



October 12, 2021

The Honourable Stephen Lecce

Ministry of Education

5th Floor, 438 University Ave.

Toronto, ON M5G 2K8

Re: Decision Making Regarding the Return to Traditional Semester Model

Dear Minister Lecce,

Secondary Schools in the Halton District School Board (HDSB) are currently operating with a modified semester model to satisfy both the Ministry of Education and Public Health COVID-19 related Guidelines. This model has students taking four courses during the semester; however, they attend only two courses per day for a week and then attend the remaining two courses the next week. This alternates week by week. This model was chosen due to its flexibility to quickly pivot back to a traditional four-course per day model within a maximum of two weeks' notice. The modified semester model is not optimal for student achievement or student and staff well-being, particularly those receiving special education support, and, on behalf of the Special Education Advisory Committee of HDSB, I am writing to request an urgent return to the traditional semester model.

For students with special education needs, the modified semester system does not allow for equitable access to education. Students with attention issues find it almost impossible to stay focused and keep up when classes are 2.5 hours long, particularly if it is the second 2.5-hour class in a day. As students' attention fades, they begin to fall behind, leading to poorer marks, reduced success, and increased stress and anxiety. Students with mental health and transition issues are subject to increased anxiety each week as they move from one set of subjects to the next. All students are finding it harder to build strong bonds with their teachers as they do not see them as regularly and are less comfortable approaching their teachers if they are struggling. If students miss a class or assignment, due to the medical or support service appointments that many exceptional students require, it is more difficult for them to catch up with the material covered in such a long class. It is also harder for students who struggle with organization to keep track of what they have learnt and what is due when. Educators must also spend extra time at the start of each week reminding students of what they were taught a week before, rather

than automatically building on what took place the day before. This is particularly difficult for students with exceptionalities affecting memory.

During the summer, the Ministry indicated that the use of modified semester models would be temporary, as it focused on controlling COVID in schools at the beginning of the school year with the assumption that it significantly reduces student contacts. The reality is that teenagers are currently congregating and mixing before and after school, at lunchtime, for co-curriculars, and evening activities; be it jobs or recreational activities. There is very little benefit to continuing with modified semester schedules when all these other factors are at play, given that the other COVID prevention measures in place appear to be working well over an extended period of time.

Halton's COVID-19 vaccination rate as per the Region's website for 12–17-year-olds is exceptional. The rate for this age group is 95% with a single dose and 91% that are fully vaccinated. Our 7-day rolling average of new cases in Halton is just 12.7. Out of 19,390 students learning in-person in HDSB

secondary school facilities last month, we have had only 11 student cases, no cases amongst educators and no outbreaks in schools. Considering the increased transmission rate of the Delta variant, our defenses against in-facility transmission are outstanding.

We are asking you to immediately allow all school boards in Ontario to work directly with their Regional Public Health Departments to determine whether it is appropriate to transition our high school students back to a regular semester. This will allow differentiation of approach based on local COVID levels, ensuring the appropriate balance of public safety and academic and emotional well-being of students. Without this, students with special education needs will continue to be disproportionately affected by our response to the pandemic and will be unable to receive equitable access to education.

We look forward to hearing from you on this matter.

Yours sincerely,



Alison Brindle,

Chair, SEAC HDSB

Cc: HDSB Special Education Advisory Committee