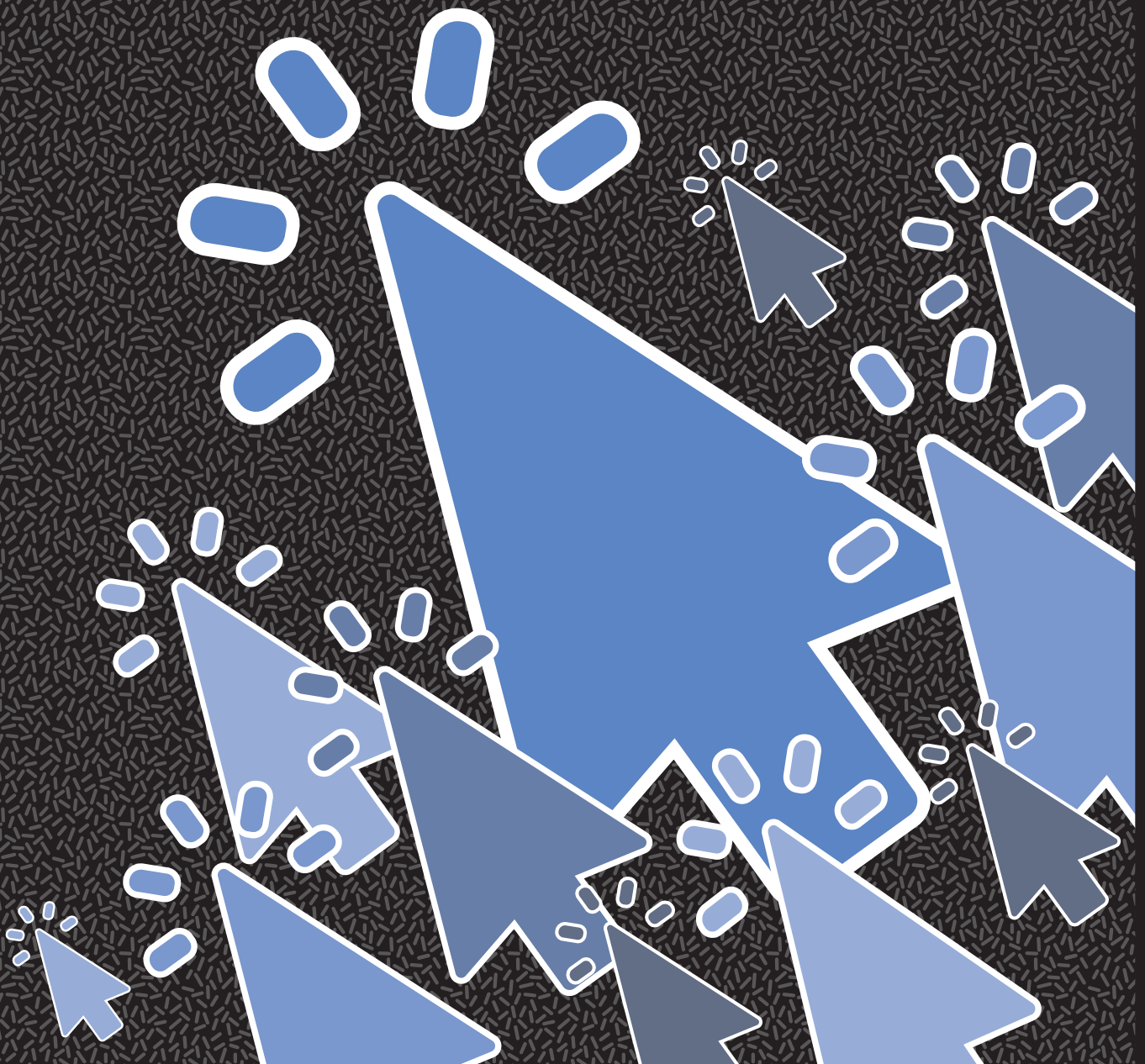
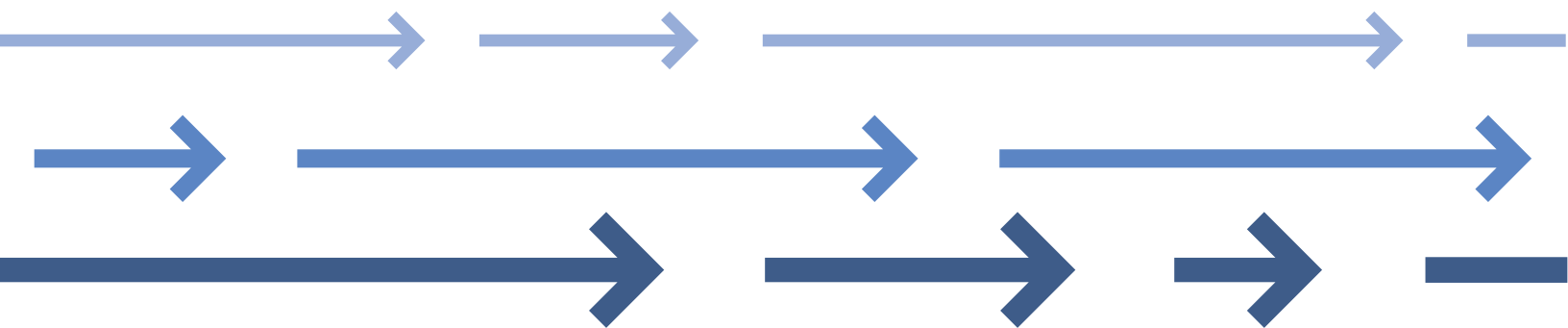


OSTA - AECO

# eLearning: The Students' Perspective

*OSTA-AECO's eLearning Survey Results and Key Findings*

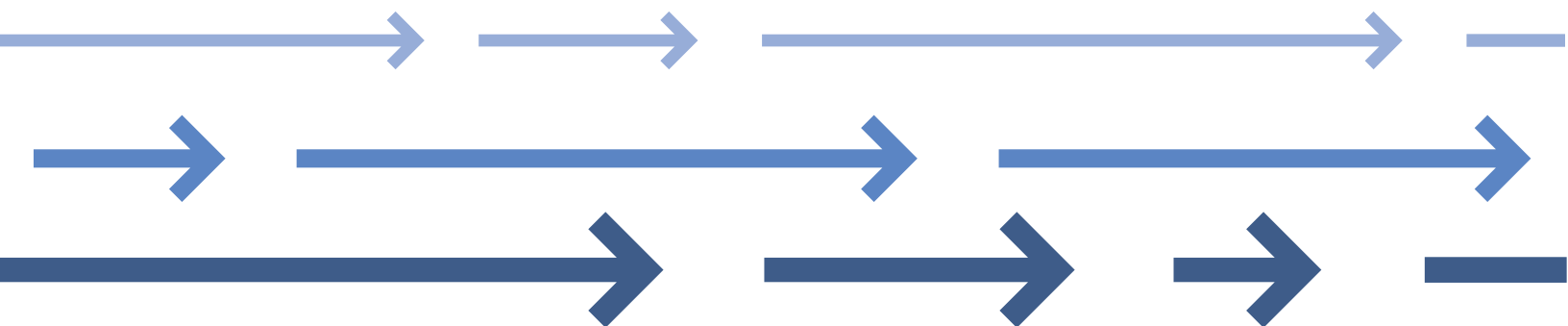




# About OSTA-AECO

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 Assembly is comprised of student trustees from public and Catholic school boards across the province. Members of the association work tirelessly throughout the year to advocate for student voice, and strive to work with provincial partners in government. Ultimately, OSTA-AECO aims to improve Ontario's education system for its students.

More information about OSTA-AECO's work can be found at [www.osta-aeco.org](http://www.osta-aeco.org)



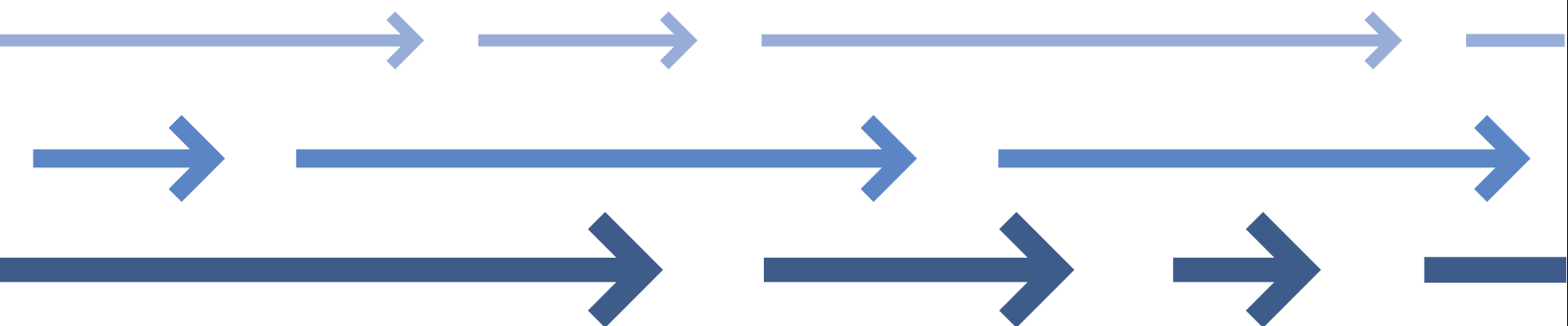
# Foreword

In today's society, technology has become an integral part of Ontario's publicly-funded education system. The way in which technology is used in the classroom is constantly evolving to fit the needs of this 21st century approach to education.

In response to the Ministry of Education's newest mandate, which makes earning four eLearning credits a requirement to receive the Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) for all Ontario secondary students, OSTA-AECO collected feedback from students in grades 8-12 on Ontario's eLearning program. **In total, the survey received 6087 responses from students across Ontario.**

The intent for this document is to inform the general public and stakeholders within Ontario's education sector about students' perspectives on the eLearning mandate, and its subsequent implementation. Additionally, we intend for this report to encourage student consultation on mandates in Education and curriculum changes moving forward. The following policy document is divided into three sections, describing:

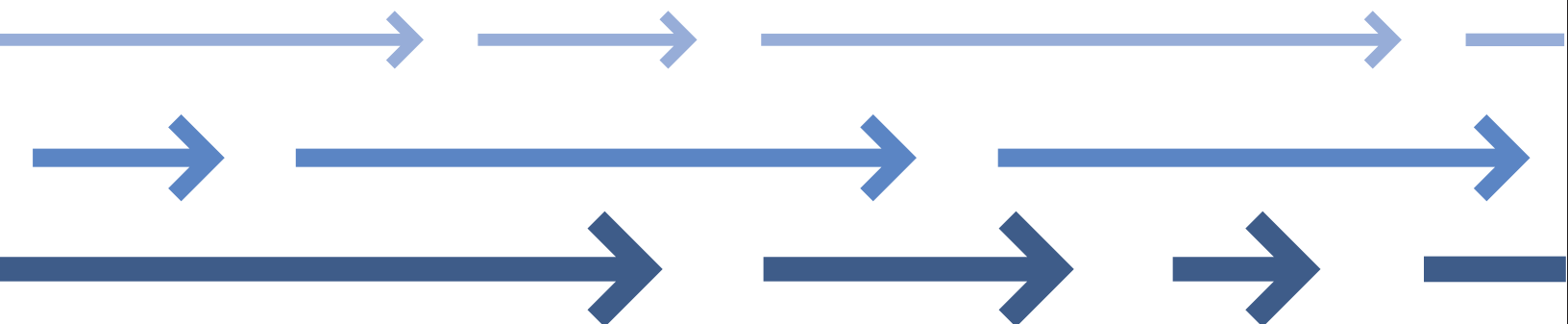
- 1) The state of eLearning today;*
- 2) The challenges students are facing with eLearning; and*
- 3) How eLearning can be improved*



As a unique report in Ontario addressing the subject of eLearning, this document is instrumental in providing the foundation for how students believe the eLearning mandate should be best addressed moving forward.

Our survey findings are conclusive and demonstrate that the majority of respondents disapprove of the direction of the Ontario eLearning mandate. As a result, OSTA-AECO is advocating for the new eLearning mandate to be reversed. These views, which are informed by a variety of factors such as the effectiveness of course material, socio-economic disparities, and course accessibility, highlight both the qualitative challenges and quantitative differences between eLearning and in-person courses.

The future of Ontario relies on how well students are educated today. OSTA-AECO believes both in upholding Ontario's high educational standards, and in the need to adequately consult students on decisions impacting their education. In providing the highest quality of education that reflects 21st century learning, the Government of Ontario and its publicly-funded school systems should ensure that students are ready to be effective and well-developed contributors to society.



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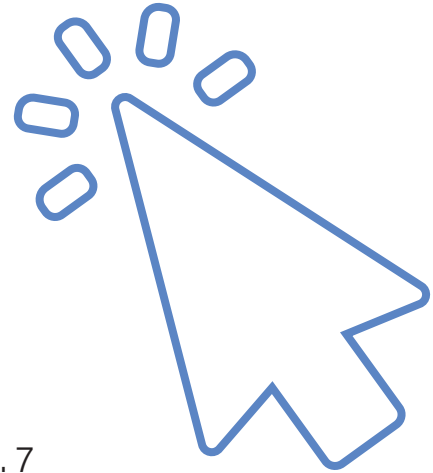
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# Fast Facts

The fast facts listed below are the key findings from the eLearning survey released to students in grades 8-12 by the Ontario Student Trustees Association / l'Association des élèves conseillers et conseillères de l'Ontario (OSTA-AECO). The survey was conducted from May 2019 to June 2019, and garnered 6087 responses.

**1 in 4** respondents said they had a hard time contacting their eLearning teachers.



**35.2%**

of respondents who have taken eLearning reported experiencing moderate to severe challenges with utilizing the eLearning software.

Approximately

**60%**

of all survey respondents who took eLearning feel that their learning styles were not adequately accommodated.

Out of the 6087 survey respondents used in this sample, 5772 respondents -- or

**94.8%**

of all respondents -- disapprove of the new eLearning mandate.

An estimated ceiling of

**90,000**

of Ontario's 2 million currently-enrolled students would not be able to obtain their Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD), if eLearning is mandated for all students.



**3 in 10** respondents had difficulty understanding their eLearning course lessons.

# Methodology

From May 2019 to June 2019, student trustees across Ontario were encouraged to distribute an online survey created by OSTA-AECO to all students in grades 8-12, regardless of whether or not they have taken an eLearning course. As a result, the information in this document features feedback from 6087 responses from students in over 60 school boards, both urban and rural, who participated in the consultation process.

“eLearning” refers to a course in which the majority of content is delivered online in the absence of a typical classroom setting. For the purpose of this survey, eLearning completed for summer school, online-based courses scheduled for school hours, and blended learning environments have all been classified as eLearning. Supplements to a course delivered in-person, such as the use of Google Classroom or Desire2Learn (D2L) to post lessons and quizzes, do not qualify as eLearning for the purposes of this survey.

Two separate question sets were used in the distribution of this survey; students who had taken eLearning were asked about their experiences, while students who had not previously taken eLearning were asked about their perceptions and ability to participate in online courses. As a part of OSTA-AECO’s vision as an organization is to work with students and relevant stakeholders to improve Ontario’s publicly-funded education system, OSTA-AECO created and distributed this survey in order to provide a platform for student voices.

The survey did not include any verification that the respondent was an Ontario student and all student feedback for this survey was self-reported. Education stakeholders in Ontario and student trustees were the main distributors of the survey.



## SECTION 1:

# eLearning Today

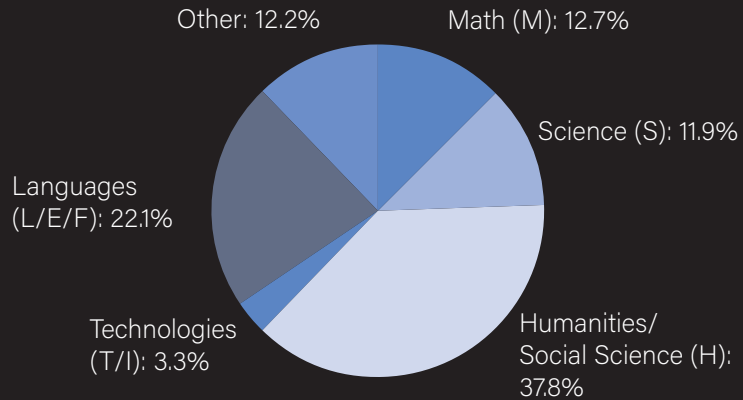
## Understanding Online Learning

In the present day, eLearning's methods of instruction can vary between Ontario's school boards, but is primarily directed through district-based programs<sup>[1]</sup> or platforms. To access an eLearning course, students log in to a learning management system (LMS), such as Desire2Learn (D2L) or TVO's Independent Learning Centre, using their board-provided information to navigate to appropriate course content. Students are not limited to accessing these platforms at school. eLearning's format allows students to use these platforms anytime, from any location. Students then have the option to view course content and lessons on the course website in a variety of formats. Face to face interaction is highly uncommon in an eLearning environment. Students are required to complete and submit work to a dropbox on the platform that closes automatically on a set date. If students have questions, comments, or concerns, most educators ask that they be reached out to via email or through the platform's instant messaging software<sup>[2][3]</sup>.

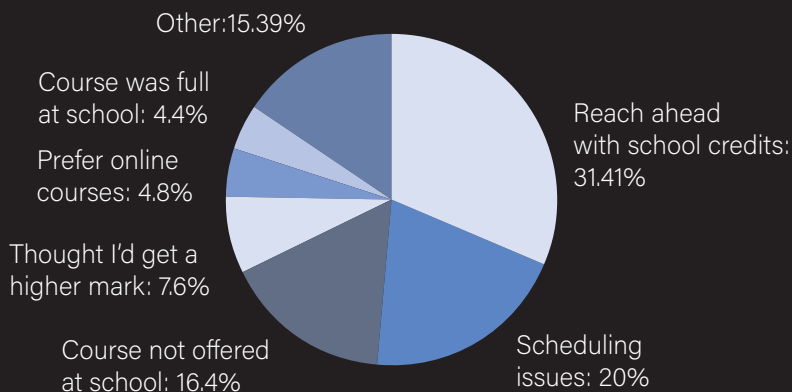
Although eLearning software is not an uncommon educational tool, the recent mandate requiring each secondary student to complete four eLearning courses is entirely unique in North America. Although five US states -- Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Michigan, and Virginia<sup>[4][5][6][7][8]</sup> -- have a requirement in place to complete one online course, nothing of this scope has been previously implemented. Due to the unique nature of this mandate, OSTA-AECO is unable to determine the specific magnitude and types of effects that a program of this size will have on Ontario's education system.

The concept behind eLearning is to serve a broad and diverse student populace, regardless of socioeconomic or enrolment situations. Therefore, many of the questions outlined in the eLearning survey aim to provide a cross-section of who eLearning's users are and their rationales for enrolling in online courses.

## Which types of courses are you currently taking, or have taken in the past, through eLearning?



60% of all participants have taken social science, arts, or language courses online, in comparison to 40% of survey participants who took science, technology, or math courses. This can be attributed to the fact that science and math courses are more reliant on in-classroom demonstrations, and experiential learning. Additionally, science and math courses tend to be more readily available for students due to higher participation rates in comparison to social science courses. Students must have a minimum of 3 credits in mathematics and 2 credits in the sciences in order to graduate, whereas social science courses do not have a mandatory minimum number of course credits that must be taken as a graduation requirement<sup>[9]</sup>.



## Why did you take an eLearning course?

*"Online courses are a great OPTION but it is not an effective way to learn for many students so making them mandatory does not help students learn! I would choose to take the same course in person because my ability to learn skyrocketed in the traditional classroom as opposed to online."*

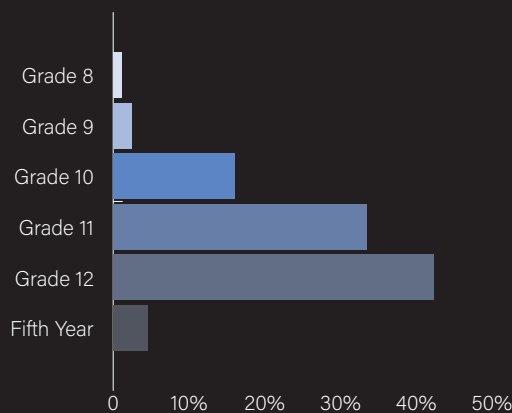
- Survey Respondent

Of those surveyed who took an eLearning course, less than four out of ten (36.21%) students took their online courses for reasons involving the personal value of eLearning, rather than obligation (reasons such as reaching ahead with school credits or preference towards online courses).

Much of this data points to the rigidness of Ontario's education system. More than four out of ten students (40.8%) took or are taking a course online simply because there is no other option available to them (scheduling issues, full classes, not offered). These issues likely stem from more content-specific courses not deemed to be a prerequisite for post-secondary<sup>[10][11]</sup> or due to limited timetable availability. Since these courses are catered to specific career pathways, challenges may include limited enrolment and conflicts within a student's timetable. They may also revolve around the fact that niche courses are already at capacity, or that niche courses normally have low enrolment<sup>[12]</sup> and unable to be offered in-person.

*Students who have taken or are taking eLearning:*

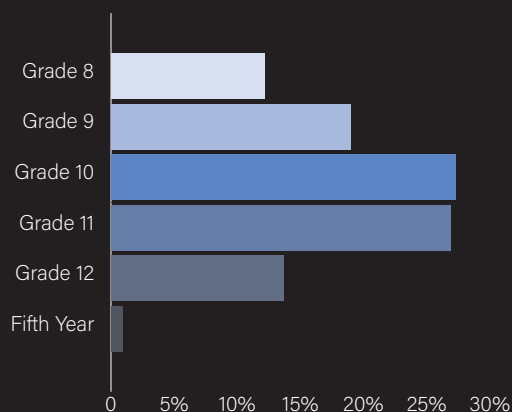
## *What grade are you in now?*



Four out of every five students who responded to our survey were senior students (grades 11 & 12), and just over one half of those students are presently taking eLearning courses. The high volume of eLearning courses being taken in grades 11 and 12, and fifth-year are due to the increased number of course options available for these grades<sup>[13]</sup>, whereas some courses may see an overall declining enrolment as they may not be compulsory for post-secondary admissions.

*Students who have not taken or are not taking eLearning:*

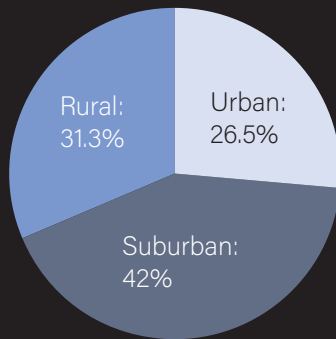
## *What grade are you in now?*



Approximately three in five (58.5%) respondents who have not taken eLearning were recorded as being in grades 8-10. This is due to the fact that a majority of students in grades 8 to 10 are enrolled in compulsory courses often with little to no scheduling conflicts. Additionally, students may not have the desired courses available to them through online means because their requirements have been accommodated through in-class means.

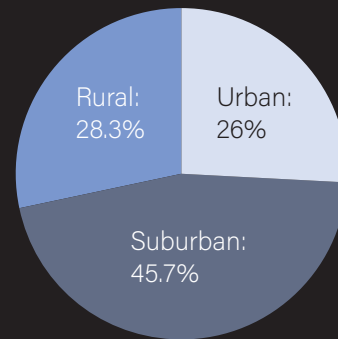
*Students who have taken or are taking eLearning:*

*How would you describe the area you live in?*



*Students who have not taken or are not taking eLearning:*

*How would you describe the area you live in?*



There is not enough of a correlation from this report and survey alone to state that a skewed percentage of students in eLearning are in one area of density over another. However, OSTA-AECO recognizes the value of eLearning to rural and Northern students<sup>[14]</sup>, since the addition of eLearning increases accessibility to students in these areas where low enrolment may limit the number of in-person course options available<sup>[15]</sup>.

## SECTION 2:

# Challenges in eLearning

## Barriers in the Current eLearning Environment

eLearning provides students with the ability to learn course content through digital mediums and to provide greater access of course work to a larger field of students. However, there are unique challenges associated with its usage, including access to internet, the accommodation of varying learning styles and its impact on students from diverse backgrounds. These challenges can be exacerbated if eLearning is broadly mandated for all high school students in Ontario.

*Did you find you faced challenges while taking an eLearning course?*

Yes: 83.2%

No: 16.8%

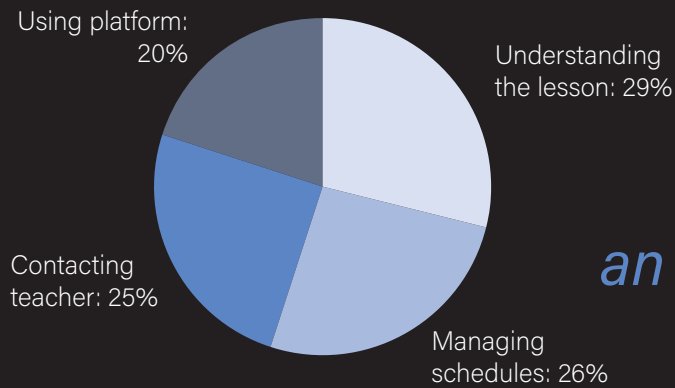


*"It is significantly more difficult to direct your learning without the guidance of an in-class teacher. I find it hard to focus and would expect a professional to educate me on the course I have taken. Teachers are the most important people in all of our lives and they have chosen their career path to serve/teach their passion to students. Online classes make it incredibly difficult to experience those vital classroom discussions and live lessons. Many people experience overburdening difficulty in online learning, so making it mandatory is frankly absurd and apathetic."*

- Survey Respondent

*"Taking online courses makes the class feel very impersonal and detached, monotone and robotic. It is more difficult to discuss things with a teacher and ask questions throughout the day if the class is online, and personally, it is harder for me to learn simply by having a lessons handed to me, I need a chance for discussion on the subject."*

- Survey Respondent



## What were some challenges you faced while taking an eLearning course?

*"I am the type of person to get confused on assignments very easily. I benefit more being face to face with a teacher to ask questions and get things thoroughly explained to me. Sometimes I need someone to explain every detail to me for me to fully understand what I need to do."*

- Survey Respondent

Of all respondents who have taken an eLearning course and experienced difficulties, approximately three in every ten respondents (29%, 24.1% of all respondents) specifically faced difficulty in understanding their course lessons.

In addition to the quantitative feedback, those who had further issues with teacher access noted in written feedback that they faced challenges in clearly interpreting course work, further weakening the understanding of course content.

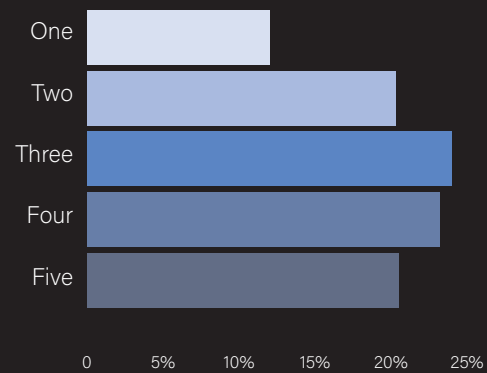
One in four respondents (25%) said they had a hard time contacting their eLearning teachers. Though all eLearning instructors teaching through the Ontario eLearning Consortium (OeLC), and equivalents certified by the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT), are recommended to provide sufficient guidance to students<sup>[16][17]</sup>, this is not always the case. The teachers (eLearning instructors) are asked to be available to answer questions or clarify information for students when needed<sup>[18]</sup>. If there are considerable communication barriers between eLearning instructors and students (which can be common due to the nature of "messaging" on eLearning platforms), achievement levels and time management skills may be impacted.

*\* It must be noted that this question does not include those who had no issues with using eLearning devices and software. It is also likely that a number of respondents had concerns that applied to more than one category. Due to the nature of our survey collection system, these numbers may be understating issues that have occurred within eLearning and may apply to a higher percentage of respondents.*

*On a scale from 1-5, how easy was it to manage your time effectively to complete your work?*

*1 = Very easy to manage my time,*

*5 = Very difficult to manage my time*



*"I would most definitely procrastinate while I'm on the computer, and I'm sure many others will. It's like the classroom pushes us to listen but at home with so many distractions it would be hard to focus."*

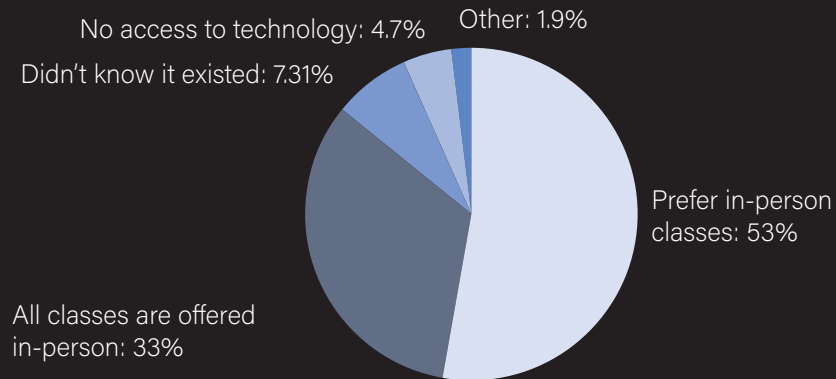
*- Survey Respondent*

Using a scale asking students to rank their ability to manage their time effectively from one to five (where a rating of one suggested that it was easy to manage one's time and where a rating of five suggested that it was very difficult to manage one's time), two in three students suggested it was somewhat to very difficult for them to manage time on their own. An issue of this size might suggest that there are systemic issues with the management of eLearning and its implementation across school boards through its mediums (eg. D2L). Other psychosocial factors, such as intangible course content or the need for regular log-ins on may also affect a student's time management skills while taking an eLearning course.

Though teachers who hold Additional Qualifications for eLearning courses are taught how to incorporate time management into lessons<sup>[19]</sup>, it still presents as a major issue for many students. Additional Qualifications are courses meant to enhance best practices for teachers, and improve the skills needed to teach a broader scope of students. Therefore, this data may indicate that teachers will require updated resources to fully support students adjusting to eLearning.

Possessing strong time management skills is required to be successful in most eLearning courses. In fact, time management has been noted as a significant contributor to dropping out of eLearning courses in previous settings<sup>[20]</sup>. Due to the independence of the course structure, students have to be vigilant, checking deadlines for course content frequently, and establish consistent contact with their eLearning teacher. Students who rely more on inquisitive learning or who need guidance to complete their online course effectively will not see their personality types accommodated in their workload.

## Why have you chosen not to take an eLearning course so far?

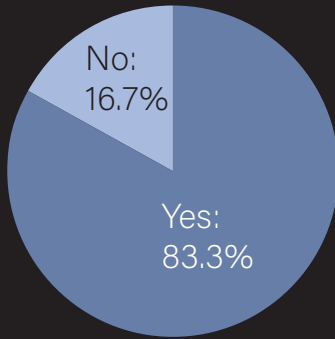


On a similar note, our data has suggested significant systemic gaps are present in education that limits the facilitation of an eLearning course. Of the respondents to this survey who have not completed an eLearning course, 4.7% (up to a maximum of 90,000 students throughout Ontario\*) said they are unable to complete an eLearning course due to inadequate access to the technology required to take an online course.

In an education system that mandates the completion of an eLearning course, it would be inaccessible for many students who are low-income or lacking household internet, as internet access already plays a significant role in strengthening student achievement<sup>[21]</sup>. Based on our survey findings, mandated eLearning courses are challenging for students in regions which do not have access to a reliable broadband network infrastructure needed to complete an eLearning course. Having no access to technology could bar students from earning their Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD).

\* Using data calculated from People for Education's 2019 Annual Report and scaled to meet the percentage of responses in this question, roughly 95.4% of Ontario's 2.02 million students are currently not taking eLearning courses. Of this sample, a maximum of 4.7% of students may be unable to complete an eLearning course due to inadequate access to technology. This number represents the potential ceiling for this group, or approximately 90,000 students. OSTA-AECO recognizes that the actual amount of Ontario's students that cannot complete an eLearning course is likely lower than this amount<sup>[22][23]</sup>.



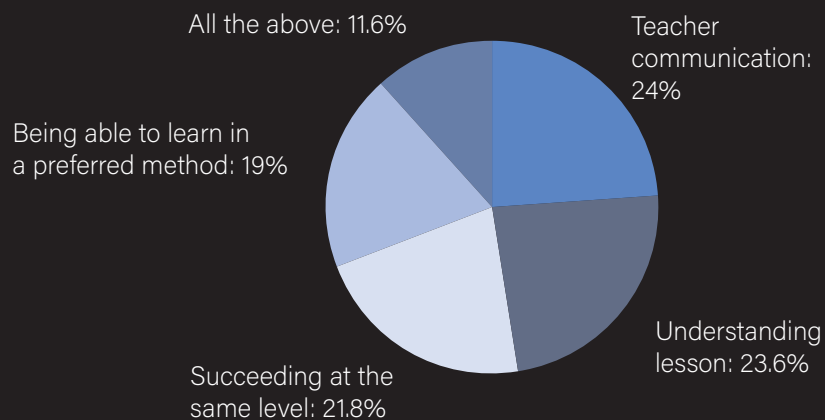


## *Do you have concerns with taking eLearning courses in order to graduate?*

Aside from issues surrounding student work ethic, respondents who had not taken an eLearning course also expressed more tangible and systemic concerns around taking eLearning themselves. Approximately five in six students who had taken eLearning expressed various concerns regarding their readiness to complete an eLearning course.

*Note: Respondents who completed this question were not asked to respond to the direction of the new eLearning mandate, and rather to respond to any personal barriers in which they may face with eLearning.*

### *If yes, what would you say are your biggest concerns about taking eLearning?*



Over one in three students (35.6%) who are taking eLearning express concerns about the nature of the eLearning platform and its ability to facilitate quality interactions between teachers and students for student mastery of course content. Ontario students need and value contact time to do their best learning, because students realize that eLearning reduces their ability to access teacher expertise, they are concerned that their learning will suffer with the new eLearning policy.

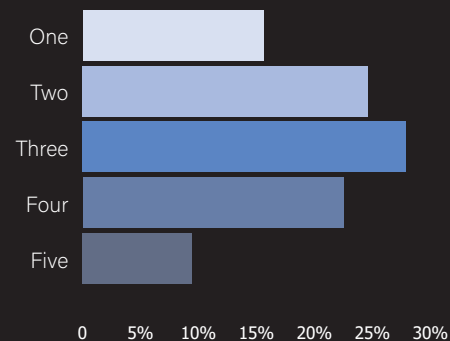
Another aspect to note is the variance in responses for students who have taken eLearning compared to those who have not. As previously outlined, 29% of Ontario students who had taken eLearning had expressed concerns about understanding the lesson. In contrast, a smaller percentage of students who had not taken eLearning expressed the same concern in our survey. Understanding lessons directly from a teacher correlates to success in a course. Therefore, the challenges associated with eLearning are predicated on fundamental shortcomings of the eLearning platforms and delivery, and less on perceptions of the platform stemming from student biases.

