

Lessons from Term 2

Remote and Flexible Learning



Lessons from Term 2 Remote and Flexible Learning

Victorian schools made enormous efforts to transition their students as quickly and smoothly as possible to remote and flexible learning in Term 2 in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Data collected by the Department of Education and Training, together with independent analyses into the 2020 Term 2 experience, have highlighted how teachers and school leaders worked together to address challenges and rethink their approaches to student learning. Parents gained unprecedented insight into their children's education. Some students thrived, and some faced challenges in the remote learning environment.

School leaders, teachers and the Department learnt a lot from the first period of remote and flexible learning and have applied those lessons to improve the approach in Term 3. This document provides a summary of lessons learned from Term 2 and the actions taken to improve wellbeing, engagement and learning outcomes for Victorian students.

Lessons and actions covered in this document include:

- Digital access
- Attendance
- Impact on learning
- Student mental health and wellbeing
- Students with additional needs
- Student support
- Parent and carer engagement and support
- Teaching practice
- Staff wellbeing and safety

Digital access



What we learnt

Some students lacked reliable internet connectivity, and challenges in sourcing a high volume of devices meant that some students did not receive their devices until late in Term 2.

A lack of access to devices and internet connectivity was most noticeable in low socioeconomic areas, including rural and regional areas.

What we did in response

During Term 3, a further 9,401 computers and 4,821 internet access devices have been loaned to students. This is in addition to the 62,000 computers and 23,000 internet access devices loaned in Term 2.

Where additional devices or internet access are required, schools can access a range of funding sources to purchase equipment that will be loaned to students or technologies that enable internet access. For example, the Government has expanded the scope of the [Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund](#) (CSEF) to include the purchase of internet plans for Victorian government, Catholic and Independent schools. All available CSEF support can now be used for the purchase of devices or technologies for eligible students.

The Department of Education and Training (DET) is also providing advice and support for schools to assist parents in accessing NBN Co's education low/no cost internet access package for families suffering hardship without internet access who live in an area with NBN coverage (accessed through local Retail Service Providers).





What we learnt

Across Victorian government schools, Term 2 remote attendance was on average better than on-site attendance for the same period last year. However, like previous years, attendance did drop over the course of Term 2.

Attendance was lower among secondary schools, in low socioeconomic areas, and in rural and regional areas.

Attendance was also lower for some at-risk or vulnerable groups, including students in out-of-home care, some students from English as Additional Language backgrounds such as students from refugee backgrounds, and students at-risk of disengaging from school.

What we did in response

Schools are recording remote and on-site attendance daily. DET regional staff, including Health and Wellbeing staff, are working closely with schools and families to support appropriate on-site attendance arrangements. Attendance reporting requirements have been amended during this period to reduce the administrative burden on schools.

DET has also implemented a number of targeted strategies to support students at risk of disengagement. For example:

- New Area-based Health and Wellbeing Key Contacts assigned to each government school are providing assertive outreach, focusing on students with mental health concerns and at high risk of disengagement.
- For students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, DET has expanded interpreting and translation services available to [government schools](#) and to parents through the [DET Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Hotline](#), translated parent resources in [easy English and 20 languages](#), created a new [EAL resource package on FUSE](#), and provided additional funding to English Language Schools and Centres for extra telephone services to support engagement with newly arrived students and families.

Intensive efforts on the part of regional staff and schools means that the majority of at-risk students in Years 7-10 tracked through DET data who did not return to on-site learning later in Term 2 have re-engaged in education in Term 3.

[New funding of \\$28.5 million](#) is boosting services to respond to increased students' mental health issues and disengagement from education, including:

- Increasing the capacity of the [Navigator Program](#) by a third, to directly support more secondary students at highest risk of disengaging from school
- Expanding [LOOKOUT](#) to increase support for the educational needs of students in out-of-home care.





What we learnt

Some students thrived during remote learning, particularly self-motivated and self-directed students who were able to manage their own workload, as well as some students who experience social anxiety in a classroom environment.

Assessing student progress was challenging in Term 2, as remote and flexible learning makes usual assessment techniques difficult.

Some principals felt that there were some students who had fallen behind relative to where they would have been otherwise.

