

Assignment 1 - Analysis and comparison of rationales for eLearning

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Context. Ontario's move toward online learning is shaped through a combination of provincial, institutional, and school-board strategy and policy. In post-secondary education, eCampusOntario's *Strategic Plan 2024-2027* frames digital learning as part of a broader digital higher education ecosystem. Its mission is to enable collaboration among learners, educators, and employers (eCampusOntario, 2024). The strategic plan also builds on the Virtual Learning Strategy, which provided \$70 million in seed funding through the Government of Ontario's Ministry of Colleges and Universities to support digital learning across universities, colleges, and Indigenous Institutes (Government of Ontario, 2021; eCampusOntario, 2024).

In K-12 education, the Peel District School Board's ("PDSB") *Virtual Schools and eLearning Policy* represents a different kind of eLearning strategy that formalizes the management, sustainability, and expectations of virtual schools and eLearning within a large school board. The policy applies across grade levels and is explicitly connected to the mandated online learning requirements from Ontario's Policy and Program Memorandum 167 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022), while also aligning with the Education Act and Ministry guidance (Peel District School Board, 2024).

This analysis compares eCampusOntario's *Strategic Plan 2024-2027* with the PDSB's *Virtual Schools and eLearning Policy*. These two documents guide connected parts of the same public education ecosystem, with eCampusOntario representing Ontario's post-secondary sector and PDSB representing a K-12 school board. This difference matters because eLearning is not solving the same problem in each context. As a teacher in Peel who hopes to move into different spheres of influence within or beyond the organization, this comparison is personally relevant. It allows me to trace how Ontario's broader educational goals shape the rationale for eLearning and connects it to my school board where I am actively part of ensuring the delivery of its outcomes.

Learning Rationales. The rationale for the eCampusOntario Strategic Plan for 2024-2027 is best synthesized to five main points. Its plan is responding to:

- 1) the growing need for flexible communication, collaboration, and learning in a digital age,
- 2) the increased integration of digital tools through the learner lifecycle,
- 3) changing expectations for personalized, flexible, and experiential learning opportunities,
- 4) the emergence of new technologies redefining how people work, teach, and learn, and
- 5) the need for post-secondary institutions to advance their use of technology.

(eCampusOntario, 2024, pp. 3-4)

The PDSB's Virtual Schools and eLearning Policy is meant to provide a framework for the management of virtual schools by outlining the requirements and needs of educators, students, and families involved in online learning. The policy recognizes that eLearning is needed to:

- 1) meet the diverse needs of learners,
- 2) provide flexible, high-quality learning opportunities that prepare students for success in an increasingly digital and interconnected world,
- 3) equip students with the skills needed to thrive in post-secondary institutions and global career pathways, and
- 4) meet provincial requirements, PPM 164 and PPM 167, which require online learning credits for secondary students.

(Peel District School Board, 2024)

Evaluation. Both documents were developed in 2024. In the *Strategic Plan for 2024-2027*, eCampusOntario does not offer a specific operational definition of eLearning. It uses the broader language of “digital higher education,” framing eLearning as part of a sector-wide

ecosystem (eCampusOntario, 2024, p. 11). The *Virtual Schools and eLearning Policy* defines eLearning as secondary courses delivered entirely through the internet and virtual learning as online instruction that allows students to participate without being physically present (Peel District School Board, 2024, p. 3). This definitional difference connects to Guri-Rosenblit's (2005) distinction between eLearning and distance education, where similar terminology can refer to varied educational purposes. The eCampusOntario *Strategic Plan for 2024-2027* and the PDSB *Virtual Schools and eLearning Policy* both support digital learning, but they define it differently and justify their existence in different ways as well. When comparing the documents, it is important to consider whether each rationale is defensible and how that rationale changes when eLearning moves from a sector-wide post-secondary strategy to a school board policy.

The documents are positioned in different levels of Ontario's public education system, but share similar rationales for eLearning. Both eCampusOntario and PDSB frame the rationale for online learning as a way to expand flexible learning opportunities and respond to diverse learner needs (eCampusOntario, 2024; Peel District School Board, 2024). eCampusOntario connects digital higher education to changing learner expectations, flexible pathways, and the growing presence of digital tools throughout the learner lifecycle (eCampusOntario, 2024). PDSB uses more student-facing language, describing virtual learning and eLearning as ways to meet diverse learner needs, provide flexible and high-quality learning opportunities, and prepare students for post-secondary and career pathways (Peel District School Board, 2024). In both cases, eLearning is justified as a response to change. This shared basis aligns with Bates and Sangrà's (2011) rationale that eLearning is justified when it expands access, increases flexibility, and supports new learning opportunities. However, this similarity also shows how broad the rationale for eLearning can become. Flexibility, learner need, and future readiness are common threads, but they can mean very different things depending on whether the learner is a post-secondary adult navigating work and study, or a secondary student completing a required online credit.

The main differences in the rationales could be linked to their levels of responsibility. eCampusOntario's rationale feels broader and more aspirational. This makes sense because eCampusOntario serves colleges, universities, and Indigenous Institutes rather than one specific group of students (eCampusOntario, 2024). The *Strategic Plan's* rationale focuses on collaboration among learners, educators, and employers, open education, workforce alignment, innovation, and ultimately the long-term vitality of the sector (eCampusOntario, 2024). In this sense, it positions "digital higher education" as part of a larger provincial ecosystem.

PDSB's rationale is also different because it is written from the position of a school board that must govern actual student participation in virtual schools and eLearning. Its policy is explicitly connected to provincial requirements, including PPM 164 and PPM 167, and must be interpreted alongside the Education Act, Ministry guidance, and other board policies (Peel District School Board, 2024). As a school board, PDSB has an added responsibility to ensure that its online learning can function as effectively as in-person schooling. The policy's rationale is therefore more protective of students' need for access to flexible online opportunities, but those opportunities must still meet various curriculum, credit, equity, and support expectations.

While I do not find sufficient evidence in either document to make a strong claim about hidden agendas, this does not mean the strategies are neutral. Each reflects assumptions about what learners need, what institutions are responsible for, and what role technology should play in educational change. For me, this is where the PDSB policy raises a more important issue. eCampusOntario's rationale specifically mentions the impact of digital technologies on teaching and curriculum (eCampusOntario, 2024), however the *Virtual Schools and eLearning Strategy* does not (Peel District School Board, 2024). If a school board is an organization directly responsible for students' learning, should its rationale for eLearning include a clearer pedagogical argument? Govindasamy (2001) supports this concern by framing successful eLearning implementation as dependent on pedagogical considerations rather than technology use alone. Bates (2022) similarly argues that emerging

technologies need to be connected to changing learner needs and different ways of teaching. This is the gap I see for PDSB. If eLearning is going to be a successful part of the board's long-term learning structure, then PDSB may need to develop a clearer eLearning strategy rationale that justifies online learning as pedagogically valuable.

Conclusion. Overall, the comparison shows that eLearning in Ontario is justified in multiple ways. The same broad language of flexibility, learner need, and future readiness appears in both documents, but are contextually relevant. For eCampusOntario, “digital higher education” development is part of a sector-wide response to changes in post-secondary education, work, and technology (eCampusOntario, 2024). For PDSB, eLearning is more closely tied to student participation, provincial requirements, and ensuring that online learning policy remains similar to in-person schooling (Peel District School Board, 2024). Both rationales are defensible, but I do not see them as equally complete. The eCampusOntario strategy more clearly names the relationship between digital learning, teaching, and curriculum, while the PDSB policy rationale is missing a pedagogical purpose. Guri-Rosenblit (2005) identified the need for technology initiatives to be tied to clearly defined teaching and learning problems rather than broad assumptions about technological value. This also connects to PDSB's broader responsibility as a school board. Ontario's Education Act identifies student achievement, well-being, and closing achievement gaps as responsibilities within the publicly funded education system (Government of Ontario, 1990). PDSB's Multi-Year Strategic Plan centres student achievement, safety and well-being, equity and inclusion, and community engagement (Peel District School Board, n.d.). If eLearning is going to be a successful part of the board's long-term learning structure, then PDSB must formally rationalize eLearning as pedagogically sound and identify the learning-specific problems it will target. This is significant because school boards should not only manage eLearning, they should be able to defend its educational value.

Statement on use of artificial intelligence:

Consensus was used to find outside academic research relevant to the analysis of the rationales. ChatGPT was used to edit for clarity of a throughline and grammatical errors. I submitted my final product with the prompt: “review for errors in grammar, clarity, and a throughline”. In response, I made minor adjustments to sentence order, wording, and grammatical issues. The final analysis, source selection, argument, and submission are my own.

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