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Critical Supports for K-12 Online Learning Success:

An Analysis of Ontario Program Leader Perspectives

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Introduction: The Landscape of Canadian K-12 Online Learning

K-12 online learning (or e-learning) in Canada has evolved from its correspondence roots to a digital program that is a key part of public and private education options. In fact, in Ontario, mandatory e-learning, first announced in 2019, requires Ontario students to earn two online learning credits to obtain their Ontario Secondary School Diploma (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022). However, as K-12 online learning programs expand across Canada and Ontario, it is increasingly clear that student success is contingent on more than just providing an online digital learning program. "Critical supports" are central to student equity, access, and success in online learning. Without a robust, supportive learning environment, inequities in digital literacy and access are magnified, creating a divide between those who are simply provided access and those who have the supports required to achieve success in their learning.

The Canadian eLearning Network (CANeLearn) launched a study to investigate the strategic landscape of these critical supports, specifically examining available assistance, student awareness, and support usage patterns across Canadian jurisdictional contexts. By identifying resources and perspectives from program leaders, this analysis is intended to identify the specific interventions and support required by students for success in online learning. The purpose of the CANeLearn Critical Supports study is to provide an evidence-based model, identify key resources, and structures for building supportive online learning environments. The study uses established theoretical models and a methodological approach required to interpret the complex educational dynamics in providing an online learning program for K-12 learners.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

A grounded theoretical approach is essential for interpreting complex educational data and ensuring research validity. By applying established frameworks, CANeLearn researchers and K-12 online learning program leaders can move beyond anecdotal observations to understand the systemic drivers of student engagement, presence, and success.

Theoretical Frameworks

This study applies two primary frameworks or models:

- **Academic Communities of Engagement (ACE)**: Borup et al. (2020, 2023) provide a lens for identifying the resources and strategies, including external support structures—teachers, parents, and local facilitators—necessary for student success. In this study, the ACE framework served as a primary tool for survey design and question creation.
- **Community of Inquiry (COI):** Garrison et al. (2000) focus on teaching, social, and cognitive presences. The COI model was utilized to interpret the success of identified supports, determining how they facilitate deep, meaningful inquiry and success in online learning spaces where students access their online learning program.

Methodology

The study employs a multiple-case study methodology (Stake, 1995, 2013; Yin, 2009) to identify and engage with multiple K-12 online learning programs across Canada. The approach targets cases with the greatest potential for understanding the digital and human supports required for successful online learning.

- **Sampling**: Purposive sampling was used to identify up to ten representative Canadian programs, including sites in British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, and Québec. These cases were selected to ensure diversity in the jurisdictional context and program structure.
- **Data Collection and Validation**: Surveys were conducted in all sites, managed using available software suitable to each program setting (e.g. REDCap survey software, Google and Microsoft forms, etc.). Survey data collected was anonymized so researchers could ensure confidentiality and ethical integrity. Data security protocols for sensitive information, confidentiality, and anonymity of individual and institutional identities were managed by the researchers.
- **Analysis**: A cross-case analysis approach (Borman et al., 2012) was employed to identify common themes, while thematic coding followed the six-step process outlined by Adams et al. (2022).

This methodology provides the foundation for evaluating the most basic requirements of the online student experience: the digital learning environment and the online student's own personal surrounding environment where they access their online program.

Ontario Program Leaders' Responses: Discussion and Analysis

Responding Program Leaders' Role

A Google Form version of the CANeLearn Critical Supports Study's Program Leader's survey was administered by the Ontario eLearning Consortium (OeLC). The survey was completed by 48 of 55 member boards between October 29 and November 4, 2025. Of those completing the survey, the majority identified themselves as Technology Enabled Learning and Teaching Contacts (TELT) or District eLearning Coordinators (DeLCs), and/or administrators, program consultants/coordinators, support persons, eRegistrars, or Superintendents. See Table 1 for a summary of the identifying roles of the 48 completing the survey.

