

Rural students struggle with distanced learning, poor internet

Written By JESSICA LAURENZA

The Ministry of Education announced that as of January 4, all elementary and secondary students will be temporarily shifting to virtual, remote learning.

While the switch isn't an issue for students living in urban areas, its potentially jeopardizing the quality of education received in households with poor internet connections.

Abbey Spencer, a grade 11 student at Orangeville District Secondary School (ODSS) says she's been having technical and educational issues with online learning. Living in Mono, she doesn't have access to high-speed internet, so her mom reached out to the school to obtain textbooks and worksheets in case she can't login to live learning with the rest of her class.

However, asynchronous learning hasn't been working to Spencer's advantage.

"I feel like they move so quick. I feel like I haven't learned a thing. I'm getting assignments, I just do them myself and hand them in," she explains.

Sometimes her Wi-Fi cuts out and she has to log off because she can't hear anything.

"It's sad," she says. "Especially for kids with IEPs (individualized education plan) or those who need extra help. I truly think I'm missing out on the whole year."

Heather Loney, Communications and Community Engagement Officer for Upper Grand District School Board, told the Citizen that the schools and the board are ensuring all families have equal access to educational resources, including a strong internet connection.

When COVID-19 first hit last spring, the Board provided students and families with access to Chromebooks, tech and internet support, and printed packages for asynchronous learning options for students who have difficulty learning in real time.

Schools had previously surveyed families to understand where access to internet is cumbersome and implemented board funding to offset any costs for data plan increases or phone hotspots in areas with weak internet connection.

"Even areas with good internet coverage may be struggling with everyone drawing on the same resources within the home," Loney explains.

She encourages any families struggling with internet connection to reach out directly to their school principal to access additional services.

Joanna Presley lives just outside of Orangeville and has three boys, in Grade 7, Grade 9 and Grade 12. Before online schooling, her internet was slow. Now with virtual learning, "we have four people (including myself) logged on at the same time and it is extremely slow."

If the Wi-Fi cuts out, the students must email their teacher after the video call for clarification, says Presley.

In terms of additional support for students, she states that it is dependent on the teacher.

She finds that elementary school teachers are much better with email communication and updates whereas her two sons at ODSS are responsible for completing the work and relaying information to parents.

One of her sons uses her work laptop to complete his online school, which impedes upon her ability to get her own agenda completed.

Online learning has been a tough adaptation for families juggling conflicting work schedules and having their kids at home.

Loney notes that "mental health and wellbeing for staff, students and families is the primary focus for us."

The school board has created resources such as webinars, virtual counselling and support, to help students and families deal with this challenging time.

Additionally, teachers are working towards innovative and creative ways to keep students engaged. Resources are shared on internal staff websites and newsletters to help teachers who are new to online platforms.

"We know it's been a really tough year. Everyone is learning how to do things differently, to change and to shift. Through all of this, we're proud of our students, staff and families."

Loney encourages families to reach out directly to their school if they require additional support or resources.