



## **Perceptions of Online Learning in Ontario during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

**Results of a Province-wide Survey of Parents and  
Community Members (November 2021)**



## Background

The Ontario Public School Boards' Association's (OPSBA) [Transitioning from the COVID-19 School Experience](#) Discussion Paper reflected the initial thinking of Association membership from first-hand accounts of remote learning during the pandemic. This process of reflection revealed two compelling realities: that a worrisome number of students have been unable to profit from remote forms of learning; and that several innovative practices in pedagogy and leadership have emerged that should be preserved and implemented on a broader scale post-pandemic.

This is why OPSBA launched an online survey to help inform public education advocacy to the provincial government throughout the 2021-22 school year and beyond. Community members were asked to share some of their thoughts about learning online during the COVID-19 pandemic and the post-pandemic school and learning environment.

There were eight questions in the survey, which was completely anonymous and voluntary. To allow more meaningful analysis of the results, some of the survey questions were mandatory.

A [student survey \(May 2021\)](#) gathered student perceptions of remote learning and serves as a comparison to the data gathered through this online parent/community member survey.

## Parent and Community Survey

### Scope, Distribution and Response Rates

An online survey was developed for parents and community members across Ontario to gather their perceptions of online learning<sup>1</sup> during the pandemic. The survey was open August 10 to November 30, 2021. This timeframe captured the September return-to-school period following four months where schools were closed due to pandemic restrictions and summer vacation. However, it is reasonable to assume that participants' reflections are also based on experiences spanning the preceding 18 to 21 months where students were intermittently required to participate in online learning.

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<sup>1</sup> Between the survey launch and publication of this report, the Ministry of Education adopted the term "online learning" to reflect what was previously known as "e-learning". For the purposes of this report, the term "online learning" refers exclusively to the remote learning format used by Ontario students resulting from COVID-19 public health restrictions.

The survey link was distributed to parents and various community stakeholder groups by OPSBA and many of its member boards via social media and other forms of digital communications. Participants were asked to identify their role (e.g., parent, caregiver, community member, education worker) and their geographic location in the province. Survey items explored participants' support for online learning for students at various ages, their perceptions of the online learning experience for students they knew, and their priorities for students during the transition back to school in September. Participants were also asked what might have made online learning better for students based on their recent, direct experience. Most survey items allowed participants to provide follow-up comments to their responses; the final item invited participants to share any other perceptions of online learning not previously captured in the survey.

Response rates by geographic region of the province did not always correspond to the overall population in respective regions. In northwest and northeast Ontario, survey response rates approximated the population; in eastern, western, and central eastern regions of the province, the response rate was about half what would have been expected, whereas in the central western region, the response rate was approximately 50% higher than expected. However, given the overall number of surveys submitted and the high proportion of responses coming from one survey population (parents), the response rate by region may not be an important factor.

Given the potentially wide range of participants' experiences supporting students' online learning during the pandemic, all 8,157 surveys, both complete and partially complete, were included in the analysis. More than 90% of respondents identified as parents. The next greatest number of responses came from school board employees (4.3%), but identity categories were not mutually exclusive. It is fair to say that the survey responses overwhelmingly represent the voice of parents and as such, *parents* will be used hereafter in this report to refer to survey participants. Additionally, 95% of respondents indicated that someone in their immediate household experienced online learning during the pandemic, which increases the validity of responses.

As is usually the case in exploratory surveys, it is important to consider both the qualitative and quantitative results together to best understand the perspectives of parents about their experiences with students' online learning during the pandemic.

### **Comfort Level with the September return to in-person learning**

Given the timeframe of the survey, parents' comfort level with the return to in-person learning reflects the period leading up to the September return to school when return-to-school plans were under development, as well as the early part of the school year when

students were attending school in person. More than half of the responses reflect the period after students returned to school. Overall, 82% of parents were Comfortable or Somewhat Comfortable with the prospect of students and staff returning to in-school learning. Roughly 9% of parents indicated Uncomfortable and were asked for further details explaining their rating. Some sample explanations follow:

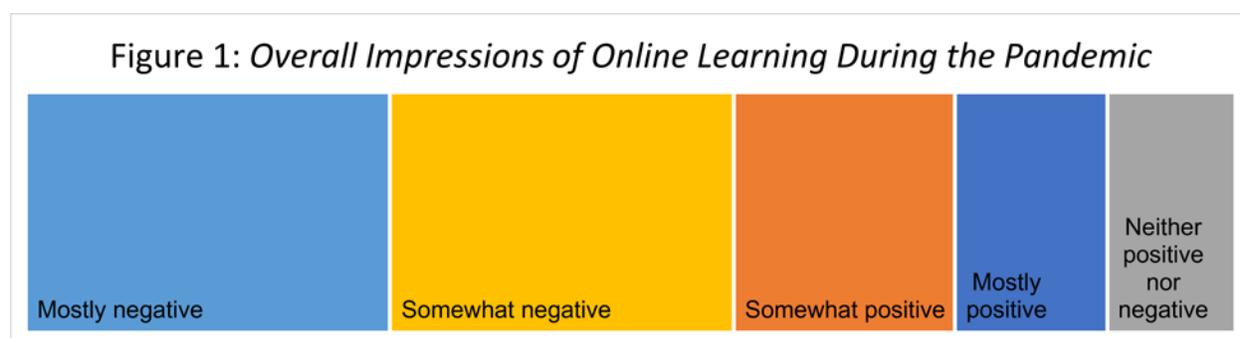
- *My children are vaccinated which helps calm me but the fact of not knowing who else is vaccinated around them is hard to get over. Especially those that work closely with (my kids). The sheer amount of students in one place sharing air in old buildings added to large class sizes makes it more worrisome.*
- *Knowing that many families were not vaccinated and were not following public health guidelines, made me a little nervous for both my vaccinated and unvaccinated child (under 12).*
- *Covid was and is still circulating and is airborne. Delta affects kids more and they started year with no vaxxes. Kids eat lunch together unmasked.*
- *Masking is a must, but all eligible students getting mandatory Covid vaccinations would ease discomfort.*
- *Many people seem to dismiss the covid measures and ignore the protocols. There is still a lot of uncertainty so the online system is required. My son is also learning much better and having a much better learning experience in the online system.*
- *Measures are inconsistent. Students cannot have recess with students from other classes but can have extracurricular with students from other classes.*



## Support for Online Learning During the Pandemic

The survey also explored perceptions of overall support for online learning during the pandemic, a learning platform usually available only to secondary students in the past, but necessary for all K-12 students during the pandemic. Parents reported their overall impressions of the online learning experience, then rated their support of online learning for groups of students by grade division.

Figure 1<sup>2</sup> shows that parents perceived online learning as a largely negative experience for their children (59% Negative or Somewhat Negative) while only 31% perceived the experience positively.



In order to better understand these ratings, parents were invited to provide comments when reporting the online experience to be either mostly positive or mostly negative. Below are sample comments of both:

### Online Learning was Mostly Negative

*While my children did not struggle academically, online learning cannot provide the social and developmental learning that takes place in a school environment. While the academic aspect is important, the social aspects are significantly (greater) and will have a much greater impact on a student's future.*

*Kids had a difficult time staying focused. Kids had limited social connectivity with other children. Limited hands on learning.*

### Online Learning was Mostly Positive

*My daughter has been doing the online education since the start of this pandemic and has shown consistency in learning and great progress, even more than she was in in-person school! This can be because we, as parents, are able to engage more with her learning in the online system. It also provides us with an immense sense of security at this time and we sincerely hope this continues to be an option.*

*Both of our children had good experiences because there was support at home. I supported students online who did not have the same support. There*

<sup>2</sup> Figures 1 and 2 in this report are weighted averages, meant to take into account the varying degrees of importance of the numbers in the data set. As such, any numeric values attributed to the responses do not add to 100.

were a lot of students who found it challenging and struggled.

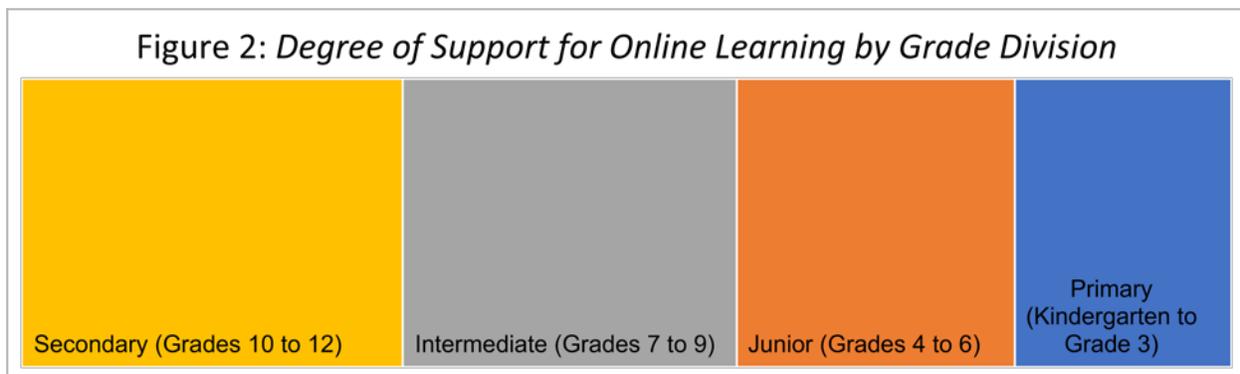
*Despite excellent effort and teaching practice of the educators the day was too long to be engaging in synchronous online learning. It was too much screen time. A model of shorter meetings, small group meetings and then large time periods of work and play time would be far more appropriate.*

