



**Association for
Children with a
Disability**

SUBMISSION

TO THE REVIEW INTO THE IMPACT OF COVID ON STUDENTS WITH DISABILITY

Association for Children with Disability (ACD)

ACD is the leading advocacy service for families of children with disability in Victoria. We are a not-for-profit organisation led by and for families of children with a disability. For 40 years we have supported families across Victoria and advocated for children with all types of disability.

Our evidence base

Between 2020 and 2022 we provided information and advocacy support to more than 15,000 Victorian families. Education was the number one issue families raised with us.

Introduction

In Victoria there were more than 170 days of remote and flexible learning across 2020 and 2021

Between March 2020 and November 2021 there were more than 25 different settings around who could and couldn't go to school in Victoria. Students with disability were excluded from the definition of vulnerable students and only vulnerable students and students of essential workers could automatically attend school.

The definition of students with disability and the specific settings around their attendance changed throughout 2020 and 2021. At one point only students with disability whose families are experiencing severe stress were able to apply to attend school. For most of the time students with disability were required to learn from home. In Term 3 of both 2020 and 2021 additional flexibility was introduced for students with disability to attend onsite.

Victorian teachers and school staff only had to work onsite if they were willing and able. This led to severe staffing shortages at schools, which resulted in significant gatekeeping by Principals (specialist schools were the worst). Teachers and school staff were not prioritised in the vaccination role out.

For students who were attending onsite there was no teaching, just supervision. This failed to meet the needs of many students with disability.

Experiences of remote and flexible learning

When announcing learning from home, the Premier and Education Minister stated that there would be special consideration for students with disabilities, particularly those with high support needs. “It will be appropriate for some students with special needs to come to school because remote and flexible learning simply won’t work,” Premier Dan Andrews 8 April 2020. In reality this did not occur.

What families reported to us

Their children with disability, including those with individual funding, received little or no support additional support during remote and flexible learning.

Learning tasks were not adapted to meet their needs. Families reported to being told by teachers that they were not required to provide differentiated learning activities during this time. This is in direct contradiction of the Disability Standards for Education.

Children who received significant assistance from education support staff at school received limited or no contact from these staff while learning from home.

Many families were shocked how “far behind” their children were compared with other children in the class and felt the school had downplayed their disability.

Specialist schools in particular offered limited curriculum-based education activities.

Many families had to reduce their working hours, or resign from their jobs, to provide the level of care and support their children with disability required while learning at home.

Families were left to cope with severe and deteriorating mental health and behaviour support needs. Families contacted us with desperate stories of increased meltdowns, dysregulation and use of violence in the home often directed towards mothers and younger siblings. This was not behaviour they had seen before.

Although some families of children with NDIS plans were able to utilise Support Workers during school hours, this only assisted families with their care responsibility, and in no way supported the students' education needs. Most families were not able to access this type of support.

Many students experienced severe anxiety or disengaged from learning altogether, and many had no social connections, this has resulted in huge challenges in returning to school.

Impact of COVID 19 today

The consequences of COVID 19 continue to be felt. In 2022 we experienced a significant increase in demand for advocacy support, particularly in relation to the exclusion of students with disability. When we compare advocacy support we provided in 2022 compared with 2019 we see:

- 350% rise in calls about children being excluded from early childhood education
- 175% increase in calls about informal exclusion from school
- 116% increase in calls about suspensions
- Schools are experiencing significant staffing shortages and this is resulting in: less professional development focused on meeting the needs of students with disability, less proactive planning to meet learning and behaviour support needs.

In their own words:

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

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

“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 by the Government.”

“My daughter cannot stop crying. She doesn’t understand what is happening and why she can’t go to school or see grandparents. Her frustration is turning to anger.”

“My son has started to hit his little sister. Neither of them can learn anything.”

Recommendations

1. School closures should always be the last resort.
2. School staff should be prioritised in vaccination roll outs.
3. School staff to be considered essential workers and required to work onsite if required.
4. Decisions about who can and cannot attend school clearly defined and not left to Principal discretion.
5. Students with disability to be included in definitions of vulnerable students and permitted to attend onsite.
6. Provision for siblings of students with disability to attend school if the student with disability cannot attend due to health reasons but the family cannot support the learning of all the children at home.
7. If students are required to learn from home NDIS guidelines to clearly states core support can be used during “school hours” to complete education tasks set by school.
8. Flexible deployment of Education Support Staff, including in-home and one of one virtual support.
9. Effective reasonable adjustments that meet the learning needs of students with disability.
10. Activate consultation between organisations such as ACD and Amaze and the Department of Education in the event of widespread school closures.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Karen Dimmock', with a stylized, cursive script.

Karen Dimmock
Chief Executive Officer