



## Citizens With Disabilities – Ontario

[www.cwdo.org](http://www.cwdo.org)

**“Together We Are Stronger”**

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June 30, 2020

The Honourable Stephen Lecce  
Minister of Education  
5th Floor, 438 University Avenue,  
Toronto, Ontario M7A 2A5

Dear Minister Lecce,

Re: Provision of Educational Programs and Service for Students with Disabilities During the Transition to School Re-opening

Citizens With Disabilities - Ontario (CWDO) is committed to the rights of all persons to participate fully in the civil, cultural, economic, political and social life of their communities.

We actively promote the rights, freedoms and responsibilities of persons with disabilities through community development, social action, and member support and referral. Our primary activity is public education and awareness about the social and physical barriers that prevent the full inclusion of persons with disabilities in Ontario.

CWDO acts in the interests of the 1.85 million Ontarians who live with one or more disabilities. Our registered members reside in almost every electoral district in the province.

Citizens with Disabilities - Ontario is submitting this letter in support of the AODA Alliance's June 18 brief which outlines recommendations the Ministry should consider to ensure the needs of students with disabilities are fully taken into account during the transition period in the fall. We are aware that different measures will occur as part of the



province's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. CWDO wholeheartedly endorses the AODA Alliance's brief.

As a cross-disability organization in Ontario, we wish to add our own recommendations in support of the full inclusion of students with disabilities. Our members include parents and students with disabilities.

First, we encourage the Ontario government to work diligently now on the Education Standards under the AODA. If these were now in place, it would have made the process of transitioning from learning at home back into the classroom much easier.

CWDO is very aware of the educational needs of students with disabilities and of utilizing the full variety of learning styles which benefit students with disabilities, some of which are not able to be used during online learning. The needs of students who learn in ways that are not able to be accommodated and who require other teaching methods must be taken into account. Accommodation of their learning needs may require additional supports and/or resources and is an absolute necessity. Appropriate funds and personnel must be allocated now to be in place by the fall.

Classrooms often have multiple learning and sensory opportunities, as well as the support personnel, to ensure the diverse needs of learners with disabilities are being met, and many of these cannot be duplicated in online learning. Some mainstream classroom teachers may lack the skills or resources necessary to create stimulating and engaging online activities. A thorough evaluation of online learning will show that not all online activities are accessible for students with all types of disabilities. Before a decision is made regarding whether a student with disabilities is able to utilize online learning, a thorough assessment of whether this will be accessible and best for that student must be undertaken.

We agree that the definition of "disability" as outlined in the AODA and in the Human Rights Code should be used in all school systems in Ontario (as outlined in the AODA Alliance brief) so that no student is left behind. We believe that every student with a disability must be accommodated during this time of transition so that they will be able to make the most of their educational experience and be better prepared to contribute to their communities.



We realize these are challenging times for everyone and that things can change rapidly, but we believe that parents of students with disabilities need to know, in a timely manner, how their children are progressing with their online lessons and how any difficulties will be addressed. If problems are dealt with quickly, there will be a greater chance of students not losing ground and being better able to cope with the transition to a regular classroom or a combination of classroom time and online time in the fall. Frequent, meaningful communication with parents is essential, especially now during this pandemic when learning has been so drastically changed. Since most parents have access to computers or tablets and the internet, teachers and administrators can communicate very quickly with parents who know their children best and can be a valuable asset in the learning process.

We applaud the efforts taken by the government to ensure families without computers, tablets or smartphones and those without internet access have what is necessary for online learning during the pandemic. Some parents and/or students cannot afford the technology not provided by schools or may have ongoing issues with poor internet connectivity. Many students exclusively use data on their phones. This can also be a challenge when internet access is needed by a parent having to work from home (beyond their stress at being unable to provide the assistance their child needs for learning). Therefore, the government must ensure parents and students have the necessary devices and/or internet connectivity, at no cost to those families, to continue learning from home, if that is to be part of their education this fall.

