



BEYOND THE STATUS QUO

Funding the Schools
Manitoba Students Need

Education Funding Submission 2022-23

 THE
MANITOBA
TEACHERS'
SOCIETY

**The Honourable Cliff Cullen, M.L.A.
Minister of Education
Room 168 Legislative Building
450 Broadway
Winnipeg, MB R3C 0V8**

December 20, 2021

Dear Minister Cullen,

The Manitoba Teachers' Society is pleased to provide comment in advance of the 2022-23 education funding announcement.

Over the past five years, education funding has failed to keep pace with inflation and enrolment. Student population growth has increased annually at about one per cent since 2016. The 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years saw a break in this pattern of student growth for pandemic-related reasons.

Between student growth and inflation there is already a significant funding shortfall in our public education system. The funding deficit is compounded by increasingly complex and diverse needs of the student population, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 has highlighted the gross inequities in our public education system and created even more.

Many families are experiencing economic hardship and food insecurity that are now worsened due to the pandemic. Many of these students did not have access to the technology required for remote learning. The result is a widening of existing disparities in education that leave marginalized students at an even greater disadvantage.

Inadequate funding has led to cuts of student electives, apprenticeship programs, and fewer hires resulting in larger class sizes. In short, the underfunding of education directly affects student opportunities and outcomes. Manitoba students cannot afford another year of underfunding.

There are many areas that require urgent support and enhancement to ensure positive student outcomes. These include school nutrition programs, smaller class sizes, special education supports, youth mental health, Indigenous education, student transportation, French-language education and more.

We appreciate your consideration of this submission and encourage you to reach out should you require more information or clarification. We look forward to the release of an education budget that provides funding that is stable, adequate and equitable to support student learning.

Sincerely,



James Bedford

Summary of issues and recommendations:

1. Funding successful student outcomes
2. Removing socio-economic barriers to education
3. Investing in classrooms
4. Supporting successful inclusion and overall mental health and wellbeing
5. Dedicating funds for teacher PLD, recruitment and retention
6. Advancing reconciliation in support of TRC recommendations

The Manitoba Teachers' Society, representing 16,600 public school educators, is pleased to present funding priority recommendations in advance of the 2022-23 education funding announcement.

Educators believe that publicly funded public education must provide all students with opportunities to realize their full potential in an environment that is safe, caring, and inclusive. Yet our members, on the frontlines of the education system, are acutely aware of the daily challenges faced by students.

Over the past five years, public education funding in Manitoba has failed to keep pace with inflation and enrolment, forcing many school divisions to compromise programs, services, and human resources due to inadequate funding allocation.

This submission revisits many of the recommendations brought forward by the Society in its report to Manitoba's Commission on Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education with a few additions gleaned from concerns highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Funding that is adequate, stable and equitable is foundational to these recommendations.

The Manitoba Teachers' Society welcomes the opportunity to work together to improve our public education system for this and future generations. Education is an investment, and Manitoba's future is in our classrooms.

Recommendations

Funding successful student outcomes

Recommendation 1

That the Government of Manitoba provide 100 per cent of education funding to improve equity across divisions.

Recommendation 2

That the Government of Manitoba provide stable, equitable and adequate funding to enable school divisions to provide quality public education to Manitoba students.

Recommendation 3

That the Government of Manitoba provide operational funding increases beyond inflation and enrolment growth.

Recommendation 4

That the Government of Manitoba provide additional funding to school divisions when mandating the implementation of provincial initiatives. This would eliminate the practice of offloading costs on to school divisions.

Removing socio-economic barriers to education

Recommendation 5

That the Government of Manitoba establish a universal meal program for all school-age children. The program must be available for any school-age student at no cost to the student regardless of perceived need.

Recommendation 6

That the Government of Manitoba work with the City of Winnipeg, other municipal governments in the province and any other applicable parties to establish a pilot project, offering bus tokens to students. The fare for public transportation should not be a barrier to accessing education.

Recommendation 7

That the Government of Manitoba provide menstrual products free of charge in K-12 public schools and ensure that the menstrual products are available in female, male and gender-neutral washrooms.

Investing in classrooms

Recommendation 8

That the Government of Manitoba reinstate the cap on class size for kindergarten to Grade 3 to help ensure that teachers can provide students the individualized attention they need to improve educational outcomes.

