



**DURHAM CATHOLIC
DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD**
Learning and Living in Faith

Memorandum

To: Board of Trustees
From: Tracy Barill, Director of Education
Date: April 26, 2021
Subject: **Update on Virtual Learning for September 2021**

Recommendation

Moved by _____, seconded by _____

“THAT the Durham Catholic District School Board receive and file as information, the Update on Virtual Learning for September 2021 report dated April 26, 2021.”

Rationale

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, schools boards across the province were required to provide a virtual learning option in 2020-2021 for all elementary and secondary students. Multiple meetings took place from June through August with Senior Administrative Teams and the Ministry of Education to determine the best models with which to proceed.

In Durham Catholic, a decision was made to launch independent Virtual Learning Schools for Elementary and Secondary. Through the efforts of Human Resources Department and the assigned School Administrators, every attempt was made to accommodate families who were opting for Virtual Learning in the fall. Given the uncertainty, families had a difficult time make decisions and many altered their placement requests well into October.

The Ministry further required that families be given the option to transition at various points during the year. This was operationally extremely challenging as the Board was still required to respect class size caps (as set out by Ministry regulation and Collective Agreement requirements). Additionally, the Board committed to maintain lower class sizes in bricks and mortar schools to better facilitate physical distancing. Moving into the Christmas Break a significant wait list for virtual learning had accumulated.

At that time, the Board received additional funding to support “red zone” requirements. This influx of funds allowed for the hiring of a sufficient number of Elementary Virtual

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Learning teachers, to accommodate the waitlist without having to restructure classes in schools across the system. At that time, a decision was made to introduce a “high flex” or “hybrid” model for secondary students on the waitlist for virtual learning. Through this model, students were given access to their scheduled classes through virtual means and did not have to transfer from their current school or change their schedule for the year. This model does however require classroom teachers who have at home learner in their class to make their classes available virtually for those students while still teaching the students physically present in the room.

As of April 19, 2021, the Ministry of Education has yet to provide any information regarding expectations for learning models for the 2021-2022 school year. Given staffing timelines and requirements, it was incumbent on staff to make decisions in absence of Ministry direction on how to proceed with regards to future virtual learning options.

Virtual Learning – Elementary English Program

Notwithstanding future direction from the Ministry of Education, Senior Administration has made the decision to proceed with a Virtual Learning Elementary School for the 2021-2022 school year. This decision was possible because staffing in Elementary schools is essentially allocated by enrolment. This gives the Board the ability to expand or decline in accordance with the number of students (assuming a minimum viability of approximately 15 student/grade) without incurring unfunded staffing costs.

On Monday, April 6, 2021, a letter was sent to all families informing them of the Virtual Learning Elementary School option for the 2021-2022 school year and requesting that those who wish to register for the school complete and submit an electronic “pre-registration” form by April 21, 2021. As of April 19, 2021, pre-registrations have been received for 772 students, which makes the Virtual Learning Elementary School viable for the coming school year.

French Immersion

At this time, the Board is not in a position to offer a virtual learning opportunity in 2021-2022 for students enrolled in a French Immersion program.

There are a variety of factors at play that contribute to this decision.

1. To date, the Ministry of Education has not mandated that Boards provide a virtual learning option of any kind for the 2021-2022 school year. As such, no funding can be expected beyond the regular funds generated by student enrolment.
2. Notwithstanding the current increase in Covid-19 transmissions, with the vaccination rollout, it is expected that by September, while some layers of protection may continue to be required, schools will be able to provide a more normal experience for students. Consequently, it is expected that most students

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will be returning to in-person learning in their home schools. Current registrations reflect a 75% decline in Elementary English enrolment for virtual learning.

3. Senior Administration has decided to operate a Virtual Learning Elementary School as a pilot program option for the 2021-2022 school year. This differs from our current situation where virtual learning was made available as a health and safety measure for those who had concerns about Covid-19 transmission in schools. Those who choose this as a learning option would no longer be connected to a “home school” and in-year movement between the Virtual Learning School and bricks and mortar schools would be discouraged for all but exceptional reasons.
4. Recruiting and retaining qualified French Teachers has been an ongoing challenge across the province and here in Durham Catholic. Staffing for DCDSB French programs (core and immersion) is so tight that when staff absences occur, they frequently need to be filled with non-French speaking teachers. This is detrimental to programming.
5. Since issuing the invitation for pre-registration, a significant number of communications/questions (approximately 70) have been received from families seeking a virtual learning French Immersion offering in the 2021-2022 school year. Unfortunately, even if all the families who reached out did in fact enroll their children, the numbers would still not meet the threshold to be able to sustain a viable virtual program.

Virtual Learning – Secondary

Senior Administration continues to consider Virtual Learning Options for Secondary students in the 2021-2022 school year. Staffing considerations in Secondary are more complex than Elementary in that to run a Secondary Virtual School that provides a full course selection for students would require a fairly significant enrolment.

To better inform the decision-making process, communication was sent to all families who had students in grades 8-12 that may be attending our Secondary schools in the fall. Those interested in a virtual learning option were asked to complete a survey.

As of April 19, 2021, a total of 317 families with Secondary students indicated that they would enrol in virtual learning for the 2021-2022 school year if it were an option.

Grade	Total
9	59
10	93
11	95
12	103

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# Students per Family	Total
1	287
2	27
3	3

This data will be considered as staff contemplate Secondary program options and await further direction from the Ministry of Education regarding requirements for virtual learning for September 2021.