

Lessons Learned from COVID-19

Findings from the experience of remote and flexible learning in schools

Parliamentary Secretary for Schools

July 2020



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At the start of Term 2 2020, following advice from the Chief Health Officer, Victorian primary, secondary and specialist schools moved to a model of remote and flexible learning to slow the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19). School staff, students and their families, as well as the organisations and community groups that support students with their education and wellbeing, had to quickly adapt their way of working. The Victorian Department of Education and Training (the Department) rapidly shifted its focus to supporting schools in managing this transition. Overall, there was a huge effort from everyone involved, all aimed at supporting students during the crisis.

Remote and flexible learning required school leaders, teachers and other staff to implement new and innovative approaches to support student learning, health and wellbeing. Despite the challenges, some schools, students, teachers and parents reported benefits and positive experiences of these approaches. Lessons learned from this period will assist with continued effort, as part of the Education State Reform Agenda, to achieve wellbeing, excellence and equity for all students.

This report outlines early lessons from the experience to date of remote and flexible learning in Victorian government schools. It aims to provide a timely snapshot and a point-in-time reflection of the experience. It draws on consultations conducted in June 2020 by the Parliamentary Secretary for Schools, evidence collected by the Department, and public submissions through Engage Victoria.

This report examines the experiences of particular student groups:

- students with additional needs;
- Koorie students;
- culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) students;
- vulnerable students (including students disengaged from education and students in out-of-home care); and
- students undertaking the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) and Vocational Education and Training Delivered to Secondary Students (VDSS).

The experiences of remote and flexible learning for these students were as varied as the students themselves. Some students enjoyed the experience, thrived on the absence of peer interruption and enjoyed greater flexibility and choice in the timing, sequence and depth of their learning. Some other students struggled, missed learning from, and with, their peers, dealt with feelings of frustration and isolation, and in some cases, became disengaged from education.

Despite these variations, there were also some common experiences. In addition to the key findings throughout the report, some broader findings emerged in relation to most of the student groups discussed:

- attendance increased for these students relative to the same time last year, but not as much as it did for the general student population;
- students had more positive experiences when they received personalised support from parents, schools and services, and had access to IT;
- 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; and
- parental engagement was a key enabler of positive experiences for these students, but parental capability and capacity to help varied.

These findings shed light on some early considerations about how to improve the support for these students going forward. For example, continuing to engage the families of these students, actions to bridge the 'digital divide' and efforts to improve the on-site learning experiences for some of these students, will ensure education better meets the needs of the whole child.

The findings in this report should be considered alongside the findings of other significant work being undertaken about the Victorian remote and flexible learning experience so far, to find adaptations that improve the experience and outcomes of all students.

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BACKGROUND

The Education State

The Victorian state government is committed to making Victoria the Education State. The Deputy Premier and Minister for Education, the Hon. James Merlino MP, is focused on working with Victoria's school communities to help them create success for every student both in and beyond the classroom, by building an education system that produces excellence and reduces the impact of disadvantage.

In 2015, the Department introduced a suite of universal and targeted reforms aimed at building a system that delivers excellence and equity in Victorian school education. As part of the Education State Reform Agenda, the Department set a range of ambitious targets to improve student outcomes in achievement, wellbeing and equity, with the goal of giving every Victorian student the best learning and development experience, regardless of their start in life.

The state's response to COVID-19 requires rapid and ongoing adaptation in the delivery of education and the Department is supporting schools throughout the crisis and beyond. Most Victorian school students moved to flexible and remote learning from the start of Term 2. The situation necessitated changes, not just to where education was delivered, but also how it was delivered to, and experienced by, students.

The period of remote and flexible learning in Victoria

Victoria's preparations for remote and flexible learning began with the announcement on 25 March of additional pupil free days. From the start of Term 2 (14 April) until 5 June, Victorian government schools delivered schooling through remote and flexible learning arrangements (9 weeks). The transition back to on-site learning was done in two stages. Students from Foundation to Year 2, Years 11 to 12, and specialist schools returned in the week of 25 May. The remaining students returned from 9 June.

Departmental responses were particularly focussed on support for the 1,543 Victoria government schools overseen by the Department, which collectively educate 631,453 students across primary, primary-secondary, secondary, specialist and language schools.¹

A focus on the health and wellbeing of students as well as their access to learning through technology were of immediate concern. This prompted responses such as: a Health and Wellbeing Key Contact allocated to every government school with a focus on at-risk students; a large-scale roll-out of technological support and devices; provision of advice and resources for parents, students and schools about learning from home; increased communication between sectors, schools and families; and the recognition that the Department needed to work differently, internally across regional and central offices, and with stakeholders and sectors.

TIMELINE OF ADAPTATIONS

Start of 2020 School Year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 28 January – concern about coronavirus (COVID-19); schools open as planned.
Mid Term 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 14 February: Travel restrictions; schools remain open; schools report absenteeism; DET launch COVID-19 webpage with advice and communication templates. • 16 March: Declaration of State of Emergency in Victoria. • 22 March: Announcement that school holidays brought forward to begin 24 March, and schools provided with four pupil-free days to prepare for possible move to remote and flexible learning. • Guidance materials provided via school updates and DET COVID-19 webpage.
Start Term 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7 April: Announcement that Victorian government schools will transition to remote and flexible learning arrangements for Term 2. • 14 April: Pupil free day. • 15 April: Remote and flexible learning commences.

¹ DET, 2020. Summary Statistics for Victorian schools, April.

Mid Term 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12 May: Announcement about the staged return to face-to-face learning.
Return to On-Site Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 26 May: Return to on-site learning for Prep to Grade 2, Years 11 and 12 and Specialist Schools. • 9 June: All remaining students return to on-site learning.
End of term 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outdoor education schools and camps, leadership schools, the Victorian School of Languages (VSL) and community language schools (CLSs) remain closed for face-to-face provision (with the exception of VCE students attending the VSL and CLSs).

Scope of this report

This report sets out lessons from remote and flexible learning so far in relation to student groups in Victorian government schools. It draws on consultations conducted in June 2020 by the Parliamentary Secretary for Schools and data collected by the Department. This data includes surveys, correspondence, complaints, parent hotline calls, administrative data and the intelligence of the Department's regional staff and stakeholders. Qualitative evidence was also gathered by the Department through interviews and focus groups with stakeholders and a public submission process through the Engage Victoria website.

This report is provided to the Minister of Education in preparation for the Remote Learning Summit to be held in mid-2020. It will be considered alongside the findings of independent analysis of the experience of remote learning for the schooling system as a whole, other data collected from the Victorian remote and flexible learning experience, and the findings from the Remote Learning Summit itself, before any recommendations are made going forward. Full details of sources for this report are in Appendix 3.

In considering the implications of the period of remote and flexible learning, this report focusses on the following student groups, addressed in separate sections:

1. Students with Additional Needs
2. Koorie Students
3. Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students (CALD)
4. Vulnerable students (including students disengaged from education and students in out-of-home care)
5. Students undertaking the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) and Vocational Education and Training Delivered to Secondary Students (VDSS).

Analysis of the lessons from remote and flexible learning for these student groups addresses the following key questions:

- a. What was the experience of remote and flexible learning for these students and their families/carers? How did experiences vary for these students?
- b. What impacts on learning, engagement and wellbeing can be identified at this stage from the period of remote and flexible learning for these students?
- c. What adaptations emerged, including in relation to student engagement, family engagement, digital provision, teacher/educator capability, collaboration, curriculum provision, and health and wellbeing for these students?

Each section provides a summary of findings and discusses system adaptations, school adaptations, student experiences and outcomes for these student groups. Lessons learned are discussed in the next section. Details of analysis conducted are found in Appendix 3.

Limitations

This report aims to provide a timely view of the experience, by capturing the perspectives of participants at a point-in-time when memories are fresh. Consideration of findings and implications in this report should take into account the rapid establishment of remote and flexible learning due to the COVID-19 context, and that future adaptations may take a different form outside of these conditions.

The data used in this analysis was collected from a wide range of sources² – most relate to government schools only, but some stakeholders and submissions received through the Engage Victoria process also speak to experiences in the non-government sector. This report focusses on certain groups of students and is not intended to reflect the experiences of all Victorian students during this period. The qualitative nature of most of the data means it cannot fully reflect the experience of all students in the groups discussed.

This report should be considered alongside other emerging data and analysis as an input into Victoria's understanding of the impact of the period of remote and flexible learning.

LESSONS LEARNED

Cross cutting findings

Several common themes and findings emerged from examining the adaptations, experiences and outcomes of these student groups that can inform lessons for all students in these groups.

Attendance increased for these students, but not as much as it did for the general student population

Most of these students experienced an overall improvement in attendance rates during Term 2 compared with the same time last year. A similar pattern was observed for all students indicating that it was easier for students to attend school from home (this may be part of the reason why some students re-engaged with education). Despite this, the improvement in attendance for most of these students was less than the improvement for all students, suggesting that these students faced challenges with learning remotely. There were exceptions: Koorie students' attendance increased more than the average (from a lower attendance baseline); and attendance rates for refugee students declined. Attendance rates for refugee students suggests that they remained disengaged even after the return to on-site learning. The attendance of VCAL and VDSS students is included in reporting of senior secondary attendance generally and has not been disaggregated at this time.

It is also worth noting that for the student cohorts discussed in this report, as with the general student population as a whole, attendance rates declined over time during the period of remote and flexible learning. While this supports anecdotal reports of diminishing motivation, there is also a general historical trend of diminishing attendance towards the end of Term 2 (as was the case last year).

Students had more positive experiences when they received personalised support from parents, schools, and services, and had access to IT

The evidence indicates that for the students discussed in this report, some students benefitted, some managed, and others struggled with the experience. However, stakeholder groups have indicated that many students struggled with the experience. Students who most benefitted from learning from home were those who were self-motivated learners, had some flexibility over their learning, were adequately supported and not distracted while learning from home.

More generally, the factors most closely associated with positive experiences and improved engagement with learning included:

- access to a more flexible learning model for those students who needed to learn at their own pace;
- the amount of proactive outreach provided by schools and other services, including to families where needed, and the ability for students to access their usual supports remotely;

² During the period of remote and flexible learning, schools used multiple means to track student attendance, which was recorded twice daily by the Department. Caution should be exercised regarding the reliability of comparisons to previous time periods, due to the different methods used during remote and flexible learning. For measures of engagement, the Department uses attendance data as an indicative measure and where attendance data is used this will be reflected.

- the ability of parents and carers to assist their child with the necessary educational and wellbeing support; and
- the availability of equipment, including IT equipment, internet connectivity, technical support, and specialist equipment, such as that needed to support students' additional needs.

Although schools were not always able to provide the same level of educational support they would normally, some schools were better positioned or prepared prior to the period of remote and flexible learning, which allowed them to continue these supports. For example, in cases where the school had a strong existing culture and practices for individualised support.

Reports suggest that there were high degrees of collaboration between schools, service providers and community organisations as well as increased parent engagement with schools. Positive outcomes for refugee students were strongest when multicultural educational aides and bicultural workers successfully reached out to families. For Koorie students and students in out-of-home care, there were positive reports of increased collaboration online between families, schools and services.

