



Auditor General
MANITOBA

Report to the Legislative Assembly

Department of Education and Early Childhood Learning: Leadership of the K-12 Pandemic Response

Independent Audit Report

Website Version



March 2022

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March 2022

Honourable Myrna Driedger
Speaker of the Legislative Assembly
Room 244, Legislative Building
450 Broadway
Winnipeg, Manitoba R3C 0V8

Dear Madam Speaker:

It is an honour to submit my report, titled *Department of Education and Early Childhood Learning: Leadership of the K to 12 Pandemic Response*, to be laid before Members of the Legislative Assembly in accordance with the provisions of Section 28 of *The Auditor General Act*.

Respectfully submitted,

Original Signed by:
Tyson Shtykalo

Tyson Shtykalo, CPA, CA
Auditor General

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Auditor General's comments

This audit has its origins in the outreach work we undertook to understand the impact COVID-19 was having on Manitobans. During the summer and fall of 2020, we met with a wide range of groups and individuals from across the province. Many conversations came back to the importance of education and the multifaceted impacts of students not being in school, such as parents and caregivers out of the workforce, student and staff mental health, access to technology for online learning, as well as challenges with connectivity. Two years later, COVID-19 remains a significant and ongoing event.

Oversight and leadership of the education system is the responsibility of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Learning (the Department). The Minister is responsible for the supervision, control and direction of all public schools and other schools established pursuant to *The Education Administration Act*. At the same time, education in Manitoba is highly decentralized. There are 37 school divisions/districts governed by elected school boards, as well as a number of independent schools.

Emergency preparedness is an essential part of government operations and required under *The Emergency Measures Act*. We expected the Department to be prepared for, and to lead, a system response to a province-wide emergency. Plans would be in place to ensure a consistent standard of high-quality education is available to all students across the province during an emergency—such as a pandemic. Equally, as the emergency evolved there would be work underway on recovery efforts.

The Department was not prepared for the COVID-19 pandemic, despite having identified it as a possible scenario back in 2007. There was no emergency management program or coordinated, system-level, emergency plan for the K to 12 school system. Business continuity plans were outdated and did not go beyond the Department itself. Plans did not include any consideration of the consequences and possible mitigation strategies for moving to remote learning for all students.

Despite the absence of an emergency management program, the Department effectively led a K to 12 system response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It put in place and maintained an incident management system. As well, it consulted with relevant stakeholders to identify risks to help ensure a consistent response. However, it lacked quality system-level data which made real-time planning and decision-making difficult.



With every emergency, efforts will shift to restoring conditions to an acceptable level and resuming operations. The recovery phase of an emergency provides an excellent opportunity to work with stakeholders to address vulnerabilities and increase resilience. There was no system-level data collection to identify long-term risks and impacts of the pandemic. Little had been done to engage with stakeholders in recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic. As we note in the report, there is an opportunity to link to the Government of Manitoba's efforts around a provincial broadband strategy. Improved internet connectivity and access to technology throughout Manitoba would bring improved resilience to the K to 12 education system.

This report includes 8 recommendations. I encourage the Department to act on these recommendations to resolve the risks identified by this audit.

I would like to thank the Department officials, K to 12 stakeholder organizations, and others we met with (virtually) for their cooperation and assistance during a trying time. I would also like to thank my audit team for their efforts.

**Original Signed by:
Tyson Shtykalo**

Tyson Shtykalo, CPA, CA
Auditor General

Department of Education and Early Childhood Learning: Leadership of the K to 12 Pandemic Response

The audit examined whether the Department was prepared for, and effectively responded to, the COVID-19 pandemic.

Why? COVID-19 has had wide-ranging effects on school operations and impacted children, families, and educators. An effectively-managed K to 12 pandemic response is important to the future success of all Manitoba students.

K-12 BY THE NUMBERS:

200,000+
students

20,000+ teachers and
other staff

\$2.5+ billion spent
each year

What we found:

The Department was not prepared for a pandemic. Despite this, the Department effectively responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, but had not yet initiated pandemic recovery efforts.



PREPAREDNESS

The Department was not prepared for a pandemic that could impact the entire K to 12 system.

- No emergency management program
- Emergency management roles and responsibilities not explicitly defined
- No coordination of pandemic planning with K to 12 school system

RESPONSE

The Department effectively led a K to 12 system response.

- Timely response initiated
- Relevant stakeholders regularly consulted
- Support provided to address immediate impacts
- Lack of quality system-level data

RECOVERY

Recovery efforts not yet initiated.

- Little done to engage stakeholders in planning for recovery
- No system in place to obtain data on long-term impacts of the pandemic
- Lack of internet connectivity impacted student learning

Report includes **8** recommendations

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What we examined

We assessed whether the Department of Education (the Department) was prepared for and effectively responded to the COVID-19 pandemic.

What we concluded

We concluded that the Department was not prepared for a pandemic or similar emergency that could impact the entire Kindergarten to Grade 12 (K to 12) school system. Despite this, the Department effectively responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, but had not yet initiated pandemic recovery efforts.

What we found

Our report includes 8 recommendations. An overview of our major findings is as follows:

PREPAREDNESS

The Department was not prepared for a pandemic that could impact the K to 12 school system (Section 1)

A lack of preparation for an emergency can have devastating impacts. The goal of preparedness activities, including creating a documented response plan, is to ensure the Department is ready to lead and respond quickly to a pandemic or a similar emergency.

We found there was no coordinated, system-level, emergency plan for the K to 12 school system. In our audit, we found that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic:

- There was no departmental emergency management program.
- Emergency management roles and responsibilities within the decentralized K to 12 system were not explicitly defined.
- There was no coordination of pre-pandemic planning with the K to 12 school system.

RESPONSE

The Department effectively led a K to 12 system response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Section 2)

An effective response to an emergency requires quick action to manage consequences. A coordinated emergency management program would have allowed the K to 12 school system to anticipate the risks related to school closures and to implement planned responses, mitigating many of the challenges that came with the quick decision to suspend in-class learning.

Despite the absence of an emergency management program that considered a system-wide pandemic response, we expected the Department would lead by initiating a timely response, as well as supporting and effectively communicating and collaborating with the K to 12 school system.

We concluded that the Department effectively led a K to 12 system response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically we found:

- The Department initiated a timely response as soon as it became evident normal operations of the K to 12 school system would be impacted.
- It put in place an incident management system, including regular communications, monitoring and planning with key stakeholders.
- There was no pre-existing communication strategy. Despite this, the Department generally communicated information clearly and consistently, but stakeholders had some concerns about timeliness.
- The Department worked with Public Health to establish COVID-19 guidelines and protocols for the K to 12 school system. These were communicated using various methods and the Department asked for return-to-school plans from schools and school divisions, however there was no evidence identified deficiencies were addressed.
- Stakeholders were regularly consulted to identify and address risks, but not all risks were addressed through a consistent system response, such as long-term mental health implications from the pandemic.
- The Department collected data to inform the COVID-19 response, but quality system-level data to inform a response was lacking.
- Support was provided to address immediate impacts of the pandemic.
- The Department monitored the COVID-19 response and adjusted as needed.

RECOVERY

The Department had not yet initiated pandemic recovery efforts (Section 3)

The aim of the recovery phase in emergency management is to restore conditions to an acceptable level. Recovery is also an opportunity to improve resilience and overcome past vulnerabilities.

The Department had not yet initiated pandemic recovery efforts. We found:

- Little had been done to engage with stakeholders to identify long-term risks related to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The Department had not established system-level data collection to identify long-term risks and impacts of the pandemic.
- Remote learning presented challenges to teaching and learning; a lack of internet connectivity throughout the province amplified these challenges.

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The Department of Education would like to acknowledge the work the Office of the Auditor General (OAG) on its review of K to 12 Education during COVID-19. The report will help inform our continued response to the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing efforts to improve the department's response to emergencies in general.

Ensuring that learning continues throughout the pandemic while prioritizing safety and health has been a priority of the department and the entire education system. As part of a whole of government response, the department continues to work in partnership with public health officials as well as school divisions and schools. All actions taken to improve emergency and pandemic response planning will be done in partnership with our key stakeholders.

PREPAREDNESS

At the outset of the pandemic, the department followed the Pandemic Influenza Guidelines for Manitoba School Divisions and Schools developed in collaboration with stakeholders and public health officials published in October 2007. The guidelines, which were recirculated to the sector in March 2020, articulate the following roles and responsibilities:

- Public health leads public health emergency preparedness and response efforts.
- School divisions and schools are responsible for the delivery of education, school operations, adhering to public health guidance and developing and maintaining their own emergency/pandemic response plans.
- Manitoba Education is responsible for the continuity of its essential services, including following its internal business continuity plan, ensuring adaptations to education policy and funding on behalf of the education system, supporting divisions and schools with their pandemic response and facilitating communication from official authorities.

Manitoba Education acknowledges the need for ongoing and updated system-wide emergency preparedness and has undertaken several steps to advance planning, including:

- undertaking a review of the 2007 preparedness guidelines in consultation with partners;
- updating the Manitoba Education business continuity plan and program;
- working with EMO to develop an overarching emergency management plan and engaging in systemic planning with the Interagency Emergency Preparedness Committee;
- maintaining an ongoing Incident Command Structure, to be embedded as part of the ongoing emergency management planning; and
- dedicating a position within the department to ensure that departmental, school division and schools plans are updated regularly and to support system level planning.

