QDOS
CHANGING PUBLIC OPINION

Remote and Flexible Learning
Qualitative Research

Report to:

VICTORIA
State Government

Education
and Training

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Contents

Research Context

Research Purpose

In the first 6 weeks of Term 2, 2020, all Victorian students at primary, secondary and specialist schools participated in remote and flexible learning, in an effort to slow the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19).

This research was commissioned by the Department of Education and Training (the Department) to provide an independent, and cross-sectoral picture of this experience. The findings from this research will inform opportunities to strengthen the school education system.

The objectives of the research were to:

- Investigate students', parents' and carers', teachers' and school principals' experience of remote and flexible learning;

- Determine the aspects of remote learning that worked and didn't work to inform discussions about opportunities to strengthen the school system.

Research Methodology

Qualitative Research

Independent focus group research provides an opportunity for those who might not otherwise have it, to candidly share their experiences. It also allows for ideas and hypotheses to be explored against the experiences of a breadth of people directly impacted by remote and flexible learning. These findings can then be compared with those of the Department to help gain a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the issues relevant to all those involved in remote learning.[1]

Group Details

Eleven groups were undertaken from mid-June to early July, 2020.

Nine groups were conducted with secondary school students, parents and carers of primary and secondary school students, primary and secondary school teachers and primary and secondary school principals across mainstream schools. Two groups were conducted with principals of special schools and parents of children with special needs.[2] Most of the student cohort represented across these two groups were students with moderate to severe intellectual, socio-emotional and/or physical disabilities.

Groups included participants across Government, Catholic and Independent school sectors from across Metropolitan Melbourne, regional and rural Victoria.

Group	Cohort	Date
1	Students in secondary school (years 10-12)	16th June
2	Parents of students in secondary school	
3	Students in secondary school (years 10-12)	17th June
4	Teachers – secondary School	
5	Parents of students in primary school (years 3-6)	

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[1] Given small numbers of participants some caution needs to be taking in generalising findings from these groups to the overall cohort.

[2] These groups were conducted on Wednesday 8th July, the day after the Victorian Premier announced metropolitan Melbourne and Mitchell Shire would be returning to Stage 3 restrictions due to the spread of COVID-19. The announcement included changes to Term 3 arrangements. A number of principals and parents therefore became unavailable to participate in the research due to more pressing demands.

Group	Cohort	Date
6	Teachers – primary school	18th June
7	Parents of students in primary school (prep to year 2)	
8	Principals - secondary school	23rd June
9	Principals – primary school	
10	Principals - Special Schools	8th July
11	Parents and carers of children with special needs[3]	

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[3] Primarily across government mainstream schools with some from special schools (one dual); across primary and secondary schools

Summary of Findings

Remote and Flexible Learning Experience

Preparation

Preparation was key for schools and fell into three areas. Technology, professional development — so that teachers could deliver remote learning, and a clear sense of strategic direction to help decide what mattered most.

Schools with established e-learning systems, a strong culture of professional development and a clear sense of school values and strategic direction got a head start.

Despite preparation, special schools had additional challenges that required adaptations as the term progressed.

Managing expectations

Trying to keep up with all aspects of the pre-lockdown curriculum was a fool's errand that created a lot of stress for everyone. Once expectations were managed, everyone was happier.

For primary schools this meant focussing on core parts of the curriculum and the welfare of teachers, students, and parents. Secondary students did best where teachers laid out clear expectations and shared lesson plans.

Remote learning was particularly challenging for special schools and for a lot of families with special needs children. Parents of special needs children requiring high care who lost services they received at school as well as at home faced significant challenges.

Routine and structure

Establishing remote learning routines was important for teachers, students and parents as it 'normalised' the circumstances.

Students at schools which struck the balance between routine and flexibility of learning were the most engaged and had the most positive experience of remote learning.

Special schools had more students return to campus as the term progressed. This helped with student engagement.

Technology

There were three main challenges with technology. Hardware availability, access to the internet and parental computer literacy — particularly parents of primary students — limited students' participation. Poor internet access was a bit more random but all three of these problems were more pronounced for lower SES Schools.

Engagement - Parents

Parental engagement, particularly for students in early primary and for those with special needs, was a central factor in the quality of students' learning and overall experience of learning from home.

This was profound for primary students but even in secondary, a degree of support and interest from parents helped students to self-motivate.

This was particularly challenging for parents of children with high care needs.

Engagement - Students

Remote learning required student-led learning. This was a very good thing. The main caveat was that it meant different personalities did better or worse. Some students could do really well with a little bit of help but got into trouble without that help. Other students did better without the social distractions of face to face classrooms. Parents of children with special needs (particularly those on the autism spectrum) also reported a range of engagement, from outright refusal to an increase in focus.

The early primary years

The degree of assistance and supervision needed for early primary students meant that the greatest pressure was on parents with children in this cohort. Three main approaches were used with youngest students and their parents, to varying degrees of success:

1. Long hours of screen time. This proved the least successful approach.

2. Sticking with the basics of letters and numbers. This was generally successful but created gaps according to parents' capacity to teach.

3. Creative engagement at home through a diverse range of activities. This meant setting aside more of the curriculum but meant less of a gap between students' learning.

Wellbeing

While schools varied in their approaches to monitoring and addressing how students, parents and teachers were coping, most schools made wellbeing a priority and established processes to monitor and respond as required. Mothers of younger children and especially those with special needs children found it a particularly stressful time. For mothers with special needs children this was not because their school was not caring but because it could not provide the level of support their families required.

Learnings for On-site Schooling

A (re)focus on learning

Teachers and principals have been reenergised and focussed on how to deliver the best learning experience for students regardless of their abilities. More expansive or creative uses of technology and digital platforms helped this focus.

Student-led learning

Schools are looking at how to continue enabling student-led/student-directed learning.

Secondary students - Secondary teachers sharing detailed lesson plans with students has been a simple but highly effective way to help support student-directed learning.

A lot of secondary students thrived when given a degree of flexibility and agency to complete tasks and would like more flexible study periods at school so this can continue. This also included a preference for later school start times (parents and teachers also mentioned this).

Primary students – Schools are considering creating separate spaces and activities for younger students who engaged well remotely but who struggle to settle in a classroom.

Broader application of technology

Much of what schools want to bring across into the classroom related to a more expansive use of digital platforms.

For secondary students:
- Streamed classes, video links and recorded classes.
- Some subjects online across clusters of schools.
- On-going use of digital platforms for students to ask questions of teachers and for teachers to be able to provide feedback (individually and via groups).
- Teachers can more easily 'drop-in' on students working in online groups and get a better sense on how they were progressing.

For parents:

- Ongoing use of technology to engage parents — from individual lessons/subjects to school assemblies and video conferencing for parent-teacher interviews and information evenings.

For teachers:
- Digital staff meetings.

Mental health 'check-ins'

Parents and students felt the various mental health 'check-ins' used by schools were very worthwhile and something that should continue.

Return to school in Term 2

Almost everyone was happy to have returned to campus towards the end of Term 2 and to a missed normality.

Key Findings

Remote and Flexible Learning Experience

Return to school in Term 2

Almost everyone was happy to have returned to campus towards the end of term 2. Principals and teachers reported an almost 100% return of students, even from school refusers. Parents of younger children or those that had struggled with remote learning were relieved to have them return and secondary students were pleased to see their friends and get back into the school environment. Most secondary students felt it was easier to engage and focus at school than at home, especially as time went on and motivation started to lag. Being back was a return to a missed normality.

Teachers expressed some trepidation as the reality of their work environments meant it was very hard to maintain social distancing, certainly it was a losing battle with students.

While some schools have the challenge of teachers who need to continue to teach remotely due to their personal circumstances, they have adapted to accommodate this. This has included having a CRT in class while the teacher is on a screen.

School leaders in areas with the most recent COVID-19 spikes reported an increase in parents keeping their children home in the last few days.

A particularly challenging time for schools and families with special needs children

Principals of special schools and especially parents found the remote learning experience challenging.

Ultimately individual student needs and abilities determined special schools' approach as it was not possible to adapt existing timetables to remote learning.

Those principals with a cohort of students who also attended mainstream schools felt Government mainstream schools in particular, placed the responsibility for these students squarely with the special school which added to their responsibilities.

Most parents with children in mainstream schools felt the schools struggled to adapt for their children to successfully learn remotely, while those with children in special schools said the school was just not able to provide anywhere near the level of care they could at school. This was especially hard for some parents of children with high physical and emotional needs, who simply did not have the resources at home (both equipment and specialised carers) that the school usually provided.

Limited support from other services

The complexity of funding from other services (NDIS was mentioned) - and whether this did or didn't apply in the absence of on-site schooling - added more stress to families. Those less able to

navigate these arrangements felt very let down. Principals in regional locations also knew of families who lost their home-based carers due to safety concerns, so these families were particularly badly impacted.

Despite these significant challenges both principals and parents said that some students (seemed to be mainly those with moderate ASD) adapted well to remote learning.

Preparation

Mainstream schools

Preparation was key for schools. Schools that prepared for remote learning in term one, prior to school closures, experienced a more smooth and successful transition.

Principals who felt their schools already had a strong culture of professional development found they were well placed to prepare for what was to come.

Preparation included embracing technologies such as e-learning platforms and conferencing software and adapting learning plans and curriculum to suit learning from home. For some schools, this also included time designated for staff to get comfortable using the technology. Some schools had the advantage of expanding the use of technology that students and teachers were already familiar with before remote learning, while other schools had to start from scratch. Some used the time to make sure all students had the requisite technology. Others prepared (hard copy) packs to accommodate those who had poor or no internet access (principally in remote areas) or for younger primary year levels.

A clear sense of school values and strategic direction helped school leaders and staff to decide what mattered most when planning in these exceptional times.

Inevitably some elements of the curriculum had to give way to make space for priorities.

Some primary schools chose to emphasise getting outdoors, quality time with family and students learning broader life skills while others focused primarily on numeracy and literacy. Most secondary schools were more likely to retain some semblance of their timetables, so planning was largely about adapting to effective ways to convey content to keep students engaged, particularly for more hands-on subjects.

Preparedness to adjust expectations and approaches if they proved unrealistic, as well clear communication of expectations to staff, was also critical. *(See Managing Expectations below)*

Special schools

While the special schools had learning plans and student support groups in place, this didn't necessarily make it easier to move to remote learning.

Some special school principals mentioned that initially theirs was a let's-try-it-and-see approach, but that their staff had all worked hard to prepare as best they could towards the end of Term 1.

Managing expectations

Mainstream schools

School leadership's communication to teachers, parents and students that we DO NOT need to worry about getting everything done perfectly was very important. If the school overwhelmed the students (and parents) with a lot of work that made it difficult to stay on top of, it could put them

under a lot of pressure. Often it took a few weeks for either the school to adapt and to get the message through to teachers, students and parents not to sweat every bit of work, or for parents to relax a little and focus on their child's wellbeing over getting every assignment done. While this meant that students may have missed out on learning from the curriculum, countering this was off-curriculum learning.

Some parents said that they felt they could relax when they had worked with the school to best accommodate a child that was struggling. Once expectations were managed, everyone was happier. This was also true for secondary students who felt most comfortable when their teachers laid out clear expectations of tasks to be completed and the effort and engagement they expected from students.

Being able to just focus on what matters — say a core part of the literacy / numeracy curriculum and the welfare of teachers, kids and parents — was very liberating for teachers and school leaders. Whether this was fewer meetings, more focussed meetings or less administration, it allowed for greater focus on the aspects of their work they most valued.

While it is difficult to quantify just from these groups, some teachers from independent schools indicated that their workload had increased exponentially due to heightened expectations from the school's leadership, which they felt reflected a need to keep fee-paying parents happy. Most other teachers said it was a different sort of workload as leadership teams had been clear about expectations. Several principals said that they had had conversations with staff who were putting in excessive hours, all but giving them permission to take the pressure off themselves.

Special schools

Principals felt several parents had high expectations of what was possible. The complex needs of a number of these students means that there is a very high reliance on the schools and their resources, much of which could not be transferred to students' homes. This meant a very large gap that families did not feel they had the capacity to fill.

Parents also said they were already stretched juggling their own work arrangements (as well as other children learning from home) so relied heavily on the school for help; help that schools could not deliver in these circumstances.

Principals felt managing expectations was compounded by parents who were (and will be) reluctant to send the children back in Term 3 due to their own anxiety or compromised immunity in their households (varied but principals mentioned between 15-30% of parents). Some principals said it would be a considerable challenge (if not impossible) for their schools to manage any sort of hybrid model.

Routine and structure

Mainstream schools

Establishing remote learning routines was important for teachers, students and parents as it 'normalised' the circumstances.

Approaches across primary and secondary schools ranged from precise timetables with live-streamed lessons and multiple interactions with teachers per day to a weekly briefing from the teacher (mainly primary school), with a flexible timetable and greater emphasis on students completing set tasks by the end of the week. Those from independent secondary schools were more likely to indicate that all classes were live with the teachers present for most of each lesson.

Those from the government sector were more likely to say they had a greater degree of flexibility about how much time was spent on screen with classes. A number of principals said they had left it up to individual teachers to decide what was best for them and their classes.

The aspects that made for a positive experience for most secondary students were regular interaction and feedback from teachers, clarity of expectations, creative content delivery and a degree of flexibility and independence. Seeing detailed lesson plans for the first time proved to be particularly revelatory. Most students (and teachers also mentioned this) found being able to see the structure of each lesson (or the structure of each subject for the week) enhanced their learning. Both students who were more self-motivated as well as those who usually needed more guidance found this 'road map' kept them focussed and expectations clear. Having it posted also meant they could return to it as needed.

Secondary students and teachers whose timetable had been copied/pasted into a remote learning format — the only change being the physical classroom became a digital classroom — were exhausted by the intensity of this form of learning and struggled to maintain concentration. However, those with little routine and interaction with their teachers felt lost and unmotivated. Students at schools which struck the balance between routine and flexibility of learning were the most engaged and had the most positive experience of remote learning.

Finding the right balance was a matter of trial and error because schools had to find out what worked best for teachers, students and parents. Some schools sped up this process by getting regular feedback from families and proactively contacting them to see how things were going.

Special schools

It was not possible for schools to adapt school routines and timetables to a remote format given the complex needs of a lot of their students. Principals said teachers had to gauge stress levels of students and families carefully and decide how much to ask of them. This meant a lot less screen time on various platforms for a number of students as the term went on.

On-site during remote learning

Given these challenges, the number of students coming to (special) school for at least some of the time increased as remote learning went on. This took some of the pressure off families and teachers and helped students feel connected with their school. Some principals said their staff had been happy to come into school on a rotational basis to manage those students who needed to be on campus.

Technology

There were three main challenges with technology:

- The availability of hardware for students, particularly for lower SES schools both in metro and regional areas (reported by all three sectors, but primarily Government and Catholic schools). There was a delay in getting computers and dongles, which schools did foresee and therefore tried to get students equipped through their own resources and contacts. Ministerial announcements on equipment also impacted other sectors as parents assumed it was a universal offer – an expectation schools then had to manage.

- Access to the internet. Teachers faced challenges keeping students on track and up to date when students did not have access to the internet at home or had unreliable internet connection. This compounded stresses already felt by parents and students and made it

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difficult for teachers to communicate and monitor student progress. Hard copy packs were the only alternative available to some schools.

- Parental computer literacy, particularly in the case of primary children, limited students' participation. Primary teachers with largely lower SES cohorts reported that a large portion of their time was spent providing technological support to parents of students. For families of low SES and where English was not the first language of parents, adjusting to online learning was particularly challenging (primarily Government and Catholic schools).

Some primary teachers at poorly resourced schools, faced with a lack of access to devices, unreliable internet and/or low computer literacy, began personally delivering paper packs of work sheets to students' homes. Unsurprisingly, well-resourced schools across all sectors were much less affected. However, unreliable internet impacted people regardless of SES.

While secondary students adjusted to learning from home within a matter of days, they said the computer literacy of individual teachers impacted on student learning. The variance in teachers' confidence using e-learning platforms and conferencing software — very apparent to secondary students who have different teachers for each subject — affected student workload, engagement and motivation.

At some schools, all staff were using the same online platform whereas at other schools, students had to download and familiarise themselves with multiple programs and platforms depending on the technology each teacher decided to use. This caused confusion and students sometimes got lost amongst too many platforms.

Principals reported some trepidation from teachers who lacked confidence with technology, but for the most part they felt their school supported them to make the transition. They mentioned that several teachers who were dreading it surprised themselves by adapting much better than they expected. Students were appreciative of teachers who adapted and were creative with their use of various platforms, e.g. posting videos giving 'mini-lectures' for some classes rather than a full lesson live online.

Special Schools

The extent to which schools used digital technology varied. Some left it up to individual teachers, others relied much more on sending packs home as this better suited their students. Regional schools had the issue of black spots so that also impacted on what they could do via digital platforms.

Principals found it useful for staff and parents to use digital platforms to engage each other; it made connecting much easier.

Engagement

Parents

Parental engagement, particularly for students in early primary, was a central factor in the quality of students' learning and overall experience of learning from home.

The degree of assistance and supervision needed for early primary students meant that the greatest pressure was on parents with children in this cohort.

For primary students, enthusiastic engagement from a less-skilled parent was more important than a very well-educated parent(s) who was unwilling or unable to be engaged in their child's learning.

For families with parents working full time, older siblings shared some responsibility for supporting and/or supervising younger children which, in some cases, impacted their own learning.

While parents of secondary students were generally less involved in their child's remote learning, a degree of support and interest from parents helped students to self-motivate. Most secondary school parents just wanted to know how to best contact a particular teacher if they had a concern. A few parents were a little lost with this, partially because they didn't want to interfere or trouble teachers but also because they weren't clear on how to engage with them.

Parents, teachers and principals observed that, as a result of the experience of remote learning, parents were better connected with their children's education and almost all were much happier with the school as a result of their management of these extraordinary circumstances.

Parents of children with special needs

Because most of these parents were required to be much more hands on, on a day to day basis with their child's learning, engaging with the school was not a particular issue. Rather it was their expectations of the school relative to what schools could provide that caused them stress.

Some parents also felt overwhelmed by what they saw as a lot of jargon in the school's written communication.

Students

Remote learning required student-led learning. This was a very good thing. The main caveat was that it meant different personalities did better or worse. Some students could do really well with a little bit of help but got into trouble without that help. Other students, who distracted themselves and others in a classroom setting, did better without the social distractions of face to face classrooms. This was true across primary and secondary as well as across sectors.

Some students who might otherwise have been doing well in school struggled while some who struggled at school did better at remote learning. This **was not** always predictable based on the past performance of the student or the socio-economic position of the family – indeed often it was a surprise who flourished and who struggled. Several parents, principals and teachers gave examples of lower performing students including school refusers who thrived learning remotely as well as increased engagement from students who were not participating regularly before remote learning. This was one of the biggest surprises to come from the experience.

Motivation waned for secondary students as long days looking at screens, distractions at home, and a lack of self-discipline affected their engagement. Students' level of engagement was linked to how engaged they perceived their teachers to be based on the quality of feedback and regularity of interaction. Secondary students were most engaged when teachers delivered clear expectations (see comment about lesson plans) and creative content, and when they were participating in interactive lessons.

Students with special needs

Several parents said motivation was one of the biggest challenges they faced with their child. This manifested as outright defiance for some and led to no engagement with schoolwork for the term.

