

2.2.2 Ontario

Ontario is the most populated province in Canada, with 12,986,857 people (Statistics Canada, 2009). It is also one of the larger provinces geographically, with a total area of 1,076,395 km². This gives the province a population density of 13.9/km², which also makes it the most densely populated province in Canada. The capital of Ontario is Toronto, which has 2,503,281 — although the metropolitan or Greater Toronto Area has 5,555,912 and the Golden Horseshoe (i.e., a “C” shaped region stretching from Niagara Falls to Oshawa along the shores of Lake Ontario) has 8,102,163. In addition to the Golden Horseshoe, Ontario is also home to Ottawa — the capital of Canada (and the National Capital region has another 1,451,415 people). If these two regions (i.e., the Golden Horseshoe and the National Capital) are removed, the population density of the province falls to only 3.3/km².

K-12 Online Learning

The Senior Policy Coordinator for e-Learning Ontario declined to participate on behalf of the Ministry of Education, as such this profile has been developed based on a document analysis of the Ministry’s website and other published Government documents.

Category	Yes/No	Comments
Province-led programme	No	
Other online programmes	Yes	Both public and private
Provincial-level policy	Yes	

Online Programmes

Ontario was one of the first provinces in Canada to establish district-based online learning programmes — with the Avon Maitland Distance Education Centre being the first in 1994-95. Since that time many of the school boards in the province have established their own programmes, and all of the province’s school boards have signed agreements with the Ministry of Education related to K-12 online learning. At present, 18 of these school boards have come together to form the Ontario eLearning Consortium (OeLC), designed to allow its members to work together to maximise their online offerings.

Along with the English-language school boards, French-language school boards in Ontario have also been active in K-12 distance education. It is believed that this activity has a longer and more extensive history than their English-language counterparts, however, there is little to no information published in English (see <http://www.cforp.on.ca/samfo/> for information in French about their online programmes).

In addition to the public school offerings, there are at least three private K-12 online learning programmes. Virtual High School (Ontario), Ottawa Carleton e-School and Keewaytinook Internet High School have all been issued Ministerial identification numbers, which allows them to grant credits that are recognised by the provincial Government for student transcript purposes.

Provincial Policies

There is no mention of distance education or online learning in the *Education Act* in Ontario. Initially, the Ministry of Education had little or no role in the development of online learning. Since 2003, the Ministry has begun to play a more active role. It began when the Ministry surveyed the existing distance education courses, and consolidated them into a single learning management system (LMS) maintained by the province. Also at this time the Ministry devised a provincial *E-Learning Strategy*, which school boards are required to follow if they wanted to access the free curriculum and technical support provided by the Ministry. The *E-Learning Strategy* includes a policy document that outlines specific requirements for the individual school boards in three areas: policies for board delivery of e-learning programmes under the Service Level Agreement, acceptable use policies, and conditions of use policies.

Beyond the *E-Learning Strategy* and the Service Level Agreements that school boards sign, online learning is not recognised as a separate schooling entity. Students are registered in brick-and-mortar schools, teachers are physically located in school board facilities, and brick-and-mortar schools are still responsible for assigning student grades and granting student credits. The only exception to this is the Avon Maitland Distance Education Centre and the three private online learning programmes (as these entities all have Ministerial identification numbers and are thus allowed to directly enrol students, assign grades, grant credit, etc.).

Funding

The Ministry of Education provides the funding for the development and maintenance of course content, along with the provincial LMS. Under the Service Level Agreement, school boards are permitted to use this content and the LMS free of charge with their own students. However, they are required to charge a fee of \$600 to students from other school boards who enrolled in their courses (n.b., the school boards that participate in the OeLC cooperate with their excess capacity).

Prior to August 2007, students who were enrolled in online courses were not considered “attending” school, and the school board lost a portion of the students’ FTE funding. Memorandum 2007: SB19, amended by Memorandum 2008: SB27, changed this policy to allow students to be considered “attending” school if they were enrolled in online courses. As such, the school boards FTE for both face-to-face and online students is calculated based on the enrolment on the official count day.

Governance, Tracking, and Accountability

The provincial *E-Learning Strategy* and the Service Level Agreements that school board sign with the Ministry govern most aspects of K-12 distance education in Ontario. The *E-Learning Strategy*, along with the accompanying policy document and Service Level Agreement, describes the responsibilities and restrictions placed on school boards. The responsibilities for the Ministry, school boards, individual schools, and online teachers primarily describe who is supposed to provide what services and how those services should be provided. Some of the restrictions include that online teachers must also be regular day school teachers, students cannot do all of their studies online, schools must enforce suspension and expulsion rules on students enrolled in online courses, and students must complete their courses within the school year.

The Ministry of Education does not track the number of students who are registered in K-12 distance education courses or the performance of these students compared to their face-to-face counterparts. While the Ministry does not track these items, some of the online learning programmes have indicated that they do keep these statistics.

Quality Assurance, Teaching, and Curriculum

As the Ministry is responsible for the curriculum and the LMS, it is assumed that they have a specific framework to ensure that the course content and the various tools used to deliver that content is updated on a regular basis.

The individual teachers are hired by their respective online learning programmes, so there is the potential for a wide range in the level of training and professional development provided to these teachers. For those within the public school system, there is a concern among the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation that the job of an online teacher remains equivalent to that of a face-to-face teacher, at least in terms of workload and quality of life issues. These concerns were recently outlined in Working Conditions Bulletin #1.4/07-08, which was circulated to local branches as part of their collective bargaining handbook.