ONGOING PANDEMIC RESPONSE

Throughout the pandemic the department has provided regulatory, policy, and funding measures to ensure that school divisions and schools could fulfil their responsibilities, such as:

- establishing a pandemic response system focussed on the continuity of learning and all applicable public health measures, including three differential response levels (caution, restricted and critical);
- allocating almost \$250 million in funding over two years for school divisions and schools to deliver education while adhering to public health measures;
- adapting the funding formula to ensure school divisions would not see a reduction in annual funding as a result of COVID-19 impacts to enrolment;
- altering the application of legislation and regulations to support continued division and school operations;
- working with multiple partners to address anticipated workforce shortages;
- preparing guidance for the Manitoba Provincial Report Card when students were learning remotely and developing a provincial remote learning framework and the related policy; and
- creating the Manitoba Remote Learning Support Centre (MRLSC) for students in Kindergarten to Grade 8 and expanding established programs, such as InformNet and the Teacher Mediated Options.

The department undertook significant work to keep stakeholders engaged in response planning and informed of public health guidelines. In March 2020, the department established a Response Planning Team to guide the system response and held regular stakeholder briefings/calls (daily for the most part and then weekly). A dedicated website was established. Written records were maintained to ensure consistency across the province.

Manitoba Education does acknowledge the challenges in communicating and coordinating across more than 800 schools, 37 divisions and several education stakeholder associations. The department has continued stakeholder briefings and is implementing a new engagement and communications strategy to strengthen our engagement across the sector. For the 2021/22 school year, we have also implemented the following actions:

- established an operations table, chaired by Manitoba School Boards Association, to work jointly with school divisions, public health and stakeholders to implement public health and safety measures;
- added Manitoba Association of School Superintendents as a co-chair to the Response Planning Team; and
- initiated scoping for a provincial student information system that will provide access to data to improve overall response and decision-making.

RECOVERY PLANNING

During the audit period, Manitoba was in its second wave of COVID-19, which was the first period of significant community transmission. That said, recovery planning was embedded as part of the pandemic response, including planning within and between waves. The department issued guidelines and allocated dedicated funding to school divisions to assess and address learning impacts, as well as increased investments in mental health and wellness for students and staff. In the 2020/21 school year, the department added two professional development days to provide additional time to plan for learning impacts. A working group has also been established to address ongoing and long term learning impacts, including the collection and use of system-level data.

Connectivity has been an issue many communities have dealt with prior to the pandemic. On November 30, 2021, the department of Central Services announced it had signed a contribution agreement with Xplornet Communications Inc. to provide broadband services to nearly 30 First Nations and approximately 350 unserved or underserved rural and northern communities.

CONCLUSION

The global pandemic has been a significant and prolonged event impacting all Manitobans and is the most significant event the school system has ever experienced both in Manitoba and across the world. Manitoba Education extends its thanks to all students, parents/caregivers, teachers, school staff, principals, and vice principals, as well as all leaders working within Manitoba's school divisions and stakeholder organizations for their partnership, dedication, commitment, resilience and perseverance over the last two years. We continue to work together to prioritize the COVID-19 response, and respond to the changing public health situation and address the needs of our school communities. The department will continue to advance its plans for addressing the findings and recommendations received from this audit.

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Overview

There are over 200,000 Kindergarten to Grade 12 (K to 12) students in Manitoba—nearly 90% are enrolled in **public schools**. The public school system is made up of 703 schools, organized into 37 school divisions/districts¹ governed by elected school boards. The education sector employs just under 15,000 full- and part-time teachers, 950 administrators, 660 support staff (such as clinicians, counsellors) and 6,000 educational assistants. Annual operating expenditures for the public system exceed \$2.4 billion.

As of September 30, 2020, there were 16,557 K to 12 students enrolled in independent schools—almost 90% of these being funded schools. **Funded independent schools** receive funding based on the number of pupils enrolled at the school. Funding is set at 50% of public school net operating expenditures (per pupil), budgeted at \$84 million for 2020/21. **Non-funded independent schools** do not typically receive significant provincial funding, but they were extended some program eligibility during COVID-19.

As of September 30, 2019, there were 3,689 students being **homeschooled**. By December 1, 2020, this number had increased to 8,377 students—up 127% from the prior year. Officials indicated this increase was likely due to parental fears over COVID-19 transmission.

See **APPENDIX A** for a timeline of events impacting K to 12 education during our audit period.

Public Schools: Operate under the Minister of Education. These schools are governed by locally elected school division/district boards. Public schools are funded by combination of direct provincial funding and special taxation levies.

There are 3 choices for independent (private) schooling:

Funded independent school: Funded independent schools must be legally incorporated, employ certified teachers, and teach the Manitoba curriculum. They receive provincial funding, based on the number of eligible pupils enrolled in the school, equal to approximately half of the net operating expenditures of a public school.

Non-funded independent school: Are not required to employ certified teachers, or to teach the Manitoba curriculum. They may apply for a \$60 per student curricular materials grant, but otherwise do not typically receive provincial funding.

Homeschooling: When parents choose to be responsible for their child's education and not have their child attend a public or independent school. Provincial funding is not available to families who homeschool.

Source: Manitoba Education website

¹ Includes 35 school divisions and 2 school districts: the School District of Mystery Lake and Whiteshell School District. In the remainder of the report we refer to 37 school divisions which includes both school divisions and districts.

Roles and responsibilities

The Department of Education (the Department) is responsible for leadership and oversight of Manitoba's K to 12 school system. The Department sets strategic policy direction, allocates funding, and ensures accountability for student outcomes. Its total expenditures for 2020/21 were \$1.6 billion, and it had 361 full-time equivalent staff.

School divisions and independent schools are responsible for providing elementary and secondary education, including hiring and prescribing the duties of teachers and other school personnel, arranging student transportation, and administration of schools. School boards, comprised of elected school trustees, govern school divisions.

In a public health emergency, the Chief Provincial Public Health Officer can set emergency measures and protocols per his or her powers and duties under *The Public Health Act*.

Legislation

The Education Administration Act and *The Public Schools Act*, and regulations made under these Acts, are the main legislation that govern education in Manitoba. These Acts set out the rights and responsibilities of the Minister of Education (the Minister), school boards, principals, teachers, parents, and students.

The Education Administration Act states the Minister is responsible for the supervision, control, and direction of all public schools or other schools established pursuant to the Act. *The Education Administration Act* also provides the Minister the authority to make regulations under a range of scenarios for all matters having to do with education (providing they are not inconsistent with other legislated authorities). Some examples of the Minister's powers include:

- Approving and establishing courses of study.
- Authorizing programs, materials, and textbooks.
- Purchasing equipment, supplies, and school buses.
- Reporting on pupil achievement and education program effectiveness.
- Approving education programs for the certification of teachers.

The Public Schools Act assigns responsibility for delivery of K to 12 education in Manitoba to school boards and independent schools. It also guarantees every Manitoban between the age 6 and 21 the right to attend school, and prescribes how school divisions are formed and governed. Further it:

- Lays out the powers and duties of school boards and employees of school divisions.
- Lays out the rights and responsibilities of parents and pupils.
- Deals with school property, the conduct of schools, and agreements with private schools.
- Defines who may teach, and personnel matters related to teachers.
- Requires the principal of each school to establish an emergency response plan and review it at least annually.

Emergency preparedness

Preparedness is one of 4 pillars of the Manitoba Emergency Plan. The plan describes preparedness as being ready to respond to a disaster and manage its consequences through measures taken prior to an event. It is a legislative requirement that every provincial department must prepare an emergency management program, including a plan for how the department would provide essential government services during an emergency.

In 2006, Manitoba Health published *"Preparing for Pandemic Influenza – A Guide for the Public from the Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health."* It subsequently issued sector-based pandemic guidance, including *"Preparedness Guidelines for Manitoba School Divisions and Schools (K – 12)"* in 2007. The guidelines for K to 12 education suggested updating plans periodically to maintain relevance, accuracy, and functionality. Training sessions to raise awareness of risks and to prepare individuals and groups for their roles during a pandemic were also recommended.

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Audit objective

To determine whether the Department of Education (the Department) was prepared for, and effectively responded to, the COVID-19 pandemic.

Scope and approach

Our audit examined the emergency management plans the Department had in place prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Department's leadership and coordination of a Kindergarten to Grade 12 (K to 12) system response, including planning and initiation of recovery efforts. The audit period we examined was January 1, 2020 to February 28, 2021. Where relevant, we considered documentation and events prior to, and after, this period.

Our audit focused on the K to 12 school system, including public school divisions and their schools, as well as funded and non-funded independent schools. We did not examine processes related to schools on First Nations reserves. We did not consider post-secondary education or post-secondary institutions, including the Manitoba Institute of Trades and Technology. Additionally, we did not conclude on the decisions or actions of:

- Other departments, including the Office of the Chief Provincial Public Health Officer.
- Individual schools or school divisions.

As part of our audit work we:

- Examined and analyzed legislation, policies and practices, data files, records, reports, correspondence, and other documentation.
- Interviewed Department staff and key stakeholder organizations, examined studies on learning disruption, and actions taken in other jurisdictions.
- Interviewed staff from the Emergency Measures Organization, and examined frameworks, standards, and good practices for emergency management, to help us assess the Department's preparedness to respond to a pandemic impacting the K to 12 school system.
- Assessed the Department's communication around the following 5 key events to assess clarity, consistency and timeliness: suspension of in-class learning, limited use of school facilities, return to school, the remote learning period after the winter break and the launch of the remote learning support centre.
- Chose a judgmental sample of 30 return-to-school plans for 2020/21, and examined the Department's process for assessing and following up on these plans.

We surveyed all 37 school division superintendents (responsible for 181,078 students). We also surveyed 114 independent school principals—both funded and unfunded (responsible for 16,557 students). This was to get their views on the Department's leadership, related to pandemic response and recovery. We received 83 responses—a response rate of 55%. An external firm was used to administer the survey and analyze the results. See **APPENDIX B** for a discussion of survey methodology and results.