Additionally, it was previously outlined that 7.6% of respondents who took eLearning did so believing they would be receiving a higher mark in comparison to an in-person class. However, 21.8% of those who had not taken eLearning demonstrated that they believe taking an online course would decrease their mark. While contrasting in nature, both sentiments demonstrate a perceived achievement barrier and performance gap that exists with eLearning.

*On a scale from 1-5, how available was your teacher when you had a question?*

*1 = Not very available,*

*5 = Always available*



*“Nothing beats face to face interaction. Having a teacher explain a subject to me I am able to better understand the topic. Unlike in person, learning through e-learning it is easier to space out and lose focus and it is harder for me to learn and understand the information.”*

*- Survey Respondent*

Our findings not only speak to eLearning’s current infrastructure, but to the potential it possesses. Over four in ten respondents who took an eLearning course found that teacher availability was relatively low. This, like other issues, may be the result of multiple factors such as additional eLearning classes, instructors having to manage more students per class (35:1 ratio for online classes, as opposed to 22:1 for in-person)<sup>[24]</sup>, and instructors prioritizing in-class material over online material. From a student’s perspective, one aspect which must be considered is the time in which course material is being completed by a student during the day. Considering the set-up of the school day, a student may be completing course content whilst their teacher is teaching in a physical classroom and unable to respond in a timelier manner.

# SECTION 3: Looking Forward

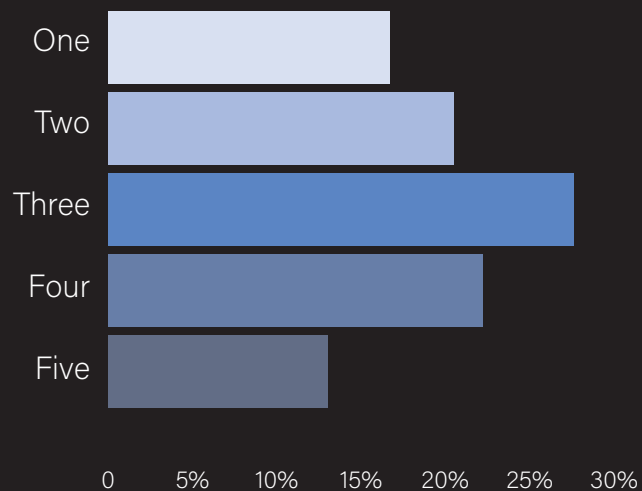
## What Students Want to See in eLearning

As illustrated in the previous section of this report, eLearning possesses its own unique and specific challenges. In addressing the outlined issues, there are areas of growth that can be targeted to improve the existing program. Thus, the following section outlines areas in need of further development in order to widely offer a more successful version of eLearning.

*On a scale from 1-5, how did you find navigating the online platform used for your class?*

*1 = Very easy to navigate the online platform,*

*5 = Very difficult to navigate the online platform*

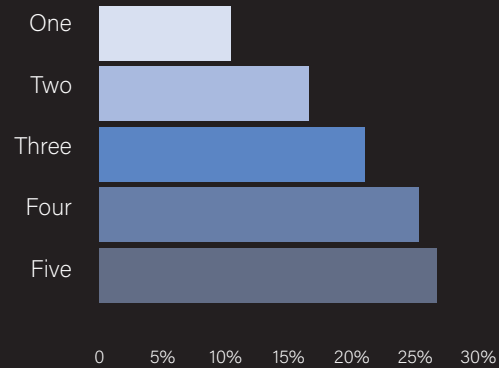


Despite a majority of students being able to effectively utilize eLearning software (D2L, Brightspace etc.), 35.2% of respondents who have taken eLearning reported experiencing moderate to severe challenges utilizing the eLearning software. As outlined by the 6087 survey respondents, educational stakeholders, including the Ministry of Education and school boards, must take significant steps to improve user experience and build the necessary supports to make eLearning a revolutionary learning tool of the future.

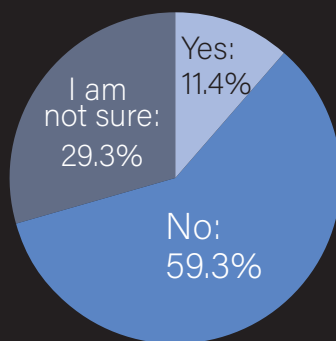
*On a scale from 1-5, how reliable was the Wi-Fi you used to complete your course?*

*1 = The Wi-Fi was not reliable at all,*

*5 = The Wi-Fi was always reliable*



All eLearning platforms require consistent access to resources such as technology and reliable internet for proper use. Many respondents expressed concern about this, as a significant number lack such crucial resources within households, leaving them to rely on school-provided internet and technology. However, half of the students surveyed described their experience with school broadband connections as being somewhat reliable to completely unreliable, therefore illustrating that there is not currently a proper infrastructure in place to support this mandate. If schools do not have reliable connections to broadband internet, the achievement gap between students from different socio-economic backgrounds will be widened. The lack of reliable access to internet services has the potential to restrict students from attaining the necessary requirements for their high school diploma.



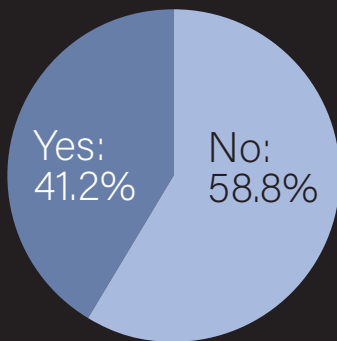
*Do you think your learning styles would be accommodated through online learning?*

Our data indicates that there is a wide-ranging perception amongst students with many learning styles, such as kinesthetic and visual learning styles, will not be well accommodated on an eLearning platform. Comprising approximately 60% of all respondents, these sentiments demonstrate high demand for eLearning administrators to accommodate more learning styles within the limitations of eLearning software.

