



# PONDA

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## Advice to Minister Lecce during COVID-19 shut down of schools

March 24, 2020

Dear Minister,

These are strange and challenging times, with society as we know it coming to a very rapid halt as we battle the global pandemic. Thank you for this opportunity to provide suggestions on how to support the special education needs of students during a prolonged shut down of schools. The following recommendations are made through consultation with a number of physicians and psychologists that I work with.

Parents are stressed and putting more expectations on them to not only care for their children but also provide for their education, is going to add to this. The messaging from the Ministry should be that home is not school, and parents are not expected to compensate for the time away from school. When kids return, teachers will reengage them in the curriculum. Learning at home can be done in many other ways, like helping to prepare a meal, or making a craft together.

At the same time, fundamental skills in reading writing and math could be taught online. The Matthew effect (the strong get stronger, the weak weaker), will be exacerbated over a long break from formal education. This is a real opportunity to put together good online resources to provide a solid foundation in these areas. For example, there are many teachers who have been trained in EMPOWER reading protocols. They could be deployed to teach groups of children online in decoding and reading comprehension. Jump math could be done similarly. In China, education continued with online classes during the epidemic that closed their schools.

We may have a window here to mobilize the system before people get too stressed. There is a bit of calm before the storm right now. Can we use this emergency to unify the school boards to work together as one system and share best practices, and ensure compliance with eLearning?

Some students with very significant learning and behaviour problems should be offered some limited centre-based programming. Daycares are going to be available for children of health care workers. We should also make exceptions for some special needs children, to give their families a break.

There is likely an increased risk of child abuse during this period of social distancing and we should do something to prevent this as best we can.

A computer/tablet and internet connectivity are now absolute essentials for public education to work. Students should have access to any equipment that is now kept at school for them. For those who do not have equipment and cannot afford it, it should be provided by the government. Bell and Rogers could be ordered to provide connectivity for everyone for this period.

While teachers are on reduced work duties, they could be engaged in online learning themselves. In anticipation of the recommendations of the OHRC enquiry, why not have all teachers take an online course on evidence-based reading instruction? Same for math instruction. We have a huge opportunity here to increase the skills and knowledge of our teaching workforce.

Some of the resources available in schools are for issues beyond the traditional curriculum. Behaviour teams could offer online meetings with families to provide advice on how to deal with behaviour issues in the home. Speech language pathologists could teach courses to parents on how to support their child's language and speech needs.

OTN is being widely used by the medical profession to have virtual appointments with clients. This could be opened up to other professionals. Programs such as More Than Words and Social ABCs are meant to increase parent capacity to address the needs of kids with autism. These courses could be taught online through OTN or similar platforms.

Teachers and EAs should be checking in with their students on a daily basis.

These suggestions are based on a very short timeline during which I reached out to a number of colleagues. I hope you find this helpful.

Sincerely,

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