



Australian Government  
Department of Education

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





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# Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted school education across Australia in unprecedented ways. At various times in various jurisdictions, hundreds of thousands of school students were required to learn remotely rather than at school. Regular ways of learning and teaching were disrupted, and rapid pivots to new ways of doing things affected most people involved in the education and support of school students.

Although the experiences of students with disability varied, in general, these students experienced an additional layer of impact from the pandemic through an apparent amplification of existing challenges. Many students with disability faced disruptions to a wide range of educational experiences, including arrangements put in place to assist with access, engagement, participation, and outcomes, as well as health and wellbeing supports.

The *Review of the impact of COVID-19 on school students with disability* (the Review) was undertaken by the Australian Government Department of Education to examine:

- the educational experiences of school students with disability throughout the pandemic
- the impact of those educational experiences on the wellbeing and education-related outcomes of school students with disability; and
- how support for school students with disability has been managed by governments, education authorities and schools.

The Review focused on the feedback we received from students, teachers, principals, parents, caregivers, advocates, and other stakeholders, while also exploring significant contemporary reports and research available at the time of writing. Targeted consultations were held with select stakeholders including government and non-government education authorities to understand the measures taken to support students with disability during the pandemic.

We know from previous work such as the 2020 Review of the *Disability Standards for Education 2005* that some students with disability face compounded disadvantage, for example First Nations students with disability. However, the information we were able to obtain via consultations did not support specific conclusions being drawn in this Review regarding the experiences of particular groups of students with disability.

In preparing this report, we focused on ways schools, education authorities and governments can learn from the COVID-19 experience, help students to recover from the effects of the pandemic, and become better prepared for other emergency events that may occur.

Several clear and common themes became evident over the course of the Review, which we unpack throughout this report: Preparedness and Governance, Experience and Support, Academic Outcomes, Wellbeing Outcomes, and Return and Recovery.

Several large-scale reviews impacting students with disability took place in 2023 alongside the Review, with some overlaps in remit. As the Review progressed, we shared our findings with the Panels for the National Disability Insurance Scheme Review and the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System to inform their considerations.

## Key findings

### ***Preparation and coordination of education responses for students with disability can be improved***

The Review acknowledges that governments, agencies, and schools needed to rapidly adapt to the changed environment during the COVID-19 pandemic, including adapting to support additional or changed needs of students with disability during this time. There was a high level of consistency in education systems' experience of supporting students with disability throughout the pandemic (dandolopartners, 2023).

Throughout the Review, we heard from students, parents and educators the ways they believed these responses could be improved or strengthened. A key suggestion made in Review submissions was the need for clear guidance and a coordinated response from governments to ensure educators, families and students are supported and informed, and provided with timely and well-planned support (The Social Deck, 2023). Barriers to collaboration and coordination included system inflexibility, incompatible IT systems, and a lack of data availability to underpin decision-making (dandolopartners, 2023).

State and territory and non-government education authorities are continuing to build upon their experience to position their systems to respond effectively and proactively to crisis or emergency events. The evidence from this Review reinforces the importance of education authorities considering the needs of students with disability as an initial priority in response planning and continuing this consideration at every stage. An important aspect of this consideration is looking at ways to strengthen consultation and communication with students with disability and their parents and carers as responses are developed and implemented.

### ***Some families and schools needed more help to understand and access supports***

The Review heard the interface between the education and health systems during the pandemic, including the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), particularly during periods of remote learning, was complex and sometimes difficult for families and schools to navigate. This led to inconsistencies in provision and access of supports for students with disability, their families and carers, and educators. Some Review respondents also indicated supports students had been getting at school prior to the pandemic did not resume after returning from remote learning.

Similar issues regarding challenges for families in navigating systems of supports have been identified by the Disability Royal Commission, the NDIS Review, and the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System. More effective alignment of systems and coordination of information and supports for young people with disability and their families continues to be a focus for governments.

### ***There is scope to improve practice for educators, and support for parents and carers, during periods of remote learning***

The Review heard that in many cases, educators, families, and carers felt underprepared to support students with disability to access and participate in remote learning. The need for better communication channels between governments, education authorities and schools, and between schools and families, was one of the most frequent issues raised by Review participants. Some educators reported they lacked sufficiently targeted resources, direction, and advice, while parents and carers also noted that clearer guidance and information would have better supported them

during home learning. The Review heard the provision of reasonable adjustments for students with disability was frequently disrupted and often reliant on the effort and capability of individual educators and/or parents and carers.

Access to suitable learning infrastructure, platforms, and resources for students with disability during periods of remote learning was a challenge. Pre-emptive work to establish or strengthen policies and platforms in preparation for future disruptions to at-school learning will assist, and there are continuing opportunities for education authorities to collaborate on and share resources across jurisdictions.

The NDIS Review, Disability Royal Commission and Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System all identified opportunities for further national and jurisdictional work to improve inclusion of children and young people with disability in education. In December 2023, all Australian Education Ministers committed to working together to meet the needs of students with disability in education, and agreed an initial priority was to identify opportunities for national collaborative action (Education Ministers Meeting Communiqué, 11 December 2023).

### ***Learning and transitions were harder during the pandemic for many students with disability***

The Review heard that students with disability had mixed experiences of education during the pandemic. Some reported a negative impact on their learning and outcomes, while for others, remote or hybrid learning was an overall positive experience. Pathways through and beyond school were affected by a lack of transition support continuity, and there were increased reports of challenges for students with disability during these times.

There was variation in the expectations placed on students' engagement, participation, and achievement during the pandemic, leading to inconsistencies in implementation and outcomes. Further, there were varying understandings across different stakeholders of what, and how much, content students should be learning during periods of remote learning.

Students, parents and carers, and educators told the Review of difficulties in maintaining educational support during remote learning. Students and families reported schools were less available to provide learning support and guidance, and educators described challenges in providing the level of access and feedback desired by parents and students.

The existing absence of national outcomes data for students with disability means it is not possible to make conclusive findings about the impact of the pandemic period. Gaps in national data for students with disability is a long-standing issue that has been identified in various reviews including the 2020 Review of the *Disability Standards for Education 2005*, the Disability Royal Commission and Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System.

### ***Student wellbeing was, and continues to be, a school education priority***

While schools and systems generally put in place welfare checks and mental health supports during periods of remote learning, Review participants reported mental health and wellbeing support was harder to access for some students with disability during periods of remote learning. Review consultations heard of the development of new, or exacerbation of existing, mental health conditions for students with disability and increased need for mental health supports. There was a



wide variation in the provision of mental health and wellbeing services, and of welfare checks by schools and systems, and no formal national evaluation has been made of their effectiveness.

In response to the pandemic, state and territory and non-government education authorities put in place local measures to monitor and boost the mental health and wellbeing of their students. The Australian Government announced the Student Wellbeing Boost in October 2022 to support schools to respond to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and successive lockdowns on the mental health and wellbeing of students. As national and jurisdictional work on improving student mental health and wellbeing continues, the needs of students with disability should be an important consideration.

***There is a need to ensure students engage or reengage with education in a way that supports recovery and positive outcomes***

The Review heard about challenges or barriers for students with disability returning to face-to-face learning following the pandemic. These included adjustment issues, reluctance to stop remote learning where it was a positive experience, increased anxiety, and a continuing lack of available supports. Anecdotally, there are reports of widespread and enduring attendance declines for students with disability. There is evidence to indicate students with disability are over-represented in the school refusal population, in students excluded from schooling, and in the home-schooling community. The Review heard reports of knowledge gaps developing during periods of online learning, including in foundation skills, although the lack of national data makes it difficult to conclusively identify or measure any potential learning loss. For students with disability, where such gaps exist, they are likely to persist without specific intervention.

Identification of the drivers of school refusal for students with disability, as well as examining best-practice interventions to engage or reengage students in education, would assist ongoing work to understand and address barriers to school engagement and participation. For students with disability who have experienced learning loss, the identification of best-practice remediations would support recovery. Additional research into online, hybrid and/or alternative learning options for students with disability may suggest options for positive outcomes for some students.

# Chapter 1: Context

## Context

### COVID-19 changed the education landscape in Australia

Beginning in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted schooling for all students around Australia, with schools rapidly pivoting to remote learning during periods of lockdown and beyond.

Australia experienced its first recorded case of community transmission of COVID-19 on 2 March 2020. On 16 April 2020 National Cabinet announced that all school students must continue to be supported by their schools to ensure participation and quality education during the COVID-19 crisis. Education authorities were to continue to be responsible for managing schools, informed by expert health and education advice. It was acknowledged that flexible, remote delivery of education was likely to be needed (Prime Minister transcripts, 2020).

Most jurisdictions had their first periods of remote learning before the end of Term 1 2020, with further periods occurring sporadically through to 2022.

Periods of remote learning differed between jurisdictions, being dependent on the spread of COVID-19 and subsequent public health responses in each geographical area. However, metropolitan areas tended to experience the most instances of remote learning, with metropolitan Melbourne having 36 weeks of remote learning across 2020-21, Sydney 20 weeks, and the ACT 16 weeks (Wade et al., 2022).

Some students were still able to access face-to-face learning or a blend of face-to-face and remote learning for some or all of the remote learning period/s. Eligibility depended on the jurisdiction, the characteristics of the student, and other factors such as staff availability and biosecurity risks.

Moving to remote learning posed substantial challenges for education systems designed for face-to-face classroom delivery and for educators trained for it. Schools needed time to scale up to ensure all students could access the internet at home, and resources designed for remote delivery needed to be developed and rolled out.

### The school education landscape in Australia

The Australian school education system is complex.

Schools are operated in three distinct sectors; Government schools operated by state and territory governments, and non-government schools, comprising the Catholic and independent sectors.

State and territory governments are responsible for ensuring the delivery and regulation of schooling. They provide most of the school education funding in Australia. They determine curriculum implementation, register and regulate schools, and are responsible for the administration of government schools. They also provide support services used by both government and non-government schools. Non-government schools in the Catholic and independent sectors operate under conditions determined by jurisdictional registration authorities.

The Australian Government and state and territory governments, along with the non-government schooling sector, together agree national policy settings for education, such as a national curriculum, national data collection and reporting, national testing, and teaching standards.

The Australian Government provides a funding contribution to state and territory governments and to non-government school authorities to support school education.

## Students with disability and their schooling

### Numbers of students

In 2022 over 911,000 school students received educational adjustments because of disability. This represents 22.5 per cent of all students. The overall proportion of students with disability is increasing over time, having been 18 per cent in 2015 (ACARA, 2023).

Of the students receiving adjustments because of disability:

- 8.5 per cent were provided with extensive adjustments
- 17.1 per cent were provided with substantial adjustments
- 42.7 per cent were provided with supplementary adjustments
- 31.7 per cent were supported through quality differentiated teaching practice.

### Category of disability

Of school students who received an educational adjustment due to disability in 2022:

- 54.9 per cent had cognitive disability
- 32.0 per cent had socio-emotional disability
- 10.2 per cent had physical disability
- 2.9 per cent had sensory disability.

### Type of school

In 2018, of students with disability:

- 70.8 per cent attended regular classes alongside their peers without disability
- 17.7 per cent attended mainstream schools but had special classes of only students with disability
- 11.9 per cent attended specialist schools that cater only to students with disability.

A statistically small number of students with disability were home-schooled or had other arrangements (AIHW, 2022).

### Sector

Quantitatively, students with disability are generally evenly distributed across the three schooling sectors. In 2022 they made up:

- 23.5 per cent of government school enrolments
- 22.4 per cent of independent school enrolments
- 19.5 per cent of Catholic school enrolments (ACARA, 2023).

There is a qualitative difference in this distribution, with students requiring extensive adjustments much less represented in Catholic (3.4 per cent) or independent (4.5 per cent) schools than across government schools (10.7 per cent).

### **Attainment of students with disability**

In 2021, 68.3 per cent of people aged 20-24 with disability had completed Year 12 or equivalent, compared with 84.3 per cent of those without disability (ACARA, 2021).

In 2021, 58.5 per cent of Indigenous people aged 20-24 with disability had completed Year 12 or equivalent, compared with 60.0 per cent of Indigenous people aged 20-24 without disability (Departmental calculation from ABS Census of Population and Housing, 2021).

69.3 per cent of non-Indigenous people aged 20-24 with disability had completed Year 12 or equivalent, compared with 85.5 per cent of non-Indigenous people aged 20-24 without disability (Departmental calculation from ABS Census of Population and Housing, 2021).

### **Legal and other frameworks**

There are several legal and other frameworks for delivery of education for people with disability in Australia.

#### ***Disability Discrimination Act 1992***

The *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (DDA) provides protection against discrimination based on disability. The DDA seeks to eliminate, as far as possible, discrimination against people with disability in a range of areas, including education. It makes it illegal to discriminate against a person on the grounds of disability.

#### ***Disability Standards for Education 2005***

The *Disability Standards for Education 2005* (DSE) clarify obligations under the DDA. The DSE seek to ensure that students with disability can access and participate in education on the same basis as students without disability. The DSE cover:

- enrolment
- participation
- curriculum development, accreditation, and delivery
- student support services
- elimination of harassment and victimisation.

#### ***United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability***

Australia is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (UN CRPD) and its Optional Protocol, which promote, protect, and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disability. Article 24 of the UN CRPD covers education and determines that persons with disability are not excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability and can access inclusive, quality, and free primary and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the community.

### ***Australian Education Act 2013 and the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability***

Under the *Australian Education Act 2013*, Australian Government recurrent school funding is calculated using a needs-based funding model, which is determined through a base per-student amount plus extra funding to address disadvantage, including a student with disability loading. The calculation of the student with disability loading is based on the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD), which captures the level of educational adjustment provided to a student with disability.

### ***The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (2019)***

The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration was jointly signed by education ministers as a commitment to improve education outcomes. The first Goal of the Declaration is that the Australian education system promotes excellence and equity. This Goal is supported by a commitment that education systems are tailored to the needs of individuals, including children and young people with disability, in a way that prioritises equity of opportunity and supports achievement.

### ***Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-2031***

Australian Governments jointly signed up to Australia's Disability Strategy in 2021. Under the Strategy, governments commit to create an inclusive community, with a focus on several key Outcome Areas, including Education and Learning. This includes a policy priority to build capability in the delivery of inclusive education to improve education outcomes for school students with disability.

An Outcomes Framework measures, tracks, and reports annually on outcomes for people with disability and implementation reports will be undertaken every two years. The Strategy also commits governments to improving their data collection and reporting processes.

## **Chapter 2: Preparedness and Governance**

### **Key Findings:**

- Governments, agencies, and schools needed to rapidly adapt to the additional or changed needs of students with disability.
- While education authorities sought to respond to the pandemic in a consistent and collaborative way, differing circumstances meant there was considerable variation in the application of support for students.
- The Review heard the interface with the NDIS during the pandemic was complex and often difficult for families and schools to manage, particularly during periods of remote learning. More national or system policy guidance on delivery of NDIS supports in a changed context would have assisted.
- Systemic responses would benefit from considering the needs of students with disability as an initial priority when planning and continuing this focus at every stage of response.

## Education governance structures and coordination

### Roles and responsibilities

Given state and territory governments have responsibility for the delivery of key frontline services, including school education and health care, most of the immediate pandemic response for education was managed at this level, or by individual schools and systems.

The Australian Government had a more limited role, which was to provide funding and partner with the states and territories to ensure COVID responses met the needs of all Australians. This was reflected in Review feedback from the states and territories and non-government education authorities, who indicated that the Commonwealth was not especially visible when it came to its influence on education for students with disability during the pandemic (dandolopartners, 2023). The Review heard that Australian Government health campaigns had a positive effect during this time related to de-stigmatising mental ill-health.

### Messaging to stakeholders was not well coordinated

During the pandemic, where education and health matters intersected, different agencies operated to different rules or policies which did not always align. The unprecedented set of circumstances caused by the constantly shifting pandemic necessitated rapid responses from all jurisdictions. In some instances, this led to uncertainty for stakeholders where information, advice or decisions changed with little or no notice, and could be perceived as confusing, complicated or contradictory.

“The fragmentation between national and state/territory responsibilities (especially around education) made for confusing messaging for families of children and young people with disability, and this continues to the current day.”

(Dickinson & Yates, 2020, p. 29)

There were some specific examples where messaging caused challenges for particular cohorts of people. For example, in some First Nations communities, where determinations under the *Biosecurity Act 2015* intersected with public health rules, they became difficult for community members to interpret (First Nations Focus Group).

“Messaging about COVID wasn’t getting through to communities and people still didn’t understand it. In particular, the understanding in remote communities was very low/ confusing.”

