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

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