Commentary

Righting the education ship: Learning from the powerful lessons of the pandemic

Paul W. Bennett

Introduction[1]

Canada's "School System" is so bureaucratic and rigidified in its structure that it proved to be vulnerable and ill-equipped to respond to the abrupt and massive pandemic disruption. School shutdowns and intermittent COVID-19 spike interruptions exposed the fragility of the modern, centralized, bureaucratic education state, identified and analysed in my 2020 book, *The State of the System: A Reality Check on Canada's Schools* (Bennett 2020a).

Three years later, the System, composed as it is of 13 autonomous provincial and territorial jurisdictions, remains unsettled – disoriented, awakening to the collateral damage, but dogged by the persistence of COVID-19, student absenteeism and ongoing school disruptions. The initial phase of denial is receding and school authorities are gradually beginning to confront the magnitude of "learning loss" among the pandemic generation of students.

Mass and localized school closures from March 2020 to the end of the 2020-21 school year had significant educational effects. Most students in Ontario, Canada's most populous province, suffered academic and social development setbacks and serious gaps were exposed in support for students with learning challenges or disabilities (Gallagher-Mackay et al. 2021). Not only have systems not recovered or bounced back, but the hidden costs are becoming more and more visible: Student learning loss, mental health challenges, record absenteeism, social media obsession, and even wider equity gaps (Alphonso 2021; Gallagher-Mackay and Corso 2022; Fallon and Miller 2021).

> ## So, what's the current challenge? Re-establish a positive, achievement-oriented school culture.

The overriding priority: Close the learning gap

Confronting the magnitude of the crisis and responding can be daunting (Schleicher 2020), but denial and reverting to past practice (social promotion) will not be good enough, any longer. Learning loss and related psycho-social challenges will not cure themselves.

So, what's the current challenge? Re-establish a positive, achievement-oriented school culture. In doing so, our overall strategy must be one attuned to early student warning signs, paired with consistent support and routines, and helping students to recover both academically and emotionally from disrupted periods of learning (Bennett 2023; Shrivastava et al. 2020).

Powerful lessons of the pandemic

After weathering the worst of the pandemic, it is time to focus on *what* matters in rebuilding Canadian K-12 education. Drawing upon the lessons of the protracted COVID-19 disruption, a number of priorities come to the fore. What follows is a post-pandemic policy priority list and a recommended strategy for "righting the education ship" in post-pandemic times.

Lesson 1. "Future-proof learning:" Preparing the next generation

Overcoming the pandemic education disruption that the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) termed a "generational catastrophe" (UNESCO 2020) calls for decidedly new strategies. Pursuing holistic, ill-defined 21st-century skills or embracing competency-based student graduation standards were called into question and found wanting in the midst of the education crisis.

School choice is now on the table in K-12 public education. Students and families were offered a choice between in-person and virtual learning for their children (Bignell 2021). "Trauma-informed education" emerged to fill the void during the massive COVID-19 disruption of school systems (Education International/CTF 2020).

What students, teachers and families really need is "future-proof" learning (Kirschner and Stoyanov 2018). That term, coined by educational psychologist Paul A. Kirschner, provided a viable and much-needed alternative to visions based upon change theories associated with 21st-century learning (Bennett 2021a). Embracing such visions and defaulting to "trauma-informed education" was doing children a disservice by selling them short. Confronting the crisis now requires a more explicit focus on "the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to continue to learn in a stable and enduring way in a rapidly changing world" (Kirschner and Stoyanov 2018).

Lesson 2. Contingency planning: Plan ahead for the next crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic shock knocked out Canada's provincial school systems and revealed a fundamental but often unacknowledged weakness. Speaking in early January 2022 on TVO Ontario's *The Agenda*, Western University education professor Prachi Srivastava identified the problem: "I'm shocked at the lack of planning, at the lack of forward planning in the face of what is quite a predictable outcome," referring to the short- and long-term consequences of mass school closures (Srivastava 2022).

A 2020 research report, *COVID-19 and the Global Education Emergency: Planning Systems for Recovery and Resilience*, produced by Srivastava and her team, exposed "the scale to which education systems were unprepared for crises. Country-wide school closures were a near universal policy response deemed necessary in the first phase. However, they have serious negative effects and deepen inequities" (Srivastava et al. 2020, 2).

Based upon a study of Canadian and global policy responses, the report identified four critically-important lessons. Planning ahead, for the next time, the team recommended: (1) more coordinated and cross-sectoral national and global dialogues and comprehensive sector planning processes; (2) integrated responses on how to reach the most vulnerable; (3) action to support countries experiencing pre-COVID-19 crises; and (4) making education systems more resilient. The overriding objective had to be to "ensure stronger and more sustainable education systems for all, while better meeting the needs of the vulnerable and at-risk" (Srivastava et al. 2020, 17).

Lesson 3. In-person learning and teaching-centred schools

"Schools must be the first to open and the last to close" is now accepted as a first principle in responding to pandemics. That was clearly established in the highly influential 2021 Royal Society of Canada (RSC) report, edited by Tracy Vaillancourt, and titled *Children and Schools During COVID-19 and Beyond: Engagement and Connection Through Opportunity* (Vaillancout 2021).

The movement for "teaching-centred schools" will likely be re-energized by the COVID-19 disruption. Students and parents are now more fully aware of the mission-critical value of teaching and in-person learning. You can also expect classroom teachers to be more skeptical about school district consultants and outside experts who flit around in today's classrooms monitoring progress and attempting to introduce new pedagogies. In that sense, the pandemic will strengthen the position of teachers clamouring for more autonomy and control over their own teaching (Biesta 2019).

Coming out of the great disruption, there are signs of a movement to bring teaching back to the centre stage in our classrooms. After weathering the shutdown and interruptions, the pendulum has swung back to "teaching-centred" practice (Biesta 2017).

It may lead to teachers pushing back against the rule of the technocrats and reaffirming the real point of education – *to learn something, to learn it for a reason, and to learn it from someone* (Biesta 2015). Education gurus and in-house consultants were exposed as "system-bound" educators, so we can expect classroom teachers to be more inclined than ever to reclaim the classroom and base their practice on what works with students in the classroom.

Lesson 4. Student data and assessment: Address the "data starvation"

The most recent RSC national study on children and schools during COVID (Vaillancourt 2021) provided a reasonably thorough assessment of the psycho-social impacts on children and teens. Only one of the commissioned studies actually focused on COVID-19 learning loss. That study, produced by two Ontario researchers, Scott Davies and Janice Aurini, could not find a single jurisdiction in Canada conducting seasonal student assessments geared to diagnosing "learning loss" so essential in developing evidence-based pandemic recovery plans (Aurini and Davies 2021).

Wilfrid Laurier University professor and researcher Kelly Gallagher-Mackay pinpointed the nub of the problem in Ontario and elsewhere: "we don't have public data on how Ontario students are doing, so we are a lot more in the dark." That's problematic because "the risk with educational issues is that they can multiply if they're not addressed," she told *The Toronto Star* (Rushowy and Teotonio 2022). If students feel unprepared or are missing critical pieces, they are inclined to opt for easier programs, limiting their post-secondary school opportunities.

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An Ontario parent advocacy study (People for Education 2022) provided a pan-Canadian scan of Canadian K-12 COVID-related education plans that was very revealing. While all provinces and territories were found to have public health safety strategies for schools, few were engaged in "data collection" or had anything approaching a vision or plan to manage, assess or respond to learning loss or the psych-social impact of mass school closures (Alphonso 2022). None had allocated sufficient funding to prepare for post-pandemic recovery.

An Ontario education research report generated by a rather conventional "key stakeholders consultation" produced an April 2022 document that dared to break with the official line: "CANADA HAS BEEN A LAGGARD ON EDUCATIONAL RECOVERY," it proclaimed – and in capital letters (Gallagher-Mackay 2022).

That report on pandemic educational planning and post-pandemic recovery confirmed what international education researchers, most notably international education researcher Prachi Srivastava of Western University, have known for some time. Looking around the world, it's clear that "other countries have invested far more than Canada in learning recovery and started sooner" (Gallagher-Mackay 2022, 2).

Lesson 5. School environment: Healthy classrooms and air ventilation

Air-borne infectious diseases like COVID-19 and its variants have made everyone more sensitive to health-proofing our schools (Matti 2021). Over the course of the pandemic, improving air ventilation emerged as a critical piece in the most effective and flexible response plans of action, tailored to the specific conditions in each school site. Periodic heat-wave days can also make in-person learning next-to-impossible, especially with COVID-19 still lurking in and around schools. Students and teachers in Quebec had to learn that lesson once again, when schools reopened briefly in June 2021. Two Quebec school boards in the Outaouais Region were forced to declare two "heat days" and keep children out of classrooms (Bennett 2021b).

The effects of excessive heat on student learning are clearly visible, but, until recently, had attracted little research attention. Recent American studies make a compelling case for finally tackling the school ventilation problem (Park et al. 2020; Roach and Whitney 2022). Adaptation measures, such as air conditioning, can reduce the harmful effects of hot temperatures on student learning. School-level air conditioning penetration works to offset the heat's effects on students. It is particularly beneficial in school districts or areas with average maximum temperatures below 84°F where air cooling systems are less prevalent. Now we know, more definitively, that heat exposure does adversely affect student learning and global warming will make it worse.

One of the best COVID-19 strategies, produced in June 2020 by the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, identified the five critical elements of an effective plan: (1) healthy classrooms; (2) healthy buildings; (3) healthy policies; (4) healthy schedules; and (5) healthy activities (Jones et al. 2020). "Breathing clean air in the school building" was deemed essential to the health and safety of students, teachers and staff during COVID-19 and in post-pandemic times. Beyond merely increasing outdoor air ventilation, the Chan public health team's remedial actions included air quality assessments,

portable air cleaners, filtering of indoor air, and the installation of central or designated zone air conditioning. It's time to incorporate this into long-term school facilities plans.

Lesson 6. Local governance: Public re-engagement and responsive schools

Provincial authorities and regional centres right across Canada remain wedded, for the most part, to system-wide management of virtually every aspect of educational service (Bennett 2020a). With school-level education governance essentially suspended during the COVID-19 disruption, concerned parents, educators and the public were left with limited access or nowhere to turn to address a whole series of education problems (Bennett 2020b).

Hundreds of thousands of students and parents opted out of in-person school and substantial numbers became what Canadian policy analyst Irvin Studin described as "third bucket kids" (CBC 2021). Most of the so-called "lost children" ultimately chose online learning or gravitated, for a time, to alternative school options, including home education and pandemic 'learning pods' (MacPherson 2022).

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Advocates for home schooling, such as the Canadian Home Education Network, claim that homeschooling grew substantially during the pandemic, before dipping a little in 2022. Before COVID-19 (2019/20), 48,800 children were homeschooled, or 2.5 percent (out of 1,923,000 school-age kids) in seven of Canada's provinces. During the early COVID period (2020-21), numbers spiked at 82,400 students or 4.3 percent of all school-aged kids. In the latter COVID period (2021-22), this number slid to 72,700, or 3.8 percent of all school-aged kids (Woodard 2022). While the vast majority of Canadian students remain in public schools, homeschooling is a growing segment.

System-wide school shutdowns strongly suggest that we had better be prepared the next time. One of the biggest lessons was the emergence of a new educational

imperative – make our schools more democratic, responsive and accountable to parents, teachers, students and communities. That's why now is the time to invest in the development of school-based governance and management in K-12 education (Wylie 2009). For that to happen, we will have to clear away the obstacles standing in the way of building *a more agile and responsive community of self-governing schools that puts student needs first.* Turning the system right-side up has to start from the schools up (Bennett 2020a).

Parent engagement may be part of the standard educational lexicon, but, in practice, it is incredibly hard to find, particularly during the COVID-19 disruption. School-managed parent involvement is far too common and stands in the way of community engagement. Genuine parent engagement exemplifies openness and responsiveness (Pushor 2018).

Today's school superintendents, consultants and many school principals have an opportunity to change the "terms of engagement." What we need is a completely different model: the family-centric approach (Pushor 2017), embracing a philosophy of "walking alongside" parents and genuinely supporting the active engagement of the families that make up the school community.

Recommended strategy: Embracing the future – Learning from the lessons of the past

"It takes a crisis – to awaken us" is a popular dictum. In this case, there's no need to invent one. Gazing into the future, our challenge is essentially two-fold:

1. Complete the rescue mission:

First and foremost: re-establish a positive, achievement-oriented school culture. Be attuned to early student warning signs, providing consistent support and routines that help students to recover from the protracted disruption and interruptions. It is still a matter of shoring-up the foundations (Srivastava et al. 2020; Bennett 2021a; Vaillancourt, Davies and Aurini 2021).

2. Revitalize public education

The pandemic school disruption has inflicted collateral damage that needs to be addressed by education policy-makers. In the aftermath of the crisis, we have little choice but to turn the management of Canada's schools right side up, and chart a more constructive path forward. New school options, previously

considered improbable solutions, look more attractive, such as independent education, virtual schools and pandemic learning pods (Bennett 2021c). Student disengagement, the normalization of student absenteeism, and the prevalence of classroom disruptions are all signs of a protracted pandemic education crisis (Bennett 2022)

Necessity can be the mother of reinvention. After weathering the worst of the crisis, we are all more aware of the critical need for responsive school systems, teacher-centred schools, more resilient children, meaningful public engagement, and revitalization of our local communities. It's now all about re-engaging the public in our schools and "future-proofing" today's students. **MLI**

About the author

Paul W. Bennett, Ed.D., is Director, Schoolhouse Institute, Adjunct Professor of Education, Saint Mary's University, and Education Columnist for Brunswick News. Early in his career, Paul served for nine years as a Public School Trustee on the York Region Board of Education (1988-1997), and was a co-founder of the Ontario Coalition for Education Reform. Since 2010, he has produced more than a dozen policy research papers for the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies (AIMS), the Northern Policy Institute, and the Institute for Research on Public Policy. His Blog, Educhatter, was ranked first among Education Blogs in Canada in 2018 and 2022. He is the author of ten books, including *The State of the System: A Reality Check on Canada's Schools* (2020). For the past five years, Paul has been National Coordinator for researchED in Canada. MLI

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Endnotes

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Paul Martin

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