Table 1: Frequency of Role Responses

Role	**Frequency of Selection (n=48)**
TELT/DeLC	43
Administrator	19
Program Consultant/Coordinator, Support Person	12
eRegistrar	11
Superintendent	7
Individual/Unique Responses	4

Digital Infrastructure: Access, Reliability, and Environment

Equitable online learning access is a core requirement and the foundation for all subsequent resources, pedagogical interventions, and support. While Ontario program leaders reported a generally high level of reliability (4.08 out of 5) for student digital access, an analysis of the data reveals potential equity issues regarding where students access their online programs from, based on where they are learning. See Table 2 for a list of the most frequent locations that program leaders believed their students use to access their online courses.

Table 2: Online Program Student Access Locations

Access Location	**Frequency of Selection (n=48)**
School	48
Home	45
Library (Public/University)	10
Public Wi-Fi (e.g., Coffee Shop)	9
Extended Family Home	5
Friend's Home	3

While the data appears positive, the burden of connectivity falls almost exclusively on the home and school environments. For students lacking a stable domestic environment or those in programs that do not provide school-based access, the lack of community-based infrastructure (libraries/public Wi-Fi) is a significant barrier. Furthermore, with 25 out of 48 programs utilizing a "Teacher-led Asynchronous" model, the demand for student self-regulation and technical stability is exceptionally high. In the locations where students are accessing their online programs, technical settings and infrastructure failures are not just inconveniences; they are immediate disruptions to the learning process. Failures in access for students necessitate specialized technical interventions and resources that may not be available. This could create real inequities in how students access their online learning programs.

Technological Interventions and Resources Utility

The pedagogy in online learning recognizes technology not merely as a "tool" but as the actual "learning environment." The utility of this environment is often dictated by the support for the student's access to and use of that learning environment. Table 3 lists the technical resources that program leaders reported they offer to support student learning for their ***home board students*** (students enrolled in the local board), while Table 4 lists the resource support reported for ***out-of-board students*** (students not enrolled in the local board).

Table 3: Frequency of Selection for Technical Resources Offered to Home Board Students

Learning Resource	**Frequency of Selection (n=48)**
Learning Management System support	47
Educational software/apps	44
Assistive technologies	42
School-provided device	32
Digital library resources	29
Artificial Intelligence	24
Individual/Unique responses	3

Table 4: Frequency of Selection for Technical Resources Offered to Out-of-Board Students

Learning Resource	**Frequency of Selection (n=48)**
Learning Management System support	39
Educational software/apps	28
Digital library resources	17
Assistive technologies	15
Artificial Intelligence	10
Individual/Unique responses	4

Data analysis of Tables 3 and 4 indicates a contrast between students enrolled within their "home board" and those from "out-of-board" jurisdictions.

- **Home Board Students**: 47 out of 48 leaders report providing Learning Management System (LMS) support, with 32 providing devices and 42 offering assistive technologies.
- **Out-of-Board Students**: While 39 programs provide LMS support, only 15 reported providing assistive technology. Qualitative data suggests out-of-board students often have access but not support; they may receive a login for the board's portal, but lack the technical troubleshooting or hardware provided to local students.

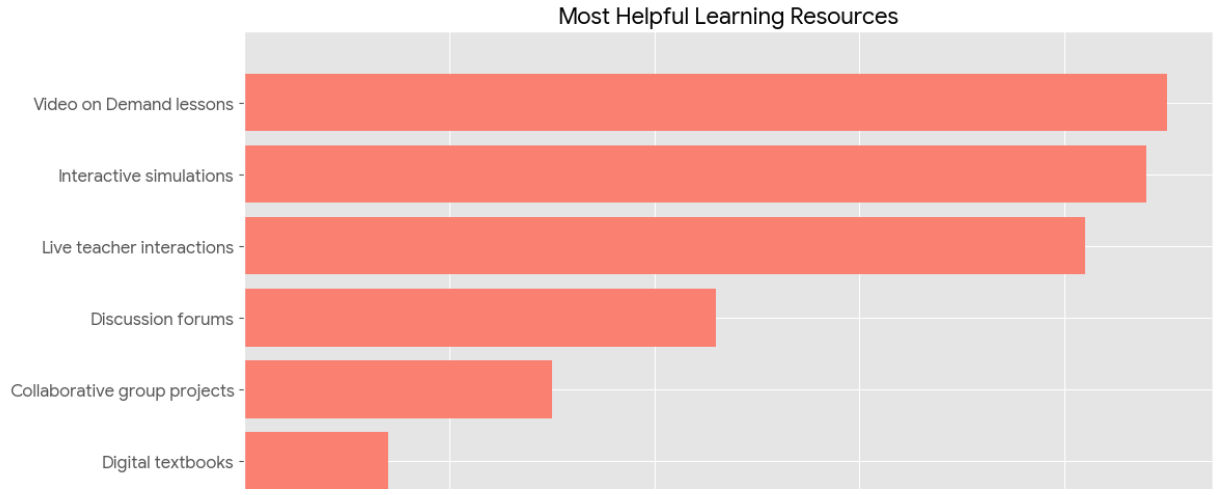
Resource Value Ranking

The perceived value of specific resources shapes not only online course design, but also the support provided for their use. Program leaders ranked the most helpful resources as follows:

1. **Video on Demand** (45 selections): Essential for self-paced, asynchronous review.
2. **Interactive Simulations** (44 selections): Vital for experiential learning in digital formats.
3. **Live Teacher Interactions** (41 selections): The primary social connection for students.
4. **Discussion Forums** (23 selections): Valued, though leaders note they are often poorly moderated or used merely as "assignment drop boxes."

While the resources indicated in the survey contribute to the infrastructure for learning, the human element remains the primary driver of student achievement and success. See Figure 1 for the relative rating for the most helpful learning resources.

Figure 1: Learning Resources Value



Teacher Presence and Support Networks

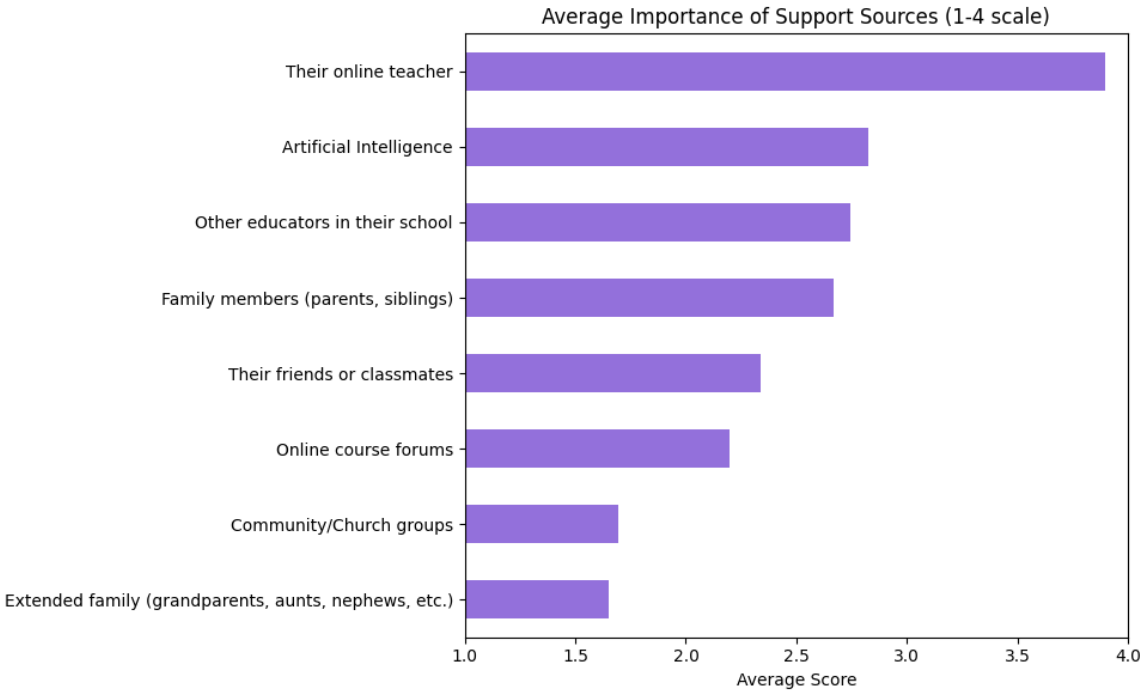
Human connection is irreplaceable in online learning, serving as the cornerstone for preventing student frustration and withdrawal. The data confirms an overwhelming preference for human intervention over automated or community-based alternatives.

