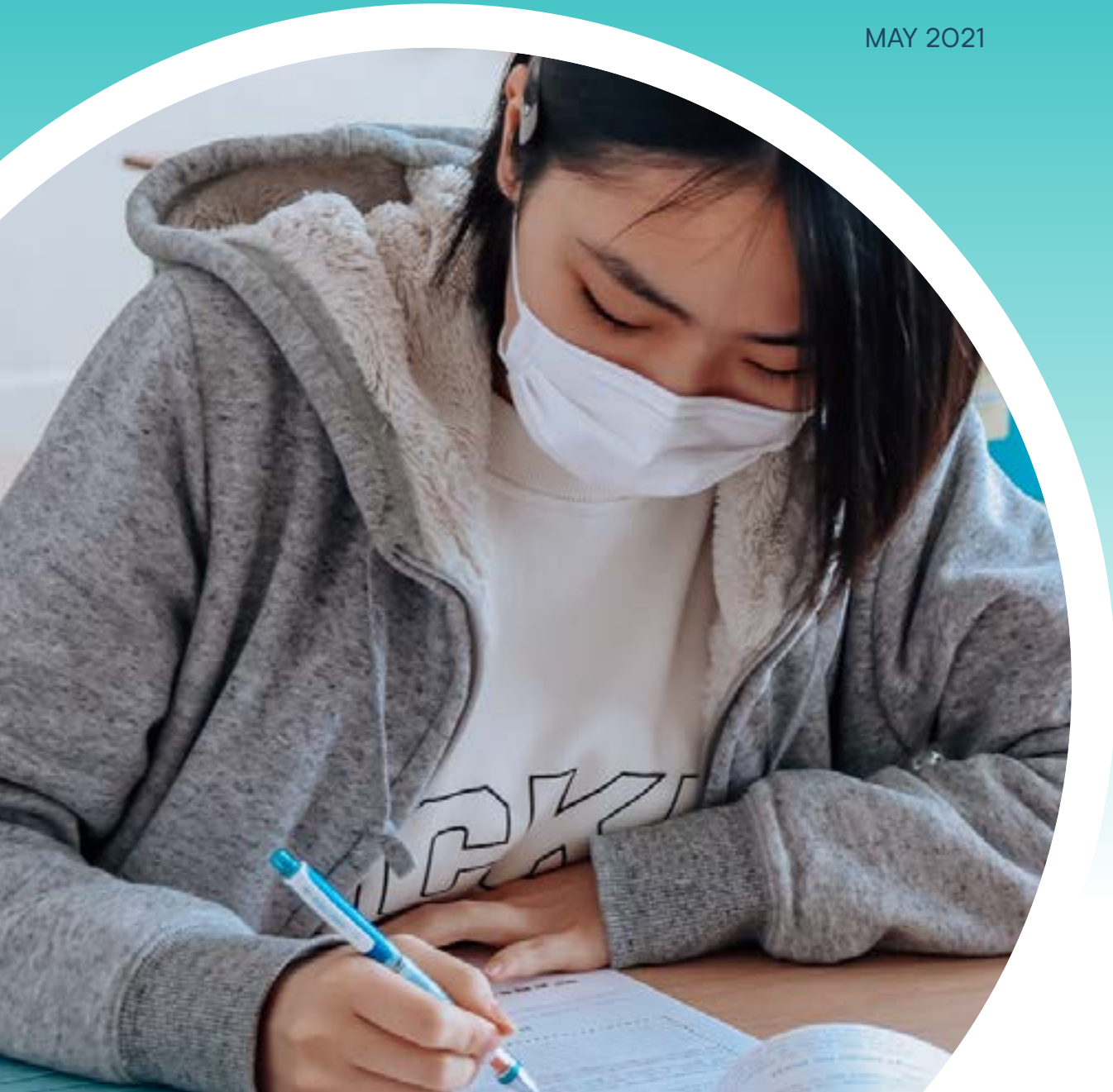ONTARIO PUBLIC
SCHOOL BOARDS'
ASSOCIATION

Transitioning from the COVID-19 School Experience

An OPSBA
Discussion Paper

MAY 2021

Reflections

Supporting students in-risk has been a challenge; especially when circumstances create distance between students and in-person supports. **Stephen Blok, Superintendent of Education–Program Services, Renfrew County DSB**

Issues related to who has chosen virtual learning, who has been most severely impacted and who have experienced issues such as food security have highlighted the inequities in our communities and the impact of barriers that many families experience even pre-Covid. **Shirley Chan, Executive Superintendent — Learning Centre, Toronto DSB**

The technical issues like devices and access to the internet have a technical solution through deployment of resources. However, it has truly been the adaptive challenges that are hard to find the solutions for, as they are varied and personal. **Camille Williams-Taylor, Director of Education, Ottawa-Carleton DSB**

We need to build upon what may have been gained for our learners through these Covid times. **Rosemary Stiglic, Secondary Principal, Peel DSB**

