

Victorian students with disability during COVID-19 disruptions to schooling

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COVID-19 is magnifying pre-existing problems. Students with disability and their families are being disproportionately impacted. They need a disproportionate response.

The culture of 'low expectations' for students with disability is very real and needs to be challenged.

Many students with disability have missed out on the personalised support they are funded to receive for much of this school year. Access to Education Support Staff, modified curriculum and personalised adjustments have been haphazard.

Measures to support students and families with disability have been patchy, with some incremental improvements along the way.

Much more can be done right now and on the road out of COVID to better enable students with disability.

Since late March, the pandemic has thrown Victorian schools, students and their families into great flux. While the schooling system has demonstrated incredible capacity for agility through this turbulent period, too many students with disability and their families are faring particularly badly.

ACD and Amaze have heard from over a thousand of families over the past six months, including through our advice lines, social media channels and an extensive community survey of families with school aged children undertaken by Amaze in Term 2 (a fresh survey is currently underway). This paper updates an earlier one released in [June](#) and includes direct quotes from families we work with.

Students with disability have been heavily impacted by disruptions to on-site learning

Many students have been unable to learn effectively

- **Lack of adjustments and modifications to curriculum:** Many students and parents report their mainstream school has not provided modified learning activities during the remote and flexible learning period. With little or no adjustments to activities, parents have been left to try to support their child's learning as best as they can. Vision and hearing impaired students have been particularly impacted by a lack of accessible materials.
- **Remote and flexible learning is simply not possible for some:** Students with complex disabilities, who normally receive high levels of support at school are facing huge barriers to learning at home. Some have been unable to access any learning activities as the nature of their disability means they cannot use a device without one-to-one assistance. Families have reported only being provided with suggestions for games and activities to do at home (e.g. play Uno or make a sandwich together).

It is extremely challenging, remote learning is no way near effective, our kids need hands on, face to face.

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. He needs one on one support. It feels like this is just not being acknowledged.

My daughter has autism and intellectual disability. Once I cook all her meals, play with her, help her sister to do her classes at home, there is no time to help her do any learning. She needs my attention all day long.

- **Assistance from Education Support Staff has been lacking:** Access to education aides for the 28,000 students with PSD funding has been highly variable. While some have reported receiving reasonable support through regular virtual and phone contact, others have received little or no support. This has been exacerbated by an absence of guidance around expectations for the staff. Unlike disability support workers, there is no option to flexibly deploy education aides into homes – even for the highest need students.
- **Adjusting to new routines and learning environments has been difficult:** For autistic students in particular, the impact of moving learning from school to home has been challenging. Different routines and learning environments including accepting “[mum as teacher](#)” are difficult for many to adapt to.

Half of respondents to Amaze’s Term 2 survey reported that their child was not being provided with enough education support by their school.

42% of respondents to Amaze’s Term 2 survey indicated that their school has not contacted them to discuss their child/ren’s individual circumstances and support needs

70% of respondents to Amaze’s Term 2 survey reported concerns that their child will struggle with changed routines and protocols when school returns

80% of respondents to Children and Young People with Disability Australia’s national education [survey](#) on remote and flexible learning reported that responsibility for education shifted away from teachers and schools and on to parents.

There has been reduced engagement with learning

We are hearing of students with disability who are finding the experience of remote and flexible learning to be so difficult that they are now refusing to participate in school activities. This is reflected in higher rates of absenteeism than their peers.

Extended periods of disengagement will make re-engaging once schools re-open even harder. Students with disability already leave school early at a much higher rate than their peers. Increased rates of early school leaving are likely in the current environment.

Mental health and wellbeing has been adversely impacted

Many parents report that their child’s behaviour and skills have regressed during learning from home. Anxiety and behaviours of concern have escalated. This reflects not being able to attend school as well as the impact of the restrictions on other activities (e.g. not going to the playground) and connections (e.g. not being able to see grandparents and friends).

What concerns me the most is the mental wellbeing of my son and how to support him best. It’s his anxiety and behaviours that are most concerning.

Social isolation from peers has also been a strong theme. CYDA’s report identified the need to support such interaction for students with disability learning remotely.

Conversely, some students are reporting relief from the bullying and exclusion they experience at school.

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

Parents capacity to maintain paid employment has been impacted

Families have reported needing to reduce their working hours, even if they were working from home, simply to be able to provide the level of support required by their child. Women in particular have had to turn down or take leave from work.

Siblings capacity to learn has also been impacted

Many siblings have also been impacted due to interruptions and families having to prioritise their sibling with disability. Innovative pilots to enable sibling attendance have been incredibly helpful.

