



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Children and Schools During COVID-19 and Beyond: Engagement and Connection Through Opportunity

August 2021

An RSC Policy Briefing

We spent the better part of the past year scrutinizing and synthesizing the research on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Canadian children and youth in the context of education. Our expert peer-reviewed Policy Briefing Report highlights that there are notable threats to children's well-being, educational success, and healthy development.

Over the past eighteen months, the pandemic has not only claimed the lives of millions worldwide, it has also upended nearly every public and private institution around the globe. Healthcare and long-term care were hit especially hard, but so were school systems, with over 90% percent of the world's 1.6 billion students (along with their caregivers and educators) impacted by school closures. In Canada, all provincial and territorial schools were closed for extended periods at some point during the pandemic, the longest being in Ontario where children and youth were out for more than half of the 2020-2021 academic year. Educators and school boards adapted to the unprecedented disruptions in education, developing multiple models of educational provisions, including fully remote online learning and blended learning programs for children and youth who could not attend school in person. Parents and other caregivers, many of whom were lacking necessary resources, also shouldered the weight of supporting their children's learning during the pandemic. Despite these valiant efforts, these variations in versions of learning developed urgently at a time of crisis, were experienced by 5.7 million Canadian children and youth who were dealing with numerous challenges, with far-reaching and potentially long-lasting consequences.

Indeed, because of these education disruptions, far too many Canadian children and youth have experienced disengagement, chronic attendance problems, declines in academic achievement, and decreased credit attainment during the pandemic, with the influence far deeper for those already at-risk before COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic. The negative reach of the pandemic has also extended beyond traditional educational indicators, affecting virtually all aspects of child development. School closures have impacted the food security of children and youth, as well as the detection and reporting of child maltreatment and neglect. Closures have also thwarted children's fundamental need to belong, resulting in greater social isolation and loneliness, and have led to a notable deterioration in mental health. Compounding these issues is the fact that children and youth were not only isolated from their peers and their educators, but they also experienced lengthy separations from their extended family and community networks such as teammates, coaches, mentors, counsellors, and spiritual leaders.

Schools have never been just about reading, writing, and arithmetic. They provide opportunities for learning and engaging with areas like the Arts, the natural world, current events, sexual health, and digital literacies. Schools also provide food resources for children and youth in need. They provide therapy for those with disabilities. They constitute a rich setting within which to develop social competencies. They can serve an important liaison function with families and community

services. They are the first point of contact for children and youth with concerns related to mental well-being and the most common setting for the provision of mental health services in Canada. Moreover, schools help keep children and youth safe because educators are the primary reporters of child abuse and neglect. Our Policy Briefing Report has highlighted that one of the best ways to mitigate these threats to the well-being, education, and safety of children and youth is to aim to keep schools open whenever and wherever it is safe to do so.

The pandemic has been challenging for children and youth. It has also been challenging for teachers, support staff, and principals who have been faced with having to quickly adapt their learning environments, being vigilant around ever-changing public health directives, and worrying about their own health and safety—all while trying to keep children and youth engaged and motivated. This is no small feat and one that must be recognized and valued. Our Policy Briefing Report also underscores that pandemic recovery must involve the adults in schools who care for students. Educators' working conditions are students' learning conditions. Thus, the well-being of educators cannot be divorced from the well-being of the children and youth in their charge.

In sum, it is clear from our report that it is neither tenable nor ethical to keep children and youth separated from the relationships, supports, and learning opportunities of schools. We are on the cusp of a "generational catastrophe" that requires swift action to mitigate the harm. Accordingly, our overarching recommendations for a pandemic recovery in education are as follows, with more detailed suggestions found in the Policy Briefing Report.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Prioritize the safe re-opening of all schools in Canada and work toward ensuring that schools stay open. Schools must be the first to open and the last to close.

Recommendation 2: Prioritize educators, school staff, and support workers in the vaccine rollout plans. Earmark federal funding to schools so they can effectively implement infection prevention and control measures as needed based on the hierarchy of controls; elimination/substitution controls, engineering controls, administrative controls, and personal protective equipment. Resources must also be allocated to ensure safe buildings and proper ventilation.

Recommendation 3: Address educational gaps. Intervention programs should be developed for children and youth who have been negatively impacted by interrupted or unfinished schooling. Small group offerings during the school day, individual virtual supports provided after school, summer camps with a combination of play, high quality recreation, and academics are some of the options that should be considered in partnership with community organizations. To ensure equity, these programs will need to be free to children and their families. Moreover, interventions to re-engage youth who have left school or have experienced chronic attendance issues during the pandemic need to be considered for supplemental funding. Addressing educational gaps also requires an investment in the social-emotional development of children and youth through school-based social-emotional learning approaches.

Recommendation 4: Take steps to reduce inequity. Inequities undermine the work of educators. Children and youth who live with the impacts of poverty and economic inequity also experience hunger, homelessness, unequal access to high-speed Internet and technology, and are more likely to belong to historically marginalized and underserved groups. Schools cannot solve all of society's problems, but they are a place where we can identify and acknowledge them. Importantly, we

must ensure that schools do not magnify existing inequities, and that curriculum and assessment actively draw on and reward diverse backgrounds, settings, and experiences.

Recommendation 5: Create a national strategy that emphasizes children’s mental health as important for life success and do so in the context in which they are most easily accessible—schools. This strategy should also provide coordinated care across sectors in a stepped care framework and across a full continuum of mental health supports spanning promotion, prevention, early intervention, and treatment. This national strategy must also include plans to deal with the tragedy of suicide in all segments of the population, but in particular, among adolescent boys and among First Nations, Métis, and Inuit youth who are disproportionately affected. We must also prioritize and invest in the wellness and well-being of school and system staff without whom our goals cannot be achieved.

Recommendation 6: Invest in comprehensive population-based follow-up studies so that more accurate information about how the pandemic may have affected all Canadian children and youth, and those disproportionately affected, can be obtained. We need a precise account of who was impacted, how, and for how long, so that we can take appropriate steps toward providing systems and services that can better support them moving forward.

Recommendation 7: Improve internet and digital access. The pandemic has revealed the needs and inequities related to technology access. These shortcomings not only impact the education of children and youth, but also limit the abilities of children and their families to successfully navigate services including vaccine appointment websites and employment, education, learning, and social networks. The Government of Canada needs to make all access to digital learning platforms, high-speed Internet, and digital devices for learning, public, universal, and free of charge, in both English and French.

Recommendation 8: Improve teacher expertise by including digital pedagogy in all teacher preparation programs. Develop a clear plan and strategy so that all Canadian teachers will have full digital proficiency within three years. Digital expertise should not only include knowledge of apps, tabs, platforms, and other technical resources, but also the ability to determine when digitally based resources do and do not provide unique added value for effective learning compared to other resources. Digital expertise should also include knowledge of how to identify, minimize, and manage the risks that often accompany digitally based learning.

Recommendation 9: Support teaching as essential work. The troubling lack of support for educators during the pandemic may have fundamentally undermined their capacity to rebound once the pandemic is better controlled. The formation of a national roundtable in collaboration with existing federations, unions, and affiliated associations including the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada is needed to reconsider the professional status of education and work to improve the conditions under which educators and children and youth spend their days.

Recommendation 10: Prioritize recess and other forms of breaks as an essential part of the school day for all grades and ensure that every school is equipped with appropriate space for learning and socializing outdoors. Outdoor, nature-based space is a valuable environment for learning and provides necessary breaks from desk-based learning. Time and forethought are needed to assess, plan, implement, monitor, and sustain a routine of new practices that support and protect children and youth in this space. Steps need to be taken to ensure recess and outdoor learning is part of school and board improvement efforts, ensuring attention to the built landscape, social environment, staff training, student voice, and outdoor spaces abundant with nature and natural materials.