The supports that these students usually have access to, which help them keep up and stay connected with school, may not have been available during the period of remote and flexible learning. These services were both school-based (e.g. school-based counsellors and GPs) and external to the school (e.g. libraries, homework clubs, community services). In addition, for some students that attract additional funding at an individual student level (Koorie, CALD, additional needs), the supports and care coordination that are usually provided with this funding were not available remotely. Stakeholders suggested that this was because some schools could not prioritise the needs of these students. This was felt to be due to industrial barriers to providing services remotely; difficulty individualising supports shared by multiple students (potentially compounded by higher costs for delivering these services as individual outreach rather than in-school); and that individual students and families lack any influence over this funding because it is provided to the school rather than the individual.

An important factor for students with additional needs and Koorie students, was whether schools had developed Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and organised Student Support Groups (SSGs) for these students prior to the period of remote and flexible learning. Experiences and outcomes were reportedly much better in those schools that had established robust IEPs and continued to hold virtual SSGs. In contrast, experiences were significantly worse for those students not supported by IEPs and SSGs. While schools are required to create IEPs and SSGs for these students as an ongoing support, it is apparent that not every student had access to these by the time remote and flexible learning began.

The Department's distribution of internet dongles, laptops and tablets was an extremely important support for these student groups. Even with this support, some schools struggled with remote and flexible learning because families shared devices and not all students had suitable internet connectivity at home.

Parental engagement was a key enabler of positive experiences for these groups of students, but parental capability and capacity to help varied

The period of remote and flexible learning placed greater pressure on parents and carers to provide support normally provided by others. They may also have had to advocate for learning and wellbeing supports for their child with schools and service providers. But not all parents and carers of students in these and other student groups had the means to help. The support of parents and carers generally varied depending on their:

- employment circumstances;
- levels of educational attainment, including English literacy;
- levels of comfort and skill with the digital environment;
- own additional needs; and
- family size and housing arrangements.

Despite the negative experiences of some families, the period of remote and flexible learning brought many schools and parents closer together around how to support the learning needs of individual students. Parents Victoria commented that more positive relationships were created by schools that had the will,

skills and capacity for engaging families.³ There were examples of parents coming to a better understanding of what their child was learning at school. For example, some parents of students with additional needs developed greater appreciation for just how challenging their child found their studies. At the same time, some schools reported that they learnt more about their students. For example, some teachers reported gaining a better understanding of the barriers faced by EAL students and the teaching practices needed to address them.

Findings related to particular student groups

In addition to these cross-cutting lessons, specific lessons were learned regarding these student groups. A summary is provided in the table below.

³ Feedback from Parents Victoria, July 2020.

	Adaptations	Experience	Impacts
Students with additional needs	<p>Department:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Updated resources, guidance and advice to schools Provided webinars: infection prevention and control for physical disability specialist staff Weekly meetings with disability sector organisations <p>Schools:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Used buses for dropping off materials and conducting health and wellbeing checks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Experiences depended on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> flexibility of the school's curriculum level of outreach and support parent or carer assistance availability of specialist equipment and IT The Association for Children with a Disability and Amaze reported that some surveyed parents did not receive contact from the school about their child's support needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased attendance for PSD students compared to the same time last year, but not to the same extent as mainstream students
Koorie students	<p>Department:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Weekly meetings with Koorie community stakeholders Establishing a process for stakeholders to raise issues and seek support <p>Schools and KESOs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regular contact with students and families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positive experiences from those on-site due to smaller number of students and less bullying Positive experiences of online learning relate to direct relationships with teachers, fewer instances of bullying, directing own learning and asynchronous delivery of learning Negative experiences related to feelings of isolation, lack of connections to community and preference for on-site delivery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased attendance compared to same time last year Increased attendance on-site compared to peers Increased parent engagement Loss of opportunity to learn IT skills for those students using hard copies
CALD students	<p>Department:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Translated resources, expanding telephone interpreting and text translation services to schools Managed communication campaign to provide information and welcome international students Provided extra telephone services to English Language schools and centres Introduced new EAL resource package on FUSE Daily contact with students and families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positive experiences relate to level of support provided by schools Negative experiences relate to concerns for own health and wellbeing and that of family overseas and greater income and housing challenges 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mixed student impacts Some EAL students are expected to have "gone backwards" EAL students attending English language schools and centres were engaged International students required extra help but were engaged

	Adaptations	Experience	Impacts
Vulnerable students	<p>Department:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students at Risk Planning Tool and associated data sources supported schools to identify potentially vulnerable students <p>Schools:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Proactive outreach and weekly monitoring of vulnerable students <p>All:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Better collaboration between schools, carers, community service organisations and government departments in online environment to support vulnerable students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positive experiences relate to home providing a safe environment for learning without social pressures for some students Negative experiences relate to lack of face-to-face connection and impact on provision of case management Safety concerns for some students in their home environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Absence rates for students at risk of disengagement trended up, and increased further with return to on-site learning Remote and flexible learning demonstrated the value of specific, individualised support for vulnerable students For students in out-of-home care, increased capacity for care team meetings to bring all relevant parties together through online forums
VCAL and VDSS students	<p>Schools/service providers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regular check ins as part of strong focus on wellbeing In some settings, dedicated teams working with each student and family to provide support and access services Increased use of online learning platforms in VCAL/VDSS provision 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positive experiences relate to flexibility of learning from home and directing own learning Challenges experienced relate to the inability to undertake practical components 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Issues with engagement of some students, and attendance not necessarily translating to learning Personalised attention from teachers appears to have had a positive impact on students' experiences Interest from some stakeholders in exploring opportunities for blended VCAL/VDSS provision

Implications of these findings

Students discussed in this report may require greater levels of support

Students who are the focus of this report typically face greater learning challenges ordinarily, which is why many of them receive in-school and other programmatic supports. These challenges are greater still for the most vulnerable students.

These students also typically have lower attendance rates than the general student population. In the remote and flexible learning context, while there were improvements in attendance rates during Term 2 compared with the same time last year, these students did not increase their attendance to the same extent as the general student population. This suggests that they faced challenges with learning remotely or other barriers during this period. Potentially, this may mean that:

- for the majority of these students, remote and flexible learning has been relatively more difficult;
- these students needed a greater level of support to achieve the same level of engagement; and
- consistent with the hypothesis from literature⁴ and feedback from stakeholders, these students will have greater challenges and require greater support to overcome any negative impacts from this period, and to re-engage with on-site learning.

These students would benefit from more flexible learning models, more proactive outreach to them and their families, and a greater focus on providing supports specific to their needs

Remote and flexible learning demonstrated the value of specific, individualised support for students. Comments from stakeholders that a number of schools did not sufficiently support the particular needs of these students reinforces this idea. This can also be seen in the point noted in the previous section, that greater school preparation and significant and specific support for these students' needs was required to support their learning remotely. As one stakeholder commented, disproportionate needs require disproportionate support.

Remote and flexible learning also exposed that many students who were already expected to have individualised supports such as an IEP and SSG were not receiving these. This suggests the need for an immediate focus on ensuring these arrangements are put in place, as well as stronger monitoring arrangements going forward.

Additional effort will be needed to engage the families of some of these students and to bridge the 'digital divide'

The need for family engagement is an important implication from this report. This is because of the importance of family engagement for learning⁵, and the emerging findings from the remote and flexible learning period that improved family engagement and relationships between schools and families have benefits for the system as a whole⁶. Given the findings in this report about poorer family engagement for some student groups (for example, CALD students, and some students with additional needs in mainstream schools) there is a risk of these students falling behind.

The notion of a 'digital divide' between students places already disadvantaged students at further disadvantage through remote and flexible learning. The digital divide relates to equipment and connectivity as well as differences in a student's level of technical ability to navigate the online environment. Considering that findings reveal that the drivers of student engagement in remote and flexible learning relate to the availability of specialist and IT equipment, connectivity and technical support, greater systemic action is important to redress these inequities.

⁴ Sonnemann, J. and Goss, P., 2020. 'COVID catch-up: helping disadvantaged students close the equity gap'. Grattan Institute.

⁵ ARACY, 2018, '[Submission on behalf of the Australian Parent Engagement Network to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools](#)'.

⁶ Learning First, July 2020, 'The experience of remote learning in Victoria', Study commissioned by the Victorian Department of Education and Training.

While some students appear to have enjoyed or benefited from remote learning, efforts should be weighed against the benefits of on-site learning when considering future reforms for these students, with greater focus on improving the experience of on-site learning

Some students across these groups enjoyed or benefited from the experience of remote and flexible learning. This was felt to be because of the absence of anxieties created by on-site conditions, such as bullying and in-class distractions. Koorie students who were studying on-site without other students present also experienced these benefits.

However, the Association for Children with Disability (ACD) noted the importance of considering the whole of child perspective when interpreting these results. They also cautioned that using these results to suggest some students may be better off if they continued learning outside of mainstream schooling could lead to perverse outcomes.⁷ Conversely, for some disengaged and at-risk students, some stakeholders suggested that continued access to remote and flexible learning may provide the only opportunity for certain students to be engaged.

To improve the experience of on-site learning, the Centre for Multicultural Youth expressed the need for a multi-pronged approach for students dealing with challenges in the school environment. This would include an increased focus on addressing the sources of anxiety in the school (e.g. bullying). It would also provide options and support for students to be able to stay engaged in education in ways that work for them.⁸ Similarly, many schools noted the opportunities of blended learning for students engaging in VCAL and VDSS, where practical components could be undertaken on-site and theoretical components undertaken in a more flexible way that suits the individual needs of each student.

The lessons learned from the period of remote and flexible learning should continue to be examined, and adaptations that have been beneficial to students should continue to be pursued

While the students discussed in this report have had mixed experiences of remote and flexible learning, there are many examples of positive adaptations that have benefitted students. They include opportunities for schools to collaborate more closely with families, individualised outreach and support to students and families, and flexible and personalised approaches to learning. These examples could inform improvements to student learning and supports going forward.

⁷ Feedback from Association for Children with Disability, June 2020.

⁸ Feedback from the Centre for Multicultural Youth, June 2020.

STUDENTS WITH ADDITIONAL NEEDS

Key findings

- Many stakeholders observed that PSD-funded students and their families found remote and flexible learning challenging. These students, especially those with significant medical conditions and with high support needs, experienced greater stress and challenges during this period.
- Where schools had pre-existing support arrangements in place this was an enabler for positive student experiences.
- Absences of PSD-funded students were lower during the period of remote and flexible learning than the same time last year but were higher than for the general population of students.

This section focusses on students who have additional learning, health and wellbeing needs. About 20 per cent of all Victorian government students (125,000) are classified under the National Consistent Collection on Data on Student with Disability (NCCD) to be learners with disability in need of educational adjustments. Of these, about 28,000 students with typically high needs receive funding under the Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD). About 57 per cent of students who receive PSD funding attend mainstream schools and most of the remainder attend specialist schools.⁹ The majority of feedback and submissions regarding student experience and outcomes in this section are for PSD-funded students.

