District Approaches to Learning in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Presentation to the Metro-Vancouver BCSSA

Nov. 26, 2021

Research partnership between the University of British Columbia and the British Columbia School Superintendents Association
Goals for the Meeting

- Summarize the study
- Have a conversation about the findings and next steps for finalizing the report
- Consider:
  - Additional analyses
  - Future directions and recommendations arising from the work
Overview of the Presentation

• Study purpose and scope
• Relating our purpose to a broader context
• Research methods
• Findings
• Connections and future directions
• To document and understand school districts’ approaches to learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic
• To highlight the strengths and challenges associated with the responses, in general and for particular groups of learners
• To link our findings to the existing literature/knowledge base
• To use our findings and others’ findings to inform decisions going forward
## Research Partners

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<th>Metro-British Columbia School Superintendents Assoc.</th>
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Scope of Research

• In partnership with school superintendents and school districts in the Metro Vancouver area
• 13 participating districts
• Focused on elementary grades/schools
• Focused primarily on the 2020-2021 school year
Research Questions

How have districts adapted instruction to address the ongoing challenges of COVID-19?

How well have the various models met the needs of the populations served (with emphasis on vulnerable groups of learners)?
Broader Context
Predominant Approaches to Learning in BC’s Elementary Schools Pre-Pandemic

• Face-to-face learning

• Distributed Learning (aka online learning)
  • “a method of instruction that relies primarily on indirect communication between students and teachers, including internet or other electronic-based delivery, teleconferencing or correspondence.”
  • DL programs more available for older grades/students

• Alternative Programs

• Homeschooling

BCTF, 2018; Government of British Columbia, 2021
How Teaching and Learning Changed During the Pandemic

Pan-Canadian Response

• Allocation of pandemic relief funds
• Variability intra-provincially and interprovincially

BC Response

• $45.6 million in provincial funding used largely to create/expand online learning
• Districts remained flexible due to evolving PHOs
• Variance in district responses
What we know about the online learning: best practices

- **Online learning:**
  - differentiated learning and individualized instruction
  - small group instruction
  - flexible instruction

- **Blended learning approaches:**
  - stronger teacher-student connection
  - improved social connection for students
  - flexible learning approach

Capstone, 2021; Garcia & Weiss, 2020
Primary factors tied to online learning success:

- Effective teacher-student communication
- At-home support to facilitate student learning.
- Student access to the technology, knowledge of how to use the technologies and some independence in using the technology.

Capstone, 2021; Garcia & Weiss, 2020
What we know about the face-to-face and online learning: best practices

- Teacher training in the modality is essential
- Ongoing professional development linked to:
  - Improved teacher wellbeing
  - Reduced teacher stress
  - Increased feelings of teacher competence
  - Enhanced student-teacher cohesion
- Strong curriculum necessary regardless of modality
- Strong curriculum and pedagogical practices important for all modalities

Capstone, 2021; Garcia & Weiss, 2020; Loeb, 2020
What we know about online learning: challenges

Relative Challenges of Online Learning

• Learners who struggle, academically or behaviourally, are more likely to struggle online
• Less availability for specialized supports/interventions for students with special learning needs
• Limited research on best practice; what is available is mostly anecdotal
• Easier to motivate students face-to-face
• Easier to encourage student attendance face-to-face

Throughout the pandemic, online learning is linked to:

• Increased screen time
• Increased Mental Health needs
• Increased rates of isolation

Burdina et al. 2019; Campbell, 2021; Capstone, 2021; Garcia & Weiss, 2020; Loeb, 2020; Nagata, 2021; Tomaino, Greenberg, Kagawa-Purohit et al., 2021
Research Methods

- Participants recruited through Superintendents of the Metro Vancouver branch of the BCSSA
- Nominated persons they considered knowledgeable
- Knowledgeable person participated in two phases
  - Phase I: Online survey/questionnaire
  - Phase II: Follow-up virtual interviews
Data Collected

13 districts submitted consent forms
12 districts completed survey/questionnaires
11 district participated in the follow-up interviews
Analysis

• Descriptive statistics used to analyze demographic data and characterize districts

• Thematic and content analyses used to synthesize information from open-ended survey questions, interviews, and literature
Findings
Demographic Data
Top Languages Across Districts

- English: 32.7%
- Mandarin: 21.4%
- Punjabi: 12.3%
- Tagalog: 9.2%
- Farsi: 6.1%
- Korean: 6.1%
- Arabic: 6.1%
- French: 6.1%
- Vietnamese: 3.1%
- Tagalog: 9.2%
Demographic Data Groupings

Small
~5000-16000 students
- Conseil Scolaire francophone
- Delta
- New Westminster
- North Vancouver
- Sea to Sky
- Sunshine Coast
- West Vancouver

Medium
~22000-33000 students
- Burnaby
- Coquitlam
- Langley

Large
~50000-70000 students
- Surrey
- Vancouver
**Student Demographic Data Across Districts**

**SMALL DISTRICTS**
- 14% SPED designation
- 23% ELL
- 10% Indigenous
- 47% moved between learning approaches

**MEDIUM DISTRICTS**
- 14% SPED designation
- 23% ELL
- 8% Indigenous
- 70% moved between learning approaches

**LARGE DISTRICTS**
- 7% SPED designation
- 30% ELL
- 4% Indigenous
- 28% moved between learning approaches
Approaches to Learning
Online education and traditional place-based classrooms

Face-to-face with an online component

Instruction face-to-face and asynchronously

Leveraging online and in-person learning

Online education and traditional place-based classrooms

BLENDED LEARNING
Relative Strengths Across Districts

Leveraging already existing structures and platforms
- E.g., Microsoft Teams, Canvas
- E.g., expanding already established programs

Transitional learning provided sense of safety for families amidst pandemic
- Flexibility of choosing when to return to school
- Immunocompromised students and families

Ability to adapt to the demand of the pandemic
- “Overall, our school staff members have done a heroic job of maintaining a responsive and supportive orientation throughout the pandemic. Our principals and vice-principals have shown exceptional leadership. We feel privileged as a smaller Metro-Vancouver district, that we could be nimble and extremely responsive to any issues, large or small, as they surfaced.”
Relative Strengths Across Districts

Vulnerable Groups of Learners
- Programs in place to ensure access to technology and food security
- Extra support for students with diverse learning needs
  - E.g., Indigenous students: staffing to work on-reserve
  - E.g., ELL students provided with online language learning supports

Professional Development
- Regular Pro D opportunities (e.g., student evaluation, technology support)
- Increased opportunities for collaboration

"One of the biggest strengths of these approaches was the learning that took place as a result of the training that was offered. In addition to the training that was done prior to the start of these programs (or the extension of the programs), there was a great deal of mentorship and collaboration, but coordinated and naturally occurring."
Relative Challenges Across Districts

Parental Support
- Multiple students per household
- Arranging adequate daycare
- Software literacy

Student
- Lack of peer and teacher connections
- Online engagement
- Mental health concerns

"Many students were on their own at home, with no adult supervision or with the adults also working from home and not able to supervise and help their children as much as they would have liked."

"Students - maintaining a sense of connectedness to the school community is the biggest challenge. Concerns about emotional well-being."
Relative Challenges Across Districts

Teachers
• New teaching modalities
• Varying levels of acceptance
• Increased workload

"Teachers faced challenges as they realized they could not just transfer their in-school methods and materials to on-line teaching. They had to learn many new computer skills, use different teaching platforms, and find new ways of evaluating students."

Equity, Diversity & Inclusion
• Increased demand for food services
• ELL learners had greater challenges with online learning
• Limited supports to vulnerable learners
• More challenging for low-SES students and families

"Significant equity issues - it is a rich get richer and a poor get poorer scenario in all aspects of the learning process."
Connections and Future Directions

How do our findings map onto the findings of others?

- Offers a different perspective
- Creative planning and pivoting to support equitable access to education
- Creative planning: serving diverse needs
- Disrupting the status quo

What are areas in need of future research?

- Online learning in an elementary context
- Teachers' experiences supporting students and families
- Teacher mental health and well-being
- Further explore issues around student equity magnified by the pandemic
Thank You

Districts and educators who participated in the survey and interviews
Dr. Tinney for the opportunity and guidance
BCSSA for your support and time today

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