

CONSEIL  
SUPÉRIEUR  
DE L'ÉDUCATION

Report on the State and Needs of Education 2020-2021

# Returning to Normal? Overcoming Vulnerabilities in an Education System Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic

## Summary

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Québec 



The declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic in March of 2020 upended the Québec education system. With no effective treatment available, limited knowledge of the virus responsible for the COVID-19 outbreak, and some hope that a short lockdown would be sufficient to prevent the spread of the disease, the Minister of Education and Higher Education ordered schools to be closed for two weeks.

The rest of course is history: it was only six months later that secondary schools were able to reopen, in September 2020. Elementary schools remained closed until May 2020, and in regions most impacted by COVID-19, until the end of that school year. Staff, students and parents alike had to adapt quickly to teaching and learning remotely. The subsequent academic year was riddled with classroom closures and student absences as infections spiked during outbreaks and many secondary school students alternated between studying in school and from home. In adult education, students also had to contend with learning remotely, and in many cases overcome unforeseen hurdles to complete their internships. For the most part, college and university students and staff members had to deal with long months of remote teaching and learning. The 2021-2022 academic year began between hopes kindled by the availability of vaccines and the fear of new, increasingly more contagious COVID-19 variants. Yet policy discourse is signaling a desire to return to normality—in other words, back to the old, pre-pandemic days of organizing and delivering educational services.

**Is going back to normal truly the best way forward?** Given the complex and unprecedented educational landscape wrought by the pandemic, the Conseil Supérieur de l'éducation sought input from individuals and stakeholder organizations in education to convey the extent of the adaptations that took place, understand the constraints that hindered them, and take stock of lessons learned since the onset of the crisis. **The Conseil therefore held consultations with stakeholder organizations in the education system,** supplemented with another, more informal, consultation of its own bodies. The resulting 31 statements submitted revealed both a number of challenges encountered since the beginning of the pandemic and the initiatives implemented by education communities across the different levels and sectors of instruction.

The Conseil's full Report on the State and Needs of Education entitled *Revenir à la normale? Surmonter les vulnérabilités du système éducatif face à la pandémie de COVID-19* [Returning to Normal? Overcoming Vulnerabilities in an Education System Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic] begins with a brief overview of existing research on the effects of past pandemics and other causes of disruptions to the normal school year that could shed light on the current one. It then presents an analytical framework to examine the education system's response to the pandemic and its impacts using **crisis management theory and the construct of resilience**. The latter demonstrate that knowing where vulnerabilities lie is key for an organization's ability to adapt and be resilient when faced with adversity. A cross reference of the statements submitted by the organizations with the Conseil's own published opinions forms the core of the report, uncovering not only the vulnerabilities in the education system, but any lessons that can be drawn to minimize them. The Conseil then concludes by proposing three broad guidelines that could steer several courses of action to swiftly address the negative impacts of the pandemic on education in Québec and make the education system more resilient over the long term.

## Responding to the Pandemic: Decisions Informed by Old and New Knowledge

The characteristics of the virus causing COVID-19 were not well known at the time of the first school closures in March of 2020, but the effects of school disruptions certainly were. Summer vacations, disasters, extreme weather and other unforeseen events all tend to leave learning loss in their wake (Cooper, Nye, Lindsay, Charlton & Greathouse, 1996; Goodman, 2014; Picou & Marshall, 2007). Additionally, school closures disrupt the social order by forcing parents to juggle or stop going to work. While all social groups have been subjected to high stress since the beginning of the pandemic, women and mothers have been disproportionately affected (Berthelot, Lemieux, Garon-Bissonnette, Drouin-Maziade, Martel & Maziade, 2020; Gouvernement du Québec, 2021). Students in higher education have also reported a substantial increase in stress, amplified by isolation and precarity (Veilleux, Leblanc-Pageau & Lévesque, 2021). **Brought on this time by public health measures in response to a pandemic, school disruptions may therefore have long-term adverse effects, not only on student achievement, but also on family dynamics, mental health and the economy.** Sustained impacts on affected cohorts are to be expected, with a long-term ripple effect on people's quality of life and income as well as government revenues and ultimately the global economy (Almond, 2006; Baker, 2013; Belot & Webbink, 2010; Correia, Luck & Verner, 2020; Jaume & Willén, 2019).

