

THE RESILIENCE OF THE VULNERABLE MINORITY ENGLISH EDUCATION SECTOR DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

A Brief Presented to the Minister of Education

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SUMMARY OF BRIEF

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted education systems worldwide. In response to it, most governments adopted health and safety protocols, created alternative education delivery systems and tried to find viable solutions to a series of unprecedented challenges that proved difficult to overcome. Furthermore, the pandemic exposed vulnerabilities in schooling: some of these were introduced by the crisis while others, which had already existed, were exacerbated by it.

In March 2020, as the pandemic spread worldwide and after the first case was confirmed in Québec (in late February), the provincial government issued a directive to close schools and education centres. As Covid infection rates fluctuated, new directives were issued. To varying degrees in elementary and secondary schools as well as in Québec's regions, they provided for a return to in-person schooling when cases declined and for online schooling when cases increased. At times, hybrid models that combined both in-person and online schooling were mandated.

The pandemic and the need to alternate between in-person and online schooling imposed many challenges on Québec's teachers, non-teaching professionals, administrators, support staff and parents, exposing many vulnerabilities in schooling. Some of these were revealed in a brief produced by the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation: *Revenir à la normale? Surmonter les vulnérabilités du système éducatif face à la pandémie de COVID-19* (CSE, 2021), which addressed weaknesses in Québec's education system in general. The Minister of Education mandated the Advisory Board on English Education (ABEE) to examine how the pandemic impacted the minority English education sector and to determine whether it exposed vulnerabilities not identified by the CSE.

This brief describes the vulnerabilities experienced in Québec's English education sector, specifically in elementary and secondary schools and adult education and vocational training centres. The brief's findings and recommendations are derived from a review of the research and from a survey conducted by ABEE. This survey (see Appendix 1) focused on the six vulnerable areas identified in the CSE report: mental health and well-being; teaching, learning and evaluation; professional development and training; governance and administration; education funding and resources; access and equity. The survey was made available in both French and English and sent to English sector teachers, administrators, parents and students. A detailed analysis of its findings is available in this brief's Research, Findings and Analysis section.

Mental Health and Well-being

Online schooling provided an opportunity to maintain many educational services during the pandemic. It also took a toll, however, on the health and well-being of students, teachers, administrators and parents.

Students faced a greater sense of isolation, elevated levels of anxiety, bouts of depression and adverse effects on their development. In addition, their interest in their studies declined, resulting in disengagement from learning and poorer academic outcomes. A reduction in physical activity also contributed to students' declining health and well-being, as did the lack of socialization opportunities such as extra-curricular activities, school trips, etc.

The health and well-being of teachers, administrators and other frontline workers also suffered. Exposure to the virus resulted in compromised health and increased mental stress. Some people experienced occupational burnout and took leaves of absence while others left the profession altogether, opting for either another career or early retirement.

Parents, inevitably, were also affected by the pandemic. Online schooling blurred the line between home and school environments and further contributed to the already stressful effects of the pandemic. Parents saw their duties intensify as many struggled to balance the demands of working from home and their children's online schooling.

Therefore, to minimize the impact on mental health and well-being, Québec's education system needs to establish a level of preparedness in the event of another crisis. To this end, ABEE recommends the following:

- Prepare the education system for another crisis by adopting comprehensive coping strategies to mitigate effects, including a hotline staffed by English speakers for school and education centre personnel as well as by students and parents.
- Establish sustainable partnerships between schools, education centres, mental health professionals and social workers.
- Maintain online opportunities for socialization as essential to healthy child development.
- Integrate a mental-health and well-being program into the Québec Education Program (QEP), along with a toolkit for teachers and administrators.

Teaching, Learning and Evaluation

Although online schooling offset interruptions to teaching and learning, it did have its limitations. The curriculum was rendered inadequate and online instruction was of low quality. Furthermore, strategies and resources required to counterbalance learning disruptions caused by the pandemic were lacking. This caused significant learning and developmental delays both in Québec's schools and in adult education and vocational training centres.

Online educational resources and services became instrumental during the pandemic. Therefore, study programs should be restructured to support online teaching, learning and evaluation. To better prepare schooling for another crisis, ABEE recommends the following:

- Promote innovative technological approaches that accommodate both online and hybrid learning.
- Provide opportunities to practice online and hybrid learning.
- Modify pedagogical resources for more effective use during online schooling.
- Adjust online instruction to ensure that the needs of vulnerable students, such as those with special needs, are met.
- Streamline teachers' workload to prioritize responsibilities, so that they can give students the support that they need.

Professional Development and Training

Professional development is a prerequisite to pedagogical preparedness. With the rapid onset of the pandemic, teachers, administrators and other professionals were unprepared to address the challenges introduced by the crisis. The general lack of digital skills and the scarcity of online

training obliged educators to develop these skills as the pandemic unfolded. This resulted in unplanned, rushed and frequently makeshift professional development. Furthermore, delivering instruction online involved redesigning the curriculum and introducing new pedagogical approaches. Again, this was difficult given the lack of preparation and digital tools.

