



# SPECIAL EDUCATION, STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH & WELLNESS

Companion Document to UCDSB's Return to School Guide



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## 1. Context

On March 13, 2020, the provincial government closed all schools in Ontario in an emergency measure to respond to the global pandemic related to COVID-19. Much uncertainty existed around the school closures and districts around the province were challenged with pivoting the educational delivery model in a very short space of time. The Upper Canada District School Board worked quickly to assess the situation and to implement a strategy to reconnect with students and families after the March Break in order to bring students back into a learning environment.

On a very broad level, the following actions were undertaken:

- Immediate and ongoing connections with families and students through various on-line methods and through telephone communication;
- Distribution of devices, particularly to students in the secondary division;
- Distribution of devices to students with special education needs;
- Regular and ongoing communication with school-based leadership to establish expectations and problem-solve the many uncertainties that were present;
- Establishment of a “Learning at Home” section on the Upper Canada District School Board web site to provide:
  - Information and resources to parents;
  - District created digital learning resources;
  - Links to Ministry of Education Supported resources; and
  - Information and resources to support special education and mental health and wellness needs; and
- Development of a Professional Learning Site to:
  - Provide an easy access location for professional learning related to distance education;
  - Develop a common location for other professional learning opportunities, initially to support remote learning and now used broadly for various types of professional learning; and
  - Provision of learning resources alternative to synchronous/online learning.

## 2. Challenges

It was identified very early in the school closure period, that there were many challenges present for staff and students, including but not limited to:

- Lack of technological devices or reliable internet for staff or students;
- Staff navigating teaching while at the same time having to support the learning for their own children;
- Lack of suitable internet to operate the platforms required for learning;

- Staff learning needs related to the various platforms;
- Challenges related to engaging students through an online forum;
- Communicating with students and families which for some was identified as too much communication from the school while others indicated that it was not enough;
- Challenges experienced by parents who often had two or three children learning at home, requiring resources, support, technology potentially all at the same time, while the parents were also working from home;
- Students who were unaccustomed to learning from home;
- Isolation from peers and work colleagues;
- Loss of routine;
- Students unmotivated to “attend” school once it was known that final grades would be determined based on work completed prior to school closures;
- Staff unaccustomed to providing education in an online environment and requiring very quick turnaround time to become familiar with platforms and pedagogical practices that were conducive to the online environment; and
- Support for students with special education needs, particularly when supports in the face-to-face environment relied heavily upon direct, face-to-face interaction.

These, along with the prevailing uncertainties throughout the school closure period, certainly provided a learning challenge to every person within the district. What we can say with certainty is that we were able to pivot to a distance learning model of delivery in a very short space of time. We can also say that we embraced this as a learning opportunity and we have, indeed, learned from our work thus far.

### **3. Special Education, Student Mental Health and Wellness During School Closures**

During school closures, the Special Education, Mental Health and Wellness Department engaged in the following work:

- Central teams established early, during school closure, the continuation of the circle of support;
- Special Equipment Allocation (SEA) devices were distributed to students to whom devices are assigned through their Individual Education Plan;
- Team members in different roles connected with each of their school-based teams and continued to engage in the support work that defines their roles;
- Team members engaged in their own learning related to virtual platforms in order to be able to serve students, families and schools;
- Special Education central team members supported the development of Learn at Home materials (digital and non-digital resources) in collaboration with the Teaching and Learning Department;

