

REVIEW OF THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON SCHOOL STUDENTS WITH DISABILITY

DATE 11 APRIL 2023

ABOUT THIS SUBMISSION

Independent Schools Australia (ISA) has prepared this submission in response to the Department of Education Review of the Impact of COVID-19 on School Students with Disability.

This submission provides an overview of the impact of COVID-19 on school students with disability in the Independent sector. The submission responds to the questions for educators, providers of education and support workers as outlined in the discussion paper.

ISA consulted with the state and territory Associations of Independent Schools (AISs) in preparing this submission.

KEY POINTS

- The pandemic has negatively impacted students with disability disproportionately to students without disability. These impacts are related to both academic outcomes and also student wellbeing.
- There were, however, some students with disability that benefited from the expansion of online learning through the pandemic as it more closely aligned with their learning needs.
- During lockdowns Independent schools offered remote learning opportunities, however access to technology and broadband was an issue for some students, families, and communities, resulting in learning gaps.
- The transition back to face-to-face teaching has been difficult for some students with disability and has resulted in school refusal.
- While AISs offered support to schools through professional development and specialised advice during the pandemic, there is more support required to help schools and students recover from COVID-19 and coordinated action required to ensure that the lessons learned inform responses to future emergencies.

ABOUT ISA

Independent Schools Australia (ISA) is the national peak body representing the Independent school sector. It includes the eight state and territory Associations of Independent Schools (AISs). Through these Associations, ISA represents 1,209 schools and over 668,600 students, accounting for approximately 17 per cent of Australian school enrolments. ISA's major role is to bring the unique

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needs and contributions of Independent schools to the attention of the Australian Government and to represent the Independent school sector on national issues.

Independent schools are a diverse group of non-government schools serving a range of different communities. Many Independent schools provide a religious or values-based education. Others promote a particular educational philosophy or interpretation of mainstream education. Independent schools include:

- Schools affiliated with Christian denominations for example, Anglican, Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Lutheran, Uniting Church, Seventh Day Adventist and Presbyterian schools
- Non-denominational Christian schools
- Islamic schools
- Jewish schools
- Montessori schools
- Rudolf Steiner schools
- Community schools
- Indigenous community schools
- Schools that specialise in meeting the needs of students with disabilities
- Schools that cater for students at severe educational risk due to a range of social emotional and behavioural and other risk factors.

Most Independent schools are set up and governed independently on an individual school basis. Unlike other school education sectors, school leaders, teachers, and other staff in Independent schools are employed directly by individual schools, or in some cases by the system that owns and operates the school. Four out of five schools in the Independent school sector are autonomous non-systemic schools.

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITY IN INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

In 2022, there were approximately 143,500 students with disability enrolled across Independent schools accounting for over 22.4 per cent of the total student enrolments in the sector. While the majority of students with disability in the Independent sector are enrolled in mainstream schools, they are also enrolled in special and special assistance schools.

Special schools provide education under special programs, or special activities, designed specifically for students with disability.¹ In 2022, the Independent school sector had 47 special schools (3.9 per cent of all Independent schools) and there were 3,472 students enrolled at Independent special schools.

¹ Australian Government, "Australian Education Act 2013," accessed July 8, 2022, <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2018C00012/Html/Text>.

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Special assistance schools are those which 'primarily cater for students with social, emotional or behavioural difficulties.'² In 2022 there were 96 special assistance schools enrolling 13,000 students in the Independent sector. Many students who attend Independent special assistance schools have complex learning or behavioural needs, often associated with mental health conditions, or physical, sensory, social-emotional, and cognitive disability. Independent special assistance schools generally have a much higher percentage of students with disability than mainstream Independent schools.

The state and territory Associations of Independent Schools (AISs) provide a range of services to Independent schools including professional learning for teachers and support and advice for schools in relation to supporting students with disabilities, the provision of adjustments and the NCCD.