Education State Reform Agenda for students with additional needs

Since 2014, the Government has made successive investments of over \$730 million to support students with disabilities and to deliver an inclusive education agenda. The Education State Reform Agenda aims to enable students of all abilities and strengths to thrive in school and in life. Key themes of the inclusive education agenda include building the skills of school staff to deliver inclusive education, improving policies and guidance about students with disability, strengthening data and accountability mechanisms, and investigating better approaches to funding and support models for students with disability.

System adaptations

At the beginning of the year, mainstream and specialist schools were expected to engage families, prepare Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and establish Student Support Groups (SSGs). As part of their usual support processes, schools are encouraged to have these for all students with disability and are mandatory for students receiving support through PSD.

In anticipation of the transition to remote and flexible learning, the Department engaged more closely with peak bodies and began distributing devices and SIM cards to students. During remote and flexible learning, the Department distributed guidance to schools, including advice on IEPs, SSGs, as well as hosting four infection prevention and control webinars. It also held regular meetings and forums with specialist school principals and disability sector organisations throughout this period and during the return to on-site learning.

Some stakeholders observed that the Department of Health and Human Services' Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and child protection services did not provide their usual level of support services during this period. The lack of CAMHS services may have reflected COVID-19 related restrictions in face-to-face access to clients, particularly for child protection. Potentially, this could also have been because providers may have lacked the expertise to serve students who have both disabilities and mental health concerns.¹⁰

⁹ DET, 'Student attendance and absence', Term 2, Week 8 (1-5 June 2020).

¹⁰ Feedback from Principals' Association of Specialist Schools, June 2020.

TIMELINE OF ADAPTATIONS

Start of 2020 School Year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools required to undertake usual support processes including engaging with families, preparing Individual Education Plans (IEPs), holding Student Support Groups (SSGs), and providing health and wellbeing services to students.
Mid Term 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Department closely engaged with Principals' Association of Specialist Schools (PASS) and disability peak associations to help schools prepare for remote and flexible learning and to understand the experiences and concerns of students.
Start Term 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Distributed devices (laptops and tablets), SIM cards and internet dongles to students including specialist school students. Provided guidance and advice to schools (e.g. learning and safety) and parents (about remote and flexible learning, COVID-19 and advice on NDIS), including guidance on how to provide students with additional needs to option to continue schooling on-site.
Mid Term 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Updated PSD guidance and resources for SSGs and IEPs. Commissioned four infection prevention and control webinars for physical disability specialist staff. Funded a trial to provide a family-centred approach to supporting students with disability and their families.
Return to On-Site Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 26 May: F – Year 2 and Years 11 – 12 students with additional needs returned to mainstream schools. 26 May: Specialist school students returned to school. Provided schools with additional guidance material for students with disability. From 3 June: Online forum and regular meetings of specialist school principals. Commissioned further eight Infection prevention and control webinars for physical disability specialist staff.
End of term 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 5 June: Operational advice provided for schools including for students with disability. 9 June: Staged return for remaining students including students with a disability in Years 3 - 10 attending mainstream schools.

School adaptations

Schools adapted to the needs of students with additional needs in various ways during the period of remote and flexible learning. They were expected to work closely with families and carers to accommodate students' needs at home or on-site by implementing their usual support processes, such as IEPs and SSGs. Specialist schools tended to make use of their school buses to drop off material and to check on student wellbeing.¹¹

Schools chose different approaches to delivering learning to students. Some of the schools chose to continue with current curriculum, others decided to focus only on literacy, numeracy and specialist subjects, while others prioritising the health and wellbeing of students, families and staff over delivering their usual curriculum.¹²

Family engagement was an important objective for many mainstream and specialist schools.¹³ The purpose of schools' engagement with families depended on the circumstance of the school. One specialist school said that it had "a lot of multi-generational families with disabilities", so it "focused on keeping these families engaged with schools."¹⁴

Some stakeholders were critical about aspects of school adaptation. According to one survey conducted by ACD and Amaze:

- some students lacked strong IEPs at the start of the year and adequate SSGs;
- some schools did not approach families about the child's circumstances and support needs; and

¹¹ DET Focus Groups, June 2020.

¹² As above.

¹³ As above.

¹⁴ As above.

- even though schools were given guidance to provide on-site attendance for vulnerable students, some schools did not provide this, potentially because of a reported lack of clarity regarding what qualified as 'vulnerability'.¹⁵

It was reported that a number of mainstream schools serving dual-enrolled students with disability chose not to provide out-of-school services to those students but relied on specialist schools to pick up those roles. In contrast, it was reported that the flexibility and support provided by specialist schools was successful and extremely well received by a vast majority of families, who felt well-supported by appropriate resources and strategies.¹⁶

An inclusive approach to returning to school at Bell Primary School

We are going back to Bell Primary!
I'm excited, but also a little bit sad.
But it is okay I will be very safe at
school.



To make sure all their students felt welcome and confident to return to school, Bell Primary School in Preston developed an inclusive communications guide for transitioning back to school. The guide was accessible and included pictures and easy descriptions to explain what school would be like once students returned, and how it might feel for students to adjust.

The guide was received especially positively by autistic students and their families who appreciated the extra support to communicate the changes that would be in place once they returned.

The guide was shared and promoted as best practice by Amaze and other disability peak bodies.

Student experience

Feedback from focus groups and Engage Victoria submissions describe a variety of experiences of students. For some students with additional needs, remote and flexible learning was a positive experience.

"There were some students with additional needs and families that did better with remote learning ... especially some of those students who were struggling to attend school (school reluctance and/or refusal)" — *Education provider, Engage Victoria submission, June 2020.*

For some students with additional needs, on-site schooling had been stressful.

"Remote learning has been a godsend. He [my son] has flourished, done his work and asked for help – all of this is new. ... His school journey is mired with bullying and a lack of understanding ... He is not happy at school!" — *Parent, Engage Victoria submission, June 2020.*

Older students with greater independence tended to benefit more.

"Secondary students with mild intellectual disabilities did the best in remote learning, a lot of them have said they preferred remote learning" — *Principal, DET Focus Group, June 2020.*

Students who most benefited appreciated the flexibility to schedule their day.

¹⁵ Association for Children with a Disability and Amaze, 2020. 'Reflections and learnings on schooling during COVID-19 for Students with disability', June.

¹⁶ Feedback from Principals' Association of Specialist Schools, June and July 2020.

"Some of the students ... liked learning when it suited them, for example, later in the day when they were more awake and engaged: they learnt much better" — *Specialist school principal, DET Focus Group, June 2020.*

Some students reported struggling to learn because of the lack of support from their teachers.

"I needed lots of help with maths, but my mum couldn't help me at home, so I felt I was missing out on help with maths" — *Specialist school secondary student, DET Focus Group, June 2020.*

One parent pointed out that the school was unable to do more to tailor the online learning activities.

"There needs to be greater support for curriculum adjustment for children who require it. My son is autistic and ... his school was unable to provide amended home learning for his needs" — *Parent, Engage Victoria submission, June 2020.*

Some students struggled to learn because of a lack of support or distractions at home.

"Students whose parents were working struggled more, as did those with other siblings at home" — *Principal, DET Focus Group, June 2020.*

Some students also struggled with the isolation, with some stakeholders reporting increased mental health issues among students with disabilities and their families.¹⁷ Students with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD), who also have mental health concerns were anecdotally most at risk of anxiety and behaviours of concern (such as self-harm).¹⁸

"Students who did not have strong peer connections (including those with ASD) felt excluded and did not manage to connect with friends remotely" — *Education provider, Engage Victoria Submission, June 2020.*

Student outcomes

The attendance of PSD students improved during the period of remote and flexible learning. Early in Term 2, the absence rates of PSD students were lower than the same time last year. However, their attendance did not improve to the same extent as the general student population. This suggests that PSD students faced challenges with remote and flexible learning.¹⁹ During Term 2, attendance rates dropped for PSD students in mainstream and specialist schools, although this is in line with the baseline trend of 2019 and the trend for the general student population in 2020.²⁰

Numerous stakeholders and submissions identified the main factors that appear to have contributed to a student's engagement (and experience) with learning from home, which included the:

- flexibility of the school's curriculum to allow the student to learn at their own pace, and based on an established IEP;²¹
- access to, and quality of, outreach support provided by the school and other service providers. For schools, this included how prepared they were to implement IEPs and SSGs for PSD-funded students prior to the period of remote and flexible learning;²²
- ability of parents and carers to assist their child with the necessary educational and wellbeing support²³; and

¹⁷ Association for Children with a Disability and Amaze, 2020. 'Reflections and learnings on schooling during COVID-19 for Students with disability', June.

¹⁸ Feedback from Principals' Association of Specialist Schools, June 2020.

¹⁹ DET, 'Student attendance and absence', Term 2, Week 3 (27 May–1 June 2020).

²⁰ DET, 'Student attendance and absence', Term 2, Week 8 (1–5 June 2020).

²¹ Engage Victoria submissions, June 2020; DET Focus Groups, June 2020.

²² Engage Victoria submissions, June 2020.

²³ As above.

- availability of specialist disability and IT equipment, connectivity and technical support.²⁴

Some mainstream school students with additional needs may have enjoyed the experience of being able to learn remotely at their own pace, without peer distractions and bullying. However, efforts to improve the experience of on-site learning should be the primary focus to ensure education that meets the needs of the whole child.²⁵

KOORIE STUDENTS

Key findings

- Most Koorie students learned from home and their experiences were varied.
- Attendance rates were higher than for the same period last year.
- On-site attendance increased over this period, especially for primary students.
- There was a high degree of collaboration by all stakeholders to support Koorie students and their families.
- Improved communication with families led to improved parent engagement with schools.
- Stakeholders raised concerns regarding Koorie student health and wellbeing (e.g. social isolation); the level of support received from schools; the difficulty of some students with access and connection to devices and the internet; and the absence of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for some students.

This section is focussed on Koorie students. Koorie is a term used to refer to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan outlines how the Department supports Koorie students, who make up around 2 per cent (around 13,300) of the Victorian student population. The information in this section is based on the Department's attendance data and relies heavily on qualitative data and the expectations for supporting Koorie students, which is outlined in the Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan.

Education State Reform Agenda for Koorie students

Marrung: Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-2026 is a ten-year integrated plan, developed with key Koorie education partners, to ensure Koorie learners across the early childhood, schools, and training and skills sectors realise the benefits of the Education State Reform Agenda. Key Marrung school initiatives include:

- Cultural Understanding and Safety Training for all government schools;
- Koorie Literacy and Numeracy Program for primary students not meeting expected benchmarks;
- Koorie Academy of Excellence for secondary school students in selected locations;
- Team Around the Learner - Koorie – supporting twenty schools to better coordinate service delivery and enhance wrap-around supports for Koorie students experiencing vulnerability; and
- Koorie Education Children's Court Liaison Officers to support students' engagement with school.