- An alternative learning choice board was developed and posted regularly to the UCDSB Learn at Home site to support students whose learning occurs outside of the regular components of the Ontario Curriculum, as outlined in their individual education plans;
- Team members connected with partner agencies in the support of our most vulnerable of students (e.g., Coordinated Service Planning, Family and Children's Services, Children's Mental Health, local food banks, etc.);
- Support was provided in the area of student success team meetings, to develop accommodations and modifications to support students in online learning;
- A virtual IPRC process was developed and shared with schools to assist in the continuation of Identification, Placement and Review Committee meetings. The process was used for the annual review of IPRC placements. Any new IPRC has been deferred until school resumption in September of 2020;
- Communication was developed and shared with parents in the form of a Newsletter for Special Education, including a segment devoted to Speech and Language, and a Newsletter for Mental Health and Wellbeing;
- A significant amount of professional learning was undertaken during this time period with approximately 289 educators accessing courses to develop skills and knowledge related to working with students with Autism;
- LEXIA, a web-based reading support resource, was made available to all students within the UCDSB. As of June 15, there were 1497 students using LEXIA;
- 1180 educators (teachers, educational assistants, instructional assistants, early childhood educators, and English language learner teachers) participated in the online LEXIA training between April and June;
- Data Coaching Webinars were offered in June to assist teachers with analyzing the data provided in LEXIA to assist with programming, remediation and interventions to respond to students' needs, based on their performance in LEXIA;
- By the end of May, 373 educators had accessed professional development on the science of reading through LEXIA;
- A special education professional learning portal was developed and housed within the broader UCDSB distance learning portal. Professional learning opportunities have been placed within this portal and many educators have taken advantage of the various professional learning offerings;
- The virtual nature of the work has increased our team's capacity to meet online and, as a result, frequent team meetings were possible among various teams. Regular updates of school-based special education teachers and school administrators, as well as regular meetings of the full special education department, were enabled through the online forum resulting in clearer and more consistent messaging to all groups;
- A Special Education One Note which had been developed for use prior to school closure was updated to provide resources during school closures. Team members, when working with schools and during central meetings, continued to reference the resources

available in the central site. A greater uptake in usage was noted as school closures continued and school-based teams became more familiar with the portal;

- Surveys were used to gather information from school-based teams and from school administrators. The information was used to identify professional learning needs, supports and resources needed to facilitate learning in the virtual environment;
- The information gathered from the surveys also supported the development of job descriptions for Educational Assistants, Special Education Teachers and central system staff. Job descriptions for each of the categories delineated requirements specific to work during school closures and provided for a consistent baseline of expectations for all staff. It was clear from the surveys undertaken that staff supporting students with special education and mental health needs were not limiting themselves to the minimum of expectations and were indeed developing creative and innovative ways to engage and support students; and
- SEAC (Special Education Advisory Committee) meetings continued through conference calls.

It is important to note that the above does not constitute an exhaustive list of activities, learning and work within the realm of special education, mental health and wellness. As a result of the evolution of the pandemic, the playing field has continuously shifted requiring our team to be nimble and resilient in order to adapt. Our school-based teams and the central Special Education, Mental Health and Wellness teams demonstrated resilience and found ways to do things that even six months ago we may have thought to be impossible. If the work of our team members, including our school-based teams, could be captured using one word, that word would be connection. The work that was forced upon us due to the pandemic has reinforced and made stronger the need for our teams to be connected and to collaborate with each other in our shared purpose of preparing all our students for a successful life.

#### **4. Return to Learning 2020-2021**

On June 19, the provincial government released its “Approach to reopening schools for the 2020-2021 school year”. With the release of this document, school boards across Ontario were asked to develop a plan for the 2020-2021 school year that would account for three possible scenarios:

- A full return to conventional learning with students attending school five days a week;
- An “adapted” return to learning where smaller groupings (cohorts) of students would attend school on a rotational schedule. All students, over a period of time, would engage in face-to-face learning, although not all at the same time. Students not attending school, either by parental choice or by virtue of the fact that their cohort was not in the rotation for a specific day, would be provided with on-line, synchronous

learning, thereby essentially creating a blended learning model to enable all students to continue their learning together; and

- A continuation of distance learning, with school remaining closed under the emergency order of the province.

On July 30, 2020, the provincial government announced plans for the re-opening of schools throughout Ontario. The Upper Canada District School Board was designated as a district where students will return full time to conventional learning in September. Students will be able to return to their schools five days a week beginning on September 4, 2020. Elementary programming (Kindergarten -Grade 8) will cohort students within the classes to which they are assigned, keeping in mind the need to restrict direct and indirect student contacts to 50. Secondary programming (Grade 9-Grade 12) will see an altered structure to the school day in order to observe cohorting of students that limits students to 100 direct and indirect contacts as part of their cohorts. The Upper Canada District School Board has prepared Welcoming Our Students and Staff Safely Back to Learning: Return to School Guide 2020-2021 to provide information to our broader community and to provide guidance to our schools as the district prepares to open schools to staff and students in September.