Some teachers also reported that students struggled with online learning. This includes students:

- with poor levels of English
- with poor home-learning environments
- already at risk of disengaging from school
- enrolled in applied programs
- who need educational and health and wellbeing supports at school but were unable to access them at home.

What we did in response

Schools have made enormous efforts to adapt to the remote and flexible learning environment and support continued student learning, by adapting for the online environment everything from curriculum, assessment and teaching practices, to wellbeing supports, and school operations including timetables and meeting schedules. DET's FUSE website has continued to provide resources and advice for schools and parents to support learning from home, including for example, curriculum-aligned resources and virtual lessons, tech support, and guidance on wellbeing and inclusion. By September, there had been more than 2.6 million views of the FUSE resources.

Through collaborative school networks, best practice from Term 2 has been identified, disseminated and is being widely used in Term 3. For example, more lessons are being structured around shorter, synchronous, initial instructions with the opportunity for students to then work on set tasks or problems, including collaboratively, and to be able to interact individually with their teacher. Schools have also increased the level of online connections between students and from the school to families and students. For example, schools increased the frequency of live chats and collaboration between students as their understanding of how to deploy the technology matured.

Schools have been [encouraged](#) to draw on a range of different data – assessments, attendance, teacher observations – to understand the impact of remote and flexible learning on student achievement, to identify students who may need additional support, and to prioritise targeted strategies to students most in need, such as individual and small group tutoring.

DET and the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) are also providing additional supports to help students to continue their learning. For example, VCAL students are being given more time to complete courses and VET students are being provided with extra time and support to access and complete [work placements](#). Refugee education supports continue to be delivered through Foundation House and the Centre for Multicultural Youth, and both organisations experienced high demand from schools seeking advice and information. Multicultural Education Aides, employed by some schools, are providing direct support for parents and students.

For senior secondary students, the VCAA has introduced a [“Consideration of Educational Disadvantage” process](#) to take into account disruptions to learning caused by the coronavirus pandemic. Students whose performance has been severely impacted by factors that could not be mitigated throughout 2020 will have their circumstances considered when calculating their individual final scores to ensure their results are fair.

For high-ability students, DET has continued to develop the [Student Excellence Program](#), working with leading academics and teachers to launch the Victorian High-Ability Program. to extend high-ability students in English or mathematics and to support their confidence and wellbeing. High Ability Practice Leaders have been inducted and trained in government primary and secondary schools.

DET has also launched a challenge and enrichment series channel to provide a virtual learning experience for students who have thrived during remote learning. The series provides extension activities for high-ability students in Victorian government schools from Prep to Year 12 across all areas of the curriculum.

Student mental health and wellbeing



What we learnt

Some students had a less positive experience, missing learning from, and with, their peers, dealing with feelings of frustration and isolation, finding it harder to maintain focus and to stay motivated.

Factors that may have affected students' experience of remote and flexible learning included:

- students' individual learning needs
- having parents or carers who were able to support them (particularly for younger students)
- the parent's and student's level of proficiency with English access to and proficiency with devices (such as laptops and tablets) and the internet.

What we did in response

DET is prioritising mental health and wellbeing to improve the student experience during flexible and remote learning.

As schools have adapted to the remote and flexible environment, the time spent by students in live chats and making connections with peers and staff has grown considerably, reflecting its importance in supporting students' engagement and wellbeing.

New mental health and wellbeing resources have also been made available for teachers, students and parents on [DET's Mental Health Toolkit webpage](#), including through partnerships with Smiling Mind, [Melbourne Football Club](#) and [Melbourne Victory](#). Parent resources are available in [easy English and 20 languages](#).

A [student facing webpage](#) has been launched which links to current supports, Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) advice and a range of evidence informed and reputable organisations which provide mental health and wellbeing support to students.

A Regional Health and Wellbeing Key Contact has been allocated to each government school to plan and respond to the needs of students who may be at risk or require additional support.

Mental Health Practitioners are delivering remote support to secondary students through telephone or videoconferencing, the Doctors in Secondary Schools Program is delivering telehealth appointments and secondary students have dedicated access to counselling provided by headspace centres.

DET's Health, Wellbeing and Inclusion Workforces have adapted to remote delivery where required, including Student Support Service psychologists, social workers, speech pathologists, as well as behaviour coaches, school nurses, the Koorie Education Workforce and visiting teachers.

