

ONE YEAR LATER:

LEARNING FROM COVID-19 TO SHAPE THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION

OVERVIEW

COVID-19 has drastically changed the way we work, learn, and interact with others. Schools are no exception. The impact of school closures and disrupted learning has been significant since schools serve the intellectual, social, emotional, and physical needs of children. Schools also serve as integral sources of support and community hubs, especially for those living in vulnerable circumstances, those experiencing mental health challenges or those with special learning needs. The pandemic has reminded us of the important economic role schools play, not only in educating the future workforce, but also in enabling parents and caregivers to work.

This past year has pushed the education system to adapt and innovate at an accelerated pace. Throughout this unprecedented time, we have witnessed enormous commitment and dedication among education stakeholders and partners. We must also recognize the toll it has had on all members of the school community and, therefore, must find ways to sustain improvement and restore where needed.

Informed by our engagement with our system partners over the course of the pandemic, the following are key lessons learned from COVID-19 that will help to inform and shape the future of education:

1. With 37 different governing bodies it was difficult to be agile and respond quickly, yet that is what Manitobans expected and needed. Combined with longstanding inequities in funding, resources and prioritization, the result was vastly different experiences and resources for parents and students across the province. We need a consistent and unified provincial education system that provides similar levels of service no matter where families live.
2. Parents and caregivers played an important role during COVID-19, yet they struggled to access information about changes and to inform and influence decisions. We must sustain parent engagement by providing consistent tools and processes for them to inform student success at the school level and in the system as a whole.
3. A lack of consistent, province-wide data made real-time planning and decision making difficult, undermining our ability to innovate and continuously improve and to allocate resources where they are needed most.
4. Inconsistent technology and technological capacity across divisions and schools undermined the ability to teach, learn, innovate, problem solve and maintain human connections in a virtual world in a consistent and reliable way. We must have adequate and consistent technology and internet access across the province, as online learning has a place in our education system and is here to stay.
5. COVID-19 affected student engagement and learning differently, and a one-size-fits-all approach will not work now or for the future.
6. Mental health and well-being are important for everyone and must be at the forefront of planning for the school community.
7. Teaching and learning have evolved and can change for the better by bringing the best from this experience forward and continuing to innovate.
8. Our education system is resilient, and we need to build on this as a foundation for modernizing the K to 12 education.

KEY LESSONS LEARNED

1 With 37 different governing bodies it was difficult to be agile and respond quickly, yet that is what Manitobans expected and needed. Combined with longstanding inequities in funding, resources and prioritization, the result was vastly different experiences and resources for parents and students across the province. We need a consistent and unified provincial education system that provides similar levels of service no matter where families live.

In spite of a strong commitment to work together the complex structure of education in Manitoba made this time challenging. Throughout the pandemic, there have been calls for consistent communication and provincial standards. Once the standards are set, we can focus on student learning, instead of navigating uncertainties. The pandemic highlighted that system-level planning is needed to address long-standing disparities created by out-of-date funding models, recruitment challenges and differential access to resources in rural, northern, and remote communities. A unified system working together in the best interests of Manitoba will help us achieve results beyond the pandemic.

While more consistency is required, this should be balanced with local flexibility. We saw benefits when school systems and school leaders were able to identify the needs for their local community and develop strategies in response to these needs. This highlights the central role that schools play and the need to ensure strong school leadership to put students first.

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Parental involvement in education is vital to building a nurturing, safe and engaging learning environment for children both in the home and in the classroom. Research is clear that parent engagement leads to student success. Throughout the pandemic, parents and caregivers have taken on a bigger role supporting their children's learning at home while balancing changes in their own work and personal lives. The use of technology has made parent engagement more accessible and flexible for many (e.g., virtual parent-teacher conferences and apps shared with students and parents alike). However, there are areas for improvement, most notably for parents of French Immersion students. Parents struggled to access information about changes and to inform and influence decisions. Parents have shown that they have a lot to contribute and the pandemic has reinforced the vital role they play in creating nurturing, safe and engaging learning environments. We must provide consistent tools and processes for parents to continue their engagement with education.

Parents have an important collective voice in education

In June 2020, 30,538 parents participated in an online school re-entry survey to share their views on students returning to in-class learning and experiences with the spring 2020 remote learning.

3 A lack of consistent, province-wide data made real-time planning and decision making difficult, undermining our ability to innovate and continuously improve and to allocate resources where they are needed most.

Reliable, relevant and accessible student data is key to effective decision making. Existing data limitations resulted in multiple, siloed and labour-intensive requests to schools and school divisions in efforts to understand the health of our system and the impacts of changes implemented throughout the pandemic. This made timely and effective decision making difficult. There was also demand from the public for transparent information, yet much of the time information was only available at the school or division level. We need a consolidated system to collect information to show communities how their schools and divisions are performing, whether it is focussed on the health of the system or student outcomes and attendance. This will contribute to a more transparent K to 12 system across the province that is focused on improvement and help build public confidence.

