Stories from the Field: Voices of K-12 Stakeholders During Pandemic

December 2020

A special report of the Canadian eLearning Network

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Foreword by Joelle Nagle
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Foreword

It has been a pleasure to be a part of the special report series for the Canadian eLearning Network (CANeLearn). With the publication of the first two reports, CANeLearn offered a national overview detailing the educational responses for each jurisdiction in Canada during COVID-19 within the Spring, as well as the Fall re-opening of schools. I believe this last installment of the series, which includes personal narratives, offers deeper insight into how Canadians navigated through this challenging time within K-12 education.

While there may be many narratives circulating in the media around emergency remote education and the re-opening of schools, it is not until we read the lived experiences of the various educational stakeholders that we can truly start to understand what is really happening on the frontline: within homes, classrooms, schools, school boards and districts, and Faculties of Education.

Through these personal narratives, I believe a more fulsome picture emerges to compliment the first two reports. These narratives provide a rich detail and perspective that cannot always be found within a Ministry of Education’s report. Within these personal narratives, it is important to take note of the impacts the pandemic has had on the education of our students—from emergency remote learning and feelings of isolation, boredom, or feeling overwhelmed, to teachers having to re-envision their pedagogy to meet the needs of remote learners, manage hybrid spaces, and to provide social-emotional supports for students; all of these done at times without the necessary tools offered through further professional development and learning.

Perhaps an examination of education in 2020 is an opportunity to focus on how educational leaders can provide more training for Canadian teachers, so they are equipped with the necessary knowledge and support for their students to leverage their learning experiences in a variety of settings, even through pandemic times.

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Faculty of Education
University of Windsor
Executive Summary

This report is third of three reports designed to chronicle how each province and territory in Canada managed their response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The first report, Documenting Triage: Detailing the Response of Provinces and Territories to Emergency Remote Teaching report (Nagle, Barbour, & LaBonte, 2020), described how each jurisdiction managed their emergency remote teaching during Spring 2020. The second report, A Fall Like No Other: Between Basics and Preparing or an Extended Transition During Turmoil (Nagle, LaBonte, & Barbour, 2020), outlined how each jurisdiction attempted to manage what should have been a transition to remote teaching during Fall 2020. The goal of this third report, Stories from the Field: Voices of K-12 Stakeholders During Pandemic, was to provide vignettes authored by education stakeholders sharing their stories about what actually transpired in their homes, schools, communities, and districts.

Sponsored by the Canadian eLearning Network (CANeLearn), a leading voice in Canada for learner success in K-12 online and blended learning, this report highlights the announcements, supports, and policy changes each Canadian jurisdiction made to continue to promote learning throughout the pandemic. Information was gathered for each province and territory through government websites, educational organizations, and current news releases. This information highlighted each jurisdiction’s strategies to provide supports, resources, and technologies appropriate for the continuation of teaching and learning. A website¹ was created to host this report series along with an archive of online workshop presentations based on each report.

In this report you will find the voices of key stakeholders within the K-12 online and blended learning community across Canada as they provide descriptions of what actually happened on the ground. Students, parents, teachers, school leaders, school trustees, and teacher-education leaders from the post-secondary offer a glimpse of the impact of what the Ministries and Departments of Education planned and announced in the Spring and Fall of 2020 for the safe return of students to schools. For students, the lack of social interaction was a noted loss, for parents their children’s physical, emotional, and mental health and their own, were worrisome at best. Many describe the education offerings lacking and some sought their own solution.

Teachers, district and school leaders, even trustees, found the changing dynamic of the education landscape overwhelming. Health protocols, physical distancing, masking, the number and flow of people in the school building(s), and the social and emotional impact on staff and students was almost impossible to manage. The range of stories from school leaders offers glimpses of success in the development of new programs and the expansion of others. The stories of teachers reflect a focus on physical, social, and emotional wellbeing first, curriculum second. As new models and approaches emerge, post-secondary teacher education researchers are shining a light on what effective practices provide options today and for the future beyond pandemic.

¹ The website is available at https://sites.google.com/view/canelearn-ert/
Introduction

The Canadian eLearning Network (CANeLearn) (2020) was founded “with a vision to be the leading voice in Canada for learner success in K-12 online and blended learning” (¶ 1). One of the ways CANeLearn has traditionally achieved this vision has been their longstanding partnership with the annual report produced by the State of the Nation: K-12 e-Learning in Canada research team, which continues to “examine the nature of the governance and level of activity of K-12 distance, online and blended education in each province and territory, as well as for First Nations, Metis and Inuit” (Barbour & LaBonte, 2015, p. 2). However, the 2020 calendar year continues to challenge schools to provide students with learning options outside of the scope and in numbers far beyond traditional distance, online, and blended learning offerings.

During the Spring 2020 the term ‘emergency remote teaching’ emerged to describe what was occurring in education at all levels. Hodges et al. (2020) described emergency remote teaching as an attempt not “to re-create a robust educational ecosystem but rather to provide temporary access to instruction and instructional supports in a manner that is quick to set up and is reliably available during an emergency or crisis” (¶ 13). In August 2020, CANeLearn released the Documenting Triage: Detailing the Response of Provinces and Territories to Emergency Remote Teaching report (Nagle, Barbour, & LaBonte, 2020), which described how each jurisdiction managed their emergency remote teaching during Spring 2020. In that report each jurisdictional profile began with a brief summary of the online tools and online course content that were available based on existing e-learning activity, followed by a specific focus on the jurisdiction’s emergency remote teaching plan. This focus included when schools were closed and reopened (for those that did); what actions were taken; the tools, content, and devices provided, curated, and/or created; and the nature of instruction that occurred.

In November 2020, CANeLearn released the A Fall Like No Other: Between Basics and Preparing for an Extended Transition During Turmoil report (Nagle, LaBonte, & Barbour, 2020). This second report provided a description of what was announced and provided for by provincial and territorial Ministries of Education during Fall 2020. While a national view was considered, approaches varied among each of the provinces and territories in light of trends with the spread of the virus (often regionally within a particular jurisdiction). Some jurisdictions required students to wear masks in school buildings, others did not. Some jurisdictions announced specific plans for remote learning, others relied on existing online learning programs for students who remained at home. Finally, few jurisdictions announced or published specific plans for professional development or training for teachers new to remote learning.

This third report, Stories from the Field: Voices of K-12 Stakeholders During Pandemic, provides the stories of those intimately involved in supporting and educating the children of our collective futures. Their voices provide a narrative of what actually transpired in their homes, schools, communities, and districts. Students are concerned with the lack of social interaction, their parents with their physical, emotional, and mental health and wellbeing. Teachers, district and school leaders, even trustees, found the changing dynamic of the education landscape overwhelming. The report offers glimpses of success in the development of new programs and the expansion of others. The stories of teachers reflect a focus on physical, social, and emotional wellbeing first, curriculum second.
Methodology

Unlike previous studies in this series, there was no systematic collection of data for this report. The researchers involved with the CANeLearn initiative on documenting the remote teaching across Canada, as well as the individual members on the Board of Directors of CANeLearn, leveraged their professional and personal networks to solicit vignettes from a cross selection of stakeholders that included students, parents, teachers, school and district leaders, trustees, and higher education personnel. In instances where these networks were lacking, the researchers resorted to cold contacts of individuals identified through traditional and social media as representing a different group of stakeholders, geographic region, and/or schooling level.

Each individual was asked to describe how the fall unfolded from their perspective. Care was taken to ensure representation from across Canada in each group of stakeholders (see Table 1).

Table 1  
Vignettes by stakeholder category

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While there was a reasonable balance of vignettes from the various regions of Canada (e.g., Atlantic Canada, Central Canada, Western Canada, and Northern Canada), it is important to highlight some issues with the representation of these narratives. There were two provinces, Manitoba and Prince Edward Island, who were not represented at all (although that is consistent with participation in the individual program survey administered annually by the State of the Nation: K-12 e-Learning in Canada study [Barbour & LaBonte, 2019]). Additionally, there are no vignettes from any of the three territories in Northern Canada. In terms of both the overall population, as well as the participation in traditional K-12 distance and online learning, both Quebec and Newfoundland and Labrador were over-represented.
How to Read this Report

This report presents vignettes or narratives by a variety of education stakeholders across the country. It is an opportunity for students, parents, teachers, school and district leaders, trustees, and higher education faculty to share their stories about what actually transpired in their homes, schools, communities, and districts from their perspective. As such, the vignettes are presented in the author’s own words. The editors of this report made only minor edits to each submission, and then only to correct grammar and formatting. Any edits for the purposes of additional clarity were sent to the author for their approval (e.g., in many instances we asked authors to add a sentence or two to describe exactly what hybrid or remote learning looked like in their context or what specific in person precautions were being taken in their classroom).

Each of the following sections begins with a brief commentary on common themes or interesting illustrations the editors wish to highlight for that particular stakeholder group. This commentary is followed by a brief summary of each of the vignettes contained in that section. The section concludes with the presentation of each vignette in sequence.

The vignette itself identifies the author and then includes some demographic information added by the editors at the beginning of the narrative. One of the demographic labels added is an attempt to indicate whether the vignette focused on a classroom, hybrid learning, or remote learning environment. In adding this label, the editors relied on the following descriptions.

- Classroom environment was a situation where the learning continues to occur in the classroom setting in a face-to-face manner.
- Hybrid learning environment was a situation where some classroom and some remote instruction is occurring. The editors relied upon the vignette author to describe the exact nature of the hybrid environment.
- Remote learning environment was a situation where there was no instruction occurring in a classroom setting or in a face-to-face manner. This included both traditional distance/online programs and those traditional brick-and-mortar settings that have temporarily shifted to a remote modality.

This is followed by the actual vignette. While the authors were asked to focus on their experiences during the Fall of the 2020-21 school year, some authors also referenced experiences from the Spring of the 2019-20 school year.

As this report is read, it is important to remember these stories have been written during the final seven to ten day of November or even the first day or two of December. As such, it is also important to be aware the status of the virus in the province or territory of each individual author. The tables and figures on the following pages indicate the number of active COVID-19 cases and the total number of cases across Canada according to Health Canada (2020) throughout the Fall period beginning with the data available on 08 September (i.e., the “first day of school” for the 2020-21 school year) and then the data available on the first of the month for October, November, and December.
### Table 2
**Total number of active COVID-19 cases by jurisdiction**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Jurisdiction</th>
<th>12 Mar¹</th>
<th>01 Apr</th>
<th>01 May</th>
<th>01 Jun</th>
<th>01 Jul</th>
<th>01 Aug</th>
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¹ The date of the first school closure (i.e., New Brunswick). Within 10 days, all provinces and territories would have their schools closed.

### Table 3
**Total number of COVID-19 cases by jurisdiction**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jurisdiction</th>
<th>12 Mar¹</th>
<th>01 Apr</th>
<th>01 May</th>
<th>01 Jun</th>
<th>01 Jul</th>
<th>01 Aug</th>
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Figure 1. 
*Active COVID-19 cases across Canada (08 September 2020)*

The count of active cases of COVID-19 in Canada was 6,537 as of September 7, 2020.

Figure 2. 
*Active COVID-19 cases across Canada (01 October 2020)*

The count of active cases of COVID-19 in Canada was 15,636 as of October 2, 2020.
Figure 3.
Active COVID-19 cases across Canada (01 November 2020)

Figure 4.
Active COVID-19 cases across Canada (01 December 2020)
This data is not presented to parse trends with regard to infection rates over the Fall of the 2020-21 school year, or to suggest specific differences between the provinces and territories. However, as the active case rate would have been a critical factor influencing the perspectives of individual authors, it is important to have an understanding of that data.

The following pages provide the vignettes that were solicited and have been organized by stakeholders. The vignettes were edited for grammar and publishing purposes, but the content of each was not altered and remains the individual’s own words.
Student Vignettes

Students offer us a different viewpoint and honest insight into the impact of the efforts to balance health and safety while fostering learning for future success amidst the social upheaval created by the pandemic. The attempts to protect and support students can create unintended consequences. From the voices of those in the adapted structures and systems of learning we find the pace of learning was too fast, too slow, too overwhelming, unengaging. Student safety in pandemic was highly structured and efficient, yet often lax and ineffective. Mental health and wellbeing was considered and cared for, but both were directly impacted despite this.

The first vignette is from Adam Webster, a grade 11 student at St. Joseph High School, Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools in Saskatchewan. Adam discusses his personal experiences in his secondary program where he found himself in a quadmester, taking two classes every day, five days a week. While in his cohort group he found the breaks offered little social or ‘down’ time, he also found the pace difficult to keep up with his studies, yet found the focus on one subject to have advantages. With the increase in COVID-19 cases, Adam now finds his program to be part time in school and at home, and his learning has suffered.

Next, Melanie Dumont is an elementary student from Ontario. Melanie’s introspective vignette offers a glimpse of the personal challenges and successes she experienced so far. She describes her “roller coaster of ups and downs” but offers this insightful conclusion “without bad things in your life you’ll never really get to see how amazing good things are in the long run… surprisingly enough, I’m thankful for the bad things too”.

The third vignette is by Sienna Park who selected hybrid learning, which follows a quadmester system and cohort system with part of the time in school, the other at home. Sienna comments that one of the biggest benefits was spending less time in school as she was only taking one course and had to be in school once every four days so could stay focused on missed school homework, volunteer activities, university applications, student council tasks and club activities. She could spend more time at her desk, and having classes as an online session allowed her to care less about appearance and clothes. On the days she was online she found it more comfortable as she did not have to get physically prepared to take class and could hide her face and voice from classmates without a camera on which made her less conscious of herself.

This is followed by Matteo Pirro, a grade 10 student in Québec, who provides an interesting insight into his day as a homeschool student. His reflections wander from procrastination to isolation and lack of social interaction. Matteo ponders about how technology has shifted conversation from in-person dialogue to short bursts through texts and email.

The fourth vignette is by Annika Roderick, a student at St. Malachy's Memorial, NB, who provides a glimpse into her weekly school life, which is spent half of the time in a school building, the other half at home. Annika offers several insights about how her experience has changed her habits and approach to learning. She offers her opinion about how these experiences have changed her now, but also quite likely into her future post-pandemic.
Finally, a vignette from Mira Buckle, a grade 12 student in Corner Brook, NL who has been full-time in classrooms with peers throughout the Fall (and knows this has not been the case for others) where she raises the concern that a return to remote learning would be a detriment for her and others. She emphasizes the importance that school and teachers have placed on the social and emotional wellbeing of students, sharing the “checklist for every class this year” that one teacher posted in their classroom: “1. Keep them safe, 2. Lower their anxiety about the current situation, 3. Make them laugh, 4. Make them feel loved, 5. Teach them something/or not’.”

The stories of these students is clear that schools remain a good place for children to be supported in their emotional growth and learning. Yet, with proper planning and good communication, homes and communities outside of school walls can be as well.
Adam Webster

- Saskatchewan
- Brick-and-mortar secondary school
- Classroom environment

*A Student’s Insight On Pandemic Learning*

Over the past three months I have been attending an altered version of high school in the French program at St. Joseph High School. This was my third year of high school and eleventh year of school overall and none of my other years have changed as drastically as this one had. My peers and I would still be attending classes in person but the schedule, classroom, assignments, and rules and regulations were all different from prior years. The approach that my school had taken this year was late coming and highly criticized by students and staff alike because at first, they had changed next to nothing.

After the backlash, both school systems drew up a new plan that had more regulations and policies in place for the safety of the staff and students where they would attend one class in the morning for three hours, have a one hour lunch then return for two more hours of a different class in the afternoon. There were two staggered breaks penciled in for each class, a ten minute one in the morning and a five-minute one in the afternoon. There were also two scheduled help periods, one at lunch and one at the end of the day. It was much easier for me personally to grasp the contents of classes since I didn’t have to jump from class to class, and with more time in one day for a period there was more opportunity to ask questions and get help if I needed. Final exams were also staggered and were easier to study for since you didn’t need to swap subjects and, oftentimes, teachers could give more time in class dedicated to studying and asking questions. Since the classes were in a shorter period of time it was easier to remember all the needed material as well and things that were discussed during the lessons.

Some things that I found to be troubling about the original block system were the amounts of homework, the rushed nature of most subjects and the break times. When I thought of two classes, one thing that came to mind would be reduced amounts of homework, but many of my friends and I were sorely mistaken as this year, compared to all other years, I’ve had more hours of homework and assignments that I needed to do in a day than I had to in three days. I understand that we’re covering more material faster and in a condensed form but I believe that assignments and homework should be tailored to that, and most teachers (that I or my friends have found) were using the same projects and homework that they would for a regular class, which creates a very rushed learning experience. The ability to latch on to ideas and topics can be very difficult sometimes and if you don’t have the time to process the idea but are forced to do loads of work using it, many are bound to do worse and struggle.

This schedule had been in place for two and a half months (i.e., Sep. 8 – Nov. 19) but then adjustments were made because of new provincial regulations. The new schedule followed the same block system but instead of students coming every day, they would come to school on either odd or even numbered days, depending on what their last name was, and then do online or assigned work on the other. Despite the sudden modifications, the block system was doing quite well to contain cases and reduce spread of the virus. There were approximately four cases before the plan changed and there were no in-school transmissions.
The second schedule was due to the rising cases outside of school and the increased amount of direct and indirect contacts among faculty and students. The change was to reduce class sizes and even further reduce spread chance. I believe it was a smart move by the school system to do so and they did it early enough for it to actually have an impact on reducing the spread. However, I currently have pre-AP art and cooking, and losing the in-class time is detrimental for both.

I now find myself unmotivated to do work on the days where I’m not in class despite being fortunate enough to have most of the supplies needed to do projects at home. For both systems there was no accommodation for friend groups or cohorts which seems like an oversight and hypocritical because the schools and the health board told everyone to stick with one small bubble, then went and popped it. The consideration of each class was missing because an A-K, L-Z split wasn’t balanced or even needed in some classrooms and needed to be thought out more.