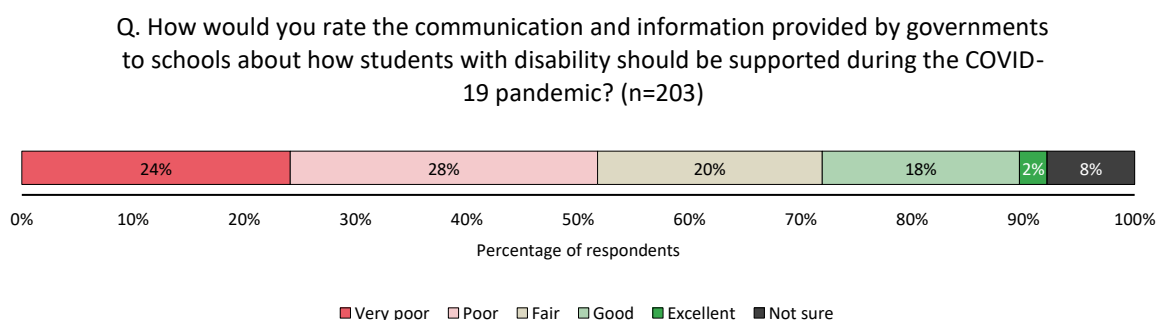
(First Nations Focus Group)

Border closures, quarantine rules, and internal state travel restrictions particularly affected boarding schools, with students and their families needing to make rapid decisions about residency and ongoing education options. This had a disproportionate effect on First Nations students and the Catholic and independent school sectors (dandolopartners, 2023).

Just over half of education and other stakeholders who responded to the Review questionnaire reported that *‘communication and information provided by governments to schools about how students with disability should be supported during the COVID-19 pandemic’* was poor (28 per cent) or very poor (24 per cent).

**Figure 1. Educator, school leader, and other organisation representatives' perception of the quality of communication and information provided by government to schools.**

Graph



*(The Social Deck, 2023)*

“In Victoria during March 2020 and November 2021, there were more than 25 different settings around who could and couldn’t go to school during lockdowns. Our members described how these ever-changing categorisations were confusing to families and resulted in repeated disruptions to routines for students and their parents and carers.”

*(Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare Submission)*

A key suggestion made in Review submissions was the need for clear guidance and a coordinated response from governments to ensure educators, families and students are supported and informed, and provided with timely and well-planned support (The Social Deck, 2023). This was also supported by disability organisation stakeholders, who suggested better planning and a more strategic response across all levels of government, support services, and organisations was needed (Stakeholder Discussion Group).

## Education system approaches were largely consistent, but responses and communication can be improved

Despite widely varying contexts and circumstances, in talking to jurisdictions, the Review found a high level of consistency in education systems’ experience of supporting students with disability throughout the pandemic (dandolopartners, 2023). In Review consultations, school sectors reported they did not identify any specific system or school-level failures for students with disability beyond those that impacted all students - although this is not to say all responses worked in all settings (dandolopartners, 2023).

The Review found that while governance systems for education support varied across jurisdictions and did change over time, there was a noted consistency in approach by all authorities (dandolopartners, 2023). Key elements of these approaches included:

- Involvement of inclusive education division officials in emergency response teams (dandolopartners, 2023)
- Interagency collaboration and coordination, especially with health and education departments (dandolopartners, 2023)

- Consultation and collaboration between government, Catholic and independent school authorities to coordinate responses and support (dandolopartners, 2023)
- Collaboration between states and territories in developing responses, for instance the creation of resources and learning materials (Wade et al., 2022, pp. 97-98)
- A focus on creating enabling conditions (dandolopartners, 2023).

There were some noted barriers to collaboration and coordination. These included system inflexibility, incompatible IT systems, and a lack of data availability to underpin decision-making (dandolopartners, 2023). Some systems also faced additional complications arising from factors such as the prevalence of remote or very remote schools, or the operation of boarding schools (in the case of the Catholic and independent schooling sectors).

Although the Review heard that education authorities rapidly implemented high-level governance systems to oversee responses to the pandemic (dandolopartners, 2023), many respondents to the Review suggested that authorities were generally less successful in providing timely and useful information and support to schools and to the community (The Social Deck, 2023).

The Review heard this led to some school staff feeling under-supported by authorities, and needing to navigate the situation on their own with limited or contradictory information. However, this was by no means a universal experience, and the Review also heard that communication flows improved over time (The Social Deck, 2023).

Submissions to the Review also reported that the provision of information to students and families was inconsistent and not timely.

“Information was provided to everyone at the same time. Parents would collect students and be telling the teachers what is happening as we had been teaching all day and hadn’t seen the news.”  
(Teacher, Educator Focus Group)

Some students told us that schools and governments should have more ways for students to learn what supports and services were available to support their learning (The Social Deck, 2023).

## Policy and practice are improved by consultation with students with disability and their families

Schools and systems had to rapidly change their service orientation during the pandemic, including how they communicate with students with disability and their parents and carers about what supports they need.

Submissions to the Review identified the need for inclusion of students with disability and their families and carers in future planning and emergency preparedness. This includes ensuring the voices and needs of children and young people with disability are at the centre of policy planning and design, communications, and COVID recovery measures (The Social Deck, 2023).

“It is super important for schools to routinely seek feedback from students with disability. The impact of COVID-19 affected each individual differently, and each individual also had multiple different experiences of their own across the span of the pandemic. Routinely checking in with the students will allow the schools to understand what is required to cater to each student's needs at a given time.”  
(YPAG Member)



This should extend beyond the crisis or emergency and be a focus for all government education departments and other types of education institutions (The Social Deck, 2023). “Designing policy and practice in collaboration with the people they are intended to support allows for a deeper understanding of the issues students face and will help inform appropriate policy responses” (Productivity Commission, 2022, p. 129).

The period of rapid reform brought on by the pandemic presents an opportunity to make inclusion a core part of future emergency responses.

“There should be more people put into schools to regularly ask students what is working and what isn’t as well, rather than waiting for something like COVID-19 to happen.”  
(YPAG Member)

## The National Disability Insurance Scheme and education system responses were not aligned

Some, though not all, students with a disability access the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), which is administered by the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA). As it relates to schooling, the purpose of the NDIS is to assist students with disability with general life care and other supports that in turn may enable them to participate more effectively in education. Specific educational adjustments to support participation in school activities and support academic outcomes are the responsibility of education providers, consistent with the Disability Standards for Education. The Review heard feedback from stakeholders that for students who were NDIS recipients, and were receiving educational adjustments in schools, the interface between the school education system and the NDIS was difficult to navigate during the pandemic.

Some stakeholders felt there was insufficient national policy guidance or system level cohesion in response to the COVID pandemic from the NDIA (dandolopartners, 2023). They told us that governments, the NDIA, and the education sector were slow to collaborate, coordinate approaches, adapt to, and resource the additional requirements and costs involved in remote schooling for students with disability (The Social Deck, 2023; Australian Federation of Disability Organisations Submission; Advocacy for Inclusion Submission).

Submissions identified a need to break down the barriers between the NDIS and educational support to ensure both systems are complementary.

“There needs to be more coordination with student supports, such as the NDIS, community mental health. This is to ensure that inter-agency and care coordination is happening so that a student doesn’t suddenly lose everything at once with no information or replacement supports.”  
(YPAG Member)

Navigating the NDIS during the pandemic could be complex for parents and carers, and plans did not always recognise or adapt to the changed needs of students with disability (Pellicano, 2020, and Carers NSW, 2020, as cited in Renshaw & Goodhue, 2021). There was a particular lack of understanding of how the NDIS applied to students undertaking remote learning as opposed to the more usual on-site schooling model.

A lack of clear and consistent protocols and policies led to decisions that were often guided by the individual interpretations of plan managers. This led to a high degree of inconsistency in the experiences of different state and territory governments, schools, and individuals in interactions with the NDIA (dandolopartners, 2023). For example, the Review heard from stakeholders that:

- NDIA officials would make decisions on individual plans that were inconsistent with the respective state or territory Chief Medical Officer (CMO), such as insisting that only students attending school could receive funded support services (dandolopartners, 2023).
- In some cases, the NDIA was rigid in its determinations, including its strict definitions of school hours, which created issues during remote learning periods where learning was more flexible (dandolopartners, 2023).
- Supports that were available were not always the ones that families needed in order to support education needs during this time.
- There was a lack of understanding around what supports are available through the NDIS and what is the responsibility of schools and/or other service providers. This is likely an issue not restricted to the pandemic.

Submissions to the Review recommended improving guidance and support for navigating the NDIS. This would enable families and carers to effectively utilise NDIS funding and other supports during emergencies (The Social Deck, 2023; see also Renshaw & Goodhue, 2021).

Participants acknowledged that collaboration would be needed between Commonwealth and state and territory governments, and across government departments and agencies dealing with education and health, to make sure that supports that facilitate student learning are available to students with disability in an event like this in the future (The Social Deck, 2023).

## Preparedness of education systems

### Digital maturity levels impacted the transition to remote learning

Differences in the digital maturity of jurisdictions, systems, or individual schools was a determining factor in the ease and effectiveness of the pivot to remote learning. This was particularly true in the early stages of the pandemic, following which there was a continuous process of learning and improving over time.

In general, schools and educators who had experience with delivering education remotely pre-pandemic, and who could draw on established platforms, infrastructure, and resources, were able to quickly focus on innovation, differentiation, and student support. Those who were less experienced or who had fewer resources, or who serviced disadvantaged areas or communities, needed to spend time and energy on basic access issues (dandolopartners, 2023).

“Students with disability who did not have access to appropriate technology, equipment or internet connection experienced considerable limitations in accessing their online learning. Families in this situation often had to rely on their schools or community services to provide equipment. However, this type of support was not available to all families.”

(Queensland Advocacy for Inclusion Submission)

In the ACT, for instance, all students from years 5 through 12 had already received Chromebooks for use at home before the pandemic began. In Victoria, school sectors partnered with Telstra to ensure

that students in disadvantaged communities received dongles to enable internet access (Wade et al., 2022, p. 97).

“It would have been good to have a back-up plan and arrange for my students to have access to the internet at home and a functioning device like an iPad so that they could have continued to learn and communicate during lockdown.”

(First Nations Educator, Interview)

Many contributors to the Review felt that education authorities and schools could have been better prepared to provide families with support for improved internet and access to devices to support their learning at home for extended periods of time. There was a clear view that contingencies should be put in place now, to support more rapid and seamless pivots to remote education in the future. Delays and apparent improvisation at the early stages of the pandemic were a source of frustration for students, parents and carers, and educators (The Social Deck, 2023).

### Educator experience in delivery of remote or online education varied widely

The role of the teacher shifted dramatically in response to the pandemic and remote learning. By far the most common change was that teachers were required to develop resources, teach lessons, and support students in largely unfamiliar formats, including fully online or as a hybrid model with both on-site and remote students. Teachers who remained teaching a fully face-to-face class also faced unfamiliar challenges relating to changed class composition, lack of support staff, and mandates governing social distancing and mask wearing which changed established patterns of communication and interaction.

Teachers faced these challenges in many instances almost overnight, with the rapidity of the pivot meaning they often did not have the time, knowledge, support, or skills to adequately prepare inclusive plans and materials for students with disability (Medhurst, 2022, and AITSL, 2021, as cited in dandolopartners, 2023).

Participants in the Review raised the varying levels of educators’ experience in delivering education in these new ways. Inconsistency in available resources and educator capacity building before and during the pandemic impacted educator self-efficacy and service delivery.

### COVID-19 put additional stresses on the teaching workforce

Many factors throughout the pandemic affected the teaching workforce. This had a disproportionate effect on students with disability, who are particularly vulnerable to the loss of experienced teachers, disruptions to learning, and changes to their relationships with teachers and assistants (dandolopartners, 2023). Education authorities noted to the Review that schools lost many teachers due to:

- Incidence of burnout
- High staff turnover
- Early retirement
- Imposition of vaccination mandates (dandolopartners, 2023)
- Temporary absences due to being close contacts of cases and needed to isolate (Wade et al., 2022, p. 42) or COVID infections (dandolopartners, 2023).

The Review heard workforce problems were a particular issue for jurisdictions – such as the Northern Territory – which have a high proportion of teachers from other states. When those teachers returned to their home states ahead of lockdowns, it led to some critical staff shortages, putting even more pressure on teachers and schools (The Social Deck, 2023; dandolopartners, 2023; First Nations Focus Group).

Teaching staff were also indirectly impacted by the deployment of support staff to other roles (The Social Deck, 2023).

Jurisdictions instituted a range of measures to ameliorate teaching workforce issues. These included:

- Establishing teams within education departments to support schools requiring relief teachers
- Redeploying qualified teachers working elsewhere within government
- Offering incentives for retired teachers to return to the workforce
- Engaging with Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs to deploy final-year students to schools
- Upskilling teachers and staff through professional development (dandolopartners, 2023).

While these responses went some way to alleviating the pressures on the overall teaching workforce, the Review heard changes to individual school staffing disrupted the learning of many students with disability, through:

- Difficulty resourcing individual learning support staff for students
- New or unfamiliar staff needing to establish relationships with students, often at the same time as students were dealing with changed learning environments
- Reduced capacity for educators to support students to access and participate in school education
- Reduced capacity to engage in disability-focused professional development.

“My kids were allowed to come to school because I was an essential worker. So they still got their education, but not always at the right grade/learning level because teaching staff was reduced”  
(First Nations Focus Group)

Teacher workforce issues continue to be an ongoing challenge for many schools and systems following the pandemic.

“Schools are experiencing significant staffing shortages and this is resulting in: less professional development focused on meeting the needs of students with disability, less proactive planning to meet learning and behaviour support needs.”

(Association for Children with a Disability Submission)

## Improving system and sector preparedness

One of the most consistent pieces of feedback to the Review in terms of system responses that may have eased the effects of the rapid pivot to at-home learning for all stakeholders was for education authorities to have plans, systems, and protocols in place prior to emergency events arising. This included both environmental undertakings such as enhancing infrastructure and platforms for online

and other alternative modes of learning, and the development and sharing of learning resources and materials.

“We need equipped, prepared and supported teachers for something that cannot now be considered unprecedented. Contingency planning at all levels of education governance - classroom, whole school, and department.”  
(Stakeholder Discussion Group)

The Review heard that developing and identifying these resources in collaboration with other sectors ahead of future emergencies would:

- Lift the burden from individual systems, schools, teachers, or parents to develop or adapt these in isolation
- Remove duplication of effort
- Allow lessons and expertise from established distance and online education providers to be drawn upon
- Enhance the quality by identifying best-practice
- Allow the highest needs students to be considered from the start
- Make resources for specific cohorts of students with disability, which were in demand, more accessible (e.g., Auslan resources, resources for sight-impaired students, etc)
- Allow for the addition of clear instructions on learning outcomes and lesson implementation- assisting not only teachers, but importantly parents responsible for at-home teaching and learning
- Provide greater equity in the provision of education during these times, without relying on the knowledge/ skills of individual teachers.

“There needs to be a curriculum, particularly for segregated schools, created or adapted from the current curriculum that can be rolled out so that there isn't a significant amount of time and effort wasted whilst figuring out how to do it.”  
(YPAG Member)

“Teaching staff have suggested improvements that could be made for students with disability during another major emergency. These include clear direction from the NSW Department of Education and greater use of existing resources, such as those developed by Distance Education, to support teachers, maintain greater equity, and reduce the burden of developing online curriculum-aligned teaching resources.”  
(Western Sydney University Submission)

Strong planning, guidance and support from education authorities, including around access to learning resources, will assist schools in future emergency events.

## Chapter 3: Experience and Support

### Key Findings:

- The Review heard there was a need for more targeted resources, direction, and advice for educators on how to support students with disability to access and participate in remote learning.
- The provision of reasonable adjustments during the pandemic was frequently disrupted (often due to the shift to remote learning) and was heavily reliant on the effort and capability of individual teachers, and/or parents and carers.
- Students and their families felt unprepared for learning in an online environment. Parents and caregivers reported that they wanted clearer guidance and information to support home learning.
- Improved communication channels between school authorities and schools and between schools and families was one of the biggest issues raised by students, parents, and educators throughout the Review.
- There is an opportunity to establish policies, procedures, learning platforms, and other resources in preparation for future disruptions to at-school learning.
- Cross-jurisdictional collaborative development, sharing and access to resources would shift the burden from teachers and schools, reduce duplication of effort, and improve access to in-demand limited resources such as Auslan.

### Influence of personal and contextual factors

#### Student factors and intersectionality impacted the experiences of students with disability

The experiences of students with disability during COVID-19 were influenced by intersectional factors such as cultural background, socioeconomic status (SES), and geographical location. This was reinforced by Review participants who told us that many students with disability and their families face additional barriers to equal access and participation in education, such as increased rates of poverty, and increased mental health concerns (The Social Deck, 2023).

“The existing inequity faced by these students from vulnerable populations was further amplified for those who also have a disability as these students often struggled to access remote learning during COVID-related school closures due to a range of family and community factors including unsafe or inadequate home environments, access to or provision of ICT, and familial responsibilities of parents, carers and siblings.”

(Royal Australasian College of Physicians Submission)

The Review heard COVID-19 affected a wide range of educational factors including access, learning environment, and provision of support. Remote learning could make at-home variables more prominent, while some of the protective or equity factors provided by schools were removed. In general, the pandemic appears to have amplified existing challenges for students with disability, and impacted their educational progress and connection to school (DESE, 2020).

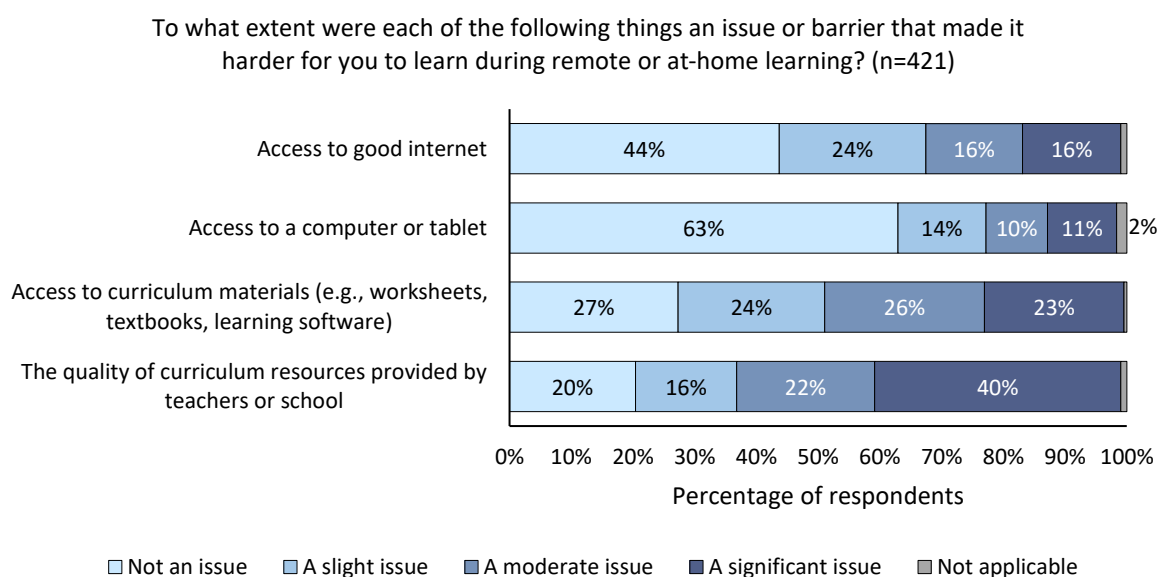
Acknowledging this, the experiences of students with disability did vary widely. Some students with disability thrived during this period, while others did not.

## Access to schooling

### Technology and the digital divide affected access to remote learning

The Review heard that a successful transition to online learning was heavily dependent on students having both access to suitable technology (including devices and connectivity) and possessing the digital literacy to effectively use it.

**Figure 2. Student, parent and carer responses to question regarding access to technology and resources during remote learning**



(The Social Deck, 2023)

The lack of reliable, high-speed internet significantly impacted the continuity of learning for many students with disability (dandolopartners, 2023). The Review heard this was particularly the case for many First Nations students, and those living in remote areas.

“Students with disability who did not have access to appropriate technology, equipment or internet connection experienced considerable limitations in accessing their online learning. Families in this situation often had to rely on their schools or community services to provide equipment. However, this type of support was not available to all families.”

(Queensland Advocacy for Inclusion Submission)

The Review heard that although different approaches were used, schools and education authorities allocated significant resources toward providing learning technology to students’ homes. This included such materials as devices, dongles, and assistive equipment (dandolopartners, 2023).

While school staff were reportedly responsive in helping students and their families access online content and problem solve technological issues (The Social Deck, 2023), some stakeholders felt that

the education system failed students regarding the provision of technology. They felt schools were given the responsibility of getting resources to students when schools were not necessarily adequately supported to do so in a timely way (Stakeholder Discussion Group).

“From a systems point of view, the schools were responsible for the dissemination of laptops and things. Some people said it was weeks in and they were still waiting for things to arrive. They did not actually know how to set up materials properly, and as one family actually described it here, “Weeks into it, laptops were still being delivered to families.” Instead of directly from the department, schools were left to run their own race, and at times their races were not really that fast.”

(Stakeholder Discussion Group)

Even when the necessary equipment and technology was available, having the capability to effectively use it was an issue. The Review heard this was particularly true where there were students whose disability may have created additional barriers in this area, for students less able to independently navigate online environments, or where multiple children had to share limited devices or bandwidth.

“I had 3 kids needing the devices ..we also are fortunate that we have access to these but it really was segregating the learning as some kids weren’t able to.”

(Parent/ Carer, Discussion Board)

Parents, carers, and students who had little previous experience with information and communication technology were at a disadvantage. On a positive note, remote and flexible learning and the provision of technology did narrow the digital divide for some students (The Social Deck, 2023; Victorian Council of Social Service Submission).

“In Victoria, the rapid deployment of laptops, SIM cards and dongles by the state’s Department of Education provided thousands of students with access to home internet for the very first time, including students with disabilities.”

(Victorian Council Of Social Service Submission)

Online and remote learning was the most frequent issue raised across all consultation activities concerning the impact of COVID-19 on education for students with disability. The suitability of online learning varied for different groups of students.

Around 90 per cent of people said they or their child moved to remote learning. For more than a quarter of people who filled in the Review’s questionnaire, this was for longer than three months (The Social Deck, 2023).

There was limited time to prepare students, parents and carers for the pivot to online learning, and therefore little time to provide information about how to learn effectively in an online environment (The Social Deck, 2023).

Stakeholders told the Review that, for some students, it was an improvement on face-to-face learning. This was especially true for students who struggled in face-to-face environments because they experienced bullying, mental ill-health, sensory issues, or for whom distractions were an issue (including Autistic students, students with ADHD, or students with intellectual disabilities) (The Social Deck, 2023).



“Being able to control my sensory environment made aspects of my physical disability easier to manage. Having flexibility in when I could do things, approach different tasks, according to my needs and where I was at in terms of pain and other things. Not having to just do it because I’m at school and have to do it.”

(Student With Disability, Focus Group)

For others, it exacerbated existing issues or raised new challenges. The Review heard of challenges from a wide range of students with disabilities, including those with hearing loss, those from CALD backgrounds, and students with low digital literacy. Students who were usually provided additional support by teaching assistants were also negatively impacted.

The nature of the home environment could negatively impact the success of remote learning. This could be through relatively benign reasons such as a lack of suitable spaces to study, through to more serious safety concerns such as the appropriateness of supervision, or instances of family violence (The Social Deck, 2023).

Students remaining at school also experienced barriers. More than 50 per cent of students with disability who responded to the Review’s Student Survey said changes to their schooling during COVID-19 stopped them from being included in lessons that other students were doing by ‘a lot’ or ‘a fair bit’. (The Social Deck, 2023)

When schools were closed to most students, exemptions were often made for specific cohorts to continue to attend in person. This typically included students with disability (dandolopartners, 2023). However, considerable variation across settings and changes over time led to confusion regarding who was granted access, and under what conditions (Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare Submission).

Even where schools were open to students with disability, the Review heard some were still unable to access them for a variety of reasons, including lack of transportation (where school bus services were stopped), and border or travel restrictions.

Students with disability who continued to access face-to-face schooling sometimes faced further challenges. Schools typically had only limited numbers of support staff on-site, which could contribute to situations such as students being supervised rather than taught (Association for Children with a Disability Submission) or being grouped into combined classes where the usual peer group and regular teaching and support staff may not have been available.

## Participation and engagement

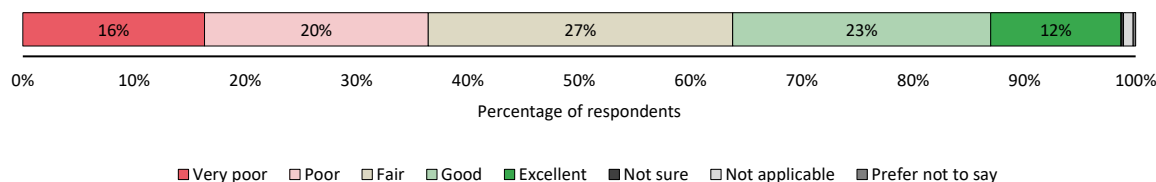
### Communication between school and home was critical, but variable.

The need for better communication between school and home environments was a frequent issue raised throughout the Review by students, parents, and carers.

Respondents to the Review questionnaire had mixed views of the quality of communication received, with around the same number of respondents rating communication from schools as good or excellent (35 per cent of respondents combined) as those who rated it as poor or very poor (36 per cent of respondents combined).

**Figure 3. Student, parent, family member and carer questionnaire respondents' views on perceived quality of communication and information provided by schools.**

Q. How would you rate the communication and information from your/your child's school about learning and/or how to access supports during the COVID-19 pandemic?  
(n=453)



(The Social Deck, 2023)

Respondents answering in relation to students attending a specialist school were more likely to report that communication and information from the school was good (36 per cent compared with 23 per cent).

Educators and other stakeholders rated communication and information from schools to students and parents/ carers as slightly better than did parents, carers, and students. 64 per cent of educators and other stakeholders rated it as excellent or good (compared to 35 per cent of students, parents, and carers), while 20 per cent still reported that it was poor or very poor (The Social Deck, 2023).

Parents and carers who responded to the 2020 Review of the DSE also "...often reported that they had limited contact with the school during the COVID-19 pandemic, despite requests for additional contact for their child" (DESE, 2020, p. 20).

"There should be more communication between students and families from the school as a consistent occurrence. There also needs to be people who can facilitate that for other intersections like CALD families and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families."  
(YPAG Member)

The Review heard that, particularly in the early stages of the pandemic, communication was sometimes seen as confusing and reactionary, with schools and school leaders trying to anticipate the coming changes and provide guidance while often not receiving adequate information themselves from governments and school systems. This was generally seen to improve over time (Targeted Conversation; The Social Deck, 2023).

Ineffective communication was most often attributed to:

- Lack of time to communicate effectively
- Communication being generic and not personalised for students
- Communication being infrequent or irregular
- Communication being provided in formats that were inaccessible
- There being limited avenues available for families to contact schools
- Schools not following up on enquiries or concerns.

Stakeholders noted that positive communication was most often associated with:

- Proactive, clear, and timely updates and direction

- Information being in accessible formats
- Developing “...active multichannel communication strategies between schools and families...” (Wade et al., 2022), including the use of different platforms and media
- Individual, personalised, and regular engagement and support
- Clearly identified contact points
- After hours availability of school staff.

“The teacher was good at communicating with us and our child. They would call and check in regularly to see how we were all doing and ask us if we needed anything. It made us feel good knowing that they cared.”

(First Nations Parent, Interview)

Some students with disability had additional complications and challenges regarding communication. For these students, effective communication in periods of high stress, such as the pandemic, are even more important (Page et al., 2020, as cited in Renshaw & Goodhue, 2021, p. 44).

Some students with disability experienced difficulties accessing their usual interpreter services in person during the pandemic (DESE, 2020), although some systems did expand interpreting and translation services for some students, including for online materials (Wade et al., 2022, p. 12). Some Deaf or hard of hearing students faced a range of challenges including the provision of online platforms, access to signing teachers of the Deaf, and school support staff (dandolopartners, 2023). Some students, including those with intellectual disabilities and/or hearing loss, found it difficult to understand others or communicate effectively when mask mandates were in force (Focus Groups).

“I have hearing loss, so not being able to see people’s faces in the classroom when they were wearing masks was hard because I need to see people[’s] mouths for lipreading. It was also hard to communicate with people wearing masks at social events and that had an emotional affect [*sic*]. I wasn’t feeling happy and I wasn’t present.”

(YPAG Member)

Good communication practices between education providers and parents, carers and students were likely to lead to better engagement with learning (Domina et al., 2021, as cited in Wade et al., 2022). This was also reflected in recent findings from the 2020 DSE Review where consultations showed that “...feelings of disconnection were further compounded by insufficient communication between schools and parents and carers” (DESE, 2020, p. 20).

“While I did have most of the required tools, the lack of teacher communication and direct feedback and interaction hampered my ability to engage properly with the school work and life.”

(Student, Discussion Board)

## Defining, understanding, and supporting participation and engagement during the pandemic presented challenges

It was difficult to define and assess participation during the pandemic, particularly for remote learning. Even where students were accessing school or remote learning, participation or engagement were not guaranteed, with questions around “...what it means for students ‘to be present, interacting, participating’ in online spaces...” (Wagner, 2021, as cited in Wade et al., 2022, p. 37; dandolopartners, 2023).

Many factors impacted on student participation and engagement, such as motivation, pedagogy, and individual agency. While many of these issues may have also been common for all students, the specific learning needs of students with disability makes it likely their participation was disproportionately impacted (The Social Deck, 2023).

Some students reported finding ways to do ‘the bare minimum of schoolwork’ during this time (Autism Focus Group). Distractions in the home environment were commonly mentioned, including interruptions from siblings or others, or simply spending time playing online games or watching videos rather than paying attention to online classes (The Social Deck, 2023).

Teacher capabilities in online and remote technologies and pedagogy, as well as their different levels of experience and confidence, also impacted students with disability (Wade, et al., 2022). The Review heard from some students that there was a shift in teaching practice to online lessons, worksheets or having information being read off a screen presentation (Student Discussion Board; Student Focus Groups). Teachers with greater knowledge and skill in online and remote pedagogy are likely to have delivered better practice learning and teaching experiences, and therefore had more success in engaging their students. (Wade, et al., 2022).

Self-regulation and self-management are important skills for students to have in order to engage more effectively in online and remote learning environments (Wade, et al. 2022). The Review heard that students struggled to ‘take control’ of and self-direct their own learning and workload (The Social Deck, 2023) without the typical structure and guidance provided by on-site schooling.

“Home for me, was more of a distracting environment than being at school, so I found that I learned a lot less and had way less motivation to complete tasks. There was no authority figure at home, keeping me on task and reminding me what to do. It was far too self directed and I did not have the will power to stay on task.”

(Student, Discussion Board)

It is important to note that student experiences were not always negative. For many reasons, such as increased autonomy and fewer distractions, some students felt they were more engaged, and more likely to participate, during the remote learning period. Neurodivergent students who participated in the Review were more likely than other students with disability to report positive at home learning experiences.

However, students with disability whose engagement was negatively impacted by remote learning are at risk of falling behind their peers (Page et al., 2020, as cited in Renshaw & Goodhue, 2021).

## **Students with disability are overrepresented in school refusal, have persistent and enduring declines in attendance, and face ongoing reengagement challenges.**

School attendance is recognised as a significant indicator of educational outcome, though not necessarily of learning, participation, or engagement (dandolopartners, 2023).

Jurisdictions do not publish attendance data in a disaggregated form for students with disability (dandolopartners, 2023), which makes it difficult to quantitatively analyse any changes occurring during the COVID-19 period. However, jurisdictions have told the Review that there have been

persistent and enduring declines in attendance for students with disability, which does not appear to be affected by the length of school closures or access disruptions (dandolopartners, 2023).

There are several reasons for this. Evidence presented during public hearings into Victoria's response to the pandemic suggested that in some cases parents may have kept children out of school due to perceived health risks, and in other cases students themselves found the experience of remote learning to be too difficult so they stopped participating (Parliament of Victoria, 2021, p. 230).

Submissions to the Review suggested large numbers of students with disability struggled to return to school following COVID-19 lockdowns. Reasons put forward by Review participants included:

- Health and safety concerns
- Difficulty adjusting to the resumption of face-to-face learning, including structures and routines
- Schools lacking capacity to support students experiencing mental health issues or behavioural issues
- Lack of support for a successful transition back to physical school setting
- Negative experiences during the period of remote learning leading to disengagement.

“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.”

(Australian Federation of Disability Organisations Submission)

School refusal is a distinct form of non-attendance characterised by high levels of emotional distress, with parents and carers typically aware of their child's absence from school despite efforts to get them to attend (Martin Burch, 2018, and Heyne et al., 2019, as cited in Clark, 2023). The incidence of school refusal for all students has increased since the start of the pandemic (dandolopartners, 2023). While available data does not allow detailed analysis of the numbers of students with disability who are refusing school, the Review heard that the numbers are significant (dandolopartners, 2023).

The Review also heard of an increase in exclusions and suspensions for students with disability. For example, the Association for Children with a Disability noted that when advocacy support provided by them in 2022 was compared with 2019 data, they saw a 175 per cent increase in calls about informal exclusion from school; and a 116 per cent increase in calls about suspensions (Association for Children with Disability Submission).

Jurisdictions and non-government schools reported that there was a growth in the number of registrations for home schooling and distance education programs (dandolopartners, 2023). Stakeholder submissions to the Review also suggested there was an increase in the numbers of students with disability moving to home schooling arrangements, particularly among students with intellectual disability and/or complex communication needs (see submissions from Children and Young People with Disability Australia; Independent Schools Australia).

As students' previous attendance is a predictor of future attendance (CESE, 2022), reengagement of students may become increasingly difficult.