The effects of school disruptions are consequently many and complex, and are likely to take their toll on society in the years to come. However, in Québec as in other Canadian provinces and most countries, **the infrastructures necessary for providing educational services are not considered essential.** At the outbreak of COVID-19, there were no strategies in place to ensure uninterrupted educational services. True, they were maintained most of the time, but at the cost of enormous effort and sacrifice by families, staff in educational institutions and learners themselves. **Access to these services has also been unequal,** subject to the availability of digital resources and the individual skills to use them. Yet in Québec education is a right, and—until the age of 16—compulsory.

## Crisis Management, Resilience and Vulnerabilities: Understanding the Pandemic Response in the Education System

In addition to the scientific literature on the effects of school disruptions, knowledge on crisis management sheds light on the effects of the crisis. The concept of crisis refers to a breakdown of normality that can threaten the capability of an organization (Brassard, 2020), and returning to a functioning state demands resilience.

Observed in individuals, organizations and networks, resilience can be defined as the ability to continue functioning in an adverse situation, and is part of the risk management and response toolkit in case of disruptions. Organizational resilience can be passive when based on strengths present in the organization or active when it requires the organization to adapt (Burnard & Bhamra, 2019). Although crises can strain organizational resources, they can also power the ability to learn and change. In this sense, **when the necessary will and leadership are present, a crisis can become a learning opportunity not to be missed** (Boumrar, 2010).

An organization's resilience is therefore determined by its strength and ability to adapt, but remains contingent on its vulnerabilities. Working toward minimizing these weaknesses in the first place rather than establishing a crisis exit plan to get "back to normal" appears to be the better strategy over the long term. The first step in strengthening the resilience of the Québec education system, then, is to identify its main areas of vulnerability.

## Areas of Vulnerability in the Québec Education System

The Conseil conducted an analysis of its consultations concurrently with a review of its previously published documents, enabling it to pinpoint six main areas of vulnerability that have hindered adapting educational services to the constraints imposed by necessary health measures. Some of the issues brought to light are system-wide, others are level- or sector-specific. These vulnerabilities in fact had been known for some time: the Conseil had identified and brought them to the attention of successive governments prior to COVID-19.

### 1. School Organization, Educational Services, Governance and Management

The organizations consulted by the Conseil noted a number of systemic issues since the beginning of the pandemic related to **communication with relevant ministries**, which compounded pre-existing issues rooted in **burdensome tasks** and management processes. These issues are part of a much broader context of understaffing across different sectors and collective agreements that had not been negotiated with remote work or distance education in mind. In compulsory education, the pandemic struck at a time when French-language school boards were transitioning to school service centres, creating some confusion about the allocation and sharing of management responsibilities. Added to this were staff shortages, particularly felt in this sector, making staff management and work more difficult. Higher education organizations felt there was a certain lack of familiarity on the part of the government about their specific characteristics, notably prior to the creation of the Ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur. Some drew attention to a lack of cohesion between different institutions in following directives, whereas the institutions, for their part, defended their autonomy. Lastly, in adult education, some organizations lamented the fact of being left out of policy discourse and the lack of autonomy and leeway in adapting services to their needs.

The vulnerabilities noted by organizations reveal the complex dynamics of institutional autonomy on the one hand, and of forces that centralize decision making on the other. In previous documents, the Conseil highlighted the lack of fluidity in educational services and the challenges of managing school organization. The Conseil is in favour of the Ministers taking on a strategic role of steering the system while ensuring adequate autonomy on the ground in adapting services to the needs of each education community (Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, 2001, 2016a, 2019).

### 2. Education Funding

Representative organizations from all levels and sectors of the education system expressed concern about the funding of education, considered in a nutshell to be both inadequate and unpredictable. Monies injected to manage health measures and other challenges triggered by the pandemic are not likely to resolve the issue if the funding is merely a stop-gap measure. Those in compulsory education cited both the run-down state of some facilities which hampers compliance with health measures, and the lack of autonomy in allocating funds based on local needs. In higher education, the funding model relying on full-time enrolment numbers is believed to be outdated, pitting institutions against each other instead

of encouraging cooperation. The funding model for adult education, largely dependent on the number of full-time equivalent students and graduation rates, is also failing to meet the needs of this student population, not to mention contributing to the precarious situation of teachers. Changes in enrolment due to the pandemic (i.e. numbers, choice of programs) are likely to impact education funding in the coming years.