Downfalls of this schedule change included, lack of motivation and/or focus, unavailable or inefficient learning methods and materials, no social interaction, and the potential of keeping students in unhealthy home situations. Keeping focus out of school is quite difficult for me as I have very high energy and oftentimes a difficulty focusing without having distractions like those in a classroom or small fidgeting things I do during class. I’m also the type that learns better from person to person methods and reading doesn’t always sink in properly; that’s why I like podcasts so much. The idle nature of learning in class or hands on experiences are preferred methods for me, neither of which are viable options for at home learning.

The now lack of in class time also restricts social interaction time which has been proven to help mental and physical health, as long as it helps people grow and develop positively. Many people don’t get to leave their homes other than for school, so losing that can be a huge hit to their wellbeing. As well, some students have a difficult home life and school is a place to escape that toxic environment. If forced to learn at home in that atmosphere, not a lot will be retained.

Learning is different everywhere you go. For everyone, more planning and preparation needs to be done for regular, more preparative courses, and for large global events like a pandemic. Since there was seemingly little planning before public involvement and there is still a lack of diversity for students and how each person learns, this should be an eye opener to how education should be done in the future. I would like to see an option for block learning in the future because for kids like me who grasp content quickly and can learn at an accelerated pace it’s highly beneficial, with some adjustments. More options in the realm of learning is always good and more hands on experiences that are more accessible should be made for kids who aren't neurotypical and can’t learn in classrooms.

COVID-19 has had some immense and most likely lasting effects on our communities, education system and society as a whole. Despite all the negatives, there have been some valuable takeaways. Firstly, different forms of learning should be made for different types of people. Secondly, when things are being planned, a more case-to-case basis should be taken and public input will help. Finally, we have tools to make things better for everyone and more efficient, we just don't always use them and it was definitely revealed during this pandemic.
My School Experience

As we all know COVID has had a great effect on everyone, and has led to all us needing to adapt to these changes in the safest way possible. This includes school environments. Everyone has their own personal experience, so now I will share mine.

At the beginning of the lockdown everyone had to go online, including me. Personally, I didn’t mind it too much. At the beginning schools didn’t give too much work for their students. I’m sure there’s many reasons why, like to not stress them out, making it easier on themselves due to online things being difficult to set up, etc. All I know is that the work didn’t take long to get done and left me for most of the week feeling bored but left to do anything I put my mind to…. Which is what I would’ve said if I handled this whole pandemic a lot better. The thing is the work was easy, but it’s just that by then we’ve been on break for so long that I’ve lost motivation and I started to procrastinate more than I usually would during quarantine. I would still get my work done in the end because I can’t really bare not getting stuff done, but I always did it last minute, stressing me out even more so. Looking back, I know I probably shouldn’t have done that but I couldn’t really help it. Without a solid working environment and teachers and friends to help keep me motivated, I wasn’t used to this new school way and, to be honest, I don’t think I would ever get used to it.

Skipping ahead a few months and I’m finally heading back to school! Considering the previous school events for online, I was very thankful to go back in person again, though like anyone else I was nervous about all the new rules and how the school would handle the situation. For the first day it was pretty simple, a few students came in, I believe it was 6-8 different students for Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday where the teacher explained how all of the new rules and procedures were going to work. I was on Tuesday, but on that day I wasn’t with many of my friends. With that, it was a little discouraging for the rest of the day, because for our recess time we were only allowed in one area with our classmates and we’re not allowed to go anywhere else. Since it was the first day and knowing the fact that I hate change, there’s no surprise that I thought of this as a nightmare. Later on for the year until now I have gotten a lot more comfortable and used to these rules, especially since there were more kids in my class than the first day, and I don’t hate it as much as I used to.

Now moving on from things not involving COVID, for my school experiences so far I’m going to start with the more negative ones: it feels different, and not in a good way. What I mean by that is I’m not getting along with my friends as much as I used to. I’ve heard people saying that quarantine changed them so that could be a very likely possibility, but it still feels sad. All these people that I grew up with are just drifting away from me and there’s nothing I can really do about it. I know it’s a part of life and it happens to everyone eventually, but it’s a really hard time to go through. The thing is, I’m figuring myself out too and I don’t know which friends would be best for me to hang out with. They aren’t completely gone yet, but I have a feeling it’s getting close to it. Another thing that’s pretty negative about school so far is that even though I’m now in my most preferred working environment, I still have some habits
from working in quarantine. As I have stated before, I procrastinated a lot during that time span and that bad habit sadly didn’t just magically disappear as soon as I got back into regular school. It’s a lot better now, but those first few weeks were awful for that so I’m at least happy I got a hold of myself and started to finish my work as soon as I get it. Which can be seen as positive, but the reason why I’m putting it here is that I will never forget the stress for the first few weeks of school with that, and I’m terrified of it happening again so I work extra hard to prevent it from happening. Which is going good, but I just hope that in the future I don’t stress myself out too much because of it.

Moving on from that, let’s look at the brighter side. This year I’ve been feeling a lot more confident and I act more like myself around my classmates than I used to last year. I feel a lot more comfortable with myself, so I’m not stressing about that as much as I did last year. I consider that a huge improvement! Another thing I would like to mention is that I turned an awful time of my life to something that’s beneficial. Me now knowing how it feels to actually procrastinate during those first few weeks, I’ve been avoiding it greatly ever since and I’m getting better marks than ever! Mostly on average 95% -100%, and I’m hoping it only gets better in the future! The last thing I would want to mention about positive school experiences so far is that during quarantine I have had an art mentor and someone who I could trust to help me fulfill my hobbies. Now that I’m back in school, many people have told me that I have improved a lot since last year, so it seems that I’m rather respected in my classroom which makes me feel welcomed and appreciated. I couldn’t be happier and am especially grateful to Kirsten who has helped me so much for the art and even my confidence as well. So, Kirsten, if you are seeing this, thank you so much. With all of that being said, I think I’ve noticed that looking at the positive of things really helps and it always feels nice to be grateful for what you have, and for what you have accomplished.

I think that’s about it for school experiences and such. To sum it up, in the beginning for online and start of regular school it was awful, but later on it got much better. So for everyone that might see this, I think you know what I’m about to say. Even if what you’re going through may seem really hard right now, just know that it’ll get better. It did for me and many others as well. All in all though, school’s been a roller coaster of ups and downs this year, but the thing is, without bad things in your life you’ll never really get to see how amazing good things are in the long run. So I’m not only thankful for the good things that have happened for school this year, but surprisingly enough, I’m thankful for the bad things too.
I am a twelfth grade student from Toronto. I immigrated to Canada three years ago from South Korea, and am interested in the health science field. My school is part of the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), which offers two options for students this school year due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic: hybrid learning and full-online learning. I selected the hybrid learning, which follows a quadmester system and cohort system. The quadmester system is equivalent to a semester divided in half. Instead of taking four different courses in a semester, students take two courses a quadmester and that repeats four times. A cohort system divides the class again into two so that the students have less interaction and have more distance from one another in school. For example, if there are 22 students in a course, 11 students are in cohort A and the other 11 students are in cohort B.

Our school has four days with rotations. I had statistics (cohort B) and a spare period in the first quadmester. To explain the hybrid system our school has, cohort A students had in-school day on Day 1, cohort B students had in-school day on Day 2, and both cohorts had online sessions in the afternoon for Days 3 and 4. In brief, a course has one in-class day, two online sessions and a day off, and it repeats. The statistics class I took had a medium course workload with seven tests, seven quizzes and seven assignments. Some of the extracurricular activities that I am a part of are Student Activity Council, English help for Immigrants volunteering and Science Club. While working on both schoolwork and extra-curriculars, I have experienced both the pros and cons of the hybrid learning systems.

Both the hybrid learning and having a spare period were the things that I have never experienced before 2020. While both of the things were happening together, I could find a lot of benefits from learning this way. One of the biggest benefits was that I had a lot of free time because I was spending less time in school. As I was only taking one course, I had to be in school only once every four days, having an in-class day once a week, or twice on an unlucky week. I was also in Cohort B, so I had a whole day off when Cohort A students had an in-class day. During the time when I had a day-off or in the morning before online classes, I could stay focused on the missed school homework, volunteer activities, university applications, student council tasks and club activities. The reason I could do this many extra-curriculars was because I could spend more time at my desk, in front of my laptop for the whole day instead of physically moving all over the place. There were also some benefits of having classes as an online session. During usual school days, I tend to care about my appearance and my clothes. On the days that I only have online sessions, it was much more comfortable for me because I did not have to get physically prepared to take class. I had an opportunity to hide my face and voice from the classmates that I am not close with which made me less conscious about my behaviour.

There were also some downsides of hybrid learning – some were course-related issues and some were personal issues. The overall course was taught twice as fast as usual, and we technically had one in-school day to write a test or submit our homework. This made going to school stressful because I had to take a test almost every time I went to school. School days were also extremely tiring. I would procrastinate and put off doing my work, which was unusual for me, but it was also possible now with this learning model. I would rush to do my homework and go
to bed around 3am before in-class days. Also, my classmates and I were stressed by the course near to the end because the exam and the culminating activity were suddenly canceled in the middle of the quadmester. Of course we had to do less course work than usual, but it also meant that we have lost some of our opportunities to raise our mark. I had to focus a lot more on the assignments and tests, which carried a lot of weight all of a sudden. The other thing I did not like about the hybrid learning was that some of the online sessions were either a waste of time or worthless. It was the first time for my teacher to use Google Meet, so every function such as screen sharing, muting, and reading chats were totally new to him. During the first online meeting, I seriously thought of switching to another course because my classmates were so distracting and noisy because they knew the teacher didn’t know how to mute them. After the first chaotic 30 minutes, my teacher spent another 20 minutes dealing with technical issues, such as combining both cohorts’ call links, and screen sharing his notes. It is understandable for them to have some technology issues but this wasted a lot of time for both students and the teacher, therefore I disliked online sessions.

Other than school or course related issues, I also had some personal struggles dealing with the new style of learning. I have experienced lockdown-learning in the spring, e-summer school, but the hybrid learning system that I have now is a whole new experience for me. My biggest struggle was that I have to adjust my personal schedule or lifestyle to the school timetable. Until summer, I usually got up at 10am, did any work I had until 1am and went to bed around 2am. While adjusting my schedule this Fall, especially my sleeping schedule was hard to manage because I was used to doing my work and going to bed at such late times, but now I had to get up early at 7am. The other difficulty I faced from hybrid learning was that it was much harder to socialize. There were eight other classmates in my cohort and I didn’t know anybody. Even when I had a chance to talk to them in school, I was just asking them about solutions or their marks. Therefore, I mostly stayed alone or stayed with my friends in other classes during the break times because I was not close enough with my classmates. The last disadvantage I faced was the lack of physical activity and dry eyes. As my classes, textbooks, and assignments were online, I had to sit in front of my laptop more than five hours a day. I started to feel back pain because of my bad posture and lack of movement. During the Summer, I had a lot of chances to walk around the neighbourhood but I currently do less because I do not have enough time. I also can feel my eyes dry from looking at the screen for too long. Every time I take a break, I go on social media on my phone, so there is no time for my eyes to take a rest.

The pandemic of 2020 is challenging for everyone in the world. It also means that the school board is doing their best to offer options that keep students and staff safe. It is new for me, and although quadmester one was a challenge for my first two credits, I hope this quadmester when I am studying biology and business will be improved as we continue to improve the system.
My Attempt at Pandemic Schooling

Writing a vignette is boring, or so I thought as I sat down at the kitchen table searching for words to put into writing. I pet my dog. Thinking. Fingers caressing his short soft fur. I stared at my screen. “What should I write?” I said to myself. “How is schooling during this pandemic?” I had plenty of examples; my lack of real face-to-face with my tutors, no more team projects with other homeschoolers and such. Unfortunately, I had no way to string those ideas together.

As I looked around me, hoping to find some inspiration from my surroundings. I found nothing but the same sights, smells and impressions as every other day. “God, I hate being stuck inside,” I said, before realizing that I had spoken out loud. Doing this assignment definitely wasn’t what I would’ve chosen to do today. I keep stealing glances at the cabinet that contains my clay and tools. I’m pretty good with my hands. I especially enjoy making minuscule masks that fit in my palm.

I began to doodle on a sheet of paper that lay beside me, gazing outside at the grey sky while I was vaguely aware of what my fingers were up to. I’ve been doing a lot of that recently. Not much else to do besides homework and chores. Not exactly my idea of fun. I haven’t even given anybody a high-five in months. Well, besides to my parents and brother … “and Jupiter” (my dog) I said, thinking about how I taught him to high-five when he was only a few months old.

I’m a highly social person. I truly enjoy conversing with others. It’s actually one of my greatest strengths. As a matter of fact, I’m using speech to text on my iPad to do this assignment. Thank goodness for technology, because writing IS NOT in my skill set.

Talking about technology, I find that today, we tend to spend more time on our electronics than on anything else. Nowadays, people text each other instead of having a proper conversation. They use LOL, OMG, BBL or such abbreviations to communicate. My point being, I’ve noticed that many young folks tend not to know how to hold up a conversation face-to-face with another human being. They seem to avoid eye contact and often answer with a vague mumbling. And with this quarantine happening and all those rules about not visiting other people’s homes or meeting up with friends or such, it’s not helping adolescents’ social skills. When this pandemic is over, they’ll probably find it even harder to resume their normal lives. HECK! Even I will, but not for the same reasons.

I looked down at what I had been drawing. It was a tiny luth. It’s sort of a roundish stringed instrument, with a big hole that is adorned with some carved filigree. I considered learning how to play the luth, but I ran into a few problems. Foremost among them, I don’t own one, but I wish I did. It has a wonderful harmonic sound and it’s a work of art, in and of itself.

As I looked back at my work, or more like what was supposed to be my work since I hadn’t
written anything yet. I wondered idly if I would ever get this done in time for the next class. I’ve always hated working until late at night. It always seems to make me hungry and irritable. Since I usually use a computer, the blue light makes it impossible for me to fall asleep afterwards. Inevitably, I end up staying awake for another few hours, even though I’m dead on my feet.

And then it struck me: I don’t need to compile a long list of events that formed the last couple of months to describe schooling during the pandemic. I just need to talk about what I enjoy and hate about this pandemic, and about what it has done to my life. Focussing my attention back on my screen, I began to write. Hoping above hope that this will all be over soon. I really don’t feel like spending another eight months stuck between those four walls.
My name is Annika Roderick. I am a grade nine French immersion student. I go to Saint Malachy’s Memorial High School in New Brunswick. I go to school every second day and I learn online on the other days. We have two alternating rotations that switch between school and home. Students with last names from A-K go to school while last names L-Z stay home, and they switch the next day.

In school, the teachers teach a regular lesson and usually assign work for the next day. School has changed a lot since last year, both because of the transition to High School and the new COVID protocols. It is strange to be so isolated from my classmates, since our desks all have to be a meter apart. You always have to be conscious of how close you are to people, and whether or not you should be wearing a mask. We recently went into orange phase, so you can’t take your mask off at all. Still, I have gotten used to the new way of learning, and all my classes are fun and engaging.

At home, I sign in through Microsoft TEAMS and do my work online. I can usually get almost as much work done online as I would at school. I have to log into class within the first fifteen minutes for attendance. It is a little different in each class, but usually I have to say Here, either in my private channel or as a reply to a post. The teachers usually post the work for the day in TEAMS so we know what to do. Sometimes there is a video to watch to explain the lesson and other times it is a continuation of the previous day’s lesson. I do not have to do the lesson at the same time I would do it in class, as long as it is done by the end of the day. The freedom during my at-home days is really nice, since I get to be more flexible with my schedule.

However, I do tend to get distracted sometimes at home, and I know I am not the only one, but my work ethic has improved a lot since the beginning of the year. Having to hold myself accountable for getting my work done has made me more responsible and a better learner overall.

While COVID-19 has been stressful, there are some good things that I have gotten out of it. A pro of the at-home learning is that I have been able to explore the different online resources available to me more thoroughly. Since we are learning online, I have been working on reducing the amount of work I do on paper. I am trying to transfer as much of my work online as possible, and I have learned to take organized notes in One Note. Without distance learning, it would have been years before I got my own laptop, and even longer before I figured out how useful many of the apps can be.

I like the use of tech in class. If I lose a worksheet, there is always a copy on TEAMS. It is easy to see all my assignments and I can chat with my teachers whenever I have a question. I like being able to keep everything in the cloud, where I can access it anywhere on any device. I used my Microsoft Office and Google Drive accounts a little bit before COVID, but now I have taken it to the next level. I have not had to touch a single USB all year. I will always have my work with me. Even when we go back to being in school all the time, I will still be taking advantage of my office account.
I miss the socialization from last year. Since we have to social distance in class, there is not as much casual interaction as there was last year. You are always wearing a mask to talk to people. I have not even met the half of my class that is at home while I am at school, which is kind of disappointing. More teamwork with my classmates online would be nice. During our at-home learning days, we do not do anything together. Everybody just does their work, and we talk about it the next day. It is disappointing not to be able to have big debates with the entire class, to talk about what we are learning about from all angles, and to get lots of different opinions. When I am at home, I might be learning the same material, but I do not get the same learning experience.

I will continue using the new technology introduced to me during the pandemic even when we return to full time in-person learning. I have gained many new tools that are not just useful for school, but for just about everything I need to do. Nonetheless, I am anxious to leave distance learning behind me. It is working fine for me to learn, but it is very stressful. There is a big difference between messaging back and forth between a teacher and having a meaningful conversation face to face with them. I feel like I am missing out on a bit on the classic high school experience when I am at home, and I am hoping to meet the rest of my classmates eventually. I don’t know how things are going to go for the rest of the year, and I know COVID won’t be gone for a while, but I think it is best to remain optimistic.
My Life in School During Covid

Unlike many other students in the country, I am in a classroom full time. I am masked, I use lots of hand sanitizer… but I am with my peers, learning in the same classes we did last year. Ultimately, school doesn't look drastically different from last year. I come into school the regular time, I go to my locker, grab my binders and head to class to sit in an assigned seat. I wear my mask in all classes. At the end of the day, we have a scattered dismissal of three different times to make the hallways less crowded and then I walk outside and take a much-needed deep breath of fresh air.

