



# PANDEMIC LEARNING FORUM SUMMARY

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WHAT WE HEARD



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# Overview

The Pandemic Learning Forum was held in the fall of 2022 to reflect on learnings from the COVID-19 pandemic and engage in dialogue in response to these learnings. The forum brought together officials from the department of Education and Early Childhood Learning, school division, superintendents, and educator teams from across Manitoba to share what they learned and how they responded during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting innovative education supports and programming.

The department held the one-day, hybrid style forum on November 18, 2022. The forum included a panel discussion followed by five breakout room discussions in an “unconference” design, a participant-driven conference model that prioritizes participants’ voices as leaders and decision-makers. The event began with a panel discussion and a question and answer session with the Chief Provincial Public Health Officer, Dr. Brent Roussin; the Deputy Chief Provincial Public Health Officer, Dr. Jazz Atwal; and the Deputy Minister of Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, Dana Rudy, to share reflections and lessons-learned from combined public health and education perspectives.

This *What We Heard Report* summarizes the key themes and findings of the forum.



# Key Themes of What We Heard

## Theme 1: Relationships

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Participants shared not only how important it is, but also their desire to build and maintain strong and positive relationships broadly across the education sector, including students, parents/caregivers, families, communities and community organizations, Elders and Knowledge Keepers, Indigenous governments, school and division staff, as well as the department of Education and Early Childhood Learning. Key challenges that impacted relationships included the COVID-19 pandemic, the governance changes proposed in Bill 64, and the inability to meet in person to maintain relationships. The changing public health situation meant that there were frequent updates to guidelines and requirements. On a positive note, frequent conference calls and the ability to meet virtually as a large group increased alignment with the implementation of these orders and guidelines.

### Trust

Throughout the forum, we heard that public trust and confidence in the public health and education systems weakened due to controversies of the pandemic response and the strong public response to the proposed legislation. We also heard that remote learning and the polarizing views towards public health orders (mask mandates, school closures, etc.) created barriers to building and sustaining relationships and trust.

We heard that a priority must be to rebuild these sentiments and renew engagement and consultation with Kindergarten to Grade 12 education stakeholders. Examples of rebuilding trust shared by participants included:

1. Increasing public engagement in policy development.
2. Receiving and integrating public feedback into public policy.
3. Ensuring policy reflects the needs of our increasingly complex society.

Significant consultations to formulate *Manitoba's Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education Action Plan (2022)* and a number of advisory tables, comprised of members from school divisions, schools, and education partners, are a few of the strategies that the department has undertaken. Similarly, the education associations and partners have invited the department to participate in planning discussions. This joint planning and communication is serving to strengthen relationships and our system.

## **Inclusion and Safety**

Another common subtheme, within the discussion of relationships and trust, was inclusion and safety. Participants shared that, for some community members and families, there is both hesitancy and a sense of fear towards authority figures and the education system. Alternatively, participants shared experiences of challenging engagements with dissatisfied community members and families sharing negative sentiments on the education system. Participants agreed that all community members and families must be able to access engagements in an inclusive and safe way. They also shared a desire for schools to be safe and inclusive places that families, students, and communities can go to in order to connect and experience a sense of belonging.

We heard that building positive experiences with the school community is vital to building trust, comfort, and good faith within and across the community. Examples of inclusive and welcoming engagements shared by participants included:

1. Seeking to intentionally reengage with parents/caregivers and the community following challenging interactions where and when dissatisfaction is shared.
2. Recognizing that building trust and safety starts in the classroom.
3. Continuing to build trust and safety in the community outside of the school environment.
4. Creating safe and welcoming spaces in the school environment.

## **Accessible Engagement**

Participants highlighted several recurring barriers to parent/caregiver and community engagement, magnified by the pandemic, that require attention and change in order to achieve trust, resolve long-standing challenges, and build/re-build meaningful relationships. Using academic language and educational jargon and requiring parents/caregivers and school community members to register for school meetings/engagements were noted as factors that create barriers and limit opportunities to engage with parents/caregivers and the school community.

We heard that we must “meet parents/caregivers where they are at.” Examples of how to do so shared by participants included:

1. Using social media channels to advertise meetings/school activities.
2. Attending and/or hosting community barbecues.
3. Extending open invitations to school activities instead of requiring registration.



## Theme 2: Mental Health and Well-being

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Participants expressed that, throughout the pandemic, well-being and mental health ranged from those who flourished to those who languished. There is a clear need to acknowledge and address the wellness gaps experienced by students and staff, both individually and collectively. Participants shared several ways to recognize and address these gaps going forward.