A commitment to not return to a system that was not previously serving all learners... embedding practices that address anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism, incorporating both Black and Indigenous histories and learning. **Patrice Barnes, Trustee, Durham DSB**

The pandemic has shone a spotlight on the inequities in education, particularly around access to learning and supports outside of school. **AJ Keene, Superintendent of Education, Lakehead DSB**

To help students learn, we must address their need to experience belonging; their physical, social-emotional, and identity safety. **Prince Duah, Superintendent of Instruction, Ottawa-Carleton DSB**

Mental health supports will be crucial. This pandemic has put a toll on us all and ensuring that students will emerge stronger than ever before is very important. **Zachary Garbaty, Ontario Student Trustees' Association, Grand Erie DSB**

There has never been a more important time to prioritize mental health promotion and prevention as part of regular school life. All students benefit when we create mentally healthy classrooms, and support learning that strengthens students' sense of wellness, identity, confidence, and belonging. **Kathy Short, Executive Director, School Mental Health Ontario**

Introduction

Since first declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization in March 2020, COVID-19 has been, and continues to be, one of the great social and economic disruptors of our time with widespread impact on one of society's most traditional institutions — school.

The pandemic has accentuated long-standing and largely unchanged school structures and processes directed by government policy and associated funding streams. The pandemic disruption has also exposed how some of these structures have compromised policy commitments regarding equitable access and opportunity for student communities. These inequities are inevitably linked to students' overall well-being and future prospects. Now is the time to take stock of, and act on, existing structures and what has been learned especially in light of the challenges and opportunities revealed throughout the pandemic. This is not the time to simply go back to what was done previously, but to challenge our collective selves to reimagine what schools could become to ensure that each and every student in our care thrives in school and in life.

This discussion document reflects the initial thinking of Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA) membership from first-hand accounts of remote[1] and online learning during the pandemic. Perspectives include those from remote and northern boards, school boards from large urban centres, and largely rural communities across the province. This process of reflection has revealed two compelling realities: that a worrisome number of students have been unable to profit from remote forms of learning; and

that several innovative practices in pedagogy and leadership have emerged that should be preserved and implemented on a broader scale post-pandemic.

The document is designed to elicit collaborative dialogue with education partners by identifying key questions to build on current observations, identify the need for further study, and to create a frame for a new vision for school. This document builds on OPSBA's two former documents, *What if? and A Vision for Learning and Teaching in a Digital Age*.

The discussion document will explore the following questions:

- **What are we observing during the COVID-19 experience?**

- **What does the emerging research tell us?**

- **What do we need to find out?**

- **What should we do about what we know?**

- **What could school look like in the years beyond the COVID-19 pandemic?**

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1   "Remote and online learning" refers to the broad spectrum of learning formats that rely on connection to the Internet. In this discussion, "remote" learning refers to all school configurations during the COVID-19 pandemic where students participated in school from home by choice or by necessity. In some school boards and at other times, this concept is referred to as "virtual" or "distance" learning.

What are we observing during the COVID-19 experience?

Since March 2020, online learning in Ontario schools has undergone a rapid transformation as a result of intermittent school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At various points during the pandemic and for various periods of time, all K–12 students, their parents/guardians, teachers and other educators have needed to adapt to what Hodges and colleagues described as "emergency remote teaching" (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust & Bond, 2020, p. 3). This shift represented a marked diversion from previous online learning configurations and a novel learning environment for most K–12 learners.

Throughout this time, educators at all levels have rallied to plan, create and implement dramatically different learning conditions for students. Given the magnitude of this uncharted territory, members of the education community have held fast in their unwavering dedication and commitment to student achievement and well-being. The herculean efforts to constantly adapt "school" were a result of well-established collaborative relationships, the dedication of school board leadership, but most importantly, the ability to leverage existing infrastructures and staff expertise in our school boards and school board consortia.

Understandably, remote learning from home during the COVID-19 pandemic prioritized student and community health and safety. To accomplish this goal, students learned at home by necessity when schools were closed, or by choice as schools re-opened for in-person learning, using a variety of teaching models (asynchronous, synchronous, hybrid). However, educators have made the following observations about teaching and learning under these conditions, observations that reinforce the essential supports needed for student achievement and well-being, but also point to opportunities that are worthy of further study.

Inspiring educators and models of remote learning

The success of rapid implementation of emergency remote learning stems in large part from committed, resourceful educators rising to this unprecedented challenge: facilitating meaningful learning for all students using technology, adaptive pedagogy, and alternative communication strategies on a scale never previously required. Novel approaches under trying conditions over extended periods of time, however, have taken a toll on educator resiliency amplified by concerns over student achievement, well-being, and engagement and educators' own concerns over their personal safety.

Much has been observed from the models of remote learning[2] implemented and modified during the pandemic. While remote learning has been available to some students for many years, remote learning conditions during the pandemic are significantly different than previous models, for example:

- Previously developed e-learning or distance-learning platforms allowed school boards to "jump start" remote learning on a larger scale as required.