In my biology class, we are unable to do labs this year due to Covid-19 guidelines. Since this is a very hands-on, experiential course, we definitely lack the ability to fully connect with the material this year. My teacher is doing modified labs, to the best of their ability, but it isn't the same. I feel like my third level biology experience is definitely affected this semester but everything else in the course is the same as it would be taught in a “normal” time.

In my English class, we have a class divided, half the class is like me – we were unable to complete English level 2 due to schools closing a quarter way through our second semester last year. We are at a disadvantage compared to the other half of the class who had completed the English Level 2 course. I have found that lack of foundation has made this course harder for me, but my English teacher has been a wonderful support. I have been successful in the course so far, however I am a “good student,” I cannot imagine how difficult it is for some students who were forced to skip a level in English and are struggling to catch up.

The first day of school, four of my teachers mentioned the concept of “Social and Emotional Learning.” I knew about this topic because I had done some reading on it, but it had never been mentioned in school before. The teachers said there would be more of a focus on being kind and understanding to students and each other this term. There would be more support for students, as their teachers and peers may not truly understand what they are going through. With a growing rate of teenage anxiety and depression, having the teachers address this was the best thing that could have happened on the first day. One of my teachers has a sign in their classroom that says, “Our checklist for every class this year, 1. Keep them safe, 2. Lower their anxiety about the current situation, 3. Make them laugh, 4. Make them feel loved, 5. Teach them something/or not.” I understand that schools are academically centered organizations, but having those other elements as priorities is what will make a successful and healthy generation of youth.

In addition to more of a focus on student’s emotions, public exams and all midterm and final exams were cancelled for semestered secondary schools in my province. This is a very large step forward to focusing more on “deep learning.” All my courses are taught in such a way that it is just to learn the material for the exam, after that many students forget everything they were taught in a certain course because they didn't understand the material to begin with. This constant cycle of memorization and testing is not healthy for students and is definitely not the most
effective way to learn. I feel like a transition into project and self-driven learning will be sped up due to the pandemic.

A concern I have for my school experience is if we have to move to online learning. I do not feel that teachers or students are prepared to make that transition at my school. I have heard that teachers have received training to use online teaching platforms, but students need the same. The school system cannot assume that because we are young we know how to use all kinds of technology and programs; as someone from that population, we don't have that knowledge. It seems like my school district is just hoping we don't have to move online instead of preparing to do so. I am concerned about the mental health of students and teachers who feel incapable of using technology so heavily.

My learning experience this year has a different feel to it. School is more regulated and serious, but it needs to be in this situation. In saying that, there is a lot of support for students and many teachers have become more understanding of individual circumstances. I feel that this pandemic has shown that schools need to put more effort into maintaining positive mental health in students and with the cancellation of publics (exams) find other ways to assess learning. It is difficult because schools also need to maintain high academic expectations for their students. The way the school system works is being tipped on its head but it is undergoing many changes for the better. The Covid-19 pandemic is certainly to thank for the beginning of this huge change.
Parent Vignettes

Parents have been impacted significantly by school lockdowns during the pandemic. In the Spring they were forced to juggle work and their child’s learning from home. If not in essential services, many were also trying to work from home if they were able to. Needless to say that experience was not wanting to be replicated in the Fall. The plans to reopen the schools were welcomed by most, and those that had health concerns about their children being in school buildings turned to remote learning again. In some instances those remote learning options were not available to some parents, or deemed to be ‘underwhelming’ and lacking the quality they expected for their child/ren. Those parents found themselves forced into making decisions they never would, or could have, anticipated.

We start with Verena Roberts, an experienced online educator in K-12 and post-secondary institutions, and proponent of open content and resources for all teachers. She is also the parent of three children in grades 5-10 in Alberta. She believed with her skills and experience would support her ability to ensure her children would be successful in remote learning. She found out she was wrong. Read her account of what she learned which can inform all of us who use online technologies and modalities to offer learning opportunities for our students, young and old.

Next is Briana Doyle, a Québec parent of three children learning from home during the pandemic. Briana clearly describes the critical things that teachers do to build a connection with her children, and it is not broadcasting the school classroom and teacher to the students who are at home. Needless to say, she deplores “Zoom School”. She believes, and found, that structuring individual or small group sessions with students, establishing rapport, playing games, providing feedback, and aligning activities to each child’s interests is the key to success.

The third vignette is from Melanie Rakovski, a mother of three children in Québec. She describes why her two school-aged children left public school in the Spring for homeschooling because of the limited provision of formal learning and the family’s personal health concerns. Melanie offers how her disappointment in public education led to making a commitment to homeschool their children this entire school year. After following the advice of others forced to do the same, they left one homeschool provider offering learning support from a teacher/tutor, they switched to a different provider and found success. They now plan to continue to homeschool through the rest of the pandemic and likely beyond.

Finally, a vignette from Dale Kirby, an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at Memorial University in Newfoundland, and also the parent of a Grade 3 student and husband of a primary teacher. Dale provides his own unique glimpse into life and schooling during the pandemic in both the Spring shutdown of schools and the Fall start up amidst health restrictions. While he describes a return to a “new” normalcy, Dale provides a description of the value of being in the classroom and school building and shares an observation that the “socio-emotional and developmental benefits of in-person instruction for our child seem far more apparent than they did before.” He voices his concerns for his family about a return to remote learning, as a further lockdown looms.
Parenting Online HUB Students During a Pandemic

As an experienced online educator, in K-12 and higher education contexts, I responded to the whole world of remote access and online learning in my own children’s contexts with rose tinted glasses. My 2019 dissertation research focused on how to expand learning from face to face classrooms into digital networked learning communities in high school learning contexts. As the pandemic began, I genuinely felt that I had the experience, knowledge, skills and evidence informed research to support my own children in succeeding in remote access learning. Even as an experienced online educator, I had no idea how much I had to learn.

Choosing Online – Fall 2020

When we were asked in August 2020 to choose the medium in which our children would learn, I asked my children what they would want to do. My grade 10 daughter informed me that going back to a face to face learning environment would best support her learning. She goes to a private school and we were sent a COVID Protocol Handbook based on evidence informed research to follow. We were sent surveys from the school administration team and we were encouraged to meet with the admin team personally if we had any concerns. The school protocols included mandatory masks and protective equipment and restricted access to “cohorts” created by grade level and geographic area. We were informed that the protocols would change based on the most current research and health policies. The school also created an app to track medical information which prevented students from coming to school with any symptoms or contact with COVID. The handbook, the surveys, the communication, the app, the transparency, the safety protocols all ensured I felt safe enough to send her to school. It should be noted that I did speak with the administrative team about my privacy concerns with the “online” option of students coming into the class through Zoom and having any of the students recorded. My feedback was taken into account and there are no recordings for students who chose to learn online at the private school.

In the last few weeks in August, our local public district offered all students the opportunity to learn online. Although our school district already had an online school, they decided to create an Online HUB, which offered all students the opportunity to take their courses online and be affiliated with their “home base” schools. The expectation would be that they would take all their courses online and in January 2021 they would be offered the opportunity to come back into face to face learning environments if they chose to do so.

As a result, the students would follow a blended synchronous model of learning. A blended synchronous model means that they follow curriculum at the same pace as the face to face classes in their home base schools, they have synchronous sessions each day (or each week depending on the subject) and they are expected to complete assignments outside of synchronous webinar times online and offline.

2 See https://prism.ucalgary.ca/handle/1880/110926
Benefits of Online HUB

Both of my boys chose to register in the Online HUB and have multiple positive things to say about their experiences. The benefits of this program have been the flexibility and opportunity to work on assignments for about four hours a day, then spend time doing other things every day. This is similar to the K-12 online learning programs of “Pre-COVID” days. As a k-12 online teacher, it was normal for students to work on assignments in their own time and own pace, with the support of a parent or caregiver. The boys have commented that without the distractions, noise and disruptions of school, they are able to get more things completed in far less time. They also have the opportunity to connect one on one with any of their teachers throughout the week should they have any problems or concerns.

Other benefits of online learning include the ability to complete assignments using technology. Both of my sons have had limited integration of technology in their previous face to face learning experiences. The digital literacies of both of the boys have increased dramatically as they are encouraged to use learning management systems (LMS), solve their own technology problems, interact and communicate in online spaces and create digital assignments. My grade nine son also appreciates the fact that his peers in face to face learning environments are banned from using their cell phones and he is able to access his cell phone (and social media) and technology to distract himself and complete assignments throughout the day. He argues, “I get my work done – I can complete my work and have access to TikTok”.

The primary benefit is the safe and consistent learning space. Although it was a rocky start as teachers were overwhelmed with schedules, LMS platforms, digital tools and way too many students at the beginning of the term - things have calmed down. We have watched the steady inconsistency in face to face schools as students have been asked to isolate at home or complete courses in half the time in order to accommodate schedules. When you learn online, you always have something to do should you choose to do something.

The biggest criticism of having kids learn online rather than go to a face to face school is the impact on their mental health. Up to last week, the boys participated in extracurricular sports. Their participation ensured that they had the same opportunity to interact and connect with other kids their age. Now that extra-curricular activities are banned and COVID numbers are rising, the online learning “feels” more isolating which is similar to the spring and I do see some impact on their mental health. As a result, I have to step up and interact and communicate more as well as participate in active outdoor activities. The teachers can’t be expected to support my kid’s mental health at all times - it takes a village.

I also want to mention how student-teacher-parent relationships in online learning experiences greatly influence my kids. For example, two of my teen son’s teacher’s send emails to the parents on a pretty regular basis to keep us updated about what is happening. As a result, we are all better able to understand course expectations, struggles and successes. Having multiple teachers, in multiple learning management systems, with multiple schedules and multiple pedagogical approaches does make learning difficult. I have noticed that my teen son has to figure out what “learning game” to play in order to succeed in each course. He has the strategies
and abilities to figure most of this out. However, many of his friends, who are also learning online, connect with my son throughout the day to try and figure out what to do and how to do it. I encouraged my son to try and get to know his teachers in order to figure out what he needs to do and some of his teachers had made multiple efforts to get to know and connect with him. Due to the teachers having way too many students in their classes (i.e., there is no limit on class sizes in Alberta K-12 online environments), my teen son has not had a lot of feedback from his teachers and the lack of feedback greatly influences his learning relationships. As a parent I perceive a teacher’s dependence on Zoom (i.e., webinar) sessions as a means to interact and connect with the students. In reality there are multiple ways to develop online relationships, however, teachers seem to be dependent upon face to face learning interaction models. This is not apparent in all classes or with all teachers.

Alternatively, my grade five son has one teacher. The teacher spent a lot of time developing relationships with all of her students at the beginning of September. She has one LMS platform and clearly communicated her schedule and expectations to her students. As my son says, she obviously knows how to “use technology because she knows what she is doing and how to do it”. Her obvious strength in digital literacies is MUCH appreciated as then I spend less time as a parent explaining things and pulling digital assignments apart so my kids can actually complete them. She also talks with her students and tells them about herself. For example, when she went away to visit her parents, my son asked me if she would be able to access his homework from her parent’s house? She also gives the students feedback in timely ways, so they know how they are doing, they feel supported and they have some accountability for their learning. I would argue that she would have done this in a face to face learning context as well. This teacher has proven to me that building relationships, being flexible - yet scheduled, having digital literacy skills and being a clear communicator are essential to being a K-12 online teacher at ANY time.

**Things to Consider – As a Privileged Online Learning Family**

**Access to technology and infrastructure:** Like in any learning environment, students need to have working tools to support their learning and the wifi to be able to connect to the teachers and learning platforms. This also includes the digital resources and assignments that are being provided in the courses. For example, my teen son still gets exercises that he cannot complete because of the digital format – especially PDFs. We ended up caving and buying him a laptop so he could access everything. Alternatively my younger son’s teacher makes collaborative and easy to copy google.docs that can be easily shared back with the teacher. *Google Docs* and collaborative digital tools provide the most options for the most students. Although I do realize as an online educator that they also share the most data and can put the student information at risk.

Another concern in online learning is the lack of access to learning resources. Both of my children point out that their courses are created on a weekly basis and include inconsistent resources. Many of the resources are made by the teachers and are difficult to understand or are not creative commons licensed.³ As an online teacher and specialist in open educational resources (OER)⁴, I know that there are resources and courses available and should have been

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³ See [https://creativecommons.org/](https://creativecommons.org/)
⁴ See [http://bolt.athabascau.ca/index.php/oer/multiply-k-12-alberta-oer-project/](http://bolt.athabascau.ca/index.php/oer/multiply-k-12-alberta-oer-project/)
prioritized and made publicly accessible by our provincial governments. There is no reason teachers are expected to create and build content when Canadian taxpayers are contributing thousands of dollars to our provincial education systems. All curricular content made by public districts should be openly accessible to all other public districts. As a parent, I am extremely frustrated that courses were not shared across the province to every district and that every district did not start with a course template that the teachers could remix from. The teachers do not have the time, or in many cases the digital literacies, to design courses, content, and activities. Their time should be devoted to building relationships and giving students feedback on their evidence of learning.

**Synchronous Webinars:** I have searched the literature for evidence informed research to support multiple synchronous zoom sessions everyday for K-12 students. I have yet to find any data to support this model. One of the reasons remote learning worked for my boys was because of the opportunity to integrate informal and formal learning with no or limited synchronous sessions. While there is value in clarifying expectations, structure and communication by meeting synchronously, it is essential that teachers, administrators and districts consider WHY they are mandating synchronous webinars. Just because we can create models that emulate face to face traditional teaching environments does not mean we should.

**Unsupervised – Social Interactions:** As we lose the opportunity to connect and interact in extra-curricular activities, online students need to connect and interact in other ways. Considering group work will not only help with assessment (i.e., less marking), but it will also create authentic and meaningful learning opportunities that teach students how to connect and collaborate online. For every synchronous webinar with the teacher, there should be two asynchronous “social learning times" with their peers - especially in cohorts which follow the same curriculum and schedule as those in face to face schools. My kids need to connect and interact in safe online spaces like blogging, book clubs, Minecraft and gaming and expert webinars. It has been done before\(^5\) and we can think of ways to integrate safe group interactions in our online learning spaces.

**Teacher Wellness and Being Human:** I was hesitant to write anything about being a parent of any child going to school during the pandemic, regardless if your child is learning online or face to face. Teachers are exhausted, they deserve our appreciation and need to feel valued and realize their integral part of any child’s success in online learning - especially during a pandemic. So I want to acknowledge that teachers have been amazing human beings and supported my kids (and thousands of others) in these difficult times and I want to do nothing but say thank you and appreciate you for making a difference in my kid’s lives.

In conclusion, I realize I am speaking from the perspective of the *privileged of the privileged* in this paper. I appreciate that my children have the infrastructure to support their learning by having their own laptops, enough wifi and parent tech support. I realize that they have the opportunity to learn online (e.g., some provinces did not offer online options) and my children have parents who are working from home who can supervise and support them. My son confided in me that he would not feel the same confidence in learning online without his parents, as we have his back and can support him when he has technology issues or curriculum questions.

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\(^5\) See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Qw0ykbOt6I&list=ULabsjEiqicw4&index=2229](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Qw0ykbOt6I&list=ULabsjEiqicw4&index=2229)
I would agree that my children have the macro conditions they needed to succeed in online learning.

Nevertheless, it is the teacher’s pedagogical approaches and ability to be flexible and responsive that have made their experience successful thus far. In fact, it is those teachers who encourage a, “it takes a village pedagogical approach”, knowing that not all members of a community can contribute - but many can! Many of the teachers have been making multiple attempts to connect and interact with children and parents. While I have had to support my children in figuring out each teacher’s process, my children have had to learn how to advocate for their own learning by communicating with their teachers. In general, the learning has been community focused. I have been included as a part of the learning process and I deeply appreciate the teachers who communicate with me so I know how to best support my children.

My children all need different learning environments. My daughter goes to a face to face school, and we are now in Covid isolation due to a school outbreak – so she is desperately trying to figure out her online course work. My teen son would probably be as successful (or less) in a face to face classroom. He would be most successful in a blended environment (i.e., some online and some at school). He is easily distracted and I am grateful for the course activities and opportunity to learn online – but he misses his friends.

However, my youngest is excelling in his class. While I would like to say it is because of online learning, I believe it is due to the teacher-student relationship that the teacher created at the beginning of the year, the timely and consistent feedback that builds his confidence in what he is learning and the opportunity to be creative with his assignments. In my opinion, it is not the medium that determines the learning success, it is the way a teacher teaches, their pedagogical values and approach, that determine learner success.

I cannot help but think about how this new confidence and development of skills in online learning contexts will be transferred into face to face settings when we “go back to normal”. From a parent’s perspective, I fear that we will go back to the way things were, rather than considering and responding to the amazing learning experiences happening everyday in our K-12 online contexts. No, online learning is not perfect. But it is pretty amazing and previously inconceivable and I am so proud to be part of the potential transformation of K-12 education.
It was the painful experience of “virtual” school in the early days of the pandemic that motivated me to homeschool this year. It wasn’t just COVID that scared me — it was the fear that we’d be back to school-by-Zoom when the second wave came.

I don’t blame the teachers. They tried their best. Yet when I listened in on my youngest’s first-grade Zoom calls, I could hear that the teacher spent much of the lesson explaining how to mute, or unmute, reminding children not to fidget, or that yes the dog is cute but right now we need to focus on the story we’re reading.

My little one sat gamely in front of the screen, but I could see in her face that she wasn’t getting much enjoyment or learning out of it. My middle daughter, then in grade five, hated Zoom school so much that she simply refused it. My middle schooler found it boring too, but appreciated the efficiency of being able to turn in assignments on his own pace and spend less time in “class.”

I’ve since learned that it wasn’t Zoom that was the problem. It was the lack of connection. The strategies teachers use in the classroom to engage with students don’t always translate easily to online learning.

As an Anglophone family, we realized we needed help to include French in our homeschool program. We turned once again to learning-via-videoconference, this time with a private tutor who works over Google Hangouts. This time, it has been a remarkably good experience for my children.

All three were reluctant to speak in French, especially since they were rusty after so many months in isolation from French-speaking teachers and peers. Yet the tutor, Laurence, was able to connect with each child by focusing on the things they loved best and flipping the script to ask the children to teach her about something they care about.

