

# **COVID-19's Second Wave: How are teachers faring with the return to physical schools?**



Part two of the results of a national teacher survey on resilience and burnout during the coronavirus pandemic highlights that teachers continue to experience high levels of stress and burnout – but also new opportunities for education



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A team of researchers from the University of Winnipeg have been studying stress and resilience in teachers since the pandemic began. Based on responses from more than 2,200 teachers from across Canada who completed surveys in April, June, and September of 2020, and several follow-up interviews, the researchers were able to gain a detailed understanding of the demands, resources, and stressors experienced by teachers, including their strategies to cope.

**Note:** These findings are part two of a survey series on supporting teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Survey responses were first collected in April/May 2020, when teachers had just begun to teach remotely (click here to check out the first set of survey results!). The survey was administered a second time in mid-June 2020. Data was collected once more in September 2020, when students (in most provinces) were physically back in school practicing safety protocols related to COVID-19.

### **WHAT WAS FOUND IN A NUTSHELL**

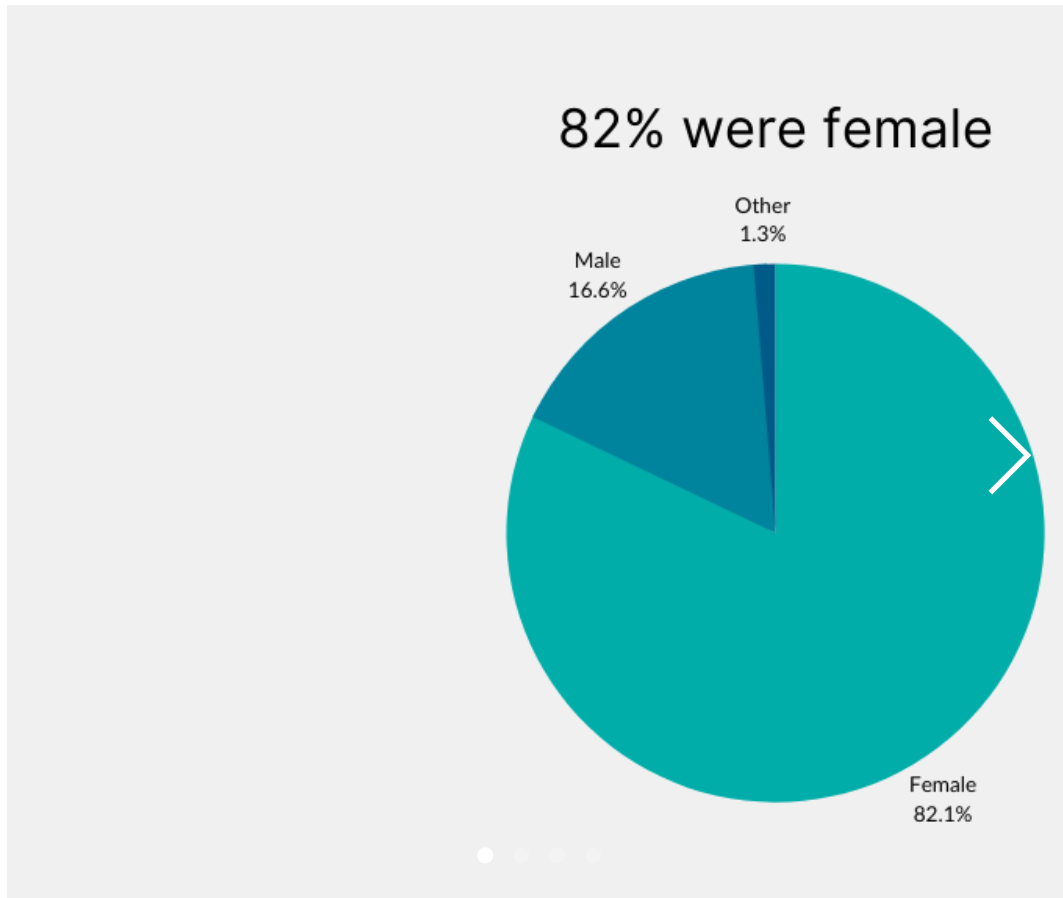
The new school year definitely looks different amid the COVID-19 pandemic, with teachers having to navigate the classroom with new protocols in place to ensure the health and safety of both students and staff. Survey findings reveal that:

- Many teachers are happy to be physically back in the classroom to support students.
- Although teachers still continue to experience stress during this time, their levels of burnout have reduced since June.
- Of their biggest worries, teachers expressed concern with having to return back to remote learning given the challenges associated with teaching certain subjects online.
- Teachers have been faced with a new set of challenges in the classroom including increased workload and unrealistic expectations.