There have been some promising measures and practices

Schools with strong inclusion practices have been better placed to support students with disability

Some families have reported good access to Education Support Staff and helpful adjustments and modifications. Schools faring best tended to have had robust Individual Education Plans and Student Support Groups in place before the disruptions to schooling commenced.

Good practice examples that have been shared with us include: listening to small groups of children read via zoom – mixed groups of students with disability and students without disability, small group zooms at the end of a class to discuss vocab, tasks, due dates and daily check-ins by phone or video conference.

Enabling students with disability to access on-site learning

In Term Two students at special schools were prioritised in the first phase of school re-openings. At the start of Term Three students at special schools returned to school as did VCE/VCAL students. Students with disability at mainstream school had the option to attend. These measures were warmly welcomed as important recognition of the challenges facing students with disability and their families.

When Melbourne entered Stage 4 Restrictions remote learning was instituted across the board. Tight criteria to restrict eligibility for on-site attendance made provision for students with disability identified by their school as vulnerable because their family is experiencing severe stress to attend. Some schools have actively reached out to families, which has been much appreciated. The option of attending even part-time can provide critical support to students and families in these circumstances.

However, schools and families have been left the grapple with the subjective question of what constitutes “severe stress” with little guidance. This has created significant ambiguity. Guidance issued at the end of Week 6 by DET, which includes provision for sibling attendance, will hopefully resolve this.

My daughter who is autistic has attended this week and reported to me that it was the best week at school she has ever had. She loves there is less kids around and I guess as a result, more teacher attention which is great. The by-product of this is that my son is now doing his home learning with me without constant interruption. In term 2 no-one did anything and it was incredibly stressful.

I was flat out told that if I wanted my child to be on site I would need to declare that my son was unsafe in my care and they (the school) would report me to DHHS and would have me investigated... They said he wouldn't be accepted onsite under any circumstances unless I was prepared to be investigated by child services. I was mortified!! I was making enquires as we have many complex family situations with my high needs child and other younger siblings. We are most definitely under extreme stress.

Options for in-home support

Collaboration between DET and the NDIA to clarify that students on NDIS plans can access in home disability supports during schools hours has been an important development. The NDIA have committed to proactively contacting families most likely to need such supports, but it is unclear to what extent this has been implemented to date.

Flexibility for a friend or relative to come to the home (at any time and from any distance) to help care for a person with disability provides an important option for families provides an important support.

There are opportunities for immediate improvements to remote learning arrangements

1. Establish a **standard of support for students with disability learning remotely** including minimum requirements around access to Education Support Staff and personalised learning adjustments.
 - Changes to industrial arrangements are needed to allow Education Support Staff to assist children in their home. For the small percentage of students with disability with level 5 and 6 funding the complexity of their disability means during any period of community transmission they are likely to need to learn from home due to their medical vulnerability.
2. Ensure all students with disability (whether receiving funded support or not) have a **functioning Student Support Group** which can meet virtually and **updated Individual Education Plans** to address the impacts of remote learning.
3. Provide **targeted outreach to students absent from remote learning** and developing tailored plans to support their re-engagement.
 - Broaden eligibility criteria for the Navigator program to enable timely re-engagement support.
4. Strengthen access to **mental health and wellbeing support** for those undertaking remote learning.
 - Student Support Services need to connect with students with disability, prioritising those exhibiting wellbeing concerns. The recently announced expansion of mental health practitioners in schools – including introducing them into senior special schools ought to be immediately leveraged.

Targeted measures for students with disability are needed as restrictions ease

5. **Prioritise students with disability for return to on-site learning** at both mainstream and special schools as restrictions ease. Provide additional staff training, PPE and cleaning measures for special schools and buses.
6. Deliver **targeted post-COVID-19 catch-up support** for students with disability - prioritising those who are behind. This might include additional intensive sessions.
7. Provide opportunities for an **additional term or semester, or repeat the year** for students in transition - particularly those in years 6 and 12, or undertaking their final year in special school.

Impacts of the pandemic underscore the need to fast-track systemic reforms

8. 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.
9. Introduce **ambitious targets and transparent measures** to lift the education attainment & wellbeing of students with disability.
10. Fast track completion of the **education strategy for autistic students** - promised in Dec 2017. [Very poor educational outcomes for autistic students](#) underscore the urgency of this.
11. Strengthen understanding of and compliance with the **Disability Standards for Education**. These need to be significantly overhauled in the upcoming review.

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