[New funding of \\$28.5 million](#) is boosting services to respond to increased students' mental health issues and disengagement from education, including:

- increasing the capacity of the [Navigator Program](#) by a third, to directly support more secondary students at highest risk of disengaging from school
- expanding [LOOKOUT](#) to increase support for the educational needs of students in Out of Home Care
- embedding dedicated mental health expertise into 85 Specialist Schools across the State
- ensuring the Mental Health in Primary Schools pilot continues and expands to 25 schools in 2021
- increasing headspace [mental health training programs](#) to train an additional 1,500 school staff.



Students with additional needs



What we learnt

Some students with additional needs may have lacked access to their usual, on-site supports during the Term 2 period of remote and flexible learning.

What we did in response

DET regional staff continue to play a key role in supporting schools to work closely with families to ensure students' needs can be accommodated at home or on-site. Under updated provisions for vulnerable students in Melbourne, principals are taking family-centred approaches with parents/carers to discuss appropriate arrangements where the family is experiencing severe stress. This is an ongoing discussion between parents and their child's school to respond to concerns and deliver local solutions that meet their individual needs.

DET updated guidance for on-site attendance for students with disabilities:

- In Melbourne, under Stage 4 restrictions, children with a disability may learn on-site where the parents are permitted workers and for whom no other arrangements can be made, or the child is identified by the school as vulnerable, or the family is experiencing severe stress.
- In regional Victoria any child with a disability is permitted to learn on-site, whether they attend a mainstream or specialist school (and provision has also been made for students in specialist schools to learn from home, where possible, if this is preferred).

In Term 3, the Department was explicit that metropolitan Melbourne mainstream schools should provide for on-site attendance for students with disabilities where the family was under severe stress.

DET is working closely with agencies across government to provide targeted support to all vulnerable students. This includes working with disability peak organisations, the Principals' Association of Specialist Schools (PASS) and DHHS to ensure the right supports are in place for students with disability. DET has collaborated across government to best support students with disability. DET is working with the [National Disability Insurance Agency \(NDIA\)](#) to reach out to parents and carers of students with disability, and check if additional NDIS supports are required during COVID restrictions. Three key actions have included co-presenting a series of webinars for parents of school-aged participants about NDIS supports, developing [information packs](#) for parents of school-aged NDIS participants, and supporting the NDIA to provide outreach phone calls for students who are particularly vulnerable.

In response to Term 2 challenges and experiences for students with disability or additional learning needs, schools have created or updated Individual Education Plans and further developed personalised approaches for learning programs. Schools are tailoring learning materials and providing direct instruction to accommodate students' learning, support and engagement needs.

Inclusive remote teaching and learning resources for students with disabilities have been further developed and a range of resources for parents and carers to support their child's engagement in their school work while learning from home are available on [FUSE](#). Schools have further developed personalised approaches for learning programs to accommodate students' learning, support and engagement needs.



Student support



What we learnt

While some schools were well set up to provide support remotely, some students did not have access to the usual supports, making it more likely they had a negative experience of remote and flexible learning.

What we did in response

Schools are working closely with families to ensure students' needs can be accommodated at home or, in limited cases, on-site. This is an ongoing discussion between parents and their child's school. Schools have also been provided with practical advice about on-site and remote delivery of health and wellbeing services.

Through their ongoing communication and monitoring, schools also consider the support needs of individual students with disabilities, to respond to changes in need. Schools are also continuing their core processes, such as holding Student Support Groups and monitoring Individual Education Plans, to ensure that students are best supported to learn.

Government agencies are working closely to provide targeted support to vulnerable students. This includes:

- working with disability peak organisations, the PASS, and the NDIA to ensure supports are in place for students with disability
- working with the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association to deliver the [COVID-19 Koorie Community Outreach Program](#) to understand need and facilitate access to essential supports required for continued engagement or re-engagement in education
- providing international students with access to [counselling and welfare services](#) available at schools
- working with DHHS and community organisations to ensure students living in high rise public housing estates have access to tailored and culturally specific educational supports.

Parent and carer engagement and support



What we learnt

During flexible and remote learning many parents and carers played a more active role in their children's education.