Hierarchy of Support Importance (Scale 1–4)

1. Online Teacher: 3.90/4.0
2. Artificial Intelligence: 2.83/4.0
3. Other School Educators: 2.74/4.0
4. Community/Church Groups: 1.70/4.0

The "Online Teacher" remains the most critical support factor. However, current pedagogical provisions often fail to move beyond administrative routines into deep cognitive support. See Figure 2 for the program leaders' ratings for the importance of the sources of support available for online learning students.

Figure 2: Importance of Provided Support Sources



An analysis of the supports offered to students for their online learning indicated that most program leaders reported that a combination of teacher-centric check-ins, online tools, and resources was provided. Table 5 provides a summary of the supports offered.

Table 5: Frequency of selection for the supports offered to students for their online learning

Supports Offered	**Frequency of Selection (n=48)**
Regular check-ins with teachers	39
Self-paced learning options	28
Regular goal-setting opportunities and check-ins	26
Progress online course tracking dashboards	24
Regular check-ins with support staff	22
Time management tools	22
Individual/unique responses	3

Finally, instructional, or pedagogical, teaching practices were reported to have a strong impact on student success. Notably, program leaders reported that timely student feedback and regular course routines were key strengths routinely provided by teachers. However, they also reported that assessments focused on the “product”, not the process of learning. There were limited, if any, opportunities for group learning or projects, nor was there one-on-one live support. Table 6 provides a contrast of the key strengths and limitations indicated by program leaders.

Table 2: Critique of Pedagogical Provisions

Strengths (Often/Always)	**Areas of Growth (Sometimes/Rarely)**
Timely feedback on assignments	Assessments focusing on process over product
Establishing regular class routines	Small group support in real-time
Providing course orientations	One-on-one support in live classes

The infrequent use of process-based assessment limits deeper learning and understanding that leads to student success. When educators focus exclusively on the final "product," they lose the ability to correct cognitive misconceptions in real-time. This gap is not necessarily a failure of the individual teacher but is often a result of systemic institutional barriers that do not provide enough time for this to occur.

Institutional Barriers and the "Support Gap"

While not new for Ontario educators and students, institutional barriers to support mandatory online program enrolment and success are hindered by a lack of dedicated personnel. Many program leaders identified as a "team of one," struggling to maintain quality under overwhelming administrative demands. This can lead to key institutional challenges, including:

- **The “Team of One” Burden**: Leaders report that a single person often serves as the TELT (Technology Enabled Learning Lead), the DeLC (District eLearning Coordinator), the registrar, and the technical support. As one leader noted: “The TELT is already doing too much—supporting guidance, being the DeLC, [while also] being the eRegistrar…”
- **Lack of Specialized PD**: There is a critical lack of Professional Development (PD) focused on eLearning pedagogy, seldom going beyond understanding basic tool usage.
- **The Assessment Crisis**: Program leaders are struggling to adapt to AI-related assessment concerns, with some using online learning as a tool for “brushing complicated student problems under the carpet” rather than providing authentic learning experiences.

Perhaps the most alarming finding is that 47 out of 48 program leaders believe parents do not understand how to effectively support online learning. This represents a near-total failure in parental engagement, driven by:

- **Lack of Communication**: No opportunity for parents to access the LMS directly.
- **Technical Literacy Gap**: Caregivers often lack the experience with electronic platforms required to troubleshoot.

- **Role Ambiguity**: Parents often view themselves as "reminders" rather than academic facilitators.

An analysis of program leaders' comments about parental involvement and support found the following themes.

