feel connected and have a sense of safety with their peers and educators.

### **Ensuring the Physical, Social and Emotional Safety of Students**

Outside of the context of the ongoing pandemic, brick-and-mortar schools are a safe place for students, and for some students, it is their safest place. Educational staff’s ability to monitor at-risk children and offer timely, targeted interventions is significantly reduced in a remote school setting. Similarly, educators’ ability to identify and intervene with children experiencing maltreatment at home is more complex and may be impossible in some instances. The proposals to establish permanent online learning options for elementary students also make issues related to an educators’ Duty to Report, identifying neglect, addressing absenteeism and overall supervision even more precarious.

Additionally, there are significant legal implications and liability risks that the government is overlooking in this sudden shift. It would be irresponsible for the government to implement the

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<sup>11</sup> The Hospital for Sick Children (2021). *New research reveals impact of COVID-19 pandemic on child and youth mental health*. Toronto. Retrieved from: [sickkids.ca/en/news/archive/2021/impact-of-covid-19-pandemic-on-child-youth-mental-health/](https://sickkids.ca/en/news/archive/2021/impact-of-covid-19-pandemic-on-child-youth-mental-health/)

<sup>12</sup> *New study reveals an alarming increase in nearsightedness*. (2019, April 2). British Columbia. [bc.ctvnews.ca/new-study-reveals-an-alarming-increase-in-nearsightedness-1.4362628](https://bc.ctvnews.ca/new-study-reveals-an-alarming-increase-in-nearsightedness-1.4362628)

proposed changes when important statistics about the incidence of domestic violence and child abuse during pandemic have yet to be released.

ETFO members have an obligation to defend the educational rights of their students. They also have a responsibility to inform parents and guardians about the best education environment for learning success. As professional educators who understand elementary-age students’ needs, the permanent option of fully synchronous remote learning will not create an environment in the best interest of elementary students.

### **Privacy and Cyber Security Concerns of Remote Learning**

Privacy and cybersecurity have been serious concerns for students, families and educators throughout the pandemic. When engaging in synchronous learning, educators and other students are potentially able to have a window into a child’s home life that they would not otherwise have. This erosion of students’ privacy risks further marginalizing vulnerable students, including those living in poverty.

Ongoing assessment is challenging for students who prioritize their privacy needs and leave their cameras off during class time. Students’ images can be seen by other students’ parents, guardians and family members. These concerns have prompted Canadian privacy commissioners to take notice and express caution.

Further, remote learning requires all stakeholders to be confident that the software, devices and platforms provided by school boards and the Ministry are secure. The Peel District School Board continues to work through the aftermath of the cyberattack in January 2021. Other than cyberattacks, ETFO continues to hear of instances of what has come to be referred to as “Zoombombing.” These and other forms of intrusion into remote classroom spaces raise concerns

about privacy and cybersafety and students and staff being subjected to inappropriate material while online.

## **The Integrity of Initial Teacher Education Programs**

The Ministry’s plan proposes drastic changes to the legislative and regulatory framework that governs public education in Ontario. The Ministry has stated that it plans to make regulatory changes under the *Ontario College of Teachers Act* to require that initial teacher education programs cover instructional pedagogy in an online environment.

The current government continues to make poorly-conceived sweeping reforms. Making fundamental changes, that are not based on evidence, to pre-service programs will only create more challenges for Ontario’s public education system. The pre-service program, as it stands, already provides opportunities for candidates to explore and implement a variety of tools and integrate technology resources. This regulatory change would be premature and void of consultation with instructional pedagogy experts. Again, it must be reiterated that the government has not shown any pedagogical research that suggests that student learning will be enhanced in an online environment. This is the time for wise and thoughtful deliberation, not for hasty and rash decisions.

## **Broader Systemic Implications**

For many years prior to this government’s mandate, Ontario’s public education system was world-renowned for its innovation and evidence-based structures and frameworks, including the Kindergarten program. The changes that made our public education system world-renowned were based upon research and data supporting that any change was in the best interests of students. Changes also occurred only after extensive and transparent consultation with stakeholders.