System adaptations

To support remote and flexible learning the Koorie Outcomes Division in the Department worked collaboratively with their networks in:

- weekly meetings with key Koorie community stakeholders, which included the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated, Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Ltd and Koorie Youth Council, to discuss the Department's COVID-19 response, supports for Koorie learners and any emerging issues;
- establishing a process for stakeholders to raise issues and seek support;

²⁴ Engage Victoria submissions, June 2020; DET Focus Groups, June 2020.

²⁵ Feedback from ACD and Amaze, June 2020.

- ensuring Koorie students were prioritised for access to laptops, iPads and internet devices²⁶;
- providing schools with guidance around the flexible use of Koorie Literacy and Numeracy Program funding (to assist Koorie students not meeting expected benchmarks);
- providing schools with curriculum resources developed by VAEAI; and
- having Koorie Engagement Support Officers (KESOs) work closely with the Health and Wellbeing Key Contacts in a multidisciplinary approach to provide regular contact with students and families.

Aboriginal community groups and advocacy organisations provided supports to assist students and their families during the period of remote and flexible learning, with initiatives such as:

- phoning twice a week, text messaging and emailing students and families while adapting to remote and flexible learning;
- developing BWAYS online homework class for Aboriginal Early School Leavers and Youth Employment Program clients;
- securing a volunteer tutor for online homework classes;
- assisting with device requests and purchasing internet boosters, printers, scanners and other furniture items (desks);
- developing COVID-19 education support resource packs for all Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association Ltd (VACSAL) clients and families (targeted at carers/parents to support remote and flexible learning); and
- advocacy for families to educational settings.

TIMELINE OF ADAPTATIONS

Start of 2020 School Year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All Koorie students expected to have Individual Education Plans (IEPs). • Koorie Engagement Support Officers (KESOs) facilitate positive learning for Koorie students.
Mid Term 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Koorie Division activated in driving system response. • KESOs, Health and Wellbeing Key Contacts (HKWC), Area staff and schools provide outreach to Koorie families, identifying vulnerable families and connecting families to relevant wrap-around services. • KESOs deliver stationery, school packs and food packs to homes where needed. • Marrung professional development (CUST) postponed.
Start Term 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • KESOs support requests from families with accessing learning materials or devices. • Area staff worked closely with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organizations (ACCOs) to establish contact points for families needing extra support. • KESOs attend Student Support Groups remotely. • option for on-site attendance for Koorie students.
Mid Term 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • KESOs continue to work with schools to ensure Koorie students undertaking VCE and VCAL are supported to continue their studies.
Return to On-Site Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategies to transition students off social media/devices. • Development of support structures for Koorie families transitioning out of COVID-19 supports (i.e. financial or other support that may end).

School adaptations

Schools were responsive to the needs of their Koorie students, with some schools finding innovative and resourceful ways to actively outreach to families. Relationships were strengthened through improved and increased collaboration between schools and families, with other schools, support services, community organisations and the Department's Koorie workforce. While each school had their own approach to supporting Koorie students, examples of adaptations and support included:

- working with KESOs to support families;
- applying for State Schools Relief funding;
- ensuring families were provided with devices;

²⁶ Prior to the period of remote and flexible learning, Indigenous Australians scored below the national average across the digital inclusion dimensions (Access, Affordability, and Digital Ability) in the Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) (Thomas, J, Barraket, J, Wilson, CK, Rennie, E, Ewing, S, MacDonald, T, 2019).

- providing food hampers;
- providing the option of online or hard copy resources;
- providing opportunities to attend on-site for short periods in order to receive guidance on tasks;
- actively outreaching to Koorie families, identifying vulnerable families within their school community and connecting them with relevant wrap-around services;
- designating a staff member to check in with Koorie students;
- teachers seeking teaching resources to support inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in curriculum and teaching Koorie culture and history; and
- focusing on the establishment and the quality of IEPs for Koorie students.

Marrung Professional development programs had to be postponed. However, schools identified how to deliver curriculum with Koorie perspectives in a range of ways. For example, a Learning Specialist, in the Whittlesea Network, created online professional development that reinforced the importance of cultural inclusion and the embedding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, histories and perspectives in remote learning packs.²⁷

Leopold Primary School engaging Koorie students and families in remote and flexible learning



Leopold Primary School in Geelong has 774 students, 21 of whom identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. The school worked very hard to ensure these students stayed connected whilst learning remotely.

A school leader responsible for Koorie students' wellbeing and engagement convened webinars every few weeks involving cultural activities, including storytelling, music, art and yarning, creating a sense of belonging and togetherness. The students were able to discuss cultural issues and events such as National Sorry Day and Reconciliation week in a safe environment, using materials developed by the Koorie Team at the Department's Barwon office.

Being able to create a platform for continued connection to learning through culture was a key to Leopold Primary School's success in engaging the Koorie students, and reflects the known role of cultural connection as a determining factor in Koorie students' social and emotional wellbeing. During this time the school principal also engaged with parents who were supporting remote learning, supported by explicit and targeted communication with these families by school staff. The support and communication with parents galvanized the critical home-school relationship for these students.

Student experience

Most Koorie students learned from home during the period of remote and flexible learning and their experiences were varied. Some students thrived attending on-site and in the presence of fewer students, some thrived directing their own learning at home, while others felt alone, and missed the hands-on learning that can be done at school.

"Some Koorie students who were on-site at school thrived. These Koorie kids felt more comfortable and experienced less bullying because there were fewer students on-site. Smaller groupings can be good for these kids." – Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, Aboriginal Community COVID-19 Taskforce, June 2020.

²⁷ DET, 2020. 'Regional Partnership Forum Report', Marrung Central Governance Committee meeting, June.

Some schools and families reported greater engagement of Koorie students during this period. This included students whose attendance had previously been an issue.²⁸ This was thought to be because of students having more of a direct relationship with teachers, fewer instances of bullying and greater ability to engage with learning material in ways that worked for them. The asynchronous approaches of some schools, and being able to access lessons online, allowed students to self-direct their learning and re-watch instructions multiple times if needed.²⁹

“A Year 10 student provided some feedback about how they were thriving during remote and flexible learning, as they felt less distracted and experienced less peer pressure, so were more engaged.” - Wyndham City Council Marrung Working Group, *Regional Partnership Forum Report, June 2020*.

However, some students found learning from home difficult and struggled with the isolation, lack of connections, and the lack of classroom time and peer support to get work done. Schools are expected to support all Koorie students with an IEP, but these were not always established prior to the period of remote and flexible learning.³⁰ One RTO reported that students struggled to adapt to remote delivery, which was felt to be because of students' preference for face-to-face delivery.³¹

“Their preferred style of learning is face to face so they can learn from ALL people in the class.” – Feedback from the *Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association, June 2020*.

The Departments' provision of devices and internet was made available to all Koorie students, however poor or limited access to internet connections and devices were an issue for some Koorie students. For families that did not have access to reliable internet, schools supplied students with hard copies. Many schools provided the option of online or hard copy resources to Koorie students, with some families choosing to receive hard copies because of the digital anxieties of parents or carers³² or because students and parents struggled to understand the work from the online resources.³³

Parent engagement with schools increased during the period of remote and flexible learning. Schools provided regular and active outreach to families which strengthened relationships and built trust and confidence in the supports and services provided.³⁴ Some parents, however, were not able to have daily contact with the school, which impacted the ability of students to engage during this period.

“Parents and carers were more engaged with teachers, especially at primary schools, and even those parents and carers that hadn't spoken to teachers before are now doing so” – *Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association, Aboriginal Community COVID-19 Taskforce, June 2020*.

Student outcomes

The attendance of Koorie students increased during the period of remote and flexible learning. As an indicative measure for engagement, data shows higher attendance rates for Koorie students during this period than for the same time last year. While Koorie students had the highest rate of absence for week 5 of Term 2, with over one in ten students absent, this was lower than Term 2, week 5, 2019 (13.6 per cent).³⁵ Attendance rates declined during the period of remote and flexible learning for all students prior to the return to on-site learning, including Koorie students.³⁶

²⁸ As above.

²⁹ As above.

³⁰ Feedback from Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, Aboriginal Community COVID-19 Taskforce, June 2020.

³¹ Feedback from Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association, June 2020.

³² Feedback from Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, Aboriginal Community COVID-19 Taskforce, June 2020.

³³ DET, 2020. 'Regional Partnership Forum Report', Marrung Central Governance Committee meeting, June.

³⁴ As above.

³⁵ DET 'Student attendance and absence', Term 2, Week 5 (11-15 May 2020).

³⁶ DET 'Student attendance and absence', Term 2, Week 6 (18-22 May 2020).

While most Koorie students learned from home, they were provided the option of attending on-site. On-site attendance was higher for primary Koorie students, which increased over the period of remote and flexible learning.³⁷ During stage one of the return to school (week 7), the attendance rates of those Year levels meant to be returning to school declined. This may reflect feelings of anxiousness about returning to school by some students and parents.³⁸ However, for those Year levels still learning from home in week 7, their attendance on-site increased. This continued in week 8, with Year 3 - 6 Koorie students attending on-site at twice the state-wide average and at more than double the state-wide average of 1.5 per cent for Year 7 - 10 Koorie students.³⁹ This may be because of the option being made available or a preference for face-to-face learning.

Some Koorie students became disengaged during this time and will need targeted support with the return to on-site learning. Students who started Foundation this year will have had limited learning time at school and may require additional support back at school.⁴⁰ There were also other impacts reported for some students during this period. These include a lack of self and peer motivation, an absence of learning space for families with multiple children, and students below minimum standards prior to COVID falling further behind.⁴¹

“Support and advocacy... helped [families] a lot. There may be a lot of parents who didn't have that support who had a different experience” - *Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association, Aboriginal Community COVID-19 Taskforce, June 2020.*

Prior to the period of remote and flexible learning, there had been an increased performance gap between Koorie and non-Koorie students across some measures of the NAPLAN.⁴² Some Koorie students learned more effectively with technology than hard copies.⁴³ However, many students still lacked access to reliable internet connections and their own devices, despite the best efforts of the Department to provide Koorie students with laptops and dongles. Some students working with hard copies of resources will have missed the opportunity to develop ICT skills compared to their peers.⁴⁴

Health and wellbeing outcomes were also raised as a concern for some students during the period of remote and flexible learning. One of the impacts of this period on Koorie students was social isolation and concerns about the interruption of their studies. One stakeholder said that the general wellbeing and mental health of Koorie students was affected by a lack of connection to others. That stakeholder also reported the importance of connection to others with positive wellbeing and the difficulty for students to connect outside of their usual networks during this period.⁴⁵

³⁷ DET 'Student attendance and absence', Term 2, Week 8 (1-5 June 2020); DET 'Student attendance and absence', Term 2, Week 7 (26-29 May 2020).

³⁸ DET, 2020. 'Regional Partnership Forum Report', Marrung Central Governance Committee meeting, June.

³⁹ DET, 'Student attendance and absence', Term 2, Week 8 (1-5 June 2020).

⁴⁰ DET, 2020. 'Regional Partnership Forum Report', Marrung Central Governance Committee meeting, June.

