

4.2 Ontario

Like most Canadian provinces, Ontario has a densely populated southern portion of the province and a sparsely populated northern portion. However, in Ontario's case, the densely populated south is extreme, given that 94% or 11.75 million of Ontario's total population lives in southern Ontario. This means that only roughly 800,000 people accounts for the remaining approximately 80% of the geographical area of the province. Even more interesting is that much of the K-12 online learning activity in the province is focused upon the southern portion of the province, and not the sparsely populated northern regions.

History of Distance Education

The Avon Maitland District School Board in Ontario established the first K-12 online learning programme in Canada in 1994-95. However, the Avon Maitland Distance Education Centre (AMDEC) did not offer its first courses until the 1997-98 school year. The first K-12 online learning programmes in Canada to offer courses were during the 1995-96 school year, one of which was the Electronic Distance Education Network (EDEN) in Ontario. EDEN was a project originally designed by the Orillia Learning Centre of the Simcoe County District School Board to deliver high school courses to adults. This consortium began with six school districts, but expanded to ten to fifteen school districts prior to the conclusion of the programme around 2001-02. This was followed in Ontario by the first online learning programme that focused on K-12-aged students, the Virtual Learning Centre created by the Trillium Lakelands District School Board in 1997-98.

By 2000, there were several district-based programmes in operation in the province. Joining Avon Maitland, Simcoe, and Trillium Lakelands were school boards in Peel, Durham and Toronto – all of whom were operating in isolation and using a variety of systems. In September 2000, many of these school boards came together to form the Ontario Strategic Alliance for e-Learning. This Alliance operated under a co-operative model where each district was responsible for writing two courses and student enrollments were shared across the Alliance. This Alliance would eventually grow into the Ontario e-Learning Consortium by the 2005-06 school year (see <http://www.oelc.ca/>) and currently operates the Ontario Virtual Academy.

In September 2004, the Ministry of Education began to play a more active role. The first steps involved a survey of all of the distance education courses currently being offered throughout the province, which eventually led to the decision to host a provincial course management system and create a standard set of online courses that all school boards could use. During their first year of this initiative, the Ministry developed 25 courses and added another 35 during its second year (and their course development process continues to this day). It was this process that helped facilitate the growth of the original Ontario Strategic Alliance for e-Learning and its evolution into the Ontario e-Learning Consortium.

It should be noted that the French-language school boards in Ontario have also been active in distance education, and this activity is perceived to have been much longer than that of the English-language boards. Unfortunately, there is little to no published information in English about this activity (see <http://www.cforp.on.ca/samfo/> for French-language information about their current co-operative online programmes).

How K-12 Online Learning is Governed

The Ministry of Education through e-Learning Ontario manages K-12 online learning in Ontario. Under this model, a school board can sign an agreement with the Ministry to offer online learning using the Ministry's course management system and the course that they have developed (see <http://www.elearningontario.ca/eng/strategy/schoolboards/default.aspx> for details). The school board has the responsibility to staff their own online learning programmes and offer the courses to students in their own board. Should students from other boards wish to register in one of these courses, there is a \$600 fee (although most of the boards involved in the Ontario e-Learning Consortium use a co-operative or trading model instead of insisting upon the fee). In addition, by entering into this agreement, a school board cannot offer courses from their own course management system that were developed by the Ministry. They are free to use their own course management system to offer courses that they have developed on their own.

As online learning is not recognized as a separate schooling entity, the teachers hired by the board to instruct in the online learning programme are all based within one of the board's schools and for legal purposes are considered staff at that school. Similarly, students are registered at a brick-and-mortar school and if they are registered for an online course that are considered registered for that course at the school the teacher is based in. For example, a student in School A is registered for an online chemistry course and their other two courses at their brick-and-mortar school. The online chemistry course is being taught by a teacher who is based at School B. The student is considered to be registered at School A part-time for the two face-to-face courses and part-time at School B for the online course. Prior to the 2007-08 school year, because the student was only taking two courses in School A they were considered a part-time student and the school board would only receive funding from the Ministry based upon part-time enrollment for that student. However, the Ministry changed how the full-time enrollment is allotted for online courses and now this student is considered full-time and the school board receives the entire full-time enrollment funding allotted to that student.

