



**INTERNAL
AUDIT TEAM**
Ontario East

COVID-19 Response Review Final Report

Ottawa-Carleton District School Board

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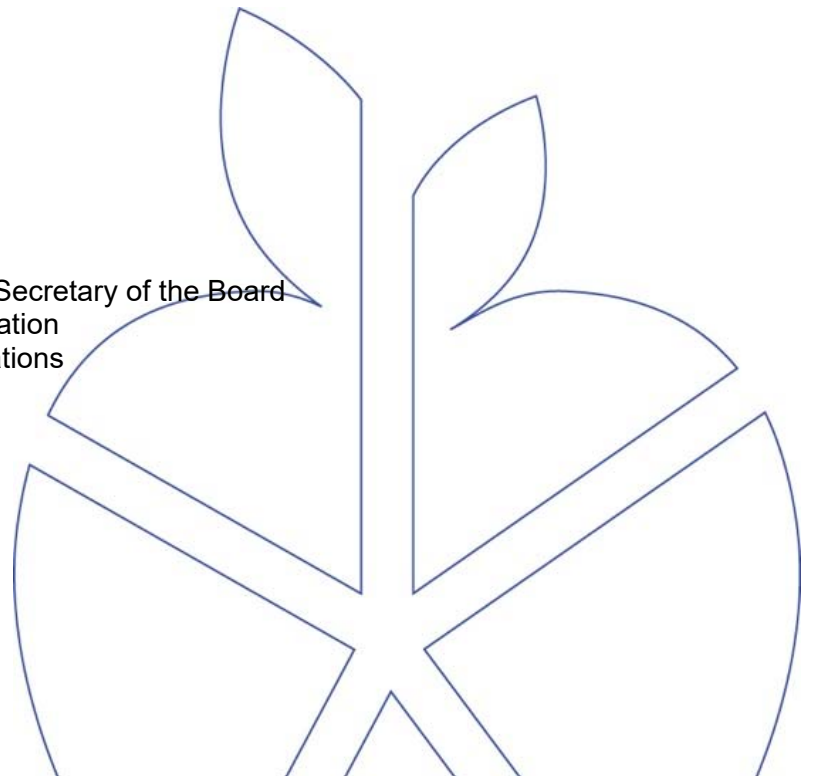
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Executive Summary

In order to reflect upon and capture lessons learned from the response to the COVID-19 crisis MNP LLP (“MNP”) was engaged to conduct a review of the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (“District” or “OCDSB”) response on behalf of the Ontario East Regional Internal Audit Team.

For this review, MNP examined documents provided by the District and interviewed a number of staff members based out of the District’s main board office, as well as representatives from elementary and secondary schools. This report includes a summary of the observations, strengths and opportunities for improvement, as well as the supporting recommendations to help drive continuous improvement and preparations for future disruptions.

The main objective was to review and analyze preparedness, response and recovery activities to identify strengths to be sustained going forward, document lessons learned and identify actions for continuous improvement.

The scope of this review included all phases of OCDSB’s overall response. The phases, and the approximate timeframes assigned to each phase, are:

- Pandemic Preparations and Activation (prior to March 2020)
- Response (April 2020 – September 2022)
- Recovery (September 2022 and ongoing)

Due to the duration of the pandemic some of the Response and Recovery activities overlap.

It is important to note that the District’s role during the pandemic was to operationalize directives, often meant for broader audiences, from the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health and the local public health unit (“PHU”). The focus was on implementing the directives in a manner that ensured the safety of students and minimized the impact to learning. Accordingly, it is not within the scope of this report to assess the effectiveness of these directives, rather, the District’s approach to implementing them.

The scope and duration of the COVID-19 pandemic were unprecedented, and the District’s operating environment and ability to respond was impacted by the following:

- The high volume of information that frequently changed, or was modified
- The requirement to execute new procedures on extremely short notice
- Complexities of being a large, multi-stakeholder organization where a degree of consultation is required prior to implementing new procedures

Overall, and considering the context noted above, the District’s response to COVID- 19 leveraged leading practices in incident management and response.

Noted strengths that supported the response are summarized below:

- **Dedicated and Prolonged Effort from Staff:** All involved in the District’s COVID-19 response worked extremely hard for an extended period of time. The District’s overall strong, focused and collaborative culture clearly pre-dated the pandemic and was evident throughout all interviews conducted during this review.

- **Response Structure and Process:** The response structure and overall process for response was appropriate, effective, and supported sound and timely decision making at the senior level. In addition, the structure and processes used enabled clear communication and information management. Interviewees consistently reported that this positioned the District to respond to the issues and challenges that were within their control.
- **Redeployment of Resources and Collaboration:** Task Forces and staff secondments were set up to quickly gather input from key stakeholders and develop solutions for human resource and operational issues that arose throughout the pandemic. There was collaboration and consultation throughout, and this contributed to the success of overall response efforts.

The District experienced many challenges during the response phase. Many of these were due to factors beyond their control, as noted above. It is also important to note that due to the length of the COVID-pandemic response phase, the District was able to modify their response actions based on lessons learned during earlier phases of the pandemic and many opportunities for improvement at the operational-level have been addressed, most notably the process for distributing IT equipment to students across the District.

Going forward, the District's biggest opportunity for improvement is to dedicate time to capture lessons learned and processes developed during the COVID response by actioning the two considerations listed below.

Summary of Considerations

Consideration #1: Form a separate Task Force/Working Group to identify areas related to pandemic response where additional pre-planning can feasibly be completed. This may include major milestones throughout the school year (i.e. start of the school year), as well as specific challenges that occurred during the response that may reasonably occur again (i.e. contact tracing).

Consideration #2: Document a Pandemic Response Framework to formalize the structure and process implemented during the response. Ensure all existing documentation used during the response is consolidated and included within the Framework.

The Detailed Report section contains insight into observations, and considerations to help improve the current process.

We would like to thank the staff of the Ottawa Carleton District School Board for their assistance during this engagement.

Standards

This engagement was also conducted in conformance with the International Standards for Professional Practice of Internal Auditing.

These procedures were performed in respect of the Ontario Covid-19 framework and the recommendations from the local Public Health Unit.

Limitation on Use of Internal Audit Report



This report is intended primarily for the information and use of the individuals on the distribution list on the cover page of this report and should not be provided to any other individual without the consent of the Regional Internal Audit Manager, Ontario East Region.

Detailed report

A. Preparations & Activation (Prior to March 2020)

Observation:

Similar to most organizations, the District actively began preparing for the pandemic in early March 2020. Initially preparing for a two-week school closure, District leadership leveraged their existing senior management structure to form an Emergency Operations Committee (“EOC”), which consisted of members of the senior management team and key subject matter experts (e.g. representatives from Communications). Once it became clear that the closure would last longer than this initial two-week period, the District adjusted their approach to redeploy staff members and ultimately to prepare for a shift to virtual learning.

Strengths

Response Structure

Within the EOC structure, the Associate Director, Operations was designated as the COVID Lead responsible for providing direction to all schools and serve as the primary point of contact between the District and the Ministry of Education, local PHU and co-terminus school boards in the Greater Ottawa Region.

Communication was cited as a strength throughout the response, and this includes during the District’s preparations. In early March, just prior to the shutdown, the District created a communication matrix to address the key issues that could require messaging and the channels to release these messages. These issues included access to childcare, medical risk/health and salary/benefit continuation. While developing specific messaging was difficult at this point, the District leveraged leading practices by developing supporting tools to do so at their earliest opportunity.

Procurement

The District established a Risk Management department in 2014, and supply chain monitoring fell within this department’s scope of responsibility. The EOC Lead received a daily update on supplies from Risk Management which helped ensure the EOC remained informed on this important issue. The need for personal protective equipment (PPE) was identified earlier in the year, but these supplies were difficult to source and were ultimately diverted to the provincial government for distribution due to the province’s state of emergency declaration. However, the District was successful at procuring PPE for schools and had supplies in place prior to the return to in-person learning. In addition, the District was successful at the procurement of IT equipment for students and reported deploying approximately 12,000 Chromebooks by April 2020.

The District had an existing Procurement Policy and Procedure in place which addressed emergency purchases and allowed them to act quickly to procure appropriate PPE and additional equipment for schools (e.g. desk shields). While sourcing equipment was a challenge, the District

A. Preparations & Activation (Prior to March 2020)

had the structure in place to assist with this, as well as a formal reporting process to ensure the Board remained informed.

Opportunities for Improvement

The EOC structure was in place prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, but the District did not have a specific or updated pandemic response strategy or framework. They also did not have documented backups in place for key positions, or a list of internal subject matter experts (and backups) to consult at the beginning of the pandemic. This opportunity also extends to identifying external stakeholders. Due to the scope of the pandemic, the District was coordinating with multiple external stakeholders, some of which they do not work with on a regular basis, including the City of Ottawa's Emergency Management Team. The District has an opportunity to identify these partners, as well as key contacts, and continue to build on these relationships to facilitate collaboration during future disruptions or emergencies.

While the District did a good job at gathering the appropriate stakeholders to manage the response, additional documentation and relationship management would be beneficial during future disruption scenarios.

B. Response

Observation:

The District experienced many challenges during the response phase. Many of these were due to factors beyond the District's control, such as the volume of new information and changing directives, however, two factors assisted with the overall response:

- The District had sound structures and processes in place to manage the response; and
- Due to the length of the COVID-pandemic response phase, which included the second half of the 2019-2020 school year, as well as the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years, the District was able to modify their response actions based on lessons learned during earlier phases of the pandemic.

Strengths

Information Management and Coherence of Action

While acknowledging the difficulty of the response phase, all staff interviewed for this report (including those at the school-level) confirmed that the District was largely successful in providing consistent direction that helped operationalize Ministry directives.

This is in large part due to the early implementation of the EOC structure and supporting processes for communication and information management. Academic and administrative leads (including Superintendents, System Principals and Managers) were able to leverage their existing reporting structure to escalate concerns from staff to a member of the EOC, and this team reviewed and assessed these concerns throughout the response to determine the appropriate action.

B. Response

Additionally, the District quickly implemented a Task Force model to facilitate collaboration with stakeholders such as school-based teachers, administrative staff, union leaders and other external stakeholders. The Task Force model is a best practice approach to tackling specific issues that require skillsets from multiple areas. It helped the District identify human resource and operational challenges, and invited input from these stakeholders to help them assess the impact of their response actions.

These Task Forces met regularly throughout the pandemic and were led by the Superintendent, HR, who was also part of the EOC and reported back regularly to ensure these updates were included in the ongoing assessment of information.

The District quickly established a schedule for communicating with staff and parents/guardians, and stuck to this throughout the response cycle. High-level messaging was developed by the Communications team for distribution to all staff and leads in all academic and administrative areas customized this messaging with specific information applicable to their team. Although this required considerable time and effort for these leads, more precise school-based communications were essential to provide direction to staff.

To ensure communication was informed by the best available and current information, the District made a decision to prioritize information from the following bodies as 'sources of truth': the Ministry of Education, the Ottawa Public Health Unit and the American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-Condition Engineers (ASHRE) for standards and guidelines related to ventilation and air quality.

When the District was required to develop more detailed communication material, such as the School Re-Opening Guides required in advance of the 2020-2021 school year, they seconded System Principals to draft this material, in coordination with Communications and with support from School Principals. This ensured that the broader public health directives issued by the Ministry and local PHU were customized for the school environment and consistent across all primary and secondary schools. It also allowed staff working directly in schools to provide input on these operational guidelines, and the structure in place allowed System Principals to direct questions back to the District's COVID Lead for follow up with the local PHU, when required.