## Demographics

Teachers were surveyed three times – in April/May 2020, in June 2020, and finally in September/October 2020, which in total generated participation from over 2,200 teachers representing every province and one territory in Canada.





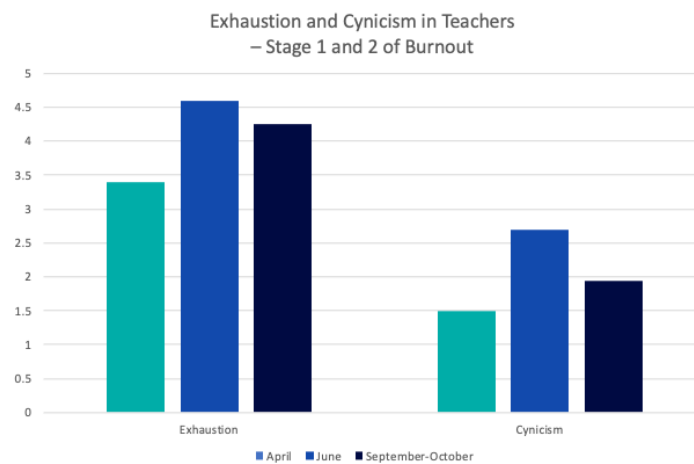
### **Teachers continue to experience exhaustion with the reopening of schools**

While the levels of burnout (i.e. exhaustion and cynicism) experienced by teachers in October was significantly lower than in June, teachers are still experiencing higher levels of burnout than when the pandemic first began. Many teachers reported feeling physically and

emotionally exhausted as a result of returning to work. Additionally, many teachers shared the challenges experienced with trying to find a healthy balance between work and life.



*“I find that I am exhausted, mentally and physically, by the end of the day and do not have much energy to do much in the evening at home. Many colleagues feel the same. I am afraid of burning out and having lower immunity due to the stress of this year.”*



*“It’s hard. I didn’t think I could work harder but somehow I am. I’m exhausted. I feel how I do by Christmas and it’s October- honestly worse. It will be hard to sustain.”*

*“It has been much more challenging to be back at work this fall than I imagined. I am so thrilled to be able to see my students but I am not managing to create a healthy balance in my life at all right now; work is completely taking over.”*

## What is still contributing to teachers' high levels of burnout?

According to teachers, their workload has increased considerably since returning back to the classroom. Teachers have had to rethink their approach to teaching as a result of the pandemic, which has led to many teachers working longer hours.

*“The first couple of months of the pandemic were difficult, but I found a rhythm that worked. I am now finding that my workload and stress levels are through the roof due to the expectations of blended learning. This is not sustainable for me and other teachers I’ve spoken with.”*

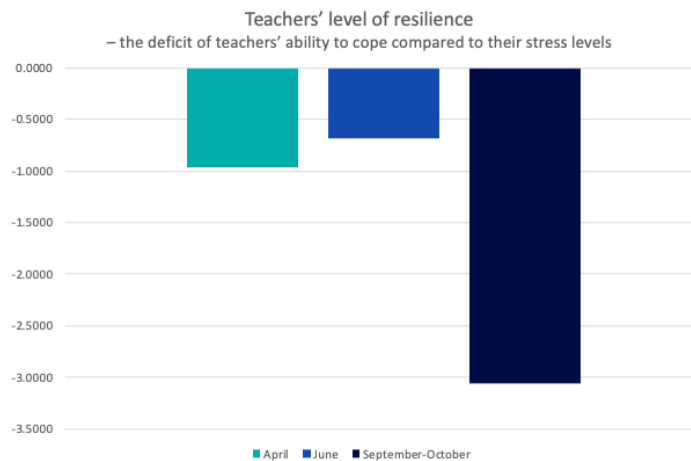


*“Teachers are working harder than ever, working late into the evening, taking time away from families and friends to do a good job and keep their students safe.”*

Additionally, teachers attributed their levels of burnout to work expectations in place that are perceived as unsustainable.

