

Students learning from home as COVID-19 crisis continues

Written By ALYSSA PARKHILL

As of April 6, schools began 'distance learning' for students to continue learning within the walls of their own homes.

Distance learning, as defined by the Peel District School Board, can be done at any time of the day, and allows students to have a voice and choice throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Work doesn't always require online access and can be done with minimal adult support. The school board encourages students to read, communicate and engage in learning while remaining physically active while at home.

Secondary students in need of a device were given on April 6 to April 13. Elementary students who did not an accessible device in their home were to receive one from April 13 to April 20.

The provincial government recently announced to remain closed until May 4 and may change as the date creeps closer.

'The decision to extend school closures was not made lightly. We know from the medical experts that the next two weeks will be critical in the fight against COVID-19 and that's why we're taking further action to keep our kids safe and healthy by having them stay home,' said Premier Doug Ford in a recent news release. 'At the same time, we cannot put the school year in jeopardy. That's why we're providing additional tools for at-home learning and ensuring students from kindergarten to Grade 12 to post-secondary education can finish their academic year and get the credits they need to graduate.'

Some challenges that teachers have endured while teaching virtually, is getting or keeping in contact with students. Orangeville resident Anthony Carnovale currently teaches Grade 11 and 12 English at Notre Dame Secondary School in Brampton. He discussed some of the challenges he has faced since starting up online programming last week.

'Getting in contact with the kids has been tough, access of technology for a lot of these kids has been tough,' he said. 'But you need a little bit of time to find your groove, and I'm slowly getting there. By next week, I hope things are in full swing.'

Teachers at Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board (DPCDSB) have had their fair share of struggles with learning new teaching techniques, and they are adjusting to the new education delivery model, explained Bruce E. Campbell, General Manager of Communications and Community Relations. We reached out to teachers and even a principal within the public and catholic school boards, but, largely, we were referred to each board's respective head office for comment.

'Many were already engaged in posting work online and were familiar with platforms such as Google Classrooms. There are also teachers who required training and familiarization with conversion to an online platform,' Campbell said. 'We have been providing training opportunities, as has the Ministry of Education, to assist as we continue engaging our students in distance learning.'

Just recently, DPCDSB, delivered over 7,000 learning devices to students who were in need of such technology to continue their education. A total of 18,000 learning devices have been delivered to students' homes, with 780 still on their way.

Lesson plans are different from day-to-day, with flexibility in deadlines and expectations. The school boards are strongly encouraging students to focus wholly on learning, but teachers acknowledge they can't expect students to fill their entire day with being on their device, and same goes for the teachers.

'I post two or three modules a week for the kids to complete on their own time. I give them some deadlines that they can work with, but we have to be flexible with deadlines. Throughout the day, you're constantly checking your email or whatever platform you're on to see if students have reached out to you to address any questions,' explained Carnovale. 'I take a two-hour chunk in the afternoon to do some lesson planning and some marketing and communicating with the kids. And that's basically it.'

He added, "It's not sitting in front of the computer for the whole day but making yourself available in different ways as much as you possibly can."

Students are experiencing anxiety and stress levels as the pandemic continues, and schools remain closed. Carnovale explains that it's easy to sense their anxiety and discomfort, especially for those whose parents are frontline workers and may be isolating away from them.

"My impression is we're creatures of habit and these habits have been upturned, and you don't know if these kids have the bandaging skills. I'm having problems keeping track of emails, texts and tweets. So, I can imagine with a kid sitting at their home base, between four or five different teachers, keeping track and managing all of those things (can be difficult)," he said.

Teachers are working hard to do their job, teach and keep students on the right track without getting lost on the way, but are hopeful and know everyone will make it to the other side. Several matters are to be considered when thinking about the sensitivity of the youths' mind, what they're going through and encouraging them to continue their education.

"A lot of parents have lost good jobs. Mental health is an issue. There's a lot of more important things, that would be a priority in a home, and you accommodate your curriculum and your expectations," said Carnovale. "These are unique times. We can't worry about things like attendance and deadlines. We can't have the same expectations as in the classroom and learning as in the classroom. It's just impossible to do. It's a learning curve for all of us culturally."