⁴¹ Feedback from VACSAL's Koorie Early School Leavers and Youth Employment Program, June 2020.

⁴² DET, 2016. Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan 2016 – 2026.

⁴³ DET, 2020. 'Regional Partnership Forum Report', Marrung Central Governance Committee meeting, June.

⁴⁴ Feedback from Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, Aboriginal Community COVID-19 Taskforce, June 2020.

⁴⁵ Feedback from Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association, June 2020.

CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE STUDENTS

Key findings

- In general, absence rates for CALD students improved, although by less than the general student population. This suggests that these students faced more barriers to remote and flexible learning than other groups.
- Absence rates for refugee students in contrast rose significantly, possibly due to a weak connection with education and/or greater challenges with remote and flexible learning.
- Students and families with low levels of English and digital literacy faced challenges with understanding material, accessing interpreter services and using online technologies.
- Many refugee students experienced heightened anxiety and mental health strain because of past trauma, job losses and an inability to access Commonwealth support.
- Multicultural educational aides and bicultural workers played an important role in supporting EAL families, particularly refugees.

This section is focussed on students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. This includes students who speak English as an additional language (EAL) who attend English language schools and centres, EAL students who attend mainstream schools (EAL-funded), refugee students and international students.

In 2019, 33 per cent of Victorian government students (208,000 students) were from CALD backgrounds. Most CALD students have a native or near native level of proficiency in English. There are about 13 percent of EAL students in Victorian government schools (79,000 students) and about 2 per cent (15,000 students) are refugees. Newly arrived migrants and refugees, who have been in the country for less than 12 months, attend specialist English language schools and centres before they transition to mainstream schooling. Mainstream schools receive additional funding to support EAL students (EAL-funded students).

There were over 5,700 international fee-paying students enrolled in Victorian schools (as at 3 February 2020). Those international students who had remained in their home countries, continued their studies remotely from home. About 20 international students left in Term 2 but continued their studies from overseas, while the majority remained in Australia (5,316) during the period of remote and flexible learning.

Education State Reform Agenda for CALD students and families

A range of language, learning, engagement and wellbeing supports are provided for CALD families:

- Eligible newly arrived migrant and refugee students can access 6 to 12 months' intensive EAL tuition through English language schools and centres and outreach and virtual services.
- EAL learners in mainstream schools receive EAL Index funding through the Student Resource Package and are supported by EAL teachers and Multicultural education aides (MEAs).
- Targeted programs build teacher and school leader capacity to support families from refugee backgrounds:
 - The Refugee Education Support Program (RESP) helps clusters of schools in all sectors to learn strategies to improve student achievement, engagement and wellbeing.
 - The Schools Support Program provides tailored professional learning workshops, advice and resources to teachers and school leaders across Victoria.
 - The Learning Beyond the Bell Program provides professional learning, advice and resource to support homework club coordinators and tutors across Victoria.

System adaptations

Some of the Department's adaptations specific to CALD students included:

- expanding and promoting its telephone interpreting services and text translation services to schools;
- translating existing and new departmental resources into languages not previously translated with a priority on key languages spoken by refugee communities;

- creating a multicultural campaign to promote key messages regarding the staged return to on-site schooling;
- the provision of funding for extra telephone services (SIM cards etc.) to the English language schools, centres and Virtual New Arrivals Program; and
- creating a specific EAL resource package for remote teaching and learning on FUSE, the Department's portal for teaching and learning resources.

The Department worked closely with the Commonwealth Government and the NSW Government. Effort was made to seek travel exemptions for offshore international students, and to ensure their safe arrival via Sydney. Administrative and policy changes were made to allow students to alter their enrolment. This was to help students unable to start school due to travel restrictions or unable to learn online.

The Department continued to fund the Centre for Multicultural Youth and Foundation House to deliver refugee education support programs and advice. These providers support schools in their work with students and families from refugee backgrounds.

During the period of remote and flexible learning, the Department's refugee education support providers adapted their program delivery. They continued to provide advice and resources to support schools and homework clubs across Victoria via telephone and online mediums. Both organisations have reported a significant increase in demand for advice during this period.

Despite significant innovations in other refugee education programs and supports, most homework clubs supporting EAL and refugee background students have been unable to operate since Term 1.

TIMELINE OF ADAPTATIONS

Start of 2020 School Year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7 Feb: information provided to students in China about travel restrictions to Australia. • Online learning provided to students remaining in China. • Health and welfare resources sent via email and Chinese social media WeChat.
Mid Term 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 14 Feb – 31 March: advice sent to students from China on travel restrictions, travel exemptions, and options to learn online, suspend or withdraw studies. Continuing engagement and updates with international students through WeChat, FAQ's on the International Student Program website, Facebook and Instagram.
Start Term 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased the number of languages into which Department resources were translated and shared. • Extended the Telephone Interpreter Service to cover the Department COVID-19 Parent Hotline. • 14 April: translated and published 'Learning from home' resource into 23 languages.
Mid Term 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 14 May: translated 'Talking to your child about Coronavirus' resource into 20 languages. • 13 May – 22 May: further information on restrictions sent to all international students via bulletin and social media. Enrolment changes processed. Students who pursued travel exemption continue to arrive in Melbourne.
Return to On-Site Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multilingual campaign to promote key messages about return to on-site schooling, including social media and audio recordings, shared through stakeholders. • 13 June: students with travel exemption continue to arrive. • 19 June: email to international students welcoming back to on-site learning and acknowledging COVID-19 difficulties.
End of Term 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 26 June: approach to online learning for offshore international students communicated to students. • 26 June: Translated messages from the Secretary and Chief Health Officer for parents into 28 languages.

School adaptations

Mainstream and English language schools and centres used a variety of tools to facilitate remote and flexible learning.

English language schools and centres

Some teachers in English language schools and centres chose to prepare their older students for the transition to remote and flexible learning while they were still engaged in on-site schooling. Most teachers distributed hard copy materials. This was because of the students' low levels of English proficiency, their limited digital literacy and a lack of access to digital technology.

Refugee background students

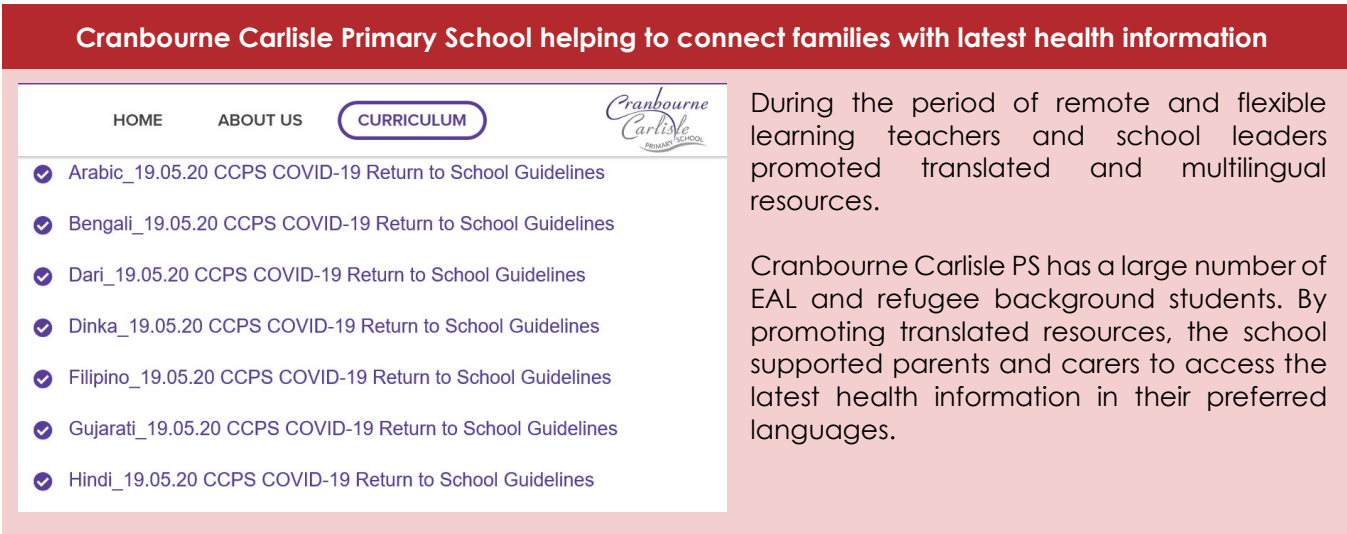
In some schools, multicultural educational aides (MEAs) and bicultural workers helped provide a conduit for communication. They phoned families to provide key updates, information and advice and set up WhatsApp groups with families to share information. Some MEAs assisted families by preparing step-by-step guides on how to register and access online platforms and learning tools for families with limited digital literacy skills. Teachers reportedly lent desks and chairs to families and provided basic stationery.

International students

Victorian government schools offered online learning to both onshore and offshore international students. School staff, particularly International Student Coordinators supported international students by:

- contacting students daily (and, where appropriate, their parent/guardian, approved relative or homestay family) to check their ongoing health, safety and wellbeing;
- supporting international students and their families in isolation if they needed access to medical facilities, food or alternative accommodation; and
- assisting international students with their enrolment options.

As noted, about 1,000 international students had either remained in, or chose to return to, their home country and continue their learning from there.



Cranbourne Carlisle Primary School helping to connect families with latest health information

HOME ABOUT US CURRICULUM

Arabic_19.05.20 CCPS COVID-19 Return to School Guidelines

Bengali_19.05.20 CCPS COVID-19 Return to School Guidelines

Dari_19.05.20 CCPS COVID-19 Return to School Guidelines

Dinka_19.05.20 CCPS COVID-19 Return to School Guidelines

Filipino_19.05.20 CCPS COVID-19 Return to School Guidelines

Gujarati_19.05.20 CCPS COVID-19 Return to School Guidelines

Hindi_19.05.20 CCPS COVID-19 Return to School Guidelines

During the period of remote and flexible learning teachers and school leaders promoted translated and multilingual resources.

Cranbourne Carlisle PS has a large number of EAL and refugee background students. By promoting translated resources, the school supported parents and carers to access the latest health information in their preferred languages.

Student experience

CALD students are very diverse, in their background, arrival and residency status, English language proficiency and outcomes. For EAL students, their individual contexts were important in determining whether the student learned effectively during the period of remote and flexible learning. A principal at a school with low levels of social disadvantage observed that EAL students and parents at the school were happy to have a routine and that the students learned effectively.⁴⁶

However, there were more reports about the difficulties faced by EAL students and the challenges of engaging these students. For example, several teachers and parents reported that there were difficulties in communicating with the parents of EAL students who have low levels of English and digital literacy.

One stakeholder reported that refugee parents who had low levels of English proficiency (and other CALD families with low levels of English proficiency) were unable to access learning materials. They were therefore unable to help their child with their learning and did not know whether their child was attending online

⁴⁶ DET Focus Groups, June 2020.

classes even though they were on a device all day.⁴⁷ The stakeholder also reported that the living arrangements of refugee families made it difficult for learning. Some students lacked suitable spaces to learn since many people of refugee background belong to large families and live in small houses, sometimes comprising multiple generations.⁴⁸

Several principals and teachers observed disengagement by EAL students. One teacher reported that:

“[Quite a] few [EAL] students have not responded during the whole period of lockdown ... These students probably have gone backward” — *Teacher, DET Focus Group, June 2020.*

A teacher observed that the school needed to better account for the challenges faced by these students.

