

PANDEMIC FALLOUT

Learning Loss, Collateral Damage, and Recovery in Canada's Schools

Paul Bennett | November 2023

Executive Summary

This research study delves into the impact of the massive COVID-19 education disruption on schooling across Canada and the collateral damage now affecting the pandemic generation of students. Approaching four years after the initial shock, the fallout from “education’s long COVID” lingers on in the form of measurable learning loss, stunted social development, and mental-health side effects. Widening knowledge gaps, and attendant problems such as increased school violence and chronic student absenteeism, cry out for more visible, effective, better-coordinated plans for learning recovery.

Learning loss is real, and the latest research confirms that a substantial learning deficit arose early in the pandemic and has persisted over time. It is widespread, affecting student from elementary grades through high school, and is more pronounced in mathematics than in reading. Children with special needs suffered the most.

As many as 200,000 students went missing from school at the height of the first COVID-19 wave of infections. Lower-income families were disproportionately affected, increasing the knowledge gap between students from affluent households and those from disadvantaged households. Smaller and more autonomous schools fared better and provided more consistent, mostly uninterrupted, learning. No one emerged unscathed.

Drawing on extensive research and analysis of the pandemic’s impact on education, this report provides a comprehensive diagnosis of what happened, pieces together the damage, compares the responses of schools across the educational spectrum, and identifies the most effective strategies in closing the persistent learning gap in post-pandemic times. It provides plenty of lessons for education policymakers, school-district leaders, parents, teachers, and families.



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For the full publication, see Bennett, Paul. “Pandemic Fallout: Learning Loss, Collateral Damage, and Recovery in Canada’s Schools.” Cardus, 2023. <https://www.cardus.ca/research/education/reports/pandemic-fallout/>.