As with principals and teachers from mainstream schools, these principals said they had the full range of engagement; from students who thrived because there were no other distractions and

they could more effectively engage with a teacher one-on-one, to students who struggled with the changed circumstances.

The early primary years

From these groups (primary teachers and parents of primary students), it appeared that three main approaches were used with youngest students and their parents, to varying degrees of success:

1. Long hours of screen time. This proved the least successful approach as it was too big an ask of parents and young students. Attention span and need for constant supervision and explanation of tasks was the most challenging aspect for parents of early primary students, especially where families had multiple children.

2. Sticking with the basics of letters and numbers. While this meant some students may have kept up on the fundamentals it also created gaps between students whose parents had the capacity to 'teach' and those who didn't. This approach also narrowed the formal curriculum.

3. Creative engagement at home through a diverse range of activities. Those schools that embraced learning in its broadest sense and got young children and parents engaged in a variety of activities (e.g. cooking together, outdoor activities such as finding three insects and drawing them) felt this was more effective keeping them engaged. This may have meant that not all children kept up with literacy and numeracy skills, but that more students were able to share a similar learning experience.

Those families with children in primary school who most enjoyed remote learning seemed to be those who, either directed by the school or through their own choice, embraced this broad, creative and activity-based approach to learning. While some parents appreciated that schools had taken this approach, other parents just took this approach themselves because they just want to stay sane and keep kids happy and active.

Wellbeing

While schools varied in their approaches to monitoring and addressing how students (and their parents and teachers) were coping, most schools made wellbeing a priority and established processes to check-in with students and provide support where necessary.

Of students

Processes included a colour system to ask students how they were feeling (primary), mental health surveys of secondary students, and follow-up for those students who were struggling (either by dedicated wellbeing staff or classroom teachers). Independent and Catholic school teachers and principals mentioned their strong record of pastoral care and existing mechanisms that helped support anyone in their school community who needed it. Special school principals said a lot of effort was put into teachers staying in regular contact with parents/carers (ranging from at least weekly to daily).

Of staff

Principals of mainstream and special schools felt providing professional and emotional support to their staff during remote learning was of paramount importance. This ranged from whole of staff meetings and more regular connections, to professional development using experts to teach resilience and giving staff permission to adapt their expectations of themselves and their students.

They acknowledged that most of their teachers were exhausted by the experience, but that they (teachers) had learnt a lot about themselves and their students.

While some teachers also said they were very tired, a lot also said they were energised by what they had learnt, about themselves as much as about new ways of teaching. They were faced with a difficult challenge and had found themselves more capable and adaptable than they had realised.

Of parents/carers

Mothers of younger children and particularly those with children with special needs, struggled a lot. This latter group often felt overwhelmed by the weight of managing their own, their partner's and their child/ren's well-being. This was compounded by what they saw was a lack of support during remote learning. It was not that their schools were being unsupportive, but that they could not access the sort of assistance they needed (often one on one carers or aides). They were acutely conscious of their child's mental health and several were concerned that it has deteriorated with remote learning because their child did not have their regular routine and social interaction.

On the whole, the degree of parental concern in their child's wellbeing or learning drove the level of engagement with their child's school.

Learnings for on-site schooling

One principal's observation succinctly encapsulated a theme that emerged across all groups, *"This experience was all about learning, not about teaching."*

Being under pressure to come up with creative ways to develop quality learning models really engaged principals and teachers. They learned a lot and will be actively looking at, or be open to, doing things differently, taking advantage of the positives from remote learning and applying them to on-site teaching. Some of this has already started.

Some principals, particularly of special schools felt allowing those students who were struggling a lot to come onto campus helped students' (and families) well-being a lot. (They had gone to a lot of effort to have appropriate OH&S measures in place to mitigate against COVID transmission.)

A (re)focus on learning

Remote and flexible learning has provided an opportunity for several teachers and principals to focus on what most matters to them as educators. They might be tired, but most seem energised, stimulated and are enjoying collaborating on how to deliver the best learning experience for students regardless of their abilities.

Remote learning has also engaged a lot of previously disengaged students by removing a lot of the stressors and schools are keen to keep enabling these students to stay engaged.

More expansive or creative uses of technology and digital platforms helped this focus.

Student-led learning

There has been an emphasis on student-led/student-directed learning and most schools are looking for ways to keep enabling this.

Secondary

Teachers sharing lesson plans with students has been a simple but highly effective way to help support student directed learning.

Most secondary students thrived when given a degree of flexibility and agency to complete tasks in combination with clear expectations, instructions, and access to support where necessary. Students enjoyed being able to switch between subjects rather than being required to work on a particular subject at a designated time. Some felt that more flexible study periods at school would enable a similar flexibility to continue.

Senior students recognised the value of learning to self-motivate and time-manage in preparation for post-secondary studies, training and work. While students appreciated being held accountable by their teachers, flexibility and trust from their teachers was also highly valued.

Secondary students (and teachers) did not miss their commutes. This often gave them much needed extra sleep. Parents talked of happier children because they had more sleep. In discussing flexibility, the possibility of later school start times was raised across the secondary groups.

Primary

Some teachers mentioned younger students who struggled to settle in the classroom had been much more focussed remotely. They have taken this into account and found that these students are benefitting by working separately from other students with adapted learning activities some of the time.

Broader Application of Technology

Teachers, students, school leaders and parents all acknowledged that much of what technology and digital platforms has delivered during remote and flexible learning that they would like to have continue with onsite learning.

For secondary students:

- Streamed classes, video links and recorded classes - The ability to be able to re-watch a lesson (or watch it if missed) was invaluable. Several teachers showed their creativity and made what students thought were engaging videos, used a variety of programs to deliver content and shared their notes digitally.
  Principals at special schools also said using videos created by teachers for some of the more hands on subjects worked very well and principals could see that teachers would continue to use these as a resource that students could refer to on an ongoing basis.

- Some principals have started discussions with schools in their region of the possibility of online classes across all their schools, for particular subjects.

- Students (especially those more reserved in class) asked a lot more questions via digital platforms and would like to be able to keep interacting this way. Teachers also liked being able to answer questions electronically and want to retain this.

- Teachers could more easily drop-in on students working in online groups and keep and get a better sense on how they were progressing

- Online learning resources to engage quieter, less confident or troubled students – principals did not see this as a substitute for face to face interaction, but it helped some students who might otherwise disengage

For parents:

- Ongoing use of technology to engage parents - from individual lessons/subjects to school assemblies and video conferencing for parent-teacher interviews and information evenings.

  Several principals across mainstream and special schools said that they had much higher numbers of parents participate in parent teacher interviews and school information nights via online platforms and that they will continue this approach. It also gives teachers more flexibility to be able to undertake interviews from home if it suits them.

For teachers:

- Staff meetings via digital platforms – It affords teachers greater flexibility if they can dial into meetings.

More structured approach to wellbeing

Parents and students felt the various mental health 'check-ins' systems across primary and secondary schools were very worthwhile and something that should continue.

The challenge of remote learning for families with children with special needs

The experience of remote learning for a lot of parents with special needs children was largely negative. They said they did not have the skills or resources to help educate their child remotely. They felt there were systemic problems related to services and funding (not just with remote learning) that were further exposed or exacerbated by remote learning.

The one useful outcome for parents was that they were able to see much more directly the level of their child's learning. Some wished the services offered on-site could be available at home.

Appendix A: Detailed Quotations

Being back at school

The benefits students saw in returning to school

For a variety of reasons, most students preferred to be back at school rather than remote learning:

- More structured/ motivating learning environment at school

Most students were glad to be back at school because of the scheduled structure which made them more motivated and gave them a sense of relief at going "back to normal". Some had felt uncertain about learning remotely as the structure wasn't as clear and they weren't always sure where they were up to in terms of academic progress.

> *"It's better in class because you're able to really know where you're at. It was sometimes hard to gauge at home, what people are doing and what am I meant to be doing." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)*
>
> *"You also feel more motivated, because you don't have a lot of distractions, it's just better." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Male)*
>
> *"I had more motivation." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)*
>
> *"I felt the transition from online back to school was very good and I was able to get back into schoolwork." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Male)*
>
> *"It's easier to do SACs and that sort of stuff at school. I did a couple online and it was not fun." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Male)*
>
> *"Being at school, I feel like I get more done just being in that environment." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)*
>
> *"I prefer being at school and doing my stuff in class than doing it at home. Being at home was unmotivational to a point. You got out of bed five minutes before your class started and dawdled to your desk … at school you have to be in the classroom and do stuff because the teacher's always there." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)*
>
> *"It's better than being at home because I fell behind in all of my work. I just relaxed and did nothing the whole time. I didn't have any motivation to do it and if I didn't do it, it didn't really matter because they wouldn't get upset, they'd just be 'okay try to get it done as soon as possible'." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)*
>
> *"For us it was very dependent on age group, year nine very different from VCE. The VCE girls all reported they prefer to be back. They thrived on the energy of the teacher. We've got a very studious group so they don't get disrupted by each other. Even the kids who (said they were) too cool for school confessed 'it's fantastic to be back'." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)*

- Being with friends

Many primary and secondary students were happy to be back at school as it meant they were able see their friends in person. Parents also saw this as important to their children.

> *"I guess it's better because we get to see our friends. And to some extent you can go out with your friends to eat and hang out. It's more fun to see people again." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)*
>
> *"It was just better to be able to see your friends." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)*
>
> *"I like seeing all my friends and having teachers there as well." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)*

"He was facetiming with his friends just to have some kind of normality but going back to physical school, he said, was the best day." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Female)

"My son … he now values his future a lot more. He values the big role his friends play in his life. Having that social interaction with other kids, that was a big thing for him. He just values his teacher teaching him and having his friends at school." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Female)

- Face to face access to teachers

Many were glad to see their teachers and to be able to directly ask questions in the classroom.

"It's easier and you can always ask teachers for help when they're there." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

Students' concerns about being back at school

- Social distancing and hygiene at school

Students talked about their school's attempt to impose social distancing.

"It's different. There are a bunch of measures in place to try to separate people as much as possible. We don't have any assemblies or church services that we used to have. All the tables and chairs in classrooms are separated. It's just weird being back. It's almost like they don't want people to be back because they limit as much interaction as possible." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"On the ovals, for ball sports, they limit 10 people per ball to try to stop too many people playing basketball. In the corridors are painted arrows to show where you can and can't walk. In the general areas where you can just hang around, you can't get too close to people. It's the 1.5 metre thing." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"Our school is basically the same as it was except, we wipe down the tables after class. We don't separate the tables or anything." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"Yeah, pretty much the same apart from the teachers asking if you've sanitised every time you go into a classroom. There are sanitisers everywhere." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

Some were concerned that students weren't always taking this seriously.

"It's pretty much the same as when we left except that they have designated areas to hang out for different year levels but it's not really happening." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"The school does their best but obviously having 2,000 kids, it's hard to manage that amount of people." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"Our tables are separated. They tried to put in the 1.5 metre distance but it's not really happening. But everything is really the same." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

- They miss the later starts/ flexibility of remote learning

As they readjusted, some students were finding school more exhausting than before. This was often because they'd become used to sleep-ins and a timetable more suited to their body clock.

"I like the social aspect, but I preferred sleeping in." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"I find that I get more work done with a structured schedule, but I quite enjoyed getting extra sleep because I got an extra hour sleep in the mornings." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"I miss being at home and sleeping in and being with my dog and doing things in my own time." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"Sleeping in was good but I felt more tired and I felt really exhausted when I did go back to school and I'd get back from school and just flop on the couch and not do anything after because I was just so exhausted from the day." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"I like seeing all my friends and having teachers there as well but, it wasn't that bad being at home and just being able to do my class in my own time." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

Principals also noted that returning to the school timetable had been difficult for some students.

"Some children have found it hard to come back to school because they were used to sleeping in, they've found it difficult to come back to the routine of a school." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Female)

Parents' attitude to students' going back to school

Most parents (particularly of primary school children in years prep to two) felt personally relieved to have their children back at school, many had struggled with home schooling (see Parent/ carer involvement in child's home-schooling), they appreciated the structure school provided students and felt that their child liked being back at school as they could see their friends again.

"Really relieved, both of us that they are back. I think they're enjoying being back. Relief is the overwhelming feeling mainly since they've both been back properly. When we got permission for them to go back, that was three days a week but since they went back properly it feels like things are more back to normal." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Male)

"It was good to have the routine back in our lives for sure. Back to school, everyone's a bit happier and the house is marginally cleaner now." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Female)

"My daughter is glad that she is back at school because she was meeting friends and she was missing that towards the end of it." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Male)

Some said their child found it hard to adjust to being away from home and back in the classroom having only spent a brief period in class before the lockdown.

"I had huge problems going back to school, he's only now settled down. A lot of social difficulties. Being at home and not having to navigate the playground. They had a brief period of getting to know the teacher and the new class and then going into lockdown and coming back and having to readjust to that has been difficult." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Male)

Teachers' and principals' views on being back at school

While some teachers described returning to school as "a bit overwhelming" the vast majority of teachers and principals were glad to be back. Principals also tended to say that the return to school had been smoother than expected for staff and students.

"Epic." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Male)

"Interesting." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

"The return has gone much more smoothly than we expected. We expected high levels of anxiety from staff and students, there've been a couple but very small. I have no idea what the cause is." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Male)

- Better structure for troubled children

Principals and teachers dealing with at-risk and disadvantaged students felt that school was the best place from them as it provided structure and stability and more direct contact with staff who were concerned about their welfare. They felt it was more likely to deter the destructive habits into which some lapsed while away from school.

"We've been very glad to be back and for us the timing was really good. On two fronts. Our students, a lot of them struggle with lockdown and we saw a lot of mental health decline. We were surprised at the level of engagement we managed and we made a conscious decision to go as close as we could to our normal program...We noticed the engagement slipping away in many students going back to really poor life habits, staying awake at night, a lot of drugs, a lot of online time as an alternative to their

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engagement with the school as the weeks progressed. I think a longer period in lockdown would have been really damaging." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Male)

"Where I've been pleasantly surprised in the return, we had a group of students identified as really high risk of not returning...they didn't connect remotely but all bar two have come back to school, that's been really positive." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Male)

- Students have returned with a greater appreciation of the school

Principals also felt that the lockdown had given students a new sense of the school's and their teacher's value. It also made apparent the important things they were missing not being at school such as friends, sports and activities.

"For our students coming back there's a real sense of entitlement, school has been a right (but) now they see it a bit differently, the gratitude for what they've got is more evident." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Female)

"Our children were very happy to come back and be with their friends, they really missed the relationships they had with their friends face-to-face." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Female)

"They really (were) missing all the extra things they get to do at school. They felt at home that they were able to do their work, the basics but they weren't able to get anything extra out of it and they appreciate that more now." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Female)

"When they came back, we did have 99.49% attendance rate for our first two weeks back for our students...kids are really keen to get back or parents are really keen to get rid of them. (We) saw that as a trust from the community around the care and support we provided while we were remote learning." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Male)

- Hygiene and social distancing

To varying degrees teachers were concerned about social distancing and hygiene protocols breaking down in schools. Some saw students and a few staff reverting to pre-pandemic attitudes and behaviours when it came to social distance and use of hand sanitiser.

"Once we went back to school, things felt pretty much as normal, we hand sanitise in and out but we have kids all over each other...we're still very close to each other so you forget a bit in that environment." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

"People would keep their distance...whereas now you've got 25 in a room and that's not happening. No one is (keeping their distance) it's just become the norm to be back at school." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Male)

"(Infection was a concern) at first...I thought '(we're a) really large school, small space we'll be next' but now nothing's happened I'm definitely feeling more relaxed. I'm not sure if that's a bad thing but it does feel very normal now." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

"That's been the concern in our area, two primary schools, the childcare centre all within about a four km radius have been shut down in the last few days. That's a big concern when we go back." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Male)

"Not everybody (is using hand sanitiser)." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

"The students are better than the staff, at my school the teachers do it for them on the way in whereas staff do it every now and then." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Male)

Teachers and principals said some colleagues had chosen not to come back yet and a few teachers taught remotely with a CRT in the room with the students.

"I think if you're in that at-risk category you're allowed to work at home...the CRT in the room and the teacher teaching remotely, it's an interesting set-up." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

"I have a learning support officer who can't return (due to) health concerns so we've had to set (them) up with a different set of work to do remotely." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Female)

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"We do have a couple of staff working at home, compromised immunity." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Female)

Some teachers wanted more scope to continue working from home but said their school had made it hard for them to do so; one felt pressure to return after an operation.

"It's been quite difficult for people to work from home, you have to have a medical. We were told we're expected back on campus…there wasn't the option of working from home." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

"It was quite strict at our school you had to have a medical certificate." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

- Some teachers need a break/ anxious about returning

Principals felt that many teachers were exhausted after dealing with the new and complex world of remote teaching. They also noted that teachers had concerns about the virus. Consequently, some principals felt that teachers needed a rest.

"Teachers were relieved to come back initially but this week it seems we're going back to how we were at the end of last term when people were getting increasingly anxious about what was going to happen 'is there going to be another wave?' They're not talking about 'when are we closing' just the anxiety dealing with the news every day and what that means for them. They need a rest." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Female)

"I had to work with a group of staff who were very anxious about coming back because of their personal circumstances, compromised immune system. So, we had to do a fair amount of prep work with the staff about how we were going to socially distance and how that would operate with students on site." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Female)

Teacher/ student relationships now school has returned

Many students said their relationship with their teacher was unchanged but others said that, upon returning to school, the student/ teacher relationship had been aided and improved by their remote learning experience. These students reported that the period of remote learning showed them how much their teachers cared not just about their academic progress but their personal wellbeing, causing them to feel closer to and more comfortable about approaching their teachers when they returned to school.

"One of my teachers was really great. He put in the time and effort. He made calls with me weekly to check in. Before, I did not respect him, but now I have a lot more respect for him." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"I feel more grateful for my teachers because I realised how hard it was without them." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"It didn't really change too much. We were talking to them every day, every period." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"I felt a bit more connected to my teachers and more trust with them when I came back." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"One of my friends did really bad in a SAC but the teacher called her and helped her for three hours encouraging her to not drop the subject. He was really nice about it. Now he cracks jokes in class. Big changes." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"A sense of, if there was anything going on at home, I could talk to them and say 'hey I'm going to be a bit off during class' and they will completely understand and just hope I get the work done." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"I don't think anything has changed much for us." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

Teaching on campus during restrictions

Teachers and principals noted that, for various reasons including troubled home lives and even a lack of internet connectivity, some students simply couldn't function in the remote learning environment and needed to be on-campus during the lockdown. Teachers were required or volunteered to supervise these students in addition to teaching a few classes. For a few it created a considerable additional workload.