“Remote learning has not taken into account students from backgrounds other than English” — *Teacher, DET Focus Group, June 2020.*

School principals said that over the period of remote and flexible learning, schools had become more aware of the challenges faced by EAL families to learn remotely⁴⁹ and the need to change their practices. For example, the experience of:

“staff working with EAL students to work through instructions is highlighting areas the school needs to work on” — *Principal, DET Focus Group, June 2020.*

Student outcomes

Attendance is one measure of student engagement with education. Data indicates that unaccounted absence rates of CALD and EAL students were lower during the period of remote and flexible learning compared with the same time last year. However, the improved attendance of these students did not improve to the same degree as the rest of the student population. This suggests that there were challenges faced by CALD and EAL students that influenced their levels of engagement.

Almost 20 per cent more refugee students were absent during Term 2 than at the same period last year. This suggests that refugee students faced more barriers during remote and flexible learning than other students.⁵⁰ In the last week of Term 2, 60 per cent more refugee students were absent than in the last week of Term 2 last year, suggesting that these challenges continued even after the formal return to schooling.

Anecdotal evidence also suggests that some CALD populations, such as Pasifika students, also experienced greater disengagement over this period.

Stakeholders representing CALD students reported that many refugee families also experienced heightened anxiety and mental health strain during the period of remote and flexible learning. This was

⁴⁷ Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture, 2020. ‘What can be learned from the period of remote and flexible learning to strengthen school education in Victoria?’, submission to the Department of Education and Training, June.

⁴⁸ As above.

⁴⁹ DET Focus Groups, June 2020.

⁵⁰ DET EAL and Absence data, accessed 25 June 2020; Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture, 2020. ‘What can be learned from the period of remote and flexible learning to strengthen school education in Victoria?’, submission to the Department of Education and Training, June.

felt to be because of past trauma, job losses and the lack of access to Commonwealth supports for families seeking asylum.^{51 52 53}

Many of the international students who chose to remain in Australia dealt with being isolated from friends and family living overseas. With an abrupt transition to online learning, international students required extra help at the start of remote and flexible learning. Data suggests however, that these students were engaged and participated in online classes in line with the general student population.

Drawing on the experiences and outcomes of CALD students, and recognising the diversity within the CALD population, the factors that appear to affect a student's engagement with education include the:

- student's and parents' or carers' level of English and digital literacy, including the level of access to translation and interpreting services;
- schools' approach to delivering curriculum, recognising that some students require more face-to-face or personalised educational support;
- level of support provided by schools and non-school bodies (educational, health and wellbeing);
- ability of parents or carers to support the student with their learning; and
- availability of IT equipment, connectivity and technical support.

VULNERABLE STUDENTS

Key findings

- Some stakeholders reported difficulty determining students' level of engagement.
- Challenges for vulnerable students included limited opportunities for face-to-face case management, concerns around the safety of the home environment, and limited IT access for some students.
- Young people in out-of-home care who were previously at risk of disengagement typically remained so, although there were a small number of reports of students re-engaging in the online environment.
- For some young people, the support of services such as Navigator provided a safe learning environment that enabled them to access education without the stress of physically attending school.
- The remote and flexible learning period demonstrated the value of specific, individualised support for vulnerable students.

This section focuses on students who are defined as 'vulnerable' by the Department, including but not limited to:

- an estimated 25,000 to 30,000 students in Years 9 — 12 at risk of early school leaving or disengagement;
- approximately 5,000 students in out-of-home care (based on number of students who were in out-of-home care for some or all of the remote and flexible learning period); and

⁵¹ Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture, 2020. 'What can be learned from the period of remote and flexible learning to strengthen school education in Victoria?', submission to the Department of Education and Training, June.

⁵² Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network (MYAN) Australia 2020. 'Policy Platform COVID-19 and Young People from Refugee and Migrant Backgrounds', May. <https://myan.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/myan-policy-platform-2020-26.5.20-final.pdf>.

⁵³ National Refugee-led Advisory and Advocacy Group, 2020. 'COVID-19 National Response Community Consultation: Outcomes Report, April.

- approximately 950 young people under youth justice supervision on an average day,⁵⁴ which includes approximately 250 young people on community-based orders who are not engaged in education.⁵⁵

This section draws on evidence from a range of sources. This includes intelligence gathered through Department Divisions, funded service providers and recent literature on the experience of vulnerable and disengaged students during the period of remote and flexible learning.

Education State Reform Agenda for vulnerable students

The Department has a number of initiatives that work collectively to support vulnerable students, including those provided by Koorie workforces, Primary Welfare Officers, Student Support Services, Headspace and the Mental Health Practitioners in Secondary Schools. Additional targeted initiatives that support vulnerable students at risk of disengagement include:

- LOOKOUT Centres work with education settings, carers, child protection case workers and the Department to improve the educational outcomes of students in out-of-home care.
- The Navigator program provides intensive case management and assertive outreach support for disengaged 12 to 17 year-old learners to support them to return to education.
- School Focused Youth Services build the capacity of school staff and group work programs to support students at risk of disengaging from education.
- Flexible Learning Options provide an alternative learning environment to support students to transition back into mainstream education or on to further education and training.

System adaptations

The Department supported vulnerable students during the period of remote and flexible learning through prioritised access to laptops and devices and the option to attend on-site where required. Regional Health and Wellbeing Key Contacts were also established to connect schools to support for vulnerable students.

The established initiatives that support vulnerable students continued to operate during the remote and flexible learning period and with the return to on-site learning. These included three initiatives that are discussed further below. The first is LOOKOUT Centres, which support children and young people living in out-of-home care. The second is the School Focused Youth Service, which supports students who are attending school but vulnerable to, or showing signs of, disengagement. And the third is the Navigator program, which provides intensive case management and outreach support for students who are disengaged or not connected to education.

The return to on-site learning has been accompanied by continued focus on vulnerable students. All funded service providers working with students who are disengaged or at risk of disengagement, continue to work closely with the Department during the return to on-site learning to monitor and respond to any increased demand. Other supports, such as counselling through the Department's Headspace partnership, Doctors in Schools and the Mental Health Practitioners in Schools program are available to students to support the return to on-site schooling.

TIMELINE OF ADAPTATIONS

**Start of 2020
School Year**

- Navigator program supporting students to re-engage with education.
- LOOKOUT centres supporting students in out-of-home care.
- SFYS providing planned interventions to support students at risk of disengagement, and to build teacher capacity.

⁵⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Youth Justice in Victoria 2018-19.

⁵⁵ Input from Wellbeing, Health and Engagement Division, June 2020.

Start Term 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 15 April: vulnerable students, including those who may have disengaged, provided option to attend on-site. • Throughout April: access to devices/laptops prioritised for vulnerable students.
Mid Term 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional Health and Wellbeing key contacts established to work with schools to support vulnerable students. • Advice to funded providers who support disengaged students, on how to adapt the support models in response to remote and flexible learning.
Return to On-Site Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Department's Roadmap to the Return to On-Site Schooling takes into account support for vulnerable students and students at increased risk of disengagement. • Regional Health and Wellbeing Key Contacts provide more proactive outreach and weekly monitoring of vulnerable students. • Attendance reports compiled and distributed weekly to monitor and respond to any increases in student absence. • Practice guidance on re-engagement provided to schools. • Staying in Education Tool output data and Early School Leaver data made available to all schools, with an associated package of support documents and guidance.

School adaptations

Schools were provided with a Students at Risk Planning Tool, which helped them to identify potentially vulnerable students during the remote and flexible learning period. The tool included strategies for providing support and links to appropriate service responses.⁵⁶ This tool has been re-released to support the return to on-site learning and is expected to become part of schools' business-as-usual support for vulnerable students.

Support for students in Out-of-Home Care

LOOKOUT Centres continued their important role in boosting the capacity of schools, carers, child protection practitioners and out-of-home care services. They also worked closely with schools to support students in out-of-home care during the remote and flexible learning period.

To stay connected to their students in out-of-home care, School approaches included:

- keeping in regular contact;
- personalising learning tasks and adapting to each student's level, with engagement in mind; and
- in some cases, proactively reaching out to young people in care to encourage them to attend on-site (feedback suggests that this was well received with the young people feeling wanted and included).

Care Team Meetings were able to bring together all relevant parties using online platforms. This also led to better collaboration between schools, carers, community service organisations and government departments. Virtual meetings allowed for more regular, shorter catchups, which meant LOOKOUT team members could attend more Care Team Meetings, Student Support Groups and Professionals Meetings. This increased capacity directly related to outcomes for students.⁵⁷

Support for students at risk of disengaging

Evidence collected from a small number of schools suggests that the usual predictors of disengagement were accurate during the remote and flexible learning period. Schools had to work more in 'real-time' in terms of how they assessed student engagement. They used informal, formative and frequently collected data to identify students at risk of disengagement rather than formal, summative or historical data.⁵⁸

School Focused Youth Service (SFYS) is an existing service that supports students from Years 5 - 12 who are attending school but vulnerable or showing signs of disengaging from school. Some of their interventions were able to continue or were adapted for online platforms or other technology to connect with students,

⁵⁶ DET, 2020. 'Report on Remote and Flexible Learning Period', Missions Coordination Committee, June.

⁵⁷ Input from Wellbeing, Health and Engagement Division, June 2020.

⁵⁸ Evidence for Learning Insights paper: Students at Risk of Disengagement', June 2020.

school staff and parents. Because online platforms improved accessibility, more staff and parents were able to attend some capacity building interventions.⁵⁹

There are mixed reports on the success of this delivery mode for students. Some projects report a positive impact for students participating in interventions that were able to continue. Challenges included technical issues and the reluctance of some students to engage with this mode (sometimes due to social emotional issues). For some students, phone calls were less confronting than video technologies. The preference of most schools and students is for face-to-face support/programs. Some of these have already recommenced in Term 2, with many more planned for Term 3.⁶⁰

The Navigator program supports young people aged 12 - 17 years who are not connected to schools at all or are at risk of disengaging, by providing intensive case management and assertive outreach support. Navigator providers reported that there was more discussion and focus within schools about supporting vulnerable students during this period. An additional benefit was having the capacity to contact young people and families more, as meetings were easier to set up with providers by phone or internet.⁶¹

Engaging at-risk students remotely through a Flexible Learning Option in north-western Victoria

In response to the move to remote learning in term 2, a school in Victoria's north-west that delivers a Flexible Learning Option (FLO) for certain students developed and implemented a suite of e-learning materials using the 'See-Saw' platform. According to the school, this had high rates of student participation and engagement. One student with a history of avoiding work and of struggling to settle in the classroom began to post daily using See-Saw and was doing so independently. The school provided remote family engagement work, to encourage the student's engagement in the program, leading to positive impacts in the way that the student engages in his online sessions. The schools' FLO setting also used remote platforms effectively to increase its capacity to attend care team meetings for vulnerable children in this setting.

