

HWDSB

March 26, 2020

Dear HWDSB Families,

We hope that you and your family are doing well during these uncertain and unprecedented times.

Since writing to you last week, the situation with respect to the Ontario school closure has evolved rapidly. Our staff have been working diligently to look at how we can best support our students and families in these unique circumstances.

Below you will find information about the work taking place behind the scenes. We have included what you can expect during this time, as well as details about resources that will help support students learning at home.

On March 23, the Premier of Ontario announced an extension of the school closure beyond April 6; however, dates have not been released. We will inform families once we know the timing of the extension.

Staying Connected

With the end of the March Break, our school-based staff are back at work. This week, our focus is on reconnecting. School teams are working with each other, establishing work-from-home spaces, identifying technology capacity and most importantly, reaching out to their students and families.

By the end of next week (April 3), students and families can expect to hear from a school staff member in order to gather an inventory of students and families that may not have access to a digital device and the internet. School staff may also be providing other learning opportunities for students, but these activities, just like the Ministry online resources, will not be assessed and evaluated until we obtain further direction from the Ministry of Education on the next phase. Watch for emails, newsletters, phone calls, and/or social media feeds.

Communication with our families will likely look different across HWDSB, depending on the grade and the practices already established for teacher to student and/or teacher to parent communication. Families are welcome to reach out to educators by email. Please ensure that your school has your current contact information; to update this information, contact your school via the school website contact form.

Distance Learning

Phase 1

Self-directed learning opportunities for students during the Ministerial Order (to April 6) is being referred to as Phase 1 of learning supports. These Ministry of Education supports are available online

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at [Learn at Home](#), a new online portal that provides resources for families so that students can continue learning while schools are closed and preparation is taking place for Phase 2.

We have also listed resources on our [COVID-19 web page](#) that cover a range of grades and subjects that may be helpful for students and parents during this time. It is important to note that Phase 1 online resources are not mandatory or graded and are meant for families to use as resources to support independent learning while students are at home.

Preparing for Phase 2

Staff are working behind the scenes, training and adapting to online tools. This week, management teams, including school principals and vice-principals, have been trained on Microsoft (MS) Teams. School-based staff will be part of a virtual staff meeting by the end of next week. Board service departments are helping educators with virtual training next week with online platforms such as The HUB and MS Teams.

While we are asking staff to continue using tools students are familiar with, they may also be reaching out and employing new tools. While all of our secondary students can utilize their board assigned iPads, many of our families have reached out with concerns about limited or no access to internet and technology. Please know that our team is developing innovative ways to ensure that all of our students are supported in learning at home. We are also encouraged by the efforts of our Specialized Services staff, who have developed a video-enabled plan for students on alternative programs. Watch for more details on this as staff are trained and develop resources for educators and families.

We know these are challenging times for students and families, and we are committed to working with the Ministry of Education to support you during this unprecedented interruption to student learning.

Graduating High School

For many students and parents, particularly in Grade 12, there is concern about graduating high school. The Minister of Education was very clear in his letter that “no graduating student will have their ability to graduate impacted by the two-week closure and the COVID-19 developments.” We share this commitment and will prioritize this in our planning for continuity of learning.

Access to Schools and Playgrounds

Access to all school buildings is completely restricted at this time. We know that school yards are important green spaces in many communities and school yards are open. However, play structures are not being cleaned and, as a result, are not a safe place for children to play.

Public Health Direction

It is crucial that we respect the direction of municipal, provincial and federal public health agencies: stay home as much as possible, remain at least two metres away from others and wash your hands often. Please continue to seek reliable information from the public health agencies in the *Reliable Information* section of this letter below.

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Mental Health Supports

This is a challenging and stressful time for students and families across our community. To help, we have developed a tip sheet for [Supporting child and youth mental well-being during COVID-19](#). In addition, we have created a [Student Mental Health Supports postcard](#) that summarizes mental health supports in case of crisis, urgent or non-urgent incidents. Please share this information with those who can benefit from it.

The [HWDSB Helps app](#) continues to be active so that students or families can anonymously share non-urgent concerns through that service, which will share it with staff who can help. Also, School Mental Health Ontario has produced resources for [How to support student mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic](#).

Thank you to our families for your patience and to our staff for your commitment to learning during these extraordinary times.

Reliable Information

Be on alert. Fraud and crime by email or electronic means remain a real threat during these challenging times. Heightened vigilance is required. Reliable sources of information include:

- [City of Hamilton](#)
- [Province of Ontario](#)
- [Government of Canada](#)

For updates during the closure, please visit the HWDSB website at www.hwdsb.on.ca and follow HWDSB on social media (Twitter, Facebook and Instagram). We will also communicate with families through our SchoolMessenger service (phone calls, emails and SMS messages).

Be safe and stay well,



Alex Johnstone
Chair of the Board



Manny Figueiredo
Director of Education