*We were fortunate to have the requirements to be fairly successful: computers with reliable internet connections and a parent home to assist if necessary. Also, my kids were grades 5 and 8, and able to build skills in responsibility and focus. As a parent I felt very aware of the skills and abilities (as well as deficits of these) of my kids in a way I couldn't have known while they are in school.*

*It was difficult to engage with classmates and teachers, skills were lost and my child missed the social part of going to school in-person.*

*Children really need the in-person learning as their social development is as important as their intellectual development. For families who had to continue to go to work or even work from home trying to work and monitor their children's schooling was a huge challenge. Additionally technology and internet connections were difficult for families with multiple children or in rural areas.*

Figure 2 shows the breakdown of support for online learning by grade division.

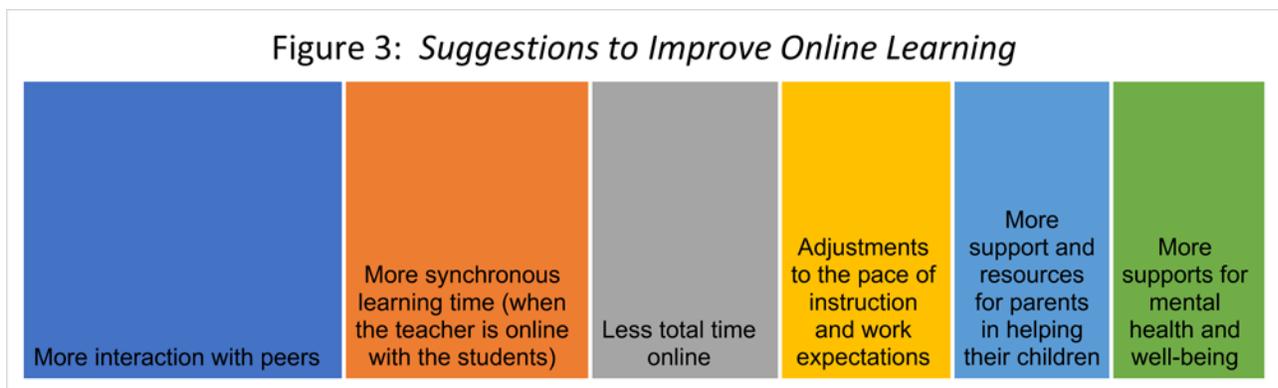


The support for online learning during the pandemic diminishes markedly from older to younger students with support for primary students almost half that expressed for secondary students (43% vs. 22%). This finding contrasts with results from OPSBA's earlier student survey ([Student Perceptions of Online Learning in Ontario during COVID-19 Results of a Province-wide Student Survey](#)) conducted during the most recent province-wide COVID-19 school closure (April to June 2021) where secondary students expressed stronger dissatisfaction with the online learning

experience than did junior-grade students. This difference may be explained by the many factors that affect parents when students are participating in online learning at home (e.g., childcare, supervision, ability to support students while working) compared to the reasons underpinning students' reported dissatisfaction with the online learning experience (e.g., lack of motivation, peer interaction, timely teacher support, among others).

## Online Learning During the Pandemic and Transitioning Back to School

Because parents and other community members play a unique and important role in supporting students during the pandemic, the survey invited participants to suggest improvements to the online learning experience. Figure 3 indicates the most frequent suggestions offered:



Again, survey participants were invited to elaborate on their ratings. Below are some sample comments:

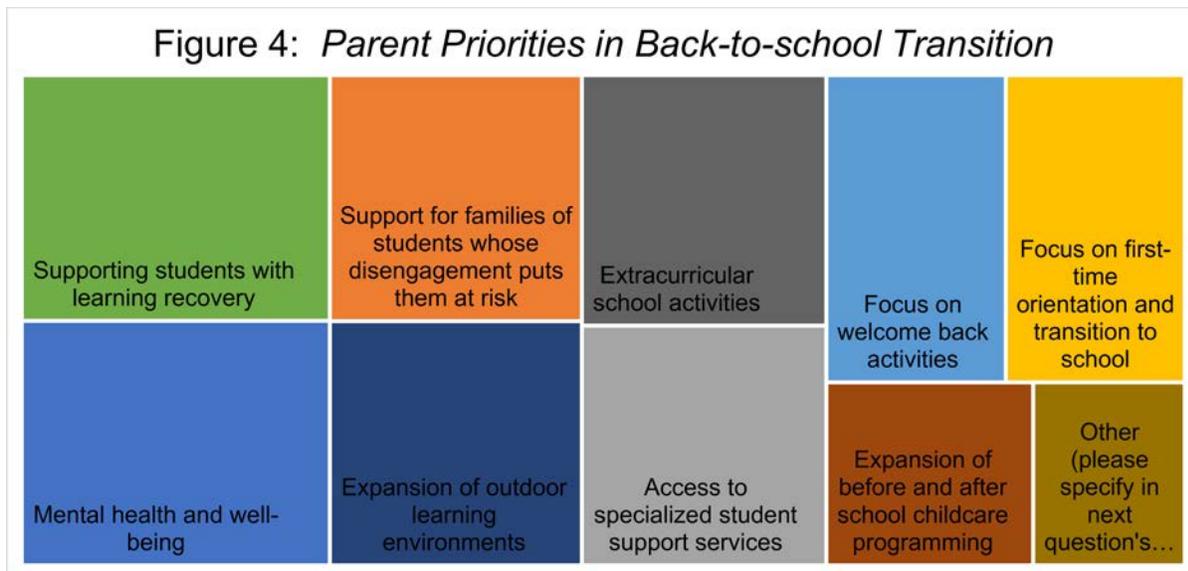
- *In the midst of a pandemic better internet, more interaction with peers and more supports for resources for parents would have been beneficial.*
- *Even optimizing online learning with better connections, more “teacher time” and more peer interactions would not be enough to make it dramatically better than in person.*
- *More small group synchronous time with differentiation for learners, more active participation rather than passive/observational.*
- *Keep the length of a school period the same as it was in the brick & mortar world (75 minutes), do a proper balance of synchronous and asynchronous learning time.*
- *Provide asynchronous activities that do not require parenting supervision, such as using the oven and a hot glue gun, or requiring children to leave the home. My children could not partake in any of these activities as we were both working full time.*
- *Working parents do not have capacity to satisfy work requirements and help young children at the same time. Technical issues and having to support learning while working causes a lot of stress for the parent and frustration for student when they are trying to keep up with class requirements.*
- *As a mental health professional, I feel that throwing mental health services as a token to this group is not able to make up for the damage done to kids mental health by keeping schools*

closed. Online - It is not a long-term solution. A few weeks at a time maybe but months long was too long. Still very angry that science table advice was not followed. Life long impact for this generation of Ontario children.



Photo Credit: Khalid Abdi, Ottawa-Carleton DSB

Specific to the transition back to in-person learning, parents indicated their priorities in re-engaging students and restoring their sense of belonging in school communities – see Figure 4.



Some corresponding sample comments from parents include:

- *Extra supports need to be put in place for students who have simply disengaged for the past two years and forgotten how to “do school.”*
- *Students need the social interaction with not only their peers but teachers and other staff; this is all part of their development. They also need sports, clubs, extracurricular and field trips that provide balance with the learning, particularly in the higher grades. Incorporating outdoor learning is always a good idea, being outside is good for everyone. Our children are all affected by this experience and we all need to be watching for the signs and ways to support them through it.*
- *Additional support staff available to assist students with transition and support in small groups to continue making academic and social skills gains I hope that online school continues to be an option as the virtual school is the largest school in our school board. There is clearly a need for it.*
- *As in-person learning may need to switch to virtual learning, I think teachers should focus on helping the students feel connected to them and to one another (i.e., fostering a sense of community, not only to better manage challenges that may arise down the road, but also to help the students resume a sense of connection to those around them, which will support their mental health).*
- *In person learning is more than course content. It is relationships and social learning. These are things that cannot be effective online. In person makes everyone more accountable and more engaged.*
- *All of these are important, but MOST important is making classrooms comfortable, welcoming places for all students to be. Classrooms need a major reboot in terms of focus and function...the curriculum needs to be adjusted to reflect 21st learning priorities of information analysis and problem solving...Finally, students should be encouraged and funded to remain in high school for a 5th year for credit recovery or social and learning skills recovery as necessary.*
- *Having the teacher teach the lesson definitely works better than having students read lessons online or watch videos. The synchronous teaching online was much better than the online courses that were established before COVID. My student had taken one of those courses and dropped it because the learning format was more like a correspondence course with minimal teacher assistance.*
- *The government must fund all boards properly to ensure virtual classrooms can exist and students in every board have similar access to either an in-class teacher or a virtual one, not a teacher dividing their attention between both.*
- *There needs to be adequate ways for teachers to test kids to ensure they are learning the material. Without this, kids may fall behind and impact their learning in future (online) courses.*

## Summary

Some links emerge between parents' suggestions to improve online learning and the priorities identified in the transition back to school, for example, a priority on learning recovery, concerns over pace of instruction and workload, and resources for parents

when supporting students with online learning. Similarly, a priority on mental health and well-being coincides with parent concerns about the amount of time spent online, and the lack of opportunity for genuine peer interaction. Not surprisingly, these concerns, and suggestions, mirror many of the findings from OPSBA's recent provincial [survey of students](#), reinforcing the overall impact of the school experience during the COVID-19 pandemic on both students and their families.

