

Wednesday, May 27, 2020

Subject: Additional Guidance on Special Education and Mental Health

Memorandum To: Chairs of District School Boards
Directors of Education
School Authorities

From: Stephen Lecce
Minister of Education

Nancy Naylor
Deputy Minister

We are writing to follow up on our memo of Tuesday, April 21, 2020, regarding continuity of learning for students with special education needs. We have heard many stories of educators, education workers and administrators working hard to connect with students, deliver needed devices, equipment and learning materials to their homes, and find new ways to continue supporting their needs. We sincerely thank you for all your efforts in this regard.

With these important foundations in place, it is imperative that every effort continue to be made to ensure that all students with special education needs receive the supports they need to fully engage with their learning and promote their continued progress.

We are writing to reinforce the ministry's expectations and share specific strategies and approaches to aid in your implementation of the continuity of learning for students with special education needs. These approaches have been informed by our conversations with you, our labour partners, parents, special education stakeholders and the Minister's Advisory Council on Special Education.

Leveraging Staff Supports and Encouraging Cross Professional Collaboration

The relationship with educators and education workers is critical for the success of students with special education needs. It is our expectation that school boards fully leverage the capacity of education workers and work in partnership with local labour partners to provide staff with a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities in supporting continuity of learning. This means that school leadership, teachers and education workers work in collaboration to develop coordinated plans to connect regularly with individual students and ensure that they are supported to meaningfully engage with their learning materials.

Where feasible, video contact is encouraged, with due consideration to privacy and in alignment with guidance from professional regulatory bodies where applicable. Many families have shared that this virtual face-to-face connection is meaningful to their children and supports their engagement, well-being and sense of routine. We have also

heard of the positive impact of phone contact where video contact is not possible. Boards must ensure that the platforms they use for connecting with students and families are fully accessible for persons with disabilities.

Identification, Placement and Review Committees (IPRCs) and Individual Education Plans (IEPs)

As indicated in our previous memo, IPRCs should continue to conduct annual reviews. Any initial IPRC decisions that were in progress at the start of the school closure period should also continue. Going forward, as set out in Ontario Regulation 181/98, initial IPRCs may be requested by parents and/or initiated by boards following the appropriate processes.

We know that IEPs and specialized equipment are also key to supporting success for students with special education needs. For some students, online learning is challenging, and work should be provided in alternate formats and/or with guidance on how the work should be staged and delivered to the student, to help parents and students prioritize and make connections in their learning. As noted above, educators and education workers should continue to connect individually with families to listen, ask about the student's needs and strengths and work together to respond as circumstances shift. Flexibility and a differentiated approach are key.

Effective Practices

We have been heartened and inspired by the work staff have been doing to support students with special education needs across our province. Our discussions have identified many effective practices that boards are encouraged to consider, in consultation with your Special Education Advisory Committees:

- Fostering multi-professional collaboration, including:
 - Education workers joining classroom teachers in any online class meetings and staff meetings to discuss classroom planning and social/emotional learning skills and strategies.
 - Creating shared virtual workspaces for teachers and education workers to share strategies and information on supporting students with specific exceptionalities.
 - Holding online workshop webinars and virtual office hours to support staff with technology needs.
 - Providing teachers and education workers with detailed plans outlining roles and responsibilities during this period.
 - Collaborating across full grade-level teams in addition to class- and student-specific teams to share best practices and plan jointly.
 - Providing additional professional development for all staff that work with students on remote learning, as well as exceptionality-specific supports.

- Facilitating teleconference workshops for staff and families who have connectivity barriers.
- Including principals and vice-principals in the classroom environment.
- Facilitating regular contact with students by:
 - Checking in with families on a regular basis to provide an opportunity to listen and answer questions.
 - Developing clear communication plans with families that include roles for teachers and education workers and a plan for ongoing follow-up communication.
 - Holding live video chats between Educational Assistants (EAs) and students, based on protocols developed with local labour partners.
 - Sending pre-recorded video messages that can be played or replayed when convenient for the student.
 - Having school-based mental health staff providing remote supports to students, including the use of virtual telehealth practices by regulated mental health professionals.
 - Providing ongoing consultation to support promotion of positive mental health, coping strategies when learning at home, maintaining healthy routines and general wellness for students and families.
 - Using platforms that are fully accessible to persons with disabilities to engage.
- Providing exceptionality-specific supports through, for example:
 - Conducting follow-up consultation with families and staff for those students with assessed language delays to share programming supports (e.g., modelling, prompting, following directions around the house, building concept knowledge at home, expanding vocabulary/category knowledge at home, phonological awareness games).
 - Offering an online social skills development program for students with communication disabilities and/or challenges.
 - Using guided groups as an instructional strategy in some online classrooms.
 - Creating parent-focused websites, podcasts, videos, tip sheets and other resources that address specific needs (e.g., assistive technology, supporting students with autism spectrum disorders).
 - Offering consultation and support to students, families and staff on accessing augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) systems to support continued usage and to problem-solve barriers.

Boards are encouraged to continue sharing their effective practices with each other and the ministry.

Resources and Tools

Universal Design for Learning is important to the design of learning programs in both school and online environments. Adaptive software that meets the needs of all students is part of universal design. We are aware that Greenfield Learning Inc. is offering unlimited free licenses to school boards that already have a contract for Lexia. School boards that do not currently have a contract with Greenfield Learning for access to Lexia may also access the free trial through July 31, 2020. As part of the free trial, Greenfield Learning provides both teacher and administrator training sessions that include specific support for use during distance learning. They are also offering discounted licenses for purchase. Boards interested in taking advantage of any of these offers should contact the company directly. School boards are expected to make any purchases in accordance with applicable procurement rules. Please note that Lexia is available in English only.

To support access to virtual care for students working with school board-employed regulated health professionals, the ministry has partnered with Ontario Health (OTN) to provide school boards with a free trial of OTN's video conferencing platform to support video visits with students, until October 31, 2020. The platform is used by hospitals and other regulated health professionals in the province. Ontario Health advises that its platform complies with the *Personal Health Information Protection Act, 2004*. Ontario Health will provide online learning and support to registered users, who will be onboarded in groups. School Mental Health Ontario will provide learning to school board employed regulated mental health professionals to support the use of virtual care for student mental health.

Should your school board wish to participate in this free trial, please express your interest by sending an e-mail to the ministry at SpecialEducation@ontario.ca by June 5, 2020. If you have any questions, please contact Claudine Munroe at Claudine.Munroe@ontario.ca. For information about OTN, please access their website at <https://otn.ca/>.

The ministry is committed to ongoing communication with boards regarding issues that may arise over the coming weeks and will be organizing follow-up conversations with superintendents of special education. Should you require any additional information or have any questions please contact Jeff Butler at jeff.butler@ontario.ca.

We look forward to our continued collaboration to support students with special education needs.

Again, thank you for your cooperation and willingness to work together to support our students.

Sincerely,

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Stephen Lecce
Minister of Education

Nancy Naylor
Deputy Minister

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