The Ministry’s plan to establish a permanent remote learning school system is not supported by empirical evidence. Research on the mid- and long-term impact of full-time remote learning is only beginning to emerge, yet it already points to detrimental physical and emotional effects on children. The Ministry has not provided any academic research or analysis to support its underlying claim of the benefits of full-time synchronous remote learning in the elementary grades.

The lack of research or data to support the Ministry’s plan and the timing chosen for it call into question the true motivations in introducing such broad changes to Ontario’s public education system.

The Ministry’s proposed plan will also divert funding away from school boards to set up a parallel online education system. The impact of this siphoning away of public funding from our public school system will be disproportionately shouldered by vulnerable students, particularly those with special education needs and those from already marginalized communities.

While the current proposal to place the delivery of online education under the mandate of TVO and TFO only applies to the secondary panel, the impact of this withdrawal of funding from school boards will be felt by students and educators from Kindergarten to grade 12.

Small school boards, particularly those serving remote, rural and northern communities will face additional challenges, including possible school closures as more students are streamed towards a parallel online system.

The government’s expansion of the mandate for TVO and TFO regarding online education allows not only for TVO and TFO to hire their own staff for the creation and delivery of online courses, but also allows them to outsource content creation, infrastructure and delivery to for-profit companies.

These changes are a clear attempt to privatize online education in Ontario, and to redirect funding from Ontario’s public schools to for-profit providers.

## Conclusion

The elementary school years are the most critical time for children to have a nurturing and safe environment. The Ministry’s plan to make remote synchronous learning a permanent option for elementary students, expand online education for the secondary panel and outsource it to TVO and TFO raises significant concerns for ETFO and its members.

ETFO echoes the concerns raised by education stakeholders such as OPSBA, which stated pointedly in its March 25 statement on the government’s proposed plan for remote learning that the plan “is not in the best interest of students” and “prioritizes cost-cutting or revenue generation over student success and wellbeing.”<sup>13</sup>

ETFO’s position remains that brick-and-mortar schools are the best source of re-connection and provide our most vulnerable students with a sense of belonging. There is no substitute for the relationship-building power provided during in-person learning. The connections with peers and caring adults that the school offers are unparalleled by virtual interactions. In-person learning will help ensure that each student receives the support and attention they deserve and is the only way to address equity issues that currently exist within our schools. An in-person school experience provides:

- the experience, special attention, and expertise of specialized education workers and the rich programming that only in-person learning can provide;

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<sup>13</sup> OPSBA. (2021, March 25). OPSBA statement on the government’s proposed plan for remote learning [Media release]. Retrieved from: [opsba.org/SitePages/OPSBAstatement\\_remotelearningMarch21.aspx](https://opsba.org/SitePages/OPSBAstatement_remotelearningMarch21.aspx)

- programs that support student self-esteem and create a direct connection between children and families to their school;
- encouragement for parent involvement to ensure academic success;
- a social environment that is safe for emotional growth, physical development and a sense of well-being for children;
- a place that promotes and nurtures stable relationships between students and educators;
- a stimulating and co-operative environment that supports the development of intellectual and social skills;
- leadership opportunities that come with being in a school with peers; and
- connection to a student’s local community.

Despite reassurances by the Ministry that its plan to expand student access to remote learning would adhere to collective agreements, many outstanding grievances related to the implementation of the current emergency remote learning remain unresolved. ETFO would see a move to make either remote synchronous learning, or hybrid learning, a permanent fixture of elementary education as a fundamental change to the teaching and learning environment in Ontario’s public schools.

The Ministry’s plan needs extensive study and broad-based consultation with educators and all other affected stakeholders. In addition, before proceeding further, the issues raised by remote learning should also be brought to collective agreement negotiations in 2022. It appears that the Ministry has not yet carried out a review of local collective agreement language concerning emergency closures or inclement weather days, or other language that would be impacted by a move to make remote learning a permanent option.

Ontarians have a right to ask if the expansion of permanent online learning for elementary students’ is in their best interest; pedagogically, physically, emotionally and socially. Instead of using the



global pandemic to make sweeping changes to the public education system, the Ministry should be focused on investing in additional safety measures so that all students can resume in-person learning, which provides the best experience for learning, quality delivery, and is the most equitable model for all students.

The Ministry of Education should withdraw its proposals and engage in meaningful, good-faith consultations with stakeholders about how to best support Ontario’s public education system.

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