There is one public school exception to the online learning programmes not being considered schools. When AMDEC was first created in 1994-95, it received a Ministry identification number or MIDENT#. This means that AMDEC is able to enroll students, directly hire teachers, and grant credits to students without the need for the involvement of a brick-and-mortar school.

Beyond the provisions in the agreements with e-Learning Ontario, the Ministry does not have specific policies related to K-12 online learning in the province of Ontario. Online learning programmes are simply required to follow the regulations that apply to brick-and-mortar schools. For example, the deadline for funding purposes of the Ministry's full-time enrollment allotment is 30 October. This means that any student still registered in a school, which would include those registered in online learning courses, who is still on the book as of 30 October, the school board receives funding for that student. If students were to dropout on 1 November, it would not matter for funding purposes. Moreover, the Ministry does not have specific regulations concerning attendance in an online learning programme, and individual boards must determine if a student still has active "attendance" in their online learning programme by 30 October. Individual school boards also make decisions on what constitutes a course completion, if their online learning programme has a trial period, how long that period lasts, how all statistics beyond those specifically required by the Ministry for brick-and-mortar schools are kept, etc..

K-12 Online Learning Activity

At present, there is a great deal of variety in the K-12 online learning activity in Ontario. The Ministry of Education continues to offer some courses directly through the Independent Learning Centre. In addition to this, fifteen school boards currently participate in the Ontario e-Learning Consortium co-operative model through agreements that they have signed with the Ministry (see <http://www.ontariovirtualacademy.ca/> for a complete list of participating boards). At least three additional school boards have their own online learning programmes (i.e., Toronto, Trillium Lakelands and Avon Maitland). As there is no central repository, there may also be other boards offering online learning opportunities.

In addition to these public boards, there are at least three private online learning schools operating in Ontario: Virtual High School (Ontario), Ottawa Carleton e-School and Keewaytinook Internet High School. All three are Ministry approved, which means that they are able to grant credits that are recognized by the provincial Government for student transcript purposes. The model utilized by one of these three private virtual schools is worthy of further description. The Keewaytinook Internet High School is focused primarily upon aboriginal fly-in communities (i.e., communities that are only accessible by plane) in Northern Ontario. The virtual school has a physical computer lab or classroom in 11 communities that students can attend in order to take their online courses. Keewaytinook uses a combination of their online teachers and classroom assistants to ensure the school has a physical presence in each classroom. The physical presence acts as a source of technical assistance for the students, and they also provide a support structure or coaching role to assist the students in the soft skills necessary to be successful in an independent online learning.

Due to this variety, there is currently no single source of information to indicate their level of participation in any of these programmes.

4.3 British Columbia

As noted earlier, the population of British Columbia is almost four and a half million people. However, half of this population lives in the metropolitan Vancouver area and almost three quarters of it lives in the lower mainland or on Vancouver Island. This means that like most Canadian provinces, there are significant portions of the province that are considered rural and some that are quite remote. Due to this remoteness, it is not surprising that British Columbia was the first province to begin using distance education at the K-12 level.

History of Distance Education

The first K-12 distance education courses were elementary school courses offered by correspondence in 1919 when notes and textbooks were sent to 86 children living in isolated parts of the province, thirteen of whom were living in lighthouses (Toutant, 2003). This was followed by the creation of an Elementary Correspondence School, and by 1929 high school correspondence courses were also being offered (Dunae, 1997-2008). This model has evolved, although in some cases not a great deal. At present within British Columbia, distance learning is offered under the label of distributed learning. The majority of districts in the province have signed contracts with the Ministry of Education to allow them to operate distributed learning programmes. However, the systems of distributed learning throughout the province include everything from the traditional correspondence-style education described above to online learning opportunities that are more typically associated with virtual schooling (and several other methods of delivery between these two extremes).