

# PLAN A STEP TOWARD PRIVATIZING EDUCATION: STUDENT TRUSTEE

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sponsibility of creating and managing online courses away from local school boards and put it in the hands of TVO, explained Halton Hills trustee Jeanne Gray during a virtual community town hall hosted by trustees of the Halton District School Board on May 13.

"In Halton, we already have a well-developed infrastructure and a significant level of expertise to offer asynchronous online learning," said Gray.

Under the province's plan, school boards would also be mandated to provide connectivity and tech resources, plus space and supervision for TVO online learners who wish to pursue remote learning but within a brick-and-mortar setting.

Schools would receive neither additional staff for supervision purposes nor provincial funding for remote learners registered with TVO. Online learners, however, would have the option of participating in a school's extracurricular activities, breakfast and school lunch programs and mental health services.

"They're not really our students but we're providing for them as if they were," commented Cathy Abraham, president of the Ontario Public School Board Association.



Graham Paine/Metroland

Virtual learning may become a permanent part of the Ontario education system.

Halton student trustee Vandy Widyalankara raised concerns about the lack of student consultation in the plan's development, and the potential negative impact on student mental health through virtual learning.

"Essentially, the Ministry (of Education) is treating our education more like a business plan, in which eLearning will divert funding from school boards so that they can

market the courses both provincially and out of province as their plan states," said Widyalankara. "Make no mistake about it, this decision is, in many ways, the first step towards the privatization of public education."

Student trustees across the province are not in support of the government's plan because it does not value or prioritize the success and well-being of the biggest and arguably the

most important education stakeholder — students, Widyalankara said.

Abraham said there is a place for online learning in public education, but it doesn't make sense to reinvent the wheel.

"It seems like an unnecessary expense of time and money to not just take it out of the hands of school boards but to have another non-education-based entity develop that which we've already done effec-

tively," said Abraham.

Parents expressed concern about overloading staff like special education teachers and teacher librarians with supervision duties. They also had questions about the difference between HDSB's current virtual learning model and TVO's.

With a third-party provider and course creator, there will be a lack of oversight to ensure courses offered have the necessary

rigour and alignment to the Ontario curriculum, said Oakville trustee Joanna Oliver.

Options for secondary school students will be narrowed, said Abraham.

"As soon as you start taking kids out of schools, we have less ability to offer programming for the kids that are in the schools."

Ontario already boasts a world-class education system, "and it is so frustrating to see that during a pandemic this is happening, that the government has decided to move forward with something that there's no evidence that this is good for student achievement and well-being," said HDSB chair Andrea Grebenc.

An opportunity exists during the pandemic to retrieve year-over-year remote learning data and make evidence-based decisions, added Grebenc.

"It feels like there's a train already heading down the tracks and we have to be on it whether we like it or not," said Grebenc.

*STORY BEHIND THE STORY: The province is considering not only making online learning a permanent part of the education system, but having a third-party entity deliver this programming. We wanted to see how local trustees felt about this proposed plan.*



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