Each weekly session is an hour long, much longer than the previous Zoom classes, yet the time flies by for the kids because the work they are doing is linked to things they enjoy. My eighth-grader is “teaching” Laurence all about his favourite Greek myths, retelling them in French for her benefit. My daughters, now in grades six and two, show her how to braid friendship bracelets and fold origami, tell her about the art they have made and talk about the funny things their pets do. Along with all the fun stuff, the tutor gently teaches them new vocabulary that relates to their interests, plays games with them online, and assigns them homework targeted to their skills and interests.

We’ve had similarly good experiences with LEARN Quebec as well, a free tutoring program for Anglophone families. These sessions are shorter, only half an hour each, and the tutor changes for each one, so there isn’t as much opportunity to develop a personal rapport. Yet
like Laurence, the tutors are able to target their teaching specifically to the children’s needs and learning styles, and the result is very effective. They also take advantage of screen-sharing capabilities to play games together online that reinforce specific skills.

After seeing the different approaches taken for online learning, my takeaways are these:

- One-on-one or smaller group sessions appear to be much more effective for learning
- Taking the time to develop rapport between teacher and student makes children much more likely to “tune in” to lessons
- Using screen sharing to play games or provide feedback on a child’s homework can be helpful and engaging.
- When teaching is aligned with a child’s interests and personality online learning can be very powerful

My kids have since tried a number of very well regarded online learning programs, educational apps, and remote tutoring solutions. I’ve learned that while video-based lessons and online programs – like IXL – work well for my middle schooler, the younger two become disengaged from learning unless they feel a personal connection with a teacher or already have a deep interest in the subject. It makes sense: young children are wired to seek connection and learn best through physical experiences.

It’s tempting to want to prop a video camera up in a classroom and simply record the teacher at work, or to have the teacher speak to 30 kids at once, rather than repeat the lesson in smaller group sessions or one-on-one. Yet from what I’ve observed, the larger the group is, the harder it is for even the most caring educator to create a sense of connection with individual students.

If there’s one thing I have learned from my homeschooling experience so far it is that there is no substitute for human connection – and that it is possible to experience this sense of connection with a teacher online. It isn’t so different after all: it happens when the teacher listens and tunes in to the student as an individual. It happens when the student feels seen, and when they believe the teacher really cares about what they do and say. The younger the student, the more important relationships are to learning.
If you had asked me a year ago if I would homeschool our children, I would have laughed at the notion. My husband and I never even considered the idea of having our kids homeschooled. In fact, we used to use it as a threat/joke with our kids saying “you’re going to get home schooled!” When COVID-19 hit in March 2020, our homeschooling journey began unknowingly.

Our kids had been attending public schools in the West Island of Montreal until the Spring when, due to the government directives, there was no formal learning put into place until June. Luckily, we had the foresight to put an immediate plan into action, having our daughters meet virtually with their tutors three times per week (i.e., 30 minutes at a time), continuing on with their course curriculum, and having assigned homework keep them challenged, busy and connected to their education plan. This helped because they never fully disconnected from the learning process. Of course we had our fun, watched movies, went for drives and walks and took up new hobbies like most others did. We took advantage of many of the free activities and learning opportunities that became available online to everyone. This paved the way for building our own educational path while we awaited news about COVID and if/when schools would reopen.

My concerns about schooling and what the future held were always at the forefront of my mind though. With no sleep away camp options on the horizon for the summer and no sign of being out of the COVID woods, I knew that going back to school in the Fall was not an option for our kids. Not only was I terribly afraid of infection, but I knew I would be highly stressed sending my kids into schools where mask-wearing would not be enforced. It was for this reason, coupled with my lack of faith in the public school’s ability to provide a well thought out and consistent learning plan for the entire year, which drove me to seek alternative solutions. I knew I could not sit around, waiting to see what the government would decide next. I had to take matters into my own hands.

We have three kids, ages 12, 10 and four. The plan to homeschool our four year old son was enough of an undertaking and so I knew that with such a needy little tyke like him, I would never be able to properly deliver my daughters’ course curriculum on my own and so I decided to find help. In my circle of friends and family, there are only a couple of people who had chosen to take this route and so initially I felt very alone. Thanks to Facebook, I discovered and joined some groups that have provided priceless support and information to help guide us on this journey. I am so grateful for these resources and the warm members of those groups who are so willing to share and help each other. I don’t know what I would do without them.

I remember the day when I submitted the notice to the Direction de l’enseignement à la maison (i.e., DEM is the home school education department of the Québec Ministry of Education) that we would be homeschooling our daughters this year. I will never forget the feeling I had just before hitting the “submit” button. Not sure why, but I felt like this was a huge, life altering, earth shifting moment. I even hesitated to click the button for nearly a minute out of fear. Fear of whether we were making the right choice, not just from a COVID /health perspective, but for our children’s well being. Would they learn everything their friends would be learning? Would they be behind or ahead by the end of the year? How will they manage socially? Are we, as parents,
going to be able to manage? These are still questions I have and will only be able to properly answer them as this school year nears its end.

But the school year certainly kicked off in a different way for us this year. Usually we take photos of our daughters in their uniforms on the front steps of the house or outside their school like so many do. This year, while all their friends were experiencing their first day of school (during a pandemic) following the Labour Day weekend, we were out in a fishing boat in the middle of a lake in the Laurentians having a grand day. It was gorgeous and sunny; we were enjoying each other, nature and the moment. This was definitely different but in a great way.

Once homeschooling began in mid-September with their private teacher, it took a few weeks to get both girls back into the routine of investing more time into their studies and homework than they had been used to over the past six months. We went through some challenges, adapting to this new way of learning and functioning. In the end, we decided to switch teachers because it was apparent that it was not a great fit for our girls. So, only five weeks into the school year we pivoted and made the change to move them to another provider, which more closely resembled being in a formal school setting. They were learning with other children online and meeting new people. My girls got off their first call with the new provider and ran downstairs to share their excitement and gratitude with me for having made this change. They are now completing their fourth week with this company and they are thriving. They are engaged, love their teachers, love the type of homework that is being assigned and the tools they are using to do it all. Although they had to catch up on five weeks of assignments in order to be properly evaluated, they are motivated and happy and wish their class time was longer than the 50 minutes they get each day. This company has done a stellar job overall and left us feeling confident in our decision.

It has been a trying eight months for everyone and we have all had our own journey. With three children, one of whom is of daycare age and relishes in terrorizing everyone and demands constant attention, the days are very long, difficult and emotionally draining. People are not meant to be with each other 24/7/365 no matter how much you love one another. Some days are really great but it isn’t always sunshine and rainbows. Yet, my daughters are discovering their interests and talents, and developing new hobbies and skills. Our eldest approached me last week saying she loves this format so much that she would choose to do it again next year. This was so incredibly surprising, after having watched her mourn the loss of her elementary school graduation and not being able to experience high school like most of her friends currently are. This speaks volumes about our daughters’ homeschooling experience thus far.

My perspective on homeschooling has been forever changed. I do not know how society led most to believe that formal schooling is the only good option out there but people in general have a fear of doing something different outside society’s “norm”. I’m so glad we had the courage to go with our gut and take the plunge. We are now able to see the multitude of benefits of taking the path less traveled. I think it is a path we will continue on for years to come.
A Parent’s View to Schooling in a Pandemic

In March 2020, with the emergence of the COVID-19 global pandemic, Newfoundland and Labrador’s public school system suspended all K-12 in-class instruction for the remainder of the 2019-20 school year as a precautionary measure. For the remainder of that school year, our province's teachers, including our son's Grade 3 teacher, gave their best effort to utilize remote instruction, online and otherwise, to support students and parents and make the best of an unexpected and unprecedented situation.

This was a new experience for us as parents, with my wife, who is a primary-elementary teacher, leading our son's home-based learning in conjunction with his homeroom teacher. Our son’s class participated in twice-weekly live activities online and, periodically, I would provide support and supervision for him while my wife attended to her own remote teaching responsibilities. As with many parents who have found themselves in this situation this year, taking responsibility for a child’s remote learning is not an easy assignment, especially since it was clear each day that our son was experiencing the stresses of isolation and not interacting with his school friends, or any friends for that matter, as he normally would.

During the summer months leading into the 2020-21 school year, we kept our fingers crossed with the hope that in-school instruction, and some sense of normalcy, would return for September. To our relief, in mid-August the school district announced its "Safe Return to School" plan. Part of this plan included providing a number of days of professional learning for teachers and school staff at the beginning of the school year in order to prepare to receive students who had been away from the physical school setting for more than five consecutive months. This delayed the re-opening of school for about a week but, like many parents, we welcomed this as a minor inconvenience.

One of the new administrative practices at our son's school, as with all of the others in Newfoundland and Labrador, is parents' daily review of a COVID-19 screening questionnaire. This questionnaire must be reviewed each day and asks questions about any symptoms of illness, out-of-province travel, and actual or potential COVID-19 contacts. This questionnaire is completed daily by teachers and school staff as well. As my wife and son are at the same school, each day I have benefited from a dinner table briefing on how things are going from both of their perspectives. With a few exceptions, we are grateful to be experiencing a school year that thus far resembles normalcy.

While some students may choose to wear masks in school depending on their family’s preference, masks are, so far, not mandatory in K-6 schools in our province. However, adults are required to wear masks when physical distancing is not an option. Some extra-curricular activities have been curtailed while others have been canceled, such as field trips and outings at the swimming pool that require students to travel by bus. Similarly, after school activities by school and outside organizations have not been permitted to proceed as usual this year. This has required our son's Scouts Canada group, along with other similar groups, to find other
venues for their activities if possible. Understandably, some alternate community venues are not available this year due to concerns of liability.

While I have grown accustomed to occasionally going into school to pick up our son for activities and appointments, this year, with very few exceptions, no parents, guardians, volunteers, or visitors are permitted to visit the school. On a positive note, depending on your perspective, vending machines offering up potentially questionable dietary supplements are not operating this year either. And, to the relief of others perhaps, all school fundraising activities have been suspended until further notice.

While this has resembled a normal school year in many ways, of course it is not at all normal. Our schools, workplaces, and communities are consumed with discussions of pandemic-related developments and concerns. As with many across the county, each day we await the news of COVID cases, the potential for new restrictions on our daily routines, and measure these against the potential impact on the remainder of the school year and our lives in general. Despite the level of community concern and anxiety in and out of school, the return to school since September has been a much welcome change from the alternative we experienced during the extended school closure last Spring. The resumption of in-school instruction and the socialization that comes with it have been most welcome for everyone in our family. Following our experience with the remote schooling exercise in the Spring, the socio-emotional and developmental benefits of in-person instruction for our child seem far more apparent than they did before.

Of course, all of this is subject to change and dependent on public health measures enacted by government and school district authorities. The school re-opening plan announced in August includes scenarios for a) partial in-school attendance with additional health measures or b) at-home learning in the event of the suspension of in-school attendance. Thus far, only one school in Newfoundland and Labrador has reported an incidence of COVID infection. This resulted in a two-day suspension of classes for its students, teachers, and staff. This is the sort of development that many, perhaps most, parents are dreading. And, as we look toward the winter months and the remainder of the school year, we continue to cross our fingers and hope that the new normal for schooling here continues.
Teacher Vignettes

If students and parents faced uncertainty in the Fall of 2020, teachers were even more invested in what might happen given their responsibility for the learning and safety of the students they would face. Compounding this, many teachers are parents with children of their own entering a changing and dynamic education landscape amidst increasing community COVID-19 infections in their community. All eyes were on government announcements, health protocols, physical distancing in schools, and masks. Calls for smaller class sizes, more effective cleaning protocols, funding for remote learning, and mask mandates dominated the social and media conversation.

Against this backdrop, teachers put aside their concerns and fears and plunged ahead putting their student’s interests at heart. Like in the Spring where parades of teachers in cars meandered school neighbourhoods, teachers started by putting the social and emotional needs of their students first, curriculum second. At times this was in conflict with the expectations of parents, some of the students, and the ministries governing public education and health. The teachers in this selection of narratives tell the story of how this focus on the wellbeing of their students contributed to student wellbeing and learning.

The first vignette was written by Suzanne Chisholm, a teacher in Saanich Schools on Vancouver Island. She holds a doctorate in education and her research interests include how districts can optimize the use of educational technology in schools to improve student outcomes. Suzanne provides a description of her time in an elementary school classroom during the Spring pandemic and then offers reflections on her new teaching position at the district’s online school, SIDES, during this Fall. In both situations she used four underlying philosophies to support her practice: equity, engagement, excellence, and empathy. Suzanne found some success in both instances, concluding that, “accepting that the exact opportunities and learning experiences will be different for students at home was an important part of successful hybrid teaching for me”.

Next, Heather Corman, a secondary teacher at Navigate/North Island Distance Education School, an online school also based on Vancouver Island, describes how in the past teaching online typically meant content delivery and marking. Heather describes how online teachers are more than that now, busy with emails, phone calls, meetings, marking, reporting, and curriculum development. In fact, she indicates online teachers are even more busy since the pandemic began as many new students have signed up for existing online programs rather than be in a school and a remote learning situation. Because of this, Heather argues it is essential that class size limits be put in place for online schools given the increasing numbers and the demands of a quadmester (two month quarterly semesters) system in neighbourhood schools.

The third vignette was written by Krystyna Villanueva-Gruszecka, a mentor teacher in Webequie First Nation, Ontario and has been with the Keewaytinook Internet High School since 2017. Krystyna teaches in a physical classroom in Webequie as well as online teaching music, foods and nutrition, and family studies. She shares her experiences about how connecting with her students regularly via social media was, and continues to be, a key component of her success with adult and youth learners in the community. She also describes how her tried and true practices of hand delivering print materials and resources directly to students filled in gaps when digital and online delivery was not reaching some of them.
Finally, a vignette from Jonathan Burke, a teacher at Avoca Collegiate K-9 Community School in Badger, Newfoundland and Labrador, describes how besides sanitizing and spacing to increase physical distancing, Trauma Informed Practice (TIP) and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) were foundational pieces for his practice. TIP and SEL were the main focus of the five professional development days provided for teachers at the opening of the school year. He writes how, despite the relatively few cases of infection, smaller numbers of students, and “luck” relative to other schools both in the province and country, teaching was anything but normal. He describes how “pandemic fatigue” is fast becoming more prominent with all the changes and accommodations required to teach this Fall. With students not wearing masks properly, the constant vigilance to ensure protocol is followed is exhausting and patience for everyone is wearing thin. Teachers cannot wait for the upcoming holiday break to rest, recharge, and reconnect with their own family.
Hybrid Teaching during COVID-19

In June, 2020, after two full months of remote teaching during a pandemic, British Columbia’s K-12 public school teachers headed back into our classrooms for a month. But things were dramatically different from what they had been just a few months earlier.

In early March, I had been teaching a lively class of 24 Grade 4/5 students. In June, after a two-month lockdown for COVID-19, parents were given a choice: send your child back to the classroom, or keep your child at home. About half of my class came back.

Elementary schools in Saanich Schools, where I teach, structured a cohort model in which half of the returning students would attend two days a week and the other half would attend two different days a week. The fifth day would be devoted to remote opportunities for all students. So, on Mondays and Tuesdays, I had six students in our once-bustling classroom, on Wednesdays and Thursdays I had seven, and on Fridays I focused on those who were at home. On the days when a student was not in the classroom, they could learn remotely. Thus, we had a hybrid classroom – a blend of in-class and remote learning.

There were four underlying philosophies that drove me as I planned lessons for the month of June: equity, engagement, excellence, and empathy. How could I ensure fair learning opportunities for all my students? How could I engage all my students, both those in class and those at home, every day of the week? What strategies and pedagogies had been successful during remote teaching, and how could I leverage those to make the most of a single month during a school year like no other? How could I be mindful of and sensitive to the home circumstances of each my students during a global pandemic?

During remote instruction in April and May, my teaching partner and I had built a five-day weekly learning plan for our students. Each week we produced a Google Slides deck with a slide for each day. Learning opportunities were provided in literacy, math, science, social studies, and French. Much of my material came from the excellent and already-established South Island Distance Education School (SIDES), which is designed to deliver the full BC curriculum to at-home learners. Using this content was crucial for me. I simply could not have created on my own the range of rich and relevant lessons that I used from SIDES. Some students absolutely thrived. For others, engaging in remote lessons was challenging, and some of those families chose not to participate, and essentially home-schooled their children with their own activities.

When I came back into the classroom in June, I planned to stick with the same five-day schedule, and I continued to produce the weekly five-slide lesson plan deck for all families. Students at home would know exactly what was being taught on any particular day in the classroom, and on days when my in-class learners were at home, they could pick up exactly where we left off with the content. It was highly structured and had a variety of engaging lessons. As is often the case in an elementary classroom, things didn’t go exactly as planned.
My initial hope was to livestream some classes. The idea was to include the at-home learners and give them academic opportunities, but also to try to re-create the social fabric of our once-bustling classroom. It was a good idea in theory, but in practice, it didn’t work. We were not technologically equipped for it. The first day that an at-home student called in to attend our math class, the audio quality was poor, and it was clear that we would need anyone who was speaking in the class to use a microphone because the computer audio was insufficient to pick up voices from across the room. However, because we were vigilant about keeping our distance in the classroom and avoiding touching common surfaces, passing a mic would not work.

Another day, an at-home student joined the class via video conference and showed how she designed and built a self-propelled racer car for our science unit on simple machines. My in-class students watched her on the screen with only moderate interest. The audio was poor and they couldn’t see the car very well. But when the time came for an in-class student to demonstrate her own elastic-propelled car, and for the class to watch it speed across the polished floor, reverse, then lurch forward, there was no contest. It was much more fun and engaging for the students to watch the real thing, and to predict, measure, discuss – and laugh – inside our classroom. How many times would this thing reverse, anyway?

