



Ontario (ON)

Population: 14,723,497

Number of K-12 Schools: 4850

Number of K-12 Students: 2,020,245

Number of K-12 Distance Learning Programs: 248

Number of K-12 Distance Learning Students: ~139,000

Governance and Regulation

There is no reference to distance education and/or online learning in the *Education Act R.S.O., 1990*. However, the *Education Act, 1990* does make a reference to “equivalent learning,” which is defined as a learning situation that falls outside the instruction traditionally provided by a board, that is approved under paragraph 3.0.1 of subsection 8(1) and for which a pupil’s success can be reasonably evaluated.

Since 2006, the Ontario e-Learning Strategy has guided the Ministry of Education to afford school boards with various supports necessary to provide students with online and blended learning opportunities. The Francophone version of the strategy, *Apprentissage électronique Ontario*, was released in 2007. Under this policy, the Ministry provides school boards with access to a learning management system and other tools for the delivery of e-learning, asynchronous course content for a wide range of English- and French-language courses and a variety of multimedia learning objects, along with a variety of other technical and human resource supports (including a “Technology Enabled Learning and Teaching Contact” or “*Personne-ressource en apprentissage et enseignement par la technologie*” in each school board). School boards delivering either online or blended learning must sign a “Master User Agreement” to access all of these services.

Ontario publicly-funded schools must report student enrollments in elearning classes to the Ontario Student Information System This includes students who are enrolled in elearning courses as part of their regular day school, continuing education, and summer school programs.

In 2021-22, funding for day school students taking e-learning in Ontario’s publicly-funded district school boards was the same as the traditional brick-and-mortar education. In English-language schools, students may enroll in an online course offered by another school board provided they do so through their home school. In such a situation, the applicability of provincially established fees for students taking e-learning courses are worked out locally between the two school boards. The fee for the 2021-22 school year was \$586 per credit course. In French-language schools, students remain with their home school board and take online courses offered by the *Consortium d’apprentissage virtuel de langue française de l’Ontario* (CAVLFO), a consortium funded and managed by all twelve francophone school boards.

Private schools operate as businesses or non-profit organizations in accordance with the legal requirements established by the *Education Act* and receive no public funding or other financial

support from the Ministry. The Ministry only inspects the standard of instruction at private schools seeking to grant credits toward the Ontario Secondary School Diploma to determine whether they can be granted this authority. In the case of online private schools, Ministry inspectors look for evidence of ongoing interactions between the teacher and students in the online learning environment, and for a direct link between the specific and overall curriculum expectations being taught and assessed in compliance with Ministry policy and observed practices. Teachers in the private school are also subject to a classroom inspection by the ministry. Inspectors review online courses, public website, school course calendar, and community involvement along with attendance policies, assignment timelines, student learning logs, examination procedures, etc.. The Ministry does not regulate, license, accredit or otherwise oversee the operation of private schools. Private schools in Ontario can operate onsite, online or offer a combination of online and onsite classes/instruction.

A November 21, 2019 announcement established that Ontario students would be required to take two online credits to graduate from secondary school beginning with students graduating in 2023-24, and that courses began counting toward this requirement beginning in September 2020 (Ministry of Education, 2019). With this announcement, Ontario became the only jurisdiction in Canada with an online learning graduation requirement. However, as a part of Policy/Program Memorandum 167, the Ministry of Education (2022) stated that:

The Ministry recognizes the extraordinary circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, this Policy/Program Memorandum recognizes up to one secondary school credit completed by Grade 9 students in the 2020-21 school year during the province-wide school closures (from April 2021 to June 2021) may be counted towards the graduation requirement. Schools should select one of these credits and record it in the system they use locally for tracking the requirement and reflect the completion of the selected credit when reporting through the Ontario School Information System (OnSIS) towards the student's online learning graduation requirement. The course itself does not need to be flagged as an "online course". It will be counted under the "Diploma Requirements" "Online Learning Graduation Requirement" section of the provincial report card template. (para. 15)

K-12 Distance and Online Learning Activity

Each of the publicly-funded 60 English-speaking and 12 French-speaking school boards have the ability to offer some form of online learning using the provincial learning management system combined with the online curricular materials provided or their own. Many of the school boards also participate in one or more consortia designed to allow its school board members to work together to maximize their online offerings by sharing course offerings, resources and students (e.g., Ontario eLearning Consortium, Ontario Catholic eLearning Consortium, etc.). During the 2019-20 school year (most recent school year for which data are available), approximately 97,000 students participated in online learning programs offered by publicly-funded district school boards.