Teachers, administrators and other professionals must receive ongoing training to increase their level of preparedness in the event of another crisis. Such professional development will enable educators to focus on pandemic-related challenges and provide them with the competence and confidence to better address a future crisis. To ensure a better level of preparedness, ABEE makes the following recommendations for professional development and training:

- Develop pre-service and in-service training to include components that increase teachers' expertise in developing and modifying online methods and resources.
- Make available to all stakeholders (teachers, administrators, students and parents) professional development that includes components to ensure preparedness in the event of another crisis.
- Make known the strengths and limitations of online platforms so that they can be more effectively used during a pandemic.
- Establish a culture of innovation to encourage the effective use of pedagogical technologies.

Governance and Administration

While leadership is important during normal circumstances and becomes indispensable during a crisis, the education system's resilience in weathering this crisis fell short. Some school boards relinquished their administrative responsibilities to a government that, at times, seemed out of touch with the realities of schooling. Furthermore, administrators felt overwhelmed in implementing the ever-changing mandates imposed by the government, often at the last minute.

Provincial directives, especially during a pandemic, should be developed after consultation with school boards, schools and education centres, since these are much more aware of the challenges they face and thus better positioned to offer viable measures to address them. However, this is possible only if educational governance is decentralized to enable school boards, schools and centres to manage their situations better locally and to address their vulnerabilities specifically. With this in mind, ABEE makes the following recommendations regarding governance and administration:

- Increase opportunities for collaboration by reducing existing hierarchies in governance and administration.
- Ensure timely and clear communication in English to ensure that school boards, schools and education centres remain informed and do not lose confidence in the governing authorities.
- Enable school boards, schools and centres to address their local contexts and needs through the decentralization of certain rules and directives.
- Relax staffing requirements to address personnel shortages and ensure that schools and centres have the requisite human resources.

Education Funding and Resources

The pandemic caught off guard an education system that was already vulnerable due to years of underfunding. Furthermore, inflexibility in the government's criteria for applying financial measures and the impossibility of carrying over unused funds rendered a difficult situation even

worse. Smaller school boards, schools and education centres experienced financial difficulties to a greater extent as they lacked the economies of scale needed to allocate funds efficiently.

Funding should be increased in general, particularly for programs that provide academic support during difficult times. Budgetary rules should be simplified and relaxed to support an equitable needs-based model of schooling. These rules should provide more latitude to school boards, schools and education centres, especially for those in regions whose circumstances are different. Because a crisis affects different communities differently, additional funding should be allocated with increased local flexibility. For these reasons, ABEE makes the following recommendations regarding educational funding and resources:

- Increase funding to improve preparedness in the event of another pandemic and to facilitate the implementation of relevant practices, resources, etc.
- Simplify the budget rules to provide more flexibility in supporting a needs-based model of schooling to address local needs.
- Give the Assistant Deputy Minister (ADM) responsible for the English education sector more latitude with respect to financial matters, as the titular holder is in a better position to understand the needs of the English sector.
- Amend funding rules to include sharing resources among the school boards, schools and education centres, in order to support the needs of small and remote schools and centres.

Access and Equity

Education was already in a precarious state before the pandemic and faced additional challenges during the crisis. As schooling pivoted to online instruction, inequitable digital access was exacerbated, with some students and regions experiencing limited or nonexistent access to the Internet and digital devices. Services available to Québec's vulnerable communities, such as those in remote regions, and vulnerable groups, such as students with special needs, worsened during the crisis.

Funding must not only be equitable but must also consider the needs of the English education sector. To ensure that English schools and education centres maintain their high student success rates, it is imperative that they have access to pedagogical resources in English so that they can provide educational services in the minority language equitably. Therefore, to address matters of access and equity, ABEE recommends the following:

- Ensure equal access to digital infrastructure, technological devices, etc., for all students.
- Boost resources, services, etc., for students and parents from marginalized groups, disadvantaged areas and remote regions, in order to promote equity.
- Include the challenges faced by vulnerable groups, such as special needs students, in policy initiatives.
- Always consider the needs of the English education sector, in order to address communities' vulnerabilities and preserve their vitality.

CONCLUSION

The vitality of Quebec's English communities is determined, in large part, by its schools and education centres. However, the pandemic has brought to the fore the specific vulnerabilities faced by English language schools and centres, demonstrating their resilience under challenging circumstances. As these minority language communities are an integral part of Québec society, the Advisory Board on English Education strongly urges the Minister to consider the recommendations in this brief so that the vulnerabilities experienced during the pandemic in the English sector can be addressed and schooling throughout the province be improved, especially in the event of another crisis.

RESEARCH, FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

ABEE's approach in fulfilling the Minister's mandate was research- and evidence-based. So that comparisons could be made, the six areas of vulnerability that ABEE investigated paralleled those investigated by the CSE. For each area of vulnerability, a review of the research on the effects of the pandemic on schooling was conducted, and ABEE's educational partners (see Appendix 2) were invited to respond to a survey (see Appendix 1) that investigated the challenges and vulnerabilities experienced in the English education sector during the pandemic. In addition, follow-up interviews were scheduled with selected teachers, administrators and parent groups.

Mental Health and Well-Being

The first vulnerability experienced during the pandemic involved mental health and well-being. Although mental health issues existed, of course, among students, educators and parents in Québec before the pandemic (CSE, 2021), 97% of the survey respondents reported that the stress they experienced since the crisis began significantly exacerbated these pre-existing vulnerabilities. Furthermore, respondents expressed a greater sense of isolation, elevated levels of anxiety, and bouts of depression during the lockdowns, especially in Québec's regions and remote areas.

Several Canadian and international surveys support the findings of the ABEE survey. The *Table Éducation Outaouais* (cited in Mercier, 2022) tabled a report entitled "How Are Toddlers Doing in the Outaouais?" This stated that 42.9% of kindergarten children whose first language is English were vulnerable in at least one of the following areas of development: physical health and well-being; cognitive and language development; social skills, emotional maturity; communication; general knowledge. According to a more extensive survey of 500 Quebec students aged 15 to 22 (commissioned by the *Réseau québécois pour la réussite éducative* and cited in *Education News Canada*, 2022), 47% of young people in school indicated that the pandemic negatively impacted their perception of the future; and 32% considered dropping out of school due to the magnitude of the health crisis.

The beginning of the pandemic saw schools and centres pivot to online schooling. Although this allowed students to continue their studies and avoid learning delays, it soon became evident that online teaching and learning had limitations and an adverse effect on students' mental health and well-being. Remote learning led to declining interest in programs of study, disengagement from learning and poor academic outcomes. This was largely due to a lack of motivation, which contributed to elevated levels of online absenteeism. A reduction or absence of physical and extra-curricular activities also contributed to students' declining health and well-being.

Most countries reported that the support given to students during the pandemic was insufficient to counteract these difficulties (UNESCO, 2022). UNESCO's Responses to Educational Disruption Survey (REDS) found that students and teachers reported a significant decline in their well-being. In addition, over 50% of students felt more anxious than usual about their friends and family getting sick and were overwhelmed by the changes they experienced during the pandemic.

According to Vaillancourt et al. (2021), the pandemic had a negative effect on child development. Many of Canada's 5.8 million children experienced school disengagement, lower academic performance, mental health issues and difficulties accessing online educational resources, all of which contributed to their mental stress. Children's Healthcare Canada reported that, during the pandemic, children's hospitals received "on average double the number of admissions for

attempted suicide, a threefold increase in admissions related to substance use, and a 60% increase in the number of admissions related to eating disorders” (2021, p.1).

Students were not alone in experiencing the adverse effects of online schooling on mental health and well-being, for teachers and administrators were also affected. It was often reported that frontline workers, including teachers, were more exposed to the virus, resulting in added mental stress. In Québec, teachers’ health and well-being, job satisfaction, working conditions and professional development opportunities dropped to unprecedented lows, contributing to stress and anxiety levels.

Nor were parents, so integral to the success of their children’s education, spared the impact of the pandemic on mental health and well-being. Online schooling blurred the lines between home and school environments and contributed to the already stressful effects of the pandemic. As parents became more directly involved in their children's education, they saw their duties intensify. Many struggled to balance the demands of working from home and supporting their children’s online schooling.

ABEE agrees with the CSE’s recommendation (2021) that Québec schools and centres prepare for another crisis and adopt comprehensive coping strategies to mitigate impacts on mental health. Such strategies should be developed by representatives from the education sector, public health officials and government departments such as the Ministère de l’Éducation (MEQ) and the Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux (MSSS). Input from school boards, schools and education centres should provide meaningful feedback and ensure that they are aware of the plan and its implementation. To support this, they should establish sustainable partnerships with mental health professionals and social workers; and the MEQ and the MSSS must provide the requisite support. For example, if another lockdown is mandated, then a hotline staffed by English speakers must be made available to school and centre personnel as well as to students and parents, so that open lines of communication can be maintained, information becomes readily available, stress and anxiety are reduced, and mental health is preserved.

As part of Québec’s coping strategy, a mental health and well-being program should be integrated into the Québec Education Program (QEP) to prepare the education system for another crisis. This program must be proactive rather than reactive; and it must be comprehensive and continuous and include age-appropriate topics in every grade. Careful consideration should be given to how the program is implemented, to ensure its rightful place in the curriculum. A program of this kind would also be beneficial to teachers, administrators and parents.

Québec’s stated purpose of schooling is to instruct, socialize and provide qualifications. Periods of isolation associated with the pandemic significantly hindered this objective, contributing to the decline in mental health and welfare. Opportunities for socialization should therefore be maintained during a lockdown, as they are essential to children's health and development. Current communication technologies, including social media, can facilitate social interaction. However, online time should be complemented by face-to-face interactions in safe environments, such as outdoors during an airborne pandemic. Furthermore, more targeted intervention should be provided for distressed students and for those from vulnerable backgrounds, as they will likely experience the crisis first and more severely.

The pandemic has demonstrated the indispensability of mental health and well-being services. During normal times, but especially in the event of another crisis, safeguards should be in place to

ensure the wellness of all educational stakeholders. This will enable education to continue more effectively and will ensure the health and welfare of those involved.

Teaching, Learning, and Evaluation

Teaching and learning were also significantly impacted by the pandemic. Online schooling was introduced as a first response to school closures, resulting in many teaching, learning and evaluation limitations. The REDS survey (UNESCO 2022) indicated that, by August 2020 on average, students throughout 108 countries had missed approximately 10 weeks of in-person schooling. In England, at the secondary level, “learning losses in reading in the first half of the fall 2020 term were estimated at 1.8 months in the overall student population and 2.2 months among disadvantaged students” (OECD, 2021, p.22). Vaillancourt et al. (2021) noted considerable learning losses, particularly for students in secondary schools, adult education and vocational training centres, from disadvantaged backgrounds and students with special needs. Due to school closures, “on average, students had sizeable learning shortfalls, with lower performers losing seven months to a full year, and with pre-existing achievement gaps being widened by sizeable amounts ranging from 6 months to 1.7 years” (Vaillancourt et al., 2021, p.57). However, the degree of these learning disruptions remains unknown as “Canada lacks high-quality and large-scale data that can be used to directly measure any impacts of those disruptions on student achievement” (Vaillancourt et al., 2021, p. 54). Although beneficial for ensuring learning continuity, online education's effectiveness varies among countries. The sustained efforts to provide quality online education did not compensate for each day of in-person teaching lost during school closures.

With recognition of the negative consequences that school closures had on student learning, additional measures were implemented for better access to online platforms, digital devices and Internet connectivity (OECD, 2022). These measures proved essential in helping students overcome learning delays accumulated during school closures. As schools and centres slowly reopened, a hybrid model was applied in many countries that combined in-class and online education. Although online schooling provided a degree of continuity, deficiencies in the programs of study were exacerbated during the pandemic because the curriculum was inadequate for online instruction.

One exception was Denmark. Although schools and centres stayed closed longer, learning losses were minimized due to the country's digital preparedness (UNESCO, 2022). Moreover, because the Danish government had a digital infrastructure in place, “...digital resources (such as virtual learning environments or learning management systems), digital lessons, digital learning materials, digital devices for students, etc. were already available...” (UNESCO, 2022, p. 51), thus mitigating the impact of online schooling. In Québec, a strategic vision that includes a hybrid model of schooling, like the Danish one, should be developed to increase Québec's preparedness in another crisis. Furthermore, this hybrid model should be piloted during normal times so that it is ready in the event of a crisis. On a voluntary basis, school boards could pilot online learning during “snow days,” for example, to provide practice for last-minute school closures.

ABEE's survey confirmed the lack of preparedness during school closures: 98% of the respondents indicated that the pandemic had an adverse effect on teaching, learning, and evaluation. Pedagogical difficulties were caused partly by a lack of the resources required to counterbalance the learning disruptions caused by the pandemic. This lack hindered the transition from in-person to online schooling, resulting in significant learning delays.

The pandemic had a more significant impact on specific student populations, including students with special needs. The tendency to apply a common online pedagogical strategy that did not consider the needs of these students rendered an already vulnerable population even more so. Therefore, differentiated instruction for students with special needs should be adapted for online schooling.

Certain vocational training programs, such as Professional Cooking, Automobile Mechanics and Carpentry, also experienced more significant vulnerabilities because of their technical approach to teaching and learning. These programs require greater access to equipment, other physical resources and practical “hands-on” skills that are difficult to acquire online. Although theory lessons continued online, the inaccessibility of onsite learning during the pandemic delayed students’ progress in these programs.

Healthcare was one vocational training field that encountered added pressure since the pandemic increased the demand for qualified healthcare workers. To meet this demand, requirements were fast-tracked, resulting in significant gaps in students’ learning. To address these difficulties, healthcare programs should adopt virtual technologies, which could also be explored in other programs where onsite instruction is required but difficult to deliver during a pandemic.

The evaluation of learning became even more challenging during the pandemic. ABEE agrees with the CSE (2021) that the use of supervised assessments, such as examinations, is not conducive to online schooling and that increasing the frequency of evaluations infringes on the already limited time available to focus on teaching and learning during a crisis. Therefore, ABEE commends the MEQ’s decisions to reduce the number of terms and cancel the provincial examinations during the crisis.

The pandemic exacerbated existing pedagogical vulnerabilities and introduced new ones. The lessons learned should not be in vain but, instead, provide the impetus to reconceptualize the organization of schooling, especially teaching, learning, and evaluation. Existing practices should be reconsidered and those introduced during the pandemic deserve a thorough review. This should afford a better understanding of the vulnerabilities faced and ensure that schooling adjusts in the event of another crisis.

Professional Development and Training

Although the pandemic obliged schools and education centres to change how they deliver educational services, they were unprepared for such changes. ABEE agrees with the CSE (2021) that, during the pandemic, there was a widespread lack of digital skills and a scarcity of online teacher training. In addition, the rapid integration of technology required teachers to learn new skills in haste as schools and centres went online. Even young teachers, who tend to be more comfortable with digital tools, needed help using technological resources in the classroom. This has implications for both pre-service and in-service teachers. Even if educators did make great strides in creating effective online lessons, professional development to support online schooling was unplanned, rushed and often makeshift. Online training must become integral to the professional development of both pre-service and in-service teachers. Addressing this lack of preparedness will ensure that schools and centres are ready for another crisis.

According to the survey conducted by ABEE, 87% of the respondents indicated that the pandemic exacerbated existing vulnerabilities and introduced new gaps in teachers’ professional development. In addition, the transition to online schooling put a strain on teachers’ time to

“translate” instructional materials into a digital format. This also required teachers to learn new digital technologies, pedagogical strategies and evaluation methods, as delivering instruction online involved redesigning the curriculum and introducing new pedagogical approaches. This was difficult, given the lack of preparation and the sudden pivot to online schooling.

ABEE supports the CSE’s (2021) position on professional development. As digital technologies become increasingly important, Québec schools and education centres should develop a culture of innovation supported by professional development. Furthermore, teachers must be consulted before designing and delivering such professional development, as this will ensure that innovation remains relevant and grounded. Given teachers’ knowledge of the curriculum and pedagogy, they have much to offer as pedagogical experts. Also, consultation will incentivize teachers to participate more meaningfully in this professional development and produce more positive results.

Many teachers rose to the occasion during the pandemic by honing their online skills as best as possible. Online teaching and learning platforms, such as Zoom, Teams, Google Meet and Classroom, became indispensable for teaching, learning and professional development. Some in-person professional development workshops were replaced by webinars, learning platforms and asynchronous training sessions during the lockdown. In addition, the production of instructional videos, podcasts, newsletters, posts on social media and weekly talking circles also supported online schooling.

To maintain a degree of readiness and to benefit from some of the features of online platforms, schools and education centres should continue to use them post-pandemic and professional development should be ongoing so that teachers remain knowledgeable of their advantages and limitations. Innovative practices such as these are excellent examples of the kind of innovation that schools should encourage and professional development should support.

Professional development is indispensable. For schools and education centres to remain prepared for another crisis, professional development should also be ongoing for teachers, administrators and support staff. Because students are the beneficiaries of instruction, while parents undeniably support their learning, it is advantageous for both to be aware of the professional development in Québec’s schools and centres. This knowledge will ensure that all stakeholders are on the same page rather than second-guessing program development and delivery. Further, it will ensure that professional development is beneficial for teachers, as its advantages will also accrue to students and parents.

Governance and Administration

Leadership is vital in normal circumstances and becomes imperative during a crisis. However, according to the CSE (2021), the education system’s organizational resilience in weathering the crisis fell short. The survey conducted by ABEE found that 82% of the respondents indicated that vulnerabilities were experienced in governance and administration.

As with teaching and learning, it is important to mention that some administrative initiatives contributed to the resilience of schooling. For example, some schools introduced a schedule with minimum online teaching hours during the pandemic. Given the added demands of learning online, this reduced the teachers’ workload and limited students’ screentime. Teachers in these schools stated that having more time to teach their more vulnerable students was beneficial. Other organizational initiatives, such as school bubbles, virtual learning hubs, professional learning communities, were also helpful.

Notwithstanding these initiatives, educational governance and administration in Québec faced many vulnerabilities during the pandemic, including a shortage of qualified teachers. Although teacher recruitment and retention have been challenging for many years, they reached a crisis point during the pandemic. A study published by UNESCO (2020b) found that “even before the crisis, the world was facing a shortage of qualified and trained teachers, with an estimated sixty-nine million new teachers needed to meet rising demand to achieve universal primary and secondary education by 2030” (p.2). During school closures, “[a]bout 40% of OECD countries recruited temporary teachers or other staff in 2021 to ensure the impact on students’ learning is minimized” (2021, p.25). According to a survey by the Quebec Provincial Association of Teachers (QPAT, 2021), 18.2% of elementary school teachers, 28.6% of secondary school teachers and 15% of adult education and vocational training teachers considered leaving the profession during the pandemic. Understaffing due to a combination of sick leaves, early retirement and the incapacity of the education system to replace personnel took its toll on the staffing of schools and centres.

The pandemic also exacerbated the shortage of other qualified professionals, such as psychologists and speech therapists, in the English sector, especially in remote areas where such needs existed before the pandemic (ABEE, 2013). The problem was also compounded by the French-language proficiency requirement for members of the many professional orders. Because these professionals work with English-speaking students and can communicate functionally in French with other professionals (ABEE, 2013), the French proficiency requirements should be relaxed, especially during a crisis.

To address the teacher shortage, the UNESCO Teacher Task Force (2020c) recommended that governments should act on the following critical aspects of the teaching profession: job security and adequate compensation to ensure teacher retention during times of crisis; support for teachers’ well-being, social and emotional competencies, and resilience before, during and after a crisis; teacher involvement in developing COVID-19 education responses; quality professional development and support; equity as a core element of education responses; teacher involvement in aid responses (UNESCO 2020c). These recommendations should also address the shortage of teachers and other professionals in Québec’s English sector.

As UNESCO (2020c) recommended, the importance of involving teachers in decision-making cannot be overstated. A collaborative educational governance and administration model is required to make this possible. However, some respondents to the ABEE survey expressed disappointment that some school boards relinquished their leadership role to a government that, many indicated, was out of touch with the realities of schooling during the pandemic. Furthermore, rather than maintaining a culture of collaboration, in some schools and education centres divisions between administrators and teachers were created or aggravated by implementing the ever-changing government measures.

Flexibility in governance and administration is a prerequisite for effective collaboration. A “one size fits all” administrative approach has many limitations. It is counterproductive, especially in the English sector, where the organizational needs of school boards, schools and education centres are fundamentally different from those in the French sector (ABEE 2013, 2018). Although the English sector covers the same territory as the French, for example, it is served by nine English boards rather than by sixty French service centres. This difference and the remoteness of many English school boards were not reflected in the directives issued during the pandemic, thus adding to inflexibility in governance and administration. Here too, ABEE agrees with the recommendation made by the CSE (2021) that the MEQ should provide direction while ensuring that school boards, schools and education centres have sufficient autonomy to meet their local needs. This would

ensure that ministerial directives are implemented while enabling these bodies to build intra-organizational cooperation and maintain a high degree of autonomy.

Communication is also key to maintaining a collaborative approach, especially during a crisis. According to the ABEE survey, some schools and centres reported timely communication from the Ministry while others indicated delays in the dissemination of vital information. Furthermore, English school boards sometimes received this information from the media rather than from the MEQ, resulting in directives that were short on detail. These directives changed constantly and were often delivered late on Friday afternoons. To make matters worse, some schools and education centres did not receive these directives at all, which, understandably, made it harder to implement them promptly.

These communication difficulties generated general mistrust in the government's ability to manage the crisis and contributed to a sense of uncertainty among teachers, administrators and parents. For these reasons, ABEE recommends that open lines of communication between the MEQ, school boards, schools and education centres be cultivated and maintained. Furthermore, to reduce uncertainty during already uncertain times, directives must be timely and clear and made available in English as quickly as possible.

Administrative vulnerabilities were experienced at all levels of education during the pandemic. To mitigate these vulnerabilities, changes in collaboration, communication, and flexibility are in order, enabling school boards, schools and centres to play a more vital role in their communities.

Education Funding and Resources

Education funding and resources were yet another vulnerable area during the pandemic, as indicated by 78% of the ABEE survey respondents. The education system, already vulnerable due to years of underfunding, was caught off guard. For example, many schools and education centres were in desperate need of repair and thus unable to fully comply with existing health measures (CSE, 2021). This became especially apparent with inadequate ventilation in many classrooms, especially since Covid-19 is an airborne virus.

The government did increase funding during the pandemic, especially to those programs that served Québec's most fundamental needs, such as homecare assistance and technology infrastructure programs (PERT, 2022). Although ABEE supports this increase in funding, most of it could not, unfortunately, be easily used. Difficulties included inflexibility in government funding rollout criteria and the impossibility of carrying over unused funds within given time frames. For example, a substantial budget to hire new staff was lost due to the shortage of professionals at that time. Also, because funding was sporadically distributed throughout the year, it did not align with needs at any given time; and some resources were available only in French. Given the limited availability of funds for translation, it was often difficult to have these resources in the English sector.

Given the English sector's individual needs, more flexibility in fund allocation is necessary during a pandemic. Budget rules should be simplified and underwrite a needs-based schooling model (ABEE, 2013). Targeted funding currently restricts school boards' ability to adjust and adapt, something that is especially necessary during a pandemic.

To support more flexibility in funding, the authority of the Assistant Deputy Minister (ADM) responsible for the English education sector should be increased to address the sector's particular

needs. Specifically, the ADM must remain involved in policy development and engaged in the initial stages of the decision-making process and work as collaboratively as possible with the English education sector. This will encourage more local input and flexibility in fund allocation and ensure that English schools and education centres effectively serve their students, parents and communities.

Rigid funding measures significantly affect small schools and education centers (ABEE, 2018). Small and remote schools and centres are often limited in the range of services and resources they can offer (ABEE, 2018). Therefore, ABEE recommends that small school boards receive additional funding, since they do not benefit from the economies of scale available to larger school boards, and that the allocation of these funds be determined at the school board level.

Funding should also be increased for online or hybrid schooling models, which would enable the education system to move online more quickly, if necessary. In addition, this funding should: support the development of digital infrastructure; ensure Internet connectivity is available throughout Québec; provide up-to-date devices to teachers and students; provide additional mental health programs; support at-home parents to ensure the ongoing availability of hybrid schooling. Further, funding for programs that provide online academic support, such as LEARN and *Allo-prof*, and programs that support at-risk and special needs students, should also be increased.

