IMPACTS OF SCHOOL CLOSURES

The Bottom Line

Online learning can be especially difficult for children and youth experiencing mental, cognitive, or socioeconomic barriers, resulting in many experiencing gaps in their education. Additionally, the closure of schools removed a prime site for abuse disclosure. Schools can close for health, safety, and weather-related issues

Risk: Lack of Access to Resources

While teachers tried to ensure children received instruction and support after school closures, many children may have been hard to reach if they did not have access to technology and did not have an updated address or contact. This may have resulted in unmet needs. Some families may have been struggling before a school closure and, due to the closure, could not afford to work and provide childcare; this may have caused parents to voluntarily or reluctantly place their children in care.

Possible Responses

- Food Delivery: For example, during COVID-19,Regina Public Schools teamed up with the Regina Food Bank to deliver food hampers and school work to food-insecure families and those without access to technology. Counsellors were also checking up on students through tele-communications.
- Technology: Many governments have been advised to cover costs of technology for those without access. Some organizations (e.g. CPS Saskatchewan) have made strides to do this for families. The provision of technology and ensuring all families are receiving resources and individualized support may reduce service gaps.

Risk: Struggle to Cope and Adapt to Online Learning

Many children and youth find it difficult to concentrate on school work, especially with others in the home. If students with different learning styles do not understand their school work, they have to go through extensive steps to ask for help. This can lead to feelings of frustration, loss of hope, and disengagement. Full-time online classes also create a barrier between the student, their peers, and their teachers. Some youth feel decreased motivation to learn in this type of online environment.

Some youth experience extra work and stress from school and have nowhere to go to cope like they usually would. Many youth experience negative effects of pre-existing and newly forming mental health challenges that prevent them from prioritizing school work. Some report losing track of their daily routine and using excessive sleep and social media time as coping mechanisms, creating further challenges.

Possible Responses

- Learning can take place in different environments other than school. Learning through the land (e.g., learning the names of birds, plants, and clouds, learning new physical abilities and skills), through interaction (e.g., numbers, new words, reading, art projects, gaining confidence in a new skill or passion), and through media (e.g., educational TV shows, movies, games, and Google searches) may be useful in filling in any learning gaps resulting from the switch to online school.
- Self-care and sticking to a routine are vital for supporting positive mental health and restoring normalcy. Be creative with learning, connecting, and self-care routines. Reduce pressure and expectations; seek out peers to work with virtually; and search out distance learning opportunities.

Risk: Inescapable Abuse

If the ability to physically attend school is removed, many children and youth may find themselves in an environment with harmful family members or others in the home. The added stress associated with switching to online learning can increase tensions and maltreatment within the home. As teachers usually spend a large amount of time with youth, they frequently recognize and receive disclosures of various mental health concerns and abusive or neglectful situations. Without the watchful eye of teachers, many students could deal with challenges at home that go unnoticed to the public.

Possible Responses

- Consider collaboration with non-conventional partners to increase the protection of children in any way possible. These partners may include service providers in other fields (e.g., mental health, income assistance, addictions), postal workers, extended family, neighbours, and others with frequent access to children. Be prepared for children to disclose mental health challenges or abuse and require access to services.

Risk: Increased Back-to-School Anxiety

Returning to school after a closure, may subject children to increased, newly formed, or pre-existing social anxiety with peers, separation anxiety with family, and anxiety regarding their health and safety due to schools being thought of as an unsafe place to be.

Possible Responses

- Have conversations with children and be open to answering any questions or concerns they may have. Discuss why the school had to be closed, why they are going back to school when they do, and the people who are working to keep them safe.

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