## Support for students

### Support requirements were elevated during the pandemic, but were inconsistently offered or tailored to student needs

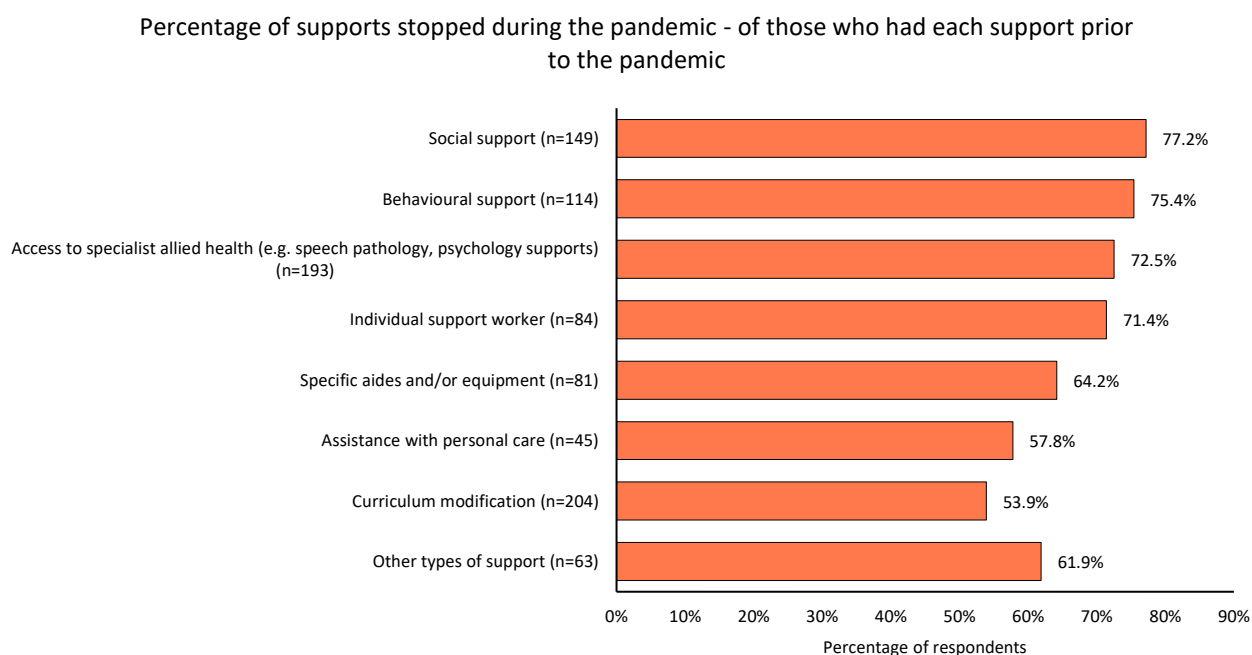
The support provided by education authorities and providers during the pandemic had a flow-on effect on school access and participation of students with disability.

Almost one third (32 per cent) of student, parent and carer respondents to the Review questionnaire reported they were not at all satisfied with the support received from school and teachers to continue learning (The Social Deck, 2023).

During the pandemic, students with disability had significantly reduced access to the range of supports they usually rely on (Dickinson et al., 2020, as cited in dandolopartners, 2023). Reduced access to supports affected students with disability across all facets of their educational experience, including academically, socially, and from a wellbeing perspective (dandolopartners, 2023).

When replying to the Review questionnaire, some parent, carer and student respondents indicated they lost access to formal supports during the pandemic that they had previously received.

**Figure 4. Supports stopped during the pandemic.**



(The Social Deck, 2023)

The supports most often reported as affected during the pandemic (as a percentage of rates of access prior to the pandemic) were:

- Social Support
- Behavioural Support
- Access to specialist allied health (e.g., speech pathology, psychology supports, other)

- Individual support worker. (The Social Deck, 2023)

"Access to school counsellors became non-existent because they had to try and help so many students. I touched base with them maybe once every two weeks. Teachers were also frazzled and couldn't support access needs."  
(Student With Disability, Focus Group)

Reasons provided to the Review for supports being stopped or reduced included:

- Staffing challenges
- Supports being increasingly time consuming and difficult to coordinate
- Access to NDIS supports becoming more challenging
- Allied health practitioners being unavailable or harder to access.

Supports that were offered were often reported to be minimal and not tailored to individual needs, (The Social Deck, 2023), although this was iterative and there was improvement over time (Wade, et al., 2022, p. 9). For example, curriculum materials developed for remote learning were supplied without adjustment, and were often not accessible (The Social Deck, 2023).

"Work sent home was not appropriate or suitable. It was just a one size fits all which for students with significant intellectual disabilities was not ok."  
(Parent / Carer, Questionnaire)

Stakeholders appeared to generally accept that it was difficult for many educators to put together individualised learning for students with disability in such limited time and when the situation was changing quickly (The Social Deck, 2023). According to information provided to the Review by the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), they recorded no increase in the number of education complaints received during the COVID-19 period (data from June 2019 to June 2022), and few complaints specifically referred to COVID-19 as the primary focus of the complainant's concerns (AHRC, 2023).

There were positive reports of schools successfully offering adjusted supports for students with disability during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was also suggested to the 2020 Review of the DSE that "...the COVID-19 pandemic improved educators' awareness of barriers to remote learning and drove them to consider the needs of students with disability more seriously, including the application of reasonable adjustments" (DESE, 2020, p. 21).

"Teachers worked tirelessly to ensure we had access in hardcopy as well as online. They checked in with us and provided us with anything we asked for. The lengths they went to were incredible. They were teaching face to face at the same time as delivering online lessons whilst also preparing and following up on hardcopy take home packages. Superheroes!"  
(Student, Questionnaire)

While positive examples did occur, the opportunity to access supports was inconsistent. Some students in focus groups suggested the level of support they received was dependent on individual teachers, rather than a 'centralised' approach by the school (The Social Deck, 2023), and may also have relied on parental advocacy (Parliamentary Secretary for Schools, 2020; Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare Submission).

Almost half of parents and carers who reported that at least one support had stopped during the pandemic indicated they did not get all of their supports back again when schools returned to on-site education, or after peak periods of the COVID-19 pandemic (The Social Deck, 2023). The reasons given for this were similar to those provided for the services being stopped initially, and indicate ongoing issues in the sector that cannot be resolved by a simple return to face-to-face learning.

### Access to allied health and wraparound services was heavily impacted

Schools often play a central role in linking children and families with health and social services. This applies whether the services are funded through the NDIS or not. Access to specialist allied health professionals and school counsellors was one of the most impacted areas of student support, with many students with disability not receiving the same quantity or quality of therapies as they did prior to the pandemic (The Social Deck, 2023).

Throughout the COVID-19 period, access to schools for external support staff (including allied health providers) was challenging (dandolopartners, 2023). Reasons included mandated restrictions introduced by governments or education authorities; and in some instances, the cancellations were initiated by the support services themselves, or by the users of the service (Dickinson & Yates, 2020, pp. 20-21).

Systems and schools made changes throughout the pandemic to how some services could be accessed by students. For example, some supports previously accessed through the school or in-person were able to be moved online or via telehealth. In some instances, this was a positive development, such as where it enhanced ease of access for students with disability in regional or remote areas (dandolopartners, 2023).

Some supports did not translate as effectively to online provision, including those that tended to rely more on in-person delivery (The Social Deck, 2023). Additionally, there were differing perspectives around the adequacy and effectiveness of telehealth supports in meeting the needs of students with complex disabilities or challenging home environments (dandolopartners, 2023).

### Education plans for students with disability were inconsistently developed, followed, or modified for remote learning.

Education plans for students with disability, often known by other names such as Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) or Individual Education Plans (IEPs), are put in place by educators to outline a student's learning goals and the supports and practices needed to achieve them. They often include any reasonable adjustments that a school will put in place for the student.

Jurisdictions and non-government schools told the Review that during the initial period of digital innovation following the transition to remote learning, supports to adapt individual education plans for a remote learning context were put in place (dandolopartners, 2023).

The Review received mixed feedback about the effectiveness of this activity, including statements that agreed plans were not followed during lockdowns, were not modified appropriately for remote learning, or were 'disregarded' altogether (The Social Deck, 2023). Other studies outside this Review found that IEPs had not been updated or modified since the beginning of the pandemic. (Wade et al., 2022; Dickinson et al., 2020).



Students, parents and carers felt individualised learning was not prioritised, and outcomes suffered because of this (The Social Deck, 2023).

### Provision of accessibility and differentiation adjustments of curriculum and materials was heavily reliant on individual schools, educators, and parents

Educators and other stakeholders commented that ‘adapting the curriculum for remote learning and making reasonable adjustments to support each individual student was very challenging’, and they highlighted associated issues of rewriting, differentiating and condensing lesson plans for online learning platforms (The Social Deck, 2023).

It was often acknowledged that most schools and teachers were doing their best in difficult circumstances to provide effective education for students with disability. For some students, their experience of school support and educational adjustments was positive. Effective supports included the ability to access resources and content in diverse ways, provision of printed material if requested, and allowing students to access campuses and libraries. (The Social Deck, 2023). However, “...the provision of such support was heavily reliant on the willingness, preparedness and resources of individual schools and educators” (DESE, 2020, p. 31).

The Review heard from many students, parents and carers that access to quality curriculum materials was an issue during the pandemic. This was a particular issue raised by First Nations parents and carers (The Social Deck, 2023).

45 per cent of respondents to the Review questionnaire reported no adjustments were made to make sure learning was accessible to them, or their child, during remote learning. Respondents who were answering in relation to students attending a specialist school were more likely to report that moderate (23 per cent) and significant (23 per cent) adjustments were made (The Social Deck, 2023).

Submissions to the Review also noted concerns around suitable adjustments. For example:

“...students with intellectual disability and/or complex communication needs received little or no learning tasks, and were therefore completely dependent on their family to support their participation”  
(Children and Young People with Disability Australia Submission).

“Learning tasks were not adapted to meet their needs. Families reported...being 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.”  
(Association for Children with a Disability Submission)

The Review heard work should be done to prepare for the types of learning and materials that might be needed if students with disability return to remote learning. Suggestions included a modified curriculum that covers the most critical content, and pre-prepared, co-developed resources that consider the highest need students from the start (The Social Deck, 2023).

“There needs to be a curriculum, particularly for segregated schools, created or adapted from the current curriculum that can be rolled out so that there isn't a significant amount of time and effort wasted whilst figuring out how to do it.”  
(YPAG Member)

## Impacts on teachers and parents/carers

### Some teachers felt unsupported, impacting their ability to provide support

Teachers responsible for students with disability needed clear information and advice on the students' specific support needs. Although provision of information on inclusive online teaching practices and adjustments for students was common (Wade et al., 2022), the Review heard this information was often both generic and overwhelming in volume, and that teachers knew what they were required to do, but not how to do it (Educator Focus Group).

While some educators gave positive examples of being supported, including some First Nations educators who reported high levels of support and leadership from senior school staff (The Social Deck, 2023), the Review also heard examples of educators feeling that "...it was very much seen as your class, your problem", and resorting to "survival teaching and just getting through the day". Educators also commented that the early period of the pandemic "was a total scramble" and they were overwhelmed and "stretched too thin" (Educator Focus Group).

During the pandemic, the Review heard support staff who were generally allocated to support students with disability were often not able to continue providing this support as effectively, or at all. There were several reasons provided for this, including:

- Reallocation to supervise other students who continued to attend school
- Difficulties imposed by online and remote learning modes
- Reduced numbers of support staff (for example through absences, or changes to staffing levels).

"They didn't have their go to person, and they didn't have the teachers they feel safe around."

(Educator, Focus Group)

81 per cent of students with disability responding to the Review's student survey said changes to their schooling during COVID-19 stopped them from being able to get help from teachers or other staff at school by 'a lot' or 'a fair bit' (The Social Deck, 2023).

This resulted in "periods of time with no individual support for students with disability" (Educator Focus Group). While this had undoubted impacts on students, it also meant that teachers were often the only person providing support for students with disability, without their usual team of support staff and teachers' aides (The Social Deck, 2023).

Research literature indicates that "...teacher wellbeing also declined during the pandemic, due in part to the sudden shift to remote and online learning, which required teachers to devote significant time to adjusting their pedagogical approaches" (Wade et al., 2022, p. e). At the height of the pandemic in 2020, many teachers reported burnout, mental health deterioration and an intention to leave the profession (Beames et al., 2021). In 2020, teachers also "...reported lower levels of morale and felt less able to engage their students in learning than teachers in 2019..." (Fray et al., 2022, p. 718). While teachers generally remained keen to return to schooling, they were concerned for their own personal health and wellbeing, reporting exhaustion, stress, and burdensome workloads. (Ziebell et al., 2020).

The additional pressures, increased workload, and changed teaching modes during this time may also have made it difficult for teachers to recognise if students were struggling or required help (CALD Focus Group; Ziebell et al., 2020). When teachers were able to identify an issue, pandemic complications such as cognitive assessment delays could have implications for access to supports (dandolopartners, 2023).

The Review heard from respondents that adequate staffing needs to be prioritised going forward. Some stakeholders suggested this may require changes in policies to make teachers' aides more available in schools, as well as to make sure support staff are able to provide support to students who are still learning online or remotely (The Social Deck, 2023).

## Parents and carers felt underprepared and under resourced to help facilitate the learning of students with disability.

During periods of remote learning, delivery of education programs remained the formal responsibility of educators and schools. In a remote learning context, parents and carers would necessarily play a supervision and facilitation role to support their child's learning; some parents felt their role went beyond this in practice. Schools, educators, and parents were all playing their parts in a challenging situation where time and resources were stretched.

The Review heard some parents felt schools relied on or expected them to provide one-on-one learning support for their child/ren. This could include tailoring lessons, with a report from 2020 finding that many parents had to spend significant time adjusting learning materials, as they often received generic materials developed for students without disabilities (Dickinson et al., 2020).

“...responsibility for managing routine, learning and support primarily fell to the parent rather than the teachers...”  
(Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare Submission, citing Dickinson et al., 2020).

The Review also heard from parents and carers that supporting learning could be difficult for non-teachers to do, especially without the formal supports provided in a school environment, such as learning support officers, sensory tools, or other resources (The Social Deck, 2023).

“Parents are not teachers.”  
(First Nations Focus Group)

Although many students told the Review their parents were an important source of help and support for learning during the pandemic, the ability of parents and carers to undertake an active education role was influenced by their own characteristics, including:

- Education and academic ability (particularly for senior high school levels)
- Digital literacy
- SES, CALD, and/or disability status
- Availability (as influenced by work commitments, other caring responsibilities, single parent or multi-child household, etc.)
- The complexity of the student's needs (including age and disability) was also a factor.

(See for example: The Social Deck, 2023; Wade et al., 2022; dandolopartners, 2023; Parliamentary Secretary for Schools, 2020)

The ability of parents and carers to support students with disability during lockdowns was a “big determinant of achievement,” and this “broke down the equality of the classroom” (Educator Focus Group).

Beyond impacts on student learning, the reliance (real or perceived) on parents and carers to provide more direct assistance in their child’s education could have further negative effects, including compromised parental mental health (Wade et al., 2022, p. 32), and family relationship breakdown (The Social Deck, 2023; Royal Australasian College of Physicians Submission).

“Many families had to reduce their working hours, or resign from their jobs, to provide the level of care and support their children with disability required while learning at home.”

(Association for Children with a Disability Submission)

There were some positive outcomes. This period allowed parents and carers to become more familiar with their children’s education and obtain an increased understanding of their needs and abilities (Ziebell et al., 2020), which was reflected in participant feedback to the Review- although “Many families were shocked how ‘far behind’ their children were compared with other children in the class and felt the school had downplayed their disability.” (Association for Children with a Disability Submission).

Some submissions suggested governments and schools should provide resources and training to parents to assist with the co-facilitation of online learning, as well as providing additional support for families who are unable to support their child/ren’s learning (The Social Deck, 2023; Queensland Advocacy for Inclusion Submission).

## Chapter 4: Academic Outcomes

### Key Findings:

- The Review heard remote or hybrid learning worked well for some, but not all, students with disability.
- Many students and families reported that educators' academic expectations for students' academic outcomes during periods of remote learning were not always communicated and/or clear to them and appear to have been lowered during the pandemic.
- Students and parents told the Review they needed greater access to learning support from teachers during periods of remote learning.
- Continuity of transition supports was disrupted during the pandemic, and there were increased reports of challenges for students with disability during times of transition.
- The lack of national data on outcomes does not support conclusive findings on outcomes from the pandemic period, including measuring learning loss.

### Monitoring and Assessing Progress

#### Academic and educational outcomes for students with disability are more difficult to define and measure

The academic and educational outcomes of students with disability, and the effect the pandemic would have on them, was an issue of concern for Review stakeholders. Poor academic outcomes was one of the most frequently mentioned themes from both students (second highest percentage of mentions) and parents/carers (highest percentage of mentions) in response to a Review question regarding the biggest impacts of COVID-19 on school students with disability (The Social Deck, 2023).

