

What can be learned from the period of remote and flexible learning to strengthen school education in Victoria?

CYDA is the peak body representing children and young people with disability up to the age of 25 across Australia. We have more than 5,000 members across the country, including young people with disability, and families/caregivers of children and young people.

What have we heard about the problems experienced by Victorian children and young people with disability in their education during this period?

Very early on during the pandemic, feedback from CYDA's members told us that children and young people with disability and their families were scared, isolated and not getting enough support.

We launched a survey for our members of their experience of the COVID pandemic just five days after the World Health Organization declared the pandemic in March, and closed it after five weeks with almost 700 responses. Subsequently because of the educational disadvantage due to school closures, we launched our annual education survey in late April which remained open for seven weeks and received 742 responses.

The overwhelming message from both our surveys is that the needs of children and young people with disability have been insufficiently planned for and supported during the COVID-19 pandemic and that this spans across all sectors, including education, health, and disability services.

Survey responses clearly demonstrated that people felt like there was a general lack of information about the coronavirus targeted to children and young people with disability and their families, with 82% stating they lacked information. Uncertainty about education was a prominent theme, including school closures and challenges with learning from home, and concern that progress gained by children and young people with disability would be lost during this period.

The impact of the move to remote learning by schools and the lack of planning for students with disability cannot be underestimated, reinforcing the existing inequality and disadvantage they already face in their education. Outright discrimination, lack of reasonable educational adjustments, and failing to include students with disability were prominent features.

Our survey told us that:

- Less than half (46%) had regular contact with the education provider to ensure the learning is accessible

- Only a quarter (26%) said their efforts to ensure the student with disability is connected to their peers
- Only half (50%) said curriculum and learning materials were in accessible formats

Clearly the Disability Discrimination Act and the Disability Standards for Education are failing to provide inclusive schooling for students with disability before the COVID-19 situation, which our annual education surveys show us. If we already had an inclusive education system the neglect and discrimination against students with disability would likely not have occurred to the same extent.

Many of our survey findings are discussed in further depth in our recent report, in partnership with researchers from the University of New South Wales, *More than isolated: The experience of children and young people with disability and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic*. We additionally have another report being developed by the same research team, which will focus exclusively on the educational experiences of children and young people with disability during this time.

What do we recommend / what can be learnt for the future?

CYDA is the chair and co-convenor of the Australian Coalition for Inclusive Education (ACIE), a national coalition of organisations working together to advance inclusive education in Australia and across state and territory education systems. In April 2020, ACIE published a paper – *Providing inclusive education for children and young people with disability in a ‘time of crisis’* – which outlines the key steps needed to ensure children and young people with disability are included in education systems’ emergency planning and response from the beginning. This paper can be downloaded from the ACIE website.

As stated in the paper, “All responses must be designed to avoid creating further educational and social disconnection and inequality. They should aim to create new opportunities for students, teachers and families to form stronger connections, develop creative initiatives, collaborate more, trial new tools, and learn in new ways that may rethink how we collectively implement a fully inclusive school system for ALL.”

The paper further articulates the key elements of inclusive education for students with disability in a time of crisis:

- Physical inclusion – present and fully participating in the same learning environments that is accessible to all, for the same amount of time. This can be online environments.
- Curriculum inclusion – curriculum is delivered accessibly, so all students are included in the same lesson material, with appropriate support and adjustments.
- Social inclusion – socially all students are welcomed, supported to belong and not separated from their peers on the basis of disability or difference.

- System inclusion – close existing gaps, minimise impact of existing educational disadvantage and optimise limited resources for community-wide outcomes.

Sadly, feedback from our members shows that these elements of inclusion were not delivered for the majority of children with disability during the remote learning period. A strong theme coming through from our members is that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated underlying inequities in our education system. As one survey respondent wrote, “the experience has emphasised how broken the system is, which is incredibly sad.”

As Victoria begins planning for the ‘road out’ and our new ‘COVID-normal,’ it is critical that we learn from the experiences of children and young people with disability during the remote learning period, and that we take advantage of this unique opportunity to address the underlying barriers and inequities in our education system and move towards an approach of genuinely inclusive education, in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.