QUESTIONS FOR EDUCATORS, PROVIDERS OF EDUCATION AND SUPPORT WORKERS

WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR EXPERIENCE OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITY ACCESSING AND PARTICIPATING IN SCHOOL EDUCATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?

The experience of students with disability during the COVID-19 pandemic varied significantly. This was in part due to the differing lockdown requirements and health mandates implemented in the states and territories. Non-government schools were also subject to Commonwealth requirements in relation to the provision of face-to-face learning as a condition of recurrent funding.

It is also important to note the non-systemic nature of the Independent sector which meant that it was up to each individual Independent school to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and to follow all relevant health mandates and directives at every level. In this, they were supported by the AISs at the state and territory level and ISA at the national level.

Some of the key issues noted by schools and AISs that impacted access and participation are noted below.

Remote learning

Students with disability had both positive and negative experiences with learning online during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some students with disability who participated in online learning during remote learning periods said they felt comfortable online and in their home setting. In addition, some parents and carers felt confident and aware of expectations and tasks with recorded lesson instructions allowing them to help their child. In some cases, remote learning increased student engagement.

However, for other students engaging in remote learning proved challenging. Access to specialised equipment and resources affected students' ability to engage in authentic and genuine learning. For some students, remote learning contributed to a heightened sense of social isolation.

Some schools reported that some students with disability would not engage in remote learning at all, as school and home held different expectations.

² Australian Government.

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Boarding students

Boarding schools had a challenging time during COVID-19 managing lockdowns, health mandates, border closures and quarantine requirements. During periods of lockdown, as with all students, students with disability at Independent boarding schools either returned home or stayed at school for extended periods during lockdowns depending on the measures in place.

Because of the number of interstate boarders in boarding schools, even schools not in lockdown were often managing students who lived in a different state or territory with border closures and / or strict quarantine arrangements in place. This meant that often students and families had to choose between being in school or being at home leading to isolation from either their family or from their peers for some students.

These issues also impacted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding students from remote communities who went back to community for extended periods of time, experiencing significant disruption.

Specialist staff

At the peak of the pandemic, there was confusion about which professionals could access Independent schools to support students with disability who remained on campus. There seemed to be inconsistent advice about the access of external providers such as allied health professionals. This affected student access to supports needed to help their learning.

HAVE THE ACADEMIC OUTCOMES AND/OR WELLBEING OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITY BEEN IMPACTED (POSITIVELY OR NEGATIVELY) BY THEIR EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC? WHY?

The pandemic has adversely affected the academic outcomes and wellbeing of many students with disability. As noted previously, learning from home was challenging for some students with disability which has meant that they have gaps in their learning. There were also impacts from changes in routine and regular teaching staff for those students who continued to be engaged in face-to-face learning.

Academic outcomes

Independent schools report that many students with disability have larger gaps in learning than students without disability due to the pandemic. The full impact of attendance and engagement on academic outcomes for students with disability may not be known for some time.

Addressing these learning gaps is also leading to increased pressure on teachers and schools. Teachers must bridge the learning gap for a higher number of students, which places extra demands on their workload.

School Refusal

ISA noted in a submission to the 2022 Senate Inquiry into the National Trend of School Refusal that “the impact of COVID-19 may be more pronounced for students with disability due to a range of factors causing increased anxiety about returning to school. School attendance problems may be exacerbated or masked due to social and/or developmental circumstances for some students with disability.

Anecdotally, AISs note that school refusal is particularly of concern for some students with social emotional disability and neurodivergent disorders and conditions such as Autism Spectrum Disorder

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as they may experience elevated anxiety levels about returning to school. However, school refusal can be evidenced across all disability categories and adjustment levels.”³

Wellbeing

As in other sectors of schooling, there has been a growing focus on wellbeing in recent years. Most Independent schools have a whole-school wellbeing approach, which focuses on the mental, physical, social, and spiritual wellbeing of students. Many AISs also support wellbeing programs for schools as part of their professional learning offerings.

Pandemic disruptions have had a significant impact on increasing the need to protect and support student and staff wellbeing. In 2022, ISA published a report that found wellbeing is not evenly distributed across Australia and inequities are felt deeper depending on students' backgrounds. The report recognised that different situations and school communities require different responses.⁴ Wellbeing during and after the peak of COVID-19 requires additional considerations for students with disability as the effects of the pandemic were often more acutely felt than for students without disability.

WHAT SETTINGS, SUPPORTS, AND TECHNOLOGIES PROVIDED A POSITIVE EXPERIENCE FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?

Adequately supporting students with disability in the pandemic was a focus for schools. Maintaining usual routines and connection with staff was an important support for students who were able to continue to attend school during lockdowns.

Schools also offered adjusted supports for students with disability learning from home. For example, many schools offered opportunities for students to access more support by having timetabled online sessions with support staff. Some students also had breakout opportunities in their online lesson times, which enabled individual or small group support during the actual lesson.

Special schools

Independent sector special schools remained open during lockdowns. This allowed students with disability to keep consistency in their learning and maintain their usual routines. Students were also able to access their regular adjustments and keep relationships with peers and teachers.

Special schools operated within government health advice and provided additional support to students for personal protection such as mask wearing and vaccinations. Staff also had to vaccinate and adhere to the relevant government guidelines, as did all schools.

Relationships

Staff relationships were a feature of effective remote learning. The relationship with the teacher was particularly important for older students with disability. Some schools chose to have a teacher's aide check in with each student every day, which also helped to maintain students' relationships with schools.

³ Independent Schools Australia submission to the Senate inquiry into the National Trend of School Refusal <https://isa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/ISA-submission-Inquiry-into-School-Refusal-2022-12-09.pdf> p.8

⁴ Kevin Reunions and Donna Cross, "Student and Staff Wellbeing and Mental Health" (Independent Schools Australia, May 2022), <https://isa.edu.au/documents/report-wellbeing-of-students-and-staff/>. p.4

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Relationships with peers are important to the wellbeing of all students, including students with disability. The pandemic meant that in periods of lockdown, the way that students related to their friends and peers changed and while sometimes there was difficulty maintaining peer relationships in the online environment, sometimes the shift to a remote learning environment actually resulted in positive experiences for students with disability learning from home.

A national survey undertaken by Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) found that 78 per cent of parents and carers said they were mainly responsible for their child's daily education routine during the first COVID-19 lockdown⁵ and many parents of students with disability found learning from home overwhelming. However, in some cases, collaboration and feedback between the school, parents and carers increased.

Technology

Many Independent schools already had the technology required for remote learning however this was not the case in all schools. Many Independent schools had to quickly pivot to remote learning provision and quickly build up capacity and capability in schools.

School staff needed to be responsive to helping students and their families access online content and problem solve any technology issues. Schools also often loaned devices to families who did not have access to computers in the home, or where the family needed multiple devices. In some schools where technology is not a primary mode of learning delivery (e.g., Steiner and Montessori education), families collected work booklets in a drive-through system each week or schools delivered to the home.

Some parents and carers struggled in the online environment. Some families were not able to help their child access remote learning because of a limited understanding of technologies, or lack of access to devices or to the internet, leading to some students not being able to participate in remote learning.

Schools have reported that a lack of access to remote learning has led to some students becoming disengaged. One Independent special assistance school noted that the provision of remote learning during lockdown was highly problematic, as many students did not have access to devices, to the internet, or to parent support to enable remote learning. When lockdown measures lifted, it was challenging for some students to re-engage with school.

Staff at this special assistance school responded to these barriers by increasing wrap-around support with a dedicated team approach to support each student's individual needs.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding students

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding students with disability who boarded and had to return to a remote community, may not have had access to the technology needed for remote learning. This includes access to devices and a stable internet connection. This has resulted in many

⁵ H Dickinson et al., "Not Even Remotely Fair Experiences of Students with Disability during COVID-19" (Report prepared for Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA), 2020), https://www.cyda.org.au/images/pdf/not_even_remotely_fair_cyda_education_report.pdf. p.20

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding students, including those with disability, having significant disruption to learning.

Funding has been provided through the National Indigenous Australian Agency (NIAA) for both 2022 and 2023 to assist boarding providers to support students to reconnect to school following the impacts of COVID-19 and to enable boarding providers to better address the education, health and wellbeing needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding students and keep them engaged in school.

DID THE SUPPORTS AVAILABLE TO ASSIST YOU OR ASSIST YOUR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITY IN ACCESSING AND PARTICIPATING IN SCHOOL EDUCATION CHANGE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?

HAVE YOU HAD THE INFORMATION AND ADVICE YOU NEED TO SUPPORT STUDENTS WITH DISABILITY TO ACCESS AND PARTICIPATE IN SCHOOL EDUCATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?

State, territory and federal governments, education bodies and schools all worked to address issues associated with COVID-19. The Independent sector also worked closely with other education sectors to share resources and information about managing the effects of the pandemic where possible.

Australian Government

It was particularly noted that Australian Government health campaigns, support resources, webinars and media conversations during COVID-19 helped to destigmatise mental ill-health. This destigmatising increased the likelihood that students would identify if they needed help and seek that help.

State and territory governments

Some AISs described positive relationships with state and territory governments during COVID-19, with the government sharing resources across the sectors. The COVID-19 Intensive Learning Support Program offered by the New South Wales Government and the School Counselling Support Grants facilitated through the Association of Independent Schools New South Wales (AISNSW) provided specialist resources and staffing to assist students with disability to access and participate in education.

Associations of Independent Schools

AISs were a conduit for information and support to schools. They gave advice on staffing issues such as mask mandates and vaccination requirements. They also provided specialised advice to special schools, which remained open during the lockdown periods.

AISs provided a range of supports and advice to schools to assist them in supporting students with disability during the pandemic including:

- AISNSW provided comprehensive and regular advice and updates to schools around Public Health orders, school closures, School Risk Assessments, staffing concerns, regulatory aspects of attendance and curriculum adjustments as well as specific advice for supporting students with disability.

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- Association of Independent Schools Western Australia (AISWA) published resources on the website and newsletters to support schools with addressing online safety for students with disability during the pandemic.
- AISWA developed and implemented alternative delivery modes to supplement existing in-person disability specific and NCCD related professional learning (e.g., webinars, online, recorded webinar options were offered).
- AISWA ensured regional and remote schools had access to consultancy about students with disability via phone or electronic means in the absence of site visits or due to Community closures on health grounds, as well as access to professional learning via webinar and online delivery.
- Independent Schools Victoria (ISV) provided a COVID-19 hotline covering all aspects of operation, including students with disability. AISWA provided telephone and electronic communication and advice to schools regarding compliance with the Disability Standards for Education.

Independent schools

Independent schools used a range of measures to manage the effects of COVID-19 on students with disability:

- Whole-school COVID-19 approaches, combined with ongoing communication about the changing government measures.
- Learning at home opportunities to support education outcomes and reduce barriers for return to face-to-face learning.
- Encouraging students to engage with professional help such as school or external mental health supports, youth workers or other supports if required.
- Reducing anxiety by maintaining a regular routine and advising the student in advance of any changes.
- Presentations in schools to support students with disability during the pandemic:
 - Tips for engaging students in telehealth.
 - Information for parents and carers about remote learning for students with disability.
 - Preparation for staff and students for online adjustments.
 - Advice on external referrals for students with disability.
 - Strategies for supporting student needs post-lockdown.

HAVE YOU SUCCESSFULLY SUPPORTED STUDENTS WITH DISABILITY TO RETURN TO FACE-TO-FACE LEARNING AFTER ANY PERIODS OF REMOTE LEARNING?

Schools have noted that for some students the return for school has been extremely difficult, for example Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with disability. The shift to remote learning affected some students with disability sense of social isolation.

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Many schools have retained some of the practices implemented during COVID-19, such as having an online class toolbox or lesson outlines. This has supported students with disability in graduated attendance planning as well as when students may need to miss class due to medical or allied health appointments.

However, in some instances, a graduated return to school meant that students may not have been back in full time schooling for lengthened periods of time resulting in further delays to learning and social engagement. In addition, access to further support services to support the extended transition (such as psychology support) presented added layers for home and school, leading to extended returns to face-to-face learning.

Since the return to face-to-face learning there has been an increase in enrolment in home schooling and distance education, which has filled the gap left by school refusal.

School refusal

As noted earlier in this submission, some students with disability have found the return to face-to-face learning difficult resulting in an increase in school attendance issues, including school refusal.

As has also been previously noted, some students with disability preferred the remote learning experience, or at least many aspects of remote learning. With the shift back to physical attendance, some students have struggled to meet attendance requirements.

Schools have also reported that there was an underestimation of the support that would be required for students to transition back from remote learning and return to face-to-face learning.

Independent schools recognise the importance of early intervention for students with significant or chronic absenteeism and students with emerging patterns of school refusal. The intensity, complexity and frequency of work needed to support the growing number of students re-engaging with school has increased and placed schools under significant strain.

HAS THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IMPACTED YOUR ABILITY TO SUPPORT STUDENTS WITH DISABILITY TO SUCCESSFULLY TRANSITION BETWEEN SCHOOLS, SCHOOLING YEAR LEVELS, OR FROM SCHOOL INTO FURTHER EDUCATION, TRAINING, OR EMPLOYMENT?

The pandemic has had a particular impact on students at key transition points:

- Younger students beginning school: routines, classroom expectations. Imputing disability was difficult for the school to manage as well as understanding adjustment needs.
- Older students exiting school: post school planning such as work experience, meeting with service providers, did not occur.
- Transitioning between Year 6 and Year 7.

WHAT IMPROVEMENTS COULD BE MADE FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITY DURING ANOTHER MAJOR EMERGENCY EVENT LIKE THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?

In consultations for this submission, there was support for better planning to improve the education sector response to emergencies, particularly in relation to students with disability. This includes ways schools can continue to make adjustments for students with disability in a range of circumstances and planning for resourcing and support needs.

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For example, increasing the available information and guidance for teachers in how to engage, support, monitor and review students with disability, using a variety of modalities, during remote learning would be welcome. Additionally, in future national pandemic or other events such as natural disasters, the provision of prompt and consistent advice about the responsibilities and scope of schools to accommodate face-to-face learning for students with disability would assist schools.

IN YOUR VIEW, IS THERE MORE THAT COULD BE DONE TO MINIMISE THE NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON SCHOOL STUDENTS WITH DISABILITY? WHY?

It is the view of the sector that there are several ways that more could be done to minimise the negative impacts of COVID-19 on students with disability. One aspect would be the provision of additional support for school staff, parents, and carers. For example, the Independent school sector would welcome the resourcing of intensive and specialised support for students who are yet to return to school full time post-pandemic.

Schools have also noted the importance of supporting schools to increase the accessibility of different modes of learning for students with disability. This includes providing the resources and equipment students need for learning and offering adjusted educational plans for different delivery modes.

It is also important to consider and mitigate the impact of the health risk factors on students with disability which have the potential to negatively impact learning. These include the risk of contracting COVID-19 and interruption to allied health services.

There are also significant mental health impacts that students and staff are experiencing post COVID-19 and more funding for support in this space would be welcomed.

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 has impacted all students however it has affected students with disability disproportionately to students without disability, and the impacts are still being felt by students and schools around the country.

The Independent sector has noted that it will take schools some time to return to 'business as usual' including improving student outcomes, addressing mental health and wellbeing concerns, and transitioning students with disability back to face-to-face learning.

It is vital that schools, systems, and governments act on the lessons learned during the pandemic. This includes providing schools with prompt information and support for enacting health mandates and government directives, particularly in relation to students with disability.

However, the pandemic also presents an opportunity for schools and systems to examine the ways in which students with disability benefited from remote learning and how those learnings can be incorporated into practice.

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