CWDO shares the AODA Alliance's concern about there not being enough Educational Assistants and Special Needs Assistants (point #7) and that they should not travel between schools. As you are aware, students with disabilities often require specialized assistance which these individuals can provide. One teacher cannot adequately help all the children in his/her classroom alone when he/she does not have the assistance required to fully support those students with disabilities. Students with social-affective needs or requiring physical specialized intervention and manual dexterity assistance are at great risk. Absence of specialized personnel to assist in the classroom and to assist parents is a serious concern. Parents are not trained as special educators or to do the work of their support network such as therapists, nurses, deaf-blind intervenors, or attendant services. For students with various cognitive, behavioural and even physical

disabilities, it can be difficult to engage in online learning (e.g., a student may be too distracted, cannot sit still or not be able to use the technology independently). Social distancing measures are difficult for students with disabilities who require support persons (as in a group home). Loneliness and isolation experienced by students at home, lack of peer support and elements of their support systems (i.e., counsellors, tutors, EAs, “buddies,” etc.) must be taken into account when determining which students require being in the classroom as opposed to learning online at home.

CWDO agrees that digital meeting platforms must be fully accessible. We know from our experience as an organization working diligently to provide fully accessible meetings that Zoom is the most accessible meeting platform available currently. We would be happy to share our experiences working with Zoom and how we ensure it is accessible to people with all kinds of disabilities. We have facilitated accessible webinars for several organizations using Zoom. Even when platforms are accessible, new barriers may arise, such as Zoom for a large class of students who all use ASL. This presents difficulty around understanding the signer when each individual gets smaller on the screen. While there is an increase in the presence of ASL interpreters in the media, ASL educational resources for signing students are still lacking, as is accessible class content and accessibility on the internet. Pros and cons of using different platforms for online learning by users with different disabilities needs to be explored, as mentioned in the AODA Alliance brief. Hiring a consultant well versed in accessible technologies and the needs of students with disabilities as soon as possible will be critical to student success in the upcoming school year.

All online content, including documents, must be accessible to students and parents. In the year 2020, this can be easily achieved, if the government has the appropriate guidance from those who use accessible technologies. CWDO recommends that the government utilize not only consultants with expertise in these fields, but also students and parents who use accessible technologies. The government is surely aware that students who depend on assistive technology such as a screen reader or a braille display might not have a compatible interface with all platforms and solutions must be found prior to beginning lessons in the fall.

CWDO agrees that Special Education Advisory Committees should be fully utilized to provide their expertise and recommendations at this time, even if they need to meet over the summer. It makes sense

that SEACs from across the province should be able to communicate and share ideas and concerns and be able to make recommendations to the province as a group. If that is accomplished over the next couple of months, the province will be better able to provide for the needs of students with disabilities beginning in September.

To address the barriers discussed above, we propose the following recommendations:

### Digital Learning Plan

The province shall develop, and make publicly available, a plan to seamlessly include accessibility in the digital learning and technology used throughout the academic journey of all students with disabilities.

The plan must be created in consultation with a diverse body of stakeholders that includes students with disabilities. Regardless of the stage in the learning process or pathway (program of study), equitable access to resources, opportunities, technology, and services must be made available to students with disabilities at no additional cost to the student or their family.

Educators must be required to identify the digital technology and learning requirements for each student with disabilities to meet the required core competencies of each course.

An integral part of this plan will be for accessibility consultants to vet the accessibility of the technology and content proposed and to recommend only fully accessible platforms and content. It is critical that systemic and environmental barriers that hinder a student's digital learning be removed and that no new barriers are created.

Training for students with disabilities, teachers and support staff on how to correctly use assistive technologies involved in the digital learning process must be included in this plan. Teachers and support staff must be continually trained on updates or changes that could impact on students' learning capabilities.

Parents must also be informed about how they can assist their children to complete homework assignments or to better be able to learn from home.

### Accessible Content

The province shall support educators and administrators with tools and processes for acquiring, producing and maintaining accessible content, and offer centralized resources (e.g., people, budget, etc.) Content must be tested using students with diverse disabilities, as well as experts in the field, to ensure it is accessible. CWDO strongly believes that procurement of accessible content for students with disabilities must also be part of the Education Standards.

As we approach the year 2025, when Ontario is to become fully accessible, it behooves the government to learn valuable lessons from what has taken place in the past few months during the COVID-19 crisis. By being proactive and prepared to put the necessary measures in place for students with disabilities, their families, teachers and support workers, the government will be preventing barriers to learning and will be creating a more inclusive educational environment.

Thank you for your shared commitment to ensuring accessibility and inclusion for students with disabilities in Ontario. In the fall of 2020, it will be critical to continue with that commitment even more diligently when students transition to the new learning environment. Seriously considering and implementing the recommendations of the AODA Alliance and CWDO will mean greater potential for the best learning outcomes. We look forward to working with you to create a more inclusive educational experience for students with disabilities.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Tracy Odell'.

Tracy Odell  
President