Student experience

The overall experience of vulnerable students during the period of remote and flexible learning varied. In some instances, learning from home provided a safe environment to engage in learning without the social pressures of on-site learning. However, for other students, the lack of face-to-face connection may have impacted the provision of case management and access to services. There were also safety concerns for some students in their home environment.⁶²

Students in Out-of-Home Care

Most anecdotal reports would suggest that those young people in residential care who were previously disengaged from education remained so. In a couple of cases it was reported that young people who had been attending school did not want to return or engage with remote and flexible learning. In addition, some carers were under a lot of stress during this period. This impacted most on kinship carers and where the young person had a disability or behavioural support needs.

There were some reports of difficulties for young people in residential care due to limited access to technology prior to the period of remote and flexible learning. Discussions with community service organisations indicate that several young people in out-of-home care possess limited IT skills without the regular access to home devices unlike many of their peers.⁶³

⁵⁹ Input from Wellbeing, Health and Engagement Division, June 2020.

⁶⁰ As above.

⁶¹ As above.

⁶² Comments from Navigator providers, Wellbeing, Health and Engagement Division, 2020; DET focus groups, June 2020; Engage Victoria submissions, June 2020.

⁶³ Input from Wellbeing, Health and Engagement Division, June 2020.

However, there were also cases of some students re-engaging in the online setting, who had previously disengaged from education.⁶⁴

Students who are disengaged or at risk of disengaging

There were mixed reports on the impact of remote and flexible learning on disengaged students, or students at risk of disengaging. For some young people, learning from home with the support of Navigator and their school provided a safe learning environment. This allowed them to access education without having to physically attend school and face the stress of interacting with other young people.⁶⁵

“What can be learned is that some, very vulnerable students will not get an education unless it is offered to them remotely...they want to feel emotionally and physically safe while they learn. This is why remote learning works for them” – *Secondary government school service provider, Engage Victoria submission, June 2020.*

Some teachers and school leaders reported that the period of remote and flexible learning encouraged them to re-think wellbeing in their school, and that problem solving with parents and carers strengthened these relationships.⁶⁶

However, as the discussion of engagement outcomes below shows, the disengaged students who thrived were likely to be a minority. Stakeholders reported a number of challenges, including:

- decreased ability to determine young people's actual level of engagement in education;
- parents struggling to support their children with online learning due to work and family obligations;
- reduced levels of connection and support that was able to be provided without face-to-face case management; and
- an increase in the number of critical incidents and increased numbers of suspected family violence incidents not being reported.⁶⁷

Despite these challenges, many schools, teachers and service providers saw future opportunities of remote and flexible learning for vulnerable students.

“Remote learning during this period has been significant in exploring the possibility of re-engaging previously disengaged students...I have seen students have the opportunity to reconnect with their learning at their own pace and rebuild their confidence to return to classroom settings” – *Secondary school social worker, Engage Victoria submission, June 2020.*

There were also reports that the period of remote and flexible learning provided schools with more of an insight into the family home environment. With home circumstances more visible, including constraints regarding technology and supports, and issues relating to family relationships, schools were better able to respond to the individual needs of each vulnerable student.⁶⁸

Student outcomes

Absences increased for students at high risk of disengagement over the remote and flexible learning period. Absences increased further with the staged return to on-site learning.⁶⁹ Nearly one in three students at high risk of disengagement was absent during the staged return to on-site learning. This was slightly

⁶⁴ As above.

⁶⁵ Comments from Navigator providers, Wellbeing, Health and Engagement Division, 2020.

⁶⁶ DET Focus Groups, June 2020.

⁶⁷ Comments from Navigator providers, Wellbeing, Health and Engagement Division 2020.

⁶⁸ DET Focus Groups, June 2020.

⁶⁹ DET, 'Student attendance and absence', Term 2, Week 8 (1-5 June 2020).

higher than the same time last year.⁷⁰ For students and their families in the most vulnerable circumstances, the education disruptions caused by COVID-19 carry a high social and economic cost.⁷¹

A study of a small number of schools suggests that the majority of students who were identified as struggling to engage in face-to-face learning prior to the period of remote and flexible learning continued to struggle during this period.⁷² Similar findings have been made in studies of online learning outside of the COVID-19 context. Literature suggests that online and blended learning is less effective than face-to-face learning for students at risk of disengaging from education.^{73 74}

This is consistent with concerns raised in other reports, which suggest that school disruptions widen achievement gaps for disadvantaged students,⁷⁵ and that disadvantaged students who fell further behind during remote and flexible learning will find it hard to catch up.⁷⁶ For a number of at-risk young people, such as those in out-of-home care or experiencing significant disadvantage, anecdotal evidence suggests that the 'digital divide' during remote and flexible learning put them at further disadvantage. Limited existing soft skills and technical ability may have prevented them from being able to adapt to remote and flexible learning.⁷⁷

Most Navigator providers reported that there were both negative and positive impacts of remote and flexible learning for disengaged young people. While the move to remote and flexible learning did not lead to an immediate increase in demand for the Navigator program, it has been rising with the return to on-site learning. Some Navigator providers are advocating for the option to use remote and flexible learning as a pathway back into the face-to-face school environment for students overwhelmed by classroom learning.⁷⁸

The remote and flexible learning period demonstrated the value of specific, individualised support for key groups of vulnerable students and those who had disengaged from education. There have been selected anecdotal examples of students who, through partnerships between their school and service providers, have re-engaged with education during the remote and flexible learning period after significant periods of non-attendance.⁷⁹ In particular, those students who experienced mental health challenges such as anxiety. However, some other young people further disengaged during this period.

⁷⁰ As above.

⁷¹ UNESCO, cited in DET: Evidence for Learning – students at risk of disengagement report.

⁷² Evidence for Learning Insights paper: Students at Risk of Disengagement' June 2020.

⁷³ Hung, J-L, Hsu, Y-C and Rice, K. 2012. 'Integrating data mining in program evaluation of K-12 online education', *Education Technology and Society*, 15(3):27-41.

⁷⁴ CREDO (2019). Charter school performance in Pennsylvania: 2019, Stanford University, Stanford, https://credo.stanford.edu/sites/g/files/sbiybj6481/f/2019_pa_state_report_final_06052019.pdf.

⁷⁵ Sonnemann, J. and Goss, P., 2020. COVID catch-up: helping disadvantaged students close the equity gap. Grattan Institute.

⁷⁶ As above.

⁷⁷ Input from Wellbeing, Health and Engagement Division, June 2020.

⁷⁸ As above.

⁷⁹ As above.

VCAL AND VDSS STUDENTS

Key findings

- There were mixed reports of the experiences of VCAL and VDSS students.
- Challenges included difficulty in undertaking practical work placements, low literacy levels of some students and difficulties in adapting to the remote and flexible learning environment.
- Despite these challenges, some students benefitted, including self-motivated students and, in some cases, previous school-refusers or students with mental health issues such as anxiety.
- Regular connection and personal contact with students were critical factors in keeping students engaged in their learning.

This section focuses on students undertaking the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) and Vocational Education and Training Delivered to Secondary Students (VDSS).

The VCAL is a senior secondary certificate. Many Victorian students undertake VDSS each year as part of their senior secondary studies. VDSS is a mandatory component of VCAL and can also contribute to a Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE). Over 50,000 students undertook VDSS in 2019.⁸⁰

It is important to consider VCAL and VDSS in this report given the higher proportion of at-risk students undertaking VCAL compared with VCE.⁸¹ In addition, students undertaking VCAL are more likely to be in lower NAPLAN quintiles in Year 9 than VCE students.⁸² They are also more likely to face greater economic vulnerabilities associated with higher rates of not being in education or employment post-school.⁸³

VCAL and VDSS students were not considered as vulnerable for the purpose of data collection during the remote and flexible learning period. As a result, this section largely draws on qualitative data drawn from focus groups conducted by the Department, Engage Victoria submissions and intelligence collected through discussions with Vocational Education and Training (VET) and VCAL Leaders.

Education State Reform Agenda for VCAL and VDSS students

The Department has a number of existing supports in place providing a platform for VCAL and VDSS students in remote and flexible learning arrangements.

- *VET Funding to increase access to VET provision* – government schools are provided with targeted VET funding to support the higher cost of provision in this area.
- *Head Start apprenticeships and traineeships* – a new model allowing school students to spend more time doing paid, on-the-job training while completing their VCE or VCAL at school.
- *Assisting schools to navigate the RTO sector through Know Your RTO* – an advisory tool for government schools with quality indicators about RTOs delivering VET to school students.
- *Structured Workplace Learning through the SWL Portal* – a single information and referral point for structured workplace learning opportunities for government schools.
- *Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs)* – facilitate the development of partnerships to increase the number and range of government school - employer engagement activities.

System adaptations

During the period of remote and flexible learning, several system adaptations were made in order to support VCAL and VDSS students. The Department and the VCAA provided advice to schools about modifying VCAL learning and teaching for the remote and flexible learning environment, such as extending Semester 1 VCAL units over the year and collaborating through VCAL networks. Small groups of students could attend school on-site for short periods if learning and assessment requirements could not

⁸⁰ Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, Senior Secondary Statistical Information.

⁸¹ Centre for International Research on Education Systems, Student destinations and outcomes analysis, 2018.

⁸² As above.

⁸³ DET, On Track survey, 2017.

be conducted at home. Upon the return to on-site learning, Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) prioritised support to secondary schools to find mandatory work placements for VCAL students, and to find local solutions to challenges arising with VET programs.

TIMELINE OF ADAPTATIONS

Start of 2020 School Year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regular communications to schools from the VCAA in relation to requirements and support in delivering VCAL and VDSS.
Mid Term 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 27 March: VCAA writes to school principals regarding continuity of learning and delivery for VCAL and VDSS.
Start Term 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 15 April: VCAA writes to school principals to confirm remote and flexible learning arrangements and revised dates for VCAL students to complete their courses. VCAA provides advice to schools in relation to modifying VCAL learning and teaching for the remote and flexible learning environment, such as extending Semester 1 VCAL unit over the year and collaborating through VCAL networks.
Mid Term 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Small groups of VCE and VCAL students can attend school on-site for short periods, consistent with physical distancing measures and other requirements, if their learning and assessment requirements cannot be conducted at home.
Return to On-Site Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 26 May: all senior secondary students resume on-site learning at their school.
End of term 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> LLENs prioritise support to secondary schools to find mandatory work placements for VCE or VCAL students, as well as find local solutions to challenges that may arise with VET programs.