The Conseil is in favour of **greater institutional autonomy**, thus supporting calls by organizations for flexibility to ensure that allocated funds are better aligned with needs. In the case of higher education, the Conseil recommends the Government introduce new investment and more stable funding. It would also like to see greater flexibility in serving the different educational realities of institutions and education paths (Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, 2019). Any funding must also encourage cooperation between universities (Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, 2020c).

### 3. Teaching Practices and Equity

The shift in teaching and learning methods since the onset of COVID-19 has required the right tools and the skills to use them, and to a large extent digital communication platforms have made it possible to continue providing educational services. However, **digital disparities go hand in hand with socioeconomic inequality, and have led to a system-wide issue of unequal access to education**. The organizations consulted believe that if anything, the pandemic has quickened the pace of integrating digital tools across the board. As for compulsory education, the Conseil noted a digital divide between the public system and the private one, with the latter already one step ahead in developing its digital infrastructures. In addition to digital disparities, organizations in higher education are concerned by the ramifications of more flexible curricular content and how the standardized grade average (R score) is calculated, seeing a danger of inequality which could unfairly skew assessment of university applications.

As far back as 20 years ago the Conseil was calling for the need to move towards an inclusive and flexible learner-centred education system (Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, 2001), one capable of developing a culture of innovation (Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, 2002). It has also reiterated the need to reduce education inequities, namely through promoting genuine inclusivity and diversity (Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, 2016b). The Conseil is concerned that those learners already more at risk of not completing higher education (Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, 2019) are likely to be the same ones to be adversely affected by the pandemic the most. Providing support and ensuring a follow-up of these learners' paths is paramount.

### 4. Digital Technology and Distance Education

Organizations consulted by the Conseil found a **widespread lack in digital skills**, both technical and relational, as well as a scarcity of teacher training on e-learning. Coupled with the wide assortment of digital technology used, these deficits have been challenging the entire education system. In compulsory education, the shortage of proper equipment and the severe lack of experience in digital education have made the shift even more difficult. While distance education is now firmly seated in post-secondary education, a large percentage of the student population had not been prepared for it, and the competitive environment between institutions certainly did not help in sharing resources. In adult education, the diversity of digital skills is reflective of the wide variety of student profiles and needs.

In its report *Éduquer au numérique* [Educating for a Digital World] (Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, 2020a), the Conseil made the case for **digital education, that is, developing the necessary skills to live in a society where digital technology is becoming increasingly prevalent**. To make this happen, it called

for establishing the necessary material and administrative conditions, embedding digital skills in aligning the curriculum, learning and evaluation and lastly, significantly upgrading teacher training accordingly. While the pandemic has been behind some great strides in creating more conducive environments and staff training, much more remains to be done to formally incorporate digital skills in the curriculum, learning and evaluation. One of the reasons these skills are so crucial is the growing recourse to distance education, both in programs of study and in lifelong learning. The Conseil deems that the education system must ensure individuals are ready for lifelong learning by the end of compulsory education, namely through the use of digital resources.

## 5. Learning Evaluation

As many of the organizations the Conseil consulted remarked, the use of supervised exams to assess learning lends itself poorly to distance education. Those in compulsory education further noted that the increased number of evaluations impinges on teaching, are overly focused on ranking students, and leave little room for professional judgement. In higher education, these practices can have an impact on academic and career transitions. Learning assessment benchmarks are seen as lacking, often summed up as rehashing in exams concepts learned by rote. Organizations consulted in the adult education sector stressed the stringency of prerequisites for certification of studies, which are not as flexible as they are in compulsory education. The use of teachers' professional judgement is also limited in this sector.

The Conseil recently devoted an entire report to learning evaluation, in which it called for genuine and criterion-referenced evaluation practices both to support student learning and attest to achievement, using often high standards—an exit profile—and without resorting to comparisons between learners (Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, 2018). **Evaluation practices based more on professional judgement and collecting evidence of learning would have certainly made shifting to distance learning easier** for all levels and sectors of the education system.