> *"Originally, it was going to be once a fortnight as a rotation I ended up going in twice. You weren't necessarily teaching them…the students who had to be at school, it was more like babysitting…all in the library, 10 to 12 on a given day." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Male)*

> *"Throughout (the lockdown) period we also had just over 40 attending on site, so we ran one of our sites with appropriate social distancing. Students with really high trauma backgrounds and poor home conditions attending four days a week to some attending one day a week. If we'd been still in remote learning, we would have been seeing really serious issues in our student population." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Male)*

> *"We started to ask students to come in on site in the morning to do the English and maths at school, just because they were coming up on our welfare radar as 'at risk'." (Group 9, Prim Principal, Female)*

> *"The essential service workers' (children) it was only really year seven, a small cohort of six or seven students depending on their parents work patterns. They were on site working remotely." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Female)*

> *"Some students were essential to be on campus and I put my hand up to help them. About six…would go into school, to do Google Classroom. I would have to set up my work whilst spending the day helping them with their online work. I sort of wish I hadn't put my hand up." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)*

> *"The specialists were asked to go in and supervise the children who were at school. We had about 20 at school, that grew to about 30 over the period. We were nervous because with the juniors there's no such thing as social distancing. We had to facilitate our own programs whilst being required to engage with school students. Every teacher was required to do so much work, we were logging off eight or nine or 10pm." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Female)*

> *"We had children that we didn't expect that didn't do as well. High levels of anxiety and what we did have was a core group of children that were on site, about 20, because of their parents' work commitments." (Group 9, Prim Principal, Female)*

> *"We found that we weren't maximising our teacher aids, so through a bit of research and trial and error, we got our breakout rooms happening and that allowed our teacher aids to work in small groups and provide more one-on-one support." (Group 9, Prim Principal, Male)*

> *"My eldest kept going to school two mornings a week so his engagement was still there, which was a great thing, he continued to learn." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Female)*

On-campus learning at special schools during restrictions

Principals of special schools noted that, because of difficulties coping with isolation, some students needed to be on campus during the initial lockdown.

> *"We'd structure it quite differently, especially for the younger kids, probably have more of an individual timetable because there's a lot of students who are high anxiety and even when we had the six weeks off, two or three times a week we'd have 15 students come to school because they needed to be in the school environment because they just felt so isolated." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Male)*

> *"(At one campus) we continued with classes we didn't go remote at all. It would be impossible for some of our children to do remote learning. Some of their goals might be toilet training you can't do that on-line. Some might be to attend to a non-preferred activity for two minutes, they wouldn't be able to sit in front of a computer for any length of time. Some children who come to us for therapeutic placement have screen obsessions so we take the screen away from them…to have a screen and focus on something that's not gaming can certainly increase their behaviours." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)*

"One thing we had to do was put on extra staff so we could separate the children more rather than having four in a class with two staff we'd have more staff and less children so we could try to socially isolate more. We put some (staff) who were part-time on full-time." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

"Our experience last time was…most staff were willing to be on site if need be and the only ones that weren't had young children or family members that had medical conditions. We also have a couple of staff who met the criteria for not having to be on site, they remained working from home… mixture of things…very hard to teach from home in an SDS so they were doing a lot of the planning. One was an ES making a whole lot of resources." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

"While we were in remote learning last term, we started with all kids coming to school (who had) parents who were essential workers or their needs were so great or their family capacity to keep their children safe was so compromised that we had them on site. That built up to eight kids…about 15% but we were still really clear on the guidelines." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

"It depends on the class you have, some classes are much more intense in the need for parents to interact whereas others, teachers didn't have as much interaction because they just depended on the teachers and students involved, so it varied from one staff member to another." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Male)

Return to Stage 3 Restrictions

The focus groups with principals and parents of special school students were conducted just after the announcement of new stage 3 restrictions. Under these restrictions special school students were, for the most part, to learn on campus which raised additional issues for principals and parents when discussing the topic of students coming back to school.

Special school principals' attitude to schools returning to campus

Special school principals discussed the decision to have special school students learn on campus during the new stage 3 restrictions. Views varied; some wanted the students at school learning in class while others preferred remote on-line learning. All were concerned about the health implications of students continuing to attend special schools during the lockdown. For some, the health concerns trumped the benefits of having children in school.

"We set our own course but we're basically following Government guidelines, so we'll be back next week." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Male)

"What we advocate for is to be treated very similarly to our mainstream counterparts because the health risks are the same if not significantly more challenging for our physical disability students, we need to make sure they're better catered for, more isolated with their complex health needs and this goes completely against that." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Male)

"I wouldn't be advocating for a hybrid model…keep us in line with the mainstream schools otherwise you're treating us as a completely different cohort while our kids have additional needs, they are still children and they still have health requirements." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Male)

"It is extremely difficult to keep the kids away (from each other). They're natural instinct is to be on top of other kids especially when they're at school. With staff it's getting more and more difficult all the time. We had a number of staff who were very hesitant to come back last time and it probably took them until week five or six to get used to things. I would imagine that would be heightened again this time round." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Male)."

"I'd rather have the kids at school as long as it was safe for the staff and safe for the students, that's the best-case scenario and the worst is to have Zoom classes throughout the day." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Male)

"Staff are going to be a bit more anxious than we were the first time around going back because the numbers are much higher, there's greater incidence of kids actually having COVID-19 and not necessarily showing symptoms. Some of students drool constantly and how are we to keep them and

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other people safe…their hands go straight back in their mouth and they're touching things. I said …the only way we can keep people safe with those students is to have someone following them around disinfecting everything they touch. I got a very standard response form the OHS unit which was not helpful." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

Principals tended to think it should not have been a one size fits all approach for special schools and they should have had more say in how they responded to the current restrictions.

"There's no discretion, no autonomy for principals to come up with and work through the best scenario that's going to work for their individual schools. So, when you have this blanket approach it really hamstrings you and creates this level of anxiety, how are they going to make sure all the students and themselves are safe." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

"We don't really know, we're not entirely sure what was feedback. There was no consultation with the peak body as to what it should look like in the new tranche of restrictions. It feels to a certain extent that we were in a situation that's a health crisis rather than an education crisis and we're expecting all staff to go back into close proximity with students who are drawn from a variety of different postcodes so there's significant concerns around maintaining the health of staff and students." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Male)

"Our feedback were we to know we would end up in this situation again may well have been very different to what we've ended up with." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Male)

All special school principals expected that some students would not return to campus for the term.

"We've got a lot of students who have got health issues themselves or family have. That led to, out of our 130, about 25 not being there for the six weeks. We had five students who went there for the whole term. Again, we'll get those students who weren't there for the whole term, won't be there until they feel it's safe… I think we'll get about 75% back." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Male)

"Some parents will choose not to send their kids, it's going to be a little bit more difficult, we won't know until Monday who's going to turn up and who won't turn up." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

Some talked about students in the locked down public housing towers in Kensington and North Melbourne.

"I don't think we know yet about the towers and what will be happening. My understanding is they're all being tested then they'll make some decisions. If their restrictions are eased and they're back onto the same restrictions as everyone else I'm assuming they will attend school so we'll have to manage that." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

"The other complication for us is we do have students that live in the high-rise towers that are currently locked down so the staff have got to be much more anxious going back than they were last time." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

Why special schools were required to return to on-site schooling

Principals tended to think parental pressure had meant that Term 3 would be on-site for special schools. Principals understood the pressures on parents but felt this needed to be balanced against health and safety concerns.

"I think it might have just come from parent bodies and advocacy groups acknowledging that it's very difficult to support the learning of a student with special needs at home. Which of course it is, it's difficult in schools as well but when we're talking about a health crisis rather than an education crisis, health and safety should come first. The vast majority of our students' health and safety is better maintained at home where they're not exposed to a variety of people coming from different suburbs all mixing together where it is impossible to social distance." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Male)

"I think it's probably pressure from the parent groups; it is difficult to engage our kids in remote learning…but it's just balancing up that with the safety of everyone." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

Principals' concerns about COVID-19 in their area

Those who were in rural locations said that there were no outbreaks in their area, so they were a little less concerned about transmission on campus. Still, they noted that anxieties persisted particularly for more anxious parents some of whom had chosen not to send their children back on campus.

Some thought parents may be reluctant to send their children to school. One talked about the way parents started to become anxious before the first lockdown and progressively stopped sending their children to school. They felt that same anxiety was appearing again.

> *"From last term I still have kids who haven't returned, three or four of my students. One could argue it's a bit soft, these seem to be parents who...struggle to engage with schooling and are already anxious about sending their kids to school regardless, they'd prefer to have them at home. This has exacerbated that for some of our families, they see it as a really good opportunity to keep their kids home. Some with higher compromised immune systems we've been able to work with them and do a part-time return to school." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Male)*

> *"We've only had one case of COVID in the town, so I think confidence is fairly high that we can keep families safe. We're still doing a lot of additional hygiene as if we were in a hotspot. It's about building parent confidence." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Male)*

> *"When we first went into remote learning, I did an audit of who was prepared to come staff-wise... 80-85% were more than happy to come back. Those who weren't they had their own small children or a family member who was immunocompromised. When we came back it was seamless everyone was back on." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Male)*

> *"Last time when we came back on-site cases had reduced and people were relatively confident it was under control, this time it's a totally different situation, the testing is showing a lot of people have the virus without showing symptoms' that's scary for people. I haven't had staff contact me saying 'I'm really worried' but I'm anticipating people will be more anxious this time round." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)*

> *"I suspect we'll get some that won't turn up. Before we went into lockdown first time round, we were getting less and less students attending on site so parents were making that choice already (before the first lockdown). The ones that kept them home at the end of term one will probably not send them back this term. By the end of term one we had about 50%." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)*

> *"A lot of parents did struggle with remote learning as we went further into (it) we had more and more on site, so some that kept them home, It's been a long time at home so they may not do it this time." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)*

Preparation for remote learning

Mainstream schools

Nearly all principals, whether from government, Catholic or independent schools, said they had prepared well for the lockdown and remote learning period. Many said they'd been preparing for remote learning before any announcements were made by government and they owed their success to the planning and preparation they had in term one. They also found that keeping teachers and parents up to speed with what to do and making sure everything was clear and concise was an important part of the preparation process.

> *"For the government sector it wasn't that different, we needed to make decisions before announcements were made because there was no way we could do all that planning if the announcement was made on the Thursday before Easter, we'd been working on that process before the last week of term." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Female)*

"We had a lot of things in place already, we'd been working on it part way through term one." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Female)

"When the information came out from the government you just used it to compare what you'd done but the information about reporting was so late and everyone had moved on before the information came out." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Female)

"Our success was really in the planning, we really jumped early. We built a website before Term 1 and had the first few weeks planned for Term 2." (Group 9, Prim Principal, Female)

"I think our success came from our pre-planning and anticipated the shutdown and we had very clear documentation in a teacher and parent guide that we went through that supported everyone." (Group 9, Prim Principal, Female)

"We had organised our remote learning before the holidays, so we were all organised." (Group 9, Prim Principal, Female)

"We had been planning with a pandemic management plan to get ready for a school closure, we were doing that back in February/March to ensure we were ready to go...we weren't waiting too much on what the government was going to do." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Male)

"Colleagues were all planning and forecasting and without doing that we would have fared much worse." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Male)

"We set up some protocols really early, probably about halfway through term 1 we planned for the worst and hoped for the best." (Group 9, Prim Principal, Male)

"We had our visions and values well in place. We had our structures in place, and also a very much coaching culture right through the school." (Group 9, Prim Principal, Female)

Principals from some independent and Catholic schools mentioned that state government announcements about issues like school resourcing for remote learning didn't go directly to schools like there's.

"The political announcements that came out from the Premier around resourcing only went to government schools." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Male)

"(There was) a lag of information for us in the Catholic sector. We would have to wait for the information to he directed from the Minister's office to the Department...to the Catholic Education Commission, then they would disseminate the information to us. There was always a three to five-day lag between the Minister giving announcements to our operational protocols arriving at the school for us to implement. (Group 8, Sec Principal, Female)

Special schools

Amount of planning for the first lockdown

The amount of planning for the first lockdown tended to vary among schools.

"Not much. It was 'let's try a few things and see what works'. The first couple of weeks of remote learning were very stressful for the staff, trying to work out what to do and how to engage the students and feeling like they were still doing their job. Once we got into a rhythm people got into the remote learning routine then we came back on site." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

"What held us in good stead... for remote learning in that last week of term one...we put in a lot of the hard yards ...we didn't tweak too much because we'd done a whole lot of preparation prior...The amount of work and energy the staff put into that period was phenomenal. If there was any consideration, we'd have any time off it was definitely not the case., we've never worked any harder." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

Learning plans and SSGs

All principals said they had learning plans and SSGs for students but that did not make the challenge any easier as they were dealing with a very different set of circumstances.

"We had all that stuff set up. The biggest challenge was for the newest students who had only been there for a term and we hadn't started some of those processes." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Male)

"We made it really clear, especially at the start of everything 'this is your task to complete this'. You've got one specific task or at best two tasks." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Male)

Technology and transitioning to remote learning

Families' access to technology and the internet

Teachers and principals said access to and knowledge of technology was one of the main hinderances for families being able to learn online. Schools with students from a lower socio-economic background sometimes had less access to technology such as laptops and iPads as well as poorer internet connectivity.

"It took us maybe a good three to four weeks before we were consistently getting results from the children. I spent most of my time as an IT helper than a teacher." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Female)

"Some of the challenges we had were families, maybe with five or six kids. Some might be in primary school and others in secondary and they might only have one device. You might assign their work for a Monday or Tuesday and it doesn't get submitted until Sunday night when it's their day." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)

"We have students travel into us from a number of outlying rural and remote properties that have all experienced varying degrees of internet connectivity which has been quite a challenge for those students." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Female)

"Also, there needs to be a larger scale quality of internet, a lot of our families have got the device, the internet but the NBN is rubbish. The actual structure didn't support a lot of what we were trying to do, depending on where you lived. So that's not really an independent/Catholic/government divide, that's just infrastructure in this country is not where it should be." (Group 9, Prim Principal, Male)

"We've got farming families… (internet) was crap. They would be freezing, depending on the time of day, night time seemed to be better, so some of their learning was later in the day, so we had to work with families on when their internet was best." (Group 9, Prim Principal, Female)

A few teachers said there were issues with ensuring software was government approved.

"We were following the exact department guidelines, and for face-to-face calls the department didn't approve a software until halfway through the eight-week period. Even though some (schools) had chosen to just use their own. So, we had quite a few upset parents wanting us on call all day." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)

Helping families that lacked the technology

- Providing technology to families

  Some principals said that, if families lacked technology like laptops and iPads, they leant them out. Also, some teachers provided tutoring on how to use the technology.

  "If they haven't got the technology in their house and we provided it, they still didn't know how to use it. We spent a lot of time doing tutorials on how to use it. I spent most days fielding questions from parents about accessing materials." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Female)

  "The difficulties we had to overcome were technology, or lack of technology in the community. Handing out our own devices, reliable (internet) access was another issue. Also, the digital literacy of the parents, that was a huge undertaking. That was in the first one or two weeks but once we stuck with one or two pieces of tech, the parents became quite good at it, and then the kids became quite good at it and that allowed the communication between teachers and parents to flourish." (Group 9, Prim Principal, Male)

"We realised there was a sense of urgency throughout our community, a low socio-economic area, we have a large amount of equity funding, so to do that we rolled out iPads to our families in the first week of the term, because we knew our families didn't have access to technologies." (Group 9, Prim Principal, Female)

"We have quite a low socio-economic cohort…there's one or two computers in the household and there's five or six people and primary schools and secondary schools are trying to engage in the same time space…'we want to access you and your dodgy internet for learning purposes'. We had to quickly put together a scheme of loaning out devices to families…we made a calculated risk, we had plenty of kids who would have traded them at Cash Converters. We sent out 50 Chromebooks which are not very tradeable and that supported things a lot." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Male)

"They arranged to give students a free laptop. They're prepared for everything that's happened, so that's impressive." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Male)

- Providing hard copy learning materials

Principals also said that if a household lacked the technology or had very poor internet connectivity this meant running a parallel system of arranging hard copy learning materials, feedback and follow-up. Also, as indicated, some schools had students on site during the lockdown. Parents appreciated these initiatives, but teachers said they meant a lot of additional work for them and left some students lagging behind those with better access to technology.

"There were challenges where for whatever reason some families couldn't access the technology and we just provided hard copy lessons which was a bit more extra work. That was only 20 or so households." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)

"We had to create two learning platforms we had our remote classes all set up on the Google Classroom, Google Meets but approximately 10% of students had no or very poor internet connectivity…so we had to create hard copy learning programs for those students…parents would come in and pick up a fortnightly package…the school would be in contact with the parents and student by telephone to make sure they were travelling ok. It was complex…the staff preparing two lots of work and the lack of being able to provide instant feedback as you do in a classroom (or via Google Meet or Zoom) was really challenging. The feedback from the parents and students in those circumstances was they appreciated there was not much else we could do." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Female)

"Our school didn't allow technology to go home to kids who didn't have any. So, we were doing the home packs that would go out every two weeks on paper." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)

"We have a group who have very poor reliability of internet…we run a small fleet of buses…we did a weekly work drop off door to door. We very quickly found a problem around feedback. Students photographed their work and text it back to teachers by phone. Our support staff were able to do a lot of phone contact with students when they were stuck on work. It was a real challenge coordinating that process of the teacher simultaneously running live classes in a Google Meet, having students on site connected to those classes with staff and having students do the hardcopy work via drop off." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Male)

Schools' experience of moving to a remote teaching format

Mainstream schools

The transition to remote learning varied for different schools. For those schools that had almost no existing online services it was a more difficult process to implement and harder for teachers to learn. Based on parents', teachers' and students' observations it appeared that private schools, some of the larger Catholic schools and a few public schools from higher SES areas were, in general, better resourced for remote learning than most public schools; they had access to a greater range of software, had established on-line platforms and learning tools and had technology like laptop computers and iPads.

"We were at an advantage that we had our own internet and teachers were already offloading their work on that." (Group 9, Prim Principal, Female)

"Technology wasn't really an issue at all, that worked really well. I had every student on 10 minutes after the start of the day on the first day of school and I was really impressed with that." (Group 9, Prim Principal, Female)

"A lot of the stuff we do is technology-based anyway so it was just putting it all online. Our homework is always online anyway." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)

"Online learning for us was a challenge at first because we didn't have any sort of framework set up. Some other classes had Google Classroom already operating and we didn't have anything. We had to go from nothing to 100% online which was a big challenge. The area is also mid-low socio-economic, so a few problems were the fact that families didn't have computers." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Female)

"My school had Seesaw and Google Classroom operating already, so unlike (other schools) having to learn programs and teach parents, we didn't have that issue. The fact that we had something in place already made it fantastic." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Female)

"We had a lot of Google Classroom stuff already set up, and the independence of our grade six kids. A lot of issues didn't come from them but some from parents. It wasn't really a challenge per say but just getting everyone involved. We have a mix of different demographics." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)

"We used Google Classroom and we were lucky enough to have a good team that didn't jump headfirst into face-to-face and waited to see what would happen. There wasn't any expectation on Zoom meetings until two weeks before they went back. Whereas my daughters go to a local school and teachers were ringing us all the time and doing a lot more work than we had to." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)

"We used Seesaw and uploaded our daily activities every morning and did a 30-minute Zoom call every day and that's how we did it." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)

"We use Google Classrooms. We added on Google Meets so it wasn't a huge change for us. Some key bits and pieces people would work out and share with other people." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

"We had extensive training, because we're independent we closed down before state schools. We had a lot of training in that build-up, mandatory training in Microsoft Teams." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

Special schools

Principals of special schools said they made varying use of technology. Some had online interaction through digital platforms (Zoom, Webex, etc.,) while one chose not to have that direct video link and instead used websites like Seesaw.