Criteria

To determine whether the Department of Education was prepared for, and effectively responded to, the COVID-19 pandemic, we used the following criteria:

Criteria	Sources
The Department was prepared for a pandemic that could affect the K to 12 school system.	• Manitoba Emergency Plan – April 2018 • <i>The Emergency Measures Act</i> • Province of Manitoba Business Continuity Program
The Department effectively led the pandemic response for the K to 12 school system.	• Manitoba Emergency Plan – April 2018 • <i>The Education Administration Act</i> • CSA 1600-17 – Emergency and continuity management program
The Department led the planning and initiation of pandemic recovery efforts for the K to 12 school system.	• <i>The Education Administration Act</i> • Department of Education Annual Report • An Emergency Management Framework for Canada

The Department was not prepared for the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite this it effectively led a system response but had not yet initiated recovery efforts.

Education has a lifelong impact on students. The Kindergarten to Grade 12 (K to 12) school system helps students develop the knowledge, skills, and attributes needed to lead rewarding lives. The system serves over 200,000 students, employs over 20,000 people, and costs over \$2.5 billion per year. Given the importance and wide-reaching impact of education, plans should be in place to ensure a consistent standard of high-quality education is available to all students across the province during a system-wide emergency—such as a pandemic.

The Department of Education (the Department) is responsible for leadership and oversight of Manitoba's K to 12 school system. Therefore, we expected the Department to be prepared for and lead a system response to the COVID-19 pandemic. With the significant disruptions and lasting impacts for students, we expected the Department, together with stakeholders, to initiate efforts to recover from the pandemic.

Based on our findings, we concluded that:

- The Department was not prepared for a pandemic that could impact the K to 12 school system (**SECTION 1**).
- The Department effectively led a system response to the COVID-19 pandemic (**SECTION 2**).
- The Department had not yet initiated pandemic recovery efforts (**SECTION 3**).

1 The Department was not prepared for a pandemic that could impact the K to 12 school system

An emergency is a serious, unexpected situation that requires immediate action. A lack of preparation can have devastating impacts. The goal of preparedness activities, including creating a documented response plan, is to ensure the Department is ready to lead and respond quickly to a pandemic or a similar emergency.

We found there was no coordinated, system-level, emergency plan for the K to 12 school system. In our audit we found that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic:

- No emergency management program was in place (**SECTION 1.1**).
- There was no coordination of pre-pandemic emergency management planning with the K to 12 school system (**SECTION 1.2**).

1.1 No emergency management program

The Emergency Measures Act requires all departments to prepare an emergency management program (EMP) that identifies, among other things, an assessment of the hazards and risks posed by various potential disasters and emergencies. In addition, the Province requires all departments to have business continuity plans (BCPs) that are updated every 2 years. In contrast to an EMP, BCPs are focused on continuing critical services of a department during and after an event. A comprehensive EMP, developed with K to 12 stakeholders, would be broader in scope, with a system-wide approach.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the timeline provided under **APPENDIX A** show an emergency situation can escalate fast. In these situations, decisions have to be made quickly. School closures are a possible risk-based response to an emergency situation. Other vulnerabilities and risks may include increased staff absences, greater need for psychological services, high public concern, and potential need for financial assistance. The Department's EMP should address these types of systemwide risks.

During a pandemic, it is incumbent upon departments to ensure they are prepared to provide essential government services through business continuity planning, and to work with stakeholders to support individual and collective readiness. Planning with stakeholders should be done in advance to anticipate and work through possible disruptions, then adjust response plans accordingly.

In examining the Department's preparedness plans we found:

- The Department had outdated business continuity plans that did not meet the needs of a system response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Emergency management roles and responsibilities were not explicitly defined.

OUTDATED BUSINESS CONTINUITY PLANS DID NOT MEET THE NEEDS OF A SYSTEM RESPONSE

Although required in *The Emergency Measures Act*, the Department did not have an emergency management program when COVID-19 escalated to a public health emergency.

Consistent with the Province's BCP program, the Department had numerous BCPs that were largely focused on internal functional activities (for example, curriculum), however the most recent BCP was dated 2012. These plans did not address the continuity of education or the wider system, and were therefore not used for the K to 12 system response to COVID-19.

The Department itself noted in an internal *Lessons Learned* document that the education system was not ready for this crisis and that business continuity plans did not account for the range of services impacted by the pandemic, nor its duration.

If the Department had worked with K to 12 stakeholders to develop a comprehensive and up-to-date emergency management program, the response to the pandemic may have gone better. As it was, the school system was not prepared to transition to remote learning. The Department had no plans that considered the consequences, and possible mitigation strategies, of moving to remote learning (for all

students or specifically for vulnerable or at-risk students). In **SECTION 3** we discuss the resulting challenges related to the lack of internet connectivity and access to technology that came with moving to remote learning. Without consideration of the specific impacts on vulnerable or at-risk students, no plans were in place prior to the COVID-19 pandemic to address the needs of students that:

- Required specialized in-person education or behavioural supports.
- Regularly accessed school food programs.
- May need child protection services (as educators play a critical role in referrals, and have a duty to report).

In addition, the Department could have taken certain actions earlier:

- Having the required expertise and knowledge of the system are important factors when dealing with an emergency. It was not until October 2020 that the Department hired a retired experienced educator to help lead the response. This level of field experience was a valuable addition to the Department's internal response team.
- An incident management system is an important factor for dealing with an emergency. In **SECTION 2.2**, we discuss how the Department's internal incident management system evolved, eventually, into an incident command structure that reflected sound emergency management practices. But the Department did not fully develop its incident command system until November 2020. It would have been helpful for this structure to be laid out in advance.

In the absence of an emergency management program, the Department's response was ad hoc and relied on reactive decisions by senior leadership. An emergency management program that meets both internal operating requirements, and recognizes its mandate as the strategic leader of the K to 12 school system would ensure the Department, and therefore the system, is prepared for a future pandemic, or similar emergency.



Recommendation 1

We recommend that the Department develop a comprehensive emergency management program. In doing so, the Department should:

- Regularly assess and update the risks, hazards, and vulnerabilities of the K to 12 system.
- Engage K to 12 stakeholders to ensure all identified system risks are addressed.
- Conduct regular emergency response simulation exercises with system stakeholders.
- Document lessons-learned from the COVID-19 pandemic as well as emergency response simulation exercises.

EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES NOT EXPLICITLY DEFINED

Manitoba's K to 12 school system is decentralized with responsibilities held by a number of different stakeholders, including elected school boards that have their own legislated responsibilities. It is important that roles and responsibilities are explicitly defined so that a swift, organized response can be employed when a pandemic or similar emergency occurs, impacting the K to 12 school system.

Emergency management literature, as well as the Province's own emergency plan, highlight the importance of collaboration and coordination. Overall leadership is needed to ensure coherency of action and to prevent organizations from functioning in isolation from each other. Department leadership told us it was not clear to them who was responsible for leading a response to COVID-19 for the K to 12 school system. We note however:

- Section 2 of *The Education Administration Act* states that, "The minister is responsible for the supervision, control and direction of all public schools and of all other schools established pursuant to this Act."
- Section 4(1)(p) of the same act states, "For the purpose of carrying out the provisions of this Act according to their intent, the minister may make such regulations... (p) respecting steps to be taken and things to be done with respect to schools in the event of emergencies."
 - While other parties, such as school boards and principals, also have certain authorities to act in an emergency, those powers do not supersede the Minister's broad authority over emergency preparedness in schools.
- The *Pandemic Influenza Preparedness Guidelines for Manitoba School Divisions and Schools (K - 12)* document was published by Manitoba Health (co-authored by the Departments of Health and Education) in October 2007. These guidelines, and the Department's 2011 business continuity plans, outline the key leadership role the Department will take in responding to a pandemic.

Given its responsibility for leadership and oversight of Manitoba's K to 12 school system, it was appropriate for the Department to lead the K to 12 system response to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, to avoid any potential for confusion in the future, roles and responsibilities around emergency response should be explicitly defined as sound emergency preparedness entails knowing in advance who does what.



Recommendation 2

We recommend that the Department, together with relevant stakeholders, explicitly define roles and responsibilities for responding to a pandemic, or similar emergency, that could impact the K to 12 school system.

1.2 No coordination of pre-pandemic planning with the K to 12 school system

Since 2004, school emergency response plans have been required. The requirements for these plans are outlined in *The Public Schools Act*, the Safe Schools Regulation, and in the School Administration Handbook. These required plans are:

- The responsibility of school principals.
- For localized emergencies, such as armed intruders, bomb threats, fires, and weather-related events—not for a pandemic or similar emergency.

In 2007, Manitoba Health issued *Pandemic Influenza Preparedness Guidelines for Manitoba School Divisions and Schools (K - 12)*. This was a joint publication between the Department and Manitoba Health. Although aimed at public school divisions, the document noted the guidelines would be useful, with adaptations, for independent schools as well. These guidelines called for school divisions and schools to expand their emergency planning beyond the pre-existing requirements for localized emergencies, by planning for a pandemic.

The Department did not take any action to work with schools and school divisions to prepare for a coordinated pandemic response. Other than the guidelines issued in 2007 (15 years ago), the Department had not outlined any other standards or requirements for schools' and school divisions' pandemic planning. Nor had the Department taken steps to ensure pandemic plans followed these guidelines.

As noted in **SECTION 1.1**, the Department has broad authority over emergency preparedness in schools. Therefore, it is incumbent on the Department to take steps to ensure schools and school divisions have adequate emergency plans. This will allow the K to 12 school system to be prepared to activate a coordinated response to a pandemic or similar emergency.



Recommendation 3

We recommend that the Department ensure all schools and school divisions have emergency response plans that address a pandemic, and are aligned with the Department's emergency management program developed in **RECOMMENDATION 1**.

2 The Department effectively led a K to 12 system response to the COVID-19 pandemic

An effective response to an emergency requires quick action to manage consequences and to minimize suffering and losses. A coordinated emergency management program would have allowed the K to 12 school system to anticipate the risks related to school closures and to implement planned responses, mitigating many of the problems that came with the quick decision to suspend in-class learning.

Despite the absence of an emergency management program that considered a system-wide pandemic response, we expected the Department would lead by initiating a timely response, as well as supporting and effectively communicating and collaborating with the K to 12 school system.

We concluded that the Department effectively led a K to 12 school system response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, we found the Department:

- Initiated a timely emergency management response (**SECTION 2.1**).
- Put in place and maintained an incident management system (**SECTION 2.2**).
- Communicated key information, though at times this could have been timelier (**SECTION 2.3**).
- Took some steps to ensure implementation of public health protocols, but no evidence that deficiencies were addressed (**SECTION 2.4**).
- Consulted with relevant stakeholders to identify risks and generally worked with them to implement a consistent response (**SECTION 2.5**).
- Lacked the quality system-level data to inform a response (**SECTION 2.6**).
- Provided support to address immediate impacts of the pandemic (**SECTION 2.7**).
- Monitored the response and adjusted as needed (**SECTION 2.8**).

Although we found the Department effectively led a system response to the pandemic, survey respondents' perception of the Department's leadership varied. As shown in the detailed results to our survey in **APPENDIX B**, on the topic of the Department's leadership during COVID-19, perceptions were mixed. Overall, 59% (49 of 83) of respondents rated the Department's leadership in the K to 12 school system's response to the pandemic as positive ('good' or 'very good'). However, of the superintendents, only 30% (10 of 33) gave a positive rating.

2.1 Emergency management response initiated was timely

To minimize the spread of the virus and the related impacts, the Department needed to initiate a timely response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We found that, despite the absence of an emergency management program, Department management initiated a response as soon as it became evident that the COVID-19 pandemic would impact normal operations of the K to 12 school system.

On January 22, 2020, Manitoba's Emergency Measures Organization (EMO) notified provincial government departments that the Public Health Agency of Canada was working with the World Health Organization to monitor the emergence of a new virus of concern. The EMO kept departments regularly apprised of the COVID-19 situation throughout February and into March 2020.

On March 10, 2020, the Minister of Education issued a letter to K to 12 partners/leaders that:

- Advised them of the outbreak.
- Encouraged schools to take measures to prevent the spread of viruses.
- Provided guidance for students and staff travelling abroad.

The next day, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic. On March 12, 2020:

- The Public Health Agency of Canada assessed the public health risk of COVID-19 in Canada to be low for the general population.
- The Province announced the first presumptive case of COVID-19, recommended Manitobans follow social distancing strategies, and directed departments to initiate business continuity planning.
- The Department initiated a K to 12 pandemic response via a conference call with education stakeholders.

On Friday, March 13, 2020, the Province announced a suspension of in-class learning would take place March 23 to April 10 and held its first internal team meeting. Emergency planning continued on the weekend, including a meeting with stakeholders on March 14.

See **APPENDIX A** for a timeline of events impacting K to 12 education during our audit period.

2.2 Incident management system put in place and maintained

In 2017, the Canadian Standards Association issued updated standards for an *Emergency and continuity management program*. These standards specify that organizations should establish an incident management system to direct, control, and coordinate response, continuity, and recovery activities.

We found that the Department put in place both external and internal incident management systems to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and monitor activities. The Department's external incident management system consisted of:

- Ongoing conference calls with external stakeholders, specifically school division superintendents and funded independent school principals, and other education stakeholders. These 12:30 p.m. calls started daily (on weekdays) beginning March 16, 2020. Later, the frequency was reduced, with a break over the summer months.
- A Response Planning Team, which included executive and senior-level department staff, interdepartmental representatives, and external K to 12 system stakeholders (see **APPENDIX C** for further details about representation on the Response Planning Team). The Department initiated this team, which first met on April 3, 2020, with a mandate to facilitate stakeholder communication and planning, and to resolve urgent matters. The team originally had 8 supporting working groups that stopped meeting by summer 2020.

Prior to August 2020, all departmental staff were focused on the pandemic. On August 17, 2020, a formal internal response system was put in place. This evolved into an incident command structure on November 12, 2020. This incident command structure was more robust, including:

- Multiple meetings scheduled daily.
- A key resource with K to 12 school system experience.
- Role descriptions and coaching for departmental staff.
- Formal situation reports.

Without an emergency management program, these incident management systems were ad hoc and created as the emergency unfolded.

An incident management system should be scalable with components activated as required. This would be detailed in a comprehensive emergency management program. When developed ahead of time, these processes can be agreed upon with stakeholders along with a clarification of roles and responsibilities. In implementing **RECOMMENDATIONS 1** and **2** in **SECTION 1.1**, the Department should consider what worked well in the COVID-19 response to inform future emergency planning.

2.3 Concerns with timeliness but communication generally clear and consistent

The 2018 Manitoba Emergency Plan states, "Complete, accurate, and timely communication must be maintained between all departments, all levels of government, and all response elements." We noted that, at times, the changing pandemic landscape resulted in rapid changes to public health guidance. This made timely communication a challenge.

In examining the Department's communication, we found the Department:

- Had no pre-existing communication strategy.
- Used numerous methods to communicate with stakeholders.
- Provided clear and consistent information (in most cases), but that communication was not always timely.

NO COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

It is best practice to develop communication strategies as part of the preparedness planning process and to document these strategies in a response plan. As noted in **SECTION 1.1**, the Department did not have an emergency management program. With no pre-existing plan to work from, the Department had to develop a communication strategy. We found the initial communications strategy was not finalized until early May 2020, more than a month after in-class learning was suspended.



Recommendation 4

We recommend that the Department, in developing a comprehensive emergency management program in **RECOMMENDATION 1**, develop and maintain a communication strategy.

COMMUNICATION DONE THROUGH MULTIPLE CHANNELS

Stakeholders were kept informed through numerous methods, including the Department's website, correspondence (letters and email responses to queries), social media, town halls, government news releases, fact sheets, and other electronic materials. As noted in **SECTION 2.2**, the Department also had ongoing meetings with key stakeholders.

COMMUNICATION NOT ALWAYS TIMELY

Throughout the pandemic, both the Department and central government issued communications related to the K to 12 school system. The timing of communication is not always controlled by the Department.

Based on our analysis of the Department's communication related to 5 key events, we found it was clear and consistent in most instances. We heard in some cases, relevant stakeholders were only made aware of key decisions through public news releases, rather than receiving advance notice. This made it difficult for leaders in the K to 12 school system, who need to communicate changes with their staff, students, families and the public. At the same time, we note that the Department's senior leadership had to consider the trade-offs between advance notice to stakeholders and confidentiality.

"Communication improved over time in some aspects but it was extremely disconcerting to hear of changes through the media or perhaps only learn of plans 30 minutes in advance of public announcements."

"Unfortunately, with such a large group, I feel the Department was restricted in how much information it could share. Confidentiality was a concern."

– Survey respondents

WHAT WE HEARD FROM OUR SURVEY

Timeliness – About half (43 of 83) of survey respondents agreed that, "I feel the Department gave me information when I needed it." However, only about a quarter (8 of 33) of superintendents agreed. As well, our analysis of open-ended responses regarding communication showed the most prominent theme was untimely or delayed communication.

Sufficiency – Overall, 72% (60 of 83) of respondents agreed that, "the Department gave me the information I needed," but again, only 45% (15 of 33) of superintendents agreed.

Clarity – There was a similar gap regarding clarity of information, with only a third (11 of 33) of superintendents agreeing that the Department's communication was clear as opposed to 70% (35 of 50) of independent school principals who responded. Overall, 55% (46 of 83) of respondents agreed.

2.4 Some steps taken to ensure public health protocols implemented but no evidence that deficiencies were addressed

The Chief Provincial Public Health Officer set emergency measures and protocols throughout the pandemic per his powers and duties under *The Public Health Act*. Not all public health orders, such as limitations on gathering sizes, that applied to the general public applied to schools. Therefore, the Department of Education worked with Public Health to establish guidelines and protocols for the K to 12 school system.

In examining steps taken, if any, to ensure these public health protocols were implemented, we noted that the Department:

- Used various methods to communicate and clarify public health guidelines and protocols.
- Reviewed return-to-school plans, but did not ensure deficiencies were addressed.

VARIOUS METHODS USED TO COMMUNICATE PUBLIC HEALTH GUIDELINES

The Department, in consultation with Public Health, developed and published a variety of protocols and resources to communicate COVID-19 health and safety guidelines to schools and school divisions. These materials were communicated to schools and school divisions by the Department.

As noted in **SECTION 2.2**, the Department had ongoing meetings with stakeholders, including superintendents and independent school principals. These meetings allowed them to provide updates and information on implementation of public health guidance and protocols. As well, beginning in August 2020, the Department maintained a dedicated COVID email address for providing responses to questions related to issues arising in schools.

REVIEWED PLANS BUT DID NOT ENSURE DEFICIENCIES WERE ADDRESSED

The Department asked funded independent schools and school divisions to submit return-to-school plans showing, among other things, how the school or school division will ensure public health orders and guidance are followed. Due to changing circumstances, including COVID-19 case numbers, guidance was continually updated. In addition to the return-to-schools plans requested in summer 2020, the Department requested schools and school divisions submit plans on 2 other occasions during our audit period.

To ensure public health guidance and protocols were implemented in the K to 12 school system for the return to in-class learning in September 2020, the Department requested return-to-school plans from school divisions and funded independent schools. We were provided documentation supporting the Department's review of school division and funded independent school plans.

We tested the Department's process for reviewing return-to-school plans for a sample of 20 school divisions, and 10 funded independent schools, for the start of in-class learning in September 2020. We found that the Department reviewed these plans and identified where there were deficiencies in meeting

public health guidance and protocols. We also found there were substantial deficiencies identified by the Department that still remained in school division plans as of September 8, 2020. The Department followed up with phone calls, and in some cases emails to communicate deficiencies, but did not provide evidence that the identified deficiencies had been addressed.

Reviewing plans and analyzing deficiencies has no value if there is no follow-up to ensure the identified deficiencies were corrected. These risks may have still remained, potentially leaving staff and students vulnerable and putting their health at risk.

WHAT WE HEARD FROM OUR SURVEY

Of all survey respondents, 75% (62 of 83), but only 55% (18 of 33) of superintendents, indicated the Department's communication on how to implement public health measures was at least moderately effective.

2.5 Stakeholders consulted to identify risks and generally engaged to implement the response

Manitoba has a decentralized K to 12 school system. Schools and school divisions deliver education and are responsible for leading the pandemic response in the field. They, and other stakeholders, understand the local context better than the Department. As the lead for the response to the pandemic for the K to 12 school system, it is important that the Department regularly consult with stakeholders to identify risks and implement a consistent response to the pandemic.

In examining the Department's consultation with relevant stakeholders to identify risks and implement a consistent risk-based response across the K to 12 school system we found:

- The Department regularly consulted with relevant stakeholders to identify risks.
- With some exceptions, the Department worked with stakeholders to implement consistent responses to identified risks.

STAKEHOLDERS CONSULTED TO IDENTIFY RISKS

As discussed in **SECTION 2.2**, the Department regularly engaged with relevant stakeholders through the Response Planning Team and conference calls. In addition, the Department provided stakeholders opportunities for consultation through surveys, town halls, focus groups, and representation on issue or task-specific committees and working groups.

Some key risks identified through these consultations included:

- Remote learning challenges, including limited access to technology (see **SECTION 3** for further discussion).
- Child nutrition.
- Student support services (for example, services for children with special needs).
- Student learning and assessment.
- Unbudgeted expenses (for example, the cost of hand sanitizer).
- Student and staff safety.
- Staff shortages.
- Limited data collection abilities.
- Mental health and well-being of school communities.

WORKED WITH STAKEHOLDERS TO IMPLEMENT RESPONSES TO RISKS, WITH SOME EXCEPTIONS

The Department worked with stakeholders to implement consistent responses across the school system. This included the timely initiation of an emergency response, regular conference calls, a dedicated email address, and emergency response management structures that evolved as Manitoba's COVID-19 situation worsened.

We found the Department worked with stakeholders to address most of the risks identified through their consultations. We heard from stakeholders that they appreciated working more closely than usual with the Department during the pandemic response. However, we note that not all identified issues or risks were addressed through a consistent system response. For instance, child nutrition through ongoing student access to school meal programs was recognized as a risk early in the pandemic. The Department struck a working group with broad representation to address this risk. The group worked with stakeholders on a response, but ultimately the initiative was dropped resulting in schools, school divisions, and other stakeholders working to address the risk/need on a local level. In general, we found the Department worked with stakeholders to respond to identified risks.

We identified the following 2 areas that have ongoing implications, and where we concluded more work with stakeholders was needed:

- Mental health (see below).
- Collecting and analyzing data (see **SECTION 2.6**).

Mental health

Mental health was identified through consultation as an area of concern by numerous parties, including parents, teachers, and students. Given the potential long-term implications of the pandemic on all K to 12 school communities, we expected a Department-led initiative dedicated to mental health, specifically supporting students, their families, teachers, and others employed in the sector.

"...we are now dealing with too many mental health issues — so many more than I have ever seen in my 26 years in education."

– Survey respondent

The Department took the following limited actions:

- Directed schools and school divisions to address mental health in their 2020/21 return-to-school plans.
- Designated mental health as an eligible expense category for COVID-19 funding.
- Within our audit period, announced over \$600,000 in school-based mental health supports.

Although mental health was recognized as a key risk early on, there was not a coordinated system response. While we acknowledge that schools and school divisions understand the needs of their local school communities, for a challenge of this magnitude and potential for province-wide negative impacts, we expected the Department to have led a coordinated system-wide response.

As well, the Department's response related to mental health was not timely. The Department's Response Planning Team established a Mental Health and Wellness Committee that did not meet until the end of 2020. The Committee's first report back to the team noted a desire to focus on school staff. We would have expected the Department to establish a working group or committee with stakeholders much sooner than nearly a year after the pandemic began, and to focus on the whole school community—students in particular.

We looked at provincial responses to school closures across Canada and noted that in response to the pandemic at least 2 other jurisdictions undertook evidence reviews of the impacts of school closures on learning and on child and family well-being. One jurisdiction also developed a mental health strategy as a guiding document for their school system.

We found there was no similar coordinated system-wide approach to mental health during our audit period. **RECOMMENDATION 6** in **SECTION 3** addresses the importance of implementing plans to mitigate significant long-term impacts from the pandemic.

WHAT WE HEARD FROM OUR SURVEY

Seeking input - About half (43 of 83) of survey respondents felt there were sufficient opportunities to provide input to the Department. Over 60% (51 of 83) of respondents agreed the Department's tele-conference calls were an effective tool to collaborate with stakeholders, but only 45% (15 of 33) of superintendents agreed. As well, 41% (34 of 83) of respondents showed agreement with the statement that, 'The Department regularly sought the input of stakeholders on the impact of actions taken'.

Decision making - Our survey results showed that 41% (34 of 83) of respondents felt the Department considered all stakeholder perspectives in making its decisions. But 60% (50 of 83) of respondents (only 36% (12 of 33) of superintendents) felt the Department sufficiently explained the reasons for its decisions.

Consistency but with flexibility - When asked whether the Department established consistent provincial approaches where needed, while allowing local flexibility where appropriate, 51% (42 of 83) of respondents showed some agreement with the statement.

2.6 Lack of quality system-level data to inform a response

Having quality information when needed is critical to an effective emergency response. As part of its emergency preparedness, the Department should have plans for how necessary data will be accessed during an emergency. These plans should be agreed to in advance with the various groups within the K to 12 school system.

We found there was a lack of quality system-level data available to the Department to inform a response.

The Department told us it collected various data from schools and school divisions to inform its system response. Some of this data is normally collected by schools and school divisions, but not regularly obtained by the Department. Examples of data the Department obtained to inform the pandemic response included:

- Financial information, including projected COVID-19 related costs.
- Personal protective equipment (PPE) inventory and usage.
- Child nutrition information.
- Access to technology and other data related to remote learning.
- Attendance statistics.

As the pandemic evolved, the Department needed data, such as attendance statistics, to inform its response. While individual schools, and school divisions collect this data, it was not readily available for the entire K to 12 school system.

The Department also obtained data on confirmed COVID-19 cases in schools from Public Health. Starting in February 2021, the Province made this information available to the public through its COVID-19 website.

The Department often gathered data through surveys or Excel spreadsheet templates that were filled out and returned to the Department. The data obtained was not always complete. For example, it was missing schools or school division information. Further, because it was manually entered it increased the risk of input error. As a result, the Department did not have quality, system-level data to inform the pandemic response. Along with quality concerns, it was a lengthy, cumbersome process to collect and summarize the data using this manual approach.

We note that the Province published lessons learned in March 2021 that found “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.”



Recommendation 5

We recommend that the Department work with schools and school divisions to determine what data it would need during a pandemic, and develop mutually agreed-to processes for obtaining quality data in a timely manner during a future pandemic.

2.7 Support provided to address immediate risks

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in additional costs throughout the K to 12 school system, including PPE, hand sanitizer, desk shields, and increased staffing due to distancing requirements. As well, it led to additional non-financial support needs across the system such as leadership and guidance.

In **SECTIONS 2.2** and **2.3**, we discussed non-financial support provided by the Department including strategic leadership of the pandemic response, guidance/direction, and a website with information and resources for students, parents, and educators. Other non-financial supports provided by the Department included:

- Changes to legislation, policy, and regulation; for example, suspending legislative requirements to allow for virtual school board meetings.
- Contributing to the development of condensed training programs to address classroom workforce shortages.
- Cross-departmental coordination in relevant areas, such as children in care.

We found the Department provided financial support to schools and school divisions to address identified COVID-19 risks in a timely manner. However, communication on the funding that would be made available was slow to come early in the pandemic.

On March 31, 2020, the Province announced the indefinite suspension of in-classroom learning. The same day, the Minister of Education directed schools and school divisions to identify and separate savings generated from the school closures. Savings were expected, for example, related to cleaning,

transportation, and educational assistant salaries. On April 20, 2020, school divisions were asked to report their net savings, which were estimated to be \$48 million.

On June 25, 2020, the Department communicated that the savings identified could be redirected to cover incremental expenditures. We were told that typically planning for the school year starts well before the end of June, so it would have been helpful if the availability of funding had been communicated earlier.

"The announcement regarding additional funding was too late to be helpful to planning. If school divisions didn't assume that there would be help forthcoming and act accordingly they would be in trouble."
– Survey respondent

On August 24, 2020 the Province announced \$100 million in funding, for COVID-19 related costs, which included the \$48 million in savings. Two days later, the federal government announced \$85 million in COVID-19 funding would be available to Manitoba schools.

WHAT WE HEARD FROM OUR SURVEY

Financial support – 69% (57 of 83) of survey respondents agreed that the Department provided their organization with the financial support needed to address immediate impacts of the pandemic. We noted that there was consensus among superintendents and independent school principals.

When asked if the Department made timely decisions on allocating financial resources during the initial phases of the pandemic (March – June 2020), and during the back to school period (July – September 2020), less than half (35 and 41 of 83 respectively) of respondents agreed. This increased to over 60% (51 of 83) of respondents during the second wave (between October 2020 and February 2021).

Non-financial support – Of the survey respondents, 53% (44 of 83) agreed that the Department provided their organization with other (non-financial) support to address immediate impacts from the pandemic, if necessary. However, only 36% (12 of 33) of superintendents agreed.

2.8 Response monitored and adjusted as needed

In an emergency such as a pandemic, it is important that leadership continually monitor the effectiveness of its response and then adjust as needed.

The Department used its incident management system, namely its conference calls and Response Planning Team (discussed in detail in **SECTION 2.2**), to monitor the ongoing effectiveness of the response. The Province also offered education stakeholders and the public platforms to provide feedback, including surveys, townhalls, and focus groups. The information obtained from these various means was then used to inform some changes to the Department's response.

3 The Department had not yet initiated pandemic recovery efforts

The aim of the recovery phase in emergency management is to restore conditions to an acceptable level. Recovery programs provide an opportunity to implement measures to improve resilience and to help overcome past vulnerabilities.

To effectively lead the planning and initiation of pandemic recovery efforts, we expected the Department of Education (the Department) to engage with stakeholders to identify risks, plan for the recovery, and initiate recovery strategies. We also expected the Department to obtain data related to long-term risks of the pandemic. We found the Department had not yet initiated pandemic recovery efforts.

- Little had been done to engage with stakeholders in recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic.
- No system-level data collection established to identify long-term risks and impacts of the pandemic.
- Lack of internet connectivity throughout the province impacted student learning during the pandemic.

LITTLE DONE TO ENGAGE STAKEHOLDERS IN PLANNING FOR PANDEMIC RECOVERY

We found the Department did limited stakeholder engagement to identify long-term risks and impacts of the pandemic. The Department's Response Planning Team held one meeting in February 2021 where stakeholders on the team were invited to discuss COVID-19 lessons learned, to help with long-term planning. The Department also participated in a series of teacher focus groups to learn about experiences with remote and in-class learning.

We note that at the time of our audit, the Department was planning additional engagement on pandemic recovery that would take place after the audit period, such as holding a forum on recovery learning.

It is critical that the Department engage with relevant stakeholders to develop and implement a comprehensive, evidence-based pandemic recovery plan to address the long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on K to 12 education in Manitoba.

WHAT WE HEARD FROM OUR SURVEY

Survey respondents gave the lowest ratings with respect to addressing long-term impacts and recovery. Only 22% (18 of 83) of respondents said the Department had asked for information about the long-term impacts of the pandemic on their organization, with only 6% (2 of 33) of superintendents agreeing.

Perhaps even more concerning, is the general lack of confidence shown by respondents about the Department taking appropriate action. Only 31% (26 of 83) of survey respondents, and only 15% (5 of 33) of superintendents, moderately or strongly agreed with the statement, "I believe that the Department is taking/will take appropriate action to address the long-term impacts of the pandemic."



Recommendation 6

We recommend that the Department work with K to 12 school system stakeholders to develop and implement evidence-based plans to address significant long-term impacts from the pandemic.

NO SYSTEM-LEVEL DATA COLLECTION ESTABLISHED TO IDENTIFY LONG-TERM RISKS AND IMPACTS OF THE PANDEMIC

There is well established evidence of the negative mental health effects of prolonged exposure to heightened stress. These mental health effects include stress from the uncertainty and fear related to a pandemic. There is also emerging evidence within Canada and internationally on the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the people in K to 12 school communities, including families of students. These impacts relate to mental health as well as student learning, with disproportionate negative impacts borne by those with socio-economic disadvantages.

As discussed in **SECTIONS 2.5** and **2.6**, although the Department effectively led a system response to the pandemic, we uncovered the following 2 noteworthy gaps:

- Addressing the pandemic's negative impacts on mental health in school communities (see **SECTION 2.5**).
- Collecting the necessary data to understand the impacts of pandemic-related learning disruption (see **SECTION 2.6**).

The Department requires better data to inform its response to the long-term impacts of the pandemic. Data collection and analysis frameworks that capture holistic information on K to 12 education in Manitoba should be established. The Department should be able to monitor, measure and report on academic performance as well as the social and emotional health of school communities throughout the province.

In addition, the Province typically obtains data from assessments completed at 3 different points during a student's K to 12 experience. These assessments are important as they provide valuable foundational information, and can show how students are doing at an aggregate level. The Grade 12 provincial exams were cancelled at the end of the 2020 school year. As well, the early and middle years assessments along with the Grade 12 provincial exams were cancelled for the 2020/21 school year. We note that this resulted in the loss of an important data source for academic performance outcomes during the pandemic.

We found the Department had not taken steps toward establishing system-level data collection related to long-term impacts of the pandemic and recovery. The Department could not provide evidence that it had done an internal assessment or analysis of the long-term risks for the K to 12 system caused by COVID-19.

During the pandemic, the Province introduced Bill 64, and announced the Better Education Starts Today strategy. Both proposed significant changes to the K to 12 school system (see **SUBSEQUENT EVENT – BILL 64 SECTION**). The strategy contained lessons learned from COVID-19 and commitments to address issues including mental health, poverty, and school data collection. The Department indicated it was still in the planning phase of the recovery approach.



Recommendation 7

We recommend that the Department work with K to 12 stakeholders to gather system-level data, and analyze it to inform the plans implemented in **RECOMMENDATION 6**.

LACK OF INTERNET CONNECTIVITY IMPACTED STUDENT LEARNING

The Department's mandate is to ensure that a consistent standard of high-quality education is available to all students across Manitoba. School closures resulting in a shift to remote learning have a significant impact on this mandate. For that reason, business and educational continuity planning is essential to mitigate any problems.

In March 2020 when the Province suspended in-class learning, education had to be delivered in new ways. Online classrooms were created and required students to have access to the internet as well as devices so they could log into their classroom. This created a reliance on technology that was not accessible by all affected students and staff.

Stakeholders we talked to noted that the shift to remote learning presented challenges for both teaching and learning. A lack of internet connectivity only amplified these challenges. In the business continuity plans last updated by the Department in 2011, we found there was no consideration of this risk.

In communities where there was unreliable internet connectivity or for families with socio-economic barriers to accessing and using technology, students and in some cases educators were automatically at a disadvantage. In response, the Department:

- Increased funding for the Teacher Mediated Option of course delivery. This option allows students to access class by telephone.
- Made funding available to schools and school divisions for costs related to remote learning.

We also heard about a variety of ways educators ensured learning continued for students. For example, in some instances teachers, educational assistants, or bus drivers delivered learning materials directly to students' homes.

Improved internet connectivity and access to technology throughout Manitoba would bring improved resilience to the K to 12 education system. We note the Minister of Central Services (now the Department

of Labour, Consumer Protection and Government Services) is mandated to lead the development of a provincial broadband strategy, including expanded coverage. Not only would this support emergency preparedness and the response to potential school closures, but improved connectivity would also bring new opportunities such as access to online professional development, resources, and courses not otherwise available to educators and students.



Recommendation 8

We recommend the Department work with the Department of Labour, Consumer Protection and Government Services to develop solutions (short and long-term) to improve internet connectivity to ensure access to online learning is available to all students across the province.

Subsequent events

In January 2019, prior to the audit period, the Province established a commission to review K to 12 education. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Province deferred its release of the commission's report, initially targeted for early 2020.

In November 2020, Bill 64 – The Education Modernization Act (in title only) was introduced in the Legislative Assembly for first reading.

In March 2021, the Province publicly released the commission's report, along with the contents of Bill 64 and the Better Education Starts Today strategy to transform K to 12 education. The draft legislation and the strategy both proposed a major shift in K to 12 policy. These documents outlined a governance model replacing or eliminating numerous organizations within the K to 12 system. We recognize these changes, if implemented, would have impacted many of the stakeholders we interviewed and surveyed for our audit.

On September 1, 2021, the Province announced Bill 64 would be among 5 bills removed from the upcoming legislative session. This bill was withdrawn on October 6, 2021.

While this is important context within which we conducted our survey, and developed our audit report and recommendations, we note that we did not audit the commission's review, Bill 64, or the strategy. Our audit was focused on pandemic preparedness, response, and recovery for the K to 12 system, and we believe our findings and recommendations remain relevant, regardless of its future organizational structure.

In January 2022 the Department of Education was renamed to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Learning, including the appointment of a new minister. Throughout the report we refer to the Department of Education.

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Additional information about the audit

This independent assurance report was prepared by the Office of the Auditor General of Manitoba on the Department of Education's preparedness for, and response to, the COVID-19 pandemic. Our responsibility was to provide objective information, advice and assurance to assist the Legislature in its scrutiny of the government's management of resources and programs, and to conclude on whether Department of Education complies in all significant respects with the applicable criteria.

All work in this audit was performed to a reasonable level of assurance in accordance with the Canadian Standard for Assurance Engagements (CSAE) 3001—Direct Engagements set out by the Chartered Professional Accountants of Canada (CPA Canada) in the CPA Canada Handbook —Assurance.

The Office applies Canadian Standard on Quality Control 1 and, accordingly, maintains a comprehensive system of quality control, including documented policies and procedures regarding compliance with ethical requirements, professional standards, and applicable legal and regulatory requirements.

We have complied with the independence and other ethical requirements of the Code of Professional Conduct of the Chartered Professional Accountants of Manitoba, which are founded on fundamental principles of integrity, objectivity, professional competence and due care, confidentiality and professional behaviour.

In accordance with our regular audit process, we obtained the following from management:

1. Confirmation of management's responsibility for the subject under audit.
2. Acknowledgement of the suitability of the criteria used in the audit.
3. Confirmation that all known information that has been requested, or that could affect the findings or audit conclusion, has been provided.

Period covered by the audit

The audit covered the period between January 1, 2020 and February 28, 2021. This is the period to which the audit conclusion applies. However, to gain a more complete understanding of the subject matter of the audit, we also examined certain matters that preceded the audit coverage period. We have also noted where significant, or noteworthy, events or actions took place after this period.

Date of the audit report

We obtained sufficient and appropriate audit evidence on which to base our conclusion on December 10, 2021, in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

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Summary of recommendations

RECOMMENDATION 1

We recommend that the Department develop a comprehensive emergency management program. In doing so, the Department should:

- Regularly assess and update the risks, hazards, and vulnerabilities of the K to 12 system.
- Engage K to 12 stakeholders to ensure all identified system risks are addressed.
- Conduct regular emergency response simulation exercises with system stakeholders.
- Document lessons-learned from the COVID-19 pandemic as well as emergency response simulation exercises.

RECOMMENDATION 2

We recommend that the Department, together with relevant stakeholders, explicitly define roles and responsibilities for responding to a pandemic, or similar emergency, that could impact the K to 12 school system.

RECOMMENDATION 3

We recommend that the Department ensure all schools and school divisions have emergency response plans that address a pandemic, and are aligned with the Department's emergency management program developed in **RECOMMENDATION 1**.

RECOMMENDATION 4

We recommend that the Department, in developing a comprehensive emergency management program in **RECOMMENDATION 1**, develop and maintain a communication strategy.

RECOMMENDATION 5

We recommend that the Department work with schools and school divisions to determine what data it would need during a pandemic, and develop mutually agreed-to processes for obtaining quality data in a timely manner during a future pandemic.

RECOMMENDATION 6

We recommend that the Department work with K to 12 school system stakeholders to develop and implement evidence-based plans to address significant long-term impacts from the pandemic.

RECOMMENDATION 7

We recommend that the Department work with K to 12 stakeholders to gather system-level data, and analyze it to inform the plans implemented in **RECOMMENDATION 6**.

RECOMMENDATION 8

We recommend the Department work with the Department of Labour, Consumer Protection and Government Services to develop solutions (short and long-term) to improve internet connectivity, to ensure access to online learning is available to all students across the province.

Timeline of events in K to 12 education during our audit period

MARCH—JUNE 2020

The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020. Two days later, on March 13, the Government of Manitoba (the Province) announced that, on the advice of public health officials, K to 12 in-school learning would be suspended from March 23 to April 10. This effectively directed student learning to take place at home for 2 weeks (the weeks before and after spring break) based on lesson plans prepared in advance by teachers.

On March 20, the Province declared a State of Emergency under *The Emergency Measures Act*. Associated public health orders issued under *The Public Health Act*, and guidance/recommendations of the Office of the Chief Provincial Public Health Officer, have affected school operations throughout Manitoba since that time.

On March 31, the Province announced the indefinite suspension of in-classroom learning for K to 12 students for the 2019/20 school year. As part of this communication, the Minister of Education noted all students will be expected to actively engage in remote learning.

On May 21, 2020 the Province announced they were examining limited access to educational facilities, where physical distancing could be maintained. Effective June 1, K to 12 schools were reopened for limited use. The intent was to enable meetings between teachers and students to conduct assessments, administer recovery and remedial learning plans, provide therapeutic or clinical services, and to plan for the resumption of classes in September.

On June 25, the Province published a document called “*Welcoming our Students Back – Restoring Safe Schools*.” This document indicated the government’s intent was to resume in-classroom learning on September 8, 2020. It also noted that school divisions and independent schools were to develop return-to school plans for 3 different public health scenarios:

- In-class learning resumes for all, with near normal conditions.
- In-class learning resumes with additional public health measures.
- Remote learning from home, with limited use of school facilities.

JULY—AUGUST 2020

On July 30, the Department published new planning guidance to school divisions and independent schools for re-opening schools in September 2020. The document outlined the key planning requirements under 3 response levels. These new response levels, adapted based on public health advice from the original scenarios published June 25, were as follows:

- Level 1: In-class learning.
- Level 2: Blended learning (in-class and remote).
- Level 3: Remote learning (with exceptions).

On August 19, the Province announced its "Restart Manitoba Pandemic Response System," introducing red (critical), orange (restricted), yellow (caution), and green (limited risk) levels, which can be applied province-wide, or to a more focused regional, community, sector or facility level if required.

SEPTEMBER—DECEMBER 2020

On September 8, schools re-opened to in-classroom learning under level Yellow (caution) of the pandemic response system. Subsequently, an upward trend in Manitoba's positive COVID-19 cases led to increasingly strict public health directives affecting K to 12 schools.

Effective October 26, all schools in Winnipeg Metropolitan Region and Northern Health Region were placed under level orange (restricted). As a result, new measures were required in schools including:

- Ensuring 2 metres of physical distancing to the greatest extent possible, with adjustments to classroom space as necessary.
- Requiring teachers and staff who move across cohorts of students to wear medical masks.

On October 30, the Province announced that the Winnipeg Metropolitan Region would move to level Red (critical) commencing November 2, 2020. While the closure of schools to in-class learning (except for children of essential workers in Grades K to 6) is noted within the range of response measures under this level, schools in the Winnipeg area remained at level orange.

When the Province placed the entire province under the Pandemic Response System level red on November 12, 2020, schools remained at level orange. Though from time-to-time a school, or division, was moved to a more restrictive level.

On December 2, the Province announced students in Grades 7 to 12 would move to remote learning for a 2-week period from January 4 to 15, 2021. Optional remote learning would be available to kindergarten to Grade 6 students during this period.

JANUARY—FEBRUARY 2021

The mandated 2-week remote learning period began for all Grade 7 to 12 students following the holiday break. The remote learning option was available for K to 6 students, and during this time period in-person classroom learning was available for any student (regardless of grade) with special needs that must be accommodated in a school setting.

On January 4, a Remote Learning Support Centre, developed in collaboration with school divisions and education stakeholder organizations, was launched with resources and staff available to help facilitate remote learning.

To address staff shortages in the K to 12 sector, on January 8, 2021, the Department announced 2 condensed training programs, the Basic Classroom Skills for Limited Teaching Permit Holders program and the Educational Assistant Essentials program, created by Red River College in collaboration with K to 12 stakeholders.

On January 14, the Province announced a Fast Pass testing centre pilot program was scheduled to open a site in Winnipeg to provide rapid testing for COVID-19 for staff working in some school divisions.

In February 2021, the Province began publishing COVID-19 cases in schools through an online dashboard on its COVID-19 website.

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Survey of superintendents and independent school principals

METHODOLOGY

As part of our examination of the Department of Education's COVID-19 response we did a confidential survey of school division superintendents and independent school principals (both funded and non-funded). The purpose of the survey was to get the views of K to 12 system stakeholders engaged by the Department in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey was conducted from May – June 2021, and sent to all 37 school division superintendents and all 114 independent school principals—a total of 151 surveys.

We hired a professional research firm to conduct the survey on our behalf. All superintendents and principals with one exception received an email with a link to the electronic survey. One paper survey was mailed to a school without internet access. We are pleased that 89% of superintendents and 44% of independent school principals, in total representing approximately 183,000 students (93%), responded, with an overall response rate of 55%. The response rate by school type is provided below.

Distribution of survey respondents by type					
Type	Number in sample	Number of respondents	% of sample	% of all responses	Overall response rate
Superintendent	37	33	25%	40%	89%
Funded Independent Principal	64	39	42%	47%	61%
Non-funded Independent Principal	50	11	33%	13%	22%
Total	151	83	100%	100%	55%

DATA TABLES

The following data tables list all the statements and questions asked on the survey. Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

1. Communication

Survey question	Response	Superintendents	Independent school principals	Overall response
I feel the Department gave me the information I needed.	Strongly disagree	3%	4%	4%
	Moderately disagree	39%	4%	18%
	Neutral	9%	2%	5%
	Moderately agree	33%	52%	45%
	Strongly agree	12%	38%	28%
	Not applicable / no response	3%	0%	1%
I feel the Department gave me information when I needed it.	Strongly disagree	27%	8%	16%
	Moderately disagree	36%	10%	21%
	Neutral	9%	12%	11%
	Moderately agree	18%	38%	30%
	Strongly agree	6%	32%	22%
	Not applicable / no response	3%	0%	1%

Survey question	Response	Superintendents	Independent school principals	Overall response
The Department's communications with me/my organization were clear.	Strongly disagree	24%	6%	13%
	Moderately disagree	33%	10%	19%
	Neutral	6%	14%	11%
	Moderately agree	27%	38%	34%
	Strongly agree	6%	32%	22%
	Not applicable / no response	3%	0%	1%
The Department was committed to being as transparent and open as possible.	Strongly disagree	18%	4%	10%
	Moderately disagree	18%	10%	13%
	Neutral	21%	8%	13%
	Moderately agree	21%	30%	27%
	Strongly agree	18%	46%	35%
	Not applicable / no response	3%	2%	2%
How effective do you think the Department was in communicating about school closures in March 2020?	Not at all effective	6%	4%	5%
	Not very effective	30%	4%	15%
	Moderately effective	27%	10%	17%
	Effective	15%	58%	41%
	Very effective	18%	24%	22%
	Not applicable / no response	3%	0%	1%

Survey question	Response	Superintendents	Independent school principals	Overall response
How effective do you think the Department was in communicating about partial re-opening in June 2020?	Not at all effective	9%	2%	5%
	Not very effective	30%	4%	15%
	Moderately effective	30%	22%	25%
	Effective	21%	48%	37%
	Very effective	6%	18%	13%
	Not applicable / no response	3%	6%	5%
How effective do you think the Department was in communicating about how to implement public health measures?	Not at all effective	12%	2%	6%
	Not very effective	30%	10%	18%
	Moderately effective	30%	22%	25%
	Effective	24%	40%	34%
	Very effective	0%	26%	16%
	Not applicable / no response	3%	0%	1%
How effective do you think the Department was in communicating about financial and other supports available to respond to the pandemic?	Not at all effective	18%	2%	8%
	Not very effective	21%	2%	10%
	Moderately effective	21%	22%	22%
	Effective	18%	44%	34%
	Very effective	18%	26%	23%
	Not applicable / no response	3%	4%	4%

Survey question	Response	Superintendents	Independent school principals	Overall response
How effective do you think the Department was in communicating about school re-opening in September 2020?	Not at all effective	6%	4%	5%
	Not very effective	36%	4%	17%
	Moderately effective	30%	18%	23%
	Effective	18%	46%	35%
	Very effective	6%	28%	19%
	Not applicable / no response	3%	0%	1%
How effective do you think the Department was in communicating about the remote learning support centre?	Not at all effective	33%	6%	17%
	Not very effective	21%	12%	16%
	Moderately effective	27%	32%	30%
	Effective	12%	18%	16%
	Very effective	3%	2%	2%
	Not applicable / no response	3%	30%	19%

2. Consultation, collaboration and coordination with stakeholders

Survey question	Response	Superintendents	Independent school principals	Overall response
There were sufficient opportunities for me to provide input to the Department.	Strongly disagree	9%	6%	7%
	Moderately disagree	30%	12%	19%
	Neutral	15%	20%	18%
	Moderately agree	30%	28%	29%
	Strongly agree	15%	28%	23%
	Not applicable / no response	0%	6%	4%
The Department's tele-conference calls (12:30 calls) with stakeholders have been an effective tool for the Department to collaborate with stakeholders.	Strongly disagree	12%	4%	7%
	Moderately disagree	27%	6%	15%
	Neutral	15%	10%	12%
	Moderately agree	24%	36%	31%
	Strongly agree	21%	36%	30%
	Not applicable / no response	0%	8%	5%
The Department considered all stakeholder perspectives in making its decisions.	Strongly disagree	18%	6%	11%
	Moderately disagree	42%	12%	24%
	Neutral	15%	26%	22%
	Moderately agree	21%	40%	33%
	Strongly agree	3%	12%	8%
	Not applicable / no response	0%	4%	2%

Survey question	Response	Superintendents	Independent school principals	Overall response
While I may not have always agreed with decisions made, I feel the Department sufficiently explained the reasons for its decisions.	Strongly disagree	6%	4%	5%
	Moderately disagree	36%	8%	19%
	Neutral	21%	10%	15%
	Moderately agree	21%	46%	36%
	Strongly agree	15%	30%	24%
	Not applicable / no response	0%	2%	1%
The Department regularly sought the input of stakeholders on the impact of actions taken.	Strongly disagree	24%	6%	13%
	Moderately disagree	27%	22%	24%
	Neutral	15%	24%	21%
	Moderately agree	27%	32%	30%
	Strongly agree	6%	14%	11%
	Not applicable / no response	0%	2%	1%
Overall, I feel the Department did its best to build effective working relationships with its key stakeholders to improve the pandemic response.	Strongly disagree	15%	4%	8%
	Moderately disagree	27%	6%	15%
	Neutral	18%	18%	18%
	Moderately agree	18%	36%	29%
	Strongly agree	21%	34%	29%
	Not applicable / no response	0%	2%	1%

Survey question	Response	Superintendents	Independent school principals	Overall response
The Department established consistent provincial approaches where needed, while allowing local flexibility where appropriate.	Strongly disagree	6%	4%	5%
	Moderately disagree	33%	12%	21%
	Neutral	18%	26%	23%
	Moderately agree	30%	26%	28%
	Strongly agree	9%	32%	23%
	Not applicable / no response	3%	0%	1%
The Department learned from experiences and adjusted when necessary.	Strongly disagree	6%	2%	4%
	Moderately disagree	30%	12%	19%
	Neutral	27%	18%	22%
	Moderately agree	27%	30%	29%
	Strongly agree	9%	32%	23%
	Not applicable / no response	0%	6%	4%

3. Support provided by the Department

Survey question	Response	Superintendents	Independent school principals	Overall response
The Department made timely decisions on allocating financial resources during the initial phases of the pandemic (March-June, 2020).	Strongly disagree	36%	10%	21%
	Moderately disagree	21%	14%	17%
	Neutral	12%	18%	16%
	Moderately agree	27%	36%	33%
	Strongly agree	3%	14%	10%
	Not applicable / no response	0%	8%	5%
The Department made timely decisions on allocating financial resources during the return to school (July-September, 2020).	Strongly disagree	27%	8%	16%
	Moderately disagree	24%	12%	17%
	Neutral	6%	14%	11%
	Moderately agree	24%	32%	29%
	Strongly agree	18%	22%	21%
	Not applicable / no response	0%	12%	7%
The Department made timely decisions on allocating financial resources during the second wave of the pandemic (October, 2020-February, 2021).	Strongly disagree	12%	4%	7%
	Moderately disagree	12%	14%	13%
	Neutral	15%	10%	12%
	Moderately agree	36%	34%	35%
	Strongly agree	24%	28%	27%
	Not applicable / no response	0%	10%	6%

Survey question	Response	Superintendents	Independent school principals	Overall response
The Department resolved, in a timely manner, urgent matters/concerns that I brought to their attention.	Strongly disagree	12%	10%	11%
	Moderately disagree	36%	8%	19%
	Neutral	9%	10%	10%
	Moderately agree	21%	20%	21%
	Strongly agree	15%	26%	22%
	Not applicable / no response	6%	26%	18%
The Department provided my organization the financial support needed to address immediate impacts from the pandemic.	Strongly disagree	9%	8%	8%
	Moderately disagree	9%	8%	8%
	Neutral	12%	8%	10%
	Moderately agree	33%	30%	31%
	Strongly agree	36%	38%	37%
	Not applicable / no response	0%	8%	5%
The Department provided my organization other (non-financial) support to address immediate impacts from the pandemic, if necessary.	Strongly disagree	18%	4%	10%
	Moderately disagree	24%	8%	15%
	Neutral	15%	12%	13%
	Moderately agree	21%	40%	33%
	Strongly agree	15%	24%	21%
	Not applicable / no response	6%	12%	10%

Survey question	Response	Superintendents	Independent school principals	Overall response
The Department did a reasonable job of allocating financial resources to where they were needed.	Strongly disagree	9%	4%	6%
	Moderately disagree	18%	6%	11%
	Neutral	21%	8%	13%
	Moderately agree	30%	32%	31%
	Strongly agree	21%	42%	34%
	Not applicable / no response	0%	8%	5%

4. Addressing long-term impacts and recovery from the pandemic

Survey question	Response	Superintendents	Independent school principals	Overall response
The Department has asked me for information about the long-term impacts of the pandemic on my organization.	Strongly disagree	52%	28%	37%
	Moderately disagree	30%	16%	22%
	Neutral	12%	18%	16%
	Moderately agree	3%	30%	19%
	Strongly agree	3%	2%	2%
	Not applicable / no response	0%	6%	4%

Survey question	Response	Superintendents	Independent school principals	Overall response
I believe that information provided by stakeholders on the long-term impacts, has been and/or will be considered by the Department in making decisions on recovery.	Strongly disagree	39%	10%	22%
	Moderately disagree	24%	18%	21%
	Neutral	18%	28%	24%
	Moderately agree	9%	28%	21%
	Strongly agree	6%	4%	5%
	Not applicable / no response	3%	12%	8%
The Department has worked together with stakeholders to initiate strategies that address the long-term impacts from the pandemic.	Strongly disagree	55%	14%	30%
	Moderately disagree	21%	18%	19%
	Neutral	9%	26%	19%
	Moderately agree	9%	28%	21%
	Strongly agree	6%	4%	5%
	Not applicable / no response	0%	10%	6%
I believe that the Department is taking/ will take appropriate action to address the long-term impacts of the pandemic.	Strongly disagree	39%	8%	21%
	Moderately disagree	21%	14%	17%
	Neutral	24%	30%	28%
	Moderately agree	12%	32%	24%
	Strongly agree	3%	10%	7%
	Not applicable / no response	0%	6%	4%

5. Leadership

Survey question	Response	Superintendents	Independent school principals	Overall response
Overall, how would you rate the Department of Education's leadership in the K to 12 system's response to the pandemic?	Very poor	24%	2%	11%
	Poor	24%	10%	16%
	Neutral	21%	10%	15%
	Good	15%	56%	40%
	Very good	15%	22%	19%

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The Department's K to 12 COVID-19 Response Planning Team

As of March 23, 2020, a Response Planning Team was in the process of being established by the Department, with their first meeting on April 3, 2020. The Response Planning Team (the Team) was chaired by the Department, and reported directly to the Deputy Minister of Education.

The Team was initially established to oversee planning related to the suspension of in-class learning. Representation on the Team initially included 23 representatives, with stakeholder representatives from 7 school divisions, as well as representation from each of the 4 following stakeholder organizations:

- Manitoba Association of School Superintendents.
- Manitoba School Boards Association.
- The Manitoba Teachers' Society.
- Manitoba Federation of Independent Schools.

In the spring of 2020 this Team was supported by 8 issue-specific working groups made up of Department staff and K to 12 education stakeholders.

The Team's membership evolved over the pandemic. By October 2020, it was condensed to a team of 18 individuals, but with greater representation from the stakeholder organizations. This Team had 5 departmental representatives, 2 interdepartmental representatives, and 9 representatives from the stakeholder organizations listed above as well as 2 representatives from Manitoba Association of School Business Officials.

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