## 6. Mental Health and Well-Being

A clear consensus emerged from all the submissions the Conseil received: mental health issues among learners and staff alike existed across the education system well before COVID-19. **The stress experienced since the start of the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing vulnerabilities.** In compulsory education, stress is one of the leading causes of understaffing and paucity of available resources to adequately help children and youth. In higher education, financial insecurity for a proportion of the student body spells serious trouble when dealing with the fallout of being locked down, i.e. job loss, isolation. The lessons learned from the pandemic have led some organizations to question lecture-style instruction as this does not encourage interaction between students. In adult education, learners come with a wide range of profiles, many of them already vulnerable. The Ministère de l'Éducation and the Ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur are well aware of the toll mental health issues have taken and have announced investment in mental health and well-being resources and services.

In recent years, the Conseil has examined issues related to child and youth mental health and well-being. While the vast majority were doing well before the pandemic, it had noted an upward trend in mental health problems (Couture, 2019). In its brief on the well-being of elementary school children (Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, 2020b), the Conseil took a stand in favour of a comprehensive and universal preventive approach, one which could be adopted by other levels and sectors of the education system.

## Organizational Lessons Learned During the COVID-19 Crisis: Ideas from the Front Lines

The Conseil's consultations have also made it possible to take stock of lessons learned across all levels of the education system since the onset of the pandemic, and show that the system's resilience can be built up by reducing its vulnerabilities. These lessons need to be shared with the entire network, and some might even help reduce systemic vulnerabilities if they are developed and become mainstays of continuous improvement. A few of these lessons are summarized below.

- While the state of communications with relevant ministries at the start of the crisis was deplored, the **organizations consulted approve of the open channels developed since then** and believe these should be kept open and further developed. Moving forward, the immediate creation of crisis response teams comprised of representatives from the education sector (including all occupational categories), public health officials and ministries should be part of protocols triggered in crisis situations.
- After having experienced distance education and remote work, members of the organizations consulted believe that these new ways of learning and working are here to stay, but **there is a need to circumscribe them**.
- Organizations noted that the pandemic caught an education system already vulnerable due to years of underfunding by surprise. The best solution would be to **maintain adequate and predictable funding**, adapted to the realities of the different levels and sectors of the education system.
- On the question of teaching practices, **innovative approaches experimented with in the last months deserve to be disseminated** so that teachers can continue building on this momentum. Also, organizations stressed the need to measure the unavoidable learning delays, revise expectations accordingly and increase resources to screen for students encountering learning difficulties, and would like to see the **continuation of tutoring services** set up in the spring of 2021.
- The use of digital technology has gained prominence in educational practices, and most of the organizations consulted considered it **an asset to be retained and further developed**. This means continuing to train and support employees (and parents of elementary or secondary school students), IT infrastructure maintenance, and developing resources adapted to educational objectives.
- Remote teaching and learning must also continue to be developed in higher education. Organizations wish to see it included in any debate on the **importance of the campus as a place of social interaction**.
- **Distance learning should be part of services offered in adult education**, making it easier to strike a work-study-life balance. In vocational education, this could also facilitate organizing internships.
- Many organizations are interested in furthering the debate begun at the time of shifting to distance education on evaluation objectives and practices. One suggestion was creating a **working group on formal assessment, evaluation and success rates and the role of teachers' professional judgment**.
- Lastly, some organizations believe it critical to increase **mental health resources** for employees and learners alike at every level and sector of the education system. These resources should be maintained as long as needed.

In total, the experiences, adaptations and innovations that have emerged within the education system since the onset of the pandemic indicate a number of concrete actions that can be taken, disseminated or sustained to improve practices in the immediate term and strengthen the resilience of the system over the long term.

## Guidelines and Courses of Action

Crises can sometimes act as catalysts for positive change, but organizations need leadership to ensure that actions undertaken in responding to a disruption will lead to a new beginning. The education will certainly not emerge from several years of a pandemic unscathed. Given that change seems inevitable, the Conseil offers three broad guidelines relating to individuals, organizations and the government to ensure positive change results in a more resilient education system able to weather disruptions great and small.