"My school didn't use Zoom or Webex or any of those things. What we did online, we used See Saw and other websites to provide learning tasks but we didn't have a teacher in front of them. We made phone calls to every family every two to three days to check on their academic progress and welfare. We felt that video and trying to get individual or cohorts online at the same time when you're rural and the technology isn't always available, we thought that was a much better approach." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Male)

"We approached remote learning very much on an individual basis so we contacted each family. We had a variety of delivery modes...packs we sent home which included paper-based learning also activities and play kits. We had some video lessons that we put on our Facebook page and Google Drive that parents could access and some Webex face to face lessons that were optional. So, everything's optional." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

A couple of principals said it was up to the teacher how they organised their class. Some would be comfortable with a hybrid Zoom and on-campus class while others didn't feel equipped to do this.

"It depends on different teachers; some teachers will be happy enough to turn on Zoom and have them there. It depends on what subject we're looking at, if it's more an academic based literacy and numeracy or if it's more of a hands-on, art, cooking. It depends on that staff member how flexible they want to be. Some are comfortable Zooming the class and having their class in the classroom at the same time.

Other staff are not comfortable with that and find it really difficult." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Male)

Teachers' adaptation to remote technology

Most teachers felt they adapted reasonably easily to the remote teaching format and to the technology although they acknowledged that some older staff struggled to adapt. It was a smoother transition to remote learning for teachers in schools that already had some online engagement.

"We already had Google Classroom and Seesaw set up so we were asked to just select a platform to deliver. I used Seesaw and like everybody else we had to learn it very quickly." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Female)

"It was often the older staff that really did struggle with adapting. The speed (of) change worked in its favour because people didn't have a chance to put up barriers...it was 'you've got no choice, get on board'." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

"The younger ones were able to provide assistance to the older dinosaurs in regards to how to use the technology and they got their eyes opened in what could be used in their teaching. They felt they were supported by their colleagues (than leadership)." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Male)

"Two IT teachers, because they've got a reduced load, their job was to support teachers with IT issues." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Male)

"It was helpful for our school to implement Microsoft teams which was already in place, it made it really easy." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Male)

An independent school teacher said they felt pressure to prove their worth through understanding the technology. The Government school teachers said they didn't feel this.

"A lot of staff were very savvy 'if we don't put out and be teachers, we could lose our jobs' so a lot of staff were on board with the technology." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

Students felt that individual teacher's technological competency and ability to adapt to online learning affected the quality of the class and students' learning. Some felt that it took teachers a lot longer than students to adjust to the technology, which reduced the effectiveness of the early stages of online learning. Most students agreed that their teachers' ability to use the learning technology improved during the remote learning period but teachers only "hit their stride" with remote learning in the last couple of weeks.

"It took me maybe a couple of days but my teachers, even when they had the holidays to work it out, just had no idea how to work it. It was a mess until the last couple of weeks." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"I found the first couple of weeks were a bit clunky but then they started to hit a stride and at the end of it, it was going very well and they had specific spots to upload different sorts of work." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"Some teachers found it easier to use than others. My Maths teacher is also the head of IT at our school, so he had the fastest internet in the world and all these things to make it easier to learn. … it really helped. As opposed to my English Language teacher, she's the best part of 95, so she was always asking people how to use Zoom which took away from the lesson because we were almost spending more time teaching her how to use the program than she was teaching the subject. It was good, it was all just on the one platform but it made it difficult for those teachers that are not the best for using technology." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"For me, it just took one day but for all the teachers to figure out what they were doing and how best to run their classes, they only really figured it out in the last two weeks of doing the online learning stuff." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"One of my teachers didn't know how to use any online stuff. He struggled for a bit. He taught Maths Methods and he never gave us any work. In the end we got three weeks' worth of work." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

Students' use of technology and remote learning software

The remote learning technologies students used most were: Microsoft Teams, Google Classroom, Zoom and Google Meet. A few mentioned that Seesaw was used in primary schools.

"We used Zoom." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"We used Google Classroom and Meet." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"We used Microsoft Teams." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"My school used Google Classroom to get the work across and if they wanted to discuss work or explain something, they would go on Microsoft Teams and we'd have a group chat and ask questions and then we'd break off into little groups as well. (it worked well) because we could have independent chats instead of the whole class... they just put us into little five person groups instead of having the full class of 30. It was more like one-on-one help." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"They introduced Microsoft Teams in the last two to three weeks, which were small groups of children interacting with the teacher. Otherwise it was all uploaded onto an app called Seesaw, there would be the teacher giving a brief five-minute explanation of what they're going to do." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Female)

"They would release the three or four-minute clips on Seesaw of adjectives and comprehension and everything and send home the full timetable for the week." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Female)

"The teacher, she sent a lot of things through. They had a couple of Zoom meetings a week together." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Female)

Most secondary students felt they adopted the remote learning technologies fairly easily. Students who had already been using some of the technology before the lockdown felt this helped the transition to remote learning.

"My school started off using Compass, which is what we used generally anyway. Then some subjects would add things like Microsoft Teams and some of the teachers did Zoom calls ... for the most part it was similar to normal school." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"It would have been easier than if we hadn't been using that stuff already so, for the most part it was pretty easy." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"I was fine. I had no problems. I'm still doing some Zoom classes for a couple of subjects." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"I was fine to adjust. Our school was really well prepared because we already used Google Classroom and everything so they just posted the work there and we just did it. Sometimes they would do a Google Meet and sometimes they wouldn't. So, it was pretty straightforward for us." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

Parents expressed similar views and most thought that, as experienced users of technology, their children adapted quickly to on-line learning.

"I think they've been training for this their whole lives because they're always on their iPads. They were fine." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Male)

"My eldest was ok. He just accepted it, a little bit of engagement." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Female)

"My eldest son adapted pretty quickly to the online classes because.... (he) learned to multi-task pretty quickly. He had Google Meets with his class (and) his teacher." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Female)

A few parents of primary school aged students said their child initially struggled with the technology.

"First few weeks he found it pretty hard, he had some trouble with his Chromebook. In the holidays they told us to come and pick up a Chromebook, they were all allocated one, then there were some issues in Google Meet.... He was struggling to get it all done." (Group 5, Parent, Y3-6, Male)

"She felt very conscious when she was on screen...so the first two weeks was very difficult to try convince her that yeah they're looking, but are they actually looking at every action that you're doing and she was so petrified." (Group 5, Parent, Y3-6, Male)

Some secondary students experienced problems with the fact that software use wasn't consistent across all their classes and was often dependent on what the teacher preferred.

"I found it fine. Most of our teachers got it pretty quickly but they used a few different software so we had Compass and Google, Microsoft Teams. So, it was a bit confusing about where I'm meant to be going and what to use. But once I figured out what each class was using and what you had to do it was pretty easy." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"I got it pretty much straight away and it was pretty easy even though all my teachers were using different things to talk to us but after about two weeks I lost everything. It just stopped and didn't understand anything and I just went okay I just won't do the work." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"It was just whatever the teacher felt like doing." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

Some students, also said they experienced headaches from staring at the screen all day.

Information for schools about available technology and resources

There was some confusion about the provision of technology by the Department. Some Catholic and independent school principals said their parents were under the impression that the offer of hardware like laptops, dongles and iPads was universal and they weren't aware it was limited to government schools.

"The (reports of) devices going out to students, the Minister should have said 'government school students'." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Female)

"The CECV in the last week of term put out an expression of interest for equipment for schools of need, we applied for 20 devices...we received three ... requests for those devices were far greater than what had been supplied to our sector, it was problematic." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Female)

"Dongles, we requested 40, we got one." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Female)

Some independent and Catholic school principals said the government didn't directly inform them about available technology and other remote learning resources.

"(There was) a lag of information for us in the catholic sector. We would have to wait for the information to he directed from the Minister's office to the department...to the catholic education commission then they would disseminate the information to us." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Female)

"The political announcements that came out from the Premier around resourcing only went to government schools. Our parents were ringing in saying 'there's a media release about borrowing computers or dongles' we're going 'we don't have any resourcing for that, we had to play a lot of catch-up. If we go back to that situation it would be worth taking it into account from a whole of education sector point of view." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Male)

Routine, timetables and lesson structure

Mainstream schools

The lesson structure, level of teacher-student interaction and required on-line attendance time varied between schools although many teachers and principals said their schools at least initially tried to retain their timetable.

"We wanted to develop a system that allowed that certainty of what students knew and the timetable but also to deliver that flexibility if you had a family where someone was quite unwell or needy. The timetable stood. We developed a list of 'must, could, should' they must put their lesson plan on Compass, must be there for the first 30 minutes of the lesson." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Female)

"We stuck to our current timetable…. (but live teaching time) was up to us. We were expected to be live initially to take the roll and get kids started then we picked the classes. The VCE kids didn't need you on-line the entire time as long as you were there to shout out questions whereas younger ones, year nines, that was on-line the entire class." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

Often, where secondary schools tried to adhere to the regular timetable, students found the workload excessive.

"It was like they still had the same expectations as they would at school. They were setting the same amount of work and giving the same amount of time to complete it, which I didn't really enjoy because everyone was finding it a lot harder and often the teachers would say 'how are you finding the work? Are we setting too much?' Everyone would always say 'yeah, there's too much work. We need to slow it down'. But they never really did. So, they weren't really being as flexible as I feel they should have or could have been to accommodate the people who were falling behind a little bit." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"They definitely wanted you doing the subject that you were in at that time. They were even holding online detentions. So, if you did something wrong or you weren't doing what you were supposed to be doing, you just sat in a zoom call and did detention things." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

While some schools required teachers to teach 'live' for specific lengths of time, most said the school allowed a little flexibility in this regard. Teachers and principals felt that different types of classes and year levels needed differing amounts of face-to-face time. Private schools tended to have a more structured arrangement with students often connected on-line for the entire day. Most government secondary school students, however, didn't have full-time classes online they tended to use the following arrangement:

- A video check-in for most classes. Some schools were stricter about this than others. This check-in also varied in length depending on the teacher and the subject matter being taught in that lesson.

"We had to check in before 8.45am." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"I wouldn't say structured classes, they had to check in at certain times with their teachers." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Female)

"Depending on the teacher they would decide how often to meet. So, it depended on the teachers when they wanted." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"Most of my classes had a video chat at the start of the lesson …if you had any questions you stay on and if you don't you just complete the work." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"We only had to check in once a week per class." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"We had to check into every class from 8.40am to 3.15pm and if we didn't we got into trouble. It was the same timetable but class would only go for 20 minutes." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"For us it varies, we had a remote learning guide, the minimum expectation was every staff member and kid had to log in at the start of the four scheduled periods every day. Whether they stayed on for the

whole 75 minutes was really lesson by lesson, case by case. The Department had a guideline of two thirds of the normal workload for years seven to 10. We left it up to teachers' judgement. Year 11 and 12 were inclined to stay on for most of the 75 but the seven to 10 a little shorter. (Staff were pretty cooked) but it worked well that structure. We ran all our normal meetings, our assemblies, the lessons the roles were marked every lesson." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Male)

"(My teachers would) have daily check ins. We had to check in as attendance to each class." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"Instead of having our regular class, we would do a five to 10-minute call, we would catch up, depending on the teacher and sometimes we'd break into smaller groups and then we could leave." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"They all had tutor group in the morning, they all had to be there first thing, then each of their classes were Zoomed." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Female)

"It depended on the class for me. My Year 12's I would teach for 40 minutes or talk then remain on (for) the rest of our 100-minute period. PE classes were a little bit easier; we'd set them challenges so that was just a 10-minute meet-up. We found they really appreciated that quick catch-up with their class and their teacher. Year 9's and 10's, 20 to 30 minutes." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

- Provide learning plans outlining the structure and expectations for each week.

  "My teachers would upload weekly plans. The first two weeks we had video calls and gradually we stopped. They just sent us work." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

  "At the start of the week we got work to do for all our classes and would just hand it in on Friday." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

  "We were expected to post all of our lessons by 8:30am … on Google Classroom so the kids saw the whole day all at once. So, if they wanted to do their maths in the morning instead of period five, they were allowed to but they were told their teacher would be available in their scheduled class times…. if they had questions. Sometimes through Google Meet or in the chat function in Google Classroom. That worked pretty well, some kids could fly through everything in the morning and had a little more flexibility in their day. For our seniors we were expected to be available face-to-face by Google Meets for half of their scheduled class time…less for juniors." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

- They were largely left to set their own working hours rather than remaining in contact via Zoom the entire day.

  "We had to say we were there in the morning every morning as attendance but they didn't talk to us much." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

  "They created a 'connect' model, five periods of half an hour…30 minutes where you were expected to be on-line with your teacher face-to-face (on) Microsoft Teams. Outside the half an hour period you were expected to do half an hour of continued learning. It worked quite well. For humanities, we used Education Perfect to monitor who was doing work. When we left it to platforms like Working Notebooks or Google Classroom it decreased." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Male)

  "We had protocols we spent term one trialing. We asked people to stick to those. Every lesson, children had to log in. There was explicit teaching instruction in most lessons and teachers were encouraged to do it in blocks and get the children to do it independently and come back later and touch base. It depended on age group and subject." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Male)

  "In our school, which is a public school, we had lots of frees. So, on some days we wouldn't start 'til 1.45pm It was just the same as my normal day at school." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

  "Yes, I feel like those ones were the best, they were just a quick video and then you got on with your work." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

Some students said the extent to which teachers then interacted with them was teacher-dependent.

  "Some teachers would just send you the lesson plan of what you needed to do and other teachers would be actively trying to guide you through your work." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"Maths and English would go on a call every time. But Geography and History, would be every once in a while, like a once a week catch up. So, it was up to the teacher." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"My school said all VCE classes would be on Zoom and then all other classes were just putting something up on our school hub where all the news comes through and teachers can post stuff on there so they just put recorded videos and set work on that for some of the younger years." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"It was up to the individual teacher. They were all quite different. My Accounting teacher put up YouTube videos to work at your own pace. So, that worked out well for me because I was able to work ahead." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

- They were able to ask questions of the teacher during the lesson time.

   "For us it wasn't (exactly the same as normal), we had to be there for them but we didn't have to be on Zoom. We had to be available for class the whole time so there were different ways. I'd often Zoom for the first 10 minutes and sit and wait for them to email me the work." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Male)

   "We only really had one-on-one zooms if you needed help with something or you had a question and it wasn't something they could just explain in an email. You'd just go on a one-on-one zoom with your teacher and then they'd explain what you're asking about." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

   "They would send an email and we could just tell them if we were struggling and if they thought we were struggling in any of the classes with the reports." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

Most students and teachers felt this approach worked well as the video check-in helped structure the day, the lesson plans provided structure and context for the week, the introductory communication at the start was informative but not overlong, the self-directed learning let students proceed at their own pace and having a teacher available for questions was important in helping students feel connected.

   "I feel like if they didn't do a video call in the morning then I'd just go back to sleep so then I wouldn't have had the motivation to do it at that time." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

   "I would have to get up and then I'd just start." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

It was also apparent that independent schools maintained a stronger connection between students and their school with more comprehensive lesson plans and more on-line class time and face-to-face interaction between teachers and students. Independent schools also seemed to have more continuity in mode of delivery (all VCE classes via Zoom for one private school student) than public schools though, even with more consistency in delivery method, the difference in teacher competency / style was apparent to students.

   "Private schools also probably have the resources to be a bit more diligent with their student attendance and they've got the systems to kind of deliver it a bit better." (Group 5, Parent, Y3-6, Male)

Special school principals

Timetable and student workload

The principals of special schools agreed they couldn't just adapt the full timetable to the remote setting. Some increasingly just checked in, left the students (with parents) to work on the weekly packages with a regular (one to twice weekly) check in from teachers. This meant less and less time on-screen with a teacher.

   "Some students didn't want to be part of a Zoom class…sometimes it was necessary to do individual sessions that really depended on teachers giving up their time to do that at another time." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

"Also, I would try to highlight those students we really knew were struggling and we'd do a later phone call or Zoom session with them just to make sure 'is everything ok, did you have any trouble with that?'." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

"Some students we said 'no, we're going to stop there' because it was stressing people out too much. It was horses for courses so you had to gauge that and take on board what families were saying 'back off' or 'you can ramp this up, they really enjoy particular tasks they've got capacity to do more'. It's just listening to the feedback from parents...everyone's different so we're going to have different expectations." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Male)

The principals identified that younger children (regardless of whether they were on the autism spectrum) were one of the most challenging cohorts.

"In the first lockdown we believed we'd be able to set up a timetable and send that home to students. None of us knew what Zoom was. It worked ok especially for our older students who were in our system for four or five years. The younger ones who need a lot of support, they had a really difficult time. A lot of parents really understood just how much support they needed and how important it was to have someone there with them all the time. You just can't set work and say 'go off and do this'. We ended up Zooming everybody all the time. We'd do things a lot differently next time." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Male)

"Some of the kids in the mainstream schools would often have an assistant one to one with them so it was hard for them to engage via Zoom." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

Student engagement with remote learning

Secondary school students

Many secondary students felt they struggled with engagement during remote learning and some thought the quality of their work declined. Many noted a lack of self-discipline, reduced motivation, a lack of oversight from an adult, distractions at home such as phones and snacks as well as the experience of learning through a screen made remote learning less engaging than in-person learning.

"It took me a solid week. It's so different and there's so much around you at home." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"Definitely less (engaged)." (Group 3, Students, Male)

"Less engaged, I think. I couldn't be bothered and I wasn't motivated." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"I wasn't motivated but that was only with school. I was very motivated to do sports and things." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"I just really struggle with doing work at home because it's just a relaxing space and I just get tempted to go lie on my bed or turn on the tv or go and make a snack." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"Your phone distracts you because it's always near you and you can use it even during classes." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"Phone was definitely a bit of a distractor and YouTube too." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"It took me like a couple days but it was well set up. My phone was a bit distracting." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

Many found it hard to concentrate, particularly for a two-hour live stream class. Consequently, they didn't retain information and, in some cases, felt they needed to then teach themselves what they had missed.

"The worst part was that I didn't feel like I was learning as much because it was easy to get the work done but retaining the information, I felt was harder to do at home." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"I found I wasn't taking any notes of the classes. I would just listen and try to remember it and when it came time to do a test, I wasn't really remembering anything." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"It was bad because for History we would have a two-hour video call and I can't stay concentrated for that long So, I would not take my notes then and have to do it later and it just took more time to do. But it depends on the subject." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"I found in the classroom is easier because sometimes teachers can ramble but sometimes it can be useful, like while they're talking to you while you're working compared to at home where it feels like a harder version of study because it feels like you're teaching yourself." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"I found that I got lots of headaches just staring at the computer all day. I wouldn't want to go outside and exercise because I had a headache. I felt that really impacted my health as well." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

Some principals also noted that lengthy face-to-face video lesson could be draining for students.

"We used video conferencing selectively we used real time learning for all of our seven to 12's...students engaging with teachers daily but not presenting the lessons through video conferencing. We did that where it was going to support the learning goal for that day...we had feedback from other schools that real time face-to-face video conferencing was very exhausting." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Female)

Students agreed it would be more productive if long lessons were broken up or if they could be pre-recorded so students could pause and rewind. Otherwise, some students had to spend additional time after class revising the content as they couldn't keep up.

