KEY FINDINGS

The Implications of Virtual Teaching and Learning in Ontario's Publicly Funded Schools, K-12

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This research focused on the systemic and long-term implications and consequences of virtual teaching and learning for educators and students in K-12 educational settings.

Five educator and two-family focus groups were held in August 2021. Based on themes arising from these groups, teacher and education worker, family and student surveys consisting of closed and open-ended questions were circulated online between November 2021 and March 2022 in both official languages. In total, 2247 educators, 847 families and 86 students (Grades 5 to 12) participated in the survey.

The findings strongly indicate that virtual models of teaching and learning do not provide the same opportunities as in-person teaching and learning to develop and nurture positive student-teacher relationships, support students' social-emotional needs and mental health, support the development and sustainment of positive peer relationships, or engage students in authentic and meaningful academic achievement. The negative impacts on participants' wellbeing, student academic engagement and success, and educational equity are clearly demonstrated. Moreover, these findings are aligned with those reported by the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) (2020; 2021) and the Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA) (2021).

1. The hybrid model of teaching and learning is fundamentally flawed and not sustainable.

It is impossible to provide equitable and quality education when attempting to engage simultaneously two student audiences, face-to-face and virtually. In the study:

- 93% of educators were extremely concerned/concerned about the impact of the hybrid model on students;
- 72% of parents reported their children's experience with hybrid learning was negative, causing disrupted/limited learning and learning gaps; negative effects on social skills and mental health, and reduced motivation and engagement;
- 81% of students in Grades 5 to 8 "didn't like it"; and
- 79% of Grades 9-12 students said it negatively impacted their learning with reduced motivation and opportunities for engagement (cannot see or hear) and a distracted environment.

The majority of educators (89%) and parents (83%) cited concern about the hybrid model's impact on relationships, given there was limited to no individual student-teacher interactions and peer interaction. Students lost communication/social skills and experienced frustrations and challenges in establishing relationships.

2. There was little or no alignment between the government's expectations and requirements for virtual models of teaching and the resources and supports made available to do so.

While a majority of participants indicated being comfortable with using information communication technologies and platforms, almost 70% of educators reported receiving none or limited/inadequate support from employers on their use.

Over 84% of educators reported no or very little alignment between the government/Ministry of Education's expectations and requirements regarding virtual models of teaching and the resources/supports made available to do so.

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3. Overall, virtual learning was a negative experience for a significant majority of educators, parents and students.

When asked about their overall experience with virtual teaching and learning:

- well over 70% of educators, parents and students in Grades 5 to 8 and 9 to 12 had a negative overall experience with virtual teaching and learning;
- 97% of Grades 5 to 8 students reported a preference for learning in-person in a physical classroom; and
- 89% of students in Grades 9 to 12 reported a preference for learning in-person in a physical classroom.

4. Overwhelming majorities of families, educators and students reported that virtual learning did not meet the needs of students.

Over 90% of educators and 80% of families were extremely concerned/concerned about meeting the needs of students in a virtual context. Sixty-five percent (65%) of students in Grades 5 to 8 said that it made learning harder for them, and an equal percentage of students in Grades 9 to 12 were concerned about their learning needs being met. Concerns were related to the following:

Practical issues of virtual learning:

- lack of student access to computers, microphones and stable internet connection;
- lack of access to effective learning environments (quiet space, no interruptions);
- inability to engage in hands-on learning (e.g., labs); and
- lack of student visibility (videos turned off, mics muted).

Challenges and concerns of educators:

- supporting student's mental health and wellbeing;
- supporting development of students' social-emotional skills, and self-regulation skills;
- meeting the needs of students with special needs and Individual Education Plans (IEPs), and English language learners (ELL); and
- providing one-on-one support to at-risk students.

Family concerns about their children:

- decreased attention and motivation;
- communicating needs for support and receiving support, particularly for IEPs, special needs, ELLs and engaging younger students;
- lack of social and emotional development and connection (relationships);
- mental health concerns;
- learning to collaborate, hands-on learning; and
- support for children with special needs.

5. Student readiness to learn, their active/interactive engagement and attention span significantly declined in virtual learning.

