

NEWS RELEASE

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Department of Education not prepared for pandemic, but effectively led COVID-19 response: Auditor General

WINNIPEG – The Department of Education and Early Childhood Learning was not prepared for a pandemic, says Auditor General Tyson Shtykalo. Despite this, it effectively led the Kindergarten to Grade 12 school system response to COVID-19—but had not yet begun recovery efforts.

These findings are contained in the report, *Department of Education and Early Childhood Learning: Leadership of the K to 12 Pandemic Response*, released today. The audit assessed whether the Department was prepared for the pandemic, and responded effectively. “This audit has its origins in the outreach work we did to understand the impact COVID-19 was having on Manitobans,” Shtykalo said. “Many conversations came back to the importance of education and the multifaceted impacts of students not being in school.”

The audit found there was no coordinated emergency plan for the Kindergarten to Grade 12 school system. This means the Department had not considered risks to the school system ahead of time, did not consider the continuity of education for the wider system, and was not prepared for the transition to remote learning. “We expected plans would be in place to ensure a consistent standard of high-quality education is available to all students across the province during an emergency—such as a pandemic,” Shtykalo said. “However, we found the Department worked out many details on the fly.”

Despite the lack of a coordinated emergency plan, the audit found the Department initiated a timely response as soon as it became evident normal operations of the school system would be impacted by the pandemic. The Department put in place and maintained an incident management system, provided supports to schools, and consulted with stakeholders to identify risks.

The audit also found the Department had not yet initiated pandemic recovery efforts. “The pandemic had impacts on student learning and mental health,” Shtykalo said. The report notes that the Department needed to begin working with schools and school divisions to develop and implement plans to address

these impacts and to take steps to ensure past weaknesses, like the lack of access to internet or technology, are mitigated in the future. “But this wasn’t done,” the Auditor General said.

The audit focused on the Department’s leadership and oversight of the Kindergarten to Grade 12 school system, and did not conclude on the decisions or actions of other departments, including the Office of the Chief Provincial Public Health Officer, individual schools, or school divisions.

The report includes 8 recommendations to help the Province respond to the long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, and to prepare for a future pandemic, or similar emergency.

To view the report, please visit <http://www.oag.mb.ca/reports>.

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