"Yeah, sometimes she'd go too fast and then you can't catch up and you just give up and stop taking notes." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"It was good having her explain everything but I feel doing notes on time and her just summarising it instead of her going through it all as well." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"At my school, all VCE classes were on Zoom. We didn't have any classes that were just posted somewhere. We had a Zoom at the start of the day, every day at 8.15am but our timetable was adjusted for the online learning. So, on some days I wouldn't have a class until 12pm but I'd still have to wake up for the 8.15am morning zoom, which was sort of annoying because you would think I could have that time to just stay in bed." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

Some secondary students found the transition to remote learning fairly smooth and said they enjoyed learning from home. A few students (and parents) felt that, in the absence of classroom distractions, they were more engaged with learning than they would have been in a regular class.

"I found it fine, I quite enjoyed it." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"Year 12, they were trying to do their SACS, they would usually do it after school monitored...she was still getting work done but in a different way...if anything she could focus more at home...she's pretty self-motivated." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Female)

"I think she quite enjoyed being taught at home than being in the classroom. Alot less interruptions. She likes to be by herself a lot." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Male)

Having a designated (and preferably uninterrupted) study area made a big difference to student productivity and the ability to remote-learn effectively.

"I had a lot of my work on my bed and I didn't leave my room. It was alright." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"I did it on my dining table and it got a bit distracting because my brother was doing it as well. He's in year four so it was very interactive." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"My brother was right outside and he was always talking and getting involved because he's 10." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"I have a younger sister and we sat in our own bedrooms so it wasn't very distracting." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

- Teachers' and principals' views

Teachers and principals indicated that students' success or failure in the remote setting often (but always) followed classroom patterns. For the most part, they thought engaged and motivated students flourished in the online environment, while disengaged students struggled.

"A lot of them were very surprised at how successful it was, particularly for the motivated students, they went ahead in leaps and bounds." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Male)

"I had a really positive remote learning experience I had a few Year 12 classes who were really self-motivated…it made my job a lot easier…we didn't really have to change what we did, we already used Google Science and Google Classroom all the same format. All we added in was Google Meet. It wasn't really that much of an adjustment period which was nice." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

"The ones who struggled…predominantly boys who didn't enjoy sitting down and avoided work, they might be on farms and (said) they didn't have internet which they do…. School just pretty much stopped for them. They go to school to socialise and because they have to." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Male)

"The ones I was contacting at home were the ones who don't do very much in class anyway…. the kids who are reluctant in class just didn't do much at home…They disappeared sort of. In the classroom they're very passive already. It was difficult for their parents to engage them. They're having a tough time too. The older kids I would contact directly and cc their parents in. After a while, contact the year level coordinator, they would try and intervene. There is only so much you can do if they're ignoring you." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

"We found our Year Sevens struggled and they were the ones we were having to chase up. They'd really just started school and we'd thrown them into this whole new world." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

"I found the high (achieving) kids really did well at learning at a distance because they were self-motivated especially in senior school." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Male)

"Losing their travel time and being able to choose when they had their breaks, those kids that are ready to go to uni felt like 'this is really good' and like their teachers were available so they had the best of everything … they got to stay home but they also had support." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

Some teachers and principals noted, however, that a few students reversed the trend with some who normally struggled flourishing in the remote learning environment and a few who were normally high-achievers having trouble adapting to home learning.

"The low (achieving) kids worked really well at my school because weren't afraid to put their hand up they could email and ask." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Male)

Some secondary school teachers thought students who were on the spectrum or reluctant to ask questions at school responded well to the non-classroom setting.

"Some were quite predictable, the ones who were engaged or disengaged, some of the kids on the autism spectrum I found were really engaged, they may not feel comfortable in the maths classroom asking for help but all of a sudden they'll ring me, on Teams just have the audio going and spend hour after hour seeking help." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

"The low (performing) kids worked really well at my school because they weren't afraid to put their hand up, they could email and ask. They started to show a lot of improvement." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

Primary school students

Some parents of primary school students felt that their child's motivation and engagement with learning declined during the lockdown. They agreed it was hard for the child to alter their perception of home to a schoolwork space rather than a play space.

"I'd give both of mine a four (out of 10). Especially my oldest, my eight-year-old, she is generally good at school but it's almost like she'd been dumbed down by having to learn at home. It's like she forgot the simplest things." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Male)

"It would be pretty low in engagement. But it's like anything, your kids are always good for someone else and they're always the naughtiest with you." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Female)

"It also depends on what the subject was. Mine were quite low if it was a subject that they didn't want to connect with and high if it was art or PE. So, I think it depended on what was on the timetable for the day." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Female)

As with secondary students, some high-achieving primary students struggled in the remote learning environment while some who had trouble in class performed better learning from home.

"There were kids who seemed to be up against it in life who absolutely flourished in the remote learning space and kids who come from affluent families who have all the support in the world, who didn't engage as well as we would've expected." (Group 9, Prim Principal, Male)

"We also had some really high achieving kids that flat out refused to do work at home because it was their parents asking, not teachers." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)

"I think a crisis inherently brings out the best and worst in some people, so some families who we expected to really knuckle down and support their children didn't to the extent that we would've expected." (Group 9, Prim Principal, Male)

"The kids you'd expect to struggle really did and it was hard to get in contact with them to give them the assistance they require when parents are uncontactable. Those students did suffer. But in the end, an eight-week period is not going to be the be all and end all." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)

Principals noted some obstacles to primary students' engagement.

"We couldn't actively work with them one-on-one and so (those struggling kids) did not have the means to succeed." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)

"In terms of getting the work done they (Preps and lower years) needed a lot of parent support and quite a lot of families had two parents working or working from home." (Group 9, Prim Principal, Female)

Special school students' engagement

Principals' views

Principals said some students adapted well to remote learning while others struggled.

"All of our students have moderate to severe intellectual disabilities, a lot also have autism and some have physical disabilities. Quite complex needs obviously quite difficult for them to engage in remote learning mainly because they need someone with them full-time to engage with any learning. That was a huge expectation for families so we had to be a bit flexible in what we provided." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

"(We're) in regional Victoria so we don't necessarily fit the criteria for intellectual disabilities, so the remote learning experience has been very mixed and varied. Some of the students really thrived as much as being a little more self-directed, they weren't necessarily following the curriculum as we had set it out. Certainly, many students struggled or didn't engage." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Male)

"We have (a cohort) that don't have significant intellectual disabilities they were the cohort we could do the on-line learning with." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

"We had a few that really enjoyed remote learning they churned through a lot of work. Some connected well with the Webex lessons because they could engage with the teacher one-on-one without all the other distractions that occur in a class room so they actually achieved quite a bit." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

"We're in quite a unique situation being in country Victoria where the incidents (of infection) are much lower than the hotspots... (one campus) we did do the remote learning and that worked very well for

most of the kids. The teachers spent time putting some packages together and it was a good insight for some of the parents about the kid's academic abilities." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

"While some students struggled in the remote environment others thrived but that is no different from the mainstream school." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Male)

Parents' views of their child's level of engagement with remote learning

Many parents of special school students found that motivation was a big problem for their children, especially those prone to defiance. One parent had a child with Pathological Demand Avoidance who didn't do any work and had no support throughout to help manage that. Most parents felt their child did best with one-on-one attention and without it both they and their child struggled.

"I found that getting him to stay motivated was a real issue and getting him to complete things was a real issue." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

"He did need one-on-one literally to get tasks done." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

"Keeping him motivated, trying to keep a structure was challenging. He doesn't like to write a lot." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

"He would do the 'I'm tired, I can't do this. You do it for me' so I think he's been doing that in class." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

"Basically, we did no school because she thought it was a demand." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

One additional positive outcome for some parents of special school students was being able to see a raw perspective of where their child's learning was. Some believed that their school didn't always provide adequate information about their child's progress.

"In some ways he learned more academically than what he would normally." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

"The positives I suppose is that I could actually see where his gaps were which I don't think could've been seen at school, with his academic skills, social skills." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

"You can't hide. It really does shine a light." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

Teachers' impact on students' remote learning

For students, the success of remote learning was largely teacher-dependent, for example, the regularity of interactions, extent of checking work, quality of instruction, engagement with students and the amount of support offered.

- Overall, quality of teaching

  Views varied but overall, students (and parents) tended to think their teachers did a good job under difficult circumstances.

  "I thought all my daughter's teachers were ok, went above and beyond. My daughter does Japanese, her teacher his ex-wife is Japanese they would do Zoom calls for speaking tasks." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Female)

  "The teacher wasn't going to be there for that whole lesson but there was plenty of work set. By the time they're 17 and in Year 12, if they're not self-motivated by then, the teachers aren't at fault." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Female)

  "Teachers have spent tremendous amounts of time and energy on our kids and I have a new found respect for them." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Male)

Some teachers had used innovative approaches to make their classes more engaging in the remote format. Some had continued this approach now that school had returned.

"Instead of me going through a PowerPoint I'd make a video on it and make it interactive. Making sure they're on-line and checking it…that they're there and engaged and asking questions." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Male)

"A lot of teachers found a way to teach that's more effective than the way that they were teaching beforehand, which I've seen continue. A lot of the teachers have changed the way they teach. Like, my maths teacher using a few different devices to be able to teach the lesson better." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

- Teacher engagement/ commitment

Many students felt they needed a teacher checking on them to keep them motivated. They said individual teachers varied in their tendency to do this and some teachers were more motivated, engaged and seemed to care more than others.

"Some teachers would really care about whether you'd done the work or not but some would say 'I'm getting paid whether you do the work or not so it doesn't really matter to me' and then just move on." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"Some teachers replied quickly and others took a week." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"My Psychology teacher was a really good teacher and she was constantly asking us questions so we were engaged." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"They incorporated the different teaching methods into the classes. My Philosophy teacher just rants and talks at you and it's easy to zone out. My maths teacher was really good, it was just a bit different doing it online. My Psychology teacher was good. My English Literature teacher, he was good but he did talk a lot so it was easy to zone out as well." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"I found in maths and history I would keep ahead in them because the teachers would always be checking in. But in geography, they would check in once a week so I'd start to fall behind as I wouldn't be as motivated to be as quick as the others." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"For English, she didn't give much feedback so I wouldn't have to put as much effort in compared to History because she was always giving really detailed feedback." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

Teachers also agreed that if a teacher was motivated, the students were motivated, whether it was via remote learning or at school.

"Probably pretty similar to when we're at school, the context changed. If a kid can tell you're really passionate about your subject area you hook them in." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

- Teachers communication and feedback to parents

While most parents were satisfied with the speed and quality of communication from teachers, a few complained about a communication delay and a lack of feedback to students from certain teachers (rather than the school itself). One parent had checked their child's work on-line and seen no teacher feedback.

"My kids are alright but myself I'm not satisfied with their academic progress because it looks like the teacher gave more work to do but the kids not really follow…the teacher rarely gives feedback. The SACS teacher and maths teacher generally give more tasks to make the kids busy in terms of on-line teaching. The reality is they're not making progress because they cannot check it so they didn't get feedback. I wonder how education is going on. They make tasks but no feedback." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Male)

"The kids found it a bit challenging. If they got stuck on something, they have to send an email to the teacher and it could be an hour or two before they got back to them, that was a pain." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Male)

"I have no interaction with the individual high school teachers all communication was from the school." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Female)

- Students and teachers interacting via video

Teachers and principals mentioned the issue of teachers interacting with students via a video link between their respective homes. Some secondary teachers felt that seeing each other in the less formal setting of their homes created a more relaxed, empathetic and successful learning atmosphere.

"It was quite nice them seeing you at home. The approach that I took was let myself be daggy in front of them, talk about crafts…that made them feel comfortable with the whole on-line classes. Returning to the classroom because we all went through that together there's some new connectedness." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

"You built a different kind of relationship. They got to know the ins and outs…I was going for a surf they asked what the surf was like…. I'm a male teacher in an all-girls school, it's always very important to keep (boundaries there)." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Male)

"Some of the (teacher/ student relationships) have got stronger. That probably comes from seeing them at home, their mum and dad were at home for the same reasons as us, you're seeing (the family) and what things are like for them at home which you don't get at school. Understanding them…what they are like at home, which is nice." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Male)

"It was nice for the students to see you in your own home." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Male)

Others noted ethical concerns with this form of contact, especially if the teacher was speaking to a student in their bedroom. Some government school teachers said there were restrictions on teacher student on-line contact - such as requiring that the teacher and student had someone else in the room with them - which made teaching more difficult and time consuming and was often hard to arrange. Most said their students didn't have to put their cameras on during remote teaching sessions.

"If they were in their bedroom, they weren't allowed to have their cameras on." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

"We weren't allowed to have one-on-one calls. That's what added to my workload because I was making videos of me talking about a question instead of just ringing them. It was a bit of a nightmare. Our principal said 'it's like they're inviting you into their bedroom'." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

"Initially, we got told to ask the student to bring a friend into those meets…they quickly decided no that's fine (one-on-one)." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

"We got told no one-on-one video but you could have one-on-one phone as long as the video was off? We got told it was department policy." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Male)

Independent school teachers said they didn't have quite the same level of restriction.

"We were told we had to always record things." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

"The pastoral stuff we made (one-on-one) calls via Teams." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

"In regards to the one-on-one's we were just told to consider what our backgrounds were. If we were to have a video, 'blur your backgrounds, be conscious of what we're showing in our home'. They were worried if we were on a video in our bedrooms how that would be perceived….be cautious." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

Principals said that they had established protocols to deal with this difficult issue. The principal of a school with many students from disadvantaged backgrounds was particularly wary of the problems of face-to-face online contact.

"We certainly put that in place we have quite a high-risk environment…we had an increase in mandatory reporting during the remote learning because we were seeing inside the homes of our students. We warned our staff about that and did a lot of work with our staff around child safe standards….and made our parents really aware (that) what was seen through the camera in your home is part of the school environment. We had a real hothouse environment and our staff suddenly had a

"We had to address that just before we went to remote learning, we addressed that through policy and practices and sent home instruction to the children about blocking out their bedroom if they were working (there) so no one was in a vulnerable position." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Female)

"In terms of the one-on-one we purposefully kept that going, we had all of our staff doing mandatory reporting...you would stand in a classroom and talk one-on-one at school so that one seemed very important." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Female)

Aspects of learning from home students most enjoyed/found most valuable

- Learning methods and resources

  Videos, online worksheets, streamed lectures and pre-recorded lectures which they could pause and rewind to improve their comprehension were popular with students.

  "We got a lot of pre-made video lectures to walk us through content. It was pretty good. They explained it pretty well. We could do it in our own time." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Male)

  "Voiceover PowerPoints that you could start and stop were good. You could learn at your own pace." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

- Independence

  In general, students appreciated the increased level of trust from their teachers that, in the absence of normal supervision, they would complete the work. This gave students a welcome sense of independence and understanding from teachers. Some students struggled with this independence (see Aspects of learning from home students least enjoyed/ found least valuable).

  "It was more independent. The teachers would send us stuff but then we could do it at our own pace." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Male)

  "I enjoyed them trusting us more." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

  "Instead of having regularly scheduled class, they were kinda like, let's check in and they would trust us to do the work. It was nice, obviously, for younger years it wouldn't work." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

  "I felt like they trusted us a lot more." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

  For a couple, independence meant being independent from other students and the expectation that they would keep up with them academically.

  "I like being really independent and not worrying about being too far behind from my friends." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

- Flexibility

  This trust and independence translated into secondary students often having greater freedom to decide how to allocate time to different subjects and assignments. Consequently, many enjoyed the increased flexibility that came with learning online and some students felt they were more productive when learning at their own pace.

  "I found that if I finished a task earlier, I was able to do work for other subjects which made it a lot better because I could do it during regular school hours." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female).

  "The flexibility really helped." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

  "You could do the work whenever it suited you." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"I kind of broke it up more and I'd just work when I felt like working. So, I could do 40 minutes or 20 minutes but I'd get it all done within the school hours." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"I found it good for school because I got more work done at home. I was able to work more productively because at school, a lot of the stuff the teacher says I don't understand, … because I was able to work in my own time, I could get stuff done earlier. Recess and lunch doesn't exist at home so I was able to knock off earlier." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"It was good because sometimes I like to do things in my own time and I could just take time to write my notes well and just make sure I got it." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"We still had to do the work required and we had a due date but it didn't matter if we did it when the teacher asked or just before the due date. If we did it well, they'd be satisfied." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"I had a lot of my friends say they were less stressed. Being able to work at their own pace." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"The teachers had to be flexible in this time because students had different abilities. Everyone had to be flexible, I mean, we had to stay home, not go to school. I think the flexibility is the thing that made it work." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"I actually preferred it compared to school. I was more productive at home. My teachers were just easier to access online. I just wasn't under as much stress. I could do the work when I wanted." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"It was good to do things in my own time. If I finished and it was lunch time and I wasn't really sick of working I could just keep working and then finish the day earlier. I didn't have to take 45 minutes or an hour for lunch. I could just take 10 minutes and get myself something to eat and just keep doing my work. It was good to be able to just work flexibly." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

- Lower workload (for some students)

Views about students' workload varied. In some cases, students and parents thought it was excessive, particularly if the school tried to replicate the regular timetable. Some students thought, however, that, as part of being more flexible, teachers recognised the unusual and potentially stressful circumstances of remote learning and imposed a lighter workload.

"It was a very light work load." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

Some of the teachers gave us less work because they knew it was really difficult." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"I really liked the pacing for my classes. It was spread out, not much work." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"I didn't have homework out of school hours and in lockdown our teachers didn't really set any because they wanted to reduce our workload. I'm getting a lot more done now." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"They didn't give us as much work as they normally would because they knew that the time was really stressful. They just gave us enough workload for that class. They would set us the work at the start of the class and … whether you chose to do that work or not was up to that person." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"Usually, I get my work done straight away but I was falling behind during quarantine so they were very understanding and saying 'just get it done'." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

- Personal freedom

Most students also enjoyed sleep-ins, later starts, easy access to food as well as freedom to take breaks when they needed.

"You could just get up during class and get something to eat." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"Having easy access to food. It was easy to go to the cupboard to get something to eat. You didn't really have to think about preparing lunch the night before or anything because it was all just down there and you can just go grab it." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"The best thing was being able to do things in your own time and easy access to food. When you're in class you get peckish and when you're at home it's easier to grab a piece of fruit or some chips or something." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"For me, the most enjoyable was definitely sleeping in and my coffee." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

- Collaborative peer experience

"One of my classmates set up a Discord with a channel for every class so we could do work from that subject together. There were about 40-50 kids on there. It was really helpful." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"Some of my friends would call and ask for help with subjects." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Male)

- More efficient use of time

Some students felt that learning from home was more productive and "to the point" and commented about how much "wasted time" there was in usual school hours (getting to and from class, general chatting, lunch times etc).

"I'm doing a lot more work and have been using all my school hours to do my work so I don't really have homework. So, that's good, I feel like I'm learning a lot more. A lot of time is wasted in class talking and messing about. I did my work a lot quicker when I was at home." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"The good thing with online learning was that you didn't have to move from class to class. There was no wasting time having to go from one classroom to another. That was the only good thing really because the rest of it was lack of motivation. You were more exhausted." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

Aspects of learning from home students least enjoyed/found least valuable

- Lack of motivation/ discipline

Most students struggled with a lack of motivation while learning from home (for most this was around school work while for others it was general lack of motivation during pandemic restrictions). For some students, lack of motivation stemmed from a sense of disconnect from 'normal' school (difficulty studying when at home and not in school uniform, no sense of divide between school and home/free time, lack of differentiation between week days and weekends).