Clearly defining what an 'academic or educational outcome' is for a student with disability is not an easy task, as the concept encompasses a broad range of achievements. Targeted Review conversations with nationally representative Principals Associations told us that for some students with disability "almost everything is an educational outcome".

While some students with disability can achieve at or above the academic levels of their non-disabled peers, for others academic success may not be about grade level achievement, or achievement within a standard timeframe. It may be about targeted academic goals set out in a student's individual education plan or a demonstration of learning at an individual student's maximum capability.

In terms of educational outcomes more broadly, these may encompass outcomes such as developing independent living skills or other practical skills, demonstrating an ability to participate effectively in the community, developing good mental health, or being able to access opportunities for employment or further education (NSW Department of Education, 2020b).

This highly individualised perspective on achievement and outcomes makes it difficult to measure the academic or educational outcomes of students with disability on a larger scale. In turn, this

makes it challenging to measure the true impact of the pandemic on outcomes for school students with disability (The Social Deck, 2023).

“One of the things that is difficult to measure is the academic achievement of many students with disability, because it's poorly measured or poorly reported to start with. Not because of poor performance, but just the school system is struggling to identify what are the outcomes for students with disability... So these impacts, it's hard to have a pure academic measure to then discuss. So I think the long-term impact of that is quite significant and we don't want that to be underestimated.”

(Stakeholder Discussion Group)

## Adequate data to understand student academic progress, support needs, and outcomes for students with disability is not available

The 2020 Review of the *Disability Standards for Education 2005* (DSE Review) found a lack of national or publicly available data on access, participation, and outcomes – both academic and wellbeing – for students with disability. This lack of information constrains the ability of policymakers and practitioners to measure, understand and improve the educational experiences of students with disability. (DESE, 2020).

The Productivity Commission Review of the National School Reform Agreement (NSRA) notes “[g]aps [in education outcomes] cannot be measured for students with disability, despite the Agreement naming them as a priority equity cohort, as there is no consistent data tracking their education outcomes” (Productivity Commission, 2022, p. 53).

At a more localised level, the Review also heard concerns from educators and school systems about insufficient data to support understanding of student learning. These concerns were supported in the literature. A study involving 210 Australian teachers conducted during the first COVID-19 wave in Australia indicated “A sizeable number [of teachers] reported being unable to track student learning (30.0%) and feeling worried about student learning and wellbeing (21.0%)” (Van Bergen & Daniel, 2022, p. 10). This study was not specific to students with disability.

The Review heard “...where teachers may have been unsure about whether a student was engaging in learning in a remote context, they may have lacked the tools to collect data to develop a better understanding of the student’s progress and how best to support them” (dandolopartners, 2023). This may also have impacted on schools’ ability to provide meaningful feedback to parents and carers (dandolopartners, 2023), which in turn could make it harder to support effective learning at home.

Gaps in outcomes data means the Review cannot make conclusive findings on outcomes, or learning loss, over the pandemic period for students with disability.

In recent years, the Australian Government and state and territory governments have made various commitments to strengthen and expand the collection of disaggregated student data including for school students with disability. This includes through the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration, the Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia 2020, and Australia’s Disability Strategy 2021-31.

## Outcomes and contributing factors

### Many students with disability reported poorer academic and educational outcomes

Studies into the impact of remote learning on academic outcomes during COVID-19 for students overall have been mixed. For example, Begg and Wild (2022) found evidence of significant educational setbacks, particularly in Victoria, and Fahey (2021) found that 6-14 per cent of students may have progressed more slowly during remote learning. In seeming contrast, NAPLAN results for 2022 have been reported as ‘mostly stable at a national level’ although there were falls in some areas (ACARA, 2022), while NSW check-in assessments showed no significant differences, on average, between 2019 and 2020 results in mathematics or reading (Gore et al., 2021). However, it is likely that disadvantaged students, which often include students with disability, will have lost more ground than their non-disadvantaged peers during this time. Identifying and responding to gaps in learning for students with disability is covered later in this report.

“School work got a lot harder since I was about to go into senior years. And the work started to make no sense [*sic*]. And I think I didn’t learn much at all during that time. My grades went from B and C to C and D. It’s still like that now”.

(Student With Disability, Webinar)

Many students with disability told the Review they have experienced poorer academic outcomes due to the pandemic (The Social Deck, 2023). ‘Poorer academic outcomes’ in this context variously referred to a range of factors not restricted to drops in academic grades. For example, gaps in knowledge may have developed due to missing out on learning important concepts and foundation skills, which may also have an impact on students’ ability to develop new skills (The Social Deck, 2023). Educators and other stakeholders to the Review also noted that students may be lacking in the development of learning skills themselves, which could be particularly detrimental for younger students, or students transitioning into different ways of learning, such as senior secondary students. Not passing coursework or having to redo academic years was also identified as a poor educational outcome, with Young People’s Advisory Group participants providing examples of having to drop out of classes because there were no teachers available to help guide them or provide advice, or having to repeat senior years of schooling.

“Throughout this year grades dropped significantly due to a missed chunk of learning due to difficulty learning from home. Has been a gap in knowledge since 2020.”

(Student, Questionnaire)

The below table shows student and parent/carer responses to a Review question regarding how COVID-19 impacted on students with disabilities’ academic outcomes and achievements.

**Table 1. Key themes and frequency of responses to the question about how COVID-19 impacted on students with disabilities' academic outcomes and achievements**

Theme	STUDENTS		PARENTS/CARERS	
	Frequency (of mentions of theme)	Percentage (of mentions)	Frequency (of mentions of theme)	Percentage (of mentions)
Negatively impacted in general	15	28	173	44
Negatively impacted due to problems with online learning	7	13	48	12
No, or minimal, impact	7	13	24	6
Negatively impacted due to lack of support or communication	6	11	28	7
Negatively impacted due to mental health issues	6	11	32	8
Negatively impacted as work or assessment was at the wrong level	4	8	6	2
Negatively impacted learning skills/abilities	3	6	20	5
Learning improved	2	4	22	6
Not able to re-engage with school/learning	2	4	33	8
Negatively impacted on return to school	1	2	6	2
<b>TOTAL</b>	53		392	

*(The Social Deck, 2023)*

The most frequent responses from both students and parent/carers identified the pandemic as having a negative impact on academic outcomes and achievement. This was broadly supported by educators and other stakeholders, who also noted decreased academic performance and / or grades among some students with disability during the pandemic in their responses to the Review (The Social Deck, 2023).

Reasons provided through consultation activities for these negative impacts on academic progress included:

- Not being able to learn effectively at home, or “not learning much” (The Social Deck, 2023) during the pandemic (including due to lack of access, appropriate materials, consistency of learning, or appropriate support, supervision, and guidance).

“...I had to learn at home for around 3-4 weeks, it was sometimes harder to do schoolwork as I found it very difficult to get motivated and do my work, I found a couple of subjects hard to do which lead me to become stressed as I didn't have the resources to use for the task. I did miss doing the activities at school and the teachers support”  
(Student With Disability, Webinar)



- Not completing schoolwork, assessment tasks, or periods of work experience (whether due to lack of support, lack of motivation, or lack of opportunity).
- First Nations students and parents/ carers in particular advised that during the remote learning period they were assigned less schoolwork, and often not at the right level. (First Nations Focus Group).
- Having missed significant amounts of the curriculum, or being provided with generic work that was not differentiated (The Social Deck, 2023)
- Mental health issue impacts on learning.

“Before the pandemic I had always been a fast learner and quick to pick up on things. Now I struggle to understand what I’m doing or how to answer questions in sentences. Even now as I am answering this survey, I am feeling overwhelmed.”

(Student, Questionnaire)

Poor academic outcomes had a wide range of reported effects on students during this period. 80 per cent of students with disability responding to the Review survey said changes to their schooling during COVID-19 made it ‘a lot’ or ‘a fair bit’ harder to do their schoolwork (The Social Deck, 2023). Parents and carers reported that students feel increasingly anxious and embarrassed when they fall behind their peers and noted that students who fell behind in their learning now have much less motivation and find it harder to engage with learning (The Social Deck, 2023). This could serve to perpetuate the problem and could lead to ongoing disengagement with schooling.

“The main thing that went down was my grades during covid. And my routine. I still went to school but I didn’t get to see my teachers so it was no help”.

(Student With Disability, Webinar)

Interestingly, negative experiences of remote learning did have unanticipated positive effects for some students, helping them to identify and pursue more suitable options, such as motivating them to complete year 12 early and begin university, or showing them that avoiding online delivery should be part of their criteria when making decisions about universities (CALD Focus Group).

While the effects were generally felt to be negative, some students reported neutral or positive effects of the pandemic period on academic outcomes.

For some, this came because of being able to learn remotely, as factors such as being able to access classes from anywhere improved learning outcomes (The Social Deck, 2023). We also heard lockdowns provided opportunities for students to learn non-academic life skills including cooking, gardening, craft, and basic chores that they might not have been exposed to through traditional schooling (Parent/Carer Discussion Board). This was reinforced by a New Zealand study that found “lockdown provided multiple opportunities for children and their family...to engage in beneficial non-formal and informal learning in the home that may not otherwise have occurred” (Bourke et al., 2021, p. 56).

“The changes to learning due to Covid made me feel excited to see how online learning went. I ended up preferring online learning to attending in real life class.”

(Student With Disability, Webinar)

For others, it was the ability to sustain face-to-face school attendance that ensured continued progress. Some students with disability and parents/carers said that when students were allowed to keep going to school in-person, they had good outcomes (The Social Deck, 2023); this may not have been the case where students attending campus in person were still effectively learning remotely.

“With the one on one with my teacher my grades improved. There was only like 8 kids in the whole school.”

(Student With Disability, Webinar)

## Both students and parents/carers reported a lack of access to education advice

Access to and communication with teachers and schools was identified as an important factor in the home learning experience for both students and parents/carers. Good communication was key to ensuring that students were engaging with their work and continuing to make progress, and that parents were confident in the support their children required and were receiving.

Students and parents/carers needed to know who to approach regarding educational matters, and how best to do so. Feedback through the Review indicated this was not always clearly communicated. Parents and carers reported that they wanted contact points for when they needed support and advice, and options such as helplines for support outside the normal school hours (The Social Deck, 2023). Students, particularly those in the senior years of schooling, felt there was a need for identifying a single contact point for each student with disability.

“This person would be someone for the student to contact during a pandemic, so they are not relying on multiple teachers. That same person should talk with the student about their home environment, and check in with the student twice a week just to ensure to update them on expectations for school and to make sure that they are comfortable [with] everything.”

(YPAG Member)

Consistent, pro-active, and responsive communication from teachers and schools was desired by both students and parents, but the responses could be variable. Parents and carers in focus groups reported that many attempts to communicate or to request support were not responded to, and they often had to follow up to find out what students were supposed to be doing and learning (The Social Deck, 2023). Some students in Review discussion boards also reported dissatisfaction with response times to enquiries.

Providing feedback on student work is an important part of supporting academic and educational outcomes, and parents and carers responding to the Review indicated that they wanted to receive more of this kind of feedback from educators (The Social Deck, 2023). Parents and carers also noted in interviews for this Review that communication and guidance from teachers that was received could often feel rushed, as educators needed to support or respond to other students (The Social Deck, 2023). Parents acknowledged through Review activities that there were competing demands on teacher attention, and remote learning could limit opportunities to provide feedback (Parent/Carer Discussion Boards).

Providing the level of access and feedback desired by parents and students during the pandemic was challenging. Educators noted it was difficult to support a diverse group of students with disability, including when some students were learning at home while others were in-person at school. (The Social Deck, 2023).

Students reported interpreting a lack of support and communication from schools during the pandemic as meaning that “education doesn’t matter”, which may affect ongoing motivation and the value placed on academic success (Parent/Carer Focus Group).

## Expectations for education during remote learning differed between stakeholders.

Different stakeholders may have had different understandings of what, and how much, content students should be learning during the pandemic.

For example, systems and schools had a very strong focus on supporting wellbeing during the pandemic, which may have resulted in academic outcomes becoming a lesser focus. During various levels of lockdowns, educators reported being told to essentially put learning on hold, and to reuse past content and include no new learning (Educator Focus Group). Educators reported there was a lack of consistency in the expectations of teachers for student learning (Educator Focus Group), while also noting that many parents had unrealistic expectations about how much students could learn during lockdowns (The Social Deck, 2023). Students felt school was sometimes optional (in 2020), with some reporting they were told not to worry about doing schoolwork if they couldn’t manage it (The Social Deck, 2023).

Review participants suggested there were not enough clear instructions and guidance to enable learning at home (The Social Deck, 2023). This could encompass issues such as the amount of time to be spent on learning, how long it was appropriate for different cohorts of students to be ‘on task’, or what appropriate amounts of screen time were.

“Schools should have had a policy with what the expectations were for online learning, how students should communicate to teachers, how teachers touch base with students, etc.”  
(YPAG Member)

Disability organisations highlighted the importance of identifying what stakeholders want to achieve in times of crisis, both in terms of outcomes and support for students, so clear direction can be provided (Stakeholder Discussion Group). They identified a need to look at whether the expectation of academic outcomes was adjusted or altered to suit the new learning environment of school students with disability (Stakeholder Discussion Group), with some submissions also suggesting managing or reducing expectations of students, families and teachers around learning and assessment during periods of remote learning.

## Transitions

### Transition points are often stressful for students with disability; this was heightened during the pandemic.

The Review heard transitions, whether within and between schools, into post-school education or employment, or between face-to-face and remote learning, were particularly challenging times for students with disability. Transitions can be complex for students with disability, and the COVID period meant that many young people “...did not get the transition experience they expected. Usual transition activities were cancelled as learning moved online” (Smith et al., 2022, p. 5). Examples of usual transition activities could include open days or orientation sessions.

Support for students at transition points throughout the pandemic was mixed and inconsistent. There was significant variety in the approaches and tools schools used in their transition to remote and online learning during COVID-19 (Wade et al., 2022). Many jurisdictions and non-government schools produced resources such as social stories to prepare students for transitions and support teachers and parents/carers in navigating these periods. Schools developed and adapted their own resources, such as virtual school tours, webinars and online forums, and videoconferencing for collaboration between teachers (dandolopartners, 2023).

The rapid pivot to remote learning was challenging for all students and their parents/carers, but families of students with disability felt particularly unprepared and unsupported (Wade et al., 2022). During transitions from face-to-face learning, the Review heard reports of increased behavioural concerns, heightened incidence of psychological and emotional challenges, and increased stress amongst students with disability (dandolopartners, 2023).

Students in the early grades, particularly preschool, as well as those nearing the end of their education and in need of transition support, suffered the most negative consequences (Australian Council of State School Organisations Submission; The Social Deck, 2023), though middle years students were also affected.

The OECD notes the importance of the early years for building strong, equitable foundations (OECD, 2021). For younger students transitioning into pre-school or kindergarten during the pandemic, their entry into school may have been disrupted by periods of lockdown, while some may have started their school journey in a remote capacity rather than face-to-face (Parent/Carer Discussion Board). There are therefore concerns around the resultant lack of preparation for school, particularly around school routines and classroom expectations. Some parents through Review activities also reported younger students are entering school with higher behavioural needs because of this.

Middle years transitions are an important transition point in terms of academic outcomes. Middle years encompass the times where students are 'reading to learn' and entering into high school settings (Clinton, 2020, p. 18), and for students with disability "The rate of learning of students...is much slower between Year 5 and Year 7 than a typical student. Thus, the upper primary and transition period from primary to secondary school is when students from equity groups fall further behind" (AERO, 2023, p. 1). Despite their importance, these transitions became more difficult during the pandemic, with a lack of continuity of support for students with disability (Parent Focus Group). This could be due in part to a focus on the transitions of younger and older students during this period.

Educators commented current Year 12 students are struggling due to lack of development of much-needed learning skills during the pandemic (Educator Focus Group). Educators and other stakeholders noted potential issues in outcomes for students with disability transitioning from education to employment (The Social Deck, 2023). This included Year 12 students who lacked the information, adjustments and resources required to complete assessments and exams (The Social Deck, 2023), leading to student anxiety about low achievement at school limiting post-school options. Stakeholders also identified that post school planning such as work experience and meeting with service providers did not occur (Independent Schools Australia Submission).

Older students also suggested implementing more support for students who graduated during the pandemic, to ensure they have what they need for transition to their next learning pathway (The Social Deck, 2023).

“Governments and schools need to focus on post and out-of-school transitions as well, planning for a what life post school might look like, what they might like to do.”  
(YPAG Member)

It is clear the pandemic heightened the need for supports during transition points for students with disability throughout the pandemic, in the context of high levels of uncertainty, frequent disruptions to regular routines, and challenges in accessing regular supports (dandolopartners, 2023).

## Senior Years and continuing/ higher education access and preparation

### Senior Secondary Students

Students in their senior secondary years during the pandemic, and recent school leavers, felt particularly affected by pandemic influences on academic achievement or outcomes.

Navigating academic pathways for this cohort was more complex, and some students reported they felt they had to navigate their own pathways in senior years (The Social Deck, 2023). Students commented there were breakdowns in communication between schools and program managers (YPAG Forum), leading to difficulties for students coordinating a number of teachers individually to make the same adjustments across multiple classes. Students suggested appointing a single contact person in a case manager type role would be helpful in these circumstances (The Social Deck, 2023).

“It would really help if at the start of every term a teacher is allocated to sit down with students and write up a plan for their educational pathway. That person can also be responsible for filtering information to that student from other teachers.”  
(YPAG Member)

Educators reported providing the necessary support for Year 12 students was difficult to coordinate and more time-consuming than in non-pandemic times (The Social Deck, 2023).

Academic pathways were also sometimes interrupted by an inability to access or complete some coursework, particularly affecting the senior years. This could occur due to not enough teachers available to run classes, practical subjects or Certificate work being unable to be appropriately adapted to online formats, an inability to access necessary materials or workspaces, and a variety of other circumstances leading to a lack of opportunity. While this was particularly a problem for students with disability who were learning from home, these issues could also affect students who were still accessing face-to-face learning due to the combining of classes or lack of regular teachers.

“When I was learning at home, I was still enrolled in the art classes, meaning a lot of my work wasn’t with me and instead at school. This made it a lot more difficult to get my work done without the materials I needed”.  
(Student With Disability, Webinar)

Undertaking final years learning and exams was particularly stressful. In engagement activities, students with disability noted that Year 12 classes created additional stress due to the pressures of achieving academically during the pandemic (The Social Deck, 2023).

Undertaking important exams was complicated by the pandemic. The Review heard reports that in some cases, communication around whether or not exams were taking place was poor, and added

additional stress for students. Students suggested that there was a need for more proactive communication on this issue from governments (YPAG Forum).

Some students noted essential support was not in place for students with disability in Year 12 who were attempting to complete their final exams (The Social Deck, 2023), though many also reported finding it easier to access accommodations and special consideration provisions during the pandemic than it had been previously. This was largely due to the fact that, particularly during 2020 and 2021, some jurisdictions put in place special arrangements and provisions for Year 12 students – for example, in Victoria there was the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority Consideration of Educational Disadvantage, and in NSW the NSW Education Standards Authority enacted both HSC timetable revisions to allow students extra preparation, as well as a revised Illness and Misadventure Process.

There was a feeling among some recent school leavers that they could have achieved better results if traditional classroom learning had continued (Autism Focus Group).

## Attainment and accessing further education or employment

Student experiences and academic outcomes during this period may affect the trajectory of students with disability throughout their further education and employment pathways.

In terms of attainment, the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability noted that "335,000 fewer people with disability attain university education" and "266,000 fewer people with disability attain secondary education" compared to general population outcomes (Vincent et al., 2022, p. 76).

While some students were satisfied in simply passing or finishing their final years, parents reported that a lack of academic success or achievement during the pandemic has resulted in some students reassessing their options for future learning and lowering their expectations for achievement in a tertiary setting (Parent Focus Group).

“No regulation around participation and engagement with the content meant that he fell behind in many of his classes. That was never able to be made up and affected his final year 12 outcome.”  
(Parent / Carer, Questionnaire)

In terms of helping school students with disability recover from the pandemic, one of the most common things reported by YPAG participants was a need to create more avenues for students with disability to learn about what supports and services are available to them (The Social Deck, 2023). This would assist students to access pathways to employment and further education even in cases where normal schooling is interrupted.

“More community connections facilitated by students where students can learn about their communities and the supports and services that are available. These events could also be places where students make networks with businesses and other institutions, so students do not have to rely solely on education and pathways. This also means that if schooling is severely disrupted, students will be more empowered to get support and have alternative pathways to employment and education.”  
(YPAG Member)

Further impacts on attainment are likely to only become evident over time (dandolopartners, 2023).

## Chapter 5: Wellbeing Outcomes

### Key Findings:

- The Review consultations and other studies suggest there was a reported increase in the development, or exacerbation, of mental health conditions for students with disability.
- Schools and systems generally put in place student welfare checks and parents reported the benefits of the supports for mental health and wellbeing for students with disability.
- Mental health and wellbeing support was more difficult to access for some students with disability during periods of remote learning.
- There was a wide variation in the provision of those mental health and wellbeing services, and of welfare checks by schools and systems, and no formal national evaluation has been made of their effectiveness.
- During the pandemic many students with disability experienced a reduction in the quantity or quality of their previously provided specialised services, such as allied health. These services may not have resumed after returning from remote learning.

### Social and emotional wellbeing

#### Social support and the development of social skills were widely impacted by remote learning

As the length of lockdowns and the associated period/s of remote learning increased, the wellbeing impacts on students with disability also increased. For example, a 2021 survey by Save the Children identified mental health and wellbeing impacts associated with the pandemic in 64 per cent of young people across Australia. This was higher in states experiencing longer lockdowns, such as Victoria (77 per cent) and NSW (75 per cent) (Save the Children, 2021, as cited in Wade et al., 2022).

Factors such as type of disability and student age also influenced wellbeing impacts.

We heard from some students with ADHD or other neurodivergences that the quieter and more flexible environment of at-home learning was beneficial, while other students such as those with hearing loss or intellectual disabilities found interactions with others online could sometimes be more difficult (Student Focus Groups).

“I wasn’t feeling happy and I wasn’t present. It was the same during online learning with the delay in what people were saying.”  
(Student With Hearing Loss).

The age of students influenced social impacts, particularly for those at the start or end of their schooling journey. Some younger children with disability who had limited exposure to the school social environment were reported as showing signs of behavioural issues as a result, while older students noted they have struggled to maintain and recover fulfilling social relationships with friends.

Continued access to social support from teachers and other school staff faced significant barriers throughout the pandemic. This was concerning as the social support provided by teachers is strongly associated with positive experiences for students with disability (Dickinson et al., 2020).

Workforce issues reduced the numbers of teachers and teachers' aides available overall. This in turn affected the amount of time teachers and teacher aides had available to engage with students. Teachers voiced concern in several studies that their relationships with students, as well as student learning, was affected by a lack of personalised contact and individualised support (Phillips et al., 2021, and Woltran et al., 2021, as cited in Van Bergen & Daniel, 2022).

Where individualised support from teachers and other staff was still available, it sometimes involved interactions that were unfamiliar to students, such as emails or check-in phone calls. Many students with disability, as well as their parents and carers and educators, told the Review they did not find this support as effective as in-person support.

Jurisdictions told us they focused on creating optimal conditions that made it easier for schools to support ongoing social interactions, rather than developing specific strategies to be implemented (dandolopartners, 2023). This allowed schools the flexibility to respond to their unique contexts. However, the inconsistency of approaches meant that opportunities for social interaction differed greatly across schools, with some providing more than others.

“Many students with complex disabilities and needs (particularly intellectual disability) need assistance to and/or do not engage well with online learning and socialising, and so the only option for connection is lost. Many students in these settings also rely on school as their sole means of social interaction.”

(YPAG Member)

Students with disability also reported significant barriers and reduced opportunities to build and maintain relationships with their classmates and peers. This included the cancellation of traditionally in-person significant events and rites of passage such as formals and graduations, as well as difficulties relating to asynchronous learning and the use of online platforms. This could in turn reduce opportunities for students to work collaboratively with peers or support each other's learning.

“Periods of isolation led to some children with disability disconnecting from their friends, and many believe that school lockdowns, especially those early in the school year, did not give their children any chance to form new friendships and as a result remain behind in this aspect of their social development.”

(Catholic School Parents Australia Submission)

Different and new opportunities to share experiences and engage with peers, such as the use of platforms like Facebook, Discord or Facetime, could lead to positive outcomes.

“I connected with people I never thought I would speak to during online classes, so it was pretty good for me and heaps of others.”

(Student With Disability)

However, many students reported higher levels of social isolation (dandolopartners, 2023) and missed social engagements with their friends and peers. Some students felt this more acutely, including students who did not have established peer friendship networks in place prior to the pandemic, and senior year students who were concluding their schooling. Some senior students reported that their relationships with peers and engagement with their social life did not improve once they graduated.



“My social skills got worse, and I am still unable to connect with most others in my age group.”  
(Student Questionnaire)

Experiences of disconnection and isolation led to reports of negative wellbeing outcomes. Students with disability reported poor mental health, decreased confidence, and feelings of sadness, worry and loneliness during the pandemic (The Social Deck, 2023). Some parents and carers noted that their children often did not understand why they were not allowed to interact with their friends as they had done previously, which led to anger, stress, and negative impacts on family relationships (The Social Deck, 2023).

Changes to social interactions during remote or online learning also impacted the development of key social skills for many students with disability, with some teachers commenting that the development of these skills was difficult to adequately support during the pandemic.

These impacts could be negative, including reports of regression in life and social skills for students with intellectual and behavioural disabilities, and reduced confidence speaking in front of groups for students from a CALD background.

“The interactions experienced in the school setting allow students with disability to develop and practice their social skills daily. Lockdowns and extended periods of remote learning impacted the development of these vital skills, with many finding it difficult to transition or develop these skills in an online setting.”  
(Royal Australasian College of Physicians Submission)

Some students with disability found that there were social positives during this period as well. The remote learning format and smaller face-to-face class sizes supported some students to interact with others more easily. Some students, such as those with chronic illnesses who normally couldn't easily engage with school, found engaging through the online learning format supported them to develop peer relationships. Additionally, some students reported that they learned new social skills relating to online platform interactions. This form of social skill is likely to become more valuable as online teaching and learning, during emergency events or otherwise, becomes increasingly available.

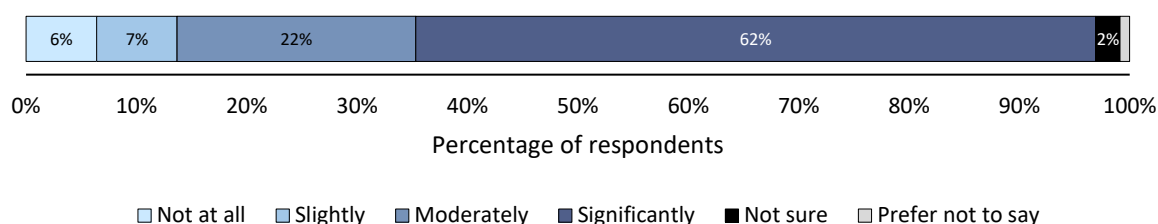
## Mental Health

### Mental health generally declined during the pandemic, and support was difficult to access

62 per cent of students with disability, parents, and carers who responded to the public consultation questionnaire reported that changes in learning during the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the student's mental health and wellbeing. 22% of respondents said it had a moderate impact. (The Social Deck, 2023)

**Figure 5. Impacts on mental health and wellbeing.**

Q. To what extent did changes in learning during the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impact you/your child's mental health and wellbeing? (n=453)



*(The Social Deck, 2023)*

There have been consistent reports in both the literature (Lee, 2020, and Li, 2021, as cited in Van Bergen & Daniel, 2022) and Review public consultation activities of increased development of, or exacerbation of existing, mental health conditions among students with disability during the pandemic. These reported increases have often been attributed to changes to learning during the pandemic such as school closures leading to disruptions in routine, an inability to adequately connect with formal and informal supports, and increased stress as a result of struggling with online learning.

Throughout the Review, parents and carers reported that heightened or severe anxiety impacted some students' ability to engage and learn, as well as to interact with others. Students with disability reported feelings of heightened depression, with parents and carers noting that their children often become withdrawn and sad, and that suicidal ideation and self-harm have resulted for some students. Though these are two of the most commonly mentioned forms of psychological distress reported as a result of changes to learning during the pandemic, they are not the only ones.

“He may have been prone to depression and anxiety before COVID, but the removal of face-to-face schooling and all his social supports just plunged him into a deep and severe depression. I cannot begin to tell you how horrible facing this was, and all the time there was this terrible fear that our worst nightmare would come true, and we would lose him to suicide.”  
(Parent/ Carer)

Though the need for it increased, mental health support became more difficult for some families and students to access during remote learning, due to a range of factors. This included changes to school staff and allied health staff availability, as well as the inability of school counsellors to keep up with the needs of families due to the number of students with mental health concerns (Western Sydney University Submission).

Schools and school sectors generally put processes in place to conduct 'welfare checks' during periods of remote learning for any students experiencing vulnerability (dandolopartners, 2023). These were variously conducted in online formats, in-person during face-to-face classes or individual teacher visits, or via telephone. Educators through the Review consultations also indicated many schools responded to wellbeing issues for students with disability by developing peer relationship activities and programs, increasing support staff numbers, or engaging with mental health and wellbeing programs.

While students, parents and carers responding to consultation activities most often mentioned specific supports for mental health and wellbeing as one of the things that helped students with disability to continue learning during the pandemic, the implementation of various ‘welfare check’ arrangements and alternative access to services and support was inconsistent across individual states and territories, jurisdictions, and schools. At the time of writing, no large-scale evaluations of the effectiveness of the arrangements during the pandemic have been undertaken, and we do not know how much these additional supports helped to mitigate effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, or led to any maintenance of, or improvements in, student wellbeing.

While the reported increase in mental health concerns for students with disability during the pandemic is concerning, some students during consultation activities reported that the online learning environment had a positive effect on their mental health.

Generally, the reasons given for this included the quieter online environment assisting with information processing, the ability to work at a student’s own pace and asynchronously from others, the ability to efficiently complete schoolwork allowing time for other interests and relaxation, and a reduction in the physical and mental drain some students experienced attending school in person.

“I love reading, but with my ADHD it is super hard to focus on it in a classroom environment. Analysing a text and interpreting it in a quiet environment definitely helped me, and I got far better grades during the pandemic.”  
(Student, Focus Group)

“One of the things we got a lot of feedback on was children with disability who were excluded or removed from class often or on reduced hours because of their behaviours related to the disability. Families reported to us that they actually had an improvement in mental health because they felt more included because they were able to participate a lot more than they had been in traditional school.”  
(Stakeholder Discussion Group)

The main suggestions made by participants during the Review for providing better mental health support were ensuring mental health, social supports, behavioural supports, and allied health remained in place for students with disability (including those learning from home) and implementing programs focusing on mental health and wellbeing in schools now, which can be enhanced for future events like the pandemic (The Social Deck, 2023).

A clear message heard throughout consultation activities is that mental health and wellbeing will be an ongoing challenge for students with disability, which will not be resolved by a return to face-to-face learning.

## Physical Health

### Physical health was impacted in both negative and positive ways

It was not only the mental health of students with disability that was impacted by the pandemic. Physical health was also affected.

Changes to the daily habits of students drove some of these impacts. On the positive side, students reported they were able to get more sleep during periods of remote learning, which they felt had

positive effects on both their academic performance and their mental health. Some students also reported that their eating habits improved during this time, due to increased leisure time encouraging healthier choices for activity and eating (The Social Deck, 2023).

Not all changed habits were positive. Particularly during periods of stricter lockdowns, many students found they were accessing the outdoors less regularly than they had previously, although other students felt learning from home allowed them more opportunities to access the outdoors, such as walking the family dog at lunchtime.

A reduction in physical activity more generally was also reported which, like a lack of outdoor time, is a known contributor to poorer mental health. There were some reports from parent and carer focus groups that the lack of physical activities (including those usually accessed through the school as well as extracurricular activities) meant students were less engaged with school, less able to regulate their behaviour, and had less confidence.

Schools implemented a range of strategies to try and maintain a level of physical activity for students. Some interesting examples we heard through consultations included Learning@home TV (QLD Department of Education) which broadcast programs to free-to-air TV including physical activity Brain Breaks programs, and Physical Education-focused YouTube channels featuring teacher-made videos of physical activities students could undertake at home (Wade et al., 2022)

Support for physical therapies was significantly reduced during the pandemic, particularly as these were difficult to implement remotely. Students were largely unable to access physical therapies such as hydrotherapy, while educators equally reported that they found it difficult to support the development of students' gross and fine motor skills.

This lack of access to physical therapies also affected students' ability to participate in learning.

“The absence of regular, professional physical therapy for children with physical disabilities would have had a significant impact on the child's ability to engage in learning, as well as the family as a whole.”

(Australian Council of State School Organisations Submission)

## Safety

### Student safety considerations were complex and contextual

Student safety, whether face-to-face at school or via remote learning, was a complex and contextual issue throughout the pandemic.

Many students with disability, particularly those whose schooling took place in a special school environment, were able to access face-to-face schooling for the majority, or throughout the entirety, of the pandemic.

Schools developed policies and procedures to enhance the safety of all staff and students engaged in face-to-face learning. This included procurement of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), hand sanitiser, Rapid Antigen Testing, air purification and improved window ventilation, and alternative transport arrangements to ensure social distancing requirements could be met where possible (dandolopartners, 2023).

However, some parents still saw schools as ‘highly risk laden’, reflecting to the Review that they felt able to keep children and young people safe and well while they were at home, but not when sending them to school. Some parents consequently chose to keep their medically vulnerable children with disability at home due to ongoing concerns about the pandemic, even where access to face-to-face learning was an option. Stakeholders therefore encouraged governments to consider how to further enhance online learning options for students with disability, especially where it is not safe for them to return to the classroom.

For students not able to access face-to-face schooling, and thereby learning from a home environment or similar, there were also safety concerns. For instance, the school environment typically provided a refuge for students with home-safety issues. Being unable to access this environment was detrimental for students facing domestic violence, unstable living conditions, or a lack of appropriate adult supervision.

Particularly during the return to face-to-face learning, some students with disability, or those who were medically vulnerable, reported they did not feel valued or protected by these decisions. Several stakeholders, as well as parents and carers, raised the point during the Review that students with disability and their families and carers should not feel pressured to return to school.

## Behavioural and Developmental Factors

### The behaviour and development of some students with disability was negatively affected

For some students, at-home learning resulted in deteriorating mental health and behavioural support needs. Families in this situation reported behaviours such as defiance, anger, and violence directed at siblings/families.

“Families were left to cope with severe and deteriorating mental health and behaviour support needs. Families contacted us with desperate stories of increased meltdowns, dysregulation and use of violence in the home often directed towards mothers and younger siblings. This was not behaviour they had seen before.”

(Association for Children with Disability Submission)

Others reported that students withdrew, or ‘retreated inwards’, which presented a different, though equally significant, challenge. This is supported by research, including school leaders in England who have also reported that “students with no previous wellbeing or mental health issues before the pandemic” have returned to school with a “lack of motivation and withdrawal” (Wade et al., 2022, pg. 35).

“The behaviour that we’ve seen is that defiant sort of behaviour, whether that’s because home life was a little bit cruiser than school life. Withdrawal, not willing to do it, not willing to give it a go.”

(Educator, Focus Group)

The Review heard some students with disability missed out on key foundational concepts and skills needed for effective socialisation such as turn taking and sharing. This is expected to have an ongoing effect on their learning. Educators also noted some students with disability of all ages returning to face-to-face learning at school are lacking independence skills, and that some have experienced developmental regressions in learning skills.

“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.”  
(Australian Federation of Disability Organisations Submission)

## Chapter 6: Return and Recovery

### Key Findings:

- There were multiple reported challenges or barriers for students with disability returning to face-to-face learning following the pandemic, including adjustment issues, reluctance to stop remote learning where it was a positive experience, increased anxiety, and a continuing lack of available supports.
- There are early indications of widespread and enduring attendance declines for students with disability.
- Students with disability are overrepresented in the school refusal population, in students excluded from schooling (e.g. suspension), and in the home-schooling community.
- Gaps in knowledge developed during periods of online learning, including gaps in foundation skills for younger students. Without specific intervention, these gaps are likely to persist.
- There is an opportunity to investigate whether online, hybrid and/or alternative learning options for students with disability have positive outcomes for some students.

### Return

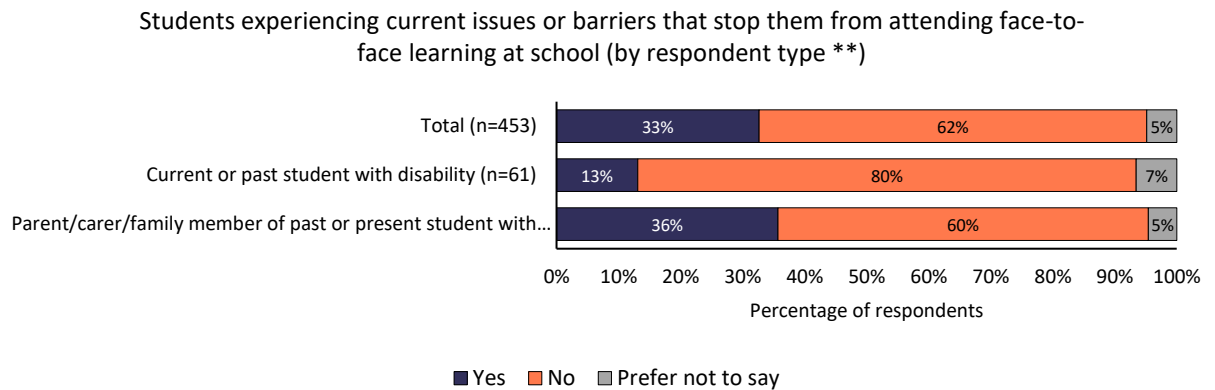
#### Returning to school posed challenges for students with disability

Students had highly individualised experiences of online learning and the return to in-person learning. While some struggled with online learning, others enjoyed the experience and did not look forward to losing the benefits that it offered. Regardless of whether the return to in-person learning was seen as a positive or a negative, some students with disability faced barriers to successfully returning to the traditional school environment and face-to-face learning.

This was an issue since the very early returns that took place in 2020 following initial periods of lockdown and remote learning. A 2020 New South Wales Government report noted “Now that face-to-face learning has resumed it has become apparent that some students may have found it more difficult to reengage in school on a full-time basis. This includes students who have anxiety, those whose family’s circumstances has been impacted by COVID-19, those with disability or who have difficulty regulating their behaviour” (NSW Department of Education, 2020a, p. 20). This continues to be an issue in 2023.

The Review questionnaire asked respondents whether they or their child were currently experiencing any issues or barriers that stopped them from attending face-to-face learning at school. Of the current and past students with disability who responded, 13 per cent said yes. Of the parents, family members, and carers who responded to the questionnaire, more than a third (36 per cent) reported that their child was experiencing such issues (The Social Deck, 2023).

**Figure 6. Current issues that stop students from attending face-to-face learning at school, by respondent type.**

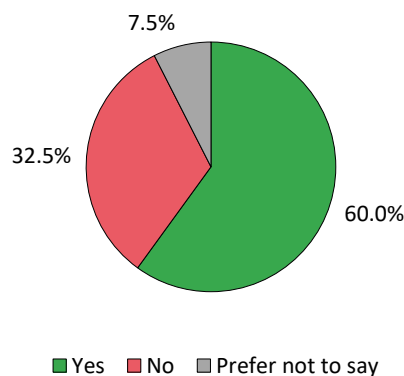


(The Social Deck, 2023)

60 per cent of educator responses to the Review questionnaire also reported knowing of students with disability who are currently experiencing issues or barriers that stop them from attending face-to-face learning at school.

**Figure 7. Educator responses to knowledge of issues or barriers currently preventing face-to-face learning at school.**

Q. Do you know any students with disability who are currently experiencing any issues or barriers that stop them from attending face-to-face learning at school?  
(n=200)  
(TSD Questionnaire)



(The Social Deck, 2023)

A variety of barriers were cited through the Review as making the transition back to face-to-face learning challenging for students with disability. These patterns appear to have persisted and may be contributing to ongoing issues regarding school refusal and enduring attendance declines.

For some students with disability, online or remote learning was simply a better fit for their individual circumstances. Where this was the case, students may not have wanted to transition back to face-to-face learning or may have struggled to adjust to old routines and structures. Students reported that they found returning to school “chaotic” and “nerve-wracking” (Student Focus Groups)



due to the volume of people and noise. Educators noted this was particularly difficult for students with anxiety or ADHD, who struggled to readapt to the distractions of the classroom environment.

Some students with disability enjoyed online or remote learning as they felt they were able to learn more and saw improvements to their grades.

“Before COVID, I was basically my own teacher using school resources. But at home, all I had to do was study, and in a more accommodating environment.”

(YPAG Member)

Other students were reluctant to return to face-to-face learning for health-related reasons, particularly where they were medically vulnerable and therefore at a heightened risk of contracting COVID. Measures intended to reduce the risk of infection were also of concern to some students, who found that having to wear masks was annoying, overstimulating, impeded communication, and created additional anxiety.

Face-to-face learning increased social pressure on students, resulting in fatigue and social anxiety that was not felt when learning from home. Educators also reported some students with physical disabilities struggled to get back into the routine of travelling to school, and disengaged as a result.

“Due to not having constant exposure to attending school in person full time (because of online learning due to COVID break), I found the school environment overwhelming, caused worse sensory overstimulation and led to autistic burnout, worsened my depression and anxiety. I could not finish high school due to poor mental health.”

(Student With Disability, Questionnaire)

Motivational factors also proved to be a challenge for students re-entering the school environment. Educators noted many students seemed to be “not bothered” (Educator Focus Group) about learning once they were back on school campuses. This was also noted by some parents and carers, who responded that due to many students missing education for long periods of time, they had much less motivation and found it harder to engage with learning. It was also suggested students were struggling to re-enter a fast-paced school environment where there was more pressure and higher expectations, especially if students had struggled to learn at home and lost confidence as a result (The Social Deck, 2023).

“His motivation and engagement fell behind during COVID and the floods and never recovered from that.”

(Parent/Carer, Questionnaire)

There was concern from many participants in Review activities that supports and adjustments available before the pandemic were not available to students once they returned to school. Student respondents noted they were no longer able to access the one-on-one support they need, and no longer had quiet spaces available for them to use. While this could potentially be linked to ceased supports during remote learning not re-starting on the return to school, or ongoing issues with a lack of staff, submissions to the Review also noted schools and educators struggled to support or adjust to a situation where some students were returning to school with higher support needs, including mental health and behavioural needs.

Review activity responses suggested families did not have adequate support to successfully transition students back to face-to-face settings. Autistic students in particular faced higher needs in

this area due to sudden change in routines and sensitivity to noise and other potential stressors for example. Educators also raised transition support, noting students with disability could have been better supported to transition back to on-campus learning by “spending funding on extra staff to help with bridging those gaps” (Educator Focus Group).

Barriers to successful reengagement with the physical school setting have resulted in some students not returning to school at all. As discussed in a previous section of this report, jurisdictions have reported increased instances of school refusal, home-schooling registrations, and distance learning program enrolments.

There were some effective measures taken which encouraged positive experiences for students transitioning back to school after periods of remote learning. Medhurst summarises these effectively, with a number of these measures reflected throughout various consultation activities: “prioritisation of students with disability to return, video calls from teachers showing the changed classroom in combination with social stories for all students in class, phased returns to onsite learning (i.e., building up the number of days), teacher aide support upon students’ return to school, and allowing siblings of students with disability and other small groups of children to attend school (Amaze, 2020; ACD & Amaze, 2020; Armitage & Loukomitis, 2020)” (Medhurst et al., 2022, p. 15). Indigenous Assistants were also available in some areas to support students to engage with learning, and to successfully reengage on return to school (Wade et al., 2022).

“Prioritise all students with disability in the return to on-site schooling, while supporting flexible or hybrid approaches for students that need them to maximise their learning, and social and emotional wellbeing.”

(Amaze Submission)

## Recovery

### Identifying and responding to gaps in learning

At the time of writing, due to the differences in experience of remote and online learning across Australia, a consistent narrative and data story is still to emerge on the effect of COVID-19 upon student achievement (Wade et al., 2022, p. 51). Accurately assessing the instances or extent of learning gaps is not an easy or consistent process with any student, particularly with students with disability. Reports that have delved into this issue to date, such as analyses of NAPLAN data or state-based check-in assessment data, do not disaggregate findings specifically for students with disability.

There are several reasons why the potential for additional or exacerbated learning losses to affect students with disability because of the COVID-19 pandemic is particularly concerning. Firstly, there is evidence to suggest many students with disability start their schooling journey already behind their peers. A Rapid Review undertaken by Victoria University on behalf of the Australian Government early in the pandemic using 2018 Australian Early Development Census data showed 44.6 per cent of students with disability were not developmentally ready in terms of language and cognitive skills at entry to school (compared to a national average of 13.4 per cent) (Lamb, 2020). Further, the OECD notes if learning gaps have resulted from school closures, students who are already marginalised, including students with special education needs, are likely to be more highly impacted (OECD, 2020b).

“Independent schools report that many students with disability have larger gaps in learning than students without disability due to the pandemic.”  
(Independent Schools Australia Submission)

Concern regarding the potential for learning gaps to have emerged or increased for students with disability during the remote learning period was consistent across Review stakeholders. Students voiced concern they had fallen behind in their schoolwork, and now have gaps in their learning as a result of ‘not learning much’ during the pandemic (The Social Deck, 2023).

“I did not complete majority of my year 10 work due to covid-19; this has affected my current learning abilities.”  
(Student, Questionnaire)

Many parents and carers also said the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on the academic achievements of their child, due to missing vital education for long periods, and a lack of regulation around participation and engagement with content (The Social Deck, 2023). Educators commented that students who had been struggling with their education before the pandemic returned to school even further behind due to a “big gap in their education when learning at home” (Educator Focus Group). Educators also reported there are learning gaps in the foundational skills of younger students who were learning online during the pandemic (Educator Focus Group). First Nations educators reported that “the students have suffered tremendously” because the pandemic and lockdowns went on for so long, with many students with disability still struggling to return to the academic level they were at before COVID (The Social Deck, 2023).

There is also evidence any learning gaps for students with disability, encompassing both academic learning and social and emotional skills, are likely to persist and will take time and dedicated effort to mitigate (dandolopartners, 2023). This makes identifying and responding to learning gaps for students with disability a priority, as addressing the issue now will minimise the disruption to students’ educational journeys (OECD, 2020a).

Literature suggests once students return to learning after remote instruction, the transition “...should include an assessment of students’ learning progress,” (Medhurst et al., 2022, p. 15). A number of jurisdictions put measures in place in order to assess student progress, which may have included students with disability, such as the NSW Department of Education ‘Check-in Assessments’, which were online tests covering similar aspects of NAPLAN reading and numeracy to provide feedback on students’ learning progress (Wade et al., 2022); and the Insight Assessment Platform which made literacy and numeracy check-in assessments available to Victorian Government school teachers (Victorian Government, 2020). Other available data sources were also relied on to assess the extent of learning – for example, the Victorian Department of Education and Training “...encouraged schools to draw on a range of data assessments, attendance, teacher observations – to identify which students may need additional support and prioritise targeted strategies to students most in need” (Victorian Department of Education and Training, as cited in Parliament of Victoria, 2021).

Previous OECD work on equity in education has revealed three key policy components of initiatives to address learning gaps – personalised learning interventions; additional or specialised instruction for certain students; and/or additional resources based on student needs (OECD, 2020a).

Review stakeholders also suggested a variety of options to support learning recovery. These included tailored programs in schools, specific tutoring programs, changing policies to allow schools to engage specialist educators and supports for students with disability, allowing remediation options such as additional time within grade and considering changes to class sizes and structures to help all students catch up on missed learning (The Social Deck, 2023).

“Provide students with disability opportunities for an additional term or semester, or to repeat a year (particularly for students in their final year of primary or secondary school).”  
(Amaze Submission)

It is likely students who were already proficient in skills such as independent learning and autonomy would have more successfully navigated the remote learning period. As these skills are often difficult for students with disability, a focus on developing these capabilities may also be warranted (Darling-Hammond, 2020, as cited in Wade et al., 2022).

Submissions to the Review indicated that addressing the learning gaps of students with disability resulting from the pandemic is also leading to increased pressure on teachers and schools.

“Our physicians have reported that school policy responses to COVID-19, in particular requesting students back to school face-to-face full time in conjunction with pressures on students and staff to catch up on the curriculum and missed learning opportunities, has contributed to a further wave of student vulnerability in the post-COVID-19 return to school process.”  
(Royal Australasian College of Physicians Submission)

## Identifying and responding to ongoing wellbeing impacts

Simply returning to school has not been sufficient to address the wellbeing issues that arose from the pandemic and periods of online learning (Wade et al., 2022).

Review stakeholders have expressed the need to support students who had mental health concerns through the remote learning period, as well as those that are experiencing mental health concerns around returning to in-person learning. Suggestions on how to identify and respond to wellbeing impacts included one-on-one scheduled times for teachers to check on student wellbeing, programs focusing on mental health and wellbeing to be implemented in schools now and enhanced for similar events in the future, investment in mental health support for students with disability and their families during and post-crisis events, and increased resourcing of schools to provide professional support to students and their families (The Social Deck, 2023).

“Teachers to have one-on-one scheduled short time with students to ask questions, clarify, and for teachers to check on wellbeing.”  
(Student, Questionnaire)

## Identifying and responding to teacher and support staff workforce issues

School environments during and following the pandemic have been significantly impacted by teacher and support staff workforce issues in every jurisdiction across Australia. The impact of COVID-19 on the educator workforce contributed to increased incidence of burnout, early retirement of teachers and school leaders, and loss of staff due to vaccination mandates

(dandolopartners, 2023). These and other issues continue to be a factor in challenges associated with the return to in-person learning.

As workforce issues are likely to have a greater impact on students with disability (dandolopartners, 2023), ensuring workforce issues are addressed, and that teachers are enabled to support students with disability to return and recover from the pandemic and other crisis events, is critical. Suggestions from educators throughout Review activities included the immediate introduction of online tools and platforms into education to enable a smoother transition to online learning during future emergencies, explicit training in the use of technology for students with disability and teachers, additional resourcing in the form of more specialist teachers, and adequate staffing to support distance learning during future emergencies. There is national and jurisdictional work underway to address teacher workforce issues, including through the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan agreed by Education Ministers.

## Maintaining flexible approaches to education

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted just how flexible learning can be. Some students enjoyed the “...flexibility and control over pace of learning” (Wade et al., 2022, p. 27) that online learning provided, and others struggled with the lack of routine and structure that a typical in-person school day would offer. In Review feedback, stakeholders consistently expressed the need for continued flexibility and accessibility in learning for students with disability, both in times of crisis and during normal schooling periods.

Though a clearly visible effect of COVID-19 has been the increase in alternative access to learning for students, with some educational institutions (mostly vocational) offering permanent online learning options (The Social Deck, 2023), students expanded on ideas beyond the online/ remote or in-person traditional options. Suggestions heard throughout the consultation period reflect the highly varied individual circumstances of students with disability. These included: hybrid learning, options for dual online and in-person enrolments, alternative options for students not suited to an online environment, quiet breakout rooms for small numbers of students with disabilities like ADHD to work in, the creation and maintenance of ready-to-use resource packs, options such as half-day learning, introduction of smaller class sizes, and an adapted and flexible curriculum to support reduced workloads.

Teachers and school leaders during the pandemic have shown great creativity, innovation, resourcefulness, and resilience. Longmuir interviewed a select number of school leaders, and their perceptions were that despite exhaustion amongst teachers, “...many returned to school with an amplified appetite for change, having expanded their understanding of what was possible” (Longmuir, 2021, p. 12, as cited in Wade et al., 2022, p. 43).

Continuing to ask students what they need is critical. Students with disability are a diverse group, with backgrounds, cultures, and socioeconomic statuses as varied as those of their non-disabled peers. What works for one student with disability will not necessarily suit another. Students with disability suggested that systems, teachers, and support staff should check and then respect the needs of every student from early in the process, and remember and acknowledge that all students learn differently (The Social Deck, 2023).

## The effects on students with disability may not be visible for some time, and some may require focused attention due to compounding factors.

The OECD acknowledged early in the pandemic that “... the effects of the COVID-19 crisis are likely to be felt well beyond the reopening of education institutions” (OECD, 2020a). Indeed, the impacts on students with disability are still emerging and are likely to shift over time, requiring ongoing monitoring and response.

Many students with disability suggested the need for more individualised support for students in the future. This included suggestions for more frequent check ins with students, more options for one-on-one support, and more monitoring of student progress (with interventions to support students who are struggling or falling behind) (The Social Deck, 2023).

For some discrete cohorts of students, the effects of COVID-19 have the potential for a more lasting impact on educational outcomes. States and territories and non-government education authorities identified two intersecting groups of students with disability of particular concern – students with disability who attended boarding schools, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with disability who were subject to the Biosecurity Act (dandolopartners, 2023).

Students who attend boarding schools experienced conflicting or unclear travel and quarantine restrictions, as well as a lack of infrastructure to support remote learning. They may also have experienced compounding factors that impacted their learning during the pandemic, such as coming from rural or remote areas (dandolopartners, 2023).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with disability living in remote communities may also have been impacted by the Biosecurity Act measures that restricted travel movements. Restrictions had significant implications for students with disability, including access to allied health services, access to infrastructure including reliable high-speed internet, and an education workforce who were significantly impacted by restrictions and vaccine mandates (dandolopartners, 2023).

“...some of their teachers working in isolated communities were unable to leave due to the biosecurity risk presented by COVID-19. This meant that many were unable to have a break during their designated holidays, which left many feeling increasingly isolated and under pressure.”

(Wade et al., 2023, p. 42)

## There were successes and innovations in education for students with disability during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as lessons to be learnt.

The COVID-19 period exposed multiple issues and barriers for students with disability, their families and carers, and educators. These included:

- Lack of planning for, and resources to support, students with disability in a pivot to remote or online education
- Suboptimal communication at all levels, including around changes to teaching and learning, individual needs, and expectations
- Issues with infrastructure and technology availability and operation for certain groups of students
- A focus on wellbeing in some cases led to a de-prioritisation of academic outcomes, sometimes to an unhelpful degree leading to potentially increased learning gaps

- Online and remote learning options did not suit all students and could lead to increased disengagement from learning.

Though these issues were not limited to students with disability, they are likely to have been disproportionately affected by them.

Equally, the COVID-19 pandemic and associated remote learning periods led to some positive impacts on students with disability. Successes have included:

- The pivot to remote/online and hybrid teaching and learning led to rapid adaptations and advanced innovative practice
- Both students with disability and their teachers were likely able to extend and improve their online learning and ICT skills.

“The remote learning broadened his technological skills and they have transferred those across to current learning exercises [*sic*] in the classroom.”

(Parent/Carer, Discussion Board)

- For a significant number of children and young people with disability, especially those who are distracted within the classroom, learning at home with appropriate support was a more enjoyable and effective learning experience
- There was an increased focus on and prioritisation of wellbeing in education
- Parents/carers and families were better able to understand where their children were at academically, and their support needs.

“We also got to see where they are academically. I didn't know how smart my kids were before this...or more, I hadn't seen close up what they were like at school... It helped us see what our ADHD daughter was like in her learning processes, so we could learn how to help her focus better.”

(Parent/Carer, Discussion Board)

“The positives to come out of it for us was to be actually seeing first hand how she struggles in a learning environment all day, made us advocate even more strongly for her to get individual support at school as much as possible.”

(Parent/Carer, Discussion Board)

- Responding to the pandemic has shown the potential for greater flexibility and online learning during events of this kind. This could include permanent online learning options.

Having made gains in these areas during the pandemic, it is important that we do not lose these positives in a wholesale return to more traditional modes of teaching and learning post-lockdowns. There are opportunities to investigate options for ongoing learning in online or hybrid formats for students where it is beneficial. A focus on supporting diverse learning needs in flexible ways will benefit all students.

“Learning from home and learning digitally within the school environment is a valid form of education that should be kept.”

(YPAG Member)

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# Appendix A- Methodology

The *Review of the impact of COVID-19 on school students with disability* (the Review) is an election commitment announced by the (now) Prime Minister, the Hon Anthony Albanese MP, in his speech to the National Press Club on 25 January 2022.

The Review was undertaken by the Australian Government Department of Education (the department) between August 2022 and July 2023. The Review was undertaken in three stages:

Stage 1: Planning and initial consultation

Stage 2: Public consultation

Stage 3: Analysis and writing

## Stage 1: Planning and initial consultation

### Initial targeted consultations

Early consultation with key disability and education stakeholders informed the scope and focus of the Review. Key stakeholders that were consulted included, but were not limited to, Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA), the First Peoples Disability Network, the Disability Discrimination Commissioner, the National Children's Commissioner, principals' associations and health groups. State and territory officials and non-government school representatives were engaged via the department's existing Disability Standards for Education Implementation Reference Group. The department's Young People's Advisory Group of students with disability, was also consulted.

Key feedback from these stakeholders included recommendations that the Review:

- Recognise the diversity of pandemic experiences due to such factors as disability type, socioeconomic status, Indigenous and cultural background and geography
- Acknowledge and build upon existing evidence, including academic and government research on the pandemic
- Recognise the speed at which families and education systems had to shift to remote learning models
- Focus on potential national collaborative actions between the Australian Government and states and territories.

### dandolopartners

The department engaged dandolopartners to undertake a rapid analysis of the measures undertaken by jurisdictions and non-government education authorities to support students with disability throughout the pandemic. This work involved both desktop research and data analysis as well as consultation with education officials about the actions taken and learnings made. dandolopartners was also asked to provide advice to the department on potential opportunities for national collaborative action to strengthen the capability of schools for future events. This advice was one input into this report.

## **Desktop analysis**

The department undertook a limited desktop analysis of existing reports and studies produced since 2020 on the effect of the pandemic on school education, focusing on students with disability. This material has been referenced where appropriate throughout the report, but the focus of the Review has been on information provided through its own consultation process.

## **Stage 2: Public consultation**

### **The Social Deck**

The department engaged The Social Deck (TSD) to support the public consultation process. TSD has expertise in consulting the disability community, having previously led public consultations for the 2020 Review of the *Disability Standards for Education 2005* and for Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-2031.

### **Engagement Hub**

An engagement hub website for the Review was established to support the public consultation process. This website contained information about the Review (including the terms of reference) as well as the discussion paper and stories from school students with disability. It provided avenues for interested individuals or groups to provide written submissions, complete a questionnaire, and/or attend consultation events such as webinars or focus groups.

### **Communication and advertising**

The department used a range of modalities to encourage participation in the Review. This included emails to a range of organisational stakeholders, dissemination of a media/communications toolkit, a media release from the Australian Government Minister for Education, social media posts and an item on the department's website.

### **Discussion paper**

The discussion paper was developed to support public consultations for the Review. It was aimed at students, parents/carers, advocacy groups and other community stakeholders. The discussion paper included open-ended questions intended to guide people preparing submissions. The questions were developed by the department in consultation with TSD and were broadly consistent with questions in related work undertaken by CYDA, the Disability Royal Commission and the National Children's Commissioner.

To support accessibility, the discussion paper was translated into Easy English, Auslan and eight commonly used community languages (Arabic, Punjabi, Dari, Korean, Thai, Vietnamese, Chinese Traditional and Chinese Simplified).

Questions in the discussion paper also formed the basis for the questionnaire available on the engagement hub.

## Consultation methods and numbers

The Review involved both open and targeted consultation between January and April 2023. There were over 850 unique engagements as part of this process. This included:

- 1 webinar
- 15 focus groups
- 2 discussion boards
- 25 individual interviews
- 124 completed student surveys
- 660 questionnaires
- 18 submissions
- 8 video stories

Engagements came from a range of stakeholders, including students, parents and carers, educators, health practitioners, academic and experts, and advocacy organisations.

## Stage 3: Analysis and writing

Analysis of all consultation input and report drafting occurred in 2023. Draft findings and recommendations were discussed with a range of stakeholders, including:

- State and territory governments through the Australian Government-chaired reference group
- Australian Government agencies including the Department of Health, Department of Social Services, the National Indigenous Australians Agency, the National Disability Insurance Agency and the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

These stakeholders provided valuable feedback which informed this report and its recommendations.

## Appendix B- Submission List

The Review received a total of 22 submissions. Those organisations and individuals who gave permission for their submission to be published are listed below.

### Organisation / Individual Name

Advocacy for Inclusion (AFI)

Amaze

Association for Children with a Disability (ACD)

Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO)

Australian Federation of Disability Organisations (AFDO)

Catholic School Parents Australia (CSPA)

Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (CFECEF)

Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA)

Independent Schools Australia (ISA)

Missing School

Parents of Adolescents with Gender Distress

Queensland Advocacy for Inclusion (QAI)

The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP)

Umesh Sharma

Victorian Council of Social Services (VCOSS)

Western Sydney University, Centre for Educational Research (CER)

## Appendix C- List of Acronyms and Definitions

Acronym	Definition
ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
ADS	Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-31
AHRC	Australian Human Rights Commission
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
CALD	Culturally and linguistically diverse
CMO	Chief Medical Officer
DDA	<i>Disability Discrimination Act 1992</i>
DESE	Department of Education, Skills and Employment
DSE	<i>Disability Standards for Education 2005</i>
ICT	Information Communications Technology
IEP / ILP	Individual Education Plan / Individual Learning Plan
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
NAPLAN	The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy
NCCD	Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability
NDIA	National Disability Insurance Agency
NDIS	National Disability Insurance Scheme
NSRA	National School Reform Agreement
OECD	The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
SES	Socioeconomic status
UN CRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability



Term	Definition
<p>Adjustments (educational)</p> <p>Sourced from:  <a href="http://nccd.edu.au">Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (nccd.edu.au)</a></p>	<p>Adjustments are actions taken to enable a student with disability to access and participate in education on the same basis as other students. Adjustments reflect the assessed individual needs of the student. They can be made at the whole-school level, in the classroom and at an individual student level.</p> <p>In the NCCD there are four levels of adjustment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support provided within quality differentiated teaching practice – Students with disability are supported through active monitoring and adjustments that are not greater than those used to meet the needs of diverse learners.</li> <li>• Supplementary adjustments – Students with disability are provided with adjustments that are supplementary to the strategies and resources already available for all students within the school.</li> <li>• Substantial adjustments – Students with disability who have more substantial support needs are provided with essential adjustments and considerable adult assistance.</li> <li>• Extensive adjustments - Students with disability and very high support needs are provided with extensive targeted measures and sustained levels of intensive support. These adjustments are highly individualised, comprehensive and ongoing.</li> </ul>
<p>Asynchronous teaching/ learning</p>	<p>Asynchronous teaching/ learning is when education, instruction, and learning do not occur in the same place or at the same time.</p>
<p>Auslan</p>	<p>Auslan is the sign language of the Australian Deaf community.</p>
<p>Biosecurity Act</p>	<p>The <i>Biosecurity Act 2015</i> is an Act of the Parliament of Australia which manages biosecurity risks in Australia.</p>
<p>COVID-19 pandemic</p>	<p>The COVID-19 pandemic is a global outbreak of coronavirus, an infectious disease caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) virus.</p>
<p>Disability</p> <p>[this definition is from the DDA]</p>	<p>Disability, in relation to a person, means:</p> <p>(a) total or partial loss of the person’s bodily or mental functions; or</p>



Term	Definition
	<p>(b) total or partial loss of a part of the body; or</p> <p>(c) the presence in the body of organisms causing disease or illness; or</p> <p>(d) the presence in the body of organisms capable of causing disease or illness; or</p> <p>(e) the malfunction, malformation or disfigurement of a part of the person's body; or</p> <p>(f) a disorder or malfunction that results in the person learning differently from a person without the disorder or malfunction; or</p> <p>(g) a disorder, illness or disease that affects a person's thought processes, perception of reality, emotions or judgment or that results in disturbed behaviour;</p> <p>and includes a disability that:</p> <p>(h) presently exists; or</p> <p>(i) previously existed but no longer exists; or</p> <p>(j) may exist in the future; or</p> <p>(k) is imputed to a person.</p>
Differentiated (teaching/learning)	Differentiated teaching/learning happens when different students, either within a specific cohort or in a class, are given opportunities to learn that are appropriate for their individual needs and abilities.
Digital divide	The digital divide refers to the unequal sharing of digital technologies and services across society.
Digital literacy	Digital literacy means having the skills you need to live, learn, and work in a society where communication and access to information is increasingly through digital technologies like internet platforms, social media, and mobile devices.
Distance education	Distance education is a type of schooling where a student is enrolled in school, but instruction between teacher and student/s is separated by physical distance. This type of schooling is typically offered to students who require access because of geographic isolation.



Term	Definition
Education authorities	Education authorities are responsible for the delivery of school education in their jurisdiction/s.
Essential worker	A worker whose job is considered to be necessary to maintain essential services and supplies to the community, or to a part of the community.
First Nations; Indigenous	<p>Encompassing all Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.</p> <p>First Nations is used by preference in this report, however, 'Indigenous' has been used in select situations where this was the terminology used by stakeholders or participants.</p>
Home schooling	<p>Home schooling, also known as home education, is where the primary responsibility for education (teaching and assessment) is taken by the parent/carer outside of a formal education setting. Home schooling is usually conducted by a parent/guardian or tutor.</p> <p>State and territory education authorities regulate arrangements that must be observed by parents who are required to register their children for home schooling. Home Schooling differs from distance education, and from remote learning as enacted during the pandemic period.</p>
Hybrid (Learning)	For the purposes of this Review, a hybrid learning environment is one in which elements of both traditional in-person and remote learning occur alongside each other. This may include some students attending school in-person, while others undertake remote learning. Individual students may also spend some of their time learning in-person, and some of their time learning remotely.
Intersectionality	Intersectionality examines the ways in which different aspects of a person's identity can expose them to overlapping forms of discrimination and marginalisation. This can include gender, race, ability, sexuality, age, class or other status.
National Cabinet	National Cabinet is <i>a forum for the Prime Minister (chair), Premiers and Chief Ministers to meet and work collaboratively.</i>
Online Learning	Learning that is conducted remotely, using online resources and platforms.



Term	Definition
Pedagogy	The theory and practice of teaching. Pedagogy informs teaching strategies, teacher actions, and teacher judgments and decisions by taking into consideration theories of learning, knowledge of students and their needs, and the backgrounds and interests of individual students.
Remote Learning	For the purposes in this Report, covers periods where students were required or were able to choose to attend school education from home. The terms ‘remote schooling’, ‘at-home learning’ and ‘learning from home’ may also be used.
Review	Refers to the Review of the impact of COVID-19 on school students with disability.
Student	In this report ‘student’ refers to a school student unless stated otherwise.
Teacher Standards	Refers to the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers.
Telehealth	Telehealth allows patients to consult a healthcare provider by phone or a video call.
Young People’s Advisory Group (YPAG)	First established in response to the 2020 Review of the Disability Standards for Education, the YPAG is a mechanism for the Australian Government Department of Education to hear directly from young people with disability about their experiences of education.