We all know that you cannot entirely replicate all classroom activities at home, and sometimes even the best technology is no substitute. There is often a certain spontaneous synergy that gets sparked in a classroom. For example, students in my Wednesday-Thursday cohort asked if they could produce a news show about what it is like to go to school during a pandemic. They were all extremely engaged and it quickly became exactly the kind of student-led, inquiry-based, hands-on cross-curricular project that we all wish we could do every day with our students. I had hoped that we could directly involve the at-home students in the news show. But when I saw the in-class students sketch and colour a logo, write a script, wander around the playground and through the halls filming with an iPad, and discuss how it would be edited and distributed, I realized we simply couldn’t involve the at-home learners meaningfully. Most of my planned lessons were tossed in favour of the news story project for my Wednesday-Thursday learners, but I think it resulted in some of their best learning all year.

One week, our math lessons involved calculating how much money and what combination of coins we would need for a trip to the market across the street to buy a chocolate bar for each student, and at lunchtime I went to the market and spent my coins on the goods. Our at-home learners obviously could not participate. For physical education, we went to a nearby tennis court each day for a week to play, and although one at-home learner joined us one day, it was mostly the in-class learners who benefited from this.

Part of this felt unfair to me. But as I thought more about it and observed how the different ways of learning work in the real world, I understood that there were also many rich and meaningful learning experiences that the at-home learners enjoyed. One girl learned about area and perimeter on MS Teams one morning, and took it to the next dimension that afternoon as she helped her father calculate the volume of topsoil they would need for their raised garden beds. Many of my students excelled at home, and some families told me that learning away
from a noisy, distraction-laden classroom was a far better learning environment for their child.

Meanwhile, several of my in-class learners told me that their June was the best month of school they’d ever had. Perhaps it was due to the small class sizes, in which classroom management was non-existent. Perhaps they felt safe and confident in our close-knit circle. Perhaps we had a sample-selection bias, in that everyone who was there had chosen to be in school.

I now teach remotely full-time at SIDES. In recent parent-teacher interviews, some families told me their children are learning far more than they ever did in their neighbourhood schools. It takes high-quality learning materials, and a high degree of student and parent commitment, but it can absolutely work. My conclusion is that remote learning can be highly effective, that in-class learning can be highly effective, and that hybrid learning can be highly effective. However, they are vastly different learning environments and should be respected and managed for their separate strengths.

We are trained as teachers to differentiate our classroom practices so we can best support a diversity of learners, and doing the same to adapt to hybrid or remote contexts is no different.

Accepting that the exact opportunities and learning experiences will be different for students at home was an important part of successful hybrid teaching for me. Different is perfectly fine, as long as the underlying ingredients of equity, engagement, excellence, and empathy – sprinkled with flexibility – are at the forefront of our teaching practice, wherever we are, and wherever our students are.
The Distributed Learning Experience

This is my thirty-fourth year as an educator. Most of that time has been spent teaching secondary English (in all its forms). I moved from the brick and mortar school to distance learning two years ago, so this is my second year as a full-time DL teacher, teaching English Studies 12. My journey to becoming a DL teacher was gradual. I slowly began integrating different online tools in my lessons. It started with a blog, originally designed to be used by students who missed classes due to illness or trips. Through it I shared notes, assignments, and due dates. Eventually it was used by almost all of my students (and their parents), and I added video content and additional resources for those who needed extra support. The blog impacted my instruction. Looking back, I suppose I had “flipped” my classroom.

I also began to use Google Docs as a writing tool. A proponent of the writing workshop, I struggled to find time to meet with every student during a block to help them with their pieces. Google Docs allowed me to connect with students outside of class time to provide feedback. Many of my students commented that they preferred composing at home when they were in the mood rather than being forced to be creative in a seventy-five minute class. And again, I found myself trying to change my teaching to accommodate for this. But it is not always easy to make changes in a brick and mortar school with scheduled blocks and required attendance. There is not a lot of flexibility. It was this that led me to DL.

While DL is not the best fit for every student (or teacher) there are certainly benefits to this model, many of which have been enhanced by new technology and teaching strategies. DL provides the flexibility my students want and need. Whether they are adult students balancing work and family, athletes and performers travelling and training, or high school students learning at their own pace (faster or slower), DL allows for flexibility in when learning occurs.

DL also allows for flexibility in where learning occurs. DL can be accessed from anywhere as long as the technology is in place. Time is not lost travelling to and from school. Parents do not have to worry about childcare. Buses cancelled due to heavy snowfall, or ferries due to stormy weather, do not lead to missed classes. Students can even learn while on vacation, though no one is travelling at the moment. But while the pandemic may have put holidays on hold, it has not stopped education. DL has allowed students to safely access online courses.

DL has allowed me to provide the individualized instruction that I did not always have time for in the “regular” classroom, when confined to a schedule and working with thirty students at once. Through email, students can reach out to ask questions or for additional support as they need it. They do not have to wait until the next time they see me. I can provide detailed feedback on assignments, and easily link to additional resources for students who need them. I can be flexible with content, assignments and due dates, and can schedule Zoom meetings for students who need one-on-one help.

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6 DL refers to distributed learning, the current name for online learning in BC
The one thing that made me hesitate to become a DL teacher was relationships. Relationships are key to student success, and I wondered how I would foster these online when I could no longer greet my students at the door, have casual conversations between classes, and show them through my facial expressions and body language that I care. I have found, through implementing some strategies, which I have been able to recreate the relationships I had in the “regular” classroom.

As part of their first assignment students are required to tell me about themselves in an expository essay, and the exemplar was written by me: sharing who I am. Before they begin submitting course work, they need to have a Zoom meeting with me, so we get a chance to meet face-to-face. Screencast-O-Matic and Loom have allowed me to easily create video content, simulating regular classroom instruction. Through course materials I share personal stories and pictures when appropriate. Assignments are designed so that students have the opportunity to show who they are, and I strive to give personalized and supportive feedback.

Perhaps, in the distant past, DL teaching just meant marking, but this is no longer the case. We are busy with emails, phone calls, meetings, marking, reporting and curriculum development. In fact, I would argue that we have been especially busy since the pandemic began. My workload last year was often overwhelming. I found myself starting work early in the morning (at around 6 a.m. or 7 a.m.) and frequently working through lunch, into the evening and on weekends in order to keep up. I do remember thinking, at times, that I should have stayed in the “regular” classroom.

Unfortunately the workload situation has not improved this year, in fact, it is much more challenging. The high school students who have chosen to take my course are handing work in, in batches as they are wanting to finish the course at the end of a quarter term. My course is not designed for this, and neither am I. As one quarter ends, a new wave of young students begin to appear. In addition, I have many adult students who have now found themselves with time to upgrade or get their diploma. I have recently received 0.2 support, but will require more if this pace continues.

I know that I am not alone in my experience as a DL teacher. It is essential that class size limits be put in place. We are not marking robots. We do all of the things a “regular” teacher does, and we deserve the same consideration.
My partner and I left Webequie for our March break in 2020 and when returning, we found out our flights had been cancelled. It was from there on that I had to support my students, including seven potential graduates, at a distance. We weren’t able to return to Webequie until early April and, during this time, I messaged students on social media and continued teaching online as usual. The local principal suggested that I turn our online lessons into offline PDFs and that I mail USBs up to Webequie and she said she would ensure they are distributed to students. I spent approximately three to four full working days turning online lessons into offline versions, with videos and all supplementary materials, for each of my students in Webequie for each class they were taking at that time. I then uploaded these files into the Keewaytinok Internet High School (KiHS) Team Google Drive so that none of my other KiHS colleagues would have to do the same, at least for that term. I now know that these USBs were not as effective as we had hoped they may have been. They were distributed with Chromebooks provided by the local elementary school but few students used the USBs (of the 15 I prepared, only three students were used).

At the beginning of April, we were able to return to Webequie. After we completed our mandatory two-week quarantine, I switched gears and began printing and delivering work to students. I would message students online and set up a time that worked for them and I set out on foot to deliver resources, assignments, and materials to my students. Despite all of these obstacles, all seven potential graduates DID graduate. I found that printing the assignments off for students was more successful than the USBs. Overall, the credit count for students in Webequie did not greatly diminish due to the pandemic at that time.

My partner recently said that when the pandemic first hit in Spring 2020, it was almost business as usual for my practice and my classroom. Before the pandemic, I was already delivering work to students that work full time, have disabilities, or small children at home. I was already printing off resources for those without computers and/or internet at home. I was already answering questions about assignments over social media, and I already had a consistent presence on social media. I found that doing these things consistently before the pandemic set my students up for greater success during the lockdown.

Although we can’t go backward, I think that it is important to prepare our students for another potential lockdown while we have them in our physical classrooms. I have been encouraging students to join my classroom’s Facebook page, and increasing how often I message adult students, parents, and guardians on social media, and I have been teaching students how to log in, complete their work, troubleshoot, and submit assignments completely independently. These are some of the things that I am doing that serve a universal benefit because while I am helping my students to become more independent learners, but I am also preparing them in case we go into another lockdown. Furthermore, these skills with technology and independent learning that they are developing now will help them if they choose to go on to post-secondary where online learning is becoming more and more popular (even mandatory during the pandemic).
My name is Jonathan Burke and I am in my twentieth year of teaching at Avoca Collegiate in Badger, Newfoundland and Labrador. Avoca is a small K-9 community school with 62 students in multi-grade classes and eight teachers. I teach all subjects, with the exception of French and language arts, to 16 students in my Grade 8/9 homeroom class.

Teaching in a pandemic. What to say? It is both uncomfortable and challenging. As an experienced teacher the basic loss of control over our current reality is bothersome. However, I am optimistic that our school and our district will see us through as best they can. To begin this year, I moved all unnecessary furniture in my classroom so I could space out student desks as much as possible. Students sanitize before using common items and I sanitize seats in between class changes, which occurs twice daily. Everybody wears a mask when out of their seat. I do what I am asked to do, what else can I do?

Our school district provided five extra professional development days at the beginning of the school year. Trauma Informed Practice (TIP) and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) were foundational pieces supplemented with more teacher specific professional development. Extra custodial staff were hired to assist with the daily sanitization in all provincial schools. Communication from both our school district and our union is frequent and evolving to reflect current realities. Recently, they requested teacher feedback on the following (possible) Phase 3 scenarios should schools be shut down or partially shut down (staggering classes). Grades 4-6 will be required to be online a minimum of six to eight hours hours per week with a focus on language arts, math, science, social studies, and wellness. Grades 7-9 will be required to be online a minimum of 12-16 hours per week with a focus on math, language, science, social studies, and wellness. All grades will avail of both synchronous and asynchronous learning should the need arise.

It is important to understand that this is new for everybody. Students, teachers, administrators and on up the ladder. Flashlight teaching – we are vigilant, yet are unsure what to look for. For me personally, I read all the communications because if it is within my influence to add an extra layer of protection or prevention then I will. I imagine our entire education system in our tiny province is in the same boat. Therefore, I cannot find fault in what our district has done thus far because they are also grappling with a novel school year.

We have our share of challenges, mainly complacency, given our low cases of COVID-19 in our province. This reality was particularly evident at the beginning of the school year when we had no active cases. Students stated that they were not physically distancing outside of school, so why should they do it in school. Thankfully, after frequent discourse, they have adapted well to current guidelines and protocols in school (e.g., masks, sanitization, physical distancing etc.).

However, pandemic fatigue is prominent. Students either forget or simply do not pull the mask up. As a teacher, the constant vigilance for perceived breaks in protocol is exhausting. In short, we are all very tired, more than normal. Again, based on our small school demographics, we
struggle against complacency because this pandemic has not really impacted any of us directly. Remembering that it could is key, but saps so much daily energy. As I write this, our active provincial cases have risen to 32. All cases so far have been travel related which is comforting because if individuals are self-isolating and following public health directives (I sincerely hope so), then effective contact tracing should contain a possible outbreak.

My students recently communicated to me that they feel trapped. Luckily, in a small school, I have a strong rapport with my students who openly communicated their frustrations with me. This pandemic has altered school life in several ways. Recess is delivered to class and is eaten in the same room where they sit for at least three or four hours every day. The student lounge, fitness room, and other common areas are closed to minimize interaction between classes (i.e., each individual class is considered its own cohort and therefore in their own bubble). Intramural lunchtime sports, assemblies, concerts, and school wide activities are nonexistent. Despite this, we have a lot of good days. For example, our annual Christmas concert attended by a large percentage of our community is going virtual. This challenge has been reinvigorating as a student suggested using iMovie and a green screen ($10 green tarp from Canadian Tire) to record our class skit. Students are enjoying this process and learning how best to leverage technology to create something that will hopefully spread some Christmas cheer. Each day is fresh as we find our way together.

In conclusion, we have very fortunate demographics. A small school in a small community in a small province with only 32 active classes, all of which have been linked to travel. We have low numbers of students and an abundance of space but that is certainly not the case in all Newfoundland schools. The challenges discussed above are actually small in comparison to these larger communities, which are again small in comparison to many other larger North American cities. We are lucky. Our school district continues to communicate and be proactive with planning for all scenarios. Teachers continue to do the best they can with the resources they have under the current circumstances. Students continue to demonstrate more adaptability then we could have ever imagined. Everybody is adjusting to the “new normal” – whatever that means. Christmas break is close and we need the break to recharge, be with our close family, and reflect on what we have accomplished and what we have ahead of us. The end is in sight and I sincerely hope that we can all stay safe and healthy until that day arrives.
School and District Leader Vignettes

If teachers felt responsibility for the learning and safety of their students, school and district-level administrators not only felt similar, but actually had to negotiate the implementation of new government policy and direction while juggling the continuation of a variety of community and social programs. They scrambled to meet the educational needs of all students, manage the safety of all staff, visitors, and school site and building maintenance with limited clarity within an ever-changing landscape and the increasing community COVID-19 infections over the Fall.

Organizing an effective learning program for all students to start was enough of a challenge. As school started, some students needed to be in the school building while others who, including teachers, could not be accommodated within school buildings; some students and parents chose at first to be in school, others at home, then many changed their minds. School leaders were expected to “pivot” – a word widely used during this pandemic that implies inherent simplicity, which is not the case in such a broad and encompassing social enterprise that is public education – from one model to another without impacting student learning or parental desire. It was a nearly impossible situation.

Despite the extra hours and best laid plans, school started smoothly in some instances, in others not so. The range of stories from school leaders offers glimpses of success in the development of new programs and the expansion of others. The vignettes speak to what can happen and lay a foundation for others to learn from and perhaps follow. However, they do not tell the tale of the toll extracted from school and district leaders as they continue to navigate in a deadly game of dodgeball with COVID-19 and the resulting chaos of unpredictability and ever-changing needs.

The first vignette was written by Maureen McRae-Stanger, the Director of Instruction, Learning and Innovation in New Westminster School District No. 40 (British Columbia). Maureen describes how the creation of a new K-8 online program (or distributed learning as it is still called in BC) and expansion of its existing grade 9-12 online program offered more options beyond remote teaching for parents and students who were unable or unwilling to attend school in classrooms. The ability to shift between school and online were also part of the program design as were both synchronous and asynchronous learning activities, but the direct support and involvement of parents was critical to the early success.

Next, the Associate Principal of Vista Virtual School, Frank McCallum, describes how registrations mushroomed and their processes became backlogged and required rapid revising to process the influx. Vista Virtual School is an Alberta Education-accredited distance learning school providing education for elementary, junior high, and senior high students in Alberta and beyond. Elementary and junior high students are offered print-based and some online courses. Senior high students, as well as adult students, are offered purely online programming. Interestingly, Frank notes how some students who at first registered with the online school quickly returned to their local school campus as they found the online school expectations to be much more demanding than they anticipated and experienced with previous remote learning.

The third vignette is from Vince Hill, principal of Wainwright High School in Alberta. Vince describes how his prior experience running an online high school, combined with the technology already in place in the school and the skills of key staff, helped the school as a team to plan a
remote learning program for all students in the Spring. Based on their efforts, they found that each teacher developed an online presence for their courses, explored new methodologies for delivering their courses, examined and adjusted their assessment practices, and learned how to use technology more effectively in the classroom. That success led directly to the school’s agility to adapt rapidly to include more remote learning this Fall as schools began to shift back to more at-home learning with the increases in COVID-19 infections in communities and schools in the province.

Next, a vignette by Amy Sanville, Principal of Regina Catholic Schools Learning Online program. The program with teachers based at all Regina Catholic High Schools and offers over 50 grade 9 to 12 courses. Facing the challenges inherent in offering remote teaching during the pandemic, Amy provides an interesting account of a true ‘pivot’ where she led the creation and implementation of a brand new elementary online learning program launched for Regina Catholic Schools in September. The program continues to grow, but based on initial response by students, parents, and district staff, the program is likely here to stay.

In the fifth vignette, the Chief Executive Officer of LEARN and founding director of CANeLearn, Michael Canuel describes how LEARN, a non-profit educational organization that serves the educational needs of the English linguistic minority of Québec (approximately 13.7% of the population or 1,092,000), adapted their programs and services to support Anglophone student access to education during the pandemic. By being ‘nimble and alert’ and partnering with the English School Boards across the province, LEARN was able to offer online resources and learning opportunities for parents and students working at home, now the focus has shifted to providing online professional learning helping teachers to shift their pedagogy to better support remote teaching.

The final vignette is from Sinéad Roy, the Academic Head of Québec Online School which has been working with homeschool families since 1998. She offers insights on how the pandemic drove the need for parents to learn a whole new skill set to support their children at home and how her program and network were there to step in to help. Sinéad hired new teachers and prepared a curriculum that would provide an alternative to the emergency remote learning that was offered by both public and private schools in the spring.
New Westminster K-8 Online Learning Program

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, we realized in New Westminster that one of the most important things we needed to do was listen to our community. Our District surveyed families about September’s Restart Plan, and although most families felt comfortable with the safety protocols put in place in our schools, there were also some families whose personal health and other concerns had them looking for options.

In response, the New Westminster School District created a new K-8 Online Learning Program for students. At the same time, we also expanded course offerings for high school students in our existing grade 9-12 online learning program through the New Westminster Virtual School. The expanded offerings for students in grades 9-12 are giving families and students the ability to learn from any location, on a more flexible schedule. Over 500 of the district’s 7,000 K-9 students are now learning online full time in addition to over 300 new part-time Grade 10-12 students.