"I think because you're not seeing your friends every day, it's all artificial and doesn't feel real and you don't have the same connection. It doesn't click the same." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"I figured I could do my work really quickly and finish before school finished and then I'd have more free time so I started to do my work really quickly and not very well. So, I kind of started slacking a lot towards the end." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

Students reflected that their lack of motivation was largely a result of an absence of student-teacher interaction in the form of follow up, checking work, or setting clear expectations. The absence of face-to-face interaction with teachers meant reduced accountability with many students less likely to submit or complete work to a high standard (easier to hide and avoid teachers).

"That's what I really like about being face-to-face, I have to be physically doing the work and they'll come around and check that I'm actually doing the work whereas in quarantine they would email me

and say 'so how are you going? This is due tomorrow'. I haven't even started it and I'd say 'yep, I'm all good'." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"It's just easier to be able to get up and go and get something to eat or just go see what other people are doing or just distract yourself and there was nobody there to say 'keep working' or 'what are you doing?'. So, it was just easier to switch off and do whatever you wanted." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

Still, students said they felt motivated when teachers set clear expectations and made the effort to touch base with them. Year 12 students who had to do SACs and assignments generally said they remained motivated.

"I wasn't getting anything in on time if I didn't have a teacher checking." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"The teachers didn't talk to us much. They didn't force us to do work." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"I lacked heaps of motivation being at home. Having a teacher keeping me on case, I prefer." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"Keeping a close eye keeps me more motivated and I have to do it." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Male)

Students said their peers had varying experiences of remote learning although they generally appeared to reflect theirs.

"Yeah, pretty much the same." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

When asked if they were sharing their experience of remote learning with friends and peers, students mostly said it came in the form of complaining or sharing a sense of a lack of motivation.

"In general, there was a lot of complaining about the work load and the stress." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"Personally, I was okay, but I had some friends who procrastinated a lot and then felt really burdened at the end. They complained and vented to us." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

Students agreed that a lack of motivation was "contagious" and reported that when they knew their peers weren't doing much work or motivated for school they weren't either.

"My friends haven't been very motivated in doing work either." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"Once one friend's not doing much, we all followed." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

- Distractions

Contributing to a lack of motivation for school work were the myriad distractions at home, particularly phones and other devices. All students acknowledged this, but only one had a strategy for managing this distraction.

"I had to put (my phone) in my brother or sister's room." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"It felt more tiring being at home and when you've got your phone right there all the time…just off screen and the teacher won't really know, you find yourself being distracted a lot more. At least in class, although it might suck if a teacher takes your phone, it sort of keeps you on track and keeps you organised." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

By contrast some of the parents thought that being at home removed some distractions.

"They could be nattering in class…here they're just focused more." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Female)

- Harder to access teachers

Some students felt they needed more one-on-one help with certain subjects and that was more difficult using the various on-line methods than it would have been face-to-face in class.

"The most challenging thing for me was communication with my teachers. They try to explain it to you over an email and you might still not understand it. So, face-to-face communication is a lot easier when you're at school." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"It was very difficult to communicate and to stay on topic in any of my classes. I fell behind really far and I've only just managed to catch up this week." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"Even though we had the Google Meets (etc.) it wasn't the same and no matter whether they tried explaining it over email or Google Meets I just didn't understand some of it." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"It's better to do the subject while the specialist teacher is in the classroom so if you have any troubles you can just ask them and they'll help you." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"I had a block of eight SACs … I was motivated to get them done but I did find doing SACS at home challenging because you not only have to print it out and upload it but there's a lot of stress added. That was reflected in my results not too badly but enough to realise that I benefit from being reassured by my teacher and the more one-on-one time with my teacher." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

Some parents also said their child found it difficult not being able to interact with teachers.

"She loves that little bit of extra time with teachers and I think she missed that rapport with teachers. Because it was a Zoom call it was like 'Ok class you can go now'. If it was in a class, she might hold back a couple more minutes, talk to the teacher." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Female)

Some, however, thought this reduced access to teachers was beneficial as it made them more self-directed in their learning.

"Some of my teachers would help face-to-face really well and they did well also with online learning but some weren't really there to help and it was frustrating but there's nothing you can do about it. You just had to teach yourself or do it yourself or find someone else that could help you." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

The experience of teaching remotely

The success of remote teaching

Views varied and people mentioned a number of concerns but overall, teachers and principals saw remote teaching and learning as a success. Some were surprised at how successful remote learning was although they were still glad to have students back in the classroom.

"Overall, the experience was very positive in terms of the learning and teaching." (Group 9, Prim Principal, Female)

"I'd say that the remote learning experience in all for our school has been extremely positive." (Group 9, Prim Principal, Female)

"We all expected high levels of anxiety and that virtual learning would be pretty substandard (it wasn't). Having said that (now) it's finished … we're back at school, it was long enough." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Male)

"At the start I was stressed then it got pretty more relaxed. I've got mainly secondary students and they were self-motivated and it really forced me to get creative. We had a fair bit of time to prepare but with technology nothing ever works smoothly, getting into the groove and getting students to log on and find everything took time." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Male)

"I feel like the kids got more used to it…(particularly) the more senior students, years 11 and 12…it got better, we adapted." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

Principals at special schools said some teachers had learned a new appreciation for being in a classroom with students.

"A lot of people have found there's a lot of things they take for granted and it's just reminded them how important it is with the comprehension of instructions to see someone in a room and look at their body language. Over a Zoom call sometimes you just can't see those things whereas in a classroom you can." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

Some principals were very surprised and pleased at the high levels of attendance during remote learning. Many noted attendances of over 90% including children normally seen as 'refusers'. The principals weren't certain why this was and felt it should be explored further and that it warranted elements of remote learning continuing now students were back at school.

"We did have a very high attendance rate when it came to Google Meets and Google Classrooms." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Male)

"Our attendance during the virtual classroom was the highest we've ever had, nearly 100% everyday including school refusers, children on the autism spectrum, some unexpected bonuses." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Male)

"We had 98-100% attendance everyday which we wouldn't normally have at this time of the year if they were really coming to school so that was really impressive." (Group 9, Prim Principal, Female)

"We counted up every lesson and we had 98% attendance to our classes, which we'd normally get 94% on a normal day." (Group 9, Prim Principal, Male)

Barriers to the success of remote learning

For many teachers (particularly primary) the success or failure of remote teaching was dependent on the willingness and capacity of parents to assist their child's learning. Teachers acknowledged that some parents struggled to balance work and home-schooling. Language barriers, socio-economic disadvantages and troubled backgrounds also contributed to remote learning difficulties for children.

"One of the biggest struggles were single parent families, who were working from home and also supervising and helping their students. Quite often we had to really explicitly tell them what to do each day than just give them a planner." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)

"A lot of parents at our school don't speak much English, so trying to get them to help was hard when they couldn't understand them themselves. So, it left our year fours to teach the four or six-year-olds." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)

"There are kids who do really well but when their parents were working, they weren't very independent and they struggled." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)

"Student engagement was pretty high, but again, you get a bit of mix and you notice the kids who weren't as high that didn't engage. It was usually a bit of the background with the family being low socio-economic and parents not being able to help. Not understanding." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)

"A lot of our family demographic was single parents or split families, a lot of trauma. Kids that have a lot of issues already mentally. We just wanted to make sure we got them through. If there was added pressure learning from home, we didn't want to make family life harder." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)

"In addition to learning needs not being met for some different students, there were quite a few families under severe financial pressure because of COVID. Their heightened anxiety I think fed into the children. I think it impacted their ability to learn and interact." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)

"I like to think I know my students and how they learn. So, I had this idea of how it was going to work. But those external factors that were out of my control (that impacted their engagement) was difficult. I don't factor in a parent's situation into my lessons." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)

"We had some families who wouldn't get involved but those who did, began to excel." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)

Some teachers felt that it could be difficult to match parents' expectations of the sort of learning their child would receive as their views were based on what occurred in a regular classroom.

> *"The school over the last few years has had high achievers. So, parents put a lot of pressure on their children, and I dare say a few of them are controlling in that manner and took it into their own hands." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)*

> *"(Parents) have their own social circles and are comparing what's happening at other schools and coming back to us and saying 'why aren't we doing this?'." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)*

> *"The parents were harder to deal with." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)*

Some teachers noted how the experience of teaching remotely differed from their expectations.

> *"I thought I'd be teaching my kids face-to-face a lot earlier than I ended up doing. I wasn't a big fan of calling parents and spending so much time talking to them. I'd much rather be speaking to the children and helping them directly. The early few weeks differed to what I thought would happen." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)*

> *"I planned and thought it would be the whole term." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)*

A few secondary teachers noted that certain subjects were much more difficult to teach remotely.

> *"Most of the subjects I teach are practical and that was a bit hard, not all of them could engage fully, some were upset about it." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Male)*

> *"Some kids in maths I found really challenging." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)*

> *"That was probably my biggest struggle with Maths. Being able to go to my maths teacher during lunch time and asking her if she can do it with me again is better than trying to get her to explain it over an email." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)*

Teachers' workload

While experiences varied, most teachers said that, as schools initially tried to adjust to the remote learning format, the workload for teachers increased considerably and was often quite stressful. Some felt the remote learning arrangement made aspects of teaching, such as checking and marking work, more difficult and meant they were working much longer hours. Also, schools that tried to stay with their current timetable and have teachers teaching 'live' the entire lesson often found this was too much for both teachers and students. In addition, some schools required teachers to take on a much bigger pastoral care role and to frequently check on students which also added to their workload.

> *"I (taught) Year 12 classes amongst a heavy VCE load as well as a pastoral role. So, I was working 15 hours a day. It was just relentless…exhausting. A lot of the work you normally do in the classroom that you don't necessarily pick up on such as walking around the classroom seeing how the kids are going and now asking them to submit it. Also, you can't count on the kids all having printers so they're answering their test in all different formats…you try and mark off the screen and that took a lot longer so assessments, that would normally take an hour to mark were taking two to three hours." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)*

> *"There's not as much discussion. On a pastoral level I found it really challenging not being able to keep an eye on kids who'd you'd normally just watch in the room, so that's adding to the workload too." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)*

Special school principals also spoke of the sudden increased workload for teachers and other staff at the beginning of remote learning.

> *"Initially, the workload was huge then it probably dropped back to more like a normal workload but I wouldn't say there was even a reduced workload. It varied from staff member to staff member. It would depend on some of the parents too. Some teachers would have parents that were really needy and that was quite stressful for them." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)*

Because of these concerns, schools felt they needed to adjust their expectations. Those that were initially strict about face-to-face time became a little more flexible (especially if teachers had children at home). They refined the process and listened to feedback from teachers (as well as students and parents) and tried to reduce teachers' workload to a more manageable level. Some teachers said that stressed staff were reassured that they shouldn't expect the same amount of work from students in the remote setting. Similarly, some primary schools had told parents not to become too worried if their children didn't finish everything on time.

"I found it was harder (workload). Because, as we were making our classes, we were still learning how to deliver it. So, we were spending a lot of time trying to figure out those issues. At the beginning I was spending 8am to 5.30pm on the computer. Towards the end, I was able to manage it a bit more." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Female)

"The first few weeks it was full on, all day all evening. The last few weeks flowed a lot more. Over time it died down because we would offer an hour of Zoom for questions which would only ever have maybe three kids. So, we could use that hour as extra planning time." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)

"Around week four, I said, I'm not doing so well. I said I can't keep on top of these bloody Seesaw posts and she said, 'don't worry about it'." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Female)

"Our minimum requirement was to only give feedback to 10 students a day. There were those teachers who worked too hard and did too much and the school came back and said 'you only have to do 10, if you do more that's on you'. They were worried about our mental health. We're lucky to have a supportive parent group that allowed that as well." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)

"For the most part we were expected to remain on, at the start they were pretty rigid with that we had to be on at the exact time for the whole time but for people with kids that was just about impossible. So, they got a bit better at allowing people to be more flexible but it was still expected that, if you were able to, you should be conferencing every lesson. The Year 12's really appreciated that you were on with them for a good chunk of time." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

"Some staff were loving it and taking on the flexibility and others who were feeling really overwhelmed we had to (say) 'don't expect the same amount of work that you would in a classroom'. We had to give staff permission, 'if you've got a 50-minute lesson a 30-minute task was ok at home. Take the small win'…Some staff were contacting home after every lesson if they didn't get the work done and families were getting overwhelmed. Once people realised they weren't expected to get through the same curriculum (they) settled into it a bit more." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

"I had a very positive experience in terms of online learning. They use a 'connect' model where you're only teaching directly an hour-and-a-half a day. Every Wednesday was a 'Wellbeing Wednesday'. At the start, a lot of panic because I didn't know the students, I wasn't able to gauge reactions…but workload reduced by 50-60% (the model) worked quite well, it didn't overload the students." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Male)

Principals also talked about the ways they tried to minimise the workload and stress for teachers.

"Our teachers ran four and a half hours a day of on-line face-to-face classes. So, our teachers and support staff were nearly done by the time we came back." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Male)

"By the end their staff were pretty cooked the demand was pretty high…To delineate the home and the work life we really encouraged staff to log off every afternoon and we sent out messages on a weekly basis to parents and kids to say 'if you send a message at night through Microsoft Teams, that's fine but don't expect a response until business hours', We did have some staff that were getting sucked into working an extra four or five hours every night." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Male)

"Even though it was very exhausting for the staff they were still able to identify small wins in that they weren't doing yard duties and the travel was gone….I think the staff who were exhausted were the ones who didn't stick to the protocols we had in place which was at the maximum start your class with a five to 10 minute interaction, set the work up with goals and then let the kids go (then) meet up with them (with) five minutes at the end to touch base…Kids could come in and out of the Google Classroom to get any extra help. Some teachers couldn't let go of the class…we had to educate those people that it's not a classroom and you shouldn't be talking that much anyway." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Female)

"For the last class each week there was to be no new work but to allow kids to consolidate the work…that made a huge difference, a circuit breaker for students and staff." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Female)

"Another good strategy we used (was) activity days, we blocked out all of the normal learning and a special team of staff who would normally be planning camps, planned these days. That meant the teachers got a day when they weren't face-to-face, we found that really helped with morale, teachers could have the day to plan or correct. The children really loved it, just fun things." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Female)

"The staff found that we were overambitious with trying to reach the students every week for conferencing in literacy and numeracy, so we tapered that off and worked around that and felt we got our groove around the third or fourth week of it." (Group 9, Prim Principal, Male)

Support from parents and the school community

Teachers derived a lot of satisfaction from seeing their students learning and developing and were very encouraged by the expressions of gratitude from both parents and other teachers for the work they did in delivering remote learning.

"I loved the engagement of the children but I particularly loved it when parents would engage as well. Some of the tasks were improvisation or mime and I loved watching the parents learning with their children." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Female)

"(People) were really thankful. There were lots of really positive comments." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Female)

"The best part for me was getting the videos from the kids who did the lessons. You put time and effort in and they would bring back something you could see working." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)

"There was a greater sense of gratitude to everyone. Parents got a sense of what our day is and we got a sense of what parents were going through. It just made everyone more connected and grateful." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Female)

"The great thing for me was comments from parents about how mature the kids were. I thought they were amazingly resilient anyway but their grasp of technology and knowing how to use it was far better than many parents. Seeing their kids use them easily helped them see the kids as young adults." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)

Similarly, many principals felt that the remote learning experience had unexpectedly forged a greater sense of cohesion in the school community.

"We had an incredibly positive experience of the community coming together and understanding each other more. Our community feels now closer than we've ever felt." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Female)

"We didn't expect to get the level of support that we did, I've never received so many positive emails, a tsunami of really deeply appreciative and quite emotional emails from parents. It's really connected our school community in ways we never expected. Counter-intuitive to what we were all anticipating." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Male)

"It's been about community, it's been about connection…and communication we found that being able to communicate effectively to our school community from one voice (e.g. principal) really helped us provide the care, support and trust that families were wanting." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Male)

"In general, the feedback from parents was extremely positive, so that was reassuring." (Group 9, Prim Principal, Female)

"The parents couldn't thank us enough, they sent us flowers, they put on morning tea, having people out in the community cook for us. I think they realise what a wonderful job teachers do, that our school has done, and I don't think they've every appreciated us more." (Group 9, Prim Principal, Female)

Support from leadership teams

Most teachers felt supported by their school's leadership teams. This was due to the aforementioned flexibility with timetabling and workload expectations and because principals and the school's leadership teams were clearly concerned about teachers' wellbeing (see Mental health and wellbeing). Some teachers thought the circumstances created more comradery between staff.

> *"Our school was fantastic, the big issue teaching in the last couple of weeks was your expectations have to adjust...although we expect to have two pages of work completed by the student that's not going to happen. When the leadership gives you flexibility with that, that eases a lot of stress." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Male)*

> *"I felt supported. We had some good initiatives some staff meetings, people felt that that they were connected with their planning times happening remotely. When that message came from leadership to not be so hard on ourselves that really helped people." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)*

> *"They still ran PDs for staff. They tried to keep it as normal as possible just knowing we were all going through the same thing that was the biggest thing." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)*

> *"One positive thing about our leadership team was they were clear on their expectations. We weren't to answer student or parent emails after hours." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)*

> *"We had a lot of teacher's aides doing those extra tasks calling parents and doing admin. Our principals were absolutely fantastic. They went out to homes, dropped off computers, visiting to make sure it was going smoothly. We had our whole team behind us." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Female)*

> *"I found within our departments we became a little bit closer and for new staff members there was more of a bond. You'd call each other more than you'd (normally) walk to their office." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)*

Few mentioned areas where support was lacking although one thought their school leaders could have done more hands-on help with students and a couple mentioned communication issues.

> *"Helping us get ready for lessons they were pretty good but on-site they could've done a bit more. We only had a principal in three days a week and our deputy didn't go in at all. The teachers on duty, it was up to them to supervise. A few of my friends were teachers at other schools, the leaders did all the supervision and yard duties so they didn't have to go in. So maybe a bit more of that. Because it was stressful being in there trying to Zoom with your class, trying to get a break and also watching kids." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)*

> *"Leadership made a few big errors...communicating with parents, for example, before staff. That doesn't have a positive impact on staff and wellbeing. We were finding out through the grapevine key information." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)*

> *"Overall, I felt pretty supported but at the start … it was ironic they were emailing us all through the holidays to make sure we were aware of our wellbeing…'stop sending me emails about 20 different programs you want me to use'. They got better and they had good intentions. They put in rules about 'let's try not to email each other outside of school hours, try to use Teams so you don't get 100 emails a day…they put out the same volume of stuff they would normally say to us but it was all emails and it got a bit overwhelming." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)*

Parents' involvement in child's home schooling and online learning

Parents of primary school students

- How parents coped with trying to teach their children at home

Many parents (particularly those of children in prep to grade two) found home-schooling very difficult and even distressing as they didn't feel they were equipped to teach their child. Trying to work from home while home-schooling made the situation even more demanding.