With only 11.4% of respondents feeling certain that their learning style is going to be accommodated in the facilitation of eLearning, course content delivery must be improved. Teachers, facilitators, and platform developers must be more aware of how to diversify content. This can take the shape of having more interactive lessons, video lectures, Skype interviews, or other alternatives<sup>[25]</sup> to reflect the differing learning styles of students in Ontario. Catering to different learning styles has been previously shown to improve a student's retention of course material for students not used to independent learning and can be conducive to expanding learning opportunity<sup>[26]</sup>.

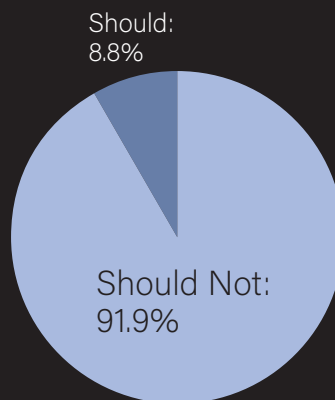
*Students who have taken or are taking eLearning:*

*Based on your experience, would you take an eLearning course again?*



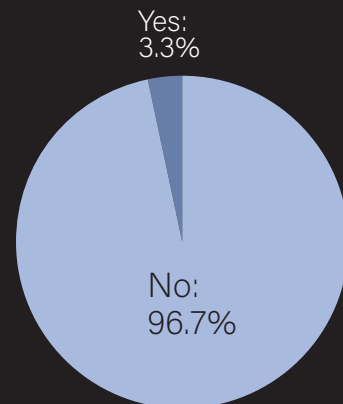
*Students who have taken or are taking eLearning:*

*Based on your experience, do you think all students should have to take eLearning courses in order to graduate?*



*Students who have not taken or are not taking eLearning:*

*Do you think that all students should have to take eLearning courses to graduate?*



As demonstrated by our data, the vast majority of respondents (94.8% of all survey respondents) believe that eLearning courses should not be mandatory for all students, regardless of their history with an eLearning platform. In addition, optional written respondent feedback suggested broad concerns about the scope of this mandate for secondary school students, and how the mandate would influence the province's path in adopting 21st century learning skills. The clear results from this question in our survey assert OSTA-AECO's view that eLearning is not compatible for students, and that under the status quo, eLearning will continue to be inaccessible to select student populations.



# Conclusion

OSTA-AECO understands the value of eLearning and the use of online learning platforms to prepare students for post-secondary education and beyond. Without a doubt, eLearning is a significant achievement in 21st century learning and, if implemented correctly, has the potential to make publicly-funded education more accessible to all. The current success of online learning in Ontario is predicated on the fact that students are not mandated, but rather have the option of self selecting to take eLearning courses.

However, concerns arise when eLearning becomes a required component of a student's high school experience. Common themes of concern highlighted within the survey results ranged from the desire to maintain one-on-one support with course instructors, the lack of access to technology, as well as a basic requirement to complete eLearning courses. While eLearning provides benefits for many students, it also presents significant issues for other students. In order for eLearning to be effective, these barriers must be addressed. Therefore, continuing to build on student success across Ontario, regardless of a student's background, should be the focal point of changes.

OSTA-AECO stands by our position that "the government [should] reverse the mandate of 4 eLearning courses as a graduation requirement"<sup>[27]</sup>. While the Ministry of Education looks toward modern alternatives to traditional classroom education, we encourage the Ministry and other education stakeholders to explore other avenues that are all-encompassing of every student's needs and perspectives.

An effective education system in the modern age is one in which each student is fully supported and is able to reach their full potential as effective contributors to society. Through maintaining the core values of being a system entrusted with educating the next generation, our publicly-funded school systems can create a modern, bright, and achievable future for each of Ontario's 2 million students.



Based on feedback from 6087 respondents, OSTA-AECO is advocating for the current compulsory four eLearning courses to be reversed back to its previous mandate for eLearning to be an optional method of course instruction. In addition, OSTA-AECO will continue to advocate for the following recommendations to be implemented in order to strengthen the eLearning model and meet the needs of Ontario's students:

**1. BROADBAND:** That reliable broadband internet services be accessible to all schools in Ontario;


**2. MATCHED RATIO:** That the student-to-teacher ratio of eLearning classes match those of in-person classrooms;



**3. TRAINING:** That students receive proper training for the use of eLearning software;

**4. LEARNING SKILLS:** That a considerable effort is made to retain critical learning skills such as time management and collaboration by incorporating face-to-face interaction with eLearning teachers and students;

**5. OFFICE HOURS:** That eLearning teachers establish "office hours" to notify students of their availability to answer questions and return course assessments;

**6. TEACHER RESOURCES:** That the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) enhance the existing Additional Qualification (AQ) course for instructing eLearning, "Teaching and Learning Through eLearning", and providing additional resources for teachers;





**7. LEARNING STYLES:** That the delivery of eLearning content should accommodate the learning styles of all students within the platform's limitations;

**8. LANGUAGE BARRIERS:** That eLearning platforms respond to language barriers, e.g. accommodating the needs of English as a Second Language (ESL) and French-speaking students;

**9. ACCESSIBILITY BARRIERS:** That eLearning platforms respond to accessibility barriers, e.g. accommodating the needs of students with exceptionalities or physical disabilities;

**10. DIVERSIFIED IMPACT:** That the Ministry of Education conducts research to understand the impact of this mandate on different socioeconomic statuses and backgrounds -- including for Indigenous, racialized, and LGBTQ+ students -- and its consequential gendered impacts.




**11. FOCUS GROUPS:** That the Ministry of Education should spend the time between now and the implementation of this mandate performing focus groups on eLearning with students of all demographics.

As this report has emphasized, student feedback is a crucial element to any educational mandate. This report has outlined critical student feedback concerning the recent eLearning mandate, and OSTA-AECO looks forward to continue working with the Ministry of Education and all relevant education stakeholders in order to integrate our recommendations into the future of eLearning in Ontario.



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