Third Session – Forty-Third Legislature

of the

Legislative Assembly of Manitoba

Standing Committee
on
Public Accounts

Chairperson
Mr. Kelvin Goertzen
Constituency of Steinbach

Vol. LXXX No. 1 - 6:30 p.m., Tuesday, December 2, 2025

MANITOBA LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
Forty-Third Legislature

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF MANITOBA

THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Tuesday, December 2, 2025

TIME – 6:30 p.m.

LOCATION – Winnipeg, Manitoba

CHAIRPERSON – Mr. Kelvin Goertzen (Steinbach)

VICE-CHAIRPERSON – MLA Jim Maloway (Elmwood)

ATTENDANCE – 10   QUORUM – 6

Members of the committee present:

Mr. Brar, Ms. Byram, MLAs Chen, Compton, Dela Cruz, Devgan, Messrs. Ewasko, Goertzen, MLA Maloway, Mr. Oxenham

Substitutions:

Ms. Byram for Mrs. Stone

APPEARING:

Tyson Shtykalo, Auditor General of Manitoba

WITNESSES:

Mona Pandey, Deputy Minister of Education and Early Childhood Learning

MATTERS UNDER CONSIDERATION:

Auditor General's Report – Department of Education and Early Childhood Learning: Leadership of the K-12 Pandemic Response, dated March 2022

Auditor General's Report – Follow Up of Previously Issued Recommendations, dated February 2025

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

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The Chairperson: Good evening. Will the Standing Committee on Public Accounts please come to order.

Committee Substitution

The Chairperson: Before we begin our business today, I'd like to inform the committee that we received the following membership substitution for this meeting only: MLA Byram for MLA Stone.

* * *

The Chairperson: This meeting's been called to consider the following reports: The Auditor General's Report–Department of Education and Early Childhood Learning: Leadership of the K-12 Pandemic Response, dated March 2022; Auditor General's Report–follow up to previously issued recommendations, dated February 2025; Department of Education and Early Childhood Learning: Leadership of the K-12 Pandemic Response.

I'm going to open the floor for suggestions from the committee as to how long we should sit, and I will look to the ranking member of the Legislature, Mr. Maloway.

MLA Jim Maloway (Elmwood): I would recommend that we sit for one hour and then revisit at that time.

The Chairperson: MLA Maloway suggested that we sit for one hour and revisit at that time.

Is that agreed by the committee? *[Agreed]*

At this time I'd also like to ask the committee if there is leave for all witnesses in attendance to speak and answers questions on the record if desired.

Is that agreed? *[Agreed]*

I'd like to ask the presenters to speak in a strong and determined voice. It is sometimes hard to hear in this Chamber. It's beautiful to be in here, but sometimes it's not always that easy with the acoustics.

I'd also like to remind everyone: the question and comments must be put through the Chair using the third person as opposed to directly to members and the witnesses.

Before we proceed further, I'd like to inform all in attendance of the process that is undertaken with regard to outstanding questions at the end of every meeting. The research clerk reviews the Hansard for any outstanding questions that the witness commits to provide an answer to and will draft a questions-pending-response document to send the deputy minister or other witnesses. Upon receipt of the answers to those questions, the research clerk then forwards the responses to every PAC member and to every other member recorded as attending that particular meeting.

And before we get into the part where we get into questions, the Chair and I were having a discussion, and we'll continue on with the practice of allowing one question and one follow-up if the members have a follow-up. So be prepared to provide those when we get to that particular part.

But before we get to questions and answers, does the Auditor General wish to make an opening statement?

Mr. Tyson Shtykalo (Auditor General): First, I'd like to introduce the staff members I have with me today. Today, I'm joined by Jeff Gilbert, assistant auditor general; and Jon Stoesz, who was the engagement leader on this report.

Mr. Chair, this audit originated from the outreach work we undertook during the summer of 2020 to understand the impact COVID-19 was having on Manitobans. Many conversations we had underscored the importance of education and how remote learning was affecting students, teachers and caregivers.

We heard about challenges related to mental health access to technology for online learning, connectivity issues and more. As a result, we examined whether the Department of Education and Early Childhood Learning was prepared for the COVID-19 pandemic and responded effectively.

Mr. Chair, we found the department was not prepared for a pandemic or similar emergency that could impact the entire kindergarten to grade 12 school system. Specifically, the department did not have a co-ordinated emergency plan in place for kindergarten to grade 12. This means the department had not considered risks to the school system ahead of time, did not consider the continuity of education for the wider system and was not prepared for the transition to remote learning.

Despite the lack of a co-ordinated emergency plan, the department effectively led a system-wide response once the pandemic began. We found the department initiated a timely response as soon as it became evident normal operations would be impacted by the pandemic. It put in place and maintained an incident management system, provided supports to schools and consulted with stakeholders to identify risks.

Finally, we found that the pandemic recovery efforts had not yet started during our audit period. There was little engagement with stakeholders on long-term impacts and no system-level data collection to guide recovery planning.

This report includes eight recommendations to help the Province respond to the long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and to prepare for a future pandemic or similar emergency. In our March 2025 follow-up, we reported that eight–of the eight recommendations, management has implemented one.

I'd like to thank the department officials, K-to-12 stakeholder organizations and others we met with for their co-operation and assistance. I also want to acknowledge my staff for their diligence and professionalism in completing this report, and I look forward to the discussion with the committee today.

The Chairperson: Thank the Auditor General, and the committee echoes your thanks to your staff for the work on this particular report.

Does the deputy minister have an opening statement? Would you please introduce the staff that you have with you here today?

Ms. Mona Pandey (Deputy Minister of Education and Early Childhood Learning): I would like to begin by introducing the department staff I have here with me.

Next to me, I have Rebecca Johnston, the executive director for Corporate Services; I have Janet Tomy, the assistant deputy minister for Student Achievement & Inclusion; and Jeffrey Kehler, the assistant deputy Minister for System Performance & Accountability.

I would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to be here today and to provide an update on the department's progress in implementing the recommendations outlined in the officer–in the Auditor General's report on the K-to-12 pandemic response.

As noted in the Auditor General's progress report issued earlier this year, the department has implemented one of the eight recommendations, and is continuing to work on the remaining seven. I want to reaffirm the department's commitment to implementing all of the eight recommendations.

Since the initial report, we have taken significant steps to strengthen emergency preparedness and resilience across the education system. We are in the process of developing an emergency management program. This work is supported by the establishment of a unit which is specifically dedicated to emergency preparedness, and the department will be launching the emergency management program early next year. We have completed the foundational work, including

hazard risk assessments and documentation of the lessons learned.

Within the emergency management plan, we have clearly articulated roles for the department, the school divisions and the external partners to ensure our clarity during future responses. We have launched the education data dashboard in January 2025 and will continue to add to this dashboard. It includes system-level data on enrolment, location of schools, program offerings, grades of schools, information that can be used to inform decision making during an emergency response. We are continuing to work on expanding these tools and finalizing a data governance framework.

* (18:40)

The department is also in the process of procuring an emergency management software that will enable real-time communication during emergencies. We have implemented recovery learning guidelines, enhanced engagement strategies and initiated work on renewing the K-to-12 framework for continuous improvement, which will launch in spring of 2026.

Internet access improvements have been implemented through partnerships, ensuring remote and northern communities have better access to online learning. So as noted earlier, while most recommendations are in progress, the one on improving Internet connectivity has been fully implemented.

We are on track to meet the timelines with some adjustments due to unforeseen emergencies on the other recommendations, and we'd like to note that these efforts are not static. They're designed to evolve as we learn more from exercises and real-world events.

The progress that we make on the recommendations requires us to work in close collaboration with our sector partners, most notably school divisions. Education is a shared responsibility with the department providing strategic direction, regulatory oversight and the majority of the necessary financial support, while divisions are responsible for the administration of schools and providing an appropriate education–providing appropriate education for all students.

The education statutes, specifically The Public Schools Act and the Education Administration Act, set out each party's roles and responsibilities. In the context of emergency preparedness and the pandemic response, the department's functions include facilitating communication across the sector,

providing direction such as public health requirements and receiving feedback as to how the department can support divisions in maintaining their operations within the changing requirements.

We're doing the work to ensure Manitoba's education system is better prepared to plan for, respond to and recover from emergencies, minimize disruption to learning and do so in a way that is equitable and sustainable.

I look forward to answering your questions and providing further details on our progress.

Thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank the deputy minister, and the staff that are here as well.

Committee members, the floor is now open for questions.

MLA JD Devgan (McPhillips): So recommendation eight, with respect to Internet connectivity: I believe I heard the deputy minister say that that has been fully implemented.

Would the deputy minister of the department be able to shed some light on what that looks like right now in terms of the number of schools that are fully connected; different school divisions; urban, rural school divisions, just to give the committee a better sense of how we got there.

Ms. Pandey: At this point, we can say that all of our schools have connectivity. Now, of course, the quality of it may vary, right, so you may have slower connections in some rural remote areas compared to others, but all of our schools do have Internet connectivity.

The Chairperson: Follow-up question? No follow-up question.

MLA Jelynn Dela Cruz (Radisson): Thank you, as well, to the department, as well as the AG's office for the labour they've poured into this. Thirty-seven school divisions is no light feat when it comes to outreach but also, of course, when it comes to the whole picture of ensuring that every child in Manitoba has an opportunity to thrive within the school system.

I actually–my background prior to entering this role, shortly before, was leading the student movement from the University of Manitoba. So I have endless questions about this. It was actually during 2020 that I made the transition into that position, but in the interests of time, I'll have to focus in and noting that, you know, there were 37 school divisions that

revealed recovery priorities such as student attendance, literacy, numeracy and something that underpins all of those outcomes, of course, is mental health.

I'm wondering if the department can share any of the tangible, concrete steps that they've taken to address the significant long-term impacts of the pandemic as it relates to mental health for students.

The Chairperson: Thank you, MLA Dela Cruz.

Ms. Pandey: Thank you for the question. Right after the pandemic, obviously during the pandemic, there was significant amount of funding provided to school divisions and that funding could be used around safety measures but also around supporting mental-health requirements.

After that, in '22-23, I believe, there was another–there was $22 million that was provided to school divisions specifically to focus on mental health and well-being of students. That funding was annualized and put into budgets so school divisions continued to have access to that funding.

Over that time, the funding for special needs for schools also increased by about $17 million. And then obviously during recovery, our efforts are now focused on supporting the students who are–who, perhaps due to other vulnerabilities, are struggling more in the system.

So we are looking at ways of supporting those students through mental health initiatives but also through other means.

The Chairperson: Follow-up question?

MLA Dela Cruz: Thank you to the department, as well, for that response. I'm really–yes, grateful that it seems school divisions were able to channel a lot of that funding in the areas that you'd mentioned.

I guess a follow-up, building off of that, would be particularly around the increased dependence that the pandemic kind of incited on young people and social media and the Internet and kind of this new–I guess, new hallway for young people in our province.

I'm wondering if the department has any information that they can share on actions that are taken on–to protect, rather–students who are victims of peer-to-peer online violence and how that may have been influenced by the pandemic.

Ms. Pandey: So one of the things that the department has done is restricted the use of cellphones within classrooms and that is to promote–to give students a better learning environment where they're able to focus. But it also helps address things like, you know, online bullying.

And school divisions are required and more focused than ever on ensuring that students have a very safe and conducive learning environment and that is by supporting policies around bullying, around use of technology in classes and other means.

Ms. Jodie Byram (Agassiz): If I may, I just want to go back to the question brought forward by MLA Devgan here regarding Internet connectivity. And I know that that's been implemented–you indicate that it's been reimplemented, but recognizing that there's maybe still some barriers or maybe connectivity that's intermittent.

And if, heaven forbid, we ever encounter another pandemic like we had where connectivity becomes an issue, is there something in place, a mechanism in place, sort of as a backup plan or something to, I guess, assist with that or in place of or in the event that Internet connectivity doesn't exist in that moment in time?

The Chairperson: Thank you, MLA Byram.

Ms. Pandey: Yes, thank you for the question. I think I would begin by saying that this pandemic has been a huge learning experience for our school divisions, and because they had to adapt to the needs, they have become better equipped to support students through such events.

So they have various forms of alternate options of providing education. So one such option is the teacher mediated option. So where Internet connectivity is not good, teachers are able to make materials available and then guide students through phone conversations and other means to supplement that support. So I think school divisions across Manitoba are looking at alternate forms of supporting students.

Now, recognizing that for early years, in-person, direct classroom support is still the best, but, you know, if there is a need, there are these other alternate means available.

* (18:50)

The Chairperson: Follow-up question?

Mr. Wayne Ewasko (Lac du Bonnet): Thanks to the department and officials for being here and answering these questions.

And knowing that the audit came out sort of in the midst of the pandemic and knowing that the department was working hard to have everyone get out of it

as safe as we possibly could, I just question, in regards to the data, the system-level data, available to the department from across the whole system, can the deputy update the committee on how is that system-wide data coming along, and are we there yet?

Ms. Pandey: Thank you for the question.

It is obviously a work in progress–will always be–because we can always use more data. But, as mentioned before, we do have an education data dashboard that we're continuing to build on, and, you know, in times of emergency, some of the information we're looking at is like, where are the students, what grades and what schools, what are their specific needs, what kind of programming do they require? So all of that information is now more easily available in the system, even the location of schools and all those things.

And, in addition to that, we are looking at student outcome data, and that is more related to recovery and what we need to do to support students in the long run. So that's been a huge focus, you know, looking at things like absenteeism, achievement gaps and really being able to focus system efforts on students who are continuing to struggle, because, for most students, we are, you know, far enough along that you don't see the impact to the same extent, but there are still students who are continuing to perhaps struggle due to the impact.

And so that is where I think the focus of the system now is, and we are collecting more data and continue to build on it every day to be able to support informed decision making in that regard.

Mr. Diljeet Brar (Burrows): Thanks for the department for your work on these recommendations and thanks for the AG for bringing this report forward.

I noticed that most of the recommendations used the word stakeholders: the department together with stakeholders. I want to understand from both parties what–who are actually considered stakeholders in this case and what's the level of their involvement when you're implementing these recommendations?

Ms. Pandey: Thank you for the question.

So we have different types of stakeholders. So within the department, we have–so each division would be considered a stakeholder because it's what they need to be able to continue to offer programming and support to divisions. But then we work very closely with school divisions and our associations, so the Manitoba Association of School Superintendents,

Manitoba School Boards Association, Manitoba Federation of Independent Schools, Manitoba Teachers' Society. Now with child care being part of our department and our system, we work very closely with Manitoba Child Care Association as well.

So these are all the partners who we work very closely with, and then, as per need, when we're planning and preparing, they will connect us to school principals, to teachers, to child-care centre operators as needed to be able to support our planning.

And then, of course, you know, our emergency management team works closely with the emergency management office, the EMO, for the Province, and they're linked in with emergency management personnel from across the province, and that's where, if needed, or, you know, response or any kind of planning, if you need to connect with, say, Hydro or any external agency, that's where those connections would happen.

So it depends on whether we are planning for, in recovery mode or actually responding to. So the list of stakeholders we work with varies, but we do have a very comprehensive list. *[interjection]*

The Chairperson: A follow-up question, MLA Brar?

Mr. Brar: Follow-up question is: Are the parents and school community members considered stakeholders? *[interjection]*

The Chairperson: Deputy Minister.

Ms. Pandey: Sorry for that.

Absolutely, they are stakeholders. I think in the context of emergency planning for the department to work, we tend to work through school divisions because they have the information at the ground level. School boards are connected with their local communities, so we tend to work through them when talking in terms of an emergency.

Mr. Logan Oxenham (Kirkfield Park): I was just curious, and first of all, I would love to just offer my gratitude to the work that the department has done over the years. As a parent, you know, and having a child enter elementary school during that time was really challenging, and I can't imagine what it was like for you folks. So a real great job and just showing how you can pivot on the fly; it was really well done.

I'm really curious. I'm a correctional officer kind of background. And so your emergency management plan kind of piques my interest. And that–is that

pandemic-specific or is that safety overall–like, personal safety.

The Chairperson: Thank you, MLA Oxenham.

Ms. Pandey: Thank you for the question.

The emergency management plan is meant to be an overarching strategy that helps respond to all kinds of risk events. So it could be the pandemic; it could be wildfires; it could be a flood event–all of that. And obviously, as I mentioned, there is a role for the department and there is also a role for school divisions, right.

So we have an emergency management plan for the department which lays out–and for the sector. And we have roles and responsibilities articulated clearly, because that was one of the recommendations on what the role of the department is, the school division, the schools, parents, students; all of those pieces. But then, what we are developing is a lot of tools and templates that school divisions, as being their own entity, can use to develop their own emergency management plans. There would be more consistency because we are providing a framework within which that work happens. And then it's more co-ordinated at the provincial level. But yes, the program would speak more broadly to what you do in the event of an emergency.

We will have specific appendices that speak to a particular kind of emergency. So the first two that are going to be prioritized will be respiratory illnesses like influenza and wildfire, because we want to get ahead of the season. So the first will be the respiratory illness one that you will see in the spring and the wildfire one prior to the summer. *[interjection]*

I think I have them reversed, I'm being told. So sorry about that. But those are the first two coming out.

Mr. Oxenham: If I may kind of switch gears a little bit, because another–something else you pointed out caught my attention; that was the Internet connectivity. That's great, getting that done.

I'm just wondering if you've been able to identify, as a department, what is the barrier to getting the other seven done. Like, is there something that is in your way or holding you up from achieving the others?

The Chairperson: Thank you.

And just as a reminder for all committee members to put their questions through the Chair.

Ms. Pandey: So just to clarify, you're asking about the other seven recommendations, right? Yes.

So I think we're well on our way. We've had some delays because with the wildfire season, for example, we had to pause. Every time there was an event, we have to pause and kind of redirect our efforts in addressing the event. But we're actively working on, like, our emergency management plan we're expecting could launch early next year. So we're well on our way.

We're also co-developing a lot of this with our sector partners. So that, you know, obviously takes a little longer. But I think whether it's having a robust emergency management plan that addresses some of the other recommendations, too, about articulating roles and responsibilities, making sure there is a very strong communication plan and, like, procedures of how we're going to communicate in–for an emergency, whether it is looking at long-term impacts of the pandemic and having the data strategy to do that, a lot of that is work that is continuing. And I think at some point, we'll say, okay, you know, the recommendation is done, but, in reality, it's ongoing work, right. Each time, we learn more data that we need–more. There are things we can do better, so we'll continue to build on that.

So I think we're on track with timelines and a number of recommendations, because a few of them are really linked; they go hand in hand. So I think when we have completion, we'll be completing, like, them in chunks. So the remaining seven, we might get three done at the same time and then the others, too, followed closely.

The Chairperson: MLA Dela Cruz.

An Honourable Member: Did you have a follow-up?

The Chairperson: My apologies.

MLA Oxenham?

Mr. Oxenham: Yes. I just wanted to clarify, too, my position was not one of criticism. I was just curious, you know, if–to identify any barriers. Just, again, you folks do a fantastic job.

Thank you.

* (19:00)

Ms. Pandey: Thank you for that. You know, as a department we're also prioritizing resources at any given time, and as I said, when there's an event, emergency, you're sort of redirecting, so just we–this is work that is ongoing. We are working on the

department's plan as well as the sector's plan, but I think we're well on our way.

MLA Dela Cruz: I'm wondering if the department can maybe paint a picture of some of the communities that have recently achieved Internet connectivity, as well as even a vague timeline of when they were able to get it.

Ms. Pandey: I don't know that I have a list of communities, but one of the things I can provide some detail on is, for example, the Province entered into an agreement with Xplornet Communications to provide broadband services to 30 First Nations and 350 rural and remote northern communities, so this is one of the ways in which we increased our connectivity.

In terms of the exact list of communities, I don't have that, but we can provide that at a later time to you.

The Chairperson: Follow-up, MLA Dela Cruz?

MLA Dela Cruz: Thank you, honourable Chair, and thank you to the department as well. That would be really interesting to take a look at.

I think what I'm trying to get at is maybe an under-standing of how access to Internet has affected various learning outcomes for students in those communities. Of course, Internet these days, it's almost seen as a, I guess like a make or break for a lot of folks in their careers, and so I–yes, I'm very interested in whether the department has any information on the correlation that they–or positive outcomes that they were able to identify from those communities that have recently received access to Internet.

Ms. Pandey: So we haven't done a robust analysis on that, so, you know, we can look at that and get back to you at a later time.

What we can say is anecdotally, we know that there are resources on the Internet that teachers are–can use in their classroom, so there is like that–those opportunities are endless, and some of those opportunities are there.

How it's translating and the exact link to outcomes, I think if we give it a little more time, then we'd be able to see if there is any change in the achievement outcomes that we are seeing in those communities. So we'd need a little bit of time to start seeing those impacts.

I think the biggest thing for us is also the preparedness aspect of it, that if there is an emergency again, and if for whatever reason we have to move to remote learning, there are more communities that will be able to make that pivot and make that adjustment in a more timely manner.

MLA Carla Compton (Tuxedo): I'm wondering if the deputy minister or appropriate person can speak a little bit more to the active planning and relationship building that's happening between stakeholders, because I know sometimes in the emergency preparedness lens of creating a plan that everyone can agree on can be difficult, and particularly when we take, you know, in the after-effects, time to reflect on how response happened, how different communities were receptive or not receptive to the action plans that did happen and such.

I'm curious how the relationship building is going now, because there are multiple stakeholders, and we know people have different ideas, and, like, I come from health-care background, so I feel in that space, in our emergency preparedness, there's a little bit more consensus or agreement around the science, the evidence base, that there may be a little bit more sense of interpretation by different members because, you know, there's public school, there's private schools, there's the–like, the independent schools, just even different school divisions and trustees.

So I'm just curious how folks are coming to the table now and agreeing or not agreeing with the plans for the next time. Because I think we all know, in this day and age, it's not a matter of if it will happen again but when. And it might not be a pandemic; it might be another fire; it might be–right–like, just reasons that might put everything on hold and we have to pivot. I'm curious how that planning and the relationships are coming forth.

Ms. Pandey: Thank for that question. The one thing I think my colleagues will agree with me that we've been very proud of is that our sector did come together. And I think the OAG report also speaks to that, that, you know, while we may not have been prepared–I don't think anybody was–for COVID-19, but the sector was able to come together and work really well together to deliver what needed to be done for students and for the school community.

So in the emergency preparedness world, I think our relationship and our collaboration with our sector partners has been really good. People have been willing to come to the table to have the discussions. We did a lot of work to–through the communication and emergency preparedness area to get feedback from all of our stakeholder partners around lessons learned, what, you know, this–the–I don't want to say

benefit, but, like, the learnings that come from such a significant event are tremendous and I think we have collected all of that and that has formed sort of the foundation that has informed the development of the emergency management plan. So that part has been good.

We also have a number of working groups that include representation from our school system, child-care system and everyone to look at, like, data, long-term impacts. There's a group that meets very actively, you know, more or less monthly depending on what phase they are in, who is very interested in looking at long-term impact.

Similarly, for the emergency preparedness and planning, we have a group that meets regularly. It has representation from all of the partners we talked to– talked about. We have MKO represented there, so we are talking to independent schools, our First Nation partners, everyone to come up with a comprehensive plan.

So of all the things, I think the collaboration has not been a concern for us.

The Chairperson: A question for you from the Chair.

First of all, thank you for being here and for providing the answers to the questions that have been posed. It's also worth noting, I think, a great deal of thanks to your predecessors who led the department through the pandemic. I think of Grant Doak and Dana Rudy, in particular, previous deputy ministers who took on some pretty difficult challenges at that time and of course many others within the department who would be too many to name here today.

One of the challenges, I think, that was experienced, I hear, is that during that time there was a lot of disparity between the capabilities within school divisions. And so school divisions were appreciative of the daily calls and the weekly calls of the deputies and the ministers at the time. But there was frustration that–expressed on both ends–that some school divisions simply couldn't meet the requirements. Spacing is one example and some superintendents, they rented space, they hired people to help with the mapping for spacing for students in the summer coming back into the fall of 2020, I believe. Others didn't do that work.

So there was frustration, I think, within the department that there was a lot of direction given, but in some ways it had to be action by the school divisions.

Is there a plan to standardize the ability to respond and to provide that support where it might not be because of a smaller division or just the nature of the skill set of those who are running that division?

Ms. Pandey: Thank you for that question. Absolutely. So the short answer is that the supports and systems we are building, we're building it in a way that they are scalable and can address the needs of the school divisions.

* (19:10)

One of the reasons for developing the templates and, you know, the tools that can be used for risk analysis, it is very much with a view of supporting the divisions that don't have the resources. We know that there are larger divisions who probably have all of this and more, so they are not necessarily the ones who need our support in getting access to the emergency preparedness tools that are necessary. But the whole idea behind the Province leading on this, is that we can provide those resources to all school divisions and then if the entire system is using similar terms–similar resources, then there's some level of standardization there.

We are definitely expanding the department's capacity to support school divisions, and again, that support is always need based, so just like anything we do, we do expect that there would be a higher level of support required by some of the smaller divisions or just divisions for different things; you know, it varies. Some divisions are going to need more assistance than others. So that is definitely part of the plan.

The Chairperson: A follow-up but on a slightly different topic. So one of the challenges during that time, and I give Dr. Roussin a lot of credit; he recognized early that schools needed to be–I think he used to describe it as the last to close and the first to open. So he recognized that there was a cost to students, but it was always difficult to quantify. And so when decisions were being made within government, the easiest thing to qualify–or quantify–were ICU beds and capacity within the health-care system, but it was very difficult to quantify the other costs that were coming as a result of closures like the schools.

Has there been an ability–I know there's a recovery aspect to what's gone on in education, but has there been an ability to quantify in some way what the cost was to students who were out of class or partially in class for almost two years?

Ms. Pandey: Yes. So one of the things we hear from– I'm kind of thinking about the word, can we quantify it?

But we're definitely hearing from school divisions that, you know, they did have more students present with higher level of needs. Whether it's behavioural, social skills, you know, like, they didn't have the same developed social skills at early years because they hadn't been in a structured kind of school environment. So those factors were there.

Students' learnings were also impacted, so the system had to do more work with the students to kind of get them to grade level and benchmarks.

Are we able to quantify it yet? I'm–okay, so we did have a health behaviour survey in 2023 that shows–showed some of the impact of the pandemic, but in terms of–I know what you're talking about: it's easier to put a dollar value to some of the impacts in health.

I don't know that we have gotten there, but definitely we hear from all of our school divisions that they are seeing a higher level of needs that students are presenting with, and some of it is just because–and especially post-pandemic.

Like, it's beginning to kind of stabilize, and again now we're more focused on the students who are maybe needing more support, so it's more targeted. But right after the pandemic, students were definitely presenting needing more of that structure and just getting used to being in a structured environment and from a very social kind of a perspective.

The Chairperson: Yes, I appreciate that. I believe it was a comment.

Why I think it's important is because government struggled with, you know, a limited set of impacts of data which were very important, were critically important in the health-care system. But we knew there were other costs, too, and we couldn't measure those properly. So some day there'll be other things that happen, right, that need to have those balance measures.

MLA Compton: I'm also curious, kind of a little bit, in that similar thread. If the deputy minister could shed some light–I'm curious–in–we're in the recovery reflection stage here–if there's actually been any surprises in terms of, like, I would say I anticipated there was going to be things showing up in schools of, you know, when kids were in for two years, right, there's going to be behaviour shifts, there's going to be some learning delays or more needs.

Has there been anything that's been a surprise or an unexpected outcome, whether maybe it could be viewed as a negative or a positive, that has come forth in this time of reflection and for planning for the future?

Ms. Pandey: Yes, so I think there were different kinds of surprises. One of the things was definitely, you know, in many rural school divisions, students were actually maintaining their achievement levels. So that was very good to see that, you know, throughout this period. Those are interesting things for us to look at; like, what were we–what did we get right there that those students were able to maintain?

Also, in talking with school divisions, I think maybe we were more prepared for anticipating sort of the learning gap, but not sort of the social, cultural impact that schools have on students' well-being and, you know, learning behaviours and social behaviours and all those things. So I think the degree of the impact that had was a bit of a surprise to the system.

MLA Maloway: I don't really have a question, and I'm assuming that we've kind of run out of questions here because we're running out of time. But I'm going to suggest that I really am very impressed with your attitude, that–and you're not the first, but we have had increasing numbers of deputies coming here with very positive attitudes and solutions and explanations as to how they're going to get through the recommendations.

And that's, I think, what this committee's been looking for. We've been actually looking for it for 25 years, probably, you know. But we're finally getting the results that we have been looking for all along, and I want to thank you for that.

And that was–I don't have a question; just that comment.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Mr. Maloway. We will test your theory with the committee that there are no more questions.

Are there further questions?

It appears that Mr. Maloway was once again correct.

All right, seeing no further questions, I'll put the question on the report and the chapter.

Auditor General's Report–Department of Education and Early Childhood Learning: Leadership of the K-12 Pandemic Response, dated March 2022–pass.

The report is accordingly passed.

Does the committee agree to complete consideration of the chapter, Department of Education and Early Childhood Learning: Leadership of the K-12 Pandemic Response, within the Auditor General's Report–Follow Up of Previously Issued Recommendations, dated February 2025? *[Agreed]*

This chapter is accordingly completed for consideration.

I'd like to again thank the department staff for being here. I'd like to thank the Auditor General and their staff for being here as well.

Before the committee rises, I'd like to ask the members please leave behind copies of the reports so that they may be used again or appropriately recycled.

The time being 7:17, what is the will of the committee?

Some Honourable Members: Committee rise.

The Chairperson: Committee rise.

COMMITTEE ROSE AT: *7:17 p.m.*