Motivation and readiness to learn:

- 91% percent of educators reported that students significantly declined (63%) or somewhat declined (28%);
- 85% of families reported that their children significantly declined (48%) or somewhat declined (37%);
- 80% of students in Grades 5 to 8 reported being less motivated in class; and
- 84% of students in Grades 9-12 reported that they significantly declined (59%) or somewhat declined (25%) in motivation and readiness to learn.

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Active and interactive engagement:
- 91% of educators reported that students significantly declined (63%) or somewhat declined (27%) in active/interactive engagement.

Attention span and ability to focus and concentrate:
- 91% of educators reported that students significantly declined (66%) or somewhat declined (25%);
- 77% of families reported that students significantly declined (41%) or somewhat declined (36%);
- 67% of students in Grades 5 to 8 reported that their attention span declined; and
- 88% of students in Grades 9 to 12 reported that their attention span and ability to focus and concentrate significantly declined (65%) or somewhat declined (23%).

6. Virtual learning had an adverse impact on the development of social and emotional skills of students.

Over 92% of educators reported that students' development of social-emotional skills, such as problem-solving and conflict resolution, declined in virtual learning. They reported:
- decline in socialization and emotion-regulation skills;
- increase in aggression and bullying;
- decline in collaboration and problem-solving skills;
- decline in empathy; and
- students not feeling comfortable to express their social and emotional needs in a virtual setting.

Over 76% of families were concerned regarding teachers' ability to respond to their children's social and emotional needs in a virtual setting, specifically their children's needs for:

- feeling engaged/motivated/willing to participate;
- the ability to access support and to feel supported;
- development of social skills;
- mental health concerns (stress, anxiety, depression, loneliness); and
- individualized attention and support.

7. Specific student populations experienced more difficulty than others in accessing the resources required to participate in virtual learning.

According to educators, those student populations experiencing the most difficulty in accessing resources to participate in virtual learning were:
- students living in poverty;
- students with special needs;
- students from single parent homes;
- English Language Learners; and
- newcomer students.

The majority of Grade 9 to 12 students with learning challenges or identified exceptionalities reported that their needs were not at all supported (43%) or only somewhat supported (25%).

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8. Family and student wellbeing suffered as a result of virtual learning.

Over 81% of families reported that their family's wellbeing declined as a result of virtual learning. They cited:
- the demanding need to multitask (distracted at work/interruptions);
- increased stress, anxiety, depression and/or fatigue;
- damaged family relationship/increased conflict at home; and
- managing challenging schedules and more time at home.

Over 83% of families reported their children's social-emotional and mental wellbeing declined in terms of:
- loneliness and isolation;
- increased sadness and depression;
- increased agitation/anger/mood swings;
- increased emotionality/emotion regulation difficulties; and
- increased anxiety and stress.

A vast majority of students also reported that their level of activity and movement declined as a result of virtual learning.

9. The demands of prolonged virtual teaching took a serious toll on educators' physical, social-emotional and mental health.

Almost 86% of educators reported a decline in their physical wellbeing, with new physical ailments or worsening of pre-existing ailments due to the nature of virtual teaching, including:
- deteriorating eyesight;
- headaches/migraines;
- muscle aches; and
- sleep disturbances.

The demands of virtual learning on educators' social-emotional and mental health was substantial:
- 50% reported that their anxiety levels increased;
- 45% reported their depression levels increased;
- Half reported concern regarding the availability of, or access to, the resources required to support their emotional and mental wellbeing; and
- 31% reported seeking mental health support, professional services or counseling.

Educators expressed concerns in relation to their sense of professional wellbeing. Specifically, their motivation to continue teaching, their sense of self-efficacy and their ability to do their work was negatively impacted in the context of virtual teaching.

10. The lack of privacy in online, virtual learning created an unsafe place for many students.

Over half of educators had concerns regarding students' privacy, as did parents and students themselves:
- a majority of students were not comfortable in sharing their feelings, thoughts, experiences and concerns safely and appropriately;
- most educators worried about the lack of resources required for responding to privacy-related issues that unexpectedly arise in a virtual environment; and
- almost half of educators were concerned about students experiencing or exhibiting feelings of shame or embarrassment due to a lack of privacy, specifically their socio-economic status, living conditions or behavioural challenges being visible to other families and students.