### Prioritize People in Adapting to Change by Supporting Staff, Students and Learners

- Ensure for as long as necessary professional services required to recognize and support all individuals affected emotionally, academically and occupationally by the pandemic, not only in the areas of mental health and learning, but also in digital and teaching skills built around the needs of each level of the education system.
- Reaffirm the ongoing importance of establishing relational security as a necessary foundation for learning, both face-to-face and remotely, at every level of the education system.
- Encourage the development of a supportive culture of learning that fosters a path toward learner autonomy.
- Fund cohort studies of students and education staff impacted by the pandemic and encourage analysis of relevant data collated to this end by institutions and ministries.

### Leverage Organizational Lessons Learned

- Avoid “wait-and-see”: identify areas of concern for each organization in the education system to operationalize them within a shared vision.
- Continue developing and improving communication tools introduced at the start of the pandemic.
- Clearly circumscribe the delivery of distance education and services while balancing the importance of educational institutions as living environments.
- Build on intra-organizational cooperation and foster autonomy.

### **Government Leadership: Resist the Temptation to Return to a Pre-Pandemic “Normal”**

- Support and disseminate positive lessons learned by individuals and organizations while ensuring equity, accessibility and system-wide coherence.
- Consult with the entire education community in determining which actions could minimize the negative impacts of the pandemic and strengthen the long-term resilience of the education system.
- Include the education system in any strategy for the continuance of essential public infrastructures.

## Courses of Action

### Prioritize People

Maintain the priorities set in the ministère de l'Éducation's *2021-2022 Revitalization Plan for Educational Success*.

Maintain the priorities set in the ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur's *Action Plan for Success in Higher Education*.

Upgrade the offer of continuous education, pedagogical support and digital training at every level and sector of the education system, and make provisions for the time needed for this training. Parents could also be provided with digital training courses in supporting their children.

Collate and make available the data needed for studies that track cohorts impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, from early education through post-secondary studies.

Promote the use of assessment methods to support learning that allow integrating and putting into practice acquired knowledge and skills.

Ensure digital equity for all learners enrolled in either public or private schools.

### Leverage Organizational Lessons Learned

Maintain and further develop communication channels introduced since the start of the pandemic to cultivate open lines between ministries, organizations and institutions.

Ensure all education professions are well-represented in any decision-making process on the organization of services.

Compile a directory of "good ideas" that came out of the pandemic and a forum for sharing them.

Maintain post-pandemic virtual school services for all students that stand to benefit from them.

Standardize and establish benchmarks for the delivery of distance learning services: in partnership with labour organizations, define tasks and ensure equal status in the case of equivalent tasks between those providing services remotely and those who do so face-to-face.

Benchmark remote work in the education system by considering the impacts of organizational operations and understaffing.

Enhance subsidiarity: provide schools, school service centres and school boards with sufficient flexibility to scale the use of funds to local needs.

Define areas of responsibility and latitude for every level of management in the education system and include the concept of resilience in management processes.

### Resist the Temptation to Return to a Pre-Pandemic "Normal"

Continue to consult all levels of the education system in gathering and sharing organizational lessons learned and scale up those likely to strengthen the resilience of system.

Clarify, at the government level, the status of education as an essential public service as well as the necessary infrastructures to provide educational services.

The Conseil took on the mandate to examine **the state** of education given the extraordinary circumstances unleashed by the COVID-19 pandemic and **the needs** that were heightened by these events. Its findings show that while the crisis may have created unprecedented challenges for parents, employees, management and policy-makers and learners alike, it has not spawned any new major vulnerabilities in the education system—it has instead exacerbated pre-existing ones.

Despite the efforts made, the education system’s resilience in weathering the crisis fell somewhat short of what was hoped for. Educational activities were maintained in one way or another most of the time, but came with the heavy cost of well-being, physical and mental health, school drop outs, job losses and the quality of life (current and future). Returning to a pre-pandemic normal, even with years of human and financial resources to mitigate the learning loss, will not hide the scars nor enable the education system to respond to future disruptions. The best way to honour the sacrifices made—and to be made—is not to aim for an education system that simply moves past the crisis, but rather for one that is more mature and resilient because and in spite of the crisis. The extraordinary circumstances we find ourselves in at the present time call for a strong political will that makes education a priority. Strengthening the resilience of the education system in tackling 21st century challenges is a defining societal undertaking, one much richer and more stimulating than simply returning to the old “normal.”



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