4 Inconsistent technology and technological capacity across divisions and schools undermined the ability to teach, learn, innovate, problem solve and maintain human connections in a virtual world in a consistent and reliable way. We must have adequate and consistent technology and internet access across the province, as online learning has a place in our education system and is here to stay.

Early in the suspension of in-class learning, a scan across school divisions of the number of students with limited or no technology revealed that approximately 6 percent of the student population had technology challenges. This represents over 10,000 students. In Northern school divisions, this percentage increased to 33 percent.

While many schools and school divisions across the province were well on their way to modernizing and integrating technology in innovative ways before the arrival of COVID-19, not all schools were on equal footing, and some have faced challenges in adapting to remote learning.

In addition to highlighting our reliance on in school and face-to-face delivery of education, the pandemic has alerted us to how much technology can enable remote and online learning. It is also clear that there are opportunities to see system efficiencies by developing a single, provincial model of remote learning versus duplicating efforts across the system.

It is clear that connectivity and access to technology critically affect the ability to teach, learn, innovate, and maintain connections. As education systems are adapting to new realities in the face of COVID-19, remote learning is quickly becoming an integral part of modern education. While technology will never replace a teacher, it can augment teacher effectiveness and there is a role for technology for both at home learning and in the classroom.

The experience of the pandemic demonstrated that access to technology and the Internet is essential to ensuring equity in education. When students do not have adequate access to technology, it affects their remote learning experience and their engagement in their learning. Access to technology will continue to be an essential part of student learning post-COVID-19, which means that all students will need reliable access. Bridging the digital divide will also require greater emphasis on digital literacy.

This digital divide was also evident across teachers and school staff. The shift to remote learning in the spring highlighted immediate needs to increase professional learning related to online platforms and effective remote

learning approaches. Many needed to overcome steep learning curves of their own before confidently providing meaningful remote learning experiences and assessment to students. While more staff are aware of their potential, ongoing investments and supports are required.

Despite the rocky start to remote learning in the spring of 2020, and persistent challenges related to access and connectivity, online learning has worked well in many ways for many students. Remote learning has provided new opportunities for students to work with their teachers on learning plans that reflect their home learning environments and individual needs. Online options provide greater flexibility and enhanced access to programming.

While we will never remove the need for in-person learning, particularly hands on learning with peers and educators, expanding access and capacity for high-quality remote learning improves our resilience moving out of the pandemic and provides greater flexibility and opportunity for student engagement.

5 COVID-19 affected student engagement and learning differently, and a one-size-fits-all approach will not work now, or for the future.

Notwithstanding the resilience of Manitoba educators and students, COVID-19 disruptions have had an impact on student learning. There was a loss of instructional time because of school closures in the spring of 2020 and the need to implement remote and blended learning strategies in the current school year in order to achieve health and safety measures.

Given the critical role that schools play in the lives of students, families and communities, school closures and disruptions have had far-reaching consequences. The pandemic has also shone a light on pre-existing inequities, displaying them more clearly than ever before and in some cases exacerbating them.

Changes in the way learning occurs and varied student engagement during this time means that the impacts on learning have varied considerably. As a result, understanding the impacts of COVID-19 must be student-specific so that recovery learning can be responsive to the needs of individual students. Going forward, listening to and effectively engaging students in how best to meet their needs will be critical to helping them succeed. We also need a specialized focus on advancing French language education priorities, as well as addressing the disparities affecting indigenous students, newcomers, and children living in poverty.

It became evident early in the pandemic that, regardless of the level of restrictions, students with special learning needs and those at risk, needed the option to attend school in-person to receive the supports and the supervision they need to learn. When students with special needs are learning virtually or outside of the school setting it can be very difficult for educators to deliver the specialized supports they require.

The importance of student-specific planning was amplified, and this highlights the need for the engagement of families in planning. Some opportunities did arise. For example, clinical services such as speech/language therapy benefitted in some ways from remote learning because of the necessity of parents being present during the virtual sessions and thereby increasing parental involvement.

Impact on home schooling enrolment

Over 4,000 students enrolled representing a 188% increase from 2019/20.

Impact on Nursery/ Kindergarten enrolment

28.8% decrease in enrolment in the 2020/21 school year.



6 Mental health and well-being are important for everyone and must be at the forefront of planning for the school community.

Many youths have reported a decrease in their mental health during the pandemic. Children feel isolated without their peers. While in remote learning, students have not had opportunities for day-to-day interactions with their friends, and in-school supports for mental health may have not been as available to them. The social and emotional benefits of schools for children cannot be understated.