*“I feel that classroom teachers will burn out quickly. The expectations put on us are not reasonable.”*

*“This is not sustainable. I have been teaching for more than 20 years and this level of effort and commitment is unbelievable! But we cannot continue at this pace. Many teachers are already burning out and we have only been in school with students for less than a month. Someone, somewhere needs to start listening to us before we have an unprecedented amount of teachers on stress leave.”*

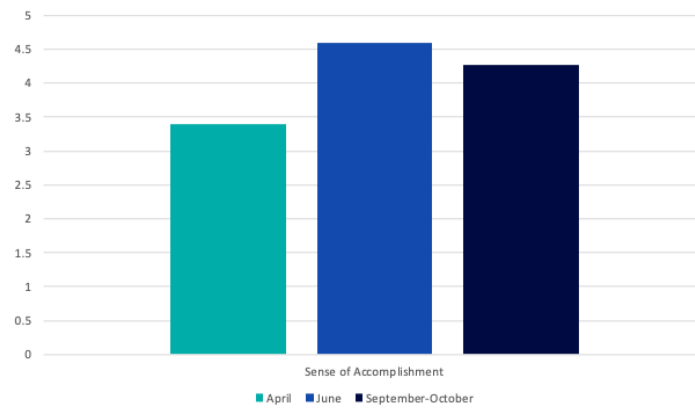


## Teachers' reported lower levels of accomplishment about teaching than they did in June

Loss of accomplishment is the third and final stage of burnout. Although teachers' sense of accomplishment about teaching was lower in October than in June, it still remains higher than when online teaching first started in April. It appears that returning to COVID-friendly, face-to-face teaching in fall 2020 necessitated many pedagogical changes that created challenges to teachers' sense of accomplishment about instructional practice and student learning. It is expected that accomplishment may increase over time, much as it did from April to June as teachers adjusted to remote teaching. Still, some teachers reported feeling worried if they were to have to return to teaching remotely, and would feel a greater sense of accomplishment by continuing to teach in-person as much as possible.

*"I am happy to be back in class. I hope we can stay in as long as possible. My current subjects are challenging to teach remotely."*

Teachers' Sense of Accomplishment  
– Stage 3 of Burnout



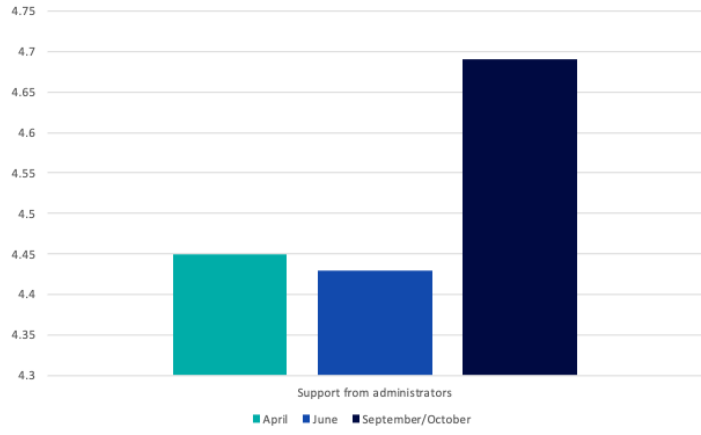


## **Administrative support remains an important factor for teachers' resilience**

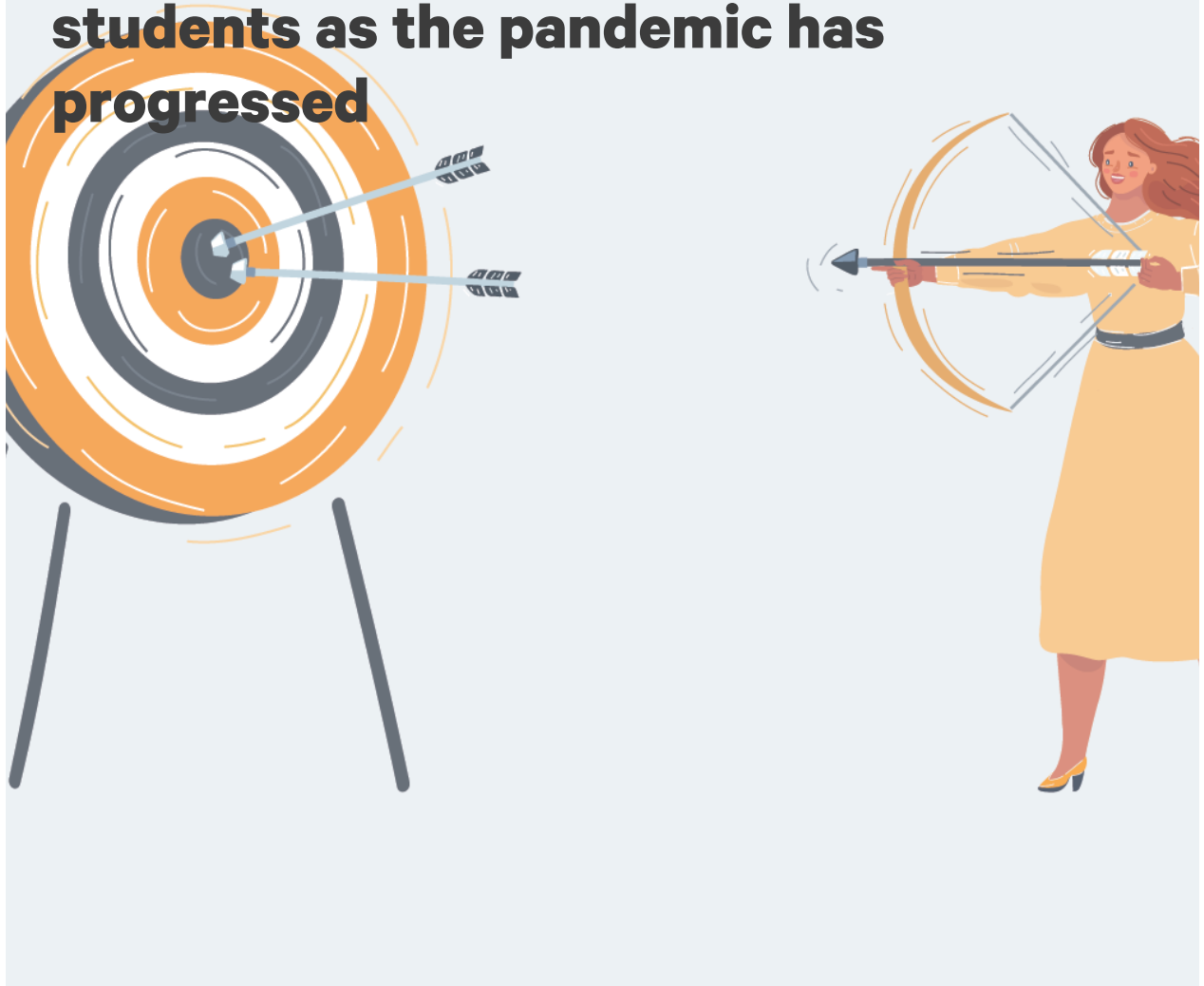


Teachers' perceptions of administrative support became significantly more positive from June to October. Teachers who feel supported from both colleagues and administrators are better able to cope as they navigate teaching in the classroom with new COVID-19 protocols in place.

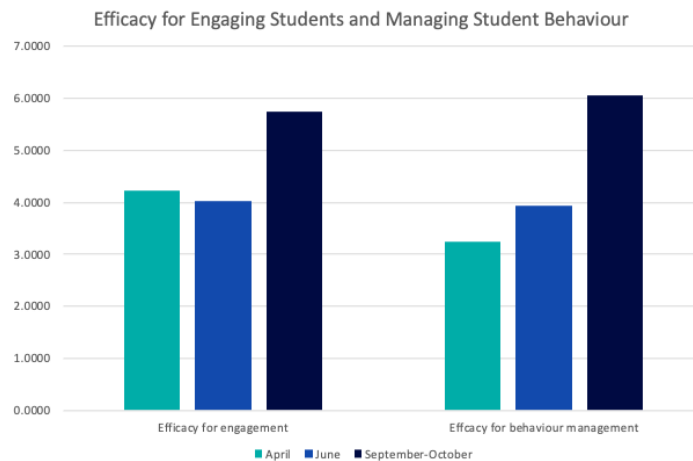
Support from Administrators



**Teachers reported a greater sense of efficacy in engaging students as the pandemic has progressed**

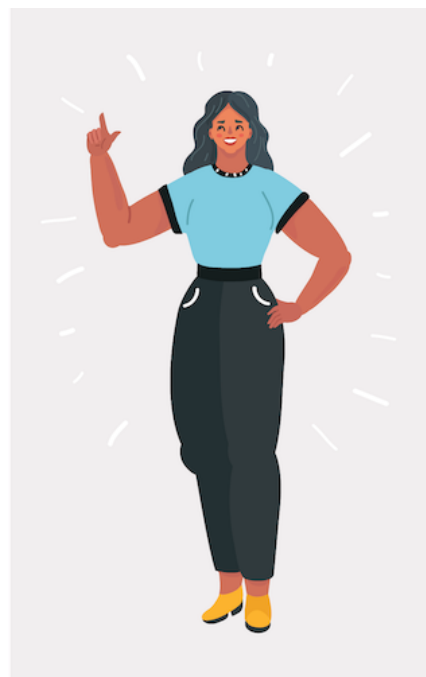


Teachers' efficacy (i.e. belief in their ability) to successfully adapt teaching strategies in response to the pandemic has increased significantly from June to October. In addition, teachers reported a significant increase in their efficacy for engaging students and effectively managing student behaviour.



## Despite teachers feeling uncertain during this time, the pandemic presents new opportunities for education

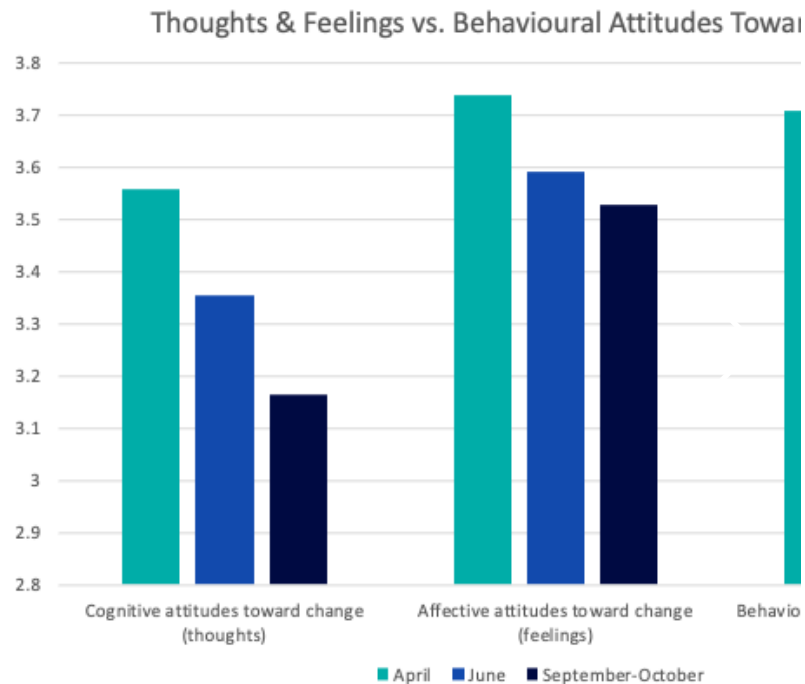
Teachers reported significantly more negative thoughts from June to October towards changes that have resulted from the pandemic. Despite these changes, their behaviours and feelings remained consistent in terms of supporting student wellbeing and learning through these substantial changes. Although the abrupt and disruptive changes resulting from COVID-19 have invoked uncertainty, teachers also see this time as an opportunity for learning and growth – for both themselves and students.