Recommendation 9

That class composition be considered when determining class size. Class composition refers to the diversity of student abilities including behavioural needs, mental or physical disabilities, giftedness, and English as an additional language. Differently abled students require access to appropriate learning opportunities, specialized educational supports, and individualized programming, intervention, and accommodation.

Recommendation 10

That the Government of Manitoba review and update any K-12 curricula older than seven years.

Further, that outcomes related to sexuality and relationships be updated to meet the comprehensive sex education (CSE) standards as outlined by the Sex Information and Education Council of Canada (SIECCAN).

Recommendation 11

That the Government of Manitoba support classroom-based formative assessments that align with existing and new curricula.

Further, that the results of any provincial assessments be used to access/determine resource needs in specific jurisdictions. Reporting of common provincial assessments and data should be limited to providing a provincial, not an individual school or divisional, snapshot of how the system is performing.

Recommendation 12

That the Government of Manitoba ensure public school students have access to technological devices and reliable, affordable internet service to enrich their learning experience.

Supporting successful inclusion and overall mental health and wellbeing

Recommendation 13

That the Government of Manitoba develop a comprehensive mental health curriculum for K-12 students, promote mental wellness and help reduce the stigma associated with mental health issues.

Further, that the Government of Manitoba ensure that mental health services are readily accessible in schools, including more school counsellors and other specialist support teachers, to address student mental health issues where necessary.

Recommendation 14

That the Government of Manitoba reduce wait times for student assessment, diagnosis, and intervention to ensure that students with learning disabilities and those who qualify for a special education designation receive timely and appropriate resources and supports, regardless of where in the province they attend school.

Recommendation 15

That the Government of Manitoba ensure that students requiring clinician resources, such as psychology, social work, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, audiology, speech and language pathology, etc. are provided access in a manner that is timely, efficient and effective.

Dedicating funds for teacher PLD, recruitment and retention

Recommendation 16

That the Government of Manitoba mandate school divisions/districts to release MTS members for professional development on MTS PD day. The province must provide any funding needed to achieve this mandate.

Recommendation 17

That the Government of Manitoba and school divisions work together to fund teacher professional learning and development (PLD) to ensure that PLD is adequately funded by Manitoba Education and to provide teachers access to ongoing learning opportunities for their work in complex and diverse classrooms.

Recommendation 18

That the Government of Manitoba, the Bureau de l'éducation française, and all other stakeholders work together to develop a strategy for recruiting and retaining French-language teachers.

Further, that the Government of Manitoba make a commitment to increase bilingual staff in all positions in French Immersion schools.

Advancing reconciliation in support of TRC recommendations

Recommendation 19

That the Government of Manitoba make age-appropriate curriculum on residential schools, Treaties, and Indigenous peoples' historical and contemporary contributions relevant to the local community and Nations involved.

Recommendation 20

That the Government of Manitoba fund certified teachers, acting in the capacity of Indigenous education consultants, and the use of Elders and Indigenous knowledge keepers to support decolonial and anti-oppressive teaching methods in classrooms.

Recommendation 21

That the Government of Manitoba address barriers and to create culturally safe spaces to engage Indigenous parents and caregivers at the school level.

Recommendation 22

That the Government of Manitoba build teacher-student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect, using anti-racism curriculum and teaching resources developed by Manitoba Education.

Recommendation 23

That the Government of Manitoba establish senior-level positions in government at the assistant deputy minister level or higher dedicated to Indigenous content and Indigenous student achievement.

Recommendation 24

That the Government of Manitoba provide time and resources for teacher professional development that promotes reconciliation and anti-racist pedagogical practices.

Recommendation 25

That the Government of Manitoba fund the development of anti-racist, anti-oppressive and decolonial policies to enhance equity and address systemic barriers that impact the school experience and achievement of Indigenous people. Policy development should be a collaborative process that includes representation from divisions, education stakeholders, Elders, knowledge keepers and members of the Indigenous community.

Recommendation 26

That the Government of Manitoba fund and support the collaborative implementation of anti-racist, anti-oppressive and decolonial policies to include professional learning and accountable reporting mechanisms.

Funding successful student outcomes

EDUCATION FUNDING IS A PROVINCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Over the past five years, the provincial government has failed to make critical investments to ensure our public education system has adequate and appropriate resources to effectively respond to complex and diverse student needs. As a result, the K-12 public education system remains chronically underfunded, putting school divisions in the unenviable position of making decisions about what human, learning, instructional, or capital resources to cut.

While the government is well on the path to fulfilling its election promise of building 20 new schools over 10-years (capital funding), operating funding for public education has deteriorated.

It is important to note that operational funding does not include Provincial Capital Grant Funding for new school construction. The operating fund focuses solely on the cost of operating the approximately 700 schools in Manitoba's K-12 public education system.

The 2019–20 Financial Reporting and Accounting in Manitoba Education (FRAME) operating fund stood at \$2.4319 billion on an audited basis. This is \$73.6 million less than what was originally projected in the FRAME final budget for that year. Of this, \$1.4615 billion was received from the province, approximately 60 per cent of total operating fund revenue. The remaining 40 per cent was funded by local divisional property tax revenue.

In the FRAME final budget for 2020-21, the operating fund stands at \$2.5025 billion with a provincial contribution of \$1.4564 billion. With that, the provincial share has dropped to 58 per cent, a level that has not been seen since 2003–04.

Based on this trend, it is estimated that the provincial contribution for the current year will have fallen further to less than 58 per cent.

For comparison's sake, in the 2015–16 school year the share of provincial funding for education stood at 63.6 per cent.

Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario have all adopted provincial-level funding systems to achieve greater school-funding equality and equity.

These provinces have successfully transitioned from a joint provincial local funding system to a provincial-level funding system—a system that has the potential to promote at least equality, if not equity, in school funding.

While each province has taken a different approach to designing and implementing a provincial-level funding system, based on

specific needs and priorities, a provincial-level funding system allows for more stable and predictable school budgeting.

Funding schools at the provincial level relies on a broader tax base. This model is more equitable than a hybrid system which depends, in part, on local property wealth. Local property wealth is often unevenly dispersed.

Recommendation 1

That the Government of Manitoba provide 100 per cent of education funding to improve equity across divisions.

APPROPRIATE FUNDING IS CRUCIAL

Under the existing hybrid funding model for Manitoba's public school system the inequities in available resources are obvious. Wealthier neighbourhoods have more money for student programming and their property tax rates are frequently much lower than those in low-income areas.

When looking at the existing hybrid funding model, there are two main equity issues to consider:

1. student equity - a child's right to similar educational opportunities no matter where he/she/they live in the province, and
2. rate-payer equity (special levy mill rates).

According to 2021-22 FRAME data, divisional special levy mill rates varied across the province. For example, the mill rate in the Flin Flon school division is 24.1 per cent and 7.3 per cent in the Fort La Bosse school division. The difference in taxes paid on properties of equivalent assessed value in these two school divisions is more than threefold.

The first step in rectifying the funding inequities rests with the restoration of province's share of the K-12 education operating funding. This entails reinvesting in the K-12 public school system and restoring provincial support for operating schools to at least the level/proportion previously noted.

This would require an immediate \$135-\$140 million reinvestment in operating support. Restoring investment would allow for enhanced special needs programming, newcomer supports and smaller class sizes. Concurrent with restoring provincial support for the K-12 public school system to former levels, predictable and sustained annual funding growth going forward is critical.

The issue of adequacy requires a funding formula sensitive to the differing cost structures that exist across the province. An obvious example of this lies with transportation spending in rural and northern areas compared with urban centres. For example, in a rural area, transportation costs can be 12 per cent of the division's total budget and less than two per cent in a compact urban centre with well developed public transit.

These cost differences need to be explicitly recognized and addressed in the development of any funding formula. Differential student needs also must be acknowledged. From an equity perspective, one size does not fit all. Moreover, the current government's often stated interest in simplifying how funding is allocated must avoid 'over-simplification' in what is a complex task with potentially profound equity implications.

Recommendation 2

That the Government of Manitoba provide stable, predictable, equitable and adequate funding to enable school divisions to provide quality public education to Manitoba students.

INFLATION AND ENROLMENT GROWTH

Given the pattern of strong student enrolment growth (pre-covid) approaching one per cent annually and inflation typically running two per cent per year, a roughly three per cent increase in operating fund revenue is essential to ensure resources per student are maintained. It is important to note that the inflation rate in 2022 may well exceed three per cent based on present trends.

Nevertheless, a three per cent increase in provincial support would amount to \$45-50 million per year.

Funding below a three per cent increase in operating revenue means that the public education system is losing ground on a per pupil basis.

Funding at a level to maintain student resources and supports means there remains a considerable and widening gap in the ability to meet the diverse needs of students. Making inroads on unmet student needs would require increments beyond three per cent.

Recommendation 3

That the Government of Manitoba provide operational funding increases that exceed inflation and enrolment growth.

OFFLOADING COSTS STRAINS BUDGETS

As the province looks to implement the recommendations from *Manitoba's Commission on Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education* it

is crucial that additional funding be provided where necessary to ensure school divisions can effectively meet the requirements within the unique needs of their context.

The issue of new unfunded provincial mandates is a continuing concern as it creates a system of competition for already scarce resources. The addition of provincial mandates without new money intensifies the financial challenge of finding resources out of static or decreasing (over the last five years) levels of operating funding.

Recommendation 4

That the Government of Manitoba provide additional funding to school divisions when mandating the implementation of provincial initiatives to eliminate the practice of offloading costs on to school divisions.

Removing socio-economic barriers to education

MANITOBA: CHILD POVERTY CAPITAL OF CANADA

There is overwhelming evidence that links poverty with reduced achievement in educational outcomes. Bronell, Fransoo and Martens (2016) is most succinct in their conclusion, that “socioeconomic status is the single most powerful predictor of educational outcomes.”

A new report on poverty (2020), titled Manitoba: Missed Opportunities, 28.4 per cent of Manitoba children lived below the poverty line in 2019, or 88,840 children in total.

The northern Manitoba federal riding of Churchill-Keewatinook Aski continues to have the highest child poverty rate in Canada, with 64.4 per cent of children living below the poverty line.

The federal ridings of Winnipeg Centre and Dauphin-Swan River-Neepawa are also among the five ridings with the country's highest child poverty rates, at 39.6 per cent and 37.2 per cent respectively.

At the rate the province is progressing, the Social Planning Council of Winnipeg estimates it will take more than 1,179 years to end child poverty in Manitoba.

According to The Canadian Council on Learning, “pre-schoolers from low-income families are twice as likely as those from higher income families to be delayed in measures of cognitive development, numeracy and literacy” (Flessa & McAdie, 2007).

Put simply, when students from poor households enter the education system they are already at a disadvantage and are less likely to graduate which can lead to a lifetime of challenges and costs.

Highschool dropouts are less likely to find a job and earn a living wage, and more likely to be poor and to suffer from a variety of adverse health outcomes (Rumberger, 2011). Moreover, they are more likely to rely on public assistance, engage in crime and generate other social costs borne by taxpayers (Belfield & Levin, 2007).

In 2013, The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives estimated the lost income and productivity of 11,000 low-income youth failing to graduate at \$23 billion, lost taxes at \$9.9 billion and additional social assistance payments at \$1.4 billion.

There are many reasons why these students underperform and eventually drop out of the school system. The two most common reasons we hear from our members have to do with food insecurity and the lack of transportation to and from school.

It is well established that proper nutrition supports effective learning for students, and since children spend half of their waking hours at school it makes sense to use schools as the medium for providing food to help instill healthy eating habits in a non-stigmatizing way.

As expected, the high rate of child poverty in Manitoba has led to an increase in the use of food banks. According to Food Banks Canada's 2019, *Hunger Count*, 40 per cent of rural food banks in Manitoba reported an increase in use in 2018-19. Forty-four per cent of those served in rural areas are children.

It is important to note that both studies rely on statistics from 2018 therefore the impact of COVID-19 is not factored in. At the beginning of the pandemic, poverty advocates said that families hovering around or below the poverty line would be hardest hit.

UNIVERSAL SCHOOL NUTRITION PROGRAM

Proper nutrition supports effective learning for students. Numerous studies show that when all children consume breakfast performance is enhanced on measures of vigilance attention, arithmetic, problem solving tasks, and logical reasoning (Levin, Madeline, 2011).

Conversely, skipping breakfast affects problem solving, short-term memory, attention and episodic memory in all children.

Looking specifically at children experiencing hunger who come from impoverished households, they are more likely to have lower math scores more likely to repeat a grade, come to school late, or miss it entirely.

School food programs improve children's long-term health, school attendance and social cohesion. According to data from the Child Nutrition Council of Manitoba (CNCM) schools with meal programs reported:

- a. 75 per cent of participants saw an improvement in student attendance;
- b. 86 per cent said that academic effort and attention span improved;
- c. 70 per cent saw better academic performance and a decrease in disruptive behaviour.

Since children spend half of their waking hours at school, it makes sense to use schools as the medium for providing food and helping instill healthy eating habits in a non-stigmatizing way.

There are various combinations of school meal programs available to public school students in Manitoba and funding is derived from many sources.

In 2020/21, the Child Nutrition Council of Manitoba (CNCM), the organization responsible for most school nutrition programs in the province, served an estimated four million snacks and meals, reaching 28,841 students daily through its 278 programs.

More than half of the programs supported by CNCM needed to access further resources to meet the unmet demand of students in their schools. Furthermore, the organization's waitlist for school food programs continues to grow, with 16 schools with 1600 students added in 2020/21.

Food programs should be able to access more stable and less complicated sources of funding and be able to expand to all public schools.

Recommendation 5

That the Government of Manitoba establish a universal meal program for all school-age children. The program must be available for any school-age student at no cost to the student regardless of perceived need.

TRANSPORTATION

Students who are unable to walk to school due to distance, weather conditions or safety concerns, can have a difficult time arranging an alternate means for getting there. For many low-income parents, dropping kids off at school in a car is not an option, and at \$73.65 for a monthly youth bus pass, the cost of public transit is unaffordable.

Some school divisions are already budgeting funds to help cover the cost of getting students, who would otherwise not be able to afford it, to school.

In May 2020, The City of Winnipeg introduced Winnypass which offers low-income individuals reduced rates on their monthly adult bus passes. Unfortunately, this pass is limited to adults and does not extend to minors in low-income families.

Recommendation 6

That the Government of Manitoba work with the City of Winnipeg, other municipal governments in the province and any other applicable parties to establish a pilot project, offering bus tokens to students, so that public transportation is not a barrier to accessing education.

FEMININE HYGIENE PRODUCTS

On October 16, 2019, in a letter to the Honourable Rochelle Squires, minister responsible for the status of women, MTS President James Bedford commended the government on the announcement that it was considering supplying free menstrual products to public schools.

Period poverty impacts the most vulnerable students and is a situation that has been exacerbated by increased financial pressures due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

At approximately \$70 per year, per person, feminine hygiene products are an added expense for many families who are already struggling to make ends meet – another barrier to education.

A survey conducted by Plan International Canada noted that 34 per cent of women and girls have had to regularly or occasionally sacrifice something else within their budget to afford menstrual products.

Plan Canada's research has shown that one in seven Canadian girls has either left school early or missed school entirely because she did not have access to menstrual products. Furthermore, students who cannot afford menstrual products may experience a higher rate of absenteeism from school, challenges to engage fully in the classroom, and negative health effects such as infections and toxic shock syndrome. It can also affect their social and emotional well-being.

A provincial plan to provide free menstrual products for students in public schools would certainly help lessen some of the barriers faced by Manitoba's students.

Unfortunately, since the announcement in October 2019, the government has not advanced this initiative. Meanwhile, the Ontario

government recently announced that they will distribute six million free menstrual products each year to all 72 school boards in the province, beginning this current school year. Ontario has joined British Columbia, Nova Scotia and P.E.I., in addressing period poverty within the school system.

Ninety-three per cent of women and girls and 88 per cent of men and boys surveyed by Plan Canada support free access to menstrual hygiene products in schools around the country.

Recommendation 7

That the Government of Manitoba provide menstrual products free of charge in K-12 public schools and ensure that the menstrual products available in female, male and gender-neutral washrooms.

Investing in classrooms

CAP ON CLASS SIZE

The universal cap on classroom size, mandated by the Smaller Classes Initiative (SCI), required 90 percent of classrooms from kindergarten to Grade 3 in each school division be limited to a maximum of 20 students. This served as an equalizer because it guaranteed individualized attention for these students, regardless of where they went to school.

The provincial government abandoned the SCI in 2017, far too early to see results especially since the program was never fully implemented.

The most well-known study on class size, Tennessee's Project STAR, showed that K-3 students who have greater access to individual attention from their teacher, due to smaller class sizes, achieve greater academic success. Furthermore, smaller classes are especially helpful for students from families with a lower socio-economic status and those with learning disabilities.

Recommendation 8

That the Government of Manitoba reinstate the cap on class size for kindergarten to Grade 3 to help ensure that teachers can provide students the individualized attention they need to improve educational outcomes.

CLASS COMPOSITION

To enhance quality and equity in our public schools, class size must be addressed along with class composition, as they are directly related. Research has demonstrated that "smaller classes may have the greatest positive impact on students with the greatest educational needs" (OISE-UT/CEA, 2010).

Recommendation 9

That class composition be considered when determining class size. Class composition refers to the diversity of student abilities including behavioural needs, mental or physical disabilities, giftedness, and English as an additional language. Differently abled students require access to appropriate learning opportunities, specialized educational supports, and individualized programming, intervention, and accommodation.

CRUCIAL CURRICULUM UPDATES

It is important that students have access to innovative, up to date curricula based on evidence, peer-reviewed research and effective pedagogical practices, reflective of today's world. Furthermore, curricula need to reflect the context and population of Manitoba.

In particular, the Society maintains that outcomes related to sexuality and relationships must be updated to meet the comprehensive sex education (CSE) standards as outlined by the Sex Information and Education Council of Canada (SIECCAN).

A national scan of curricula, conducted by Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights, found that Manitoba's current health curriculum lacks mandatory outcomes addressing gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, positive aspects of sexuality, and health information that is relevant for diverse identities and bodies.

The current health curriculum is also limited in its coverage of consent, prevention of gender-based violence, media literacy as it relates to health and relationships, bodies and sexual function, and safer sex. These gaps limit the health and safety benefits of the curriculum.

Studies monitoring the impacts of comprehensive sex education have found that benefits include reduction in risky behaviours, increased use of condoms and contraception, increased knowledge of safer sex behaviours that prevent STIs and unwanted pregnancies, and improved attitudes toward sexual and reproductive health including communicating about consent and seeking health care.

These impacts lead to significant cost savings in health care. According to SIECCAN, health care costs in Canada associated with preventable outcomes such as STIs, unwanted pregnancies and sexual assault exceed \$6 billion per year.

Continued failure to address areas like gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, etc. does a disservice to Manitoba students.

Recommendation 10

That the Government of Manitoba review and update any K-12 curricula older than seven years.

Further, that outcomes related to sexuality and relationships be updated to meet the comprehensive sex education (CSE) standards as outlined by the Sex Information and Education Council of Canada (SIECCAN).

PROVINCIAL ASSESSMENTS

Provincial assessments are limited as they provide a snapshot of student achievement, as such, provincial assessments should be used solely to ensure that system wide changes are adequately funded and supportive of effective pedagogy.

Recommendation 11

That the Government of Manitoba support classroom-based formative assessments that align with existing and new curricula.

Further, that the results of any provincial assessments be used to access/determine resources need in certain specific jurisdictions. Reporting of common provincial assessments and data should be limited to providing a provincial, not an individual school or divisional, snapshot of how the system is performing.

TECHNOLOGY AND INTERNET ACCESS

The shift to remote learning in Spring of 2020 and 2021 highlighted many inequities in the public school system, including the lack of access to technological equipment and internet connectivity.

In June 2020, The Manitoba Teachers' Society and Manitoba Education collaborated on the Teacher Engagement Survey, which provided teacher perspectives on how to best address learning gaps and needs in the transition from emergency remote teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic to an in-school environment.

The online poll, conducted by ViewPoints Research, found that most teachers (58%) believed access to technology and connectivity necessary to participate in remote learning was a significant challenge for their students.

For example, the Winnipeg School Division estimated that as many as 40 per cent of its students did not have access to computer technologies at home.

In northern Manitoba, the concern was even greater, with 77 per cent of teachers reporting lack of access to required technology for their students to participate in remote learning. These teachers also struggled with accessing the teaching and learning resources necessary for planning and delivering instruction and assessment.

Almost half (44%) of northern teachers said that access to technology was a significant challenge, affecting their ability to teach remotely.

Looking beyond remote learning in a pandemic circumstance, investments to not only access but also enhance the classroom experience for students are critical. The provision of computers and software are insufficient without upgrades and access to broadband internet, which is lacking in many rural, remote, northern and Indigenous communities. Affordability is also crucial factor in ensuring consistent and sustainable accessibility to internet service.

Recommendation 12

That the Government of Manitoba ensure public school students have access to technological devices and reliable, affordable internet service to enrich their learning experience.

Supporting successful inclusion and overall mental health and wellbeing

MENTAL HEALTH CURRICULUM

The COVID-19 pandemic raised concerns about a growing mental health crisis among young people around the world.

According to an ongoing COVID-19 mental health study led by The Hospital for Sick Children (SickKids), during the second wave (February to March 2021), more than half of the 758 children aged eight to 12 years old and 70 per cent of 520 adolescents participating in the study reported clinically significant depressive symptoms (Tombeau Cost et al., 2021).

A significant proportion of these otherwise healthy school-aged children reported deterioration in several mental health domains,

including depression (37.6 per cent), anxiety (38.7 per cent), irritability (40.5 per cent) and attention span (40.8 per cent).

COVID-19 disrupted routines for all children and the social isolation that resulted from public safety and health orders can have negative lasting effects on health and wellbeing.

However, the mental health crisis of Canadian youths preceded the pandemic. In the UNICEF Report Card 16 released in 2020, Canada ranked poorly on measures of well-being, defined as feeling positive and being in good mental health, placing 31st out of 38 when compared with high-income countries.

Canada's ranking on teen suicide rates was equally alarming, placing 35th out of 38 countries with comparable income levels.

Poor mental health contributes to significant difficulty with schoolwork (Duncan et al. 2021), affects student's relationships with peers and teachers (Vaillancourt and Boylan, 2021; Whitley et al., 2018) and is linked to morbidity and mortality (Walker et al., 2015).

Studies also show that between 50 and 75 per cent of mental health disorders in adulthood begin before the age of 15 (Kessler et al., 2001, 2007; Kim-Cohen et al., 2003).

According to Kutcher et al. (2009), schools are "an ideal place to begin the work of addressing mental health" because they can:

- Pro-actively promote mental wellness;
- Be sites for early identification;
- Have educated personnel who recognize and intervene on behalf of students; and
- Serve as sites for mental health care delivery if working in an integrated way between classroom teachers and mental health specialists.

Some schools in Manitoba are already integrating mental health promotion and planning into their current curriculum and activities. However, since mental health promotion is not mandatory, this is happening in an ad hoc or incidental manner.

Recommendation 13

That the Government of Manitoba develop a comprehensive mental health curriculum for K-12 students, promote mental wellness, and help reduce the stigma associated with mental health issues.

Further, that the Government of Manitoba ensure that mental health services are readily accessible in schools, including more school counsellors and other specialist support teachers, to address student mental health issues where necessary.

SUPPORTS FOR SUCCESSFUL INCLUSION

Manitoba's public education system includes policies that outline a commitment to inclusion. This commitment is based on the principle that all students, including those with diverse physical, cognitive, and linguistics needs are provided equitable, accessible, and inclusive education.

Studies have shown that early assessment of learning disabilities improves performance and education outcomes, by addressing learning difficulties before they become entrenched and lead to other issues such as behavioural and emotional problems.

Unfortunately, learning disorders are usually not recognized until a child reaches school age and begins exhibiting problems in areas like reading, writing and math.

In Manitoba, there is no comprehensive data for the average time it takes for an assessment to be completed, but anecdotally we know that assessments can take well over a year.

Once a learning disability has been identified, programs and services can improve student outcomes. However, because of the lag in assessment time, many students struggle to keep up with the curriculum.

Oftentimes, this leads to frustration, which manifests as behavioural issues and is disruptive to the entire classroom.

Inclusive education cannot succeed if those in need of support are not identified. Timely assessments enable children to reach their full potential as learners.

Recommendation 14

That the Government of Manitoba reduce wait times for student assessment, diagnosis, and intervention to ensure that students with learning disabilities and those who qualify for a special education designation receive timely and appropriate resources and supports, regardless of where in the province they attend school.

IMPROVED ACCESS TO CLINICIAN RESOURCES

Once needs are identified, it is important that students can access special-needs programming in a timely and efficient manner. Currently, there are not enough school-based resources to address the diverse needs of students.

In the north, it is not uncommon to have one school psychologist service all the schools, resulting in wait times of three months to a year, between visits, depending on the type of service required.

Further issues arise if a child changes schools, perhaps moving to a division with no extra funding to hire a qualified clinician. This is neither efficient nor effective.

Recommendation 15

That the Government of Manitoba ensure that students requiring clinician resources, such as psychology, social work, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, audiology, speech and language pathology, etc. are provided access in a manner that is timely, efficient and effective.

Dedicating funds for teacher PLD, recruitment and retention

MTS PD DAY

Numerous research studies have demonstrated that student learning and achievement increase when educators build their professional capital by continuous and collaborative learning to improve competence and confidence.

Further, increasing self-efficacy – a predictor of teacher performance – is cultivated in the context of MTS PD Day by creating opportunities for teachers to demonstrate mastery by facilitating workshops and being influenced by professional social persuasion.

MTS PD Day fosters focused learning in a specialty area with educators from across the province whose needs vary greatly from classroom to classroom and division to division. This annual opportunity to autonomously address individual learning needs of teachers that are reflective of their specific classroom contexts must be honoured.