Additionally, the Independent Learning Centre (ILC), which operates within TVO, serves Ontario youth 14+ and adults seeking to earn high school credits or an Ontario Secondary School Diploma. The reporting year for the TVO ILC runs from April 1 of one year to March 31 of the

following year, the same as the government of Ontario's fiscal year. Again, based on the most recent data available, there were more than 22,000 students enrolled in distance courses offered by the ILC during the 2020-21 school year.

Finally, in 2019-20 (most recent year for which data are available) 175 private schools offered online learning. Of these schools, 34 were fully online. The most recent data available, which is also from 2019-20, indicated that approximately 18,000 e-learning credits were earned in private online schools.

K-12 Blended Learning Activity

The Ministry of Education describes blended learning as instruction and student learning that incorporates digital resources within the face-to-face classroom. In addition to the various resources provided by the Ministry that were described earlier (e.g., learning management system, digital content and resources, Technology Enabled Learning and Teaching Contact, etc.), the Ministry has also provided funding to school boards through the Technology and Learning Fund from 2014 to 2017 to implement innovative practices to transform learning and teaching, many of which incorporate aspects of blended learning.

The Ministry does not track the wide variety of digital tools that may be used to support blended learning that take place in Ontario schools. The Ministry does provide licenses for a provincial learning management system, and digital tools for school boards to use for blended and e-learning opportunities with their students. As such, all educators in Ontario have the opportunity to use digital tools to provide a blended learning experience that meets their student needs. In the 2021-22 school year there were approximately 1,306,497 unique student logins in the learning management system.

Remote Learning

Fall 2021 Reopening

All of Ontario's public schools from K-12 returned to full in-person learning in the Fall of 2021 with masks mandatory and social distancing as much as possible, including staggered schedules to limit student numbers in hallways and cafeterias. Secondary students still worked in quadesters, taking two courses at a time, and several school boards opted for hybrid learning for secondary schools. Caregivers had the option to keep their child in remote learning via each board's virtual school, which was mandated by the province as an option within all public school boards. In case of active COVID-19 within schools, boards were required to provide students the opportunity for remote learning with 300 minutes of learning using both synchronous and asynchronous activities and have plans in place so they could move to remote learning quickly to ensure continuity of learning for students. Extra-curricular activities and sports were encouraged by the Ministry to continue and all student assessments and standardised testing resumed as normal (LaBonte et al., 2021).

2021-22 School Year

As the new school year progressed amidst school closures for COVID local outbreaks, the number of children choosing to learn remotely increased. Local school closures resulted from staff shortages and student absenteeism due to the spread of the virus in many communities across the province. As a result, the Government of Ontario signed an agreement with the Ontario Teachers' Federation to temporarily increase the number of days a retired teacher could work to expand the pool of supply teachers available to address rising teacher absenteeism due to illness and self-isolation. Provincially, schools remained open to in-person learning but masking was required. Just prior to the return to school from December holidays, due to increasing community spread of the Omicron variant of COVID-19 school opening was delayed for two days. Later it was decided to close schools to in-person learning with students returning to remote learning until January 17, 2022. That return saw some limited student cohort grouping, reduction of 'high contact' sports, and the requirement for students to self-isolate if they had symptoms. Interestingly, schools in the Greater Toronto area did not open until the next day due to heavy snow. February saw the gradual release of community restrictions across Canada and the Ontario government release included relaxing school masking and increasing indoor event capacities. Further plans announced February 17 were to address learning loss during prior school closures that included tutoring support. On April 14 the government passed legislation designed to improve capacity to keep buildings open, particularly schools, and the mask requirement for school students and staff was removed, followed by a removal of all restrictions on June 11 (LaBonte et al., 2022).

References

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