Advance Planning

The operating environment made advance planning a challenge. However, the District began advance planning for the 2020-2021 school year as early as possible. This included:

- conducting walkthroughs of elementary and secondary schools,
- developing site plans to address the need to cohort students,
- putting together the aforementioned School Re-Opening Guidelines and Operating Guidelines for Elementary and Secondary Schools,
- addressing accommodation requests from staff, and
- assigning staff and students to either the in-person or virtual learning format.

Throughout the advance planning phase, the District engaged school staff and Learning Services staff to ensure the needs of all students were addressed and engaged the Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committee in the review of re-opening plans. The District also modified their school

B. Response

calendar to front-load professional development activities to provide staff with proper training for both the in-person and virtual learning formats, and adjusted the timeline for the beginning of the academic year to ensure a gradual, phased re-entry into schools.

In addition, the District focused on conducting an assessment of all ventilation systems across all schools to prioritize which buildings required upgrades and focus their resources accordingly. It should be noted that the District, prior to the pandemic, had implemented building automation systems in all schools and abided by international standards for air quality. This helped with this process and enabled them to act quickly when the Ministry provided an outline of their requirements.

Opportunities for Improvement

Similar to many organizations, District staff had multiple competing demands on their time and were required to complete additional tasks to operationalize directives from the Ministry and local PHU. These additional pressures were in many cases unavoidable and were exacerbated by staff shortages (a common problem across the K-12 sector, even prior to the pandemic).

The District has an opportunity to identify and document these extra tasks in advance of any future public health emergencies and build a pandemic response strategy/framework that includes timelines for actioning items that they may reasonably be expected to deal with in a future pandemic (i.e. student accessibility needs, commencements, contact tracing, cleaning routines, specialized IT training) but may not have anticipated due to the unprecedented nature of the pandemic.

C. Recovery

Observation:

Strengths

The shift to a virtual environment for academic and administrative staff provided the District with an opportunity to automate and streamline specific portions of their processes, including using digital signatures and reducing the amount of paper forms. The reliance on technology during the pandemic Although the exact time of recovery is difficult to identify, due to ongoing variants and waves of COVID-19 infections, for this review the Recovery Phase has been established as starting in September 2022, when students largely returned to in-person learning.

resulted in additional teacher training on relevant IT software, and the District continues their work to determine how to effectively integrate technology into their school operations.

In addition, virtual meetings and interviews have provided additional flexibility and reduced the amount of travel that is required from staff. This ensures they can spend more time at their home schools. The District has also developed a policy related to remote working for applicable staff to document expectations around work location and allow for some flexibility, where possible.

Opportunities for Improvement

An overall observation during the recovery phase was that a lot of senior staff involved in the response were in the process of retiring. When key people are not available there is a loss of corporate knowledge, and this can impact sound and timely decision making. The District's key opportunity for improvement is to ensure all the work done to manage the overall COVID-19

C. Recovery

response documented is and consolidated to provide a “tool kit” and aide to leaders that may have to deal with future health emergencies.

Considerations

Consideration #1

Form a separate Task Force/Working Group to identify areas related to pandemic response where additional pre-planning can feasibly be completed. This may include major milestones throughout the school year (e.g. virtual school registration, commencements), as well as specific challenges that occurred during the response that may reasonably occur again (e.g. student accessibility needs, contact tracing, cleaning routines, specialized IT training).

Consideration #2

Document a Pandemic Response Framework to formalize the structure and processes implemented during the response. This includes but is not limited to:

- The structure of Task Forces
- Process for forming Task Forces
- Tools used for EOC meetings
- EOC Roles as well as primary and backups (this can be by position)
- Key stakeholders and contacts
- Formalize any tools used to supplement the COVID-19 response into supporting plans as required (e.g. the stakeholder matrix can be included in a Crisis Communications Plan)
- Ensure all existing documentation (e.g. weekly updates, operating guidelines, etc.) is consolidated within the framework for future reference and use