- For varying periods of time, remote learning has been the only available learning model for students.

- Remote learning platforms have been used for students in Kindergarten through Grade 12.

- With great effort, many areas of the curriculum have been made available through online platforms, even curriculum designed for hands-on experiential learning.

Active participation in remote learning also requires that:

- students learn from home. This requires homes to have reliable and affordable internet service to meet the Ministry of Education's minimum online participation requirements.

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2   As per PPM 164, remote learning is defined by combinations of *synchronous* learning (learning facilitated by educators and occurring in real time) and *asynchronous* learning (learning facilitated by educators but not occurring in real-time). Adapted/hybrid models of remote learning have evolved over the course of the pandemic based on local contexts.

- students have consistent access to digital devices and software to participate fully, especially during synchronous learning, which constitutes the bulk of mandated instructional time according to PPM 164.

- students' home learning environments[3] allow students periods of focused study and age-appropriate adult supervision while balancing other responsibilities or distractions.

No matter how well-intentioned various remote learning models have been, educators have observed troubling trends, such as:

1. Not all families have access to reliable internet services due largely to issues of affordability and where they live.

2. Not all students/families have access to sufficient number of digital devices for students living in the household, due largely to issues of affordability of the devices and of internet services.

3. With much reduced access to direct teacher support, many students require consistent, alternative adult support, (e.g., from older siblings and/or parents/guardians) in order to engage meaningfully in remote learning.

4. Some students struggle to maintain engagement during synchronous learning sessions. School boards are currently following up with increasing numbers of students who no longer attend school, either through remote or in-person learning models.

5. Increasing numbers of students report feelings of isolation, stress, worry, boredom and loneliness associated with the pandemic.

Educators have also observed positive outcomes from the use of remote learning models. For example:

1. Some students have adapted readily to synchronous learning opportunities, effectively using digital tools to communicate, collaborate and demonstrate their learning. Other students have benefited from the opportunity to learn without the social and physical distractors of busy school environments. In some cases, student achievement has improved while learning remotely. More study is required here to better understand the scale of these reports, the students most affected, and the learning conditions leading to their success.

2. Educators have shown remarkable innovation in quickly adapting to instructional and assessment practices that accommodate remote learning realities while balancing student achievement and well-being.

3. Educators have capitalized on remote learning technology to collaborate more with colleagues, facilitate ad hoc discussions and scheduled meetings, to co-teach, and to learn about new resources.

4. Family engagement has shifted. Parents/guardians working from home have been able to observe much more closely how their children engage with curriculum, communicate with peers, maintain momentum, and develop critical learning skills. Meeting times have become more flexible, allowing parents/guardians to join in virtual meetings at more mutually convenient times.

QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

How do we continue to inspire educators to integrate pedagogical practices developed during the pandemic into their teaching practice when students safely return to in-person learning?

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3   This includes times when young students have engaged in remote learning but from a child-care setting instead of from home.

Bricks and mortar schools/In-person learning and the importance of belonging

Traditionally, school buildings serve as hubs for learning, critical social interaction and community connection. With fluctuating access to school buildings during the pandemic, school boards have had to recreate schools remotely. This has included the development of innovative co-curricular online opportunities where students have come together to support community-based actions and participate in online clubs. While student learning has continued in various formats, remote schooling has reduced opportunities for important student-student and teacher-student interaction resulting in worrisome levels of student disengagement. Recently, educators have identified that remote learning has triggered increases in homeschooling, exemptions from remote learning options, "ghosting" (students logging in to remote learning, turning off cameras, and not responding when teachers attempt to engage them). This degree

of disengagement has resulted in reports of increased concern over potential credit loss. One Toronto teacher reflected on how important it was for him to come to school as a teenager:

"I came to school mainly for the sports and to see my friends," he said. "Indirectly, I became part of a school and a learning environment, but if I didn't have those reasons to come and that space to be in … No one's checking for me. I had no reason to go there. It's easy to leave." (*K. Mitchell, as reported by Jessica Wang, CBC News*).

Parent/guardian and family connections have also changed in unique ways: for some, parents/guardians have been able to directly observe teacher-student interactions and the content of the curriculum. Similarly, greater parent/guardian attendance has been observed at School Council meetings and other school-hosted information sessions on a range of topics. This represents a new opportunity to engage parents/guardians further and promote the positive effects their involvement has on student achievement.

The need to provide environmentally safe learning spaces in school buildings has drawn greater attention to the condition of school buildings and portable classrooms. Aging infrastructure, inadequate air circulation systems, availability of technology for both on and off-site learners and undersized common areas have challenged school boards' capacity to optimize fluctuating learning formats for students.

QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

What supports are needed to re-engage students and restore a sense of school community and belonging?

