THE VOLUME OF OUR VOICES

Volume One: Learning and Living During a Pandemic

May 2021

CONTENTS

ABOUT OSTA-AECO

The Ontario Student Trustees' Association—l'Association des élèves conseillers et conseillères de l'Ontario (OSTA-AECO) is a registered non-profit, nonpartisan organization, and the largest student stakeholder group in Ontario, representing approximately 2 million students. The general ssembly is comprised of student trustees from public and Catholic school boards across the province. Members of the organization work tirelessly throughout the year to advocate for student voice, and strive to work with provincial partners in the education sector. Ultimately, OSTA-AECO aims to improve Ontario's education system for its students.

More information about OSTA-AECO's work can be found at osta-aeco.org.

THE VOLUME OF OUR VOICES

The Volume of Our Voices is a three-part series by OSTA-AECO highlighting student stories. *Volume One* focuses on the impact that COVID-19 has had on public education; *Volume Two* centers on how students' race, ethnicity, nationality, or cultural identity have shaped their school experience; and *Volume Three* features how students' gender identity or sexual orientation have shaped their school experience.

Students in grades 7 to 12 across Ontario were invited to write and submit to *The Volume of Our Voices* between January and May 2021; the submissions in this publication were submitted at varying times in this months-long period. The online submission form was provided in English, and students could request to have their submission transcribed over a call or otherwise submitted through an alternate means to ensure accessibility in submission methods. Students were encouraged to freely share whatever they wished on the theme of each volume, and all submissions were anonymized to protect the students' safety and privacy.

We want to feature student voices discussing complex issues and their personal experiences within the Ontario public education system. Student voice will always be essential to decision-making and we hope these stories shift provincial and local discussions and decisions surrounding topics such as racism and homophobia in schools or learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The stories featured in each volume are followed by our policy recommendations for a variety of stakeholders such as the Ministry of Education, school boards, schools, and teachers. Each volume also contains recommendations from previous OSTA-AECO publications, such as *Affording Our Students' Success: 2020-21 Pre-Budget/Grants for Student Needs Submission*, *The Students' Vision for Education: OSTA-AECO Vision Document*, and *eLearning: the Students' Perspective*.

Above all, we owe a debt of gratitude to all the students who courageously submitted to *The Volume of Our Voices* and shared their experiences. These stories and their openness and vulnerability are truly at the heart of this project. We hope that the people and stakeholders reading these volumes do their stories justice by critically examining our public education system and continuously working to serve the students of Ontario.

The ethos of this project simply comes down to this: Our voices matter. Our stories matter.

Welcome to *The Volume of Our Voices*.

INTRODUCTION

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the lives of billions were upended around the world.

Massive systems and institutions were disrupted, and the Ontario public education system is no exception. Students rode out the waves of invention and innovation from staff, schools, school boards, and a province attempting dozens of new local and provincial changes for the first time to adapt to the pandemic.

The pandemic continues into the 2021-2022 academic year. The Ministry of Education must strive to provide early and consistent directives to maximize stability of planning for all stakeholders in education, from school boards to families. Furthermore, the Ministry, school boards, and schools to take lessons learned from the current school year and apply changes to improve upon plans and models for the upcoming one. It is crucial for all aforementioned major decision-makers within public education to listen to students' experiences and feedback and to shape ongoing and upcoming plans accordingly.

We invite you to ask yourself: what do these stories tell us? What have these disruptions and changes revealed and taught us about schooling both before and during a global pandemic? How do we use these experiences to teach us not how to revert back to what was "normal" for public education, but to rethink how things operate in the public education system as a whole?

MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health is a consistent priority and point of advocacy for students across the province, with their school environment often being a dominant factor affecting their mental health. This is also evidenced by the submissions we received to Volume One: over 60% of students explicitly referenced their mental health.

"... **My mental health has been through ups and downs since the beginning of the school year, however I really struggled before the summer [of 2020] during emergency learning as I tried to keep up and do my best in everything**...However, I have had some amazing teachers this year that have tried their best to let me know I am cared for... My family is very worried about me going to school as some of them are **immunocompromised** and have been at home for a year... **This has put a lot of stress on me as I am responsible for my family's wellbeing**, and has led me to avoid any friendships this year for fear of them wanting to hang out at some point... **I think student health and safety is the most important thing this year and everyone should be pushing mental health resources**. I am working with my school to make sure this happens as much as possible. Thank you for listening to my story." —Grade 11 Student

"The COVID-19 pandemic has had a **massive toll on my mental health**. Staying inside for most of the day has made me feel very bad. I think a feeling that I have that is shared with many other people my age is that I feel like these should be some of the best years/time of my life when it is [not] shaping up to be that way... **There has not been a lot of mental health support though.** I am in the IB program so this has made it even harder on top of all this. I hope everyone out there is doing ok, and I hope we can get through this and be stronger for it at the end." —Grade 11 Student

"... **Not being able to leave the house has had a devastating toll on my already not great mental health.** Before this pandemic I was already stressed out but at least I was able to see people who are important to me and I had sports, clubs and a regular routine to help me manage. Now that is all gone. I sit on my bed all day, normally rolling out of bed and logging onto class in my PJs then sitting there for three hours, I take a 30 minute break then return to my bed or the floor in my room for my next class. I then do my chores or other household tasks then finish my homework. Before remote learning I didn't really procrastinate. Now I find myself procrastinating until the very last second. Even doing simple household tasks seems impossible. **This has often [led] to me having sleepless nights, poor eating routines and lack of physical exercise as I feel so drained. I get such bad anxiety and the cut off from in-person socializing has [led] to me feeling quite depressed**... I'm a very high achieving student with top marks but that was when I was able to get out and actually get on the bus early in the morning, go sit in a classroom, and see other people in person. **I strongly think online learning is hurting students' mental health and academic success.**" —Grade 10 Student

"I am feeling great today. **My mental health has been affected by being in lockdown** and not being able to go anywhere which has made me feel lonely at times... I have gotten depressed a little bit because of COVID-19. I am worried about being around people and then eventually getting the virus. I am relieved that we were out of lockdown at one point. **My mental health is being accommodated by my teachers and school** because they give us breaks so we don't overwork ourselves and they give us mental health resources to be get help for our health. **The mental health resources are very accessible as they are posted on our school website.**" —Anonymous Student

"... My mental health has been rather odd since the pandemic hit. I've been very happy as of late since I've started taking testosterone to help me transition, but I'm also incredibly paranoid because of the virus. **COVID-19 has been absolutely terrifying to me**, and I simply can't get used to every single change going on. I don't mind cleaning things all the time, or sanitizing my hands, or wearing a mask. **I'm just constantly in fear that my school could get another case, maybe they won't be able to control it again if it were to happen. I have been provided sessions with our school counselor, and it helps to talk to her about it,** but whether or not I stop panicking is up to me. I believe I'm at a point where I don't want to stop being paranoid. I think if I stop being paranoid, I won't worry about how COVID-19, could affect other's or myself. .." —Grade 11 Student

"**Overall, the combination of COVID-19 and school has been very detrimental to my mental health. I have been struggling a lot with motivation, self-esteem** and my grades have dropped significantly. **I have also found myself extremely overwhelmed with school** and unable to cope with it at times. I have not really felt accommodated by my school, and I have not seen any support from them when it comes to mental health... I think that **our schools should begin offering more mental health services** to the students and making it public. I know they have guidance counselors already, but if I am being honest, **none of the students feel that they can trust the guidance counselors with mental health or details about their home life. Many students I know who have gone to the guidance counselors for help came back with a negative experience**. Maybe having therapist(s) at our schools would help some? Even if some kids do not necessarily take that opportunity to see the therapist, just having that service there would help make the kids more comfortable in [and of] itself. It would let them know that the school actually cares about their mental health. If having a therapist isn't possible, then maybe the schools should make mental health services more visible to students (e.g. actively posting therapy services, people to contact if they need help, etc. on platforms like Edsby)." —Grade 12 Student

Students have learned to be resilient over the course of this pandemic, but this resilience and well-being must be supported. Schools exist as a support system and are an essential hub for students to seek internal and external mental health resources. Now more than ever, it is crucial to commit resources and strategies to support mental health. OSTA-AECO recommends:

1.1: The Ministry of Education specifically outline the role of guidance counsellors to ensure that they can perform their job to the best of their abilities, and students can have a solid understanding of who to turn to for assistance in mental wellbeing and academic success;[1]

1.4: School boards proactively inform students of school mental health resources (e.g. school psychologist) via proactive outreach;

1.2: The funding provided for guidance counsellors in Ontario be increased in order to properly support the needs of Ontario students, and the funding provided at the elementary level should match the secondary level;[2]

1.5: School boards proactively inform students of community mental health resources using proactive outreach, including resources responsive to identities and lived experiences such as cultural background, gender identity, or sexual orientation; and

1.3: The Ministry work to develop the infrastructure to allow and work with school boards to digitize the booking of guidance counsellors and other mental health worker appointments through online systems that fits their local needs;[3]

1.6: School boards seek opportunities to collaborate with mental health organizations to increase support for student mental health.

Recommendations for the Ministry of Education are written in blue, while recommendations for school boards, schools, and/or teaching staff are written in navy.

ANTI-ASIAN RACISM

Anti-Asian racism includes beliefs, stereotyping and discrimination that is directed to people of Asian descent. A shadow pandemic of anti-Asian racism, violence, and hatred has spread across Canada—not leaving Asian students in Ontario unscathed—in conjunction with the global pandemic of COVID-19.

"**Ever since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, I've dealt with racism at my school simply because I am Asian**, and this has caused me to feel less comfortable at school. **People have told me that it 'it makes sense to stay away from as many Asians as possible'** during this pandemic without thinking that those words are extremely harmful." —Grade 9 Student

"**COVID-19 has amplified the racist micro-aggressive behaviors in my school.** While personal attacks have been uncommon, **some students have taken to social media to share attacks on the Asian population or blame towards Chinese people**. I've noticed subtle comments towards Asian students like myself, notably **one instance where two students coughed and joked [that] they had coronavirus after I walked into a bathroom**. I've become more frustrated with the education system as a result of the pandemic, but not because the changes have caused these problems, rather because they pulled back the curtain hiding these issues." —Grade 11 Student

Anti-Asian racism has drastically increased during the pandemic as a result of inflamed political rhetoric. The roots of anti-Asian racism itself go back centuries, but it continues to manifest today in the perpetual othering and scapegoating of Asian people. This ideology and rhetoric, no matter its often mundane disguise, is violent and still reproduces itself in the words and actions of people as young as high school students. In turn, this racism cuts deep for Asian students already trying to navigate the uncertainty of coming-of-age, a school life, and a global pandemic. These experiences stay with Asian students for their entire life. This racism often creates deep insecurity, self-hatred, and internalized racism that often require years, if not decades, to learn to work through and rebuild from.

To be told at such a young age, in such a visceral way, that you do not belong is devastating. The only way to prevent children from experiencing this form of racist violence in its myriad forms is if all stakeholders in public education commit themselves to actively combatting it. Until then, Asian students will continue to experience this harm as microaggressions, intimidation, harassment, and assault reinforce a culture of fear and violence in schools. The shadow pandemic and anti-Asian racism will continue—even after the COVID-19 pandemic ends—unless all members of society, including public education, work to combat its spread. OSTA-AECO recommends:

> 2.1: The Ministry of Education and school boards provide training and resources (e.g. the Toronto District School Board's *Addressing Anti-Asian Racism: A Resource for Educators*) to teachers on anti-Asian racism and addressing racist incidents;

> 2.2: The Ministry, school boards, and schools support the creation of communal spaces such as sharing circles, discussion groups, and affinity networks for students to learn and share about anti-Asian racism; and

> 2.3: The Ministry fund the creation of an Office of Human Rights and Equity in each school board to provide oversight to internal human rights complaints procedure, provide leadership and advice to school boards to identify and address systemically-based human rights and equity issues, and to increase capacity to ensure compliance with the *Ontario Human Rights Code*.[4]

These two stories are also be included in *Volume Two of our The Volume of Our Voices* series, where additional relevant recommendations are provided.

Recommendations for the Ministry of Education are written in blue, while recommendations for school boards, schools, and/or teaching staff are written in navy.

REMOTE LEARNING

All school boards have been delivering fully remote learning since April 2021 in conjunction with the declaration of a province-wide state of emergency; some school boards are experiencing these school closures for the third time since March 2020. This academic year, most students have received part-time in-person learning in coordination with cohorting schedules. Other students have enrolled in fully remote learning.

COMMUNITY AND CONNECTION

"Being in virtual high school (VHS) I wish there was more of a way for students to still feel connected with their home school. I felt as though students who took VHS were pushed out of their home schools and were expected to be in a new school. For being in grade 12, I felt like I spent most of my years with people from my home school making friendships and getting to know everyone, just to be divided in my last year. I do like the way virtual high school runs, however, I found it easy enough to get the hang of." —Grade 12 Student

". . . During lockdowns I lose the motivation to put effort into my schoolwork. In remote learning, I enjoyed having breakout groups to give a sense of social interaction. My school board has just returned to in-person [learning] and I am very pleased, since I know my quality of education and life will increase." —Grade 11 Student

"This past year has been excruciating. It's [an] absolute pain to have to sit through 4-5 hours of hearing my screen talk to me. I often found myself not paying attention as it was difficult to do so. I also feel like the approach feels redundant as it appeals to a very specific group of students, those who listen. I myself and many others would consider myself a visual learner. And without textbooks being present, I have to go through a plethora of information on the internet just to find a specific thing." —Grade 11 Student

". . . As formerly mentioned, the vast majority if not the whole of the student body are resentful towards this lockdown as the very little time they had for communicating with friends and extended family is now gone. If students were already facing an increase of mental illness it has now surely become an epidemic. The monotony of online school is overwhelming and downright depressing as you can hear the voices of your professors and classmates but are separated by kilometres in distance making the whole experience very alienating. I have the feeling that I am just one in a group of endless blank Gmail accounts sitting in a meeting with a professor that only views their students as a picture and a voice removing all the emotion in learning as well as teaching. The lack of being capable to emotional connect with a teacher and a teacher with their students creates a very bland and unappealing way of education. Without schools being open students still are required to wake up early everyday and still do not obtain enough sleep to continually retain attention to a screen that's telling them to do more house work that they despise doing very much. Through this poor alternative to actual school, many students are actually wishing to go back to a real school. The deprivation of emotional connection and a system that only perpetuates the former will lead to a student body of emotionally undeveloped, reclusive, uncooperative, and mentally ill individuals. All I can hope for is that the future and that my generation can change and correct the fundamentally flawed system that educates us today." —Grade 12 Student

". . . I started the 2020-2021 school year online and it was [very difficult] to adjust to [the] learning platforms and the lack of social interactions at first. Lots of my friends were learning in school and it was strenuous on my mental health to consistently remind myself that I'm not missing out and that my value has not decreased as a result of less interactions with my peers. I'm extremely lucky because I did not experience any housing or significant technological issues, so I was able to connect when/if I wanted to. Also, I had some pretty great teachers that checked in on us and valued our feedback. Eventually, I made special virtual connections with classmates and I am currently involved in multiple extracurricular activities. The virtual aspects have allowed me to take opportunities regardless of geography." —Grade 10 Student

Schools are not merely environments for academic learning; they serve as vital social environments for students to engage with friends and peers—engagement crucial to students' emotional development and well-being. With Ontario currently experiencing its worst wave of the pandemic, and with school shutdowns potentially becoming necessary again during the current and next academic year, it is clear that shutdowns are no longer short periods of time during which the shortfall of social connection should only be mitigated with short-term solutions. With students spending longer and longer stretches in fully remote learning (for fully virtual learners, this stretch represents the entire academic year), it is imperative to develop robust, long term, sustainable structures to support students' social engagement and interaction online. OSTA-AECO recommends:

3.1: The Ministry and school boards create and/or maintain structures and social environments (e.g. affinity networks) with sufficient funding that are accessible to students;

3.2: The Ministry and school boards engage community organizations and institutions in providing virtual extracurricular opportunities and events to students;

3.3: The Ministry refrain from implementing a permanent remote learning pathway at school boards due to the intrinsic shortfall of opportunities for social engagement and emotional development in a virtual learning environment; and

3.4: School boards provide students and staff flexibility in operating on virtual platforms that best facilitate social interaction, understanding that stringency in approval processes often restricts students from engaging on platforms that allow them to effectively interact with each other.

Recommendations for the Ministry of Education are written in blue, while recommendations for school boards, schools, and/or teaching staff are written in navy.

OPTIMIZING VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVRONMENTS

"Remote learning is very challenging. I feel so distracted during my classes and **I lack the proper environment to get through my schoolwork**. When my Wi-Fi goes out I'm disconnected from my class. Other members in my household are also normally on the Wi-Fi and it is quite frustrating for everyone when it disconnects. I was supplied with a free, unlimited data iPad but typing out documents, creating slides and changing tabs on it is very frustrating compared to a laptop or Chromebook, especially as all my courses require [a lot] of typing. **Conflict among household members is also a challenge as some people don't understand that all of my schooling is now online. Sometimes my internet is taken from me purposely because my time management has become difficult**. . . I don't even know what some of the teachers look like from classes I've been in. **The whole possible situation with online/remote learning becoming a permanent part of some education is definitely stressing me out** as it's only made things much more difficult for me. I never saw leaving the house as a luxury but after this whole situation is over, I'll definitely never take any in-person learning for granted." – Grade 10 Student

". . . As for online classes, **I do have a comfortable environment at home to work in** and I have had little issues connecting to classes **(it isn't the same for other students - some of my peers have issues with their internet, their computers, printing notes, or their home environment)**. My teachers have been trying their hardest to maintain the attention of their classes. Although I can't say I have been engaged all throughout the classes, I can say the teachers have been putting in the most effort they can and it is the most they can do given the situation we are in. I really appreciate the school's and the teacher's efforts to get resources to us and keep our classes going." – Grade 12 Student

". . . **I'm someone who needs to be inside a classroom and interacting with my peers** or else I fall into a state of mind where **I can't get anything done because there is so much distracting me at home. My mental health has plummeted, and I no longer have the patience to do most of the things I used to love**. The plan they have [implemented] for my school is so horrible, **learning [a] four month curriculum in 40 days has put so much stress and anxiety on me**, I don't even want to do good anymore[,] I just want to get the school year over with." – Grade 9 Student

---

Virtual learning environments should not be understood as merely the online platform students use for learning. Rather, virtual learning environments also consist of the physical space and academic environment in which students learn; they should be equitable environments that allow all students to participate. Students must be supported as they try to optimize the variety of factors affecting their ability to participate in virtual learning, such as access to Wifi and quiet household space. OSTA-AECO's report eLearning: The Students' Perspective responding to the Ministry of Education's former mandate in 2019 to make four eLearning credits a requirement for graduation provides additional valuable insights from students (over 6000 survey responses from Ontario students) and recommendations on eLearning—this report's value and relevance has only increased with the prevalence of remote learning during this pandemic. OSTA-AECO recommends:

> . . . In terms of doing online school because of the virus, schools need to understand that we're all just kids. Most of us don't have the motivation to do the work given and on top of that **a lot of us live in places where it's hard to get access to school given or there's too many distractions in our living environment**. Frankly I think **the way schools (or at least mine) have organized online school is very unorganized**, teachers are never using the same website whether that's Webex, Google Meet, etc, and it can be really confusing. Why not just have all the teachers use the same program so that everyone already understands what they're supposed to do[?] – Grade 12 Student

---

3.5: School boards, schools, and teachers frequently collect and implement feedback from students on their virtual learning experience and structurally incorporate student voice in decision-making processes;

3.6: School boards advise schools and teachers to create equitable learning environments that accommodate the diverse personal circumstances that impact an individual students's ability to learn at home rather than a traditional classroom environment;

3.7: School boards provide adequate instructional support to students with special education needs during remote learning, soliciting student and parent feedback to do so;

3.8: School boards advise schools and teachers to proactively review, update, and implement students' IEPs and empower students' self-advocacy (e.g. creating processes that mitigate the teacher-student power imbalance);

3.9: School boards build a process to proactively assess students' technology needs and distribute devices (e.g. hotspots, Chromebooks) accordingly to ensure every student can participate in remote learning;

3.10: Reliable broadband internet services be accessible to all schools in Ontario;[5]

3.11: A considerable effort is made to retain critical learning skills such as time management and face-to-face interaction with remote learning teachers and students;[6] and

3.12: The delivery of remote learning should accommodate the learning styles of all students within the platform's limitations.[7]

Recommendations for the Ministry of Education are written in blue, while recommendations for school boards, schools, and/or teaching staff are written in navy.

THE QUADMESTER AND OCTOMESTER EXPERIENCE

All school boards have been delivering the academic year under the quadmester or octomester. These models support public health measures such as cohorting and will be employed at most, if not all, boards for the upcoming school year. These new models have received mixed reception from students.

"My school has been using the [quadmester] layout where we have one week of one class then the next week [of another class], [this] layout has been stressful and not an amazing experience. **What I've found is this layout['s learning style is] super condensed and doesn't give you time to process information**. As much as [the quadmester system] allows less subjects to be on your plate I've found you have to learn all this information in such a short period of time where you have zero time to process any of it." —Grade 12 Student

"**On top of that it's [the quadmester's] extremely fast**. I find myself online doing a unit every day, whereas at school it would take upwards [of] a month. Since exams are closed this leads to an even heavier amount of tests/quizzes/CATs etc. It feels like I'm running a marathon." —Grade 11 Student

"In regards to school, I'll admit that a lot is very different compared to what we were doing before lockdown. It's not necessarily a bad thing either, in some ways, it's become easier. We have two classes a day, both of them being just under three hours long. We switch to different classes every week. **I've been finding it much easier to keep up with my work compared to when we would have all four of our classes every day**." —Grade 11 Student

"My school is doing [quadmesters] fully in-person. **The [quadmesters] are not terrible, I enjoy being able to only focus on two classes. [However], so far none of my teachers have been able to finish the curriculum, making me feel unprepared for university. I am currently taking grade 12 classes, and am missing full units**." —Grade 11 Student

"This year has been intense with uncertainty, feeling [isolated,] and strangeness in schools with distance and barriers from others, [with] constantly changing information and risk levels. During first semester I had English and math. Especially with math **I was working constantly, most of the time from when I got home to when I went to bed, with little help from teachers due to the model. The new model is a lot better as teachers can accurately assign workloads each day and see how it is affecting students as well as dealing with student comprehension issues as they arise**." —Grade 11 Student

"The school I attend has [the quadmester system] in place. Personally I don't like [it], **the curriculum moves way too fast and a lot of what was supposed to be taught is cut out. This leaves me feeling unprepared for the next year and stressed out as sometimes multiple assignments are assigned and due within an unrealistic amount of time**. Even with extensions it's [a lot] of work. I also enrolled in pre advanced placement courses and [a lot] of the enrichment material I signed up for was never taught. This is done because the teachers need to teach the curriculum but their time to do that has been cut in half. **The double long periods are also hard to sit through**. There's no breaks within the class time and this causes mental fatigue after sitting for so long. Bathroom breaks cut time from when we get a few minutes to complete independent worksheets. It's also very easy to get overwhelmed in notes or procrastinate then not write them. This only adds to academic related stress." —Grade 10 Student

While quadmesters and octomesters allow certain students to focus and balance one or two classes at a time rather than four classes (as is the case within a regular semester system), the submissions also reflect the constraints of the quadmesters and octomesters that student trustees of OSTA-AECO's general assembly have also broadly observed students experiencing at their respective school boards: significantly faster pacing of instruction, heavier academic workloads, and sections of the curriculum not being taught.

With the pandemic projected to continue into the fall, various school districts have planned for the continuation of a quadmester or octomester model for at least part of the 2021-2022 school year. The 2020-2021 school year compelled staff and students to experience the quadmesters and octomesters for the first time, thus the upcoming school year provides the opportunity to assess these new models, improve upon them, and mitigate their flaws. OSTA-AECO recommends:

4.1: School boards create a contingent pivot and transition plan to the regular semester or non-semestered model during the 2021-2022 academic year, if or when the local public health circumstances permit such a return;

4.2: School teaching staff actively solicit students for feedback on the class workload and adjust the amount accordingly to a level that is manageable for students;
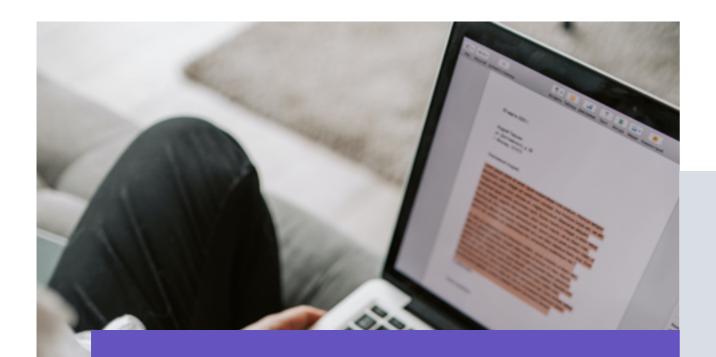
4.3: School teaching staff and departments collectively assess what curriculum (e.g. units) was not taught this year and adjust 2021-22 teaching plans accordingly to accommodate or support these gaps in learning as students enter the next year having covered different content in class per staff decisions;

4.4: School boards and schools bolster or create learning support systems (e.g. subject-specific interactive office hours, peer tutoring, study groups) that are easily accessible for students to receive academic support outside class time; and

4.5: School boards or schools standardize break lengths within and between classes to ensure that all students receive adequate time to rest.

Recommendations for the Ministry of Education are written in blue, while recommendations for school boards, schools, and/or teaching staff are written in navy.

CLOSING

The student stories of *Volume One* centered around mental health, anti-Asian racism, remote learning, and the quadmester and octomester experience during the pandemic. Within these topics, students discussed a wide range of experiences that express how their schooling has been and what they want their schooling to look like.

There is a myriad of ways to respond to this collection of feedback, as outlined by the policy recommendations in this volume, and stakeholders in public education should seek to implement them for the current and upcoming school years in a timely manner. Student voices and feedback outside of this project should be regularly accessed to guide these decisions and be actively included in shaping the future of a public education system designed to serve them.

We hope these stories inspire and compel you to reflect further on schooling and public education in Ontario and to contribute to shaping the ever-growing and evolving school systems around you.

CALLS TO ACTION

FOR THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION:

1.1: The Ministry of Education specifically outline the role of guidance counsellors to ensure that they can perform their job to the best of their abilities, and students can have a solid understanding of who to turn to for assistance in mental wellbeing and academic success;

1.2: The funding provided for guidance counsellors in Ontario be increased in order to properly support the needs of Ontario students, and the funding provided at the elementary level should match the secondary level;

1.3: The Ministry work to develop the infrastructure to allow and work with school boards to digitize the booking of guidance counsellors and other mental health worker appointments through online systems that fits their local needs;

2.1: The Ministry of Education and school boards provide training and resources (e.g. the Toronto District School Board's *Addressing Anti-Asian Racism: A Resource for Educators*) to teachers on anti-Asian racism and addressing racist incidents;

2.2: The Ministry, school boards, and schools support the creation of communal spaces such as sharing circles, discussion groups, and affinity networks for students to learn and share about anti-Asian racism;

2.3: The Ministry fund the creation of an Office of Human Rights and Equity in each school board to provide oversight to internal human rights complaints procedure, provide leadership and advice to school boards to identify and address systemically-based human rights and equity issues, and to increase capacity to ensure compliance with the Ontario Human Rights Code;

3.1: The Ministry and school boards create and/or maintain structures and social environments (e.g. affinity networks) with sufficient funding that are accessible to students;

3.2: The Ministry and school boards engage community organizations and institutions in providing virtual extracurricular opportunities and events to students;

3.3: The Ministry refrain from implementing a permanent remote learning pathway at school boards due to the intrinsic shortfall of opportunities for social engagement and emotional development in a virtual learning environment; and

3.10: Reliable broadband internet services be accessible to all schools in Ontario;

FOR SCHOOL BOARDS, SCHOOLS, AND/OR TEACHING STAFF:

1.4: School boards proactively inform students of school mental health resources (e.g. school psychologist) via proactive outreach;

1.5: School boards proactively inform students of community mental health resources using proactive outreach, including resources responsive to identities and lived experiences such as cultural background, gender identity, or sexual orientation;

1.6: School boards seek opportunities to collaborate with mental health organizations to increase support for student mental health;

2.2: The Ministry, school boards, and schools support the creation of communal spaces such as sharing circles, discussion groups, and affinity networks for students to learn and share about anti-Asian racism;

3.1: The Ministry and school boards create and/or maintain structures and social environments (e.g. affinity networks) with sufficient funding that are accessible to students;

3.2: The Ministry and school boards engage community organizations and institutions in providing virtual extracurricular opportunities and events to students;

3.4: School boards provide students and staff flexibility in operating on virtual platforms that best facilitate social interaction, understanding that stringency in approval processes often restricts students from engaging on platforms that allow them to effectively interact with eachother;

3.5: School boards, schools, and teachers frequently collect and implement feedback from students on their virtual learning experience and structurally incorporate student voice in decision-making processes;

3.6: School boards advise schools and teachers to create equitable learning environments that accommodate the diverse personal circumstances that impact an individual students's ability to learn at home rather than a traditional classroom environment;

3.7: School boards provide adequate instructional support to students with special education needs during remote learning, soliciting student and parent feedback to do so;

3.8: School boards advise schools and teachers to proactively review, update, and implement students' IEPs and empower students' self-advocacy (e.g. creating processes that mitigate the teacher-student power imbalance);

3.9: School boards build a process to proactively assess students' technology needs and distribute devices (e.g. hotspots, Chromebooks) accordingly to ensure every student can participate in remote learning;

3.11: A considerable effort is made to retain critical learning skills such as time management and face-to-face interaction with remote learning teachers and students;

3.12: The delivery of remote learning should accommodate the learning styles of all students within the platform's limitations;

4.1: School boards create a contingent pivot and transition plan to the regular semester or non-semestered model during the 2021-2022 academic year, if or when the local public health circumstances permit such a return;

4.2: School teaching staff actively solicit students for feedback on the class workload and adjust the amount accordingly to a level that is manageable for students;

4.3: School teaching staff and departments collectively assess what curriculum (e.g. units) was not taught this year and adjust 2021-22 teaching plans accordingly to accommodate or support these gaps in learning as students enter the next year having covered different content in class per staff decisions;

4.4: School boards and schools bolster or create learning support systems (e.g. subject-specific interactive office hours, peer tutoring, study groups) that are easily accessible for students to receive academic support outside class time; and

4.5: School boards or schools standardize break lengths within and between classes to ensure that all students receive adequate time to rest.

REFERENCES

1 OSTA-AECO Executive Council, *The Students' Vision For Education: OSTA-AECO Vision Document*. (Toronto: Ontario Student Trustees' Association, 2019).
2 OSTA-AECO Executive Council, 25.
3 OSTA-AECO Executive Council, 28.
4 "OCDSB Office of the Human Rights and Equity Advisor," Ottawa-Carleton District School Board, accessed May 10, 2021, https://ocdsb.ca/about_us/human_rights_and_equity_advisor.
5 OSTA-AECO Executive Council, *eLearning: the Students' Perspective*. (Sarnia/Toronto: Ontario Student Trustees' Association, 2019).
6 OSTA-AECO Executive Council, 21.
7 OSTA-AECO Executive Council, 22.
Photos by Katerina Holmes, Charlotte May, Vlada Karpovich, August de Richelieu, and Fauxels from Pexels

APPENDIX

The following are the full submissions students provided, in the order that they appear in this volume. They have been lightly edited for clarity.

"COVID-19 has been disruptive to my education, however my family and teachers have been helpful in making this year a bit more bearable. My mental health has been through ups and downs since the beginning of the school year, however I really struggled before the summer during emergency learning as I tried to keep up and do my best in everything. This year has been intense with uncertainty, feeling [isolated,] and strangeness in schools with distance and barriers from others, [with] constantly changing information and risk levels. During first semester I had English and math. Especially with math I was working constantly, most of the time from when I got home to when I went to bed, with little help from teachers due to the model. The new model is a lot better as teachers can accurately assign workloads each day and see how it is affecting students as well as dealing with student comprehension issues as they arise. I didn't really have friends before the pandemic, but now even small talk is pretty much gone as it is unnecessary risk. However, I have had some amazing teachers this year that have tried their best to let me know I am cared for. I have tried very hard to join as many extracurricular [activities] as I can to look good in the future and to help my community currently, however this has also made me very busy, which is good and bad because I have less time to think about things I'm worried about. My family is very worried about me going to school as some of them are immunocompromised and have been at home for a year, while they let me go because they are all in elementary school yet understand it's important for me to attend high school in-person. This has put a lot of stress on me as I am responsible for my family's wellbeing, and has led me to avoid any friendships this year for fear of them wanting to hang out at some point. Getting volunteer hours has been difficult, however I already had 27 before the pandemic so hopefully my community involvement can contribute to this. I think student health and safety is the most important thing this year and everyone should be pushing mental health resources. I am working with my school to make sure this happens as much as possible. Thank you for listening to my story." —Grade 11 Student

"The COVID-19 pandemic has had a massive toll on my mental health. Staying inside for most of the day has made me feel very bad. I think a feeling that I have that is shared with many other people my age is that I feel like these should be some of the best years/time of my life when it is [not] shaping up to be that way. I have been at school in-person since September and the protocols are hard to follow but I manage. Sometimes I felt unsafe at my school as there were cases of here, but we did not close [the school]. There has not been a lot of mental health support though. I am in the IB program so this has made it even harder on top of all this. I hope everyone out there is doing ok, and I hope we can get through this and be stronger for it at the end." —Grade 11 Student

"I am feeling great today. My mental health has been affected by

being in lockdown and not being able to go anywhere which has made me feel lonely at times but when we are not in lockdown or a stay-at-home order, I get to see people socially distanced. I have gotten depressed a little bit because of COVID. I am worried about being around people and then eventually getting the virus. I am relieved that we were out of lockdown at one point. My mental health is being accommodated by my teachers and school because they give us breaks so we don't overwork ourselves and they give us mental health resources to be get help for our health. The mental health resources are very accessible as they are posted on our school website. The changes to COVID and school have affected my education because we now only have one class per week instead of four classes per day and some students are online for their school and some are in-person. The extracurriculars I participated in were canceled because of COVID and there would be close contact such as curling, hockey, track and field, baseball and badminton. I am very athletic so the impact that it has on me, is that I am unable to be more active in the community. I am graduating this year and it feels like I have more access to post-secondary as I have applied to about three bursaries and scholarships than I anticipated. I have been able to earn my volunteer hours through household chores, yardwork, and online through overnight camps and youth groups. This experience helped me realize the importance of community involvement by helping other people around me and being able to socialize virtually." —Anonymous Student

"In regards to school, I'll admit that a lot is very different compared to what we were doing before lockdown. It's not necessarily a bad thing either, in some ways, it's become easier. We have two classes a day, both of them being just under 3 hours long. We switch to different classes every week. I've been finding it much easier to keep up with my work compared to when we would have all four of our classes every day. Although, my mental health has been rather odd since the pandemic hit. I've been very happy as of late since I've started taking testosterone to help me transition, but I'm also incredibly paranoid because of the virus. COVID-19 has been absolutely terrifying to me, and I simply can't get used to every single change going on. I don't mind cleaning things all the time, or sanitizing my hands, or wearing a mask. I'm just constantly in fear that my school could get another case, maybe they won't be able to control it again if it were to happen. I have been provided sessions with our school counselor, and it helps to talk to her about it, but whether or not I stop panicking is up to me. I believe I'm at a point where I don't want to stop being paranoid. I think if I stop being paranoid, I won't worry about how COVID-19, could affect other's or myself. With that, it has taken a bit of a toll on my assignments. I'm not doing as good as I used to in regards to my grades. They're not bad or anything like that, but I know I could do so much better." —Grade 11 Student

"Remote learning is very challenging. I feel so distracted during my classes and I lack the proper environment to get through my schoolwork. When my Wi-Fi goes out I'm disconnected from my class. Other members in my household are also normally on the Wi-Fi and it is quite frustrating for everyone when it disconnects. I was supplied with a free, unlimited data iPad but typing out documents, creating slides and changing tabs on it is very frustrating compared to a laptop or Chromebook, especially as all my courses require [a lot] of typing. Conflict among household members is also a challenge as some people don't understand that all of my schooling is now online. Sometimes my Internet is taken from me purposely because my time management has become difficult. Not being able to leave the house has had a devastating toll on my already not great mental health. Before this pandemic I was already stressed out but at least I was able to see people who are important to me and I had sports, clubs and a regular routine to help me manage. Now that is all gone. I sit on my bed all day, normally rolling out of bed and logging onto class in my PJs then sitting there for three hours, I take a 30 min break then return to my bed or the floor in my room for my next class. I then do my chores or other household tasks then finish my homework. Before remote learning I didn't really procrastinate. Now I find myself procrastinating until the very last second. Even doing simple household tasks seems impossible. This has often [led] to me having sleepless nights, poor eating routines and lack of physical exercise as I feel so drained. I get such bad anxiety and the cut off from in-person socializing has [led] to me feeling quite depressed. The school I attend has [the quadmester system] in place. Personally I don't like [it], the curriculum moves way too fast and a lot of what was supposed to be taught is cut out. This leaves me feeling unprepared for the next year and stressed out as sometimes multiple assignments are assigned and due within an unrealistic amount of time. Even with extensions it's [a lot] of work. I also enrolled in pre advanced placement courses and [a lot] of the enrichment material I signed up for was never taught. This is done because the teachers need to teach the curriculum but their time to do that has been cut in half. The double long periods are also hard to sit through. There's no breaks within the class time and this causes mental fatigue after sitting for so long. Bathroom breaks cut time from when we get a few minutes to complete independent worksheets. It's also very easy to get overwhelmed in notes or procrastinate then not write them. This only adds to academic related stress. I'm a very high achieving student with top marks but that was when I was able to get out and actually get on the bus early in the morning, go sit in a classroom, and see other people in-person. I strongly think online learning is hurting students' mental health and academic success. I don't even know what some of the teachers look like from classes I've been in. The whole possible situation with online/remote learning becoming a permanent part of some education is definitely stressing me out as it's only made things much more difficult for me. I never saw leaving the house as a luxury but after this whole situation is over, I'll definitely never take any in-person learning for granted." —Grade 10 Student

"Overall, the combination of COVID-19 and school has been very detrimental to my mental health. I have been struggling a lot with motivation, self-esteem and my grades have dropped significantly. I have also found myself extremely overwhelmed with school and unable to cope with it at times. I have not really felt accommodated by my school, and I have not seen any support from them when it comes to mental health. I do not have any issues with my school's COVID-19 protocols. I think they have done a really good job making everything accessible to students (like scholarships, tutoring, masks for COVID-19, etc.) As for online classes, I do have a comfortable environment at home to work in and I have had little issues connecting to classes (it isn't the same for other students - some of my peers have issues with their Internet, their computers, printing notes, or their home environment). My teachers have been trying their hardest to maintain the attention of their classes. Although I can't say I have been engaged all throughout the classes, I can say the teachers have been putting in the most effort they can and it is the most they can do given the situation we are in. I really appreciate the school's and the teacher's efforts to get resources to us and keep our classes going. I think that our schools should begin offering more mental health services to the students and making it public. I know they have guidance counselors already, but if I am being honest, none of the students feel that they can trust the guidance counselors with mental health or details about their home life. Many students I know who have gone to the guidance counselors for help came back with a negative experience. Maybe having a therapist(s) at our schools would help some? Even if some kids do not necessarily take that opportunity to see the therapist, just having that service there would help make the kids more comfortable in [and of] itself. It would let them know that the school actually cares about their mental health. If having a therapist isn't possible, then maybe the schools should make mental health services more visible to students (e.g. actively posting therapy services, people to contact if they need help, etc. on platforms like Edsby)." —Grade 12 Student

"Ever since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, I've dealt with racism at my school simply because I am Asian, and this has caused me to feel less comfortable at school. People have told me that it 'makes sense to stay away from as many Asians as possible' during this pandemic without thinking that those words are extremely harmful." —Grade 9 Student

"COVID-19 has amplified the racist micro-aggressive behaviors in my school. While personal attacks have been uncommon, some students have taken to social media to share attacks on the Asian population or blame towards Chinese people. I've noticed subtle comments towards Asian students like myself, notably one instance where two students coughed and joked [that] they had coronavirus after I walked into a bathroom. I've become more frustrated with the education system as a result of the pandemic, but not because the changes have caused these problems, rather because they pulled back the curtain hiding these issues." —Grade 11 Student

"I am new to the country of Canada as I have only resided here for a few years now and I would say that my experience prior to this pandemic was mostly positive besides a few missed assignments or disagreements between me and my fellow classmates. My experience with the education system here is generally very poor as back in Finland we only had to go to school for five hours each day and with this Canadian system myself and I would presume all students are tired and have little time to do things with our friends. When I was living in Finland, we would get little to no [homework] to do and would learn at school through cooperation as well as problem solving skills we had developed in an educational environment that cultivated it. Here it is very different with [homework] that requires hours and hours to complete, and the majority of group work is just a large piece of homework that is divided between group members who communicate rarely or more commonly not at all. All of this in my eyes is reflected in the attitudes of my peers as many of them are very hesitant or outright refuse to work with other people as they do not [have] the social skills to do so. This is very sad to see as back in my country students often communicated and would prefer to work with others and had the correct skills for it to be a very pleasant learning environment. It's clear to me that the pandemic for many individuals that are enrolled in this education system is something that they resent but what I do not understand is with all of the work, long school hours, and hesitancy to cooperate with other students, what is the difference between the two? From personal research within the community and overarching factors that cannot be dismissed, I have observed that the average student doesn't have much free time to do what they would desire to do. As previously stated with the time that education takes up in the average student's life, they have little time to educate themselves emotionally. I do realize that some students may still find the time for the occasional time to meet with friends the vast majority of their time is spent working away in a system that denies them free time which is a fundamental piece of a youth's social development and growth. As formerly mentioned, the vast majority if not the whole of the student body is resentful towards this lockdown as the very little time they had for communicating with friends and extended family is now gone. If students were already facing an increase of mental illness, it has now surely become an epidemic. The monotony of online school is overwhelming and downright depressing as you can hear the voices of your professors and classmates but are separated by kilometers in distance making the whole experience very alienating. I have the feeling that I am just one in a group of endless blank Gmail accounts sitting in a meeting with a professor that only views their students as a picture and a voice removing all the emotion in learning as well as teaching. The lack of being capable to emotionally connect with a teacher and a teacher with their students creates a very bland and unappealing way of education. Without schools being open students still are required to wake up early everyday and still do not obtain enough sleep to continually retain attention to a screen that's telling them to do more housework that they despise doing

very much. Through this poor alternative to actual school, many students are actually wishing to go back to a real school. The deprivation of emotional connection and a system that only perpetuates the former will lead to a student body of emotionally undeveloped, reclusive, uncooperative, and mentally ill individuals. All I can hope for is that the future and that my generation can change and correct the fundamentally flawed system that educates us today." —Grade 12 Student

"The pandemic has immensely changed the dynamic of my learning experience. I started the 2020-2021 school year online and it was [very difficult] to adjust to [the] learning platforms and the lack of social interactions at first. Lots of my friends were learning in school and it was strenuous on my mental health to consistently remind myself that I'm not missing out and that my value has not decreased as a result of less interactions with my peers. I'm extremely lucky because I did not experience any housing or significant technological issues, so I was able to connect when/if I wanted to. Also, I had some pretty great teachers that checked in on us and valued our feedback. Eventually, I made special virtual connections with classmates and I am currently involved in multiple extracurricular activities. The virtual aspects have allowed me to take opportunities regardless of geography." —Grade 10 Student

Being in virtual high school (VHS) I wish there was more of a way for students to still feel connected with their home school. I felt as though students who took VHS were pushed out of their home schools and were expected to be in a new school. For being in grade 12, I felt like I spent most of my years with people from my home school making friendships and getting to know everyone, just to be divided in my last year. I do like the way virtual high school runs, however, I found it easy enough to get the hang of." —Grade 12 Student

"COVID-19 has changed my experience in my life completely. My quality of education has decreased, my mental health has gotten worse, and I am not feeling very prepared for post-secondary. My school is doing [the quad semester learning style] fully in-person. The [quad semesters] are not terrible, I enjoy being able to only focus on 2 classes. [However], so far none of my teachers have been able to finish the curriculum, making me feel unprepared for university. I am currently taking grade 12 classes, and am missing full units. We also have cancelled exams, which forces me to miss the experience of preparing for exams. As well, during lockdowns I lose the motivation to put effort into my schoolwork. In remote learning, I enjoyed having breakout groups to give a sense of social interaction. My school board has just returned to in-person [learning] and I am very pleased, since I know my quality of education and life will increase." —Grade 11 Student

"This past year has been excruciating. It's [an] absolute pain to have to sit through 4-5 hours of hearing my screen talk to me. I often found myself not paying attention as it was difficult to do so. I also feel like the approach feels redundant as it appeals to a very specific group of students, those who listen. I myself and many others would consider myself a visual learner. And without textbooks being present, I have to go through a plethora of information on the internet just to find a specific thing. On top of that it's extremely fast. I find myself online doing a unit every day, whereas at school it would take upwards [of] a month. Since exams are closed this leads to an even heavier amount of tests/quizzes/CATs etc. It feels like I'm running a marathon. Overall, it's pretty bad [experience] 4/10 >:(" —Grade 11 Student

"COVID-19 has affected [schools] in so many ways, more negatively than positively in my opinion. I'm someone who needs to be inside a classroom and interacting with my peers[,] or else I fall into a state of mind where I can't get anything done[,] because there is so much distracting me at home, my mental health has plummeted, and I no longer have the patience to do most of the things I used to love. The plan they have [implemented] for my school is so horrible, learning [a] four month curriculum in 40 days has put so much stress and anxiety on me, I don't even want to do good anymore[,] I just want to get the school year over with." —Grade 9 Student

"COVID-19 has massively messed up my school experience, there are things that I wanted to do in school with my friends that now I'll never get to experience which definitely isn't the school's fault. However, in terms of doing online school because of the virus, schools need to understand that we're all just kids. Most of us don't have the motivation to do the work given and on top of that a lot of us live in places where it's hard to get access to school given or there's too many distractions in our living environment. Frankly I think the way schools (or at least mine) have organized online school is very unorganized, teachers are never using the same website whether that's Webex, Google Meet, etc, and it can be really confusing. Why not just have all the teachers use the same program so that everyone already understands what they're supposed to do[?]" —Grade 12 Student

"My school has been using the [quadmester] layout where we have one week of one class then the next week [of another class], [this] layout has been stressful and not an amazing experience. What I've found is this layout['s learning style is] super condensed and doesn't give you time to process information. As much as [the quadmester system] allows less subjects to be on your plate I've found you have to learn all this information in such a short period of time where you have zero time to process any of it." —Grade 12 Student