### Capacity and Resilience

Participants highlighted the significant effect of the pandemic on mental health across the education system. Factors effecting mental health and wellness included increased isolation, stress, increased demands on the medical system, uncertainty and disruption to daily life, grief, and lost time due to sickness and long-term symptoms connected to “Long COVID”. The pandemic has left many across the education system with what participants described as a feeling of “depleted capacity and diminished resilience”. At the same time, the pandemic revealed many opportunities and innovations within the system that can and should be maintained.

We heard that there is a need to support increasing and strengthening capacity and resiliency across the system. Potential solutions shared included:

1. Increasing the availability and use of sick days to prevent burnout and to recover from sickness.
2. Increasing the number of mental health resources available as well as awareness of and accessibility to them.
3. Prioritizing staff and student well-being by providing ongoing supports and programs.

### Proactive Approach

Participants highlighted that a proactive approach is vital; we cannot wait for the presence of a crisis to address mental health needs. The pandemic affected people differently. For some, it increased stress and isolation. For others, it provided more flexibility and comfort (i.e., remote learning). There is a need to develop a better understanding of the complex and intersecting factors that affect mental health. There was also significant concern about there not being enough quantitative and qualitative data collection and the need for this data to be shared more broadly across the education system.

We heard that we must implement a proactive approach to mental health across the education system by understanding the scope of mental health within the school system, learning how to address early signs of mental health crisis, and understanding the range and scope of services offered outside of the education system across regional health and social services. Examples of proactive actions shared by participants included:



1. Revitalizing the “OurSchool” survey (formerly the “Tell Them From Me” survey)
2. Providing training in Mental Health First Aid and ASSIST
3. Increasing land-based learning opportunities
4. Increasing Indigenous language programming
5. Using “Thrival Kits” to show children how to develop positive coping strategies and tools to deal with life events and emotions
6. Expanding the Roots of Empathy programming
7. Increasing awareness and use of Zones of Regulation programming
8. Implementing the CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) framework

## Resources and Information Sharing

Participants expressed that support resources continue to be a priority as we implement solutions to challenges highlighted by the pandemic. They also shared the benefit of Kindergarten to Grade 8 remote learning resources and noted a limitation within high school remote learning due to a focus on reporting, credit attainment, and graduation. There is a perception of limited room in the curriculum for additional mental health education and resources. Renewal of the Physical Education/Health Education curriculum will be well-received in this post-pandemic era.

Participants also shared that they know less about their students than they did in the past due to separation throughout the pandemic. Students have shared concerns of falling behind and becoming overwhelmed. Common challenges across the system included access to and knowledge of available mental health resources, particularly in rural communities.

Planning considerations suggested to improve resources and information include:

1. Expanding the focus on student achievement reporting with an increased focus on well-being, including new tools to measure mental health and well-being.
2. Continuing reflection and streamlining of information sharing on mental health initiatives across the education system.
3. Increasing technology use to help bridge the resource gaps between rural and urban communities (e.g., Telehealth) for regional health and social services.
4. Considering innovative ideas that could improve capacity and resilience in the system, such as changing testing, incorporating flexible start times for students, and changing the structure of the classroom.



## Theme 3: Technology

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Participants highlighted the need for digital tools and skill sets, the importance of social interaction and equity, and the need to adapt teaching and learning practices to a virtual context. Consistency of learning platforms, increased education and development, and continued innovation in the system are needed. Participants shared valuable feedback on the increased use of technology in the classroom. Improvements in this area should build upon successes, as this was a significant area of growth throughout the pandemic.

### Remote Learning

Participants highlighted that remote learning and other uses of technology are not a replacement for classroom learning, rather they are tools to supplement and improve it. *Manitoba's Remote Learning Framework (2020)* was viewed as an important tool in ensuring consistency across the province. Regardless of the improvements in remote learning, the importance of in-class learning cannot be underestimated. It was noted that younger students in Kindergarten to Grade 8 are best served through in-class learning with their peers and dedicated teaching staff. This speaks to the important roles schools play beyond the academic, including offering broader student services and a strong social support network.

It is important, nonetheless, that we continue to develop understanding of remote learning and other uses of technology, and utilize the evolving technological landscape to ensure students are prepared to face similar situations and leverage technology as they continue their Kindergarten to Grade 12 post-secondary studies.

Participants noted that there are advantages as well as common challenges regarding remote learning. These included:

1. Increasing flexibility and responsiveness of learning platforms.
2. Using online learning platforms to increase attendance when possible.
3. Ensuring clarity and effectiveness by creating a "common place" as a learning tool, a cloud-based drive or other innovative platforms.
4. Developing professional capacity for the use of technology across the education system.
5. Prioritizing technological literacy for students and staff.
6. Creating inclusive and engaging learning experiences by using technology and online platforms.