*“People need to understand that this is new for everyone. We are all doing this for the first time.”*

*“I believe this would work better for most students if they had a choice of how they learn during this pandemic.”*

*“As a new teacher, I feel like I am in many ways at an advantage because I am still in the learning stages of teaching and am used to developing skills and strategies to use in the classroom. I have not developed “tried and true” teaching methods and/or plans, so I am used to adapting.”*



## Key Takeaways

- **Teachers view the pandemic as an opportunity to innovate in teaching and learning.** With shifts towards the increased use of technology and the need to deliver classes without student contact, teachers are concerned with their ability to reach and teach effectively. However, teachers have been adjusting to the realities and challenges of COVID-friendly instruction, which have presented opportunities for teachers to adapt and develop innovative approaches that focus on student engagement and wellbeing.

- **Administrative support continues to be an important factor in teacher wellbeing.**

Support from administration has a strong impact on teachers' ability to cope when faced with challenging – and even unprecedented – situations. This has shown to be highly effective in teachers' ability to cope with change.

- **With new challenges presented by the pandemic, teachers are reporting increased workloads.** COVID-19 presents a myriad of challenges beyond its physical health impacts, placing strains on overall mental health, relationships, and work-life balance, among other challenges. Setting realistic expectations on workload that are adjusted to current circumstances could ensure that teachers aren't placed on a path towards burnout and are instead able to remain resilient for the long haul.



Collectively, the data suggest that generalizations about teachers' experiences during the pandemic are inadequate, as teachers are expressing a wide range of experiences, thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. Teachers are not all in the same boat, even though they are weathering the same storm of COVID-19. This observation suggests that a different type of analysis might provide us with more practical information for moving forward. The team is currently examining these data sets using latent profile analysis. This statistical approach will generate prototypes of categories based on the data provided by Canadian teachers, which we can then link to the supports and demands that teachers told us are most meaningful to each group. That work is happening now and will be reported as soon as it is ready.

**For further reading, check out this recently published EdCan article by the University of Winnipeg research team here:**

It's OK to Be OK, Too: Why calling out "toxic positivity" in teachers may backfire

**To learn more about the Well at Work initiative visit:**

[www.edcan.ca/well-at-work](http://www.edcan.ca/well-at-work)

**Meet the Researchers**



### **Dr. Laura Sokal**

Laura Sokal is Professor of Education at the University of Winnipeg in central Canada. Aside from working in schools in five countries, she has served as a Child Life Therapist, as Director of programs for marginalized children and youth, and as Associate Dean of Education. Her SSHRC-funded research program includes investigations of the psycho-social aspects of teaching and learning from preschool to university, with a special focus on inclusion and well-being.



### **Dr. Lesley Eblie Trudel**

Dr. Lesley Trudel has been successfully involved in K-12 education for over thirty years. She has held positions ranging from instructional to administrative, working with diverse populations in both urban and rural settings. Lesley was most recently an Assistant Superintendent of Schools in Manitoba, Canada. In January 2019, she joined the Faculty of Education at the University of Winnipeg as an Assistant Professor. Lesley is a collaborative and interdisciplinary researcher, with a keen interest in organizational learning and systemic change.

### **Jeff Babb**

Jeff is an Associate Professor with the Department of Mathematics & Statistics at the University of Winnipeg. He joined the Department in September of 2000 and served as its Chair for 2004-2009. Jeff was Principal Consultant for the Statistical Advisory Service the Department of Statistics at the University of Manitoba for 1998-2000. Previously he served as the Biometrician for the Grain Research Laboratory of the Canadian Grain Commission in Winnipeg for 16 years.

## **Meet the Knowledge Mobilization team at Well at Work**



### **Sarah Ranby, Research Analyst**

Sarah leads the planning, communications, coordination, and conducting of research and knowledge mobilization outputs for EdCan. She earned her Master of Science Degree in Family Relations and Human Development and holds a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Psychology from the University of Guelph. Sarah's research interests broadly include knowledge mobilization, and program evaluation, in particular, analyzing school-based supports that promote positive mental health.

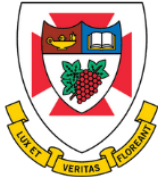


### **André Rebeiz, Research Manager**

André is Project Lead for EdCan's Well at Work initiative, which supports school districts and provinces to make teacher and staff well-being a top policy and investment priority. He is a graduate of Sciences Po Paris (Institut d'études politiques de Paris) holding a Master's degree in International Public Management from the Paris School of International Affairs and a Bachelor's degree in the Social Sciences.







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