Digital Citizenship and Cyber–security

Remote learning platforms must always respect the safety and security of all participants. The use of online cameras to facilitate student–teacher and student–student interaction has raised privacy questions when teachers' and students' homes become "classrooms." Improving user privacy (such as turning cameras off) in these instances sometimes reduces the spontaneous classroom interactions that facilitate personalized instruction and authentic assessment.

The dependence on remote learning environments on the scale required during the pandemic has tested the strength of good digital citizenship instruction, and has unfortunately led to instances of harm, such as the use of offensive language online often by unidentifiable participants, and inappropriate exchanges targeting educators and students. School boards have also had to invest in improved cyber–security following large–scale breaches during critical periods, e.g., hacked Zoom calls, and system networks corrupted by malware.

> **QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION**
>
> *What has emerged from remote learning experiences that can inform future instruction about digital citizenship in school and the broader community?*

Inclusion and Equity of Access, Outcomes, and Opportunity

Equity and inclusion work in school systems has, in recent years, shifted its stance from equitable access to equitable student outcomes. However, remote learning during the COVID–19 pandemic has underscored the importance of continued advocacy for equitable access to the infrastructure fundamental to successful remote learning. In addition to factors such as access to specialized learning supports, authentic interpersonal relationships, physical safety, and psychological security, educators have observed that underachievement in school, and its consequential relationship to learning outcomes and future opportunities, has now become a function of access to reliable internet connectivity and digital learning devices in the home.

Schools traditionally play a key role in providing equitable access to learning resources, a full range of learning support programs and personnel, facilitating food security for families, much of which became out of reach for families oppressed by economic insecurity, systemic discrimination, and their physical distance from accessible internet service. Educational opportunities for students requiring special education supports and services during school closures has been particularly challenging (programs are designed to be accessible within the school building and grounds) to provide learning resources and specialized equipment often dependent on school infrastructure, and to sometimes include significant levels of adult assistance and physical care.

> **QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION**
>
> *Given the effects of the pandemic on racialized and economically insecure communities, what should we be advocating for in order to fully realize the aspirations within the Ontario Education Equity Action Plan?*

What does the emerging research tell us?

Researchers around the world have quickly begun to document the consequences of the pandemic on public school systems. Some evidence has emerged quickly; other effects will develop over time, and many results to date are specific to varying education contexts globally prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Common to much of the emerging research is the caveat that many of the effects of the pandemic on schooling are linked to "emergency remote learning" (Hodges et al., 2020, p. 3). Unlike previous remote learning implementation, the pandemic forced plans for remote learning to be developed quickly, to include all or most students all or some of the time, and to be responsive to frequent changes in government policy designed to minimize the ill-effects of COVID-19 on public health and the economy. As articulated frequently in public policy statements, emergency remote learning prioritized public health first, everything else second. Despite the sense of urgency and time restrictions, planning for emergency remote learning included many of the fundamentals of effective online learning: modality (ratio of synchronous, asynchronous, hybrid), role of the instructor, tasks for students, pacing, student–teacher ratio, communication platforms, pedagogy, assessment, and feedback (Means, Bakia & Murphy, 2014).

Despite schools' efforts to implement well-grounded remote learning conditions, the speed and scale of implementation drew researchers' attention to early impacts of implementation in several areas: teacher practice, students' academic achievement, mental health, and other educational outcomes typically tracked in education research. Increasingly, research is turning attention to the transition to the post-pandemic period, and how education may be improved by the (hard) lessons learned because of the pandemic. In jurisdictions that routinely gather demographic data, research has been able to analyze early pandemic effects by student age and identity (e.g., race, gender, participation in subsidized lunch programs, etc.). These analyses have provided a more detailed picture of the differential effects of emergency remote learning and evidence supporting future change.

Teaching – The research to date on teachers and teaching in Canada during the pandemic is very limited, and notably less than the early research on student learning over the same period. While the largely perceptual research being conducted with teachers cannot be generalized at this point, it describes authentic details about teaching during the pandemic. Barbour and LaBonte (2020) gathered narratives of teachers' lived experiences from across Canada. Given the different teaching contexts for each participant (variations in teaching experience, location, elementary/secondary, subject areas), a number of common themes emerged:

- Pace — teachers reported a significant increase in the pace of their work. There was more to do, especially in communication with students, parents/guardians and colleagues when students were online, and monitoring and supporting COVID-19 protocol compliance when students were in-class.

- Pedagogy — online teaching required teachers to quickly adapt to pedagogy that would work in an online format, possibly pedagogies that were new to them, and relied on technological knowledge they did not already possess. Flexibility became essential in responding to student attendance patterns, technology malfunctions, and student input.

- Facilitating student engagement — maintaining student engagement became challenging when students were not attending in-person, and disengagement became a constant worry for teachers.

- Individual differences — to varying degrees, all teacher stories recounted scenarios where individual students achieved better under remote learning conditions than when in school. Some students were able to learn more quickly; some preferred the relative quiet of their home environment; some took advantage of new communication strategies (chat rooms, text messages, emails) to access teacher support; some explored innovative strategies to create student work that clearly demonstrated what they'd learned. Other

students spent more time doing schoolwork than previously, possibly because of limited options outside of school, but possibly because they had greater control of their learning time.