"Remote learning for us was awful. I was never destined to be a teacher. It was hard work. My son and I just fought because he didn't want to do it and I couldn't help him with everything because I'm in and out of meetings and at that age, it's not like he's in grade 4 or 5 where he can go off, read a question and answer it. He needs a lot of explanation." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Female)

"I had to do the whole lesson with him. Me being the teacher, it was blurring the lines of parents and having to discipline ... I would be emailing the school saying 'what are you doing here, you're killing me. Give me some help'. I did get a little bit of things coming through towards the end but it was just horrendous. I'm paying about $25,000 a year for the school that he's at. So, I'm not happy." (Group 7, Parent, Early Prim, Female)

"It was super difficult. My grade two child is very routine driven and needs direction and needs her friends, her social network around her. Her and I were having yelling matches at the beginning and I just got to the point where I said to the teacher, we can't go on like this, she was sitting there doing her work crying." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Female)

"You're being the teacher as well as the parent and there's no way any child can learn from their parents as well as they could learn from their teacher. It was really difficult." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Female)

"The other thing that worried me in the beginning was being able to teach them the way that the teachers teach in the classroom. I learnt math a lot different to how they teach in the classroom now so it was all a learning curve for me as well." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Female)

"When it came to the curriculum stuff, if I didn't sit down with him, he wouldn't do it." (Group 5, Parent, Y3-6, Male)

"It was quite stressful for us in the first few weeks." (Group 5, Parent, Y3-6, Male)

"The key factor is parent availability rather than delivery mechanism. If you were busy working your kid would have no chance in most cases. You can't expect a kid to sit at a screen." (Group 5, Parent, Y3-6, Male)

"I wouldn't be able to do it if I was working from home." (Group 5, Parent, Y3-6, Female)

"I found it hard for a preppie to sit behind a computer screen, their attention span is about one second." (Group 5, Parent, Y3-6, Female)

Teachers with younger children at home also found teaching from home very difficult.

"At the start I really enjoyed it and I felt invigorated about having a lot of time to plan and do things. But I have three young boys at home who needed a lot of time. I couldn't meet the needs of my own children because we ran off the timetable and I had to be on at certain times. If I was teaching a lot I really struggled. By week three it really hit. My kids had no face-to-face teaching, just emails so they needed a lot of help...it was a nightmare." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

"I didn't have the planning that everyone else did...when I had live classes it was so stressful because I've got a one year old at home...I'd be in a class and she'd be calling out. I (only) had to do a handful (a week). Any more, I don't know how I'd do it." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

A few parents of primary school aged children thought they had successfully home-schooled their child and found the experience of spending more time with them quite enjoyable.

"I had an online Zoom with the teachers and they noted he'd improved over the lockdown but that was just basically because of the work that I put in." (Group 7, Parent, Early Prim, Female)

"It was difficult at the start because it was totally new and we had no idea what we were getting into but as the weeks went past my wife got the hang of it and got into a rhythm of getting things done and she did a great job. It was difficult, especially with a two-year-old and nine-month-old child living at home by herself." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Male)

"The first couple of weeks I was sitting with him and getting everything done, it was great. By about week three we got a bit sick of it, but we enjoyed it overall, it was a good experience." (Group 5, Parent, Y3-6, Female)

- Workload and expectations

Many primary school parents thought that, initially, the workload for children (and by default, parents) was too heavy. They felt the school had not adequately adjusted their expectations to account for the problems of children learning from home and being taught by parents working from home. At that stage, parents were stressed because they thought they still needed to keep up with the curriculum.

"We all felt like we were a failure if we didn't do everything." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Female)

"We found out two weeks into remote learning that the teachers were sending through more work than the kids had to actually complete but they failed to notify us. We were doing everything they sent and we were online from nine until about five 5 and I got no work done. So, it was a disaster." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Female)

"At the beginning it was 'you won't have to teach your child, you're not a teacher'. But we were sent all this stuff on Compass...(and) told to print off and go online (etc.). There's no way you can tell a grade two child, this is all your work for the day, I'll see you in a few hours." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Female)

"School had daily online classes and there was much more work to do (than their previous school), which was of course stressing my son out even more." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Female)

"They said 'it's okay, relax, you don't have to do all the work, do what you can' but they would have big check-in Zoom meetings every morning and talk about all the work they'd done. So, it was like, it doesn't matter that we're not doing all the work but then you go and talk about it and if your child hasn't done it, they're upset and they think they're going to get in trouble." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Female)

Some principals said overly eager teachers were creating a heavy workload for students.

"We found that, despite our pleas and despite reminding people every second day to stop doing too much content or completely take assessments out, we found that some just couldn't do it and that was overwhelming some of our students." (Group 9, Prim Principal, Male)

Some parents thought independent schools put more pressure on students to complete work.

"I was deeply traumatised from the experience of home-schooling with my eight-year-old. He goes to a private school. I had an issue with the fact that it was a one size fits all approach. He gets some assistance at school, he's in a Literacy Enhancing Program and the expectation was for him to complete the class standard work and he was in tears, I was in tears. It was all too much.... I felt like I was his full-time integration aide." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Female)

Some parents felt that because they had to dedicate so much time to their primary school-aged children, younger and older children were neglected, which was a source of guilt.

"My toddler was sort of left unfortunately, I just threw food at him and he watched TV. I couldn't really do anything else with him because I was concentrating on the other two." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Female)

"We found it really difficult, especially not having a routine. My daughter thrives on routine and at home the distraction level was huge. When the three-year-old is running around and yelling for food... you just put on the TV to distract them. They said you can't leave a seven-year-old in a room by themselves with all the information. They have to be near you, which means that they're near the other kids as well while they are trying to learn." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Female)

Many parents eventually decided it was not worth the stress of trying and keep up with the curriculum and simply had their child do what they could within a reasonable time frame.

"At the beginning we tried really hard but we became really laxed. She reads a lot so that was okay, I wasn't worried about that." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Female)

"We did what we could and touched on a few things and then by the end of it we knew school was going back in two weeks and it ended up as extended school holidays, the last two weeks. It just wasn't worth the stress for everyone… I don't feel guilty about it at all because everyone was trying their best, you can only do what you can do." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Female)

"It was really daunting. Especially at first, a shock to the system and we actually found very early on that we weren't going to let it overwhelm us completely. We decided that as long as they were doing some of the daily tasks, that was fine. Because my wife was trying to work as well, it was literally impossible for both to do all of the tasks the school set them on a daily basis. We did get special approval from the school to send them back earlier because it was just not working." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Male)

Consequently, most parents felt that, despite the difficulties their child's education had still effectively stayed on track. They tended to think that primary school age children (particularly prep to grade two) had an opportunity to catch up if needed.

"I don't think that he fell behind in anything. Everyone in their class were at the same level regardless of the amount of work they did. Grade 2, cool, he's not going to become the Prime Minister tomorrow, so, it wasn't imperative that he did everything but he was still doing his reading. He wasn't falling behind and I'm pretty happy with how he progressed." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Female)

"We've got about 40 outstanding tasks we didn't end up getting done but I just said if she's happy and she's in grade 2, I don't think in the long term it's going to make a huge impact." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Female)

"I don't think it's going to have an ongoing effect on her." (Group 5, Parent, Y3-6, Female)

Some parents (and teachers) said their school responded to concerns about children not being able to keep up, acknowledged parents' differing capacities to home school their child and recommended they just do what they could. They agreed that it would be useful for schools to convey this attitude to parents should we go into lockdown again.

"I've been a lecturer all my life, I've taught adults and businesses and when I had to teach my kid, I realised teaching adults is much easier than sitting with a kid who is in prep. I did feel a bit of guilt every now and then for not being able to finish his work but I'd called up his teacher and had a chat with her and she said everyone is in the same boat so we just went with the flow." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Male)

"With our school they ended up doing essential and beneficial tasks. So, it was like the smarty pants parents that were excelling had extra work and people like me just did the essential tasks." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Female)

"My experience was quite positive …We did have good communication from the school initially and that was try and get that essential one done …but don't stress if you don't. Have fun with your kids. Relax with your kids and if it's sunny, go outside. (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Female)

"Our school did a reasonably good job of conveying that from the start, so credit to them. We said very early in the piece 'this isn't completely doable. We did have some fears allayed by the school as well. That was helpful and then we didn't stress out too much about the content." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Male)

"They… said 'you aren't a teacher but do your best'." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Male)

"We (said) 'here's your work and if it's not done, that's not a big deal. As long as you can get to the Zoom 30 minutes', that was what we focused on just taking at least something away for the day." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)

Some teachers who taught specialist subjects such as art, PE and languages in primary schools felt that, because their subjects were a little harder to physically deliver online, they were not considered real teaching, were downgraded and the teachers were treated as a spare resource.

"In the first two weeks, the parent feedback was that they just weren't able to keep up with the amount of work that teachers were delivering. So, the decision was made, without consultation, that remote

learning would happen Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and that they would put all specialist classes on Wednesday. I knew … they would think the real learning was (the other days) and that Wednesday was a day off. About 50% engaged with the specialist classes (music/drama, P.E, language and art) because it was sold as an optional extra." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Female)

"Our specialist teachers I felt for them, because I felt like they were almost doing double the work. They were organising daily activities for art and P.E and French, which were optional, but needed to be prepared. In addition, they were supporting the year levels where teachers volunteered to come in to help on-campus students. They had to do that classroom role as well." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)

- The amount of remote learning available to primary school students

Some parents, including a few who had both primary and secondary school aged children felt that one of the main issues for parents trying to home-school was that there was comparatively little remote learning offered to primary school students. They felt this placed the onus of teaching on the parent and they would have preferred the teacher to be on-line engaging with the class and being there to answer questions for longer periods.

"Primary school there was none online. Once a week they'd have a call for 15 minutes so the kids could connect but other than that the teacher would just put on Seesaw, a primary school application, upload the work to be done for the day and I had to sit with him from nine to 2:30, 3pm…it was a nightmare. Anyone with a primary school kid it was the same feedback." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Female)

"I would have so much preferred a scenario where there was a teacher having a classroom conversation with the kids. It was difficult…to tell the kids to put themselves on mute … but it would have been good to have that explanation with the kids. They had a recorded video for most tasks but if they had questions who do they ask? They're not going to get an instant response and I'm no help when it comes to a lot of things to do with English because it's completely different to what I learnt." (Group 7, Parents. Early Prim, Female)

"We had experience with two different schools … the first school was no contact at all and the second school there was online learning, it was far better for the kids to have that daily connection with their teacher." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Female)

"(Also) how they structured, they didn't have the full class there, the teacher picked a time and had half the class and then later they also had the other half … so they could have more interaction. I found it really beneficial for my kids to be able to have that daily contact with their teacher, with other students. It was necessary for them to still feel a part of their schooling experience." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Female)

"The online learning was not as accessible to the younger year levels." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)

- Communication and information from the school

A few primary school parents thought the main struggle was starting and adapting to the new norm and they didn't understand what they were meant to be doing. They thought their school hadn't provided enough information as to what was expected each week.

"For me it was not knowing what was expected. As a parent, I found it challenging. There was a lot of interaction between my child and her teacher but I was out of the loop until I was told she hadn't done everything. It would've been nice to be on the same page from the start." (Group 5, Parent, Y3-6, Female)

Other parents, particular those with children at smaller schools, enjoyed a better experience. As the teachers were more available for direct communication with students and parents, they felt they were in the loop.

"Our school communication was pretty good, we're a small school so a lot of the teachers would always check in on us. It isn't just handing the work in on Seesaw, they would also call at least once a week to see if everything's ok." (Group 5, Parent, Y3-6, Female)

"The experience I had with our school was that the communication was very clear, as to what the expectations were of our kids but also regular feedback about where they were at." (Group 5, Parent, Y3-6, Male)

"It was very clear communication, as opposed to when they're in the face-to-face environment, you don't get that clarity as often and as clearly." (Group 5, Parent, Y3-6, Male)

"The communication has been great so I've had no problems with the homeschooling situation." (Group 5, Parent, Y3-6, Female)

"I think they've done a really good job." (Group 5, Parent, Y3-6, Female)

"My boy's at a small school so I think that really helped us that ours was really tailored and wasn't using Seesaw, we had a lot of communication with the teachers." (Group 5, Parent, Y3-6, Female)

Some of the principals said they had actively tried to keep in contact with parents. They thought it was vital for students' success in online learning as they found a lot of the stress came from the parents rather than students.

"Communication was a big key thing. I was communicating probably everyday as we were going into closure … two or three times a week, even if there was so news to report…Parents reported they enjoyed having all that communication it made them feel connected." (Group 9, Prim Principal, Female)

- Parents attitude toward their child's school and teachers

Despite all the stresses of home-schooling, most parents acknowledged that their child's primary school and their teachers did a remarkable job trying to reorganise and teach remotely in such a sudden and unexpected situation as a pandemic.

"I reckon it was tough for them but at our school they did a stand-up job for the most part. Except them not telling me to take it easy if you can't do it until I spoke with the teacher. But otherwise, they did come up with an info pack with a lot of activities to do over the few weeks coming up. I don't have any complaints to be honest." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Male)

"Ours coped brilliantly well…for such a sudden thing. They did an amazing job." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Male)

"For something that happened so quickly our school adapted pretty well. The teachers worked really hard to get as much work as they could to everybody in a short space of time. We got small packs they sent home or we could pick up from school once we were remote learning. Everything was online, they tried to work through IT issues on Google Classroom. They did all their meetings and recordings as much as they could so I can't fault the way that they handled it." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Female)

"I'm going to buy my teacher a really nice present at the end of the year. I just feel like he was really encouraging and he's a really lovely man." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Female)

"Our teacher … they were responding to emails at 11pm and 6am … running up to 24 kids in a class and they've got to make sure everyone's dealt with and the parents would send numerous questions to them and they just could not keep up. The Principal had to say 'can you please just contact between these hours and they are not going to be checking their emails after these hours' because people would expect to be able to talk to them at any time." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Female)

Given the extreme challenges of remote learning and home-schooling, most parents of primary school children felt they now knew their child's teacher much better. Some felt that they were now better involved in the school and would find it easier to ask for information if they needed it.

"Especially with my older son, we were a bit closed off, whether it was the teaching style or the experience from last year but we've found a whole new level of trust and integrity in the school which has really reassured us that we are confident in their learning methods, and at the same time improve our kids." (Group 5, Parent, Y3-6, Male)

"I know the teacher better but the school I don't. But I know the teacher well." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Female)

"The teachers have kept in contact with us weekly … they are commenting and encouraging your child and we felt that the teacher was really good. We sort of got to know her a bit. We didn't really know her much before because it was only about three months before all of this started going into grade one so, I definitely felt that the teacher was doing a great job at school." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Male)

- What parents learned about their child's education

While experiences of home schooling their child varied, overall, parents tended to agree that they were now more engaged with their children's education, they understood the nature of their education better and were better able to support them and detect any problems they might have.

"When this all happened, the number of parents by going online and seeing what their children produced, they could see the purpose because of the clear learning intentions and seeing the success criteria of the children reflecting on their own work and giving themselves feedback and sharing with the teacher." (Group 9, Prim Principal, Female)

A few parents felt that educating their primary school aged children at home revealed deficiencies in the child's learning.

"It was a bit of a worry all around really. You get alerted to the sort of education they're receiving with 23 in a class. He couldn't read. There was a vast improvement with having the one-on-one with me." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Female)

"I wasn't aware how bad it was. Speaking to other parents at other private schools, a lot were very shocked at what they were seeing having that one-on-one time with their kids…'my kid is not necessarily up to scratch in this area or that area'. They've now got an insight into their kids and they can see what their ability is." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Female)

"For me it was an opportunity to see that there were gaps, and I've looked into homeschooling at even a part time basis just to see." (Group 5, Parent, Y3-6, Female)

Parents of secondary school students

Overall, parents of secondary school students were pleased with the way their child's school handled remote learning.

"I think they've done pretty good. I'd give them an eight (out of 10)." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Male)

"I think seven, I feel they can do better, they can make more engaged with students. They do well, they didn't expect those kinds of change. To move everything on-line they get good marks." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Male)

"Probably a nine, because my daughter's older we had no problems. The school sent out a lot of emails they were focused on the children's wellbeing." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Female)

"Eight or a nine. It was all good. The only thing is, if (their child) was really stuck they might have had to wait for a teacher for a while. Other than that, everything was great." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Female)

"They were pretty good everything's new, it's new for the teachers as well for everyone." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Female)

Parents of secondary school students appeared to be supportive and tuned into their child's wellbeing but mostly uninvolved in their learning except for checking in to make sure they were doing school work and achieving academically or responding if the school had contacted them with any concerns about their child. Some parents were initially worried about their child keeping up but they generally trusted them to do this. In most cases, there was some discussion about work

and ideas at home but not much engagement. Most students admitted that they didn't discuss their expectations and experiences of remote learning with their families. Teachers also tended to agree that most parents had a 'set and forget' attitude and left students to their own devices.

> *"Mine have been really checking up on grades and if they're being affected. Making sure I'm not being lazy." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Male)*

> *"I found it fine. They just left me to do my own thing. They trusted me." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)*

> *"At first, my mum was really chilled about it because she knew I would do the work … towards the end of it, I was falling behind because I was getting distracted easily and she said 'after every day I want you to show me all the work you've done'. So, that gave me motivation." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)*

> *"We had a chat about some of the work and shared some ideas." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)*

> *"I found that my mum was really supportive. …It was really good because my mum was always asking me how I'm going and if there's anything she can do and she would often bring me lunch … so it was nice having her around." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)*

> *"The school emails the kids all the tasks they have to do, I've got no idea what they have to do. They're trying to make them more self-motivated." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Female)*

> *"Obviously in Year 12 I don't need to babysit her…she was fine." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Female)*

> *"My two (daughters) are quite academic, especially my Year 12 she's self-motivated." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Female)*

> *"I could leave my eldest to crack on with his work and that was it, I wouldn't see him." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Female)*

> *"It's been normal for me, the school's been pretty good with all her work." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Female)*

> *"I'm not entirely sure (of my child's engagement with learning), I kept reminding my eldest he needed to keep up with the work…the report card will show how he was keeping up with his work over that time. I think he was submitting tasks on time but it's very hard with teenagers. Usually the school's very good if they're not keeping up with work and I didn't get any notifications." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Female)*

Only one secondary school principal said parents at her school were very involved in their child's remote learning. They felt this forged a greater appreciation of teacher's efforts and of the way their child learned.

> *"One of the things I got a lot of feedback from parents was that they sat next to their child while they were participating in the lesson, so they were in the classroom and had a much greater understanding of what's going on. That's really helped the connection, they have an understanding of the work of teachers (and) they know more about their child as a learner which is really valuable." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Female)*

> *"The feedback we were getting they were saying 'I never understood what was going on in the maths class, they're having fun' or they would hear laughter and they'd come and see what was going on." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Female)*

Principals at special schools also felt that parents had gained a new appreciation of the difficulties that teachers faced in teaching students with special needs.

> *"The families that did join in on the Webex session they had a better appreciation of what we do at school and understanding and some of the strategies we use. That was one of things that we tried to model through our Webex lessons and videos was the different communication systems we use; the different positive reinforcement schedules and parents have a better understanding of a lot of those strategies now." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)*

> *"There's no doubt it's come through really strongly, a lot of parents just didn't realise the amount of support their sons and daughters needed, how simple you could make a task and they still couldn't understand it…(parents have realised) we are professionals and it takes time to train people to a level*

of particular skills. They've found it's a lot more complex than they believed it was." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

A parent whose child had Asperger's felt it was essential they were directly involved in their remote learning.