Parents experienced many difficulties during the pandemic as health insecurities, isolation and the demands of online schooling took their toll. Therefore, a parents' support network, such as the one constituted by community learning centers (CLCs), should receive additional funding to support parents during a public crisis. This would benefit all parents, including the parents of children with special needs, given the additional challenges they experienced during the pandemic.

Funding should ensure that the Québec education system is prepared for another crisis. This would also improve how Quebec's schools and education centres respond by providing additional educational resources, strategies, etc. to foster student success in the event of another pandemic.

Access and Equity

Schooling should be accessible and equitable. However, 61% of ABEE survey respondents indicated that the pandemic had a negative impact on access and equity since the digitization of teaching and learning exacerbated existing structural inequities. Furthermore, according to the OECD (2022), "students with limited access to information and communication technologies [who] are not digitally literate and do not possess a certain level of cognitive skills may be unable to navigate the digital world and hence are left behind" (p. 79). Such digital inequities were more marked in remote regions; urban areas already had a lead in digital infrastructure development and were better prepared to sustain online schooling. In previous briefs, in fact (2013, 2018), ABEE raised various concerns about regional inequities, pointing out, for example, that per capita funding represents equality but not necessarily equity. Not only do such inequities persist, but they have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

Inequities during the pandemic were also more pronounced among Indigenous and racialized students, those with pre-existing mental health problems and other vulnerabilities, and students with special needs (OECD, 2021). As well, inequitable access to digital resources increased as schooling pivoted online and this affected some students more than others. The pandemic also exacerbated inequities across the province, as certain communities lacked access to services and resources such as the Internet.

To address these inequities, high-speed Internet must be available to everyone at a reasonable rate, especially when students depend on it for their learning. Digital devices should be subsidized and made readily available to parents who cannot afford them. To ensure equitable access, these measures should factor in regional differences and the specific needs of the school boards, schools, education centres and, most notably, those of students.

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LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Mental Health and Well-Being

- Prepare the education system for another crisis by adopting comprehensive coping strategies to mitigate effects, including a hotline staffed by English speakers for school and education centre personnel as well as by students and parents.
- Establish sustainable partnerships between schools, education centres, mental health professionals and social workers.
- Maintain online opportunities for socialization as essential to healthy child development.
- Integrate a mental-health and well-being program into the Québec Education Program (QEP), along with a toolkit for teachers and administrators.

Teaching, Learning and Evaluation

- Promote innovative technological approaches that accommodate both online and hybrid learning
- Provide opportunities to practice online and hybrid learning.
- Modify pedagogical resources for more effective use during online schooling.
- Adjust online instruction to ensure that the needs of vulnerable students, such as those with special needs, are met.
- Streamline teachers' workload to prioritize responsibilities, so that they can give students the support that they need.

Professional Development and Training

- Develop pre-service and in-service training to include components that increase teachers' expertise in developing and modifying online methods and resources.
- Make available to all stakeholders (teachers, administrators, students and parents) professional development that includes components to ensure preparedness in the event of another crisis.
- Make known the strengths and limitations of online platforms so that they can be more effectively used during a pandemic.
- Establish a culture of innovation to encourage the effective use of pedagogical technologies.

Governance and Administration

- Increase opportunities for collaboration by reducing existing hierarchies in governance and administration.
- Ensure timely and clear communication in English to ensure that school boards, schools and education centres remain informed and do not lose confidence in the governing authorities.
- Enable school boards, schools and centres to address their local contexts and needs through the decentralization of certain rules and directives.
- Relax staffing requirements to address personnel shortages and ensure that schools and centres have the requisite human resources.

Education Funding and Resources

- Increase funding to improve preparedness in the event of another pandemic and to facilitate the implementation of relevant practices, resources, etc.
- Simplify the budget rules to provide more flexibility in supporting a needs-based model of schooling to address local needs.
- Give the Assistant Deputy Minister (ADM) responsible for the English education sector more latitude with respect to financial matters, as the titular holder is in a better position to understand the needs of the English sector.
- Amend funding rules to include sharing resources among the school boards, schools and education centres, in order to support the needs of small and remote schools and centres.

Access and Equity

- Ensure equal access to digital infrastructure, technological devices, etc., for all students.
- Boost resources, services, etc., for students and parents from marginalized groups, disadvantaged areas and remote regions, in order to promote equity.
- Include the challenges faced by vulnerable groups, such as special needs students, in policy initiatives.
- Always consider the needs of the English education sector, in order to address communities' vulnerabilities and preserve their vitality.

**SURVEY ON THE VULNERABILITIES EXPERIENCED AND ACTION TAKEN
DURING THE PANDEMIC IN QUEBEC'S ENGLISH EDUCATION SECTOR**

The mandate of the Advisory Board on English Education (ABEE) is to advise the Minister of Education on all matters affecting the educational services offered in English elementary and secondary schools, as well as in adult education and vocational training centres. The Minister may also ask the Board for advice on specific topics.

In November 2021, the Advisory Board was asked to advise the Minister on lessons learned during the pandemic and how schooling could be improved moving forward.

The Advisory Board recognizes your organization's valuable role as an English education stakeholder. You are invited to complete this survey, so your organization's perspective on lessons learned and how schooling could be improved can be integrated into the advice provided to the Minister. Although you may share this survey with the members of your organization, please answer the questions on behalf of your organization.

The completion of this survey is voluntary, the identity of your organization will remain confidential and the responses will be aggregated. Please answer only those questions that are relevant to your organization. It should take between 30 to 45 minutes to complete this survey. Please respond by **May 20, 2022**. If you have any questions regarding the survey, please contact the Advisory Board at: cela-abee@education.gouv.qc.ca

This survey addresses the following areas in education that were affected by the pandemic:

1. Mental Health and Well-Being
2. Teaching, Learning and Evaluation
3. Professional Development and Training
4. Governance and Management
5. Education Funding and Resources
6. Access and Equity

In this survey, you are asked to describe the vulnerabilities that arose from the pandemic and the action that was taken or should have been taken to address these vulnerabilities.

- Vulnerability' here refers to a limited or insufficient capacity to address the pandemic's impact effectively.
- "Action" refers to a concrete measure to address a vulnerability caused or exacerbated by the pandemic.

1. Name of the responding organization: * **Required**

- 2.1 With respect to ***mental health and well-being***, to what degree were the members of your organization impacted by the vulnerabilities that arose from the pandemic.
 - Strongly impacted
 - Somewhat impacted
 - Hardly impacted
 - Not impacted

- 2.2 Describe the vulnerabilities you experienced, if any :

- 2.3 Describe the actions that were implemented to address these vulnerabilities, if any :

- 2.4 Describe the actions that should have been implemented, if any, and why they were not :

- 3.1 With respect to ***teaching, learning and evaluation***, to what degree were the members of your organization impacted by the vulnerabilities that arose from the pandemic.
 - Strongly impacted
 - Somewhat impacted
 - Hardly impacted
 - Not impacted

- 3.2 Describe the vulnerabilities you experienced, if any :

- 3.3 Describe the actions that were implemented to address these vulnerabilities, if any :

- 3.4 Describe the actions that should have been implemented, if any, and why they were not :

- 4.1 With respect to ***professional development and training***, to what degree were the members of your organization impacted by the vulnerabilities that arose from the pandemic.
 - Strongly impacted
 - Somewhat impacted
 - Hardly impacted
 - Not impacted

- 4.2 Describe the vulnerabilities you experienced, if any :

- 4.3 Describe the actions that were implemented to address these vulnerabilities, if any :

- 4.4 Describe the actions that should have been implemented, if any, and why they were not :

- 5.1 With respect to ***governance and management***, to what degree were the members of your organization impacted by the vulnerabilities that arose from the pandemic.
 - Strongly impacted
 - Somewhat impacted
 - Hardly impacted
 - Not impacted

- 5.2 Describe the vulnerabilities you experienced, if any :

- 5.3 Describe the actions that were implemented to address these vulnerabilities, if any :

- 5.4 Describe the actions that should have been implemented, if any, and why they were not :
- 6.1 With respect to **education funding and resources**, to what degree were the members of your organization impacted by the vulnerabilities that arose from the pandemic.
- Strongly impacted
 - Somewhat impacted
 - Hardly impacted
 - Not impacted
- 6.2 Describe the vulnerabilities you experienced, if any :
- 6.3 Describe the actions that were implemented to address these vulnerabilities, if any :
- 6.4 Describe the actions that should have been implemented, if any, and why they were not :
- 7.1 With respect to **access and equity**, to what degree were the members of your organization impacted by the vulnerabilities that arose from the pandemic.
- Strongly impacted
 - Somewhat impacted
 - Hardly impacted
 - Not impacted
- 7.2 Describe the vulnerabilities you experienced, if any :
- 7.3 Describe the actions that were implemented to address these vulnerabilities, if any :
- 7.4 Describe the actions that should have been implemented, if any, and why they were not :
- 8.1 What **other** vulnerabilities did the members of your organization experience, if any ?
- 8.2 Which actions were implemented to address these vulnerabilities ?
- 8.3 Which actions should have been taken to address these vulnerabilities, and why weren't they ?

ORGANIZATIONS INVITED TO RESPOND TO THE SURVEY

Administrators of Complementary Educational Services (ACES)

Association of Administrators of English Schools of Quebec (AAESQ)

Association of Directors General of English School Boards of Quebec (ADGESBQ)

Consortium of CEGEPs

Directors of English Education Network (DEEN)

English Parents' Committee Association (EPCA)

Eastern Townships School Board Central Student Advisory Committee

Faculties of Education

Fédération des comités de parents du Québec (FCPQ)

First Nations Education Council (FNEC)

Provincial Organization of Continuing Education Directors English (PROCEDE)

Québec Association of Independent Schools (QAIS)

Québec Board of Black Educators (QBBE)

Québec English School Boards Association (QESBA)

Québec Federation of Home and School Associations (QFHSA)

Québec Provincial Association of Teachers (QPAT)