1. **In Development or Recognized as a "Good Idea" (11 mentions)**
   - The most common response from leaders is an admission that proactive parent support does not currently exist but is recognized as a gap. Many leaders viewed the survey question itself as a prompt, noting that building out these resources is a "good idea," has been "added to the list," or is actively "in the works."
   - Example context: Leaders mentioned developing parent-facing websites or resources, currently under construction, to complement the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).
2. **Reactive Support Only (8 mentions)**
   - A significant portion of programs only provide support to parents when explicitly requested or when a crisis arises. Because parents rarely request interaction regarding eLearning, formal proactive resources haven't been built.
   - Example context: "We provide support to individual parents/guardians if/when they reach out," or "Parents are contacted when there are concerns of students not engaging."
3. **Lack of Time, Staffing, and Priorities (7 mentions)**
   - Many leaders noted they simply do not have the human resources to create and manage parent materials. Departments are small, and the primary focus (and limited time) is dedicated to supporting teachers and students directly.
   - Example context: "TELT is already doing too much," and "The focus has been on the teachers and the students."
4. **Utilization of Existing Platforms and Basic Tech Support (7 mentions)**
   - When support is provided, it is usually heavily focused on basic technical orientation rather than academic coaching. Programs leverage existing tools (like the Brightspace parent portal or D2L) and provide simple "how-to" guides, progress update access, or host evening webinars to help parents understand the digital landscape.
5. **Delegated to the Home School (4 mentions)**
   - Several respondents noted that parent communication and support are decentralized. Instead of the central eLearning program managing parent relations, this responsibility falls to the student's physical brick-and-mortar home school, specifically the guidance counsellors and in-house support staff.
6. **Platform Limitations and Communication Barriers (4 mentions)**
   - Leaders cited structural difficulties in reaching parents. Learning Management Systems (LMSs) often lack built-in tools to communicate directly with parents or allow them guest access to view courses. Furthermore, communication often has to be "filtered through the students," meaning it doesn't always reach the home.
7. **Parent Digital Literacy and Mindset (4 mentions)**

- A few leaders highlighted that parents themselves face barriers. Some lack the digital literacy or aptitude required to navigate electronic platforms. Furthermore, one respondent noted that online learning still carries a "negative connotation" for many adults, requiring leaders to first educate parents on the viability and potential of online courses before they can effectively support their children.

8. **Pedagogical Concerns & Student Independence (3 mentions)**
    - A small but distinct group of respondents intentionally limit parent involvement. They expressed that high school students should be independent and plan for themselves. Additionally, there is a concern that in asynchronous environments, providing too much access to parents results in them becoming "too involved in their child's work completion."

Overall, the data suggest that the lack of parent/caregiver support is rarely an intentional pedagogical choice. Instead, it is a resource gap. Program leaders are overwhelmed with supporting teachers and students, and LMS platforms lack easy parent-facing features. Consequently, parent support defaults to a reactive model or is delegated to the student's physical home school. However, a strong consensus exists among leaders that building out proactive, parent-facing resources is a necessary next step for their programs.

Additional Written Comments

Three additional questions were added at the end of the survey that focus on challenges in providing student support, the most important support provided, and additional supports that could be provided. The following is a summary of those comments.

Question 1: Greatest Challenges in Providing Support

The responses highlight systemic friction points, primarily revolving around resourcing, time, and adapting to new technologies.

- **Lack of Time and Release Time** (16 mentions): The most frequently cited challenge is a severe lack of time. Respondents repeatedly note that they do not have the time in their schedules to provide adequate support, and budgetary constraints prevent them from securing release time/supply teachers to pull eLearning teachers together for necessary meetings or Professional Development (PD).
- **Limited Staffing and High Workloads** (12 mentions): Many leaders feel overwhelmed, often noting they are a "team of one" or "part-time" trying to manage a high volume of students and a vast scope of responsibilities (from supporting teachers to dealing with IT).
- **Funding Shortfalls** (10 mentions): Directly tied to time and staffing, a lack of funding is frequently explicitly stated as a barrier to providing PD, face-to-face technical support, and hiring dedicated staff.

- **Adapting to Artificial Intelligence** (6 mentions): Leaders are struggling to support teachers and students in navigating the rapidly changing educational landscape brought on by AI, specifically concerning how to adjust assessment and evaluation practices.
- **Logistics of Out-of-Board Students & Distance** (6 mentions): Communicating with distant home schools, unresponsiveness from parents/home schools, and battling differing IT restrictions across boards create major administrative hurdles.
- **Need for Targeted Professional Development** (6 mentions): There is a consistent need to train eLearning teachers, but delivering this PD is hindered by the factors mentioned above. Specifically, leaders noted a need for PD on "triangulation of data" and focusing on process over product.