Although Manitoba teachers, staff and leaders are very capable and inspiring professionals, many have experienced a toll on their own health and well-being from their struggles to ensure their students continue to receive a quality education. These challenges have reinforced the value of implementing a mental health strategy for students and the entire school community.

COVID-19 has elevated the mental health discourse. Everyone in one way or another has personally felt the effects of isolation, sacrifice, fear, loss or fatigue because of this pandemic. Because of the growing demands for mental health supports, as well as because of the heightened pandemic restrictions, there are new innovative “non-traditional” and “less formal” approaches to helping families, students, and staff to cope with mental health concerns through the pandemic. These include helplines, resources for parents, peer groups, etc., where people can contact help through texts, chat lines, video conferences and breakout rooms. This increased awareness and broader understanding will establish the foundation going forward towards building a more comprehensive mental health strategy for the entire school community.

7 Teaching and learning have evolved and can change for the better by bringing the best from this experience forward and continuing to innovate.

Disruptions to in-class learning meant that many schools had to focus teaching on core curriculum, limiting electives and suspending the practical hands-on learning for some courses and programs. COVID-19 has reminded us of the importance of ensuring students have foundational knowledge as well as critical, creative and problem-solving skills necessary to learn, work and live in a rapidly changing world where information and misinformation can be difficult to discern. The ability to adapt to and thrive in different situations, along with persistence, have gained renewed recognition as important life skills during these months of the pandemic. It will be important to reflect on what makes up curriculum, how curriculum is implemented, what changes are needed and how students are assessed to ensure students transition out of school with the skills, knowledge and abilities to face the challenges and opportunities of today and tomorrow.

The challenges with remote learning reminded us that powerful learning can only happen when we are engaged, energetic and focussed. Manitoba’s new Remote Learning Framework highlights guiding principles for teaching and learning that reflect a commitment to students. Specifically, that student learning and well-being are enhanced when:

- students feel like they belong to a community in which everyone is valued, accepted and supported.
- students have a sense of efficacy in their ability to demonstrate progress and achievement in an online environment.
- students feel a sense of autonomy and responsibility fostered through student voice, self-regulation and metacognition.

With this renewed focus on fostering more engagement in learning and creating opportunities for students to co-create the learning there is plenty of opportunity for innovation to support teaching and learning excellence. A good practice has been to reduce screen time and emphasize learning opportunities that focus on creative and critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration and communication. These types of learning opportunities emphasize global competencies—knowing where we fit in the world and how we interact with others to create an inclusive and sustainable future for all.

Planning for a modernized classroom might consider alternatives to the current models of education where student learning is focused in classrooms for hours upon hours with few breaks. Learning is a social endeavour and opportunities for learning and thinking together along with high yield teaching strategies underscore the importance of the classroom for social interaction with teachers and peers.

As teachers adapted to varying and changing models of blended learning (in-class and remote), the importance of collaborative time to plan with peers has been reinforced. To advance excellence in teaching, we need to rethink how professional learning can be improved, with a focus on learning that is job embedded, on demand, collaborative and individualized. Virtual learning opportunities also ensure that all teachers and staff get professional development opportunities when they need them, rather than waiting for traditional workshop or seminar sessions. Virtual learning opportunities quickly grew and responded to teachers' immediate needs, providing affordable, flexible and accessible options that will continue well beyond the pandemic.

Our education system is resilient, and we need to build on this as a foundation for modernizing the K to 12 education.

In spring 2020, Manitoba's education system pivoted quickly in response to the changing public health situation, and administrators, educators, families, and students quickly prepared for a new way of learning. Quick actions by everyone in the system ensured that students continued to learn. People at different levels stepped up, learned new technologies and processes and became experts on topics they had not heard of pre-COVID-19. COVID-19-related health and safety measures in the classrooms changed everything about what students and families had come to expect.

These experiences pushed people to develop new skills and expand creativity and resourcefulness. Teachers, staff and school leaders provided opportunities for students to connect with one another like creating Minecraft clubs, integrating movement breaks and applying strategies to build student confidence.

The crisis reinforced the value and importance of communication, transparency, collaboration and flexibility among stakeholders within the school system. The resilience and collaboration have been impressive and are a foundation to build upon as we plan for education recovery and a new post-pandemic world.

SUMMARY

The pandemic has highlighted challenges, opportunities, and strengths. Every day throughout the pandemic students, families and teachers have learned to adapt in creative ways to support continued learning and engagement in learning. The value of connectivity, communication, collaboration and cohesive approaches cannot be understated in reflecting on these COVID-19 learnings and will be key in planning for the future. But it goes without saying that we are still in the midst of the pandemic. Our priority must be in operating safe schools so learning can continue. We must continue to work together to:

- protect health and safety for the entire school community
- restore what has been lost
- sustain the things that have changed for the better
- address the challenges that have come to light to build a stronger and future-oriented education system

