



An elementary classroom that moved to e-learning three times in a row due to COVID-19 cases. A student marching band that braved the elements to play together outside throughout the year. A principal who pleaded to families to trust the school team was doing everything in its power to protect pupils.

These are the realities of mid-pandemic schooling — all of which are captured in a new report compiled by the Seven Oaks School Division.

Superintendent Brian O’Leary said it was important for the division to record the hardships and successes that have occurred over the last two-and-a-half years, and in doing so, acknowledge the time-intensive efforts of all community members to ensure learning has continued.

“(This report) really is a testament to the strength of our education system, and to the resilience, and the creativity and tenacity of our staff,” said O’Leary, who oversees the education of nearly 12,000 students in Winnipeg.

Seven Oaks has published a document detailing a timeline of public health updates, educator accounts of how the virus affected their jobs, including raising anxiety levels, and a breakdown of COVID-19-related expenses.

It was important for the division to record the hardships and successes that have occurred over the last two-and-a-half years, said Superintendent Brian O’Leary. (Ruth Bonneville / Winnipeg Free Press files)

Since March 2020, the division has purchased 75,000 N95 masks, approximately 10,000 litres of disinfectant and close to \$19,000 worth of sanitizer.

“It wasn’t like school at all,” said mother Kamlesh Sharma, describing her children’s educational experience in recent years. “They missed, the most, their friends, gym classes. My son is a badminton player, so they missed tournaments. They missed everything.”

As her children enter Grade 6 and 9 in 2022-23, Sharma said she is excited there will be in-person learning, extracurricular activities, and no mandatory masking.

The mother of two said a return to normalcy will require teachers and parents to keep putting in extra time to catch students up with the content they missed. Sharma noted she has become a math tutor for her youngest because disruptions to face-to-face learning interfered with numeracy lessons.

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Even though the virus and related public health orders caused countless interruptions, academic measures in the division remained “fairly consistent,” according to Seven Oaks’ 28-page report.

“However, gaps emerge when we examine engagement data, suggesting that COVID-19 had a much larger impact on social engagement and mental health,” it states.

Every school year, Seven Oaks surveys its Grades 7 to 12 students via the national OurSCHOOL study. Roughly 2,700 respondents in 13 schools participated in the latest survey undertaken in early 2022. The late 2018 edition included approximately 3,400 students across 14 buildings.

The number of students who reported feeling a positive sense of belonging at school and high self-esteem has dropped by 10 percentage points, respectively. At the same time, the tally disclosing moderate to high levels of anxiety and depression has spiked — up from, in both categories, 29 per cent in 2018 to 40 per cent in 2022.

The data show fewer students overall report that they value school outcomes, practise positive homework behaviour and participate in school clubs and sports. There are worrisome drops among total percentages of pupils who want to finish high school and those who plan to attend post-secondary or pursue an apprenticeship.

Attendance statistics also took a hit. The truancy rate rose by three percentage points in 2022, while the average number of student absences between September and April — a figure that hovered around six in pre-pandemic years — increased to nine.

Greg McFarlane, chairman of the school board — pictured with his children Charlize, 4, and Christian, 8 — feels cautiously optimistic about the new school year. (John Woods / Winnipeg Free Press)

The report notes that attendance, motivation, aspiration, connection and mental health do not exist in silos and Seven Oaks recognizes it needs to support students to improve connectedness — a task leaders say they can accomplish with the return of in-person operations.

Greg McFarlane, chairman of the school board, said he has received no shortage of angry emails or calls since March 2020.

Some community members warned about the consequences of not implementing stricter COVID-19 measures beyond the province's recommendations. Others sounded alarms about the implications of mask-wearing on language development.

In the lead-up to the new school year, McFarlane said his inbox has been quiet and he hopes that is a good sign. The school trustee, who has a kindergartner and third-grader in Seven Oaks, said he feels "cautiously optimistic" about what lies ahead.

Although families are celebrating an end to public health orders, monitoring will be in place and education leaders will continue to communicate frequently with public health officials, he said.

"I'm just wishing everybody the best and a great school year and hope we can get back the things we've lost in the last two years," McFarlane added.

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