## Theme 4: Funding and Other Resources

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Participants noted that the pandemic revealed challenges with the current funding framework, with the bulk of funding gaps centring on geographic disparities. While the COVID-19 funding was well received, some divisions noted that surpluses were used to fill other gaps. Participants in rural areas noted that the resource gap was more apparent for them and that rural schools continue to face funding challenges. Despite these challenges, there is an opportunity to incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing; incorporate land-based learning; and capitalize on already-existing community-specific resources.

### Guidance Counsellor Funding and Training

Some school divisions struggled to access mental health resources and to provide students with access to guidance counsellors. Certain school divisions are without guidance counsellors and have limited mental health supports in the community. This has exhausted and challenged the capacity of those working in the system.

Planning considerations shared to address these disparities include:

1. Ensuring all school divisions have access to guidance counsellors and mental health supports.
2. Providing training and resources for guidance counsellors to respond to the growing issues following the height of the pandemic.
3. Providing access to psychotherapists and other professionals to support guidance counsellors.

### Access to Internet and Technology

Participants noted that, in some rural and northern communities, access to the internet is limited compared to urban areas, resulting in a profound inequity of access to education, especially throughout the remote learning periods. Some school divisions shared successes in extending internet access that was not there previously. Planning considerations shared to ensure equitable access to internet and technology for those in rural and northern communities include:

1. Investing in reliability and quality of internet connectivity in rural areas.
2. Engaging with rural and northern communities to understand gaps and challenges.
3. Implementing a renewed funding model to ensure equitable funding across the system.



## Theme 5: Equity

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Participants reported that the pandemic “showed us the needs and risks that were already there, but we did not see.” Issues were raised that highlight the deeply uneven impact of the pandemic on students, particularly those living in and a part of equity-deserving communities. Participants highlighted that the greatest disparities in learning are found between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. These issues should be considered as inequities or opportunity gaps rather than “learning gaps,” one speaker noted, because clear points of origin can be found in systemic inequalities. Identifying and addressing these inequities should be a system-wide priority moving forward.

### **Food Insecurity**

Participants noted that food insecurity was exacerbated due to the economic impacts of the pandemic. Many cited that school divisions are continually filling gaps in the system and that they need more support in their efforts to respond to this issue. Participants shared stories of families feeling safer and more comfortable in a school setting when they built connections through the school food program. They also highlighted several potential solutions. Planning considerations shared to address increases in food insecurity in schools include:

1. Supporting school divisions in their efforts to respond to food insecurity.
2. Identifying areas of extreme food insecurity.
3. Partnering with not-for-profit and non-government organizations for funding and resources.
4. Building and expanding access to school breakfast and lunch programs, working toward a universal program.

## First Nations, Metis, and Inuit Peoples

Participants expressed a desire for the education system to close the academic achievement and outcome gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Delivering the promise of “Jordan’s Principle” was a common theme throughout discussions, as well as ensuring equitable access to all government-funded services and supports. Encouragingly, participants noted many helpful initiatives that could be expanded upon. Some examples included:

1. Expanding land-based education to highlight and incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing.
2. Funding Indigenous language programming to promote language revitalization.
3. Ensuring that First Nations children have equitable access to resources and supports.
4. Utilizing existing data collection and measurement such as the “Our School” survey to gain an enhanced understanding of the inequities in the system.
5. Welcoming and consulting with Elders and Knowledge Keepers, increasing their participation and engagement in schools.



## Theme 6: Communication

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Participants’ commented positively about the increased communication during the pandemic, across the education system and other sectors, and also commented on opportunities for this to be improved and streamlined. Some expressed concerns with regard to online platforms and modes of communication. Whether online or in person, it is clear that improving the quality of communication would be beneficial.

### Communicating with Parents/Caregivers

Discussions pertaining to communication centred on collaboration among teachers, administrators, parents/caregivers, and students. With this in mind, communication must be phrased carefully, focusing on student capabilities and strengths rather than learning deficits. As several respondents noted, “schools need to go to parents.” In order to improve the communication with parents/caregivers in the education system, participants shared that we must do more of the following:

1. Implement more home visits and in-person interactions to build connections.
2. Use social media and other online platforms to increase reach of communication.
3. Listen to what “the parents are using” to communicate, use common platforms.

