

RESEARCH CONNECTION

Digital realities of Manitoba school divisions

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Why this research is important

From fall 2020 to summer 2021, the study allowed the team to investigate how the pandemic affected the digital realities of school divisions and to see firsthand how digital policy and practice morphed and adapted to meet the learning needs of students, parents, and teachers during the school closures of the Covid-19 pandemic.

How the research was conducted

The study was conducted in two phases. The first phase of this study involved scanning divisional websites and social media presence of select rural and Northern Manitoba school divisions to gather (public) information about digital policies, infrastructure, procedures, and practices. This was done to build a 'digital profile' of rural and Northern Manitoba school divisions, providing local context for the second stage.

The second phase consisted of interviews with school division technology coordinators to delve deeper into the policies and practices identified in the first phase. Interviews also allowed the research team to explore the challenges, solutions, and innovations arising because of the Covid-19 pandemic and related school closures.

What you need to know

The goals of this study were to examine the digital realities for rural education in Manitoba by exploring the current digital policies, programming, and practices in select rural and northern school divisions in Manitoba.

What the researchers found

Our [full report](#) has more detailed findings, but a brief synopsis of our findings in key areas is as follows:

TECHNOLOGY POLICY: All the school divisions examined had policies around digital technology and guidelines around the acceptable use of technology within their schools. Most acceptable use policies and procedures are based on trust, honesty, and responsibility.

POWER DYNAMICS INFLUENCED BY PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE OF POLICY: The philosophical perspectives that undergirded policy statements had significant implications for how decision-making regarding technology was processed. In some divisions, teachers had more control over which software they preferred, how to manage devices, filtering and blocking, etc. In places where power was kept local, divisions could roll out devices quickly and pivot and respond with agility in an online learning environment. The local school board was responsive to the context, including knowledge about barriers such as infrastructure and access, and viewed their job as supporting the decisions from the field and equipping through access to training or funding for infrastructure. At the other end of the spectrum, there were

examples of large distances between teachers and those making the decisions. Sometimes this was further complicated because of large demographics, geography, complex policies, communication issues, or lack of familiarity with existing structures. In these cases, it took longer for things to happen.

Recommendations

- *Digital Equity:* Not being able to access technology such as laptops or not having access to the internet with no data caps was a roadblock faced by many divisions, schools, and students in Manitoba. Manitoba has one of the lowest broadband speeds in Canada. We need to ensure that divisions and schools have sufficient digital infrastructure and HR resources that are equitable across the province. We need to ensure that connectivity, devices, and staffing resources are invested in and supported.
- *Rural Divisions face the most significant challenge in achieving digital equity:* Accessing the internet and internet speeds was one major obstacle for rural divisions and remote regions in Manitoba. We need to invest and build digital equity now.
- *Digital choice is essential:* It is a common and tempting approach to standardize across the province—however, similarly to the success of creating an atmosphere of trust and responsibility of digital use within schools, divisions have demonstrated that retaining their flexibility regarding devices, software, and digital policy rather than being mandated is an effective approach.
- *Levelling up digital skills through professional development and access to learning opportunities for teachers:* The success of the rapid transition to remote learning across the province showcases the digital potential of rural schools and divisions. To make the most effective use of digital technologies in rural and northern regions, it is essential to help teachers, staff, and students continue levelling up their digital skills.

How this research can be used

Our work can help inform stakeholders at various levels—students, caregivers, teachers, administrators, and policymakers—of the effects of technology policies in schools, effective technology use for education and teacher training, digital citizenship, and digital equity.

About the researchers

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