



SUBMISSION

TO THE INQUIRY INTO THE VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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 disabilities.

Over the past 10 weeks we heard from more than 500 families across Victoria with students with disability. Over this period we received a 25% increase in education related calls to our Support Line. The information below is based on the issues and recommendations raised by these families.

Introduction

At the start of the COVID-19 crisis the greatest concern of families was for the health of their children. As highlighted by the Disability Royal Commission, people with disability often experience discrimination in accessing healthcare. Families feared if health systems were overrun then their children would not receive treatment. We applaud the quick actions of the Victorian Government, which resulted in very low rates of transmission and a health care system that has the capacity to treat all cases.

The decision to have Victorian students learning from home from the start of Term 2 was a key aspect of the Victorian Government response to COVID-19. There are 28,000 students in government schools whose disability means they receive additional support in the classroom to assist their learning. The support needs of these students of course vary, but thousands of Victorian students require one-on-one support to undertake learning. The vast majority of students undertook learning from home, with an average of 3% of students attending school in mainstream settings and 6% in specialist schools. However learning from home had a disproportionately negative impact on students with disability and their families.

Education issues faced by students with disability and their families:

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.

In aged care and disability services, essential care continued throughout the COVID-19 restrictions, with protective measures in place. Education support for students with disability did not continue. It was left entirely to families to support their children. Consequently, a young person who finished school in 2019 and who receives disability services received far greater support during the restrictions than a student with a disability currently undertaking year 12.

Education support staff and specialist teachers could have been deployed to provide in-home support to students, with protective measures in place. This did not occur.

Options such as a part-time attendance for students with disability or siblings of children with disability being able to attend school were considered by DET but were left to Principal discretion. In practice this meant many Principals told families they were not required by DET to offer such flexibility.

Throughout Term 2 schools remained open to provide onsite supervision of students who were not able to be supervised at home as well as vulnerable students. However substantial gatekeeping occurred and most schools did not consider disability as part of the assessment of vulnerability.

There is a clear delineation between schools and the NDIS regarding education, and schools are responsible for the education of students with disability. 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 families had to reduce their working hours, or resign from their jobs, to provide the level of care and support their student with disability required while learning at home.

Families and students were 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.

Many students experienced increased anxiety and behaviours of concern escalated. This impacts both the student and their family.

The announcement regarding the return to face-to-face teaching partially acknowledged the needs of students with disability, as all students at specialist schools irrespective of year level, returned on the 26th May. However students with similar support needs in grades 3 to 10 at mainstream schools had to wait until 9th June.

We want to acknowledge that DET met weekly with ourselves and Amaze to consult around the needs of students with disability. The Department also established a Parent Advice Line, approximately 20% of calls related to students with disability (significantly higher than the percentage of students with disability).

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.

Recommendations:

1. Establish a standard of support for students with disability during times of crisis. This may be required for COVID-19 cluster outbreaks or school closures due to bushfires or other disasters.
2. Define education support for students with disability as an essential service.
3. Provide professional development for school leaders and teachers that reasonable adjustments and differentiated learning are not an optional extra but an essential requirement.
4. Strengthen mental health support for students with disability.
5. Ensure activation of processes such as the weekly consultation with ACD and Amaze and the Parent Advice Line during times of crisis.

We hope this account of the situation for students with disability and their families during COVID-19 will ensure better support for students with disability in the future.

Further data and analysis of the experiences of students with disability will be available soon from the Child and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) national education survey.

We are happy to provide further information and case studies if required.

Yours sincerely



Karen Dimmock
Chief Executive Officer