A more structured study by Sokol, Trudel and Bobb (2020) at the University of Winnipeg compared teacher efficacy, attitudes and perceptions of support early in the pandemic and at the end of the 2019-2020 school year with more than 1,600 teachers across Canada. Their findings showed irregularities in how teachers typically respond to change. For instance, during significant workplace changes, it is predictable that attitudes toward the change are reflected in change behaviour; for instance, negative attitudes predict little or no change. In the early phases of the pandemic, when teachers were required to quickly make significant changes to their work, attitudes of exhaustion and cynicism could be expected. If sustained, such attitudes often led to under-accomplishment. As anticipated, teachers in this study reported that exhaustion and cynicism increased as the pandemic wore on, however, their sense of accomplishment (in teaching remotely) increased. This led to increased perceptions of teacher efficacy. In other words, while teachers pushed through their increasing fatigue and worry, they felt their efforts were paying off, at least for the students who remained engaged. Teachers' feelings of efficacy, however, remain fragile. An update to this same study (February 2021) concluded: "While we would expect the pandemic and the changes it causes to provoke stress, what's most concerning is that teachers reported high stress for such a long duration, a situation that commonly leads to burnout. This suggests that teachers require a decrease in demands, an increase in resources, or both, to ensure they can remain resilient and be their best self at work (p. 2)."

More has been documented about the observed effects of COVID-era learning on students. The research examines a range of effects on students during times of full school closures to full in-school attendance during the pandemic. While student achievement is linked to well-being and mental health, the research discusses distinct pandemic-related outcomes for each.

Student Achievement — Because learning in school is usually segmented by time (years, semesters, etc.), school closures began to raise concerns about the potential impact on loss of learning (Defeyter et al., 2020; Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). Previous research on school closures (e.g., due to natural disasters, prolonged labour disruptions, summer holidays) has produced inconsistent results in the degree to which students' learning lags when schools are closed. It stands to reason that if learning is associated with time, then loss of time would affect learning. Given that students in Ontario were out of school for a few weeks, the concern over potential learning loss has been mitigated somewhat by students being able to return to school learning either in-person, remotely, or a hybrid of the two.

However, as school disruptions during the pandemic continue, Zhao (2021) and others caution that return-to-school plans focusing on learning loss may be counterproductive and lead to undesirable outcomes.

Zhao particularly warns against a resurgence in standardized testing, increased demand for remedial programs (especially in math and reading) for short-term gain (Dean & Kuhn, 2007; Kapur, 2014, 2016) and the unnecessary pressures such approaches may add to students as they return to school. Instead, Zhao recommends that return-to-school plans prioritize "meeting students where they are" (p. 4) and attending to all educational outcomes such as curiosity, adaptability, independence and resilience. This approach will allow attention and resources to address pressing concerns about the widening gaps between students from have and have-not communities.

In Canada, the US, and the UK, research points to significant inequities in how certain communities have been able to respond to school closures or degrees of remote learning. In the Canadian context, James (2020) writes that students living in racialized, low-income communities have struggled to engage fully in pandemic-era school alternatives. Such communities are experiencing higher than average rates of COVID-19 (meaning more illness), less access to home internet (meaning less participation in remote learning), and higher rates of working in essential services (meaning fewer adults at home to assist students as needed) — all factors projected to increase the risk of compromised student achievement. Other research express parallel views from various parts of the world, e.g., from British Columbia, (Gautreau & Hales, 2020); United States (van Dorn, Cooney & Sabin, 2020; Dorn, Hancock, Sarakatsannis & Viruleg, 2020; Lund, 2020); Australia (O'Sullivan, Rahamathula & Pawar, 2020), and the UK (Defeyter et al., 2020) — in sum, learning conditions during the pandemic worsened disproportionately for students with pre-existing systemic disadvantages.

Well-being and mental health — Increasingly, research attention is being drawn to the current and potential latent effects of the pandemic on students' overall well-being and mental health. Early cross-sectional survey findings point to a heightened level of worry, sadness, irritability, loneliness, and isolation amongst children and youth in Canada and elsewhere in relation to the pandemic and related public health restrictions (Ford, John, & Gunnell, 2021; Maximum City Report, 2020; Public Health Ontario, 2021). These elevations are not unexpected in the context of a global pandemic that serves to both threaten protective factors for wellness and increase risk factors for mental illness.