The new K-8 Online Learning Program relies on strong partnerships with parents. They support their children at home, connect with teachers online, and join virtual classroom sessions as well. The District has also focused on keeping students connected to their home school to allow for transitions between student learning opportunities at school and at home throughout the school year. Online classes were carefully structured to group students from the same school and grade levels into the same “classrooms,” led by a teacher from their home school whenever possible. Students requiring extra support are connected virtually to Learning Support Teachers, Education Assistants, Child and Youth Care Workers, Aboriginal Support Workers, and Counsellors from their home school.

This newly created and inclusive K-8 program is helping our families who may have health concerns and worries, but also those who wish to continue to support their children’s education while keeping them connected to schools and some of the many supports they may count on there. Families in the program are able to return to in-class instruction when they are ready and have been offered two opportunities to return, one in October and the second in December. The program will be reviewed in January with additional return dates planned as well as the potential for more blended face-to-face learning opportunities for families who continue online.

Teachers provide synchronous (i.e., at the same time) and asynchronous (i.e., independent) learning activities in the online environment and use videoconferencing and online collaboration tools to support student engagement. Synchronous learning includes classroom meetings, happening live and in real-time, combined with asynchronous activities including lessons the students pursue on their own time. All elementary school teachers are using Microsoft Teams – an online platform that provides live chat, meetings, resources, and assignments all integrated into one platform for learning to occur. High school teachers offer a similar model using a combination of Blackboard Learn, an asynchronous learning management system, and Blackboard Collaborate, a synchronous live meeting platform.
Students are invited to class meetings, specific online lessons, group meetings, and one-on-one conferences with their teachers as needed throughout the program. Depending on the grade, students participate in online learning sessions several times a week – with sessions lasting between 20 minutes to an hour. Parents and caregivers are expected to work in partnership with teachers to facilitate the continued learning at home based on the projects, assignments, and activities assigned by the teacher. Teachers assess the learning experiences and provide feedback to students and parents on a regular basis.

The K-8 Online Learning Program is staffed by teachers who were granted accommodations because their medical or personal circumstances put them at high risk from COVID-19, as well as a number of others who were reassigned from regular classroom teaching due to lower in-class enrolment. The addition of this new staff has brought a new level of excitement to the teachers, with a “buzz” happening in the rooms where teachers work online as they talk about the different learning opportunities they can offer students. For example, in some cases, students are now able to experience in-person activities such as one online kindergarten teacher who is getting small groups of children (with their parents) together at a local park on Wednesdays for outdoor learning – physically distanced, and with appropriate COVID-19 protocols in place.

Our teachers in the K-8 Online Learning Program are not used to putting all their curriculum and instruction into an online format, but they are learning quickly and adapting. With collaboration and ongoing professional development, teachers are now using more of the features these programs have to offer – such as video conferencing capabilities that can put students into more of a “virtual classroom” setting and using channels and whiteboard in Teams for student connections. Teachers have also jumped in to make their own instructional videos for students, rather than just using ready-made videos from external sources. The power in these videos is students having their teacher share personalized lessons directly with them. The videos have been especially helpful for English language learners who might struggle with extensive written instructions.

Transitioning to teaching online is a very complex process, particularly shifting to an online format in such a short time frame. The move to online learning has come with a huge learning curve for teachers, especially those in the K-8 Online Learning Program, for whom the entire program was brand-new this year. The whole team at New Westminster Schools is very proud of our teachers and their ability to embrace this new way of teaching and provide robust learning experiences for students who may need to be at home.
How the Fall of 2020 Rolled Out

Vista Virtual School is one of about two dozen online schools in Alberta. Although governed by the Pembina Hills School Division north of Edmonton, Vista Virtual School serves school-aged students and adults from across the province, with a majority of students from southern Alberta.

To no one’s surprise, student registration traffic to our online school from mid-August to the end of September was much higher than the previous year, notably in Grades 1-9 where we saw almost a five-fold increase in student registrations, all related to concerns about COVID in local school settings.

Interestingly, a small proportion of those students who registered with Vista Virtual returned to their local schools before September ended. This was largely related to the expectations of intentionally designed online learning versus the emergency remote learning that took place at the end of last school year; several parents assumed their children would only be working 1-2 hours per day with direct online supervision from teachers whereas our asynchronous program covers the full depth of the program of studies.

Related to the increase in student registrations were the new challenges created that had to be addressed. For instance, the sudden tsunami of registrations needed to be processed and oriented to our specific online learning context. Orientation is normally completed by staff through individual batches of intakes where processing typically takes under 10 business days. As there were no additional resources made available early on by the Department of Education to address the student influx, solutions had to be found using the school’s existing staffing complement.

By “shortcutting” the registration process, we were able to process registrations in approximately three weeks but this required “cleanup” of all registrations through October and November to self-audit all of our registrations and documents collected. In essence, this simply moved the workload from the month of September and extended it throughout the fall.

In terms of orientation, we moved to a group orientation approach, providing students with suitable video instruction as to how our program worked and then followed up with synchronous Zoom sessions to answer questions and address concerns. While this allowed dozens of introductions simultaneously, online education is dependent on building solid relationships and while our individual orientation sessions would do this, the group orientation denied us an important first step in such relationship building.

Another unanticipated challenge was providing supporting instructional materials. While we deliver asynchronous courses online, we rely on authorized textbooks to support our online course materials. As we prepared for the school year, we did not count on such a large influx of students and had some materials back-ordered as late as October.

Finally, with class sizes ballooning, we were able to add teaching staff once additional budget
resources were made available from the Ministry of Education. This did not occur until late September and early October. In the interim, the ability of teachers to make meaningful connections to students was hampered by the volume of students with whom they were working.

A side note to these experiences is our connections with other schools. Historically, we are a very cooperative school and gladly work with other high schools to help augment their programs by offering a part-time program to high school students. Changes this year to the funding framework in Alberta, though, meant we were unable to continue offering this program. We have worked with other schools to provide some level of service to non-primary students (i.e., students who are registered in other schools) and developing a fee-for-service model that a few schools have accessed at this point of the school year.

Looking ahead, we are already making concrete plans to address second-semester registrations in order to NOT have the same backlog in registrations and then looking ahead to what we expect to be a busy Summer School. Finally, without knowing what the pandemic future might bring, we are revisiting all of our start of year processes to find efficiencies should we see anywhere near a repeat of the fall of 2020.

As we reach mid-November the school is running more smoothly, with students registered, teachers making those connections so important for success, and backorders largely filled.
March 16th, the headline read, “COVID-19: Alberta cancels all school classes, closes licensed daycares.” Many of us in ‘bricks-and-mortar schools’ half expected something was coming down from Alberta Education and the Government of Alberta, but just didn’t know when. Daily we watched the stats of COVID-19 cases rise across Canada and the world, unsure of what this meant for each of us individually or for our families. Emotions were high. Teachers’ stress levels were certainly at near-record highs only to be compounded by the following news, “all in-person classes were canceled”, but instruction and learning were not. It was just going to be done differently.

At Wainwright High School (WHS), we quickly jump into motion, first to understand the scope of our new adventure, but then to develop a plan. It’s important to note, the teachers at WHS are very conscientious of the students achieving the highest level of learning they can reach in a given school year. Academic rigour is paramount, and every step is taken by the teachers and students to meet this collectively. So, when the news came down, we needed to develop a plan for our students to continue receiving their instruction of core subjects, it became very important that we supply the best possible alternative solution to meet the learning needs of our students.

Thankfully, we were supplied a few days to get our plan together before we launched into delivering our course offerings. These first days were critical if only to allay fears and concerns with teachers. It was important for them to know we were in this all together, and we may struggle for the first while, but we would embrace technology as the primary means to deliver our instruction, not asynchronously but synchronously.

I had the good fortune of being a part of the online world with Credenda Virtual High School and College in Saskatchewan and one of the key factors we felt made the school successful was the combination of synchronous delivery via live online meetings and asynchronous via a learning management system which allowed us to give immediate access and feedback to students. As we considered our approach to online learning at WHS, it was important we supplied daily live classes to our students to keep them on task, engaged, and supply the feedback so crucial in learning. Once we had wrapped our minds around the philosophy of good teaching and learning in an online context, it was simply a matter of which tools we were going to use to make this happen.

We didn’t tell any of the teachers which live meeting programs they had to use, we simply asked them to use any one of the programs out there that gave them the ability to record their classes so they could archive them for a student to reference later, or for students, who may have missed a class and needed to access the class later. Most teachers chose to use Zoom because Zoom lifted the 40-minute restriction and allowed teachers to have unlimited time to record classes. Zoom’s ability to share presentations and create breakout rooms were a few of the added bonuses they used in their classes to replicate as close to a face-to-face experience for students. Some of our teachers chose to use Google Meet for their live interactive classes which had some limitations, but as we approached the end of the 2020 school year, Google Meet did make some improvements to their
application to allow for some of these features as well. *Zoom* responded proactively and closed the security risks in short order. Most of us ended up staying with *Zoom* for these reasons; besides, none of us were complaining about the price, it was free!

Although we all had access to *Google Classroom*, only a handful of us used the learning management system. Our school division had purchased the license for *Hapara* and had invested a lot of time and training into this system, so it was encouraged we use *Hapara*. We had a few *Hapara* champions in our school, who had been using it for a few years and had many of their courses loaded into the *Hapara Workspaces* for students to access. Many of these teachers gave up their time to create all-day training for teachers in our school who wanted to use it to house their courses, content, and assignments. Thankfully, we had nearly a week to get ready before we launched online with our students. Most of this time was spent training, developing, and prepping for the next steps of going live online.

One added step we took was to send out a survey to our parents and students inquiring about the level of technology available in each of their homes. Did they have Chromebooks, iPads, computers, laptops? What was their internet service like, if they had access? What we discovered was nearly everyone had access to the internet, however, the limitation was access to devices to access online learning. Some families had up to five children all needing to access the internet at the same time, so they needed extra devices. To accommodate the needs of these families, we literally pulled apart two of our Chromebook carts of 30 each and signed out Chromebooks to families who needed them at home. At the end of June, these were returned. We didn’t lose one of the 60 devices we sent home, and only one of them required some repairs to the screen. We also had one student, who came to the school each day and sat outside the building accessing the school WIFI because he didn’t have the internet at home or a Chromebook. During rainy days, we let him into the school and had a desk and chair set up for him to use one of the side entrances, which we wiped down afterward.

When the day arrived for going live, we had a few hiccups along the way. We had to teach some of the students about proper social etiquette in an online classroom. If you were using *Zoom*, you had to prevent students from putting up inappropriate names for themselves or background pictures. We had to make a few phone calls home to parents asking them to speak to the child about coming to class clothed and not lying in bed. The newness of the online soon wore off. New issues arose where students were not attending because their understanding of information put out by the Government of Alberta said no child would fail, so why would I go to classes if I’m going to pass anyway.

While other schools across the province supplied more text or paper-based solutions to their students, WHS teachers really stepped up to the plate and supplied a solid rigorous online solution to their students. They had to make some adjustments along the way, but it was a joy to watch the technological literacy growth in teachers. I couldn’t have been prouder of the work they did to ensure students were engaged and learning. It certainly wasn’t easy, but they came out from the other side technologically skilled and much more multi-dimensional in their approach to teaching.

Some of the take-aways:
• Each teacher developed an online presence for their courses
• Each teacher explored new methodologies for delivering their courses
• Each teacher examined and adjusted their assessment practices
• Each teacher learned how to use technology more effectively in the classroom

What’s even more interesting is the added learnings teachers have had now, since we have gone back to online learning midway through the semester for a 6-week period, as the government tries to get the COVID-19 numbers down.

Here are a few of the things shared with me by teachers:

One teacher has divided up her students into groupings of students with similar challenges and divided the 80-minute block of time into four groups of 20 minutes. She instructs each group live but in smaller groupings so she can make better use of the time responding to the individual needs of the students.

Another teacher spent the summer and beginning of the school year developing video recordings of class instruction along with presentations should we go back into this online situation again. The teacher simply meets live with each class, dialogues for a few minutes, and then pushes the video recording out to the students and stays online afterward for Q/A time. He has also made some major changes to his assessment practices to reflect assessing the outcomes to measure the level of learning that has taken place.

Another teacher shared how she feels that she is now at a more advanced level in using the technology. She felt she was only using technology at a basic level in the spring, but now her comfort level is so much higher, she feels she is being more effective as a teacher.

Another teacher talked about using more breakout rooms, using a jigsaw learning strategy, and bringing the students together afterward, very powerful to share their own understanding and take control of the mic. He added it was important to establish the norms upfront at the beginning about how students were to conduct themselves in the online classroom, but then trust them to do the right things.
Launching a New Online Elementary School

For the past five years, I have been the administrator of a high school with over a decade of experience in providing distance education. Scaling up our high school program to meet the increased demands for online learning was a task I knew I could confidently handle. Creating an elementary program in such a short period of time, on the other hand, was a challenge that I was not prepared for. In June, our elementary school was nothing more than a couple of thoughts and ideas I had scribbled on a yellow notepad. Today, it is a functioning school with almost 400 students, 21 staff members, and 15 virtual classrooms.

That yellow notepad quickly filled with more ideas as I spent the last few weeks of summer building the framework of our school. These ideas came through research, conversations with my superintendent, and connecting with administrators in other school divisions who were also tasked with adding elementary programs to their distance education high school. I was surprised by how many ideas also came out of inquiries and intake meetings with parents. These conversations were a very humbling experience for me, since I often did not have an answer to their questions about what our program would look like and what supports we would provide. My standard response became, “I don’t know, but I will see what we can do.” I jotted those questions and inquiries onto my notepad and started to explore what could and could not be offered in our elementary school.

A synchronous online school focusing on creating connections and community while meeting curricular outcomes was one of the phrases on that notepad and became the foundation of our school. We needed to focus on connections and community just as much as curriculum. Our students have had limited social opportunities since the beginning of the pandemic, so providing these through the school was critical. To achieve this, our students connect each day with their teacher and classmates through class meetings and live lessons. Group work, virtual centres, and class chats provide opportunities for students to meet and work with new friends in our digital classrooms. School community has also been created through events like our reading night, where students and their families enjoyed stories read by a local news anchor.

Building the elementary school has not always been a smooth process and we have experienced more than a few bumps along the way. One of the biggest challenges was how fast the school grew and not knowing how big it was going to get. On that yellow notepad, I outlined what our class cohorts could look like. The initial plan was to have three classrooms; grades one to three, grades four to six, and grades seven and eight. As soon as registration opened, it became evident that the scope of the school was greatly under estimated. The three classes very quickly became five, then 10, and currently there are 15. As the school year approached and new teachers were hired, classes were shuffled and class assignments were changed. This made planning for the school year extremely difficult. We even had to briefly delay the start date to accommodate the increase in staff and students and the change in course assignments.
To help onboard so many teachers in such a short period of time, I was fortunate to have the support of the coordinators, consultants, and coaches that work for our school division. At the beginning of the school year, there were wrap around supports for all of our teachers. This was not only technology support, but also curriculum and assessment. Almost half of the teachers in our elementary school are not only new to distance education, but also brand new to the teaching profession. These additional supports were vital in providing teachers with what they needed to be successful this year. To allow for ongoing support and training, all classroom teachers have a common preparation period at the end of the day. This provides opportunities for group training and gives teachers time to collaborate and connect with each other.

Not only were our teachers brand new to our school and distance education, but so were each of our elementary students. This provided additional challenges as we started the school year. A Week One Orientation Course was created to familiarize students and parents with our platforms and distance education. This continues to be a requirement for students to complete prior to joining their classroom. Our technology coach is available daily to provide tech support to students to ensure they are successful in a technology rich environment.

Having all new students also made it difficult to determine student needs and required supports. It was only after the school year started, and students settled into their classes, that we could understand the full scope of what was needed. The personnel and programs required for our students and school have been provided without hesitation by the superintendent and the rest of the senior leadership in our school division. As a result, we have been able to provide supports to meet the diverse learning needs of our students. Although our programming is in English, French Immersion students are able to participate in daily French language tutorials that provide them an opportunity to continue to practice their French language skills. Students requiring accommodations are supported by our Learning Resource Teacher and Instructional Assistant. These supports include small group and individual pull outs and guided reading. We also have 13 students learning in an Inclusive Classroom program. A Guidance Counsellor and English as an Additional Language teacher are the most recent additions to our school supports.

Almost three months in and our enrolment continues to grow. However, now that the school year has started, adding additional teachers and splitting classes is not an easy process. It is a balancing act to keep class size at a manageable level and avoid the disruption that moving students to a new class and teacher mid-year would cause. As the COVID case numbers continue to climb in our province, we are struggling to find a solution for how to best manage the increased demand for distance learning at this point in the school year.

Even with all of the challenges of building a new school in such a short period of time, it has been an extremely rewarding experience to see what has developed out of a few ideas on a notepad and the hard work of the teachers, support staff, curriculum supports, and leadership who have all contributed countless hours to the creation of this school. Although the future is uncertain, we do have students accessing our program for reasons beyond COVID and I am excited to see how our school will continue to evolve to provide a quality distance education to meet the emerging needs of our elementary school students.
The official word came out on Friday, March 13, 2020 that the government would be shutting down all schools across the province on the following Monday, however, we had received unofficial information that a shutdown was imminent and we were ready. Our mandate at LEARN, given that we have three divisions within our organization, we needed to adapt and to adjust our strategic planning for the services and resources we provide to teachers and students, modify our approach for the support we provide to our 88 Community Learning Centres, and ramp up the work we do in our Virtual Campus.

When the official word from the Minister came out, it was initially indicated that schools would be closed for two weeks, and students were told to consider it a type of holiday. Early into the first week though it was evident that this period would be extended significantly. The LEARN team re-opened some old files dating back to the H1N1 virus and the fear at that time that schools would be shut down. We dusted them off and studied them to see what if anything was still applicable in the new COVID 19 context. The major difference we saw was the extent to which this most recent pandemic had greater reach and impact on the population at large. At the same time, the Ministry decided it needed everyone to mobilize and to start providing resources first for parents who would be homeschooling their children, and second for teachers who would, at some point, be called on to do remote teaching.