"I was able to dedicate a lot of time to assisting my kids." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Female)

"It's been pretty challenging; I'm a sole parent and my youngest son has Asperger's and he flatly refused to do any school work because, for him, school is where you do school work and home you don't do school work. We had to stop; it was way too stressful. He (also) won't go (to school despite having that option). His mentor was excellent and they were very supportive but it was zero productivity." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Female)

The remote learning experience was much more difficult for parents who also had primary school aged children.

"The whole home-schooling scenario. I found primary school was a lot harder than high school. It was incredibly difficult in terms of the demand on parents and how much work we had put in. It was near impossible. I was looking for a job as well. I couldn't home school and look for jobs at the same time." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Female)

- The school's communication with parents

  Most parents of secondary school children said they received a lot of communication in terms of email updates from the school – a couple found the number of emails overwhelming while some wanted more feedback from the school and better one-on-one access with teachers.

  "There were lots of email updates, Facebook posts of what they were doing in the school but no one-on-one." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Female)

  "We've got an app called Compass that they do everything on if there's any issues they email you through that, I got nothing, everything was fine." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Male)

  "Both schools had a lot of communication come through a lot of emails. Navigating through all that communication was quite alot." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Female)

  "There was a lot of communication, I don't think it's calmed down. Maybe we'll get better at it next time." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Female)

  While they received a lot information by email, parents of secondary school students didn't have a lot of direct contact with their child's school or teachers during the lockdown.

  "We were told we're going to get a phone call once a week from my daughter's home room teacher, it never came. It would have been nice to have one phone call to say 'how's she coping'. If I'd wanted to contact the school, I could have but I didn't see a need my daughter was doing fine." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Female)

  "They were touching base with her, maybe because she's older they didn't need to contact me." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Female)

  "The individual teachers I didn't have anything." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Female)

  Similarly, very few secondary teachers said they had more to do with parents during the remote learning phase. Most didn't think teachers needed to interact more with parents. They also tended to agree that parents were probably reluctant to contact teachers because face-to-face interaction wasn't available, contact involved a more complex process and they may not have wanted to impose on teachers' time as teachers were already struggling with remote learning.

  "They're dealing with their own issues; we don't know if students' parents have lost their jobs. Parents were respectful to us not knowing what was going on in our lives and I tried to back off and not email as much." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

Parents of special school students

Balancing work, parenting and home-schooling

A lot of parents of special school students struggled to balance working at home as well as keeping track of their children's learning. Many parents had to balance working as well as caring for other children in the household.

"We had to utilise our NDIS plan for three mornings a week to get his aid to come. Three hours, then my husband and I just juggled literacy and English and I did art, that was the only thing I felt I could do with him, even then it was a struggle." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

"I think it rubbed off on the other kids at home, because they were like 'well if she's not doing anything why should we have to' and I was trying to work from home, sitting on the couch monitoring everyone making sure they're doing work." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

"I'm really dreading this nearly happening again, because I could barely do my work at all." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

"I was working weekends and nights to make sure I was keeping up with work work, as well as making sure (son) was working and doing things." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

"We would have a bell, he would get his school uniform on, so we tried to keep the atmosphere of getting ready for school and doing things like that." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

Some children, though, did enjoy being at home.

"Being at home was great, he loved staying at home. He could be at home all year and be pretty happy." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

Managing expectations of special school students and their parents

Principals of special schools (primary and secondary) said they tried to take the pressure off students and their parents (and teachers) particularly when it came to academic expectations.

"That was the message the first time around but like a lot of schools some parents have unrealistic expectations of what they think should be done. Other parents are very accepting of 'whatever the school says we'll follow that through'." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Male)

"We took a lot of the academic pressure off. We're providing you packs every week, 'get through it if you can'." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female) M

"(The response) was pretty good, there were a few families where we had to do a lot more reassuring that they could do it and do what they can. I think they liked the more casual approach it was about as good as we could get in a bad situation." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

"Last time we had 30 or 40 students out of 130 who didn't attend school and that led to (the question) 'how are we going to teach the school group? Are we going to teach at school (or) remotely? Can we do both at the one time?' That led to a number of difficulties…it's one or the other, you can't do both at the same time. Out of 130 we've had 20 requests from parents who said 'we don't want to send our students to school next week, can you provide something remotely?'. That's going to be extremely difficult if we have another 100 students at school next week. Teachers can only do so much." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Male)

"What we learned last time was that providing remote learning was just keeping the kids ticking over we're not trying to teach them anything new, just providing some activities which they can do at home that are within their grasp, as many practical activities as possible." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Male)

"We were very conscious that parents or someone had to be with the child to engage them in the learning so we just said 'whatever you can do you can do, this is about keeping people safe first and if you can engage in some things that's great'." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

"Last time around we started with the belief that if we set up a timetable and if every time student had a class, we'd Zoom it but it just became too much for the students and the teachers. So, if a normal

lesson might be 40 minutes, we'll pare that back to 20. Have one simple task, have a series of breaks."
(Group 10, Special School Prin, Male)

"Some said 'I've got five kids at home doing remote learning, I'm trying to work from home as well I'm not going to be able to do anything' and we said 'ok'. Parents struggle depending on their circumstances, some families, the parents have got mental health conditions, some of our students have mental health conditions. It is really complex and we just have to look at it on an individual student basis." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

The level of support from their child's school

The parents of special school students reported varied but mostly negative experiences in terms of the support their school provided for home-learning. Parents often found that the support given by the school wasn't enough as they struggled at home. Many parents had children in mainstream schools whilst others were in special schools. They suggested that mainstream schools struggled to accommodate the learning requirements of particular conditions. Also, in transitioning to home learning, special schools struggled to replicate their level of on-campus care.

"The school did offer integration aid support, two meetings a day with an aid, which I am told by other people was actually quite generous in terms of what other people are receiving, however, it was still nowhere near enough for (her son)." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

"I have a student in the VCAL end and they didn't cope well at all. They sent home lots of links, they didn't make accommodations for kids, dyslexia means kids struggle a lot with reading and they sent home packets and packets of information that kids couldn't get through." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

One of the biggest complaints was that there was a lack of contact and information.

"In terms of the school giving me information, he goes to a state school, I was just unaware of what these terms actually meant and that I was the person that he came to for help. If we did it again, I'd need to know those terms, there'd need to be something there for me." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

"There wasn't any opportunity for him to communicate with his teacher, his aid, or the students." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

"The school gets I think $37k a year for whatever level of funding she is and I felt for that money they could think of more ideas instead of calling." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

"Some schools seem to do video, but ours didn't. I think each school made a decision, so that was really a bit tricky because you didn't' have that kind of contact with other kids or teachers." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

"I'm really happy with the school but remote learning was really terrible for us, we didn't have any contact with the aid at all and (his) new teacher this year was a brand new graduate so previously you would have the same teacher for two years, knew him really well but this year it didn't work very well." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

Some parents complained that the schools tended to use a lot of jargon which they couldn't understand.

"The school would classify something as an 'encoder' and I went 'I don't even know what an encoder is' so there were these terms that I would be saying 'you should be doing this' and he's going 'no no no' but, he couldn't explain it." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

"I find that schools use a lot of jargon." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

Some parents, though, were quite positive about the level of support provided.

"Our school was very organised with remote learning across the board." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

"The other really important thing is that they did a slow transition back for (her son), in terms of before the other kids came back for a week and a half he would go in the mornings to school." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

"The school was very proactive with giving us equipment which was great." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

The aspects of remote learning special school students and parents found most difficult

- Lack of aids and equipment

As many of the support structures - such as physios and trained aids - for the children with extreme cases of autism were based at the school, many parents and students struggled with the transition to home learning. In the worst cases, children with cerebral palsy didn't have the required equipment to perform tasks at home and that put more stress on the parents.

"A half an hour time slot for (him) to do a piece of writing is impossible. He would take two days to write a paragraph, that's how long it can be with (him)." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

"Each teacher seemed to put the work in a different spot, so for us it seemed to take 10-15 minutes to find out exactly what the work that (he) should be doing in that class." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

"He has all his therapy at school. He has his physio, it's all set up so it works perfectly for him at school. He has everything he needs there, whereas at home it doesn't reflect that." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

"The amount of money it takes to care for (him) at home is huge not including love and attention he really needs, so it's really really pathetic what our kids are receiving at school." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

- Loss of social connection

In other cases, children didn't have the social aspect of school.

"I think my son didn't see his friends for the entire time. He had one or two or three that he would meet, but they weren't his friends." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

For some the social isolation was made worse by internet connectivity problems in regional Victoria.

"It was a shitshow for us, remote learning. We live in a black spot as well for our internet, so even though the school was good and gave us an iPad and a dongle for internet connection, it really didn't work and I ended up feeling like a lot of (his) reports and stuff had been staged. Even photos. You can't do this; this is so strange that I'm getting photos from the teachers saying that he's participating and doing this and pressing this button and it's not like that in reality at all." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

- Financial issues

Financial problems were also a big part of the problem for some parents as there was no relief through support payments while the actual support their child received was very poor.

"Without the NDIS support he would not have been able to participate in the curriculum at all with remote learning" Group 11, Parents, Female)

"Also, the financial stress, though, the NDIS I think has really plugged that financial gap for some families but for many it doesn't, it's never enough." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

"The service providers were getting more money, they were getting a 10% increase, but they were not increasing that in people's plans. So, it seemed quite cruel that it was going to cost you more for certain NDIS services during the pandemic because there was extra money going to the providers, but not extra money going into people's plans." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

Students views on their siblings' remote learning

While many of these students had siblings (mostly younger) they didn't have much to say on how remote learning had impacted on their families as a whole. Some students felt that younger siblings (at primary school) had much more interactive online learning experiences which contrasted with their experience of receiving instructions then completing tasks. Some said parents checked up on younger siblings more.

"With the smaller one, they've been involved and helpful." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"With me, my parents know that I'll do my work and everything but my brother struggled. My parents work all the time and they haven't been able to help him and then when they do help him, they have no idea … they try to figure out Year 8 maths and they were losing their mind. Once we were sent back to school, they were just happy that the teachers could teach him and not them." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"My parents haven't been much different with my brother. He does the work himself." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

Students offered some comments about distraction while trying to learn in the same space with siblings in different year levels.

"My brother was right outside and he was always talking and getting involved because he's 10." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"I've got a younger sister but we knew to be in our own areas." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"I have a younger sister and we sat in our own bedrooms so it wasn't very distracting." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

Many parents were working and unable to support younger siblings in their learning so some secondary students were responsible for assisting younger siblings with their schoolwork.

"Yes., especially when my mum was at work so I had to be the one to help them if they didn't understand the work. So, I kind of fell behind." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

Mental health and wellbeing

Students' wellbeing

- Students' views

  Students felt that, in different ways, the lack of social interaction and the disruption to regular routine impacted on some people's sense of wellbeing, motivation, general happiness and possibly their mental health. A few students noted the importance of fresh air and exercise for mental health and managing stress. Some students also reported that a sense of apathy and lack of motivation dissipated upon return to school.

  "I found I got out way more because you couldn't go to the pub or hang out with mates or play footy … if you were just stuck inside it's not good for mental health and it's good to get outside and get some fresh air just to think things through. So, that's what I did just to keep going." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)

  "I know a few people who really suffered during isolation and had a lot of trouble with the workload and stress. It took a toll on a lot of my friends." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

  The degree of mental health support students perceived to be available to them was largely school-dependent. In general, though, students felt teachers made an effort to stay connected

and empathised with their situation. One student shared that a teacher had conducted a mental health survey with students and personally reached out to those students who were struggling.

"One of my teachers had a mental health form and the teacher would then reach out and help them out more. So, they would feel closer with that teacher." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"Our wellbeing team reached out." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"All my teachers caught up every week." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Male)

Students also appreciated that schools acknowledged the stress they were under trying to complete work in a new environment and allowed students more flexibility with their working hours.

"They were very understanding, some students were having a really difficult time with getting the work done because of motivation or something and they were just saying 'try to get it done as soon as possible' and it was very easy to talk to them if we needed more time because we lost motivation or if there was something happening." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

- Parents' views of children in mainstream schools

Parents had mixed views about the level of concern the school showed regarding students' wellbeing. Apart from information in the large number of emails they received from the school, some parents couldn't recall if there'd been specific welfare and mental health initiatives during the lockdown. As their child appeared to be coping well, most parents of secondary school students weren't particularly concerned about this.

"I can't remember." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Female)

"There was something about wellbeing. Being a Catholic school they're usually very focused on that, so I'm sure there was something." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Female)

"(The school sent out a lot of emails they were focused on the children's wellbeing), information on psychologists, help lines. Being teenagers and not being able to see their friends that was a huge aspect." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Female)

"Not that I know of." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Male)

"(They sent) email to all the parents in the year level but not to individual students." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Male)

"There was emails about different things, yoga so we got alot." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Male)

A few parents of primary school children had concerns about the mental health impacts of the lockdown and home-schooling. Some suggested that if schools had said from the start of the lockdown that children and parents shouldn't feel too much pressure to complete all the set tasks, home schooling would have been a less stressful experience for families with primary school children.

"The only thing that hasn't been covered here that got me worried, during the last phase of lockdown was the mental health. My son was getting a bit frustrated of not being able to go out, of not being able to see friends, not being able to have people come over. I'm glad that school is back in action and he can go out and do all of his physical activities and be with his friends." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Male)

"The whole experience was so traumatic worldwide and then all that stress on parents to work from home and to help their kids with homework and …you can't get everything you need (at) the shops. So much pressure coming in from all angles. Those that did have to work from home, I think it was essential to have better communication from the government, from schools. Give people more support, maybe even a little bit of trauma support. It is overlooked and it can be really traumatic when you're dealing with kids at home who are young and feel frustrated and don't know what to do with their feelings and when you're the parent you get overwhelmed." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Female)

"Our educators did say 'don't sweat it if you don't get tasks done'. As a parent, you feel compelled to try and get through the things with your kids for them." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Female)

- Parents' views of special school students

For many parents of special school students, dealing with their own, their child's and in some cases the other parent's mental health was extremely difficult as they found that provided supports were insufficient to cope with the high stress environment of caring for their child at home 24/7. Many parents found their child struggling with mental health problems. In regional Victoria the availability of mental health services was particularly diminished.

"I am really concerned about the mental health aspect of remote learning. It's going to be hugely taxing on primarily mothers as you can see from us, it's a huge issue. I'm working full-time...to monitor a child with adhd, making sure they're online and not on games and disappearing down that rabbit hole is extremely stressful." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

"I had to send my son's psych report to the RTO who was designing the course through Swinburne and to basically call the riot act because they weren't providing any support. RTO's are not obligated to get in contact with students within three days, I found that unacceptable...It was really hard and I don't think it was necessary for me to send the psych report to get any recognition." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

"You could see they were having Webex or Zoom meetings and that's so important for kids' mental health and wellbeing and I don't think enough focus has been put on that." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

"Mental health-wise, he needs to see people more, he needs to talk to people, he's the only child so he's not getting any contact with anyone except us but that not a healthy way to be." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

"Overall, it's a very isolating experience for him." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

- Views of principals and teachers in mainstream schools

Teachers and principals from both primary and secondary schools said student wellbeing was one of the highest priorities. Some principals characterised the lockdown period as one that fostered a sense of community. Many schools required teachers to perform a much larger pastoral care role, in some cases having teachers checking (by video or phone) each week to see how students and their families were coping. This created additional work for teachers but all agreed that being diligent with checks on students was essential.

"Another thing we did really well was we had a check in system with all the kids and if the kids didn't check in, the team leaders were straight onto it." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Male)

"The wellbeing check that we had on the students...Every day they had to do the wellbeing survey and talk about how they felt. As a pastoral teacher we had to check on them. Some kids took to home-learning really well but others struggled. it was more work but the wellbeing of students was pretty important. As teachers we were stressed so it was good to check on students and how they were feeling about everything." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

"We had a relatively high SES (at our school). Wellbeing of students was the main focus. We gave them numeracy and literacy and the rest of the curriculum was more of an option." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)

While student welfare was a priority at all schools, those with students from troubled and unstable backgrounds were a particular concern and focus for principals.

"It was really about checking in and looking after the kids, because, for many of them, school can be a sanctuary from home." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)

"Wellbeing was high on our priority list for remote home learning." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)

"I teach Year 11 general maths. About half (have issues) with wellbeing...they ended up getting a few of them into the classroom as well...students who were struggling or had significant home issues. That seemed to work well. If they didn't have that routine they were sleeping in 'til lunch time...they're the kids coming back (saying) 'yay, we're back at school'. Before remote learning they never would have said that. They appreciate actually being at school." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

"I tried to sell (the idea) to my school to eliminate the panic because it was doing more harm than good. The message of wellbeing and checking in became a bit more apparent." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Female)

"We would expect that teachers would be in contact with parents anyway...with homerooms it was a matter of making phone calls at the beginning of remote learning and having regular communication via email and the occasional phone call at home to check in and see how students were going...It was different work...we intentionally made time for heads of sub schools to ring parents whereas that would normally be an as need." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Male) ...." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Female)

"We were always in contact with students and through house leaders as well, in contact with parents...we looked at communication as very important so we could identify issues, applaud the effort that's going both at home as well as students and continue that connection. We would regularly be chatting to students and if we found they were having issues we'd be contacting home." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Male)

"We also had a group of students say 'we're not interested, we're not doing this remote learning'...we have two full-time wellbeing staff and every student was phoned a minimum of once a week by a wellbeing staff member as well as their teachers and higher needs (students) more often...Even those students who did zero with the learning materials were talking to people from the school at least once a week." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Male)

- Special school principals' views on students' wellbeing

Special school principals talked about making regular phone calls to check on students' academic progress and emotional wellbeing.

"A couple of them it had certainly hit their mental health and they had to come to school. We had a focus on exercise to help them with their anxiety...walking and bike riding to give them and the parents a break." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

"There was a heap of communication to parents on line, via phone etc and that really ramped up tremendously over those six weeks.... a five or 10-minute call just made life a lot easier for everybody. We had a shortened day so teachers had an hour to an hour and a half at the end of the day so we had time to do some of those things." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Male)

Principals were asked if teachers did welfare checks on their specific class. They said the teacher made that judgement call.

"We had a buddy system where every classroom teacher has a substitute teacher buddy...between the two teachers they'd split those 12 students and communicate with them on a regular basis as many times a week as was deemed necessary." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Male)

Parent's wellbeing

- Views of principals in mainstream schools

In most cases, the schools' approach to wellbeing also extended to the parents. As indicated in 'Parents involvement in their child's homeschooling and remote learning' above, schools often sought to relieve stress on primary school parents who were struggling with home-schooling their children but reassuring them that it was ok if their child didn't finish all their work on time.

"The message from our school was, if things are too hard, don't worry about it. Put wellbeing first. Get outside. Spend family time. Do life learning at home with cooking and times. If a parent said it was a hard week, there was no expectation for them to engage." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)

"One of the things we struggled with alot was that sense of wellbeing. A couple of weeks in, the feedback was that parents weren't coping. We already had meetings with students in place but we were asked to do them with parents as well. We were calling families to make contact with students and parents every two weeks. It was challenging managing that sense of wellbeing because everyone was panicked and scared." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Female)

- Special school principals' views on parents' wellbeing

"I have extreme concerns for parents over this time (second lockdown) many families will get to a crisis point...a point of relinquishment, