

Pandemic Preparedness and Response – Department of Education and Early Childhood Development



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2023 Volume II Chapter 3 Highlights

School operational plans were kept updated and remained consistent with the guidance provided

Issues with collective agreement provisions were successfully addressed

Air quality concerns were known and plans have been developed to address issues

We found that the Return to School Plan was consistent with directives and adequate central services support was provided to the districts

Overall Conclusions

- The Department responded effectively to the COVID-19 pandemic by continuing to provide public education and protecting the health and safety of students.
- Improvements can be made in planning, training and communication to better prepare for future disruptions to business continuity.

About the Audit

Introduction to the Audit

- 3.1 The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (the Department) is responsible to provide public education for all children from kindergarten (K) through grade 12. It is comprised of two sectors, anglophone and francophone. Each sector is responsible for its own curriculum, student services and assessment.

Why we Chose this Topic

- 3.2 A motion was passed in the Legislative Assembly on March 31, 2022, requesting that our Office undertake a review of the provincial government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 3.3 As of October 1, 2022, over 102,000 children in New Brunswick were enrolled in the K-12 school system.
- 3.4 The COVID-19 pandemic impacted the education system, including public health lockdowns, school closures, and staff and student absences due to illness.

Auditee

- 3.5 The auditee was the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, and we also obtained audit evidence from the seven school districts.

Audit Scope

- 3.6 Our audit scope included educational services for K-12 and covered the period from **March 11, 2020** (World Health Organization declared COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic) to **March 14, 2022** (Province lifted emergency restrictions for the second time). We examined information outside this period as we deemed necessary. See details in Appendix II and III.

Audit Objective

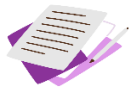
- 3.7 Our audit objective was to determine if the Department responded effectively to the COVID-19 pandemic by:
- continuing to provide public education (grades K-12)
 - protecting the health and safety of students throughout the pandemic

Conclusion

- 3.8 The Department responded effectively to the COVID-19 pandemic by continuing to provide public education and by protecting the health and safety of students throughout the pandemic. However, improvements can be made in the areas of planning, training and communication that can better prepare the education system for future disruptions to business continuity.

Summary of Findings

- 3.9 The Department:



did not ensure updated pandemic plans were in place prior to the COVID-19 pandemic



acted quickly to support districts in the creation and upkeep of operational plans, aligned with central government, Public Health, and Public Safety



supported districts with the provision of central services including negotiation of memoranda to collective agreements, capital infrastructure and transportation. However, we noted improvements in the areas of hybrid learning, coordination, and communication



evaluated and reported on aspects of the pandemic response such as mechanical ventilation, return to school plans, the laptop subsidy program, and outbreak management processes



took actions to address deficiencies, however, not all actions were complete as of the time of this work



did not ensure emergency management training was provided



does not have plans to undertake an after-action review

Background

- 3.10 The Department is responsible to:
- establish educational goals and standards
 - establish service goals and standards
 - provide a provincial education plan
- 3.11 The Department may:
- prescribe or approve instructional organization, programs and services as well as evaluation procedures
 - establish policies related to education, health and well-being of staff and students, student transportation and school infrastructure
- 3.12 Regulation 84-7 under the *Emergency Measures Act* authorizes the New Brunswick Emergency Measures Organization (NBEMO) to be responsible for stimulating and coordinating emergency preparedness and for coordinating preparedness planning and training by departments of the Government of New Brunswick. Under this legislation, the Department is to develop policies, plans and guidelines for school authorities for the protection of students during an emergency.
- 3.13 Data from the Department reports that New Brunswick students lost approximately 17 weeks of learning time due to full closure as a result of COVID-19. Student attendance was impacted throughout the pandemic as demonstrated by a 30 percent increase in average days absent per student rising from 1.15 days in the last three months of 2018 to 1.50 days during the pandemic.

Lack of Updated Plans and Training

- 3.14 Given the importance of continuity of educational services, especially for longer term and/or widespread emergencies, an updated business continuity plan is crucial. While the Department had a business continuity plan that was developed for the H1N1 Influenza Pandemic in 2009, it was not updated and had not been tested. Despite this, the Department did react quickly and established a new plan in March 2020.
- 3.15 Emergency plans were established prior to the pandemic for events such as bomb threats, vandalism, etc., however, no emergency training was provided prior to or during the pandemic. Training had not yet been completed as of July 2023.

Recommendations

- 3.16 We recommend the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development ensure that a business continuity plan is kept up to date, reflects the specific educational needs for potential long-term emergencies (including pandemics) and is periodically tested according to a predefined schedule.**
- 3.17 We recommend the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development ensure adequate training is provided to staff identified with key roles and responsibilities in business continuity plans according to a predefined schedule.**

Return to School Plan was Consistent with Directives

- 3.18 Schools were first closed March 16, 2020, and some educational services resumed remotely on April 6, 2020. By summer 2020, the Department was working closely with WorkSafeNB, the Department of Health and school districts, planning for the return of teachers and students to schools in September. The Department developed a Return to School Plan with the objective of limiting the spread of COVID-19 while providing for quality education and student services.

- 3.19 The COVID-19 cabinet committee reviewed and approved the Department’s plans for the 2020-2021 school year. Based on our audit work we were able to determine the Return to School Plan was consistent with the direction of government and the advice and recommendations of Public Health and Public Safety.

Guidance was Consistently Reflected in School Operational Plans

- 3.20 School operational plans were created by schools using guidance and templates provided in the Departmental Return to School Plan and Healthy and Safe School materials. The districts reviewed the plans in consultation with their health and safety coordinators and provided support to schools in the updating of their operational plans.
- 3.21 Our audit work concluded that school operational plans were up to date and consistent with direction that was provided by the Department based on guidance provided by Public Health, and Public Safety.

Adequate Central Services Support

- 3.22 We evaluated whether or not the Department provided adequate central services support to the districts.

Negotiation of Memoranda to Collective Agreements

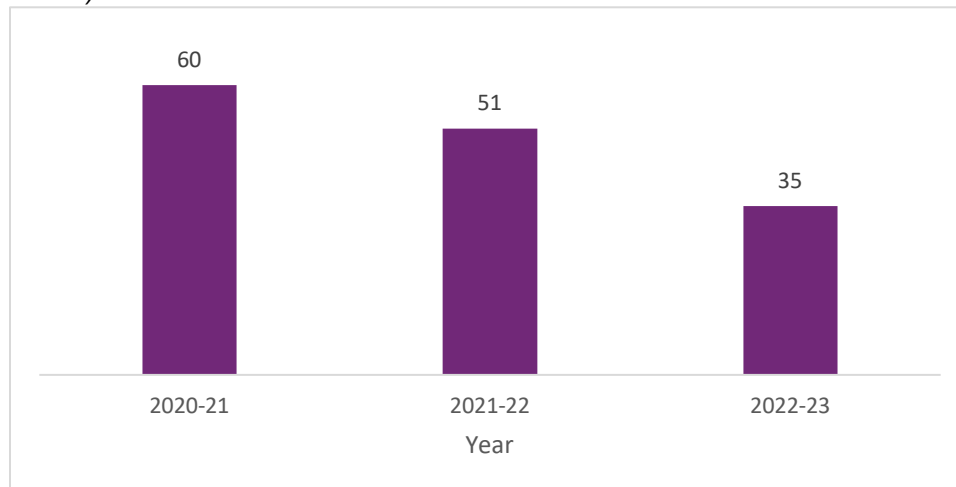
- 3.23 The Department of Finance and Treasury Board (FTB) provided support to departments in the area of health and safety, critical staffing and union relations. The employees within the Department and districts belong to five different union groups, however, none of the collective agreements contained sufficient flexibility to allow for the many circumstances (e.g., working hours, worker mobility, sick leave, etc.) that arose during the pandemic. The Department did provide support by working closely with FTB to successfully address the gaps through the development of several memoranda of understanding and letters of agreement.

Capital Infrastructure – Air Quality

- 3.24 In 2020-21, the Department reported that 60 of 294 schools did not have integrated mechanical ventilation systems. Between 2021 and 2023 an additional six schools were identified as requiring mechanical ventilation improvements. Two consulting firms were hired to measure carbon dioxide (CO₂) levels in a sample of rooms at these 60 schools. Results did not demonstrate serious health or safety concerns.

- 3.25 By fall 2021, due to air quality and its possible correlation to COVID-19, the Department began working with the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure (DTI) to better understand outbreaks and mechanical ventilation systems in schools.
- 3.26 The Department distributed two air filtration units per classroom, in the schools lacking mechanical ventilation. In addition, the Department undertook efforts to install mechanical ventilation systems in schools without one. Mechanical ventilation systems were installed in nine schools in 2022-23. The Departmental 2022-23 multi-year capital budget indicates that upgrades to integrated mechanical ventilation will be complete for all schools by 2026.
- 3.27 CO₂ levels are published on the departmental website. Testing is risk-based, schools who have a mechanical ventilation system are tested for one year after installation. Schools that demonstrate improved readings, CO₂ levels below 1,500 parts per million (ppm) through mechanical ventilation improvements or other causes are not retested in future years. Therefore, schools that are retested did not show sufficient improvement in CO₂ levels. Exhibit 3.1 shows a decrease in the number of schools who did not meet optimal CO₂ levels.

Exhibit 3.1 – Number of Schools Tested (Did Not Show Sufficient Improvements in CO₂ Levels)

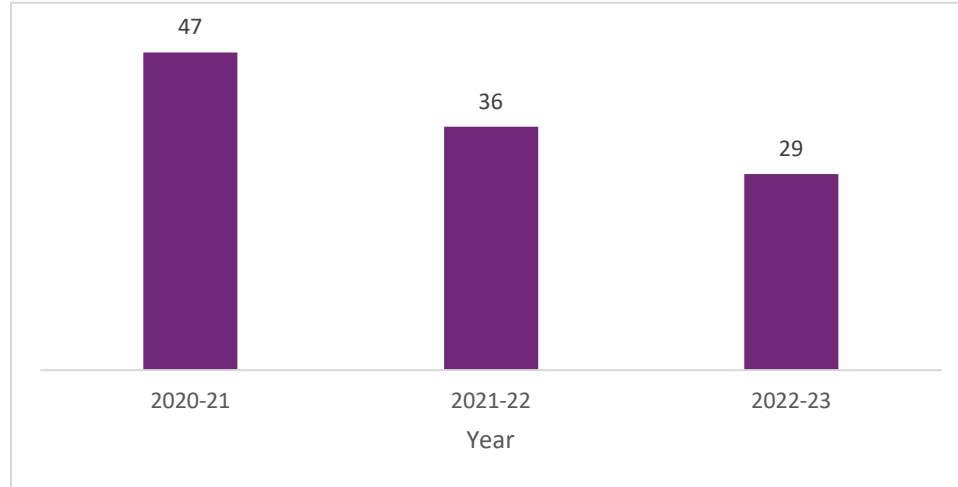


Source: Prepared by AGNB with information from the Department (unaudited)

- 3.28 WorkSafeNB sets the threshold for concern for CO₂ at 5,000 parts per million (ppm) over an eight-hour period. Information provided by the Department shows that no schools had peak or average CO₂ levels over 5,000 ppm in any of the years reported (2020-2021, 2021-2022 and 2022-2023).

- 3.29 Data shows a reduction in the number of schools with CO₂ levels above 1,500 ppm from 47 schools in 2020-21 to 29 schools in 2022-23. Although deemed safe, rooms with CO₂ levels above 1,500 ppm are less than optimal for learning when tested following peak periods of stagnation. We examined departmental data and found schools exceeding 1,500 ppm were as shown in Exhibit 3.2.

Exhibit 3.2 – Number of Schools With Peak CO₂ Levels Above 1,500 ppm



Source: Prepared by AGNB with information from the Department (unaudited)

Capital Infrastructure – Laptops

- 3.30 The Return to School Plan for September 2020 required students in grades 9-12 to have a device to support a hybrid model of learning (at home and school). The Department launched the laptop subsidy program to provide financial assistance for low to middle income families to purchase laptops. During the 2020-2021 school year, the Department reported that a total of 8,600 students were financially supported.
- 3.31 As schools pivoted to online learning, it quickly became apparent that many older schools had insufficient internal network capacity to support increased demands. In September 2020, only new schools had adequate internal network wiring to support online meetings with large numbers of people. The Government of Canada provided \$39.79 million to New Brunswick through the Safe Return to Class Fund and a portion of that funding was used to ensure schools and classrooms had improved network capacity. The Department reported that by June 2021, the project was complete.

Pupil Transportation

- 3.32 The *Education Act* authorizes the Minister to establish policies and guidelines with respect to student transportation. Regulation 2001-51 under the Act states that it is the responsibility of the district superintendents to provide student transportation.

- 3.33 The Transportation Policy on the Departmental website states that the Department is “*committed to ensuring students are transported to and from school in a secure manner.*” The Department established directives for student transportation during the pandemic that were reviewed by central government.
- 3.34 As the Department began to prepare for the 2020-21 school year, it was recognized that social distancing, disinfecting and increasing the numbers of buses and drivers would be required. The Department:
- procured 60 buses a year earlier than planned
 - asked parents and guardians who were able to do so, to transport their children to and from school
 - reformulated bus routes
 - sourced products for disinfecting buses
 - supported bus driver recruitment
 - increased bus driver training
- 3.35 The Department documented procedures and provided online training videos to assist drivers in learning the new protocols. Additionally, they supported districts by advertising and promoting driver recruitment and providing opportunities for additional training.
- 3.36 By September 2021, guidance was provided in the Healthy and Safe Schools documents, and buses returned to regular capacity. There were still driver shortages, so the Department continued to provide increased opportunities for bus driver training.

Virtual Learning – Training

- 3.37 Training provided to teachers on virtual learning was ad hoc and provided at the district level. Teachers, in turn, were tasked with training students on how the technology worked. There was no centralized coordination or oversight by the Department; thus, no way for them to know how well things were going or where the gaps were. The Department informed us that by October 2020, some teachers still could not sign into Microsoft Teams (the software provided as the online learning platform). Teachers expressed their concerns that training was limited to how to use the technology tool itself and not how to provide effective remote learning.

Recommendation

- 3.38 We recommend the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development ensure consistent, appropriate virtual learning training is provided to district staff.**

Communications

- 3.39 The New Brunswick Provincial Pandemic Coordination Plan (PPCP) states that the Department is responsible to communicate government decisions consistently to relevant staff, the public education system, and families. While the Department did not have a pandemic communications plan pre-pandemic, they reacted quickly to develop communication strategies.
- 3.40 The Department established a toll-free number to assist in answering questions and districts provided support with the goal of reducing calls going directly to schools. Communications were initially managed at the school level, but due to unmanageable volumes, were moved to the district.
- 3.41 Communications from Public Health were often technically complex, last minute, and not always in both official languages. Departmental staff noted the lack of translation resources during periods of heightened planning and communications.

Recommendation

- 3.42 We recommend the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development ensure that a communications plan is in place for similar future emergencies, and it should incorporate lessons learned.**

Planning Evaluation / Reporting

- 3.43 We noted the Department has evaluated and reported upon various aspects of the pandemic response plan. The departmental website contains public reporting on the return to school plans, assessment and evaluation, air quality and network infrastructure in schools. Annual reports are also available online, detailing actions that supported the response to the pandemic.
- 3.44 However, the Department has not performed and has no current plan to perform an after-action review. Such a review would inform planning for other potential emergencies, by detailing what worked well, what did not, and where the material risks are.

Recommendation

- 3.45 We recommend the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development ensure a comprehensive after-action review is completed to identify areas for improvement.**

Appendix I: Recommendations and Responses

Par. #	Recommendation	Department’s Response	Target Implementation Date
We recommend the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development:			
3.16	Ensure that a business continuity plan is kept up to date, reflects the specific educational needs for potential long-term emergencies (including pandemics) and is periodically tested according to a predefined schedule.	Agreed. Updated Business Continuity Planning (BCP) began during the spring of 2023 and is currently being updated. This document will continue to evolve to meet circumstances.	Updated BCP submitted to Executive Council Office (ECO) July 1, 2023. Modifications will be ongoing.
3.17	Ensure adequate training is provided to staff identified with key roles and responsibilities in business continuity plans according to a predefined schedule.	Agreed. Training plan currently being developed.	Appropriate training to be included in staff training plans beginning in 2024.
3.38	Ensure consistent, appropriate virtual learning training is provided to district staff.	Agreed. Financial support for use of virtual tools is now including in onboarding and ongoing professional learning for teachers.	Implemented
3.42	Ensure that a communications plan is in place for similar future emergencies, and it should incorporate lessons learned.	Agreed. As part of BCP referenced above.	As above

Par. #	Recommendation	Department's Response	Target Implementation Date
We recommend the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development:			
3.45	Ensure a comprehensive after-action review is completed to identify areas for improvement.	Agreed. ECO is leading a comprehensive after-action review of which the Department will be a part.	Underway

Appendix II: Audit Objective and Criteria

The objective and criteria for our audit of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's response to the Pandemic are presented below. The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and their senior management reviewed and agreed with the objective and associated criteria.

Objective 1	To determine if EECD responded effectively to the COVID-19 pandemic by: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• continuing to provide public education, K-12• protecting the health and safety of students
Criterion 1	The Department should have ensured that plans were in place for the continuation of education while protecting the health and safety of students, throughout the pandemic.
Criterion 2	The Department should have enabled the school districts in the implementation of their pandemic response by providing central services including: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• negotiation of memoranda to collective agreements• teacher education and certification• human resource services• budgeting and accounting services• capital infrastructure• transportation framework
Criterion 3	The Department should have evaluated the implementation of the pandemic response plans and publicly reported the outcomes.
Criterion 4	The Department should have taken corrective action against observed deficiencies to ensure the effective implementation of plans.

Appendix III: Independent Assurance Report

This independent assurance report was prepared by the Office of the Auditor General of New Brunswick on the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and its response to the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of public education from kindergarten to Grade 12. Our responsibility was to provide objective information, advice, and assurance to assist the Legislative Assembly in its scrutiny of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development on its pandemic response practices.

All work in this audit was performed to a reasonable level of assurance in accordance with the Canadian Standard on Assurance Engagements (CSAE) 3001 – Direct Engagements set out by the Chartered Professional Accountants of Canada (CPA Canada) in the CPA Canada Handbook – Assurance.

AGNB applies the Canadian Standard on Quality Management 1 – Quality Management for Firms That Perform Audits or Reviews of Financial Statements, or Other Assurance or Related Services Engagements. This standard requires our office to design, implement, and operate a system of quality management, including policies or procedures regarding compliance with ethical requirements, professional standards, and applicable legal and regulatory requirements.

In conducting the audit work, we have complied with the independence and other ethical requirements of the Rules of Professional Conduct of Chartered Professional Accountants of New Brunswick and the Code of Professional Conduct of the Office of the Auditor General of New Brunswick. Both the Rules of Professional Conduct and the Code are founded on fundamental principles of integrity, objectivity, professional competence and due care, confidentiality, and professional behaviour.

In accordance with our regular audit process, we obtained the following from management:

- confirmation of management’s responsibility for the subject under audit
- acknowledgement of the suitability of the criteria used in the audit
- confirmation that all known information that has been requested, or that could affect the findings or audit conclusion, has been provided
- confirmation that the findings in this report are factually based

Period covered by the audit:

The audit covered the period between March 11, 2020 (World Health Organization declared COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic) to March 14, 2022 (Province lifted restrictions for the second time). This is the period to which the audit conclusion applies. However, to gain a more complete understanding of the subject matter of the audit, we also examined certain matters outside of this period as deemed necessary.

Date of the report:

We obtained sufficient and appropriate audit evidence on which to base our conclusion on December 8, 2023, in Fredericton, New Brunswick.