

JUNE 2020



VCOSS submission to The Education State: Lessons from Remote and Flexible Learning

Introduction

The Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on lessons from Remote and Flexible Learning, which was instituted as part of the Victorian Government's COVID response.

In making this submission, we are highly attuned to context. Our community is in the throes of unprecedented social and economic dislocation caused by a global health pandemic. We understand that the Victorian Government has had to make decisions at pace, based on the best available public health information at any given time. We particularly acknowledge the extraordinary scale and speed of adaptation that the Department of Education and Training was required to make in order to establish and operationalise Remote and Flexible Learning.

Throughout this time, VCOSS's focus has been – as it always is – on vulnerable students and families: those for whom school is a refuge from violence, abuse or neglect, and those who rely on schools for meals, for mental health care and other wellbeing supports, for additional learning support, and for educational resources that aren't readily available at home (for example, a quiet space for individual study, or access to books, news media, digital devices and internet). We have also been concerned for students who, pre-COVID, had risk factors for early school leaving or were on a pathway back to education after a period of school disengagement, and the impact that COVID adaptations have had on their engagement.

Once the decision was made to move to Remote and Flexible Learning, VCOSS welcomed the Victorian Government's commitment to keeping schools open for vulnerable students, and those whose parents are essential workers, to have their learning supervised onsite.

VCOSS also welcomed the Victorian Government's acknowledgement of the digital divide between students and its commitment to provide devices (laptops and tablets) and internet access to every student who needed this support during the period of Remote and Flexible Learning.

Through partnership forums such as the Human Services and Health Partnership Implementation Committee (HSHPIC), the Department of Education – Community Sector Organisation Governance Group and the Education State Schools Guiding Coalition, we were made aware of rapid adaptations to school-based wellbeing supports to try and maintain continuity of support to the most vulnerable students and families, and work to sustain established school re-engagement programs such as Navigator.

At the outset, whilst acknowledging these commitments, we did express concern that some students may still be left behind – in particular, students with additional needs who may usually have a teacher's aid and/or other school-based supports to enable their participation and assist their learning.

The feedback we have had from VCOSS members during this time shows a mixed picture. Remote and Flexible Learning was experienced differently across (and within) different student cohorts, educational settings, and places (local areas).

For some students, changes to the usual school routine, not having to travel, and being away from a school environment they can find stressful represented freedom and helped them to thrive. Some VCOSS members reported that online learning increased students' sense of agency and improved their engagement. Distribution of devices has provided some students with home internet for the first time ever. The body of this submission identifies what worked well and should be sustained.

There have also been students whose experience of Remote and Flexible Learning has been negative. This is because they experienced systemic barriers associated with having a disability, experienced delays in receiving devices that enable internet access, were trying to study in a home environment not conducive to this purpose (e.g. living in overcrowded housing), lost peer connection and/or reported a reduction in their wellbeing.

In some instances, this was exacerbated by the stress of lockdown, including the closure of (or limited access to) community spaces, and inability to connect in the same way with formal and informal supports (for example, programs run by community service organisations, peer and extended family networks).

While we understand that the Department of Education and Training worked to adapt wellbeing supports, to ensure vulnerable students continued to have access to school psychologists and other wellbeing resources, some students who might previously have had access to mental health care through school did not get the support they required and needed to find new avenues to access support.

VCOSS has identified the following lessons from the Remote and Flexible Learning period. Each one is unpacked in more detail in the body of the submission, and is framed as a recommendation for government. Many of these recommendations have their roots in pre-COVID times. In many ways, the pandemic has magnified pre-existing faultlines and opportunities, and the rapid adaptations made during this time show what is possible:

- Lesson 1: We cannot break the link between disadvantage and educational outcomes unless we address the technological divide. Having reliable internet access and a digital device for schoolwork at school **and** at home is essential to students' participation and learning. Every Victorian student should have a laptop or tablet and internet access. The rapid deployment of devices to support Remote and Flexible Learning has been a game-changer for some of the State's most disadvantaged learners. Going forward, the Victorian Government should sustain the provision of devices to students who do not otherwise have access to these at home.
- Lesson 2: Students with disabilities face additional health, learning and development needs that often require targeted teaching support and access to specialist therapists and integration aides. The period of Remote and Flexible Learning heightened barriers for students who do not receive the tailored support they need to fully participate in learning – for example, we heard from the Association for Children with Disabilities that families were told by teachers that they were not required to provide differentiated learning plans. Additionally, existing in-school education supports were not adapted to support students and families to engage with home-based learning. In addition to the educational impacts, this has affected the mental health and employment participation of many families. COVID-19 has highlighted the need for the Department of Education and Training's emergency planning and response to have an increased focus on the adaptation of education support at times of crisis. More broadly, there is a need for the Victorian Government to boost funding and support to students with a disability.

- Lesson 3: Interface issues between the education system and the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) have become more pronounced for students and their families. The National Cabinet has shown what is possible, in terms of federal-state collaboration and joint problem-solving. The Victorian Government should seize this opportunity to work with the Commonwealth to fix outstanding issues at the interface of state education and the NDIS, so that all students with disabilities have access to the supports they need to thrive.
- Lesson 4: While Remote and Flexible Learning has not worked for every student, a strong message we have heard from students (via our members) is that they do want to retain flexibility and variety in the way their learning environment is structured. In particular, there is an appetite to do more in terms of integrating face-to-face and online learning beyond the COVID environment. The Department of Education and Training could explore this in the context of Education State goals to increase student agency and increase engagement, retention and completion.
- Lesson 5: COVID-19 is anticipated to generate more demand for support services as a consequence of increased unemployment and poverty, mental ill-health, substance use, and family violence. Students exposed to – or experiencing – these challenges will be at heightened risk of early school leaving. The Victorian Government should ensure eligibility criteria and funding for school and community-based engagement/re-engagement programs (for example, Navigator and School Focused Youth Services) enables schools and community-based providers to be responsive to young people's needs.

Bridge the technological divide

Pre-pandemic, access to a device (such as a computer or iPad) and a secure, reliable internet connection were important for students to get the most out of their education. The move to remote learning during COVID-19 meant these devices became vital – without them, the learning experience was compromised, and important connections to teachers and peers were disrupted.

One-in-five households in regional Victoria, and one-in-ten households in metropolitan Melbourne, have no internet access at home. During the early COVID-response phase, Victorian Government restrictions meant that community facilities where people go to publicly access the internet, for example, libraries, were closed. While this was an urgent public health measure, it had an unintended consequence of heightening the educational disadvantage of some of the State's most vulnerable students.

Not-for-profit organisations such as State Schools' Relief received thousands more requests for assistance with internet access and extra devices.

The Victorian Government acted quickly to deliver thousands of laptops, devices, SIM cards and dongles to students, to enable access to online learning. Devices were given first to priority cohorts including senior secondary students, students in bush-fire affected areas and families who couldn't afford an internet connection. This was a major logistical exercise for the Department of Education and Training. VCOSS acknowledges the scale and complexity of the task. For many students who received devices, having those devices was a key determinant of whether remote learning was successful and effective. However, some of the challenges included:

- Some students waited several weeks for their devices, meaning they missed out on weeks of online learning.
- Because demand exceeded supply, some students outside the priority cohorts missed out. For example, VCOSS members report some culturally and linguistically diverse families with multiple children only had one device to share between siblings.

Some correspondence sent to families asking them whether they needed a device or internet access was not translated into languages other than English, leaving migrant families and families with low-levels of literacy unaware of the support available. Some refugee and asylum seeker families did not approach schools requesting a device because were worried they would need to pay.

We are still in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. In parts of Melbourne, there is a surge in confirmed cases. There will likely be an ongoing need for devices in the context of the pandemic. However, the need for internet connection and devices will not end with the pandemic. In 2020, a laptop and device for internet access are a student's 'tools of the trade'. No access to devices and internet can mean students are unable to complete homework or participate fully in the curriculum. In the absence of government provision, some families go without other basics to cover the costs of these essential learning tools¹.

VCOSS has been deeply concerned to hear anecdotal reports that some students have already had to return their devices as they return to onsite learning. Every student in Victoria should be able to participate fully in learning at school and at home. Students who have received devices during the period of Remote and Flexible Learning should be able to retain these.

¹ Borrell, J, 'The Stress, the Strain & the Pain: The impact of school costs of families and the CISVic sector', *Community Information & Support Victoria (CISVic)*, May 2020.

However, beyond COVID, the Victorian Government should provide devices to all students who do not otherwise have access to these at home.

Provide additional support to students with disability

Students with disabilities experience significant systemic barriers to education participation and engagement², and have lower Year 12 or equivalent attainment rates relative to other student cohorts³.

These barriers have become magnified during COVID-19. During the period of Remote and Flexible Learning, VCOSS heard that there was a lack of specific guidance and information for students with disability. The Association for Children with a Disability experienced a 25 per cent increase in education-related calls to its Support Line. Additionally, 20 per cent of calls to the DET's newly established Parent Line related to students with disability, far outweighing the proportion of students with disability⁴.

Support for students with disability was inconsistent across Victoria and driven by school-level interpretation of policies and government guidance. For example, some students with disability were not provided with reasonably-adjusted course materials to enable them engage with remote learning on the same basis as their peers, raising concerns about students falling behind and heightened risk of future disengagement.

Additional supports usually available in the classroom were often not provided during online or remote learning. As well as limiting students' ability to engage with online learning, this placed significant strain on families. Families and carers supported their children to engage in remote learning without the additional assistance that would otherwise have been provided in the classroom. Some families had to take unpaid leave, or lost work, due to increased caring responsibilities.

This period of Remote and Flexible Learning also highlighted the need for the education system to interface more seamlessly with the National Disability Insurance Scheme. VCOSS is very concerned by reports that – in the absence of appropriate support from schools to assist parents to oversee home-based learning for students with disabilities – some students with a NDIS plan used funding for daily support during remote learning, reducing access to vital developmental supports.

² Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA), Education: Ensuring inclusive education for children and young people with disability, <<https://www.cyda.org.au/issues/education>>, accessed 30 June 2020.

³ ABS, *Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings*, Cat No 4430.0, October 2019.

⁴ Association for Children with a Disability, *Submission to the Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic*, June 2020.

Addressing the learning support needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged students

The Victorian Government announced that students who were unable to learn from home were able to access onsite schooling, including:

- students who did not have appropriate supervision at home, or an appropriate learning environment
- children in out-of-home care
- children deemed by Child Protection and/or Family Services to be at risk of harm
- children identified by the school as vulnerable (including via referral from a family violence agency, homelessness or youth justice service or mental health or other health services and children with disability).'

However, communication and decision-making by schools was inconsistent and in some cases contradictory.

VCOSS is aware of vulnerable students, including children with disability and children in residential out-of-home care who were denied access to onsite learning. Some schools cited insufficient onsite staffing, while others provided no justification for their decisions.

For some students who did try onsite learning, working remotely in a classroom with very few children or different ages and class levels was too difficult. One VCOSS member organisation reported that 80 per cent of the young people in their residential care facilities were being supported to learn from home, despite clearly falling within the cohort eligible to attend school onsite.

For those students who were able to access onsite learning, it was often a result of extensive advocacy by support services, like disability advocacy organisations. Access to onsite learning, and its accompanying supports, should not be reliant on advocacy, but instead on clear principles and guidelines that enable access.

Provide ongoing flexibility to students

Remote and flexible learning has demonstrated the importance of providing students with an array of options to suit their individual needs. While some students struggled, some students thrived in the environment of remote and online learning. Amongst student cohorts that we were particularly concerned about – for example, students with histories of long disengagement – we have heard reports of positive outcomes and experiences during this time, including students engaged in the Navigator program and TEACHaR program.⁵

For example, almost 50 per cent of young people engaged in Anglicare Victoria's Navigator program in the Western Melbourne Area engaged positively, or to some extent, in remote learning, with 24 per cent of students demonstrating an improvement in their attendance/participation during remote learning.

VCOSS members report students who responded positively to remote learning felt less anxious, which significantly increased engagement and enthusiasm for schoolwork. This reduced anxiety related to previous feelings of disconnection from peers and teachers, feeling behind in school-work, and negative perceptions of their ability.

Case study: Venusha, 13 years*

Peer friendships made through online learning and improved self-confidence may be the key to supporting Venusha back to the classroom.

Venusha had been refusing to go to school over a long period. With the introduction of online learning she agreed to go to school, whilst there weren't other students around, and she collected a laptop to commence online schooling.

Venusha has been connecting with classroom peers online who have assisted her with logging in/accessing the work and she is now enjoying these friendships. Venusha has now committed to doing her school work and feels more confident to ask for assistance from the school.

⁵ Anglicare Victoria, TEACHaR, Tutoring for Children and Young People, <<https://www.anglicarevic.org.au/teachar-a-tutoring-program-for-vulnerable-children/>>, accessed 29 June 2020.

Given Venusha's positive school online experience she may feel more open to attend her school. Her work is modified and it will be manageable for her. Venusha's father is hopeful that she will return to school post online schooling.

Anglicare Victoria, Navigator program, Western Melbourne

*Name has been changed to protect student's identity

The ability for students to move at their own pace was an important contributing factor for students thriving in online learning. Remote learning enabled students to:

- take small steps to reengage (for example, working their way up from logging on each day to actively completing school work)
- work through classwork at their own pace
- prioritise and direct their learning as needed, helping students gain confidence in their ability to complete work, sparking motivation and hope.

Case study: TEACHaR Program

All 165 students in residential care, home-based care and linked with family services in Anglicare Victoria's TEACHaR program had outstanding results from the period of remote and flexible learning.

Students thrived in their one-on-one online learning sessions with the TEACHaR program, with students enjoying greater control in self-directing their learning, taking breaks when needed, and even feeling empowered when teaching teachers how to use aspects of digital platforms. Teachers found that during online learning, instead of becoming frustrated, students were able to hang up when they were overwhelmed, or say the line was dropping out to signal their need for space.

Some young people who would not engage in face-to-face learning began engaging in the program online and some students even requested additional work.

Approximately 50 per cent of students in this program want a dual modality of learning moving forward, to incorporate face-to-face and one-on-one learning, as well as online opportunities.

For many young people, finding a positive connection to peers or teachers and building positive experiences at school will help increase and maintain their engagement in the future. As students return to face-to-face learning, School Focused Youth Services are an important support, providing students with opportunities to connect with students, make new friends, build self-confidence and connect with other teachers in the school.

VCOSS understands the funding for this program is due to expire at the end of 2020. School Focused Youth Services need secure funding to ensure young people who have reengaged during remote learning continue to have 'sticky' points to keep them engaged.

VCOSS is also aware that the Navigator program – which was heavily subscribed pre-COVID – is also likely to have increased demand in these next stages of the pandemic. VCOSS has long advocated for additional expansion of this highly-effective program, including changes to eligibility criteria so more students can get support earlier. Ensuring funding for engagement/re-engagement programs matches demand should be an important priority for the Victorian Government going forward, as COVID has heightened the risk factors for early school leaving.



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