It is important to note that the plans provided by the Ministry of Education for the re-opening of schools does provide parents with a choice between distance learning or in-person learning for their children. The Upper Canada District School Board is currently surveying parents to determine which model of learning parents will select for their children.

It is recognized that the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year will be like no other that we have experienced in Ontario Education.

- There will continue to be uncertainty surrounding COVID-19, including health and safety concerns for both staff, parents and students;
- Students will have been away from their physical school buildings for almost six months by the time the school year resumes;
- Some students will continue in distance learning while others will attend school in person;
- There is likely to be heightened anxiety for numerous reasons;
- There will be learning gaps;
- Students will be introduced to many new routines and changes to the physical settings of their schools, while at the same time needing to be re-introduced to typical routines and practices within the school setting;
- There may be stigma associated with COVID-19, for students who may have been infected, for family members who may have been infected and potentially based on assumptions and misinformation related to matters of equity, etc.;
- Students may have been exposed to higher levels of stress within their family homes, particularly with the significant financial implications of provincial shut down; and

- Students with significant special education needs may not have had access to specific supports that were associated with school attendance and may have academic, social, emotional and physical learning gaps.

Our work will have to continue to be proactive and responsive as school-based teams gather information in their work with students. The supports that will be available will have to adapt as needs are identified.

## **5. Summer 2020 Support for a Return to Learning**

Funding has been provided to all districts within the province by the Ministry of Education to support summer learning, mental health and transitions back to school. Funds provided to the UCDSB have been used for the following:

- Two Intensive Support Teachers were provided support to K-8 Students enrolled in the Summer Learning Program related to the development and implementation of accommodations and modifications for students with special education needs. 158 students with special education needs were enrolled in the summer learning program. The two teachers, who hold special education qualifications, also consulted with the Principals and teachers in the summer learning program in student success team meetings to strategize ways to support students;
- Special Services Counsellors (SSC) were on duty on a rotational basis over six weeks during the summer period. Students currently on the SSC caseloads were provided a telephone number to phone and text for supports and services related to mental health. The focus of the support was on maintaining connections, ensuring community supports were in place, referrals and crisis intervention;
- 78 school sites hosted transition supports during the last week of August for students, with special education and mental health needs, identified by their schools as requiring assistance with the transition back to school. These sessions ran in the face-to-face environment and were staffed by a teacher, educational assistant and/or early childhood educator. Each school developed its own scheduling format based on the unique needs at the school. Common content for the transition support was created centrally for all schools to work through with students, allowing for some flexibility for each school to add content. The transitions focused on health, hygiene and safety practices that will be in place in the school setting. There was education around COVID-19 and what to do to be safe and protect others. Emphasis on mental health and wellbeing (stress management) was incorporated into the sessions (using resources from School Mental Health Ontario). Information was developed for parents to help them understand what the school environment will be like in the Fall and how we will be working to keep students safe at school. This information will also help parents to support their children in the transition to school process. Of note, 1757 elementary

students and 210 secondary students were identified by schools throughout the system to participate in the summer transition supports; and

- Central teams were available during the transition supports on a consultative basis if further information was required or if more specific interventions or coordination with community partners was needed (e.g., transitioning a medically fragile student back to school).

The main area of focus for the funds provided by the Ministry was on the transition supports that were offered during the last week of August. The transition supports were available in almost all schools within the UCDSB, apart from schools that were not able to identify staff members available to lead the programming or schools where construction is occurring and preventing staff and students from safely accessing the sites. It was felt that for successful transitions, it was important to have staff from each school lead the sessions.

## **6. Welcoming Students Back to Learning-Supporting Special Education and Student Mental Health Needs**

For each of the following learning models, the members of school-based teams continue to be the primary agents in the development and delivery of supports for students with special education and mental health needs. The circle of support, beginning with the classroom teacher and then extending to the school special education team, administration, and then central Special Education, Mental Health and Wellness team, has been in place throughout school closures and will continue to be in place as we move into the return to learning in September.

