

Literacy skills suffer amid pandemic learning loss

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Posted: 01/7/2021 3:00 AM

Early assessment scores in Manitoba schools suggest elementary English and French literacy skills have suffered amid the COVID-19 pandemic, while numeracy scores are similar to last year's statistics.

Manitoba has suspended the collection of several K-8 provincewide assessments, but divisions continue to collect and analyze test scores and report cards to find out how students are faring, following the spring learning disruptions.

In Seine River School Division, which encompasses St. Norbert-area classrooms and others southeast of the Manitoba capital, grades 1-3 reading score averages trail slightly behind where they would be in a typical school year.

Superintendent Michael Borgfjord said these students, on average, experienced four months' worth of learning loss in reading — per November 2020 Fountas & Pinnell tests done in the division.

The latest results in Seine River indicate "there's been a change at the bottom and the top" of early-year classes, Borgfjord said.

The number of students who need additional support has increased by 10 per cent over previous years, while the total pupils who exceed grade level expectations has also decreased by approximately 10 per cent.

Meantime, different data from Seine River, as well as the Louis Riel School Division — the latter of which has been analyzing November report cards to determine how many K-8 students scored a three or four (good or excellent proficiency) — show numeracy progress in a different light.

In Louis Riel, fall numeracy averages improved since 2019 in all but one level: Grade 2. The percentage of second graders who achieved a good or excellent first-term score in English reading and writing also dipped, by nine and seven percentage points, respectively.

(In the spring, the division identified 41 per cent of current Grade 2s would need recovery learning in English, French and mathematics, in comparison to 36 per cent of the K-8 population.)

Louis Riel's data also show a significant decrease in early years' pupils French immersion literacy levels. Grade 2 scores dropped by 15 percentage points in French reading and 16 in French writing.

"In French immersion, those early years are so critical in terms of building language... We are creating a very special learning environment where students are immersed in language," said superintendent Christian Michalik.

Double-digit drops in Grade 2, 3 and 4, as well as 7, indicate many students didn't speak French at home in the spring or summer, Michalik said.

Similar to recent research on COVID-19 literacy learning loss out of the University of Alberta, Manitoba data indicate the province's youngest learners have struggled more than older peers.

Recovery reading teacher Lisa Harder said it isn't unusual for there to be literacy learning loss among younger students in any given year, because they are not independent learners and have yet to attain reading proficiency.

Significant gaps this year, however, can be attributed to whether or not students could connect for online lessons, said Harder, who works at both Park La Salle School and École St. Norbert Immersion.

Face-to-face reading intervention strategies cannot be replicated online, said Teresa Hampton, principal of Park La Salle School. That's especially the case with struggling young readers: "You need to be right there, right beside them."

While COVID-19 has complicated close one-on-one reading support, read-alouds on the carpet and mouth-reading through masks, Hampton said teachers are making sure there are lots of opportunities to read and write in all subject areas this year.

Reading recovery, co-teaching and literacy plans are longtime strategies in Seine River.

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