School adaptations

Schools introduced a range of adaptations for VCAL and VDSS students. A number of schools and some non-school providers reported having a strong focus on wellbeing during the remote and flexible learning period.⁸⁴ Teachers and school leaders reported that maintaining regular connection and personal contact with VCAL and VDSS students was critical to keeping students engaged in their learning.⁸⁵ Adaptations included:

- dedicated teams working with each student and family to provide support, guidance and where required, referral to other support and specialist services;
- increased focus on checking-in on students to support their engagement and wellbeing; and
- providing opportunities for students to indicate how they were feeling about their work, whether they understood what was required and whether they needed help.⁸⁶

One of the key challenges raised regarding the delivery of VCAL and VDSS remotely was students' inability to undertake the practical components of their studies.⁸⁷ This was exacerbated by business closures which prevented students from seeking out work placements in their local area.⁸⁸ Many schools prioritised theoretical components of VET studies during this period, with plans for undertaking practical components with the return to on-site learning. However, schools have acknowledged that this puts significant pressure on the second half of the year for catching up on applied learning.⁸⁹ Teachers have also acknowledged that while it may be an adequate work-around in the circumstances, pedagogically it is preferable to be practising and applying theoretical knowledge throughout the year.⁹⁰

⁸⁴ Engage Victoria submissions, June 2020; Feedback from DET North East Victoria Region VET/VCAL Leaders, June 2020.

⁸⁵ As above.

⁸⁶ Feedback from DET North East Victoria Region VET/VCAL Leaders, June 2020.

⁸⁷ Engage Victoria submissions, June 2020; VET/VCAL Leaders meeting 24 June 2020; Feedback from VCAA Curriculum Division Managers, June 2020.

⁸⁸ Feedback from VCAA Curriculum Division Managers, June 2020.

⁸⁹ As above.

⁹⁰ As above.

There were also particular challenges for the VCAL and VDSS teaching workforces. Firstly, many VCAL teachers are first-time teachers or new to teaching VCAL, which presented challenges in adapting to the remote and flexible learning environment. Secondly, some sessional VET trainers did not have the time and/or confidence to adapt their teaching in order to provide their students the best experience of learning remotely.⁹¹ Schools were also unable to modify the content of courses for the remote environment due to course content being drawn from nationally-recognised VET certificates.⁹²

The Pavilion School supporting VCAL students

The Pavilion School delivers VCAL and applied learning for young people aged 12-20 who have been disengaged or excluded from mainstream education. While the smaller and more intensive hours offered at The Pavilion School would not be normally considered a full-time program (2 to 4 hours per day of face-to-face instruction), The Pavilion School creates a full-time timetable for its students by organising external services and educational programs for each student, and importantly this is negotiated by each student. During the recent period of remote and flexible learning, instruction was refocused on dynamic interactions between student and teacher. Synchronous daily check-ins in the morning and afternoon were complemented by video and multimedia instruction, daily learning intentions and step-by-step student programs, and student-teacher interaction through Microsoft Teams and OneNote. As The Pavilion School transitions to on-site learning it will continue to use Teams and OneNote to provide continuity for on-site and off-site learning, and provision of content through synchronous on-site and asynchronous remote instruction. This supports students to proceed with self-directed learning both on and off-site, with each class supported and staffed by a teacher, educational support staff member and social worker.

Student experience

There were mixed reports about the experience of remote and flexible learning for VCAL and VDSS students. Some schools noted challenges engaging VCAL students, including losing students to non-completion or the workforce.⁹³ Similarly, some parents of VCAL and VDSS students also commented on the challenges of keeping their child engaged in their learning. Some engagement challenges appeared to relate to the difficulties in undertaking practical components of studies remotely.⁹⁴ In addition, accessing online support for students with low levels of literacy was cited as a particular challenge.⁹⁵

“VCAL students in particular struggled during online learning...these students thrive on hands-on, real-world tasks – these are often difficult to deliver remotely or with adequate support” – *Catholic secondary school teacher, Engage Victoria submission, June 2020.*

However, engagement was reported to have increased for certain VCAL and VDSS students, such as those who were self-directed and enjoyed the flexibility of learning from home. Some schools and parents also noted increased engagement of students who were previously school-refusers and students with mental health issues, including anxiety.

“The most important lesson from remote learning is that it can provide a flexible alternative for students who do not learn through traditional classroom education” – *Government secondary school parent, Engage Victoria submission, June 2020.*

⁹¹ As above.

⁹² As above.

⁹³ As above.

⁹⁴ DET focus groups, June 2020; Engage Victoria submissions, June 2020; Feedback from VCAA Curriculum Division Managers, June 2020.

⁹⁵ Engage Victoria submissions, June 2020; Feedback from VCAA Curriculum Division Managers, June 2020.

A number of teachers also commented on the range of skills and capabilities that VCAL and VDSS students demonstrated during the period of remote and flexible learning. The benefits of self-motivation and independence in preparing students for further education, training and employment were also noted.

“...our students pursuing hands on learning such as VCAL and VET showed exceptional abilities in their adaptability and perseverance in spite of the challenges” – *Government secondary school teacher, Engage Victoria submission, June 2020.*

Student outcomes

Findings on VCAL and VDSS student outcomes suggest that learning varied between students, with some schools reporting that remote attendance did not necessarily translate to learning.⁹⁶ However, some schools noted that students seemed to benefit from the highly personalised attention that was characteristic of some schools' remote and flexible learning delivery.

Schools have raised concerns that the period of remote and flexible learning may have had lasting impacts on students' motivation to learn. For some students, this impact has been negative, with certain students having 'written off the year' and the VCAL course. There have been reports of challenges in getting practical units of competence signed off, which may result in non-successful completion of VCAL, in part due to some Registered Training Organisations not yet allowing students back on campus.⁹⁷

However, many schools also reported positive impacts. This included students being enthusiastic to be back at school, with an increased determination to succeed with their education.⁹⁸ Schools also reported increased use in online learning platforms for VCAL and VDSS students. This provided students greater flexibility in their learning and the opportunity to learn valuable 21st century skills.⁹⁹ Many schools also noted the opportunities that a blended model for VCAL/VDSS presents for the future. For example, a blended model may be as a way of enabling self-directed learning, as well as mitigating time lost through attending VET studies off-site.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ VET/VCAL Leaders meeting, June 24, 2020.

⁹⁷ As above.

⁹⁸ Engage Victoria submissions, June 2020; Feedback from DET North East Victoria Region VET/VCAL Leaders, June 2020.

⁹⁹ Feedback from DET North East Victoria Region VET/VCAL Leaders, June 2020.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Terms of reference

LESSONS LEARNT FROM HOME, REMOTE AND FLEXIBLE LEARNING

Parliamentary Secretary – Schools (Tim Richardson)

This Terms of Reference document sets out the context, purpose and methodology for DET's work to understand the lessons learnt from the experience of home, remote and flexible learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. It sets out the scope in two discrete work streams, in the form of key questions for schooling. DET will report to the Parliamentary Secretary for Schools to prepare advice for the Minister for Education.

CONTEXT

The COVID-19 pandemic saw many Victorian families move to home learning in the majority of Victorian school students move to remote and flexible learning from the start of Term 2. This required quick adaptation, including of the roles of teachers and families and carers in learning, and in the use of technology; communication with and between sectors, schools and families; and with regard to the way children and students experience education. It also required DET to work differently—internally across regional and central offices, and with stakeholders and sectors.

This Lessons Learnt project will capture insights from the period of home, remote and flexible learning, including about the experience of children, students, families and other stakeholders. The project will highlight examples of innovation and good practice, including some things that were not expected at the outset.

PURPOSE

To provide advice to the Minister for Education on the lessons learnt from the period of home, remote and flexible learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

SCOPE

On 26 May 2020, the Minister for Education announced a cross-sector summit would be held to consider the lessons learnt from the remote and flexible learning period and discuss reforms to strengthen education in Victoria. The summit will be held during July and will bring a range of stakeholders together. The summit will be informed by independent analysis, including analysis of survey and other data, and a series of focus groups of students, parents, teachers and school leaders. The summit is expected to cover a wide range of issues and lessons learnt across the schooling system.

To ensure the varied experiences of different cohorts of students are captured in sufficient detail, the advice developed in schooling for the Minister for Education will focus on the experience of vulnerable student cohorts, in particular for:

- a. Students with additional needs
- b. Students undertaking VCAL or VET
- c. Koorie students
- d. Culturally and Linguistically Diverse students
- e. Students disengaged from education
- f. Out of Home Care students.

Advice to the Minister for Education will address the following key questions in relation to these cohorts:

- (1) What was the experience of remote and flexible learning for these students and their families/carers?
- (2) What impacts on learning, engagement and wellbeing can be identified at this stage from the period of remote and flexible learning for these students?

(3) What adaptations emerged, including in relation to student engagement, family engagement, digital provision, teacher/educator capability, collaboration, curriculum provision, and health and wellbeing for these students?

TIMEFRAME

This work will proceed based on the following timeline:

May	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agree Terms of Reference • Collect necessary data (schooling) • Commence initial stakeholder consultation (schooling) • Review literature for Victorian context
June	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undertake stakeholder consultation • Develop case studies
BY 10 JULY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide advice to the Minister on lessons learned

METHODOLOGY

This work will draw on a range of data being collected by DET, including surveys, correspondence, complaints, parent hotline calls, and the intelligence of DET regional staff and stakeholders. It will also draw on qualitative evidence, gathered through interviews and focus groups, with stakeholder groups including but not limited to:

- Parents, carers and families
- School leaders and teachers
- Primary and secondary students
- Area-based school staff
- Peak bodies and unions
- Non-government school sector authorities
- DHHS

Existing stakeholder reference groups may be used. DET will work with the Parliamentary Secretary to determine their involvement with some stakeholder meetings.

The final advice to the Minister will be in the form of a short report outlining the lessons learned.

Appendix 2: Stakeholder consultation conducted by the Parliamentary Secretary for Schools

Wednesday 17 June 2020	Aboriginal Community COVID-19 Taskforce <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Victorian Aboriginal Education Association• Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation• Koorie Youth Council• Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association Ltd (VACSAL)
Wednesday 24 June 2020	Principals' Association of Specialist Schools DET North East Victoria Region VET/VCAL Leaders
Thursday 25 June 2020	Rural Youth Ambassadors Forum – Country Education Partnership Amaze and Association for Children with Disability VicSRC
Monday 29 June 2020	Centre for Multicultural Youth Little Dreamers
Monday 6 July 2020	Parents Victoria

Appendix 3: Data and analysis

This study drew on a range of qualitative and quantitative data including:

- Over 3,300 submissions from Engage Victoria that included responses from 2,326 parents, grandparents and carers, 729 school leaders and teachers, 150 students, 15 peak association representatives, and a small number of education support and service providers.
- Twenty-five focus groups conducted by the Department of 39 Victorian Government primary schools, high schools, specialist schools and Virtual School Victoria. These included 10 workshops with school leaders, eight with students, four with teachers, and three with parents.
- Three focus groups comprising Senior Education Improvement Leaders across the Department.
- Information and data made available by the Department's Performance and Evaluation Division from its Parent and Student Learning From Home Surveys of 20,240 students from 188 schools and 12,160 parents from 234 schools. The Department conducted this optional online survey of students and parents between 14 May and 26 June.
- Administrative data sets the Department collects on student enrolments, attendance and the OnTrack Survey.