Reduced Protective Factors for well-being include:

- Less healthy movement and increased sedentary behaviour and screen time

- Less time outdoors

- Less interaction with a range of caring adults

- Less interaction with peers

- Less predictable structure and inconsistent routines

- Less access to a range of learning modalities

Risk Factors for mental health problems include:

- Family financial strain and conflict

- Social isolation and loneliness

- Disrupted/changed sleep and eating patterns and routines

- Worries about health of self and others

- Worries about academic performance

- Loss and grief

In the meantime, schools have an important role to play in terms of wellness promotion and prevention of mental health problems. As always, ensuring a welcoming, inclusive and safe in-person and remote school environment is foundational to student engagement and learning. Helping students to build habits and skills that enhance their strengths and personal resiliency can ease the burden of pandemic disruptions and loss. And offering mental health literacy learning to students in developmentally-appropriate ways can help them to understand the importance of caring for their mental well-being. Further, we know that child and youth mental health is mediated through adult wellness. When adults

can practice and model active coping and send hopeful messages, young people are better able to thrive through adversity. In the normal school context, much of this social–emotional learning, relationship–building, and strength–based care happens informally through day–to–day interactions (Barbour & Labonte, 2020; Lund, 2020; Maximum City Report, 2020).

In terms of prevention, early findings show that some students are more at risk for mental health problems than others. Those who are more disadvantaged by a loss of protective factors (e.g., reduced access to counseling services, sports and recreation, learning, nutrition programs), or more impacted due to risk factors (e.g., food insecurity, poor physical health, pre–existing mental health problems) may experience more pronounced emotional concerns during the pandemic (Dorn et al., 2020; Maximum City Report, 2020; Parolin & Van Lancker, 2020).

In summary, research findings to date about the effects of COVID–19 on teaching and learning in public schools mirror the observations noted by educators across the country. Teachers have regularly had to make significant adjustments to their pedagogical practice in order to accommodate shifts in learning formats brought about by measures implemented to curb COVID–19 infection rates. These teaching conditions have caused significant stress, much of it borne out of concern and worry for the mental health and well–being of students, especially those with pre–existing struggles in school. Learning conditions have given rise to a number of concerns about student achievement — that students will fall behind academically, which will cause a domino effect as students transition from grade to grade. More importantly, educators and researchers are concerned about the impact of COVID–era schooling on students' well–being and mental health. Early research findings suggest these worries are warranted, as student reports of anxiety, sadness, and loneliness have been noted. These concerns are inescapably linked to student achievement, are disproportionately affecting systemically disadvantaged groups, and will continue to require strategic intervention and support well into the post–pandemic period.

Zhao (2021) recommends that return–to–school plans prioritize "meeting students where they are" (p. 4) and attending to all educational outcomes such as curiosity, adaptability, independence and resilience. This approach will allow attention and resources to address pressing concerns about the widening gaps between students from have and have–not communities.

What should we do about what we know?

Any future action taken will be informed by short- and longer-term goals developed in light of emerging evidence. Effects of the pandemic will continue to accumulate until the pandemic abates, and for some time thereafter, so high-stakes priorities and plans must be developed and communicated now to restore confidence in public education with all stakeholders. Such priorities include:

1. Attend to the mental health of all students.

- A strong focus on mental health and well-being must be an essential part of a re-imagined education system, certainly in the near term as staff and students enter into a pandemic recovery phase, but also as an ongoing component of the school experience. Consistent messaging and programming that prioritizes wellness and hope as part of everyday school life is an essential element for the future of education.

- School itself is a powerful intervention for enhancing student mental health and well-being. At its best, the classroom experience provides a wealth of protective influences that can bolster student mental health. Welcoming and identity-affirming classrooms that foster a strong sense of belonging and support, stable and predictable routines, daily physical activities and mental health moments, and opportunities for caring relationships with peers and adults all contribute to good student mental health. For most students, this is all they will need to recover socially and emotionally from the pandemic and to ignite their readiness to engage in learning. To ensure successful transitions back to in-person learning, educators will need thoughtful, iterative professional learning that effectively prioritizes student mental health and wellness into their daily practice.

- Every student and COVID-19 story are unique and will require differentiated support for re-engagement and mental wellness. Some students will need more than daily mental health promotion in the classroom in coming months. There are three broad groups of students who will require more intentional, targeted supports: those disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, those with pre-existing or escalating mental health concerns, and those who have been disconnected from school, or marginally engaged, during the pandemic.

- Student wellness is mediated, in part, through adult wellness. School and system staff and parents/guardians and families have experienced the strain of the pandemic and have been on the frontlines of care for months upon months. They too need time to recover and refresh.

- A gradual return to modest learning expectations for students and demands on parents/guardians related to academic progress must be a thoughtful part of post-pandemic transition planning. Student learning has continued throughout the pandemic and should be valued and connected to curriculum expectations. Specific to students' developmental stage, focused attention to prioritizing learning conditions that promote students' sense of confidence and belonging will better position students and parents/guardians to embrace the academic learning goals that lay ahead.

- With support, educators are well-positioned for early identification, noticing when a student may be showing changes in their emotions or behaviours that could indicate a concern, and an initial step in linking with school mental health professionals who can provide early intervention, or with community mental health agencies who provide more intensive treatment.