Unfortunately, over the years, the absence of consistent divisional policies around MTS Professional Development (PD) day has resulted in inconsistent access to participate in this important professional development opportunity.

While the Society recognizes the value of school and division-based PD, there is a longstanding history and high regard for what MTS PD Day represents. Not only does it symbolize a provincial and collective commitment to teacher learning, but it also unifies it on a single day of learning solidarity.

Many of the challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic will have long-lasting effects on the education system. Regardless of this impact, the professional learning and development needs of teachers shall remain a constant.

Recommendation 16

That the Government of Manitoba mandate school divisions/districts to release MTS members for professional development on MTS PD day. The province must provide any funding needed to achieve this mandate.

PD FUNDING IS NEEDED

Currently, educators can participate in professional development and learning opportunities through their school divisions and the Government of Manitoba, however adequate funding is still needed to enable teachers to access and participate in a variety of professional learning and development opportunities.

It is also important that professional development and learning opportunities be available in English and French to ensure that all teachers can access learning that is reflective of their classrooms.

Any education improvement agenda should be built on a foundation of building school cultures that support teachers as learners collaborating to improve their practice. This is enhanced when teachers engage in professional dialogue (Donohoo, 2017a; Donohoo, 2017b; Hattie, 2015; Hattie, 2016).

Recommendation 17

That the Government of Manitoba and school divisions work together to fund teacher professional learning and development (PLD) to ensure that PLD is adequately funded by Manitoba Education and to provide teachers access to ongoing learning opportunities for their work in complex and diverse classrooms.

FRENCH LANGUAGE TEACHER SHORTAGE

French-language education is the fastest growing segment of public education in Manitoba, having increased by more than 40 per cent in the last 15 years. This amounts to more than 95,000 students or 52 per cent of Manitoba's student population learning French in school, whether it's in the Division scolaire franco-manitobaine (DSFM), immersion schools or through learning French as a second language.

With the growing demand for French-language education comes a growing demand for French-language teachers.

Recommendation 18

That the Government of Manitoba, the Bureau de l'éducation française, and all other stakeholders work together to develop a strategy for recruiting and retaining French-language teachers.

Further, that the Government of Manitoba make a commitment to increase bilingual staff in all positions in French Immersion schools.

Advancing reconciliation in support of TRC recommendations

Efforts have been made to support reconciliation in education in a number of ways such as the Indigenous Academic Achievement grant, the development of residential school resources and province- led collaborative conversations about Indigenous education.

The vision of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to address the legacy of colonization and to work toward reconciliation can only be achieved through strong and collaborative partnerships between The Manitoba Teachers' Society and the Government of Manitoba.

It is imperative, therefore, that the Government of Manitoba, in consultation and collaboration with Survivors, Indigenous peoples, and The Manitoba Teachers' Society, maintain an annual commitment to Indigenous education as set out in #62 and #63 of The *Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action*.

Recommendation 19

That the Government of Manitoba make age-appropriate curriculum on residential schools, Treaties, and Indigenous peoples' historical and contemporary contributions relevant to the local community and Nations involved.

Recommendation 20

That the Government of Manitoba fund certified teachers, acting in the capacity of Indigenous education consultants, and the use of Elders and Indigenous knowledge keepers to support decolonial and anti-oppressive teaching methods in classrooms.

Recommendation 21

That the Government of Manitoba address barriers and to create culturally safe spaces to engage Indigenous parents and caregivers at the school level.

Recommendation 22

That the Government of Manitoba build teacher-student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect, using anti-racism curriculum and teaching resources developed by Manitoba Education.

Recommendation 23

That the Government of Manitoba establish senior-level positions in government at the assistant deputy minister level or higher dedicated to Indigenous content and Indigenous student achievement.

Recommendation 24

That the Government of Manitoba provide time and resources for teacher professional development that promotes reconciliation and anti-racist pedagogical practices.

Recommendation 25

That the Government of Manitoba fund the development of anti-racist, anti-oppressive and decolonial policies to enhance equity and address systemic barriers that impact the school experience and achievement of Indigenous people. Policy development should be a collaborative process that includes representation from divisions, education stakeholders, Elders, knowledge keepers and members of the Indigenous community.

Recommendation 26

That the Government of Manitoba fund and support the collaborative implementation of anti-racist, anti-oppressive and decolonial policies to include professional learning and accountable reporting mechanisms.

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