

Students share pros and cons of UGDSB's Remote Elementary School

Written By **AUGUST BETTINELI** Special to the Free Press

When the pandemic hit, schools shifted to a remote version of learning, and for around two years the local school board's elementary remote program has been up and running: sparking debate as to whether the model is effective. To provide insight from those with first-hand knowledge; the Free Press spoke with students who are enrolled in the Upper Grand District School Board (UGDSB) Otter's Elementary Remote School (ERS) program, as well as its principal Mike Anderson.

The days are laid out to resemble a traditional school day: with 300 minutes of learning, days following a one to five cycle, and grade seven and eight students participating in rotary classes. Teachers are often volunteers and recruited when students made the jump to remote learning.

Being completely virtual, staff sometimes struggle with being alone, and for students; formatting of online school can pose a challenge, as well as missing the social factor brick-and-mortar school offers.

Despite these challenges, Anderson says the remote teaching staff are working hard to build a sense of community through clubs, student council, and peer help programs ? all running virtually ? as well as more physical aspects including spirit wear and a mascot.

Although there are difficulties surrounding being physically distanced from one another, the general consensus was that fewer social distractions and more flexibility are beneficial to the students' learning, and their families.

Aside from clubs, teachers encourage connections among students using virtual tools including ?break-out rooms? and having students complete collaborative ?group? work.

?We don't want them to feel emotionally distanced,? says Anderson.

A fourth-grade student currently enrolled in the Otters' remote program provided insight of his likes and dislikes regarding online school.

?I like lunch where I can use my iPad and not going on the bus,? he said.

When asked what he would do if he was principal, the student indicated that he would lengthen the days to give the students more lesson time, along with time to socialize. Overall, his responses were positive and he expressed enthusiasm towards the fact that he can gear free time towards his own likings, and the convenience of being at home.

When asked what challenges he had with the remote model, the grade four student said that he doesn't, ?like how sometimes [he] doesn't see [his] friends a lot,? and not having a stable internet connection can get quite frustrating at times.

Having a notable amount of students in rural areas, internet connection seems to be one of the largest complaints.

Overall, the remote programs poses both opportunities and challenges for staff and students, and is a schooling method that, as stated by Anderson, ?may not work for everyone, but for the people it works for, it works.?