The first thing we did was to move all of our face-to-face workshops and training sessions online and, given that we were quite experienced with a variety of online platforms, this did not represent much of a problem. We followed this up by collaborating with the Ministry and school boards across the province to populate a website with curated resources for parents, students, and teachers. The Directors General of the English school boards across the province requested we provide them with a plan on how we could support teachers who were being asked to teach online. Underlying this request was an assumption that teachers could quickly and easily adapt to online teaching once they had a handle on the technology, however, it soon became clear that there were other substantive issues at work. Specifically, the didactic approach employed by many teachers at the high school level simply did not work well in an online synchronous classroom. What students were largely exposed to was a talking head and many turned off quickly and not surprisingly, parents were disconcerted. Other teachers were told to generate videos with instructions and questions, send them out to their students, have them complete worksheets and that would be sufficient. At the same time, word came out from the Ministry that there would be no evaluations and as a result, the work students would do online would not count for marks. The scene now was set for a very challenging time.

At LEARN we offered a series of Twitter chats for parents as well as a series of interactive workshops for teachers and the participation levels were impressive. It suggested to us that there was a very real and urgent need within our community. As we headed into the Fall session and the start of the new school year, the Ministry of Education had made it clear that
all schools would be open for face to face classes and that only in extreme circumstances would they go online. Through September the number of new cases in the general population seemed under control and all went relatively well, however, by mid-October, there were almost no schools in Québec that did not have at least one or more cases of students or staff infected by the virus.

As of October 28, the Ministry somewhat revised their stance, and students at the senior high school level were to alternate between on-site classes and online classes. The challenge remains for the proper pedagogy to be employed in these situations as well as equity for students who have inadequate equipment or bandwidth to work effectively from home. LEARN is giving a number of workshops that address these issues and we are attempting to make them as targeted as possible including workshops for kindergarten teachers. There remains a certain resistance and stigma to online learning in the province, though that has diminished considerably since the outset of the pandemic.

One of the most important benefits of the pandemic is an appreciable increase in the recognition of the importance and value of social-emotional learning (SEL). The strains, both psychological and emotional, that this situation has created on students, teachers, and parents are not insignificant. We are now being asked more than ever to provide resources and services linked to SEL, and while we introduced mindfulness into our online classes two years ago, this is an area where an organization LEARN has much more to do.

We expect that the coming weeks and months will deliver more challenges and surprises, but the operative term we committed to prior to the start of this school year is “Nimble.” Thus far, we have had to be both nimble and alert and this is not likely to change any time soon.
A September to Remember

The beginning was strange. Strange in the way of a warm, spring day in the midst of a cold January or perhaps more of a freak, winter snowstorm in the middle of a mild October. As the pandemic hit and slowly moved across the consciousness of our provincial outlooks, it was a mesmerizing kind of experience. There was a giddiness in the voices of the children who spoke with excitement of two weeks of unexpected vacation, and a slight annoyance in the voices of parents who had to rush to arrange child care or deal with the reality of their own worlds locking down. What is sure is that no one expected that this would last for more than a few weeks. It was the calm before the storm.

By the end of April, the reality was beginning to hit. Reports of burnout from parents, students, and traditional teachers alike were swarming the pages of social networks. There was fear of failure, fear of unknown expectations, fear of too much screen time and too little learning. All of a sudden, the homeschool community, who had endured little respect and lots of stereotyping in Québec, found themselves holding the hands (figuratively speaking, of course) of hundreds and thousands of new parents, who were trying to stay afloat in a boat that was swiftly sinking.

Knowing that many people were considering homeschooling for the first time, Quebec Online School began preparing by interviewing new teachers and preparing a curriculum that would provide an alternative to the emergency remote learning that was offered by both public and private schools in the spring. Homeschoolers have to follow the Québec Education Program in terms of “Essential Knowledges” and “Competencies,” but have a lot of freedom in how and when these are accomplished. There is no stipulation for mandatory hours or schedules, and families are permitted to design their curriculum in any way that meets these outcomes. At the same time, there are strict legal requirements for planning and reports, with minimum support offered by the government.

Quebec Online School offers two different support packages to homeschool families. The All-in-One Course provides a single Zoom class each week to students, with a rotation of five core subjects - English, French, math, science and social studies. Parents are provided with lesson plans, website subscriptions and PDF resources to supplement this learning at home. The Deluxe Course provides daily classes so that each subject is taught once a week with homework assignments for the parents can follow up. STEAM, coding and 3D Virtual Worlds are offered as enrichment classes in the afternoon. By the end of September, QOS registered had multiplied 1000% – from 30 students in May 2020 to almost 300 students in September 2020. There was a huge cry from the Francophone community for something similar, but nothing was available. Had we been ready, our numbers could easily have surpassed 1000 new students.

The feedback from parents had been remarkably similar. Many have been shocked to find out, for the first time, that their children have huge learning gaps especially in the core areas of math, English and French. They have been surprised to learn that homeschooling takes far less
time than regular school hours, and have commented that in the two to three months since they started in September, their children have in many cases, not only “caught up” on crucial learning skills, but are more motivated to move ahead and enjoying the “game-style” of learning that happens naturally at home and amongst the homeschool community. They are, of course, missing friends at school, but the word on the street is that school is not what it used to be anyway, with the social distancing rules and restrictions on the playground. Many who admit that they had no respect for the homeschool community a year ago, are now avid members and ambassadors for a life-style that had changed learning not only for their children but for their families. They have committed to return, regardless of whether or not COVID conditions have improved for September 2021. This was indeed, a September to remember.
Trustee Vignettes

Vignettes from two school board trustees tell the stories of how local political action influenced both provincial direction as well as the roll out and preparation for the return to school in the Fall. School boards had to follow provincial health orders, but how they managed the continuity for learning with the return of teachers and students to school buildings varied. At times decisions announced by the boards themselves, as well as by provincial and territorial governments, created controversy and parents voiced their concerns in the media and directly to the school boards. In the end, both trustees share how the controversies led to better decisions and outcomes for the safe return to school and point to how their work as trustees had a direct and beneficial influence for students in their districts.

Norm Di Pasquale, a school trustee for the Toronto Catholic School Board, provides his account of the Fall which started in the Summer months preparing for submission of school reopening plans to the Ontario Ministry of Education. Norm had advocated for smaller class sizes, which eventually were put in place by the launch of schools based on the hybrid model of half-time in school and at home. Based on recommendations from the local health unit, Toronto Public Health, the board passed a motion making masks mandatory for K-12 students, instead of Grades 4-12 that the Ministry recommended. While there was some controversy at first, eventually school communities came to support masks for all. Norm describes how other motions were passed to have air purifiers installed in schools with little or no ventilation along with other safety measures. He describes how the board started a virtual school from scratch, also a major challenge. He writes how it is uplifting to see students back in school, getting reacquainted and playing with friends, and reinforces the decisions made in the summer that did keep student and staff health at the forefront, making the start of the school year as safe as possible.

The second vignette is from Peter Whittle, a school trustee for Zone 16 (an area including the Northeast Avalon) in Newfoundland-Labrador’s English Schoolboard. Peter describes how the sudden outbreak of COVID-19 in the province left no time for a planned response in the Spring. He notes that despite the introduction of their online program the Centre for Distance Learning and Innovation in 2001, the school district was “simply not prepared for a switch to virtual education”. With internet infrastructure challenges, teacher’s lack of preparation for teaching online, and computer equipment shortages for staff and students, the school district set out to plan for a better response for school opening in September, dusting off their 2009 Swine Flu Pandemic plan.

Facing limited resources, infrastructure for online instruction, and the need to meet provincial health requirements, the school board appealed to the provincial government for financial assistance for technology equipment, teacher training, and money to meet physical distancing requirements in schools and on buses. As initial funding announcements focussed only on purchases of laptops and tablets for students and teachers, the board cut the number of students able to be bussed to school to meet physical distancing requirements. The move added to the heightened scrutiny and concerns about decisions made regarding the safety of both teachers and students getting to, and remaining in, school buildings. However, in the end provincial funding was expanded to address the concerns and additional buses were added. In the end, Peter concludes the work done by the board and staff was “a job well done, in a year like no other.”
Norm Di Pasquale

There has been very little that has been normal in this school year, and that started with school board meetings all through the summer in preparation for the school year.

In July, the Ontario Ministry of Education asked us to submit our reopening plans for approval. Staff had recommended face-to-face learning with no indication of cohorts restricted to 15 students. I knew what the public health recommendations were, which were cohorts of no larger than 15 children in places like daycares, so I moved an amendment to request the ministry fund smaller class sizes of no more than 15 for elementary and secondary school. This motion was ultimately defeated in favour of full class sizes. But none of that mattered, as the Ministry directed us on the reopening model we would use.

Throughout the summer Trustees moved motions to make our schools safer, based on excellent recommendations from our local health unit, Toronto Public Health. These included making masks mandatory for K-12 students, instead of Grades 4-12 that the Ministry recommended. This came with some controversy at first, but eventually our school communities came to support masks for all. Toronto Public Health also supplied us with a COVID-19 hotspot map for Toronto, and for those schools we moved to have them staffed to support classes no larger than 15 students.

We also motioned for to have air purifiers installed in our schools will little or no ventilation, as experts agree that aerosol transmission is a major source of the virus and many of our older buildings don’t have ventilation systems. To help address ventilation, we motioned to open our windows beyond the typical four inches. Air exchanges are critically important to prevent COVID-19.

We also moved to install outdoor tents at our schools. From that, we have a pilot of 18 schools using outdoor tents, which can support two classes each. It’s all part of getting our students to be outside and stay active. In that vein, we are installing bike racks at all 200 of our schools, and encouraging students to use active transportation to get to school.

We also motioned to have student Plexiglas setup in our COVID-19 hotspot schools, so each student has a Plexiglas guard on their desk, which makes a difference particularly when students are eating without a mask.

From a tech perspective, we have supplied our students who need one with a Chromebook or an iPad with embedded internet for those who need a device and internet access. We are also supplying virtual students from underprivileged families with grocery gift cards.

Now that school is open, we are seeing the results of our efforts. Our COVID-19 hotspot schools make up the bulk of our cases, which makes me wonder what would have happened if we hadn’t prioritized those schools? Masks are largely working as intended to lessen the blow of COVID-19. Air purifiers are in classes, and many families are using active transportation. Students and staff love the outdoor tents. Plexiglass poses visibility and issues with people
being able to hear each other. This was a year to rapidly innovate, without fear of failure. Our students and staff’s health were depending on us.

I did not expect to see so many underprivileged families choose remote learning. One of the main reasons why they did was due to living in susceptible multigenerational families. We are working to ensure those students stay connected through device loaners and grocery gift cards, along with mental health supports.

Starting a virtual school from scratch was also a major challenge, despite having the most incredible and capable staff working on it. We started with two weeks of central staff running classes while we assigned teachers and students to classes, which went very well. Unfortunately, staffing and technology challenges dogged us for months. We supplied the virtual school with 15 vice principals, two superintendents, as well as its own Chief Information Officer. We also just completed a reorganization of teachers and support staff to ensure that all virtual school students have a reliable teacher. Better staffing assignments in the first place might have lessened the pain the virtual school admin staff had to go through.

We allowed parents to switch learning modes in November to coincide with that reorganization and our high school virtual student population increased by 25%. If we just moved all those students to the virtual school, many in person high school courses would have been in jeopardy, so we opted to pilot a hybrid or adaptive learning model for the 1500 new secondary virtual school students. Hybrid or adaptive learning was operationalized as having the student engaged in some in person learning and some virtual learning.

It’s uplifting to see our students back in school, getting reacquainted and playing with their friends. This is the reward for the countless hours and late nights I put in this year as a trustee. We want to get our students back into our schools and make them feel love and belonging in our communities of faith.

Every decision I made in the summer was with student and staff health in mind. I was determined to make this school year as safe as possible. To that end, we repeatedly asked the Ministry of Education for funding for safer smaller class sizes in cohorts of 15. We never heard back.
Peter Whittle

The 2020-2021 school year has been an incredible challenge for all aspects of the delivery of education in the Newfoundland and Labrador English Schoolboard (NLESD). What is to follow is the personal perspective of one trustee and does not purport to encapsulate the official view of the NLESD. I am the Trustee for Zone 16, which includes the North East Avalon which has the highest student population in the province. NLESD represents all English speaking students and schools in Newfoundland and Labrador comprising of 252 schools, 63,000 students and 11,000 employees.

Despite our geographical position as an island in the North Atlantic, the arrival of COVID-19 shattered any pretense that Newfoundland would be immune to the pandemic which was sweeping the globe. A slow trickle of travel related cases morphed into a public health emergency when the province’s first super cluster took hold in the most densely populated region of the province, the capital St. John’s. As with all matters of public health, the School District took guidance from the Provincial Government and public health authorities supporting our school communities. After engaging with school communities March 14, 15, and 16, I publicly called for the closure of schools on the Avalon Peninsula despite reluctance from the Chief Medical Officer.

On March 17 the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, in consultation with the District and the Chief Medical Officer of Health, suspended all in-school class instruction throughout the District schools. The NLESD faced the greatest of challenges providing families with access to general support and resources for students to engage in learning activities. Despite the introduction of the Centre for Distance Learning and Innovation in 2001, the NLESD was simply not prepared for a switch to virtual education. We faced significant internet infrastructure challenges, the majority of our staff had not engaged in online teaching previously, and both teachers and students lacked computer equipment at home. There were also many concerns about reaching disadvantaged, underprivileged, and special needs learners. The board held many virtual emergency meetings to discuss updates and concerns. Staff, parents and students coped as best they could with the circumstances the pandemic created.

The focus quickly turned to the preparation for the delivery of education, transportation of students, and the welfare of the myriad of school-based populations for the 2020-21 school year. The district had devised a plan in 2009 to address the potential impact of the Swine Flu Pandemic on our school populations which provided a good start. The board was included in many discussions with staff, the programs, and finance committees to develop a plan for the fall 2020.

On May 27th, the board submitted a 47-page report entitled Reimagining Teaching and Learning to the Department of Education outlining several key concerns, including student services, transportation, and human resources, along with recommendations on ways to mitigate those concerns. The cover letter to the Minister stipulated that we would need significant provisions for additional staff, infrastructure, particularly in student transportation,
computers for teachers, Chromebooks for students, personal protective equipment, training for teachers, and enhanced internet access for rural locations.

Six weeks later, the province announced a strategy with three scenarios that depended on the proliferation of COVID-19 in the province. The first scenario involved schools opening and instruction resuming almost as normal. The second featured schools being partially opened, while the third involved full-time at-home learning. The province also announced a $20-million expenditure on laptops and tablets for staff and all students in grades 7 to 12 in the event that the second or third scenarios were enacted and take-home technology was needed.

NLESD released a more detailed plan (i.e., A Safe Return To School) on August 17th. There was some confusion as the government’s plan presented online learning as the third of three scenarios, the board (i.e., district) felt many children might have to participate via online learning right away. Additionally, the board approved reducing the number of students eligible for bus transportation by about 6,000 to accommodate physical distancing aboard buses. The Newfoundland & Labrador Teachers’ Association voiced concerns about class sizes and the official opposition expressed similar concerns.

The six-week period from August 17th to the opening of schools was hectic. The public, parents, and teachers expressed concerns demanding more clarity on social distancing, online resources for the immunocompromised, cleaning services and busing. Teachers and staff were recalled on September 2nd, one week early, to allow for orientation and preparation time related to COVID-19 protocols and classes began on September 8th. The student transportation issue became a particular point of contention for parents.

On September 3rd, Education Minister Tom Osborne announced that ten new teachers would be hired full time to provide online learning resources and another ten million dollars for 100 additional school buses to ensure all students who needed busing would have a ride to school. Notably, the NLESD was not invited to the press conference held at Waterford Valley High in St. John's. The Minister served notice that he and the premier were disappointed with the bus issue and he intended ‘to find out how the mess was created’.

The re-opening went surprisingly well. The distribution of laptops for teachers was completed in October and the provision of Chromebooks is ongoing. I am confident that the NLESD is prepared and ready to continue education in light of any change in the COVID situation in the province. As a board member, I was very pleased with the role the board played in guiding the process. However, the real credit has to be given to the District staff and administrators who adapted to and implemented the Safe Return to School plan. The best interests of our children were my primary focus in every decision made. A special recognition must be made to the bus drivers, custodians, secretaries, student assistants, teachers, and teaching and learning assistants who diligently strived to provide a safe and welcoming school environment.

A job well done, in a year like no other.
Higher Education Vignettes

Since its inception, the focus of CANeLearn has been at the K-12 level and other Canadian organizations have focused on distance, online, and blended learning in the higher education context. However, when COVID-19 caused disruptions to the K-12 system there were direct impacts on university-based teacher education programs across the country. Issues around pre-service teachers being able to conduct formal and informal observations, as well as student teaching, when K-12 schools were closed or engaged in remote learning or when there are limitations on who can access the school building needed to be addressed. Institutions of higher education were also active in providing professional learning opportunities to help teachers transition to remote or hybrid learning environments. These two vignettes explore many of these issues, and how each of these two universities attempted to address them.

The first vignette is from Barbara Brown, Amy Burns, Astrid Kendrick, Theodora Kapoyannis, & Nadia Delanoy from the Werklund School of Education (WSE) at the University of Calgary. Werklund offers undergraduate and graduate programs in education to over 2600 students and the COVID-19 disruptions in K-12 schools impacted both programs and community services. The authors provide examples from their undergraduate programs to illustrate how challenges were turned into opportunities as they adapted to changing contexts in schools and supported K-12 schools and their teacher education program and undergraduate students.

