

Dufferin parents, teacher react to extension of virtual learning

Written By **Fatima Baig**

Premier Doug Ford recently announced that students won't be returning to classrooms for the remainder of the 2020-21 school year and will continue to learn from home

"It was a hard choice to make, but I will not take unnecessary risk with our children right now," said Ford, during the announcement on June 2.

However, there have been mixed reactions from Dufferin County residents, and many wondered why it took so long for the Premier to decide.

Kim Crago, a grade one teacher from the Upper Grand District School Board (UGDSB), said she believes the decision gave a sense of direction for families and educators.

"Initially, my reaction was just being pleased that a decision was made one way or another. I would say for my students and families, educators' whether you preferred one way or another, knowing made a difference, and it helped us get a sense of direction of where we would be going."

According to Crago, she was pleased a decision was made and that safety was taken into account.

"I can appreciate the hardships that closures have on families given the current facts about the spread of COVID-19 and vaccine rollout as well as the limited days left in the school year. I am pleased that the decision was made with the safety of students and staff in mind," she said.

However, when local parent, Vivian Petho first heard the news, she wondered why it took so long for the government to make a decision.

"We were obviously in a state not to open up the province [or] anything else, and they wanted to send our kids back to school for three weeks, and I didn't understand how three weeks was going to give the children anything back for all the months we've lost this year," she said.

Petho has a hard time with distanced learning. Her son, Solomon Vahey has Autism and finds difficulty with sitting in front of a computer and doing virtual learning.

"My oldest child is eight and has Autism so [with] distance learning ? he can't do the online version ? so we've had to walk to the school, which is a 25-minute walk to pick up the packets," she said

However, according to Petho, some of the packages aren't in sync with what other students are doing. She has to take what is relevant from the online learning and packages then submit it, which creates extra work.

She stated her son was marked absent the first semester because he couldn't do online learning.

Since then, Petho has included in his IEP (Individualized Education Plan) that he not be marked absent because he can't sit for online classes.

"If he is handing in the work, I don't want him being marked absent, that was the thing I was frustrated about as a parent because he is doing the work. He just can't do it how everybody else is doing it," said Petho.

However, Petho's son is in grade two and has started doing coding, which can only be done online. He is only able to sit for a few minutes to do it because of his inability to focus online. He also isn't able to get as much out of speech therapy since it's only able to be accessed online.

For other residents, the news hasn't affected them that much. Orangeville mom, Stephanie has four children ages 6 to 11. Her daughter has been diagnosed with a learning disability and her oldest son has high functioning Autism.

?To be honest, it hasn't really affected my family since we, at the beginning of the school year, choose to do this the entire year,? she said

Stephanie was not surprised by the announcement the schools with stay virtual for the rest of the year.

?As far as having an opinion if it was the best decision or not, I don't really know what else people expect them to do at this point, so I think it was a wise decision, especially since there are only three weeks left for school,? she said.

According to Stephanie, she did have some issues with her daughter, who has difficulties reading at the start. Since online learning was very text-based, she struggled and eventually switched to the asynchronous option, allowing students not to attend live Google Meets or meetings.

Stephanie noted that she did receive extra help for her daughter form home school but not the virtual school.

?There wasn't a lot of support for extra help with helping kids who were falling behind in certain areas coming from the school board. A lot of that was coming from me to figure out how to deal with that. I did have a lot of support from our home school,? she explained.

However, since Stephanie's daughter had switched the format of learning, she has had no problems. Her son hasn't had an issue with online learning since it allows him time to do activities he's interested in and not become as bored.

Looking ahead to the 2021-22 school year, UGDSB has said they'll be offering a remote learning option for students but it won't be a hybrid model. Students who register for remote learning will be placed in a standalone elementary school strictly designated for remote learning and those who opt for in-person learning will remain in the classroom, without the option to switch between.

More information about remote learning and registration can be found on the Upper Grand District School Board website (www.ugdsb.ca).