



**Australian Federation of
Disability Organisations**

Review of the impact of COVID-19 on school students with disability

April 2023

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About AFDO

Since 2003, the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations (AFDO), a Disabled Peoples Organisation (DPO) and Disability Representative Organisation (DRO), has been the recognised national peak organisation in the disability sector, along with its disability specific members, representing people with disability. AFDO's mission is to champion the rights of people with disability in Australia and support them to participate fully in Australian life.

Our member organisations represent disability specific communities with a total reach of over 3.8 million Australians.

AFDO continues to provide a strong, trusted, independent voice for the disability sector on national policy, inquiries, submissions, systemic advocacy and advisory on government initiatives with the Federal and State/Territory governments.

We work to develop a community where people with disability can participate in all aspects of social, economic, political and cultural life. This includes genuine participation in mainstream community life, the development of respectful and valued relationships, social and economic participation, and the opportunity to contribute as valued citizens.

Our vision

That all people with disabilities must be involved equally in all aspects of social, economic, political and cultural life.

Our mission

Using the strength of our membership-based organisations to harness the collective power of uniting people with disability to change society into a community where everyone is equal.

Our strategic objectives

To represent the united voice of our members and people with disability in national initiatives and policy debate.

To enhance the profile, respect and reputation for AFDO through our members.

To build the capacity and sustainability of AFDO and our members.

To foster strong collaboration and engagement between our members and stakeholders.

To enhance AFDO's connection and influence in international disability initiatives, particularly in the Asia Pacific region, through policy, advocacy and engagement

Our members

Full members:

- Ability First Australia
- Arts Access Australia
- Autism Aspergers Advocacy Australia
- Blind Citizens Australia
- Brain Injury Australia
- Deaf Australia
- Deafblind Australia
- Deafness Forum Australia
- Down Syndrome Australia
- Disability Advocacy Network Australia
- Disability Justice Australia
- Disability Resources Centre
- Enhanced Lifestyles
- National Mental Health Consumer and Carer Forum (NMHCCF)
- People with Disabilities WA
- People with Disabilities ACT
- Polio Australia
- Physical Disability Australia
- Women with Disabilities Victoria
- Women with Disabilities ACT

Associate members:

- AED Legal Centre
- All Means All
- Amaze
- Aspergers Victoria
- Disability Advocacy and Complaints Service of South Australia (DACSSA)
- Explorability Inc
- Leadership Plus
- Multiple Sclerosis Australia
- National Organisation for Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (NOFASD)
- Star Victoria
- TASC National Limited
- YDAS – Youth Disability Advocacy Service



Acknowledgements

AFDO acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the traditional custodians of the land on which we stand, recognising their continuing connection to land, waters, and community. From our head office in Melbourne, we pay our respects to the Bunurong Boon Wurrung and Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung peoples of the Eastern Kulin Nation and to their Elders past, present, and emerging. We also pay our respects to the traditional owners of all lands on which we operate or meet around the country.

AFDO acknowledges people with disability, particularly those individuals that have experienced or are continuing to experience violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation. We also acknowledge their families, supporters, and representative organisations and express our thanks for the continuing work we all do in their support.

Report Author: Rebecca Rudd, [Coordinator – Policy and Submissions](#)

Reviewed by: Ross Joyce, [Chief Executive Officer](#)

AFDO recognises and thanks its membership for contributing their invaluable expertise, as well as the insights drawn from their respective memberships' lived experience, into this submission.

AFDO acknowledges and endorses the majority of recommendations made by our colleagues from Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) in their submission to this review

Introductory comments

AFDO welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the *Review of the impact of COVID-19 on school students with disability* and thanks the Department of Education for their consideration of this submission.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia necessitated the implementation of social distancing protocols that included the closure of schools in favour of remote and flexible modes of instruction. While this unprecedented transition and the consequent upheaval it caused proved to be overwhelming for all students, those with disability were particularly affected. This is in part due to the myriad inequalities that were already prevalent within the education system, which were exacerbated by the crisis.

This submission will examine some of the key challenges encountered by students with disability consequent to the pandemic, and the impacts these had upon them. While this submission will also explore some of the more effective responses implemented by schools and the education system in general, AFDO would emphasise that, in many cases, the COVID-19 pandemic merely exposed and amplified pre-existing systemic issues that need to be addressed.

Key areas of concern

Accessibility of remote learning

There was a lack of a coordinated approach across the education sector and between Federal, State and Territory Governments in handling the changes from classroom to remote or other learning environments.

This resulted in significant issues for students with disability across all years of education. Whilst we will detail a number of these key issues and provide recommendations to address below, it is important to acknowledge as a priority the disconnect across the education sector in implementing significant changes to the method of delivering lessons and ensuring participation by all students within the system.

We advocate that there needs to be a comprehensive Education Disaster Response Management Plan developed and maintained to cater for National, State, Territory, and local emergencies. We see the leadership for this Plan being the responsibility of the Commonwealth.

This must ensure that all States and Territories are required to maintain and update their own Plans as part of any funding arrangement down to a local school level.

Plans at a minimum should cover;

- resourcing and funding issues;
- School operations and resourcing;
- Teacher responsibilities and individual student liaison
- ensure the students individual needs are taken into account;
- multiple areas for teacher, student, parent, guardian, family and community engagement;
- curriculum changes and delivery methods such as in school or home or remote environments;
- accessibility and resourcing and alternative requirements;
- use proven strategies that have addressed the identified issues and deficiencies over the course of the current Pandemic.

Recommendation:

1. That the Commonwealth develops and keeps updated a comprehensive Education Disaster Response Management Plan to cater for National, State, Territory, and local emergencies. This must ensure that all States and Territories are required to maintain and update their own Plans as part of any funding arrangement down to a local school level.

Accessibility of remote learning

Many students with complex disabilities who would typically receive extensive support within the school environment encountered significant obstacles with remote, flexible, and online modes of instruction. Other students were prevented from participating in educational activities entirely as the nature of their disability precluded them from using devices without direct assistance.

Furthermore, the transition from classroom-based to home-based learning presented considerable challenges, with the altered routines and learning environments proving difficult to acclimate to.

For some individuals, remote and flexible learning is simply not a viable option. In addition, many schools failed to appropriately modify their curriculum or provide accessible materials.

Clearly, there is a need for further efforts to develop remote learning platforms, teaching methodologies, and educational materials that are accessible and suitable for individuals with diverse disabilities.

Recommendation:

2. That the Commonwealth, as part of education funding, requires all schools to continue to develop and maintain an annual remote learning platform accessible by all students for its entire curriculum.
3. That educational materials required for remote learning curriculum are fully accessible for individuals with disability and diverse disabilities.

Lack of support from education staff

Availability of education aides has been markedly inconsistent, with some students with Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD) funding receiving regular contact via phone or online, while others received little to no support.

This was further compounded by the absence of clear guidelines in regard to the responsibilities of PSD staff, and their lack of authorisation to provide in-home assistance.

As a result, many students with disability received inadequate individualised support to allow them to properly engage with remote learning. Provision of usual supports, such as supervision, social supports, and individual support workers, were also significantly reduced.

Recommendation:

4. That the Commonwealth, as part of education funding, requires all schools operating a Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD) to integrate a consistent approach for remote learning to ensure regular contact and individualised support is maintained by PSD teaching staff with PSD students to ensure their continued engagement.

Lack of support from the NDIA

The NDIA were slow to collaborate with schools, resulting in a critical delay in acknowledging, flexibly adjusting, and adequately funding the additional costs associated with remote learning.

As a result, many students with disability – most notably, students with intellectual disability – were unable to access adaptive equipment such as tablets or activity packs.

In addition, there was a general lack of clarity in regard to how the NDIS could be used to support remote learning.

Recommendation:

5. That the Commonwealth require the NDIA to develop and maintain an Agency Plan and Policies to efficiently respond to requirements of participants attending primary or secondary schools following education systems implementing remote or other learning to ensure the participants plan can handle the changes to supports or equipment needs.
6. That the Agency and education institutes are required, under their respective funding agreements and regulations, to establish a collaborative mechanism to assist those students affected by any remote or other learning changes to be able to obtain supports to ensure their continuing participation in the changed system.

Key impacts on students with disability

Effect on mental health and wellbeing

Many students with disability experienced a regression in behaviour and skills as a result of the pandemic and the shift to remote learning, evidenced by heightened anxiety and an increase in challenging behaviours. These issues were further compounded by social isolation from their peers and restrictions on other usual activities.

Conversely, for students who are regularly bullied, excluded, or otherwise find schools to be an anxiety-inducing environment, being removed from this environment may have enabled them to learn more effectively.

Recommendation:

7. Individual plans for remote learning or other means of education delivery in the event of a loss of school wide classroom attendance need to be developed by the school staff with students with disability and their families as part of the enrolment process.
 - a. The plan should be reviewed by all parties at the start of each school year to ensure it is maintained and updated.
 - b. The Plan must take into account the students learning preferences, social interaction needs and accessibility requirements.

Disengagement with learning

For many students with disability, the experience of remote and flexible learning has been so arduous that they have disengaged with school entirely, reflected in higher rates of absenteeism.

This is a matter of serious concern, as the longer a student remains disengaged from the education system, the more difficult they will find it to return, leaving them more likely to be early school leavers.

The recommendations outlined in the previous sections would assist in ensuring that students with disability do not disengage when there are sudden changes to a remote or other learning environment.

Recommendations

1. That the Commonwealth develops and keeps updated a comprehensive Education Disaster Response Management Plan to cater for National, State, Territory, and local emergencies. This must ensure that all States and Territories are required to maintain and update their own Plans as part of any funding arrangement down to a local school level.
2. That the Commonwealth, as part of education funding, requires all schools to continue to develop and maintain an annual remote learning platform accessible by all students for its entire curriculum.
3. That educational materials required for remote learning curriculum are fully accessible for individuals with disability and diverse disabilities.
4. That the Commonwealth, as part of education funding, requires all schools operating a Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD) to integrate a consistent approach for remote learning to ensure regular contact and individualised support is maintained by PSD teaching staff with PSD students to ensure their continued engagement.
5. That the Commonwealth require the NDIA to develop and maintain an Agency Plan and Policies to efficiently respond to requirements of participants attending primary or secondary schools following education systems implementing remote or other learning to ensure the participants plan can handle the changes to supports or equipment needs.
6. That the Agency and education institutes are required, under their respective funding agreements and regulations, to establish a collaborative mechanism to assist those students affected by any remote or other learning changes to be able to obtain supports to ensure their continuing participation in the changed system.
7. Individual plans for remote learning or other means of education delivery in the event of a loss of school wide classroom attendance need to be developed by the school staff with students with disability and their families as part of the enrolment process.
 - c. The plan should be reviewed by all parties at the start of each school year to ensure it is maintained and updated.
 - d. The Plan must take into account the students learning preferences, social interaction needs and accessibility requirements.
8. AFDO also endorses the recommendations made by Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) in their submission to this review.