



Reflections & Learnings on Schooling during COVID-19 for Students with Disability

ACD and Amaze are committed to working with the Victorian Government to capture learnings from the remote and flexible schooling experience, support recovery and drive better outcome for students with disability. We welcome the Government's review and upcoming Summit, and urge that the experiences of students with disability and their families are front and centre. Deep engagement - including through a dedicated roundtable - with students, families and their support organisations is critical.

Key reflections:

- COVID-19 magnified pre-existing problems - students with disability and their families were disproportionately impacted. They needed a disproportionate response.
- The culture of 'low expectations' for students with disability is very real and needs to be challenged. With small adjustments many students with disability can do their school work.
- 28,000 students with PSD funding went without personalised support. Flexible deployment of Education Support Staff is critical during periods of school disruption.

Experience and impact of remote & flexible learning for families and students with disability

- Families reported **both positive benefits and significant challenges** during the remote and flexible learning period.
- **Widespread uncertainty about whether students with disability could attend school in person** led to students being turned away and very low presence at schools.
- Many families had to **reduce their working hours, or resign from their jobs**, to provide the level of care and support needed for their child to learn from home. This particularly impacted women.
- Students with disability had **higher rates of absenteeism and disengagement** from remote learning and **have returned to school at lower rates**.
- Many students with disability are **far behind** – further behind than parents had understood
- Students **went without the support of Education Support Staff** funded to assist their learning.
- Students with **strong Individual Education Plans and Student Support Groups** fared better – but these were not in place for all students with disability.

I have had to drop back all my hours of work, even while working from home, because supporting my child and working were impossible. (ACD helpline)

The teachers at my son's school are trying so hard to provide an "online" option but my child simply cannot learn online, he cannot use an iPad by himself. (ACD helpline)

It is shown me clearly how poorly he is being supported at school - both academically and behaviourally. (Amaze survey)

My child is already on restricted hours due to the school claiming they are incapable of learning...They have been thriving with home learning and has done everything the school claims they cannot, with ease! (Amaze survey)

Very disappointed I did not realise until home learning how much my child does not know and how behind he is for grade 5. (Amaze survey)

- Some students felt **relief from bullying and exclusion** experienced at school.
- Many reported **increased mental health issues - anxiety and behaviours of concern escalated** - impacting students & families.
- **Families were desperate for advice.** Demand spiked across Amaze's and ACD's engagement channels. DET's Parent Advice Line received a disproportionate number of calls related to students with disability.

It impacted my child's mental health most of all, which deteriorated quickly. His principal agreed that him attending school would be appropriate and that helped a lot. (Amaze survey)

My child is extremely anxious and worried about returning to school. I have advised the school but they have not offered any supports with this. (Amaze survey)

70% reported concerns that their child will struggle with changed routines and protocols when school returns

Measures to support students and families with disability were patchy

- Victorian **did not have a state-wide approach** to support for students with disability during the COVID-19 crisis. The onus principally sat with families to approach their child's school to request support. The **response was patchy** – some schools provided excellent support, many did not.
- Schools remained open to vulnerable students and those not able to be supervised at home, however **substantial gatekeeping occurred**. Most schools did not consider disability as part of the assessment of vulnerability. Despite the Premier saying it was appropriate for students with special needs to come to school where remote and flexible learning wouldn't work for them, many were turned away.
 - *42% of respondents indicated that their school has not contacted them to discuss their child/ren's individual circumstances and support needs (Amaze survey)*
 - *Half of respondents reported that their child was not being provided with enough education support by their school. (Amaze survey)*
- While there were **promising local initiatives** in discrete regions (such as enabling students with disability or their siblings to attend school and bringing small groups of students in for short periods) these **were not widely available across Victoria**.
- Students learning remotely generally received **no personalised assistance from the Education Support Workers funded to work with them**. These workers were not deployed in homes, and faced restrictions on video conferencing. Education support was not declared an essential service.
- **Virtual Student Support Groups** worked well and provide a flexible solution to bringing multiple people together going forward.
- In contradiction with the Disability Standards for Education, some schools advised families they were **not required to provide differentiated learning activities**.
- Students at **special schools were prioritised** in the first tranche of school returns.
- Additional measures to protect students and adults using **specialist school bus travel** were introduced.
- DET's **Return to School Guidelines did not include discrete measures** for students with disability.

Adaptions: urgent action is needed to support students and families with disability

Systems change actions

- ✓ Implement all recommendations from the **Program for Students with Disability Review** including a new funding and support model, inclusion measures, behaviour support and strengthened staff capacity.
- ✓ Introduce **ambitious targets and transparent measures** to lift the education attainment & wellbeing of students with disability.
- ✓ Strengthen understanding of and compliance with the **Disability Standards for Education**.
- ✓ Fast track completion of the **education strategy for autistic students** - promised in Dec 2017. [Very poor educational experiences for autistic students](#) underscore the urgency of this.
- ✓ Extend the **mental health practitioners in schools** program to **special schools**.

COVID-19 response actions

- ✓ Establish a **standard of support for students with disability** during times of school disruptions. **Access to differentiated learning** and **flexible deployment of Education Support Staff** to ensure personalised support continues is critical.
- ✓ Provide **targeted** post-COVID-19 **catch-up support** for students with disability – prioritising those who are behind.
- ✓ Provide **outreach to students** still absent from school and develop tailored plans to support return.
- ✓ Ensure **all students with disability** (whether receiving funded support or not) have a *functioning Student Support Group* and an *updated Individual Education Plan* to address the impacts of the remote learning period.
- ✓ Strengthen **mental health and wellbeing support** for students with disability during this transition period.

Amaze and the Association for Children with a Disability are committed to working with the Victorian Government towards a better future for students with disability

Amaze is the peak body for autistic people, their families and supporters in Victoria. Operating for over 50 years Amaze provides quality information on autism; undertakes research and develops policy to improve the lives of autistic people. During the COVID-19 crisis Amaze conducted a Pulse Check survey of nearly 300 families with school aged children – over 90% of respondents were attached to mainstream government schools. Our channels – including the Autism Connect line – experienced a surge of school related engagements.

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Association for Children with a Disability is the leading advocacy service for families of children with disability in Victoria. A not-for-profit organisation led by and for families of children with a disability, ACD have supported families across Victoria and advocated for children with all types of disabilities for 40 years. During the COVID-19 crisis ACD heard from more than 500 families of students with disability, and experienced a 25% increase in education related calls to their Support Line.

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