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E-learning in Ontario: The Promise and the Peril

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One of the points of contention in the current conflict between Ontario teachers and the Ford government has to do with a proposal to require students to complete two e-learning courses.

On the surface, the proposed requirement appears to be a good thing.

One of the fundamental goals of education is to create independent learners.

E-learning helps develop independent learners by turning education into a low-cost consumer good that is accessible from anywhere 24/7.

Companies, such as LinkedIn, offer access to a large catalogue of high-quality video instruction.

Virtually every student has physical access to the devices needed and have a basic understanding of how to interact with the software.

E-learning should, therefore, make education more efficient as teachers need only provide intermittent support and guidance.

Research suggests, however, that the relative difficulty of digital tasks is largely determined by the literacy and numeracy demands of problem being solved rather than by mastery of the syntax needed to interact with digital system.



Problematically, an estimated 69% of Ontario 15-year old students have literacy skills below Level 4 on the 6 level PISA reading proficiency scale¹, levels that only allow them to use digital technologies to locate single or multiple pieces of information gleaned from digital texts.

Tellingly, digital tools such as Siri and Alexa can already perform these low-level tasks reliably. To add value in the information age, students' need to be able to do more than machines. They need to be able to use digital technologies to draw a high-level inferences based upon multiple pieces of information drawn from multiple texts, to think critically and to fluidly problem solve in information rich contexts.

Without this level of skills students will not be able to get full value out of study at the post-secondary level nor will they be able to meet the demands of 94% of all jobs created by the Canadian economy between 1994 and 2015².

These insights carry important implications for the proposed roll-out of e-learning in Ontario.

Using digital technologies to think critically and solve problems fluidly requires at least level 4 literacy and numeracy.

Unless steps are taken to increase the literacy and numeracy skill of students to at least PISA Level 4, e-learning will only benefit the 31% of students who are already at this level.

The immediate result will be that inequality in educational outcomes, already high in Ontario, will continue to grow. Longer term, the ability of Canadian firms to compete in the global economy will be compromised.

¹ The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). See CMEC (2019) **Measuring up: Canadian Results of the OECD PISA 2018 Study: The Performance of Canadian 15-Year-Olds in Reading, Mathematics and Science**, Toronto.

² See Canada West Foundation (2018) **Literacy Lost: Canada's Basic Skills Shortfall**, Calgary



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