

# Equity a challenge when teaching in a COVID-19 world

*Catherine Whitnall*

It's always a challenge to keep the attention of a room full of students, never mind when they're miles away.

But that's what thousands of Kawartha Lakes and Peterborough teachers are endeavouring to do; at least for the time being.

Granted, many suspect the Learn@Home directive will continue for the remainder of the current school year.

"It's a learning curve for everyone," says St. Luke's Catholic Elementary School in Downeyville teacher Kate Winn.

"That said, I believe that all the bumps will smooth out ... I think it's sustainable to the end of the school year. We will just have to keep tweaking things as we go along."

Being a kindergarten teacher comes with added challenges though, notes Winn, explaining she and her Early Childhood Educator partner have come up with a plan they believe works.

"We do a week at a glance and send it out to the parents," said Winn. "We had to first figure out what works in an hour of instruction because, unlike the higher grades, assignments are optional for kindergarten. It's not like you can ask them to write an essay."

Winn adds learning isn't also limited to textbooks and assignments.

"Don't ever discount other forms of learning. Not everything is done at the table with a textbook," said Winn, who enjoys hearing parents share stories of baking and cooking with their youngsters — which is a great way to practise math, reading and teamwork — while others have gone on nature walks.

Winn also acknowledges the frustration some parents may be experiencing with having the job of 'assistant teacher' added onto their shoulders.

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"I really feel for families that are being thrown into this. They're not trained for this and are having to learn as they go," said Winn. "And that's at the same time that they're dealing with the stress that's already in the home. Maybe they're ill or afraid of becoming ill. Or they worry about family finances because they're not working and don't know if they will even have a job to go back to."

The biggest hurdle though, says Winn, has been ensuring every student has access to

learning.

“We know of a couple of families without internet so it’s meant having to find alternative ways to get the information out to those kids.”

In the Trillium Lakelands District School Board — which covers City of Kawartha Lakes, Haliburton Country and Muskoka Region — roughly 700 of its 17,000 students do not have internet or access to equipment.

Director of education Larry Hope said the board is working to address this by “looking at the best ways to get what’s needed into the hands of students.”

About 5,500 students continue to use Edwin — an educational software program that was piloted by the local board — however, close to 350 of those students had to make arrangements to retrieve their equipment from their school. Close to 500 special needs students also had to be equipped with technology to assist them with learning at home.

Much of that “learning” can be done through the Google Classroom platform. Of the 440 available, 419 are active and one-quarter have between 15 and 24 students registered.

Hope says the board is still running its School Within a School program with Fleming and Georgian College and Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program (OYAP) participants are continuing their studies online.

Area schools board are also working with the Ministry of Education and colleges and universities to ensure graduating students will still be able to attend post-secondary studies come September.



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