### **Learning Model 1: Return to Conventional Learning**

A return to conventional learning, with all students attending school five days a week with their peers is the preferred scenario of the UCDSB. Within this scenario, the following elements will figure prominently in supporting students with special education and mental health needs.

1. Central Special Education, Mental Health and Wellness team members will connect in late August and during the first week of September with all schools to reinforce the circle of support. Connecting with students, families and partner agencies will be important during the first few weeks of the school year as relationships are rebuilt and supports are re-implemented in the school setting for our students.
2. The central team will provide schools with specific resources and suggestions to support student learning with the return to school. Examples of possible materials would be social scripts to explain new routines, visual schedules and reminders about health and hygiene practices, links to online materials to help students understand the changes that are in place to support health and safety, etc. Materials developed for use during

the Summer Transitions Support will provide a starting point for system and classroom staff.

3. Ongoing messaging to school-based teams will include:
  - a. Reminders about the Special Education Notebook for access to numerous resources for working with students.
  - b. Professional learning opportunities to further develop capacity to support students with special education and mental health needs, particularly related to the post-school closure period.
  - c. Support to implement daily mental health activities in every classroom with every student, emphasizing the building of a feeling of safety at school along with reconnecting and motivating students in their learning.
  - d. Support for schools in determining specific needs and gaps, with an emphasis on school-based Student Success Team meetings. This will also reinforce the circle of support that includes system level team members.
  - e. Examples of IEP goals that address the new routines and the return to learning after a period of almost six months outside of the regular school environment.
  - f. Continued collaboration with the Teaching and Learning Department in the development of tasks that are differentiated to meet the needs of all learners.
  - g. Resources developed by School Mental Health Ontario to support system leaders, school-based leaders, educators, students and parents.
  - h. Work done with STEO (Student Transportation of Eastern Ontario) to problem-solve challenges with the transportation of students with special education needs to and from school in the event that restrictions are in place from the public health perspective.
  - i. Early and regular communication with partner agencies and families for students with profound special education needs, particularly students who are medically fragile. Welcoming students with significant needs back to school will require a high degree of coordination among all stakeholders to ensure that health, hygiene and safety measures are in place and understood by all.
  - j. Guidelines regarding supporting students with significant personal care needs or requiring specialized supports for behavioural complexities will be developed. There may be a need to enhance or adapt the Behaviour Management Training Schedule to provide training to staff through various means.
  - k. Although not specific to a return to learning, schools and the central system will be transitioning safety plans to an online system which will be beneficial for gathering information and for planning and developing interventions by central staff, without the need to attend at each school to view safety plans.

4. It will be imperative as learning resumes to seize the opportunity to use what we have learned during school closures to further improve special education and mental health service delivery. It will be important to:
  - a. Continue to grow capacity in the digital environment.
  - b. Identify practices that evolved in online learning that can support students with special education and mental health needs in the everyday classroom.
  - c. Recognize barriers and find creative ways to remove them or work around them with staff and students.
  - d. Develop specific professional learning to support staff capacity development, particularly:
    - i. Student Success Team Process.
    - ii. Learning for All.
    - iii. Using information (data) gathered to inform planning and instruction for students with special education and mental health needs.
    - iv. Differentiated Instruction and Universal Design for Learning.
    - v. Mental health literacy.
    - vi. Everyday Mentally Healthy classrooms/Supporting Minds.
    - vii. Understanding stress and its impact on learning.
    - viii. Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) practices that support learning.
    - ix. Other professional learning in collaboration with other departments and as identified by schools.
  
5. At the outset of the school year, there will be restrictions placed on who may access school sites. Volunteers and visitors, including parents, will not be permitted to attend at school sites. Staff working at the central level will be directed in their work based on specific job categories, thereby limiting the travel of itinerant staff between schools. At the beginning of the school year central staff will be deployed as follows:
  - a. Psychology and Speech Language Pathology staff will be assigned to one specific location from which they will continue to function in a consultative role and develop professional learning for system and school teams.
  - b. Special Services Counsellors will be assigned to a specific work location on a three-week rotation continuing in the adapted work model that evolved during school closures.
  - c. Autism Therapists, Speech Language Assistants, Intensive Support Teachers and Itinerant Student Support Workers will be assigned to a specific work location on a three-week rotation. Employees within these job categories may be directly supporting students and staff, within the parameters of the duties of their respective job descriptions. They will also be available to virtually support and consult with other schools to which they are assigned.
  - d. Chief psychologists, the Principal of Special Education, and the Vice-Principal of Special Education will be assigned to a specific office location to provide services

remotely. Some travel to various UCDSB locations will be required for these members of the Special Education and Mental Health and Wellness Team.

- e. Special Education Teachers working at the system level to support students who are deaf or hard of hearing and who are blind or have low vision will be assigned to specific schools for a three-week period. School assignments will be selected based on where these teachers are currently supporting students. These teachers will also be available to consult with other schools within their assigned areas.
6. The central Special Education Team will continue to communicate to parents through a variety of means:
    - a. Wellness Twitter account.
    - b. Special Education, Mental Health and Wellness Newsletters (once a month).
    - c. General communication through UCDSB social media platforms.
    - d. Provision of information to school administrators to be shared through school social media platforms.
  7. The Central Special Education, Mental Health and Wellness Department will capitalize on the learning that has occurred in the use of virtual platforms to continue to meet virtually for the purposes of professional learning and dissemination of information. This has been a beneficial development within the department and is helping to grow our common capacity to serve, permitting regular meetings that were previously inhibited by travel and location limitations. The department will also expand on professional development and training opportunities available to school-based staff by offering voluntary professional development sessions as “lunch and learns”, after school sessions, sessions requested based on needs identified by specific schools, and by continuing to provide professional learning on designated professional development days. Learning sessions will be archived in the staff portal providing access to learning for individuals and school-based teams for use when needed at the school level.
  8. The Special Education department will continue to support the use of LEXIA, a web-based reading support program, for students with specific special education needs in the area of reading.
  9. Meetings, case conferences, consultations, feedback sessions, IPRC meetings, will all continue to be conducted virtually or by phone until such a time as public health determines that there is no risk associated with having non-essential visitors attend meetings at schools or with partner agencies.

## **Remote Learning Model 2: Continuation of Remote Learning**

Remote learning will be available to students whose parents select this as the mode for learning in September. The Special Education, Mental Health and Wellness Central Team will provide support to staff and students within this learning model. The distance learning model is currently evolving, and the Special Education, Mental Health and Wellness Department is developing plans to support student learning. Preliminary considerations include:

1. The use of information gathered from system staff and from school-based teams on areas that worked well in our first experience of distance learning and areas that continued to be challenges.
2. Deployment of special education staff.
3. The continued support of educators in the development, implementation and monitoring of IEP goals in the distance learning environment. This was identified early on as a challenge given the fact that many aspects of the learning environment for students were beyond the influence of educators and many of the goals and supports included in typical IEP's require the specific support from educators. Support for the development of IEP goals that directly reflect the distance learning environment will be provided to distance learning teams.
4. It will be essential to connect with families and students very early in the school year to re-engage students and motivate them to want to participate in distance learning. Streamlined communication with families will be essential to ensure connections are being made with families in a way that is not overwhelming or perceived as intrusive. Engagement data collected during school closure will be a vital source of information as schools seek to prioritize connection and re-engagement.
5. System staff will work with distance learning teams to identify supports that parents might require to engage and motivate their children in distance learning. System level staff will continue to communicate strategies, resources and supports to assist parents as they work with their children in distance learning.
6. LEXIA may be used as a resource in identifying and closing gaps in reading development. The Special Education Department will explore the potential for a deployment of licenses through the system, likely in key grades. This is dependent on the availability of a significant level of funding. UCDSB was fortunate to have accessed free licensing of this program for all students within the district during the initial five months of school closure. The free licenses will not be available in September.

7. System staff will work with distance learning teams to monitor and problem-solve challenges related to the engagement of students with special education and mental health needs.

## **7. Our Ongoing Work**

The work of the Special Education, Mental Health and Wellness Department will continue to emphasize three foundational pillars.

### **Know the Learner**

Our continuing work is centered around knowing and understanding the needs of each individual learner. School and system level staff will continue learning about the use of data (including all information gathered regarding a student's learning profile) to plan appropriate goals, interventions, learning supports and next steps in learning. The Student Success Team process will continue to play a vital role in the sharing and analysis of information as teams work at fine-tuning teaching and learning to best meet the needs of students throughout the district. Work will be done with all schools during the 2020-2021 school year to standardize the Student Success Team process. This work will support common standards that will assist in the development of Individual Education Plans and further develop the capacity among all educators to support students with special education and mental health needs in the classroom. When educators know and understand the questions that need to be asked and the information to gather when a student is experiencing difficulty, they are better equipped to apply tiered intervention strategies with students. More precisely, they are better equipped to decide which level of intervention is required for a student.

### **Pedagogical Practices/ Planning for Learning**

When educators understand the learning needs of students, they are positioned to make intentional moves to further the learning. The Special Education, Mental Health and Wellness Department will continue to work with educators, in collaboration with the Teaching and Learning Department, to reinforce links between student profiles, diagnostic information, ongoing assessment, selection of materials and resources and purposeful planning so that instruction is precise and attuned to the profile of the class and students within the class. Learning For All will be a key resource that will be referenced and reinforced throughout learning sessions with educators. Our work will continue to emphasize "HOW" students learn, using the "WHAT" students must learn as the conduit.

### **The Learning Environment**

Welcoming students to school, re-engaging students in their learning at school after lengthy school closures, and motivating students to want to be at school and learning will be the initial priorities as we move into school re-opening in September 2020. The environment in which a

student is learning is critical to the capacity to learn. Understanding stressors that might inhibit learning, creating opportunities for students to understand the brain-body connection when stressors are present, and the specific teaching of strategies related to mental health and wellness are key components in developing and nurturing a safe learning environment. Resources from School Mental Health Ontario will provide support for system leaders, system staff, school-based leadership, educators, students and parents. It is clearly evident in the Ministry of Education's Approach to Reopening Schools that priority needs to be given to mental health and wellness and the UCDSB is deeply aware of the dysregulation that school closures have caused for our students, particularly those who are most vulnerable.

It is our intention to continue to explore the learning environment by looking at the content and composition of sensory rooms and areas that are established in schools as calming spaces. Each student has different needs in this regard. There are, however, common and fundamental considerations that should be in place in all schools to support student self-regulation and social-emotional learning.

Our work will also continue to explore ways and means to engage and utilize student voice in the creation of safe, caring and accepting schools. This is a cross-department endeavour and has great potential in establishing, maintaining and creating school environments that engage our students and creates havens of learning that support academic and wellbeing growth and development.

## **8. Power Up Pilots**

We will also continue to implement the Power Up Pilot and are looking forward to a less interrupted school year in order to fully assess the impact of providing very precise learning environments for students who require direct supports on a regular basis to learn strategies and skills for success in the larger classroom setting. Initial results have been very promising and we will continue to grow the system's capacity in understanding the foundational delivery model offered through Power Up 1. This delivery model supports the development of lagging skills both in short-term, flexible environments (Power Up 1) and year-long placements in classrooms with smaller groupings of students (Power Up 2). It addresses lagging skills which can often lead to aggressive and explosive behaviours when children have not yet developed the skills needed to manage the expectations of the classroom setting. It provides for short term and more intensive interventions with immediate feedback as skills are being developed, with much work done with students to generalize the skill acquisition. The goal in all that is done within Special Education, Mental Health and Wellness is to prepare each and every student for a successful life. Not all students require the same thing at the same time and this requires us to know our learners, plan precisely for the learning that will occur, and to establish a learning environment that supports and empowers our learners in the manner that is required at just the right time.

## **9. Returning to Learning**

There are many uncertainties that will accompany a return to learning in September 2020. The Special Education, Student Mental Health and Wellness Department has done considerable planning to prepare the on-the-ground requirements for students and staff for both distance and in-person learning as school is set to resume. It is impossible to plan for or even anticipate all situations that might arise as we move into school reopening. We are confident that our students will be welcomed safely back to a learning environment in a manner that supports present and evolving needs.