The final vignette is from Lori McKee, an Assistant Professor teaching in the Bachelor of Education program at St. Francis Xavier University. Lori shares her perspective of the complexities of P-12 teaching and learning in Nova Scotia in the COVID-19 era, including examples from her own teaching experiences with pre-service teachers on the university campus. She poses several important questions about issues in preparing a safe learning environment in elementary school classrooms and ponders what type of experience her students will have during their upcoming practicum.
The Werklund School of Education (WSE) at the University of Calgary offers undergraduate and graduate programs in education to over 2600 students. COVID-19 disruptions in K-12 schools impacted our programs and community service and provided an opportunity for increased community outreach. In this article we provide examples specifically from our undergraduate programs in education to illustrate many of the challenges and opportunities we encountered as we adapted to changing contexts in schools and how we supported our K-12 schools and in turn how they supported our teacher education program and undergraduate students.

Pre-service Teachers Experienced an Online Pandemic Practicum During School Closures

The quick transition to online learning for post-secondary institutions and K-12 schools in Alberta and throughout the globe during 2020 was unexpected. Practicum experiences are critical in pre-service teacher development and in Spring 2020 when schools were closed, we had to quickly design an online practicum experience for our undergraduate students. Each spring pre-service teachers complete a shortened winter term and begin a four-week student teaching practicum. This four-week practicum is often a highlight for the pre-service teachers as they move from theoretical on-campus instruction into the practical and experiential component of their B.Ed. degree. In the weeks before beginning their Spring practicum, pre-service teachers meet with their partner teacher (i.e., in-service teacher who mentors a pre-service teacher), to begin planning their classroom lessons, and investigate pragmatic strategies for teaching in K-12 classrooms. In March 2020, days before this course was set to begin, COVID-19 reached Alberta and prompted a province-wide lockdown of all non-essential services. Schools moved to online learning and our pre-service teachers were asked to stay home.

The WSE determined that to protect the pre-service teachers from any delay or disruption to completing their B.Ed., an online alternative would need to be created for field experience. Unlike many other faculties of education who cancelled or postponed practicums, our directors of field experience worked to collaboratively design the pandemic practicum as an online course alternative. The development of the pandemic practicum was guided by the question: *How can preservice teachers build their pedagogical practice in Kindergarten to Grade 12 instruction in the absence of children and youth?* The focus of the course was on ensuring that the preservice teachers practiced teaching to both small and large groups within a virtual environment rather than the usual in-person environment in a practicum. The design included creating a new course, working with 23 instructors to learn about digital pedagogies, developing an effective virtual environment, and finding resources to effectively meet course objectives.

Despite the disappointment our undergraduate students shared with us about missing a classroom-based field experience and the challenges they experienced with learning online, by the end of the pandemic practicum, survey responses from our students indicated there was a changing and increasingly positive perception about online teaching and learning. They gained a new empathy for the K-12 teachers who had to quickly transition from in-person to online
classes and realized that teaching online required a completely different set of teaching resources and instructional strategies to be effective. The design of the pandemic practicum provided an opportunity for students to think deeply about their learning experienced during previous course work and provided students with experiences in designing lessons, integrating inclusive practices and discussing the ways that planning, and delivery could be manifested within an online learning environment. Additionally, faculty were able to provide a course experience where students used synchronous and asynchronous technologies to demonstrate competencies in teaching lessons. For many instructors, working online was also new, so the instructors worked collaboratively and shared pedagogical approaches to support student learning.

This course was developed quickly as an online practicum and struck a balance of applying the theoretical learning from previous classes with that of pedagogical development within an online learning environment. Students were able to focus on lesson planning, assessment, inclusive practice and the authentic integration of Indigenous studies. Each week, instructors provided scaffolding for students to continue to develop their teaching practice. Moreover, the design helped optimize the intentions of the original practicum experience and flow of learning activities by gradually progressing from designing small group activities and then advancing to designing a complete instructional plan for a lesson with attention to assessing student outcomes. The online practicum did not provide the pre-service teachers with a classroom of school age children to test out their lessons; however, the adapted pandemic practicum did provide a valuable experience for undergraduate students to design and enact a lesson in an online environment, learn about online pedagogies, and receive critical peer and instructor feedback.

Key learning emerged from the implementation of the pandemic practicum. Firstly, in times of crisis, a focus on student and teacher wellbeing needed to be at the forefront of instructional practice. The first week of the pandemic practicum was dedicated to working through the fears, anxieties, and anger expressed by the pre-service teachers about teaching online and the absence of their usual practicum experience. As a result of working through the pre-service teachers’ concerns, they became more open and willing to engage with the remainder of the course. Educational workers will face crisis and trauma work while working within school communities, so providing students with knowledge and competencies in building and protecting their own wellbeing needs to be a part of pre-service teacher education.

Secondly, despite the pre-pandemic marginalized status of online teaching and learning in K-12, virtual education may now become more commonplace in tertiary education. Faculties of education will need to build the digital instructional literacy of pre-service teachers to improve their confidence, motivation, and knowledge in online pedagogies, as online education will likely play a larger role and teachers need the knowledge, skills, and competencies to be effective in both in-person and online environments. Further, instructors within universities also need to learn about effective online pedagogies so that they can model and use a variety of digital strategies and platforms with pre-service teachers.

Creating the pandemic practicum was a response to a crisis moment, and while the course itself led to interesting and novel insights about developing digital instructional literacy in pre-service teachers, it also highlighted the importance of in-person instruction and the importance of experiential learning in education programming. Online teaching and learning will continue to
grow as a segment of tertiary education and building the confidence of pre-service teachers with teaching in virtual environments will become a necessary component of teacher education.

**Pre-Service Teachers Tutored K-12 Students During School Closures**

During this time, we also heard about concerns from parents who were suddenly responsible and feeling ill-equipped to support their children with learning at home (Brown, 2020). Parents shared their challenges with balancing the demands of working from home and at the same time supporting their children who were learning from home. When in-person practicums had to be canceled due to K-12 school closures, the WSE began brainstorming ways to both engage pre-service teachers and support the community. In response, the experiential learning team launched a volunteer online tutoring program that had tremendous impact in the community (MacGillivray, 2020). The purpose of this program in Spring 2020 was to provide the opportunity for pre-service teachers to engage with their community to provide free online tutoring services for K-12 students who found themselves at home due to the closure of schools. The student volunteers were able to draw on their learning from the pandemic practicum course in their tutoring sessions. The tutoring program provided our undergraduate students with an opportunity to interact with children and youth and practice some of their newly acquired online teaching skills.

The program received requests to support over 1000 children and youth from across Alberta. At that time, almost 300 pre-service teachers stepped forward to serve as tutors, and some offered to support multiple children. This arrangement continued for many families throughout July and August, and well beyond our expectations. Additionally, due to high community demand and the excitement of the pre-service teachers when engaging with the community, the tutoring program continued in Fall 2020 and pre-service teachers offered non-stop support to K-12 students while completing their full-time undergraduate studies. The tutoring program stands as an example of the innovation that was propelled forward by the complexities presented by COVID-19 and one of the ways WSE has found to engage in new and different ways of educating future teachers while supporting K-12 educators, students, and their families.

**In-Person Practicums Were Blended with Online Course Work**

In the Fall 2020, to ensure pre-service teachers would be sufficiently prepared, both for certification with the government and with respect to their ability to enter competently and confidently into their chosen profession, the decision was made to return to in-person practicum opportunities within K-12 schools. We also decided to provide fully online courses during the Fall term. This provided our students with a combination of an in-person practicum in schools coupled with online courses in their program. This decision presented both opportunities and challenges for students, instructors, practicum teachers, as well as our program administrators.

Our students were able to remain relatively physically isolated from their peers during the period leading up to their practicum allowing them to feel more confident that they were healthy and physically prepared to enter into the practicum, an experience that they value highly and that is considered a cornerstone of teacher education. Additionally, by being a student in the online environment, these students had the opportunity to experience online education and to see the myriad of ways their own instructors designed learning for the online environment. Knowing that
the need to engage in some kind of online delivery during their practicum was a very real possibility, this provided students with the chance to reflect on how they might themselves engage in online education as a K-12 teacher. A challenge faced by some pre-service teachers in moving from the online environment to the in-person practicum was the uncertainty surrounding schooling and the added health measures in schools during COVID-19. This level of uncertainty about being in schools during a pandemic was something new for our program administrators and required instructors, administrative staff and our school partners to support students in new ways. While it was not historically uncommon for pre-service teachers to exhibit nervousness regarding their competency, their fit for the profession or, for example, their ability to form connections with their partner teachers or students, it was a unique experience working with pre-service teachers who were nervous to be in a school during a pandemic.

Schools and Community Members Supported our Undergraduate Students

Securing practicum placements also presented a challenge due to the additional health and safety protocols implemented by schools. School administrators were also nervous to invite additional guests to schools, such as student teachers and their field placement supervisors. Our partner school districts recognized the value of field placements and worked with us to support in-person practicums. Most students completed their field placement completely in-person; however there were also instances of classes that were required to move to online learning during the practicum time period and our students demonstrated their flexibility and adaptability to work alongside their partner teachers and complete their practicum in online learning environments.

School leaders and teachers also volunteered to meet with our undergraduate students online and share their expertise through panel presentations in webinar formats. For example, one webinar included panelists of in-service teachers and instructors focusing on the “how” and “why” of developing ePortfolios. While Instructors wanted students to feel confident in the pragmatic elements of designing their ePortfolios, it was important to also emphasize the pedagogical implications of the assignment. The panelists spoke from their experience and shared examples while elaborating how they are using them to support their own classrooms as well as their own professional learning. In another webinar with over 400 participants of students and instructors as well as different school partners including classroom teachers, parents, instructional leaders, principals and students, the focus was on discussing the topic of online teaching and learning in K-12 classrooms. Panelists shared their perspectives about the possibilities and challenges of online instruction. These included opportunities for students to continue their learning from home and provided comfort to many families navigating the challenges of COVID-19. Issues of equity, accessibility and mental health concerns were also shared as panelists spoke from their experience in both urban and rural settings. Online webinars provided a convenient venue for our community partners to provide their expertise and share insights with our students.

A Professional Learning Series was Provided for In-Service Teachers

The need to support practicum partner teachers was readily apparent due to the ongoing shifts between in-person and online learning that was happening across K-12 schools. As a response, the WSE created a professional learning seminar series to support partner teachers with topics that they identified as areas for growth and to show our recognition and appreciation for our
partner teachers. We provided free, accessible online webinars for practicum teachers on the following topics: online and blended practices, teacher wellness, Indigenous education, and teaching in diverse contexts. We have learned as this series was being developed that educators need professional learning that is practical, easy to integrate and conveniently accessible online.

As a part of school re-entry plans in Fall 2020, school districts in Alberta also started offering fully online schooling options for families. For instance, Calgary Catholic Schools created a new online school for K-9 with over 5000 students and 200 online teachers (Ross, 2020). In addition to the professional learning series for practicum partner teachers, we also offered freely accessible professional learning for online teachers in the field. The increase in online teaching in Alberta schools resulted in an increased demand for professional learning about online teaching for in-service teachers. The WSE received numerous requests from local school districts for professional learning to support their online teachers. We responded to the requests and worked with graduate students to help design an online professional learning series for teachers. This resulted in a series of sessions on topics, such as universal design for learning, engaging students synchronously, online pedagogies, choice boards, and e-assessment, to name a few.

**Online Teachers in the Field Informed our Online Pedagogy Series Designed for Students**

We also received requests from pre-service teachers and instructors for increased opportunities in learning about online pedagogies. Drawing on our experiences offering professional learning in online spaces (Beck et al., 2020), we started an online pedagogy series open to faculty and students that commenced in Spring 2020 and continues to evolve with new sessions added on a monthly basis. This series is also informing the design of a new undergraduate course that will be offered in Summer 2021, entitled digital pedagogies. The digital pedagogies course will be open to enrollment from students in the undergraduate program, recent graduates in education, and practicing teachers in the field. The course will provide educators with an understanding of digital pedagogies and the literacies that can be implemented to support digital learning. We also updated one of our graduate certificates in leading and learning in a digital age in the M.Ed. interdisciplinary pathway based. In addition, we developed a new graduate certificate in online assessment. The four courses within the assessment topic focus on research, practices, and trends in the field of assessment in technology-enabled learning environments. These graduate courses and programs now have a greater emphasis on teaching and learning online environments.

**Lessons Learned**

Seeking student input has been a valuable strategy as we have been moving forward in making changes to courses and programs. Representatives from the Education Student Association (ESA) provided valuable input and students continue to gather input from their peers to share with our faculty. For example, the ESA is working collaboratively with our faculty to design a student questionnaire to seek input about the challenges and successes experienced with online learning. We also continue to survey instructors, and partner teachers in the field and seek input from faculty and community partners. Feedback from students, instructors and K-12 schools inform our faculty as we continue to design and redesign online courses and plan for future program improvements and learning experiences in online environments.
We also learned that instructors need additional supports with designing and delivering online courses as well as on-going professional learning in online pedagogies. We initially provided supports, such as teaching assistants (i.e., often graduate students with experience in teaching online) helped instructors who needed to quickly transition their courses from in-person to online modalities – many of who were teaching online for the first time. Technology coaches were also available through our institution for instructors to seek individual assistance in learning how to use technologies commonly used in online courses (Canon, 2020). Instructors started to recognize that designing a high-quality online course requires more than substituting activities from in-person to online environments. Extra technology support was helpful to make a quick transition, but we also recognized that with more time, instructional designs could be improved. In moving forward, we are also providing instructors with funds to hire a graduate student to provide assistance in designing new courses. We also continue to examine ways to improve professional learning opportunities for instructors. Designing quality online learning experiences requires competencies in online pedagogies and sufficient time for instructional design.

Another challenge was the timeline for decisions and communications regarding the modality of course delivery. In the early stages of COVID-19, instructors and students were required to quickly adapt to the changes involved in moving in-person courses to online courses. There was little time to prepare for these changes. However, more time was provided for the Fall term. Our institution announced in early June that most of the Fall 2020 courses would be delivered online and this early communication provided instructors with sufficient time to design their courses and seek professional learning supports to adequately prepare for the Fall term. We recommend providing instructors with more time, if possible, to design appropriately for the modality of their course. The additional time is also beneficial for students as they too can plan accordingly for their courses and practicum experiences knowing in advance if they will be taking courses in-person or online. We recognize it may not always be possible to provide advance notice and extra time to prepare in times of crisis and quick shifts in modality may be required.

Our experiences and insights through designing a pandemic practicum, developing a tutoring program, transitioning in-person courses to online, blending online courses and practicum experiences, and engaging with our community to receive and provide supports and professional learning opportunities, will help us continue to be responsive to the changing needs of our students, instructors, and school partners. We also learned the importance of maintaining ongoing communications to work together and keep everyone informed and involved in changes and adaptations needed to respond to the changing contexts in schools during the pandemic.
On the first day of class in Fall 2020, my students, all first-year elementary teacher candidates, filed silently into the classroom, pausing only to sanitize their hands. Greeting my students felt clumsy as it was hard to hear attempts at conversation through our non-medical masks while also maintaining physical distance. Students found a seat in the classroom, sanitized their workspace, and then sat silently as they waited for class to begin. The classroom felt awkward and distanced. I began teaching my class with my toes hugging the “safety line” that indicated that I was two metres away from the front row of students. I reflected that nothing in my two decades as an educator had prepared me for teaching in these conditions and I wondered how I might prepare teacher candidates to teach in elementary schools with similar safety policies in place. Herein, I share my perspective of the complexities of P-12 teaching and learning in Nova Scotia in the COVID-19 era.

The nature of the virus meant that the return to face-to-face schooling in Nova Scotia was uncertain. The province’s return to school plan identified that classes would begin in schools with enhanced safety measures including physical distancing and the wearing of non-medical masks (for older students and staff), but also clearly explained that the delivery model of schooling would shift – to a blended approach, or at-home learning – in response to the COVID-19 cases and health information available. The fluid approach to the plan made sense as it allowed schools to pivot in response to the conditions in their region (Nov Scotia, 2020), but it created a tentative feeling as all stakeholders carefully watched the virus case count knowing that the delivery model (and associated teaching methods) could rapidly change.

Though teachers knew what the safety policies were for P-12 schooling, they did not have experience with how to teach within these conditions. All teachers, whether experienced or novice, were learning to teach this Fall. In my own teacher education classroom, I experienced the ways that masks and distancing constrained communication. Would elementary classrooms be as silent as my teacher education classroom? Would children be able to hear instructions when their teacher was wearing a mask? Would the small group instructional practice that was necessary for many students be possible when abiding by two meters of distance? What was an alternative? Would teachers revert to instructional methods that focused on solitary work or was it possible to support student collaboration? How could teachers create a physically and emotionally safe learning space for their students within such an uncertain context? Over time, as our cases have remained low in the province and policies have been stable, teachers have gradually found learning routines (often using a trial and error approach) that support face to face, physically distanced classroom learning. In my teacher education classroom, my classroom feels less awkward and is no longer silent as my students have found ways to connect with one another in the current conditions of masking and physical distancing. But, what if policies were to change?

Interrelated with the questions of how to innovate teaching practices in the COVID-19 era was the question of how resources could be used in elementary classrooms. Materials usually
available for teaching and learning (e.g., crayons, papers, books, math manipulatives, digital technologies) were subject to enhanced cleaning measures. However, it was not clear how this cleaning might impact the use of these materials (e.g., cleaning would take place immediately or if the resource would be out of circulation for hours or days). Would this uncertainty further restrict the materials used in classrooms and the learning opportunities available to students? Would access to materials be consistent for all students in all grades? In some ways, planning lessons with fewer materials seems easier, but how might learning opportunities be impacted?

The return to school has been filled with more questions than answers. From my perspective, teachers have worked very hard as they have learned to teach in new ways within a context of uncertainty. I wonder how long educators can sustain this level of innovation while also attending to the physical and emotional safety of their students, their families, and themselves. My teacher education students are almost ready to enter their practicum teaching placements. These novice teachers have experience as a learner within a classroom where COVID-19 safety measures are in place. Will this experience help them navigate the classroom in this new era? Will the strategies for communication and collaboration developed in our teacher education classroom transfer to the elementary classrooms? As this group of teachers enters the classroom, we wonder how long our COVID-19 cases might remain low enough so we can sustain this face-to-face, physically distanced mode. My teacher education students, alongside all other educators in Nova Scotia (including myself), are continuing to learn to teach in the COVID-19 era.
References and Resources