## Intersectoral Communication

Participants suggested greater collaboration with mental health services and social work. As part of the need for intersectoral responses, a few participants called for enhanced coordination with Child and Family Services (CFS). One participant noted that CFS has retreated from monitoring chronic absenteeism, thus increasing pressure on education system workers to take on this monitoring. Strengthening of communication challenges solutions and successes across sectors should continue. The common theme was that schools should be hubs for access to services and that the education system need not be the sole provider of those services. To ensure this, we must:

1. Build awareness of the socioeconomic disparities that can impede the flow of communication.
2. Recognize and address the trend towards ideological polarization and nurture trust between communities and government to improve communication.
3. Encourage a better understanding of various sectors' strengths and capacity for collaboration and partnership.



## Theme 7: Evidence-based Decision-making—Data Collection

Participants revealed greater understanding and learnings about the system as a whole. The pandemic also revealed a large discrepancy across school divisions in the tools and approaches employed to identify their students' learning needs. During the forum, superintendents confirmed that school closures during the pandemic impacted students' academic outcomes, behaviours, and skills. Several school divisions reported adopting a proactive approach and using assessment and classroom screening tools to support early identification of learning needs in order to gather data and inform student programming (such as Early Years Evaluation). Divisions further reported increasing their use of data (including Social Emotional Learning data). Some school divisions are focusing on young learners' literacy and numeracy outcomes, while others are centered on middle years learners. Many school divisions reported being flexible by permitting teachers to prioritize content based on the assessment of students' learning needs. Most school divisions asserted that they are facing challenges in collecting qualitative and quantitative data regarding the mental health and well-being of the students due to limited access to resources. There is also a clear need for provincial data to inform planning and evidence-based decision-making.

Some participants identified a lack of a clear standard for data collection, which results in some school divisions developing their own strategies. Better collaboration with the department regarding data collection may improve efficiency in the manner data is collected, leading to better evidence-based decision making overall. It was noted that the challenge lies in creating a balance between the autonomy of school divisions and standardization in order to improve the efficiency of data collection.

## Reducing Learning Gaps

Participants noted that some students experienced a substantial disruption in their learning behaviours that has since been observed as a result of the interruption of human interaction, collaboration, and participation. Students living in poverty, with disabilities, and with health issues, as well as those from communities with high mortality rates were the most affected by school closures. Some families also struggled with providing their children with the level of engagement and support that was needed for their learning and well-being throughout the pandemic. To reduce learning gaps, school divisions are employing different methods and practices including:

1. Supporting teachers so that they can meet students' needs and understand developmental milestones.
2. Enhancing collaboration within teaching teams to examine and evaluate classroom activities.
3. Offering education assistance, including summer and after-school programming, mentoring, tutoring, and technology hubs.
4. Focusing on positive and holistic approaches to build on students' strengths and competencies for success.



## Theme 8: Staff Skills and Competencies

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The pandemic illustrated the need for increased capacity and knowledge across the system. Participants highlighted that teachers and school staff need adequate training regarding mental health as well as increased knowledge of evidence-based strategies and approaches to collaborate with parents/caregivers in order to effectively support students' mental health needs. Variations on comfort with remote learning were further shared. Participants noted that while *Manitoba's Remote Learning Framework (2020)* was helpful to guide and inform remote teaching, many teachers and school staff would benefit from increased capacity building in their facilitation of remote learning. Suggested topics for future professional development included:

1. Technology and online learning platform training for teachers and support staff
2. Mental health and wellness
3. Land-based learning—incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing
4. Indigenous languages
5. Impacts of trauma on learning

# Conclusion

The Pandemic Learning Forum was an opportunity for reflection and candid information sharing, as well as a forum for brainstorming solutions to inform future planning. Participants valued the day of sharing and learning with and from one another.

Participants shared views on relationship building, mental health and well-being, technology, funding structures, equity, communication, evidence-based decision-making, holistic approaches, and staff training and capacity. The lessons learned and the themes that emerged during the Forum, along with the learnings and recommendations from the Office of the Auditor General's report on Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education and leadership during the pandemic, are vital in informing future planning to continue building and strengthening our education system and provide students the tools they need to live **The Good Life** and reach their full potential, no matter what changes society will experience in the future.

Many thanks to Dr. Brent Roussin, Dr. Jazz Atwal, Dr. Carol Kurbis, and the entire public health team for all they have done to ensure that learning continued throughout the pandemic and for sharing the importance of building upon learnings and relationships to ensure high-quality learning as well as mental health, well-being, and engagement.

The department also thanks the participants for their engagement and candor. It was clear from the session that there is a desire to strengthen collaboration and planning. This is critical as we achieve our shared vision that **“All students succeed no matter where they live, their background, or their individual circumstances.”**