- Schools are part of a wider system of care when it comes to supporting student mental health and well-being. Our main role relates to mental health promotion, early identification, and prevention/early intervention services. We need to continue to work closely with community and health partners to ensure a robust system that wraps around students and their families.

2. Explore the expansion of online learning opportunities.

- Remote learning during the pandemic has resulted in both positive and negative outcomes.

  » On one hand, most K–12 students and teachers have been able to adapt to a learning platform previously reserved as an option for older students. For some students, online learning has emerged as a preferred alternate platform for meeting some curriculum expectations.

  » On the other hand, reduced in-person learning has proven very challenging for some students based on age, developmental stage, and individual learning preferences.

In either case, the technology needed for successful online learning is currently not available for many students due to cost and infrastructure challenges. Support for sustainable, equitable access to online learning is necessary for all students to have the same ability and choice to fully and meaningfully engage in this learning option.

- Curate and share resources and pedagogical practices (instruction, assessment, task development, multiple demonstrations of learning) shown to enhance teacher-facilitated online learning.

- Continue to build on and expand school board/consortia-focused professional learning about effective online learning pedagogies.

- Rethink the value of learning technology devices compared to traditional consumable learning resources (e.g., textbooks).

- Review related regulations, e.g., school attendance, in order to enable flexibility of online learning opportunities in various contexts.

- Review infrastructure requirements in order to accommodate the implications of online learning formats for students and teachers

3. Study the possible continuation of regulatory changes and innovative administrative practices adopted during the pandemic.

- Many administrative practices were altered in response to the pandemic. Over time, some of these changes have shown positive impacts as they increased flexibility and efficiency for students, parents/guardians and administrators. For example:

  » Secondary school timetables — many educators and students have reported that quad-mesters and other reconfigurations to traditional semesters have been beneficial. They concentrate learning time, reduce scheduling conflicts, and for some curriculum, facilitate improved pedagogy and learning outcomes.

  » Pedagogy — remote learning formats have reinforced the call for instruction and assessment to be responsive to students' learning needs and circumstances. Promising student outcomes have sparked renewed discussion regarding topics such as the fundamentals of assessment, authentic learning tasks, and the value of course examinations and EQAO, among others.

  » Meetings with parents/guardians and school staff. Virtual meetings have allowed parents/guardians, outside professionals, and school board support personnel to participate in decision-making meetings (e.g., Identification, Placement and Review Committee Meetings [IPRCs]) without having to travel to traditional meeting venues. This flexibility has increased parent involvement, minimized disruptions, and optimized everyone's use of time.

  » School Board meetings have experienced greater community engagement due to reduction in travel time.

Can you provide examples of innovative administrative practices that have emerged during the pandemic that exemplify effective pedagogy in online and in-person learning environments?

4. Monitor outcomes of new approaches.

- As with any innovation, it is important to monitor its effects. While the pandemic has identified opportunities to review traditional approaches to public education that improve the learning conditions for student achievement and well-being, a plan to monitor the effects of such actions will provide innovators with the evidence needed to demonstrate progress, improvement and modify approaches.

What do we still need to find out?

The following critical questions remain:

1. What innovations in pedagogy, administrative practice, and community engagement have schools already undertaken during the pandemic that will/should continue post-pandemic?

2. What plans are under development to re-engage students/communities most disaffected by COVID-19?

3. According to students, who has profited by remote learning, who has not, and what key factors have contributed to these outcomes?

4. What innovations in online learning have been developed to support experiential learning, and to engage students requiring special education supports/programs as well as students learning English and French as additional languages?

School itself is a powerful intervention for enhancing student mental health and well-being. At its best, the classroom experience provides a wealth of protective influences that can bolster student mental health.

What could school look like in the years beyond COVID-19?

School cultures that:

- Balance curricular expectations with an integrated focus on mental health and well-being.

- Take responsibility for addressing inequitable student outcomes.

- Anchor student learning in community schools.

- Continue to implement measurable school improvement plans grounded in a balance of self-directed, collaboratively planned, and mandated professional learning.

- Increase and value outdoor education and land-based[4] learning opportunities.

- Value and recognize learning skills that develop within communities outside of the classroom.

- Personalize student support by shaping instruction and expectations to the specific and articulated needs of communities informed by students' lived realities that impact their schooling experience and outcomes.

- Enable and implement variations of online learning for a wider range of students.

Responsive Pedagogies that:

- Provide students with choice, pathway options, and flexibility based on their personal needs.

- Are grounded in an equity, anti-oppression, and social justice stance.

- Promote learning outdoors, land-based learning and experiential learning.

- Focus on student inquiry that facilitates authentic learning and assessment of overall expectations.

- Optimizes student engagement and curiosity in person and while using technology as a vehicle for learning and teaching.

Learning formats that:

- Allow flexibility in restructuring the school day.

- Include models of blended learning (online and in-person) across the curriculum.

- Allow flexible learning groupings based on factors other than chronological age.

