

Students to learn from home a little longer as cancellations extend

Ontario's publicly funded school closures have been extended from May 4 to May 31, at least, as students adapt to remote learning environments.

The unprecedented process of cancelling in-school classes because of COVID-19 has been a new and rapidly changing situation for the Simcoe County District School Board (SCDSB).

Following March Break, students moved to a distance-based learning model where their work is completed online or through paper packages.

"To say that this past month has been a whirlwind would be a complete understatement; many teams at the school and board level have been working extremely hard to set students up for success," said SCDSB Director of Education Steve Blake at a board meeting last Tuesday.

Currently, the school board is using Google Classroom and Brightspace as Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) and staff is working with students as well as their families to ensure they're confident using the new online learning models.

"While a great deal of focus continues to be on the use of technology, it's important to note that the foundation of learning continues to be the relationship between the teacher, the student, and the family," noted Chris Samis, SCDSB Superintendent of Programs and Special Education.

"Everyone understands this type of learning is very different and could never replicate the value of face to face learning."

Under the current distance-based learning guidelines, students from kindergarten to Grade Six are provided with five hours of learning per week, with a focus on mathematics and language. Those in Grades Seven and eight are being provided with 10 hours of instruction and Grades Nine to 12 are getting three hours instruction per subject each week.

These learning plan guidelines are not mandatory, and the SCDSB said it recognizes some families may be more challenged with online learning.

And while some may feel overwhelmed by the guidelines and recommended number of hours for learning each week, other families might welcome more learning opportunities, depending on their circumstances, Samis noted.

Fortunately, the board's staff is working with families to do what makes the most sense for students, he said.

"It's not about forcing children to be able to do work that they're finding difficult at home; it really is about engaging students and families where they're at," Samis explained. "It has to be in the best interest of students."

Some families could have parents working from home but others could be made up of frontline workers who endure 12 hour shifts and have less capacity to support their child's education, said Samis.

"It's not a one size fits all model because I think the situations that our families find themselves in are as unique as the situation that we're in overall," he stressed.

With regards to mental health, it is "absolutely expected" that students may be struggling as a result of the pandemic and supports do exist, Samis noted.

"The board continues to provide mental health support to students remotely," he said.

A number of mental health and well-being resources are also available for educators, students and families through the SCDSB's website.

When looking at special education, the board's continuity of learning plan indicates students with intellectual disabilities will continue to receive appropriate accommodations as outlined in their individual education plans.

Educational assistants, speech pathologists, and hearing resource teachers will be available in the VLE's students with special needs use to best support them.

SCDSB Superintendent of Education Dawn Stephens said the board has been working closely with teachers regarding assessment of students.

"Secondary schools provided Grade 12 students with mid-term marks to support the application process to universities and colleges," she noted.

Teachers are working with administrators and other staff to meet curriculum expectations for courses with more of a "hands-on dynamic," Stephens said.

"They are modelling learning with video and demonstration, and although not ideal, educators are adapting to ensure they continue to meet curriculum expectations in a variety of ways and ensure that students can earn their credit," she explained.

Since school closures were extended past March Break, SCDSB teachers worked to determine the needs of its roughly 50,000 students.

For those with an internet connection but no laptop or device, over 4,000 pieces of technology were distributed.

As well, more than 1,300 paper packages were issued to students with limited or non-existent internet access and their teachers are following up with them by phone.

In addition to families with low internet connectivity, others may have multiple children in the same home who struggle with the online learning environment and have a better experience with the paper packages.

"One of the things we've seen as we've surveyed families is they all need different supports? so some may start out with technology and then determine that it may not make the greatest sense for them," explained Samis.

Stephens said the board has been able to meet the needs of all students through their various methods of distance learning.

For the next phase of paper package rollouts bus operators under the Simcoe County Transportation Consortium will pick up and deliver students completed work, technology needs, or any other items the board deems necessary.

Any parents who have questions about accessing technology for distanced learning should direct them towards their school's principal, Stephens said.

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