Question 2: Most Valuable Form of Support

When identifying what works best, responses overwhelmingly pointed to human connections and relationships over technological tools.

- **The Online Classroom Teacher** (17 mentions): The eTeacher is viewed as the absolute most critical support. Respondents emphasized that teachers who build community, provide clear expectations, scaffold learning, and form relationships with students are the primary drivers of student success.
- **Home School Support Staff** (12 mentions): Having a "real person" physically present in the student's home school—such as a Student Success Teacher (SST), Guidance Counsellor, SERT, or engaged administrator—is highly valued. This allows for immediate troubleshooting and accountability.
- **Synchronous/1-on-1 Live Interaction** (11 mentions): Opportunities for live conversations, virtual drop-ins, and one-on-one synchronous office hours are frequently cited as vital for forming relationships and addressing academic struggles.
- **System/Central Support (TELT/DeLC)** (7 mentions): The central administrative team (Technology Enabled Learning and Teaching Contacts / District eLearning Contacts) stepping in to provide 1:1 support, system-level advocacy, and triage is viewed as a crucial backbone for the programs.
- **On-Demand and Video Resources** (5 mentions): Self-serve videos, clear course layouts, and orientation modules help students help themselves, particularly with tech troubleshooting and logging in.

Question 3: Additional Supports for Student Success

The final open-ended question reinforced the need for holistic, team-based approaches and refined online pedagogy.

- **"Wrap-Around" Home School Teams** (10 mentions): Respondents strongly emphasized that online learning cannot happen in isolation. Students rely heavily on their physical school environment. A collaborative model where Guidance, Special Education, librarians, and administration all actively monitor and support online students is essential.

- **Improved Pedagogy and Assessment Practices** (5 mentions): There is a recognized need to shift online teaching away from strictly product-based assignments. Leaders want more focus on active learning, descriptive feedback, and utilizing conversations and observations for assessment.
- **Direct Teacher Access via Video** (4 mentions): Encouraging teachers to use video conferencing (so students can "see the human on the other side of the computer") and transitioning to full-time eLearning teachers with flexible schedules are seen as highly beneficial strategies.
- **Clear Communication and Expectations** (3 mentions): Ensuring students are placed in appropriate courses (via proper counselling) and clearly communicating online learning expectations to both students and parents from day one helps prevent issues later in the semester.

Summary of the Three Open-ended Questions

Ultimately, while the greatest challenges mentioned are systemic (lack of time, funding, and centralized staff), the most critical supports are human. The data indicate that student success in online learning relies heavily on a dedicated online teacher supported by an active, physical "wrap-around" team at the student's home school, but program leaders currently lack the financial time and resources to properly train and unify these groups.

Conclusion: Strategic Recommendations for K-12 Online Learner Success in Ontario

The findings of this multi-case analysis suggest that Ontario K-12 online education is at a crossroads. To move from delivery and access to success, programs must bridge the gap between virtual instruction and local support.

Strategic Recommendations

1. **Mandate and Fund the "eLearning Contact" Role**: Given that 98% of leaders report parents cannot support the student, the local school facilitator (eLearning Contact) is the strategic linchpin. Institutions must formalize and fund this role at the student's physical school to provide the in-person accountability that parents cannot provide.
2. **Institutionalize Proactive Human Outreach**: Programs must transition from reactive troubleshooting to proactive outreach. Following the "preventative intervention model," TELTs and DeLCs should be empowered to conduct 1:1 sessions, such as inviting students to in-person drop-in sessions at their home school.
3. **Invest in "Support-Ready" Resource Libraries**: To mitigate the issue of overextended staff, programs must develop on-demand, self-serve "how-to" video libraries. This enables students to solve technical issues independently outside of standard school hours.

The future of online education in Ontario depends on program leaders' ability to support the adults—the online teachers, the TELTs, and the local facilitators—who surround the learner. Without addressing the systemic issues affecting each of these roles, and the disconnect with parental support, online learning success and equitable access will be challenging.

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