

REPORT**SpC-20-3****TO: SPECIAL COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE****SUBJECT: CONTINUITY OF LEARNING #4 – THOUGHTEXCHANGE
CONSULTATION FEEDBACK****DATE: TUESDAY, JUNE 23, 2020**

ORIGIN

Director's Council

BACKGROUND

At the Committee of the Whole meeting of May 12, 2020 Trustees approved a consultation with students, parents/guardians and staff to gather feedback regarding distance learning. This consultation allowed for the Board's stakeholders to provide important input as plans are prepared for the return to school in September. The ThoughtExchange survey platform was used to conduct the consultation. The exchange was launched on Tuesday, May 19 and remained open until Wednesday, May 27. A total of 2,099 participants shared 2,864 thoughts and provided 50,798 ratings of other people's thoughts regarding distance learning. This report will provide some highlights of the feedback received during the consultation.

COMMENT

he ThoughtExchange participation rate was very good. The parent/guardian group accounted for 52% of the participants, staff made up 28% of the respondents and students were the remaining 20%.

To begin the ThoughtExchange, participants were asked four demographic questions (see Appendix A):

- a) Please select the panel with which you most closely identify (i.e., elementary/secondary/both);
- b) Does your (or your child's) distance learning experience continue to support faith development through religion focused learning tasks and/or opportunities for prayer and reflection;
- c) Students and parents, please chose the statement that best describes your distance learning experience so far;
- d) How would you describe your feelings towards distance learning?

A large percentage of the participants in the feedback (62%) identified as being involved with elementary education.

In the other demographic questions, encouragingly, 73% (1392 participants) felt that distance learning did continue to provide a faith development focus for students. In regards to the amount of work students received, 47% (877 participants) felt there was just the right amount of work while 16% identified that there was too much work and 12% felt that there was not enough work.

Finally, with regards to how participants felt about distance learning the overwhelming choices were *Stressful* (30%) and *Challenging* (36%).

Following the four demographic questions participants were then asked to share their thoughts on the following question: *As the HWCDSB continues to support faith formation and learning from home, we wish to hear your thoughts about your distance learning experiences. What has worked well, what have been the challenges, and what suggestions do you have for improvement?*

Eight themes emerged from the consultation. These themes were:

- i. Lesson Delivery/Online Learning
- ii. Connection/Communication
- iii. Assessment, Evaluation & Reporting
- iv. Learning at Home Digital supports
- v. Equity in Learning
- vi. Religious Education and Faith Formation
- vii. Mental Health & Well-Being
- viii. Special Education

A brief overview of each theme is provided below.

Lesson Delivery/Online Learning

In this theme participants identified that there is realization that there is a learning curve as students and teachers/educators adapted to distance learning. Appreciation was expressed for efforts teachers have made. There was a consistent message that interaction by video with the teacher was important for parents and students. Discussions about the pros and cons of synchronous learning were also shared. The dominant thoughts focused on the importance of students receiving instruction from their teachers prior to the assigning of learning tasks.

Connection/Communication

This theme identified the challenges associated with communication and connection during distance learning. The thoughts here stress the importance of regular, meaningful and personal connection between the students and the teacher/educator. Thoughts also were presented that identified the challenges of connecting with parents and the home to attempt to keep students motivated and engaged in their learning. Finally, there were also comments about the loss of interaction between students.

Assessment, Evaluation & Reporting

The emphasis in this theme was on the importance of students receiving timely feedback on their school work. A number of thoughts were shared regarding the real challenge teachers experience as they evaluate work without fully seeing the process the student has gone through to create the work. In a typical classroom the on-going daily feedback loops of assessment are lost in the distance learning model and it is hard to judge student growth/learning when a final product is all that is submitted. There were a number of concerns expressed that students' marks would not go lower than the March 13 mark and the negative impact this had on student motivation.

Distance Learning – Digital Supports

Thoughts here identified the challenge experienced by some teachers if they did not have any previous experience in working with the myClass environment. The need for ongoing professional learning, both real time and on-demand were clearly expressed. There were many thoughts that appreciated the quick response and learning opportunities that were provided to teachers as the shift happened to distance learning. Finally, thoughts were shared that it was difficult for students and parents to access help if they were having difficulty with the online platform.

Equity in Learning

Concerns were expressed here regarding the different home realities of students across the Board. The ability for parents/guardians to support their children is impacted by so many different factors (language barriers, understanding of the curriculum, working during the day etc.) that a full distance learning model likely increases the gaps between students. Equity of access to technology and broadband internet was also identified as a real concern.

Religious Education & Faith Formation

Many thoughts in this area identified that there was a real effort to maintain a Catholic community. This was achieved for staff through weekly prayer and Christian meditation services. Students had prayer and celebration opportunities. Religious instruction made up an important part of the day through the Growing in Faith, Growing in Christ online resource.

Mental Health & Well-Being

Comments in this theme were split into two areas: the need to focus on the mental health and well-being of students/families and the need to support staff well-being. Many comments identified the current situation in general as stressful and a loss of normalcy. The challenges of working and supporting children in distance learning were identified by parents and teachers/educators as a real source of stress. Many in this theme report that the amount of work required to support their children or to teach children in this new manner is very draining.

Special Education

The challenges of supporting students with special education needs were highlighted in this theme. Students with Individual Education Plans (IEP) and students that require direct support in the classroom often struggled with online learning. Meeting accommodations in a distance learning model is very challenging and keeping students, even with mild intellectual delays, motivated about their learning was difficult. The challenges that English Language Learners experienced during distance learning were also highlighted in this theme.

What we have heard

As we prepare for a return to school and the real possibility that some learning will need to continue in a virtual manner we have heard that the following are important elements for students to be successful with digital learning:

- Teacher driven instruction, via synchronous, asynchronous and/or video/audio is essential for students to fully understand the learning tasks they are being asked to complete;
- Connection and communication – authentic and personal connection between students and the teacher/educator and students to students are essential elements of student learning and well-being. Fostering the home-school communication is also an important element of virtual learning;
- Formative, summative and evaluative assessment practices are vital to the teaching and learning process. Students need to know where they are doing well and where they need to focus their efforts;
- Providing professional learning for all teachers and educators to assist them in enhancing their ability to deliver instruction and support for students in the virtual classroom. This professional learning should include the use of video, audio and synchronous techniques. Learning opportunities for parents on the various elements of online learning should continue;
- Equity of access to supports, digital resources, internet connectivity needs to continue to be a priority in order to support those students most in need. Beyond digital supports the Board must also find ways to support families that have difficulty directly supporting their children with online learning;
- The focus on daily religious education and faith formation opportunities for students and staff should continue and be enhanced where it can be enhanced;
- The need to focus on the mental health and well-being of students and staff will likely increase as we return to a school year that will have many uncertainties as the year starts. Recognizing the loss of 3½ months of school will create some real anxiety and stress for members of our school communities;
- Students with special education needs will need much more 1:1 support, both in the classroom and online. Support and training for educational assistants on digital tools will be an important consideration.

The detailed responses from the consultation will be shared with the instructional services teams as they work to support teachers in preparing for learning in the fall. Board staff will

continue to examine the consultation information carefully to inform the work that is happening to be ready for September.

RECOMMENDATION

THAT THE REPORT CONTINUITY OF LEARNING #4 THOUGHTEXCHANGE CONSULTATION FEEDBACK DATED, JUNE 23, 2020, BE ACCEPTED AS AN ITEM OF INFORMATION.

SUBMITTED BY: D. HANSEN
DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION