

NATIONAL CITIZENS INQUIRY

Impact of measures on the Education System



Analysis from the NCI Final Report | 7.2. Social Impacts





Analysis

Excerpts from the NCI Final Report | [7.2. Social Impacts](#)

7.2.5. Impact of the Measures on the Education System

Introduction

The Government response to the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted nearly every facet of life, including education. This is a global phenomenon, but the focus in this report is specifically on Canada, where the education system, from primary school to university, has been deeply affected by the pandemic and the ensuing government-imposed measures.

When we speak about the education system, we must remember that we're not simply discussing infrastructure, textbooks, and school buses. Rather, at the heart of this system are precious young individuals—children and adolescents whose dreams, aspirations, and futures have been entrusted to it. It is their right to have an environment that promotes learning and creativity, while also offering them safety, stability, and the means to grow holistically. They are not mere numbers on an enrolment sheet but unique individuals with their own potential and vulnerabilities.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, it's crucial to acknowledge that the education system completely failed due to the restrictions placed upon it by the government and the teachers unions. The purpose of this system extends beyond the imparting of academic knowledge, such as reading, writing, and arithmetic. It is equally tasked with safeguarding the mental, emotional, and social wellbeing of its students, protecting them from harm both inside and outside the classroom.

Unfortunately, due to the unprecedented actions taken by the government during the pandemic, the system was strained beyond its capacity. While a half-hearted attempt to continue providing education through online platforms was initiated, it fell short in shielding its students from the mental, emotional, and developmental impacts of this global crisis. Hence, it is vital to recognize these shortcomings and work tirelessly towards addressing them, keeping in mind that the lives and futures of our young ones hinge on these actions.

The actions taken by the government were unnecessary, based the testimony of witnesses who stated that the information concerning which populations were actually at risk was available and known to public health as early as March of 2020, when the declaration of a pandemic was made. Further, the actions taken to contain the spread of the virus were ineffective and created a cascade of changes and challenges for both educators and students.

Canadian education had to shift gears rapidly, moving from in-person teaching and learning to online modalities. Teachers had to quickly adapt to new ways of delivering lessons, while students had to adjust to learning from home, often with varying degrees of success. Not only has this transformation impacted the quality and access to education, but it has created significant mental health implications for children and young adults, and created a new group of “unschooled” children who are at risk of never acquiring even a basic education.

The following sections will examine the impact of the government's response to COVID-19 on various levels of education in Canada. This will include a review of how the sudden transition to online learning has deepened the digital divide, affected academic progress and access to school-provided nutrition, and disrupted tertiary education.

The profound impact of these measures on children's mental health, brought on by social isolation, increased anxiety and depression.

Based on the testimony and analysis, a series of recommendations are made to mitigate some of the damage done and help Canadian education emerge stronger and more resilient from this unprecedented crisis.

Witness Testimony

The following witness testimony was utilized in the analysis:

Cathy Careen, a teacher, tried to get an exemption from the mandatory vaccines. She was eventually terminated for not taking the vaccine.

Bliss Behar was a high school student when the vaccine mandates were imposed on his school. After doing his own research into the vaccines, he decided he should not take a vaccine. As a result, he dropped out of school. He spoke out and was subject to attacks on social media.

Dr. Irvin Studin testified that he began seeing children out of school in 2020, and it took him several months to understand what he was seeing. On further investigation, he was better able to appreciate the extent of what was happening. He stated the degree to which our childhood education system had collapsed in Canada. It was an experience completely foreign to such a developed country.

Kim Hunter, a teacher for 25 years, talked about the effects of masking on children.

Kassandra Murray, a school teacher, testified to the effects of masking on children and how a toxic environment developed within the classroom due to the mandates and the fear of other staff.

Kathy Howland, an education assistant, spoke about being forced to take the vaccine and her alleged adverse effects from the vaccine.

Katrina Burns, a teacher for seven years, spoke about the effects of masking on children in the classroom.

Elizabeth Galvin had a daughter who committed suicide after she found herself isolated and scared when the university closed the campus.

Jay McCurdy was a teacher of grades 7 and 8. He testified to the effects of the lockdowns on students.

Pierre Attallah had two children in school and testified to the effects of the mandates on his children.

Leigh Vossen was a student in university at the time of the lockdowns, and testified concerning her experiences.

Kyra Pituley was a 15-year-old student in Grade 9, and she spoke about how the lockdowns and remote learning impacted her.

Stephanie Foster was a teacher assistant; she had to get the vaccine to keep her job; she has had an alleged vaccine injury.

Charlotte Garrett was a teacher for disabled adults; she described her alleged vaccine injury and also discussed the effect of the mandates and lockdowns on her students.

Kelcy Travis, the mother of six children, described the effects the mandates had on her family and children.

Chantel Kona Barreda was teaching on a reserve when the mandates were put in place; she lost her job for refusal to take the vaccine.

Dianne Molstad was a teacher and a councillor for 30 years. She described her experiences with applying for a vaccine exemption.

Angela Tabak spoke about her son. He was forced to take online courses and could not access his psychiatric care; he committed suicide.

Dr. Patrick Provost, a university professor, was suspended for six months without pay for speaking out against the vaccines for children and questioning the narrative of the COVID-19 pandemic. He was facing the prospect of losing his tenure.

Madison Peake was a student in university when the mandates were put in place. She spoke about the effect of the mandates on her education and on her family.

Dr. Keren Epstein-Gilboa, an expert on childhood traumas, spoke about the effects of the mandates and masking on children.

Aidan Coulter was enrolled as a student at university. He was not allowed back to classes due to vaccine mandates.

Discussion of Impacts on Education

Primary and Secondary Education: In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Canadian provinces and territories transitioned primary and secondary schools to remote learning. This change was unnecessary and had numerous unrecognized or ill-considered consequences.

One significant impact was the widening of the digital divide. Not all students had access to reliable Internet or technology, which led to disparities in educational attainment.

Not every student had access to a safe and suitable space in which they could attempt to be homeschooled; for some, school is the only safe space available.

There were also challenges in teaching certain subjects, like science and arts, which often required hands-on learning.

Further, schools provide more than just education; they are a source of nutrition for many children. The government-imposed COVID-19 response brought considerable developmental challenges for primary grade children, encompassing social, mental, speech development, and disturbing increases in mental illnesses and antisocial behaviour.

Social Development: Social interactions at school are pivotal in children's social development, teaching them to communicate, share, negotiate, and develop empathy. With school closures and social distancing measures, children have lost out on these valuable interactions. Playdates, an essential aspect of social learning and emotional understanding, have also been severely limited. This lack of social interaction can hinder children's ability to build social skills, establish strong relationships, and understand social norms and cues.

Mental Development: The mental wellbeing of children has been significantly impacted by the pandemic. As routines and structures have been upended, children have experienced heightened stress and anxiety. The uncertainty surrounding the pandemic, fear of the virus, and reduced contact with supportive networks (friends, teachers, extended family) has exacerbated this situation.

Speech Development: Speech and language skills often develop rapidly in primary grade children, supported by interactions with teachers and peers. Reduced interaction time with teachers, who play a crucial role in correcting and improving a child's speech, can slow speech development. Moreover, children learn language not only from explicit teaching but also from overhearing and participating in conversations. The shift to online learning limits these opportunities.

Increase in Mental Illnesses and Antisocial Behaviour: The mental strain of the pandemic, along with social isolation, can lead to a range of mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety. Children may not fully understand why their routine has been disrupted, leading to feelings of confusion and stress. The pandemic also resulted in increased screen time, which can contribute to sleep issues, physical inactivity, and reduced social skills, further impacting mental health. Regarding antisocial behaviour, long-term isolation and lack of peer interactions may lead to difficulties in social situations and reduce the development of empathy and sharing habits.

To mitigate these effects, it's important to create structures that can support children during these challenging times. This could include virtual social activities, increased access to mental health supports, structured home routines, limited and purposeful screen time, and involving children in family conversations to stimulate speech development. It's also crucial for adults to openly discuss the pandemic with children in age-appropriate ways to reduce fear and anxiety.

Tertiary Education

Colleges and universities also shifted to online learning. The abrupt transition negatively impacted the quality of education due to reduced student engagement, lack of practical learning opportunities (especially in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Medicine), medical, and technical disciplines), and networking opportunities.

The government actions during the COVID-19 pandemic caused numerous disruptions to the lives of university and college students. The lockdowns and school closures have led to lost opportunities and delays that can have long-lasting implications on these students' educational and career trajectories.

Delayed Academic Progress: With the abrupt closure of universities and colleges, many students faced delays in their academic progress. While some courses transitioned online, others, particularly lab-based or practical courses, were more challenging to adapt. This led to incomplete courses, postponements, or even cancellations, forcing students to defer their graduation dates.

Lost Opportunities for Research and Internships: For many students, especially those pursuing graduate degrees, participating in research projects is a crucial part of their education. The pandemic led to the suspension of many such projects, robbing students of valuable research opportunities. Additionally, internships, a vital stepping stone to the job market, were cancelled or shifted to a virtual format, often providing a less enriching experience.

Reduced Networking Opportunities: Universities and colleges provide students with various opportunities to network with professors, alumni, visiting scholars, and industry professionals. This networking often leads to job opportunities, internships, or collaborations. The transition to virtual learning has significantly reduced these opportunities.

Limited Access to Campus Facilities: Access to facilities like libraries, labs, study rooms, and sports complexes significantly enrich the learning experience. The closure of these facilities due to lockdowns not only disrupted students' academic progress but also negatively impacted their overall university experience.

Challenges in Transitioning to the Job Market: The economic downturn brought about by the pandemic has led to a challenging job market for new graduates. The lack of internships and networking opportunities due to lockdowns further compounds this problem.

Loss of Campus Experience: Beyond academics, the college or university experience is often about personal growth and the creation of lifelong memories. The shift to remote learning has resulted in a loss of campus life experience, including participation in clubs, sports, cultural events, and social interactions, all of which contribute significantly to a student's personal development.

The pandemic's impact on higher education was profound and led to significant delays and lost opportunities. It is crucial for institutions to find innovative ways to support students during these challenging times, such as virtual internships, online networking events, and flexible academic plans.

Impacts on Mental Health

Schools and universities are not just places of learning; they are also hubs of social interaction and play a significant role in mental health. The changes wrought by the pandemic have had substantial mental health impacts.

Social Isolation

Social isolation, a significant consequence of lockdown measures, involves reduced social interaction and physical contact with others. This abrupt shift in daily life is deeply disconcerting, especially for elementary, high school, and university students who are used to a routine packed with social interaction. This transition affected students' mental and emotional health, educational progress, and overall wellbeing in a variety of ways.

Emotional Impact: The sudden loss of everyday contact with friends, classmates, and teachers can lead to feelings of loneliness, sadness, and frustration. For many students, school is not just a place of learning but also a vital social environment. Without these regular interactions, students may feel cut off from their social networks, leading to a sense of isolation.

Mental Health Effects: Prolonged social isolation can exacerbate feelings of anxiety and depression. Human beings are innately social creatures, and isolation can create a heightened sense of stress and worry. It can also lead to a decrease in motivation and concentration, impacting students' academic performance.

Educational Disruption: Collaborative learning opportunities have been proven to enhance understanding and problem-solving abilities. The absence of face-to-face group work can affect students' learning experience and engagement levels, possibly leading to a decline in academic performance.

Development of Social Skills: Particularly for younger children, school is a critical setting for developing social skills, forming friendships, and understanding social norms. Social isolation can hinder the development of these critical skills.

Lack of Routine: For many students, the structure and routine provided by attending school or university provide a sense of normalcy and control. The loss of this routine can create feelings of disorientation, restlessness, and anxiety.

Physical Health: Reduced opportunities for physical activity (gym classes, sports teams) can lead to a more sedentary lifestyle, potentially impacting students' physical health and increasing feelings of lethargy or sluggishness.

Loss of Support Systems: For some students, school is a safe haven, providing support systems like counselling services, mentors, and free meals. The loss of these services can exacerbate feelings of isolation and insecurity.

The impacts of social isolation due to school and university closures are profound and varied, underlining the critical role that these institutions play beyond academic instruction. They're essential for social interaction, mental health support, and a stable routine—all of which are crucial for a student's holistic development.

The Commission heard testimony from witnesses who stated that their children had simply dropped out of school, or had succumbed to depression and despair, with some resorting to suicide.

Anxiety and Depression

Several key factors have contributed to an increase in anxiety and depression among school-age students during the COVID-19 pandemic:

Social Isolation and Loneliness: School closures and social distancing measures led to prolonged periods of isolation from peers, which play a crucial role in a child's social and emotional development. Missing out on these interactions could lead to feelings of loneliness and alienation, which could trigger or exacerbate anxiety and depressive symptoms.

Disrupted Routines: School provides a structured routine that offers predictability and a sense of control to students. The sudden loss of this routine due to the pandemic could lead to feelings of uncertainty, which is a common trigger for anxiety.

Online Learning Challenges: The transition to online learning presented its own set of challenges. Some students may have struggled with the lack of in-person instruction, technological issues, or lack of a conducive learning environment at home. The stress and frustration from these challenges could contribute to feelings of anxiety and depression.

Fear and Uncertainty about the Pandemic: The continuous flow of news about the pandemic, coupled with fear about contracting the virus or it affecting loved ones, could lead to elevated anxiety levels. Uncertainty about the future, concerns about academic progress, and changes in exams and grading could also increase stress and anxiety.

Limited Access to Mental Health Services: Many students rely on school-based services for mental health support. With schools closed, students may have found it more difficult to access these services, causing existing mental health conditions to worsen.

Grief and Trauma: Some students may have lost loved ones to the virus, causing profound grief and potentially leading to depressive symptoms. Others might have had parents or caregivers working on the frontlines, causing additional worry.

Increased Family Stress: With the pandemic causing economic instability and job loss, family stress levels have increased. Higher levels of family stress can lead to increased anxiety and depressive symptoms in children and adolescents.

Understanding these factors is crucial for creating strategies to address the mental health crisis among students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent government-imposed lockdowns and closures have had a profound detrimental impact on education at all levels in Canada. Although the government and public health stated that these measures were implemented to protect public health, they did not appear to have properly considered what would most surely result from the significant disruption in the educational system. Students of all ages, from primary grade children to university students, have faced unparalleled challenges, including but not limited to social isolation, mental health issues, disrupted routines, and delays in academic progression.

Government actions did not fully account for the wide-ranging impacts these measures would have on the education system and the students it serves. The sudden transition to remote learning highlighted and exacerbated existing inequalities, strained resources, and put enormous pressure on both students and educators. It is essential to recognize that the impacts extend far beyond academic achievement and have deeply affected students' mental health and overall wellbeing.

Similarly, universities and colleges imposed their own lockdowns and restrictions, which caused them to shift to virtual learning environments and dismiss students who refused or were unable to comply. The loss of in-person interaction, networking opportunities, access to campus facilities, and delays in academic progression all contribute to a vastly altered and often diminished university experience.

Moreover, teachers' unions—facing a perceived change in working conditions, mounting pressures regarding teachers' safety, and the challenges of remote instruction—played a role in reinforcing the need to implement the unnecessary lockdowns and closures during the pandemic. The unions' actions and advocacy for teachers' "rights and resources," seemed ill-considered and appear not to have taken into account the actual data that was available as early as March of 2020.



Recommendations

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Recommendations

- A. Avoid Prolonged School Closures:** Recognize that extended school closures should not be imposed in the future, as they have profound and far-reaching negative impacts on the socialization and education of children.
- B. Prioritize In-Person Learning:** Ensure that in-person learning remains the primary mode of education, even during public health crises. Remote learning should only be used as a last resort and for a limited duration, and in conjunction with parental consultation.
- C. Data-Informed Decision-Making:** Base any decisions related to school closures on comprehensive and up-to-date data, considering the specific needs and circumstances of each region or community.
- D. Support Vulnerable Populations:** Develop targeted support systems for vulnerable students, including those with disabilities and students from low-income backgrounds. Recognize that these populations may be at higher risk than the general student population and provide specific measures to protect them. Do not impose these measures on the entire student population.
- E. Enhance Mental Health Services:** Invest in mental health support services within schools to help students cope with the emotional toll of the pandemic and the challenges of social isolation.
- F. Prioritize Social and Emotional Learning:** Incorporate social and emotional learning into the curriculum to help students build resilience and emotional intelligence, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- G. Maintain Transparent Communication:** Keep parents, students, and the community informed with clear and transparent communication regarding the reasons behind any decisions related to school closures or restrictions.
- H. Plan for Crisis Scenarios:** Develop contingency plans that prioritize education and socialization, while maintaining health and safety during future crises.
- I. Learn from Past Mistakes:** Conduct a comprehensive review of the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic in education, and use the lessons learned to shape future policies that prioritize the wellbeing and education of our children.

By implementing these recommendations, we can work towards a future where our education system remains resilient in the face of emergencies, ensuring that our children's socialization and development are protected and nurtured.