- Facilitate self-paced learning pathways that respond to students' individual interests and aspirations.
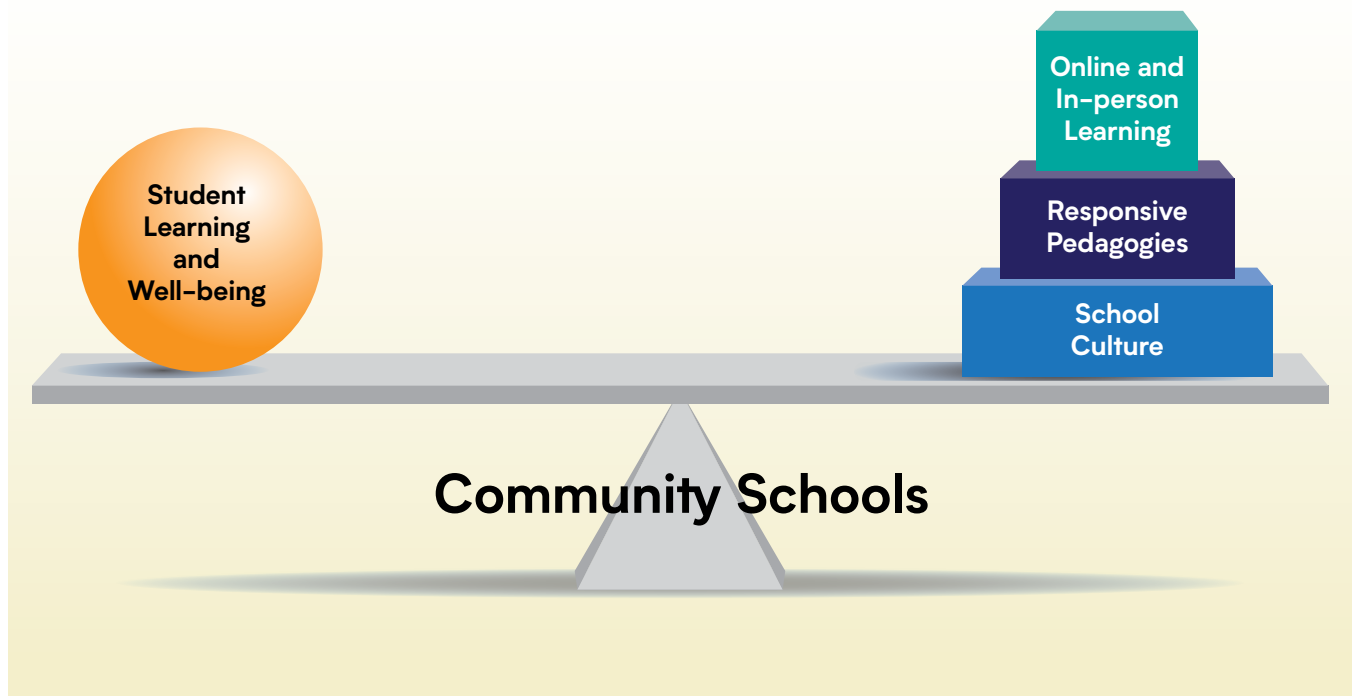
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4   "Land-based education assumes an environmental approach to learning that recognizes the deep connection and relationship of Indigenous peoples to the Land. It seeks to offer education pertaining to the Land that is grounded within Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy." (Boon, J. (2018). OISE WordPress)

School culture and responsive pedagogy have always been foundational to student success. With the Internet came new learning choices; school boards embraced this opportunity and moved to create and grow e-Learning options to provide greater flexibility and choice for students. Emergency remote learning, however, created an unsettling disparity between those able to profit by this learning format, and those who experienced negative social, emotional and academic challenges when unable to attend school in-person. The transition to school post-COVID will require a concentrated, collaborative effort to strike the right balance between all elements known to support student achievement and well-being.

This discussion paper has identified issues, challenges, opportunities and key considerations that have been revealed as a result of the emergency adjustments made to learning and teaching conditions during COVID-19. Areas of further study have been identified to ensure that the full implications of the pandemic on student achievement and well-being are more fully understood before permanent policy decisions are legislated. What should be preserved, mitigated or discontinued needs further evidence-informed, collaborative discussion with education partners to ensure that we are collectively making the best possible decisions for students now and into the future.

Next Steps

OPSBA looks forward to engaging with education partners to examine how the experience of emergency remote learning has informed and sharpened our focus and understanding of children and youth development, including the need for socialization, recreation and mental wellness. Using evidence-based research, it is hoped that collaboratively we can explore the possibilities to reframe and reimagine learning and teaching in Ontario schools and how it can be effectively supported.

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The Ontario Public School Boards' Association represents English public district school boards and public school authorities across Ontario, which together serve more than 1.3 million public elementary and secondary students. The Association advocates on behalf of the best interests and needs of the public school system in Ontario. OPSBA is seen as the credible voice of public education in Ontario and is routinely called on by the provincial government for input and advice on legislation and the impact of government policy directions.

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