Parents gained unprecedented insight into their child's schooling and praised the work of teachers. However, some thought that communications from teachers and schools could be improved and some found the combination of remote learning, working from home and the stress of COVID-19 difficult.

Many schools used a range of formal as well as informal channels (such as one-on-one check-ins) to communicate with parents.

What we did in response

Schools have refined their approaches to engaging parents and carers, and in many cases have increased communications over time. For example, most schools have contacted families each week, and for students and families from refugee backgrounds, schools have been taking practical steps to strengthen parent engagement by using telephone and on-site interpreters to support communication with families, providing parents with copies of the Department's translated resources, arranging additional translations of key school information, and communicating via a range of formats to support families with low literacy levels in English and/or home languages (for example, using graphics, visuals, audio files or videos).

DET has continually improved the resources, tips and advice for parents available on its website, with dedicated pages for '[COVID-19: advice for parents and guardians](#)', '[Learning from home information for parents](#)', as well as on [FUSE](#), where there are digital resources to support learning at home. Resources are available in a number of languages and cover a range of topics including:

- how to support their child's engagement with their learning
- fact sheets for using the digital applications required for online classrooms and schoolwork
- how to support their child's mental health and wellbeing

Support and advice for parents is also available through the [DET COVID-19 advice hotline](#), which includes interpreter services for callers.

DET has also partnered with the Raising Children Network on a podcast series called '[Raising Learners](#)', to provide parents with practical advice, tips and ideas for supporting children's health, wellbeing and engagement at school and at home.

Teaching practice



What we learnt

Some teachers were energised by the experience of learning new skills and the opportunities to collaborate with their colleagues.

Some teachers, many of whom have children of their own, found the workload of transitioning from face-to-face to remote learning difficult.

What we did in response

Teachers have continued to develop and refine their approach to remote and flexible delivery. For example, giving shorter, more concise and explicit instructions, sharper assessments and feedback, and improved planning and collaboration with colleagues. Many of these adaptations will also lead to improvements in face-to-face teaching practice. School-to-school networks have also been critical in spreading best practice.

DET has continued to develop resources to support teachers to design, plan and deliver flexible and remote learning. Teachers can now access more than 900 high-quality, engaging virtual learning experiences through [Arc](#), DET's new digital events hub.

DET has delivered hundreds of online professional learning courses through the Continuity of Learning Hub and the Arc platform, including:

- Training on digital adoption and capability building in the use of Webex video conferencing to connect and engage students in learning
- Specialist support, professional learning and capability building in primary and secondary literacy and numeracy, and senior secondary needs in a remote learning environment.

Online professional learning [webinars](#) have been conducted and published with presentations by teachers, school leaders and academics, highlighting practices and strategies for sequencing learning and teaching in an online environment, using the Victorian Teaching and Learning Model, as well as focusing on High Impact Teaching Strategies.

Staff wellbeing and safety



What we learnt

During remote and flexible learning, principals were focused on the health and wellbeing of their staff.

What we did in response

DET has provided additional wellbeing support for school staff during remote and flexible learning, including in relation to psychological wellbeing when working and leading from home.

[Online and phone-based supports](#) for wellbeing are available to all school staff across Victoria. DET has established a hotline and email enquiry line, in addition to providing online access to the latest advice and information as it becomes available.

All health and safety support and services have been tailored to the current COVID-19 context, with a strong focus on infection prevention and control, remote working ergonomics and mental health and wellbeing, to better ensure safety at work for school staff. Schools have been provided with supplies of hand sanitiser, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), thermometers and face coverings and with information, instruction and training to implement these controls.

Intensive support is also being provided to schools to implement DET's COVID-19 Safety Management Plan, including training and guidance on:

- on-site safety across a range of risk categories, includes cleaning and hygiene, physical distancing, facilities management, the appropriate use of PPE, temperature screening and face coverings, and considerations for teaching and learning and office environments
- the provision of routine first-aid, managing unwell students or staff members and managing a suspected or confirmed case of COVID-19.

"Leading for Wellbeing in Times of Uncertainty" sessions have been provided to more than 1000 principals to support them to be wellbeing leaders in their school, and provide practical strategies for supporting their own wellbeing during COVID-19.

