

?Octomester? poses new challenges for students, teachers, and education workers

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By Nate Smelle

In normal times, by the end of August, teachers and students throughout Ontario are aware of what classes they will be teaching and taking during their first semester. Thanks to COVID-19, so far 2020 has been anything but normal.

With the 2020/2021 school year about to begin, early last week teachers and education workers at secondary schools in the Hastings Prince Edward District School Board, the Algonquin and Lakeshore Catholic District School Board, and many other non-designated boards throughout the province learned that they would be switching from the ?quadmester? teaching/learning model which saw students studying two subjects a day to a new model being called the ?octomester.?

Under this new model, students will be required to study one subject a day for 22 days at a time. To create less opportunities for contact, students will remain in one classroom at the same desk for the entire school day, without travelling to another classroom. In addition, students will take staggered breaks from the classroom, and eat lunch in this classroom as well.

Last week the ALCDSB's director of education, David DeSantis declared in a press release that the board's change to its return to school plan for secondary students had been made in consultation with our local public health units under the direction of the Ministry of Education. Recognizing that the new schedule is ?different than a traditional day at a secondary school and this update comes with little time before the start of the school year, he reiterated that the adjustment was made because ?the health and safety of our students and staff is a top priority.

The Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation's District 29 president Scott Marshall said the fundamental last minute change to the teaching/learning model has forced educators and education workers to scramble in an attempt to make sure students can learn safely. With class sizes in schools from non-designated boards still at pre-pandemic levels (30+ students per classroom in many instances), he said one of the biggest challenges they are facing in the last minute planning process is ensuring that students can practice physical distancing while in class.

?Whether it's the asynchronous learning at home, which is going to be on the same model; or this one at school now where the kids have the same subject for five hours, it's really like trying to force a square peg in a round hole here,? said Marshall. ?Limiting student contacts would have required more investment than they are willing to do, and that's the unfortunate part. Five hours of the same subject every day - and it's the same at home or at school - that's going to be really hard on the high school kids. What happens if the kids miss a day or two? Well, they'll be missing the equivalent of four days in the old model. My background started in phys-ed, so imagine five hours of phys-ed day after day!?

Highlighting the limitations of the teaching/learning space available in most local classrooms, Marshall added ?Being a non-designated board we still have that concern about the inability to have two-metre distancing, because class sizes can be up over 30 if everyone is there. You just can't distance with the size of our classrooms and that many students.?

According to Marshall, another issue teachers and education workers have with the ?octomester? model is that it has been developed by the school boards and the ministry without the input of the teachers. Although the government has repeatedly said they are trying to work with the education unions, he said the OSSTF's leadership team has reached out to them several times but there is still no meaningful dialogue taking place. Acknowledging the enormous amount of work that happens behind the scenes to prepare and be ready for the upcoming school year, Marshall said the short time-frame they have been given to ensure they are providing quality education in a safe learning environment has teachers and education workers extremely concerned for the health and safety of their students and all education workers.

?Making these changes that turn everything upside down at the last minute requires incredible effort,? he said. ?People are scrambling to try and make it work, but there is a lot of anxiety and concern, because it's not the ideal model and there are still concerns about pedagogy, student safety, and student wellness. It would have been better to have been planned and invested in properly a while back with a framework that would support a more thoughtful reopening plan for the students.?

In light of these concerns, Marshall said the OSSTF asked HPEDSB to delay the reopening of the schools to make sure everyone is ready. However, despite the concerns raised, he said the board plans to stick to the current schedule of re-opening.

?I don't think the schools are ready right now but we'll see,? said Marshall. ?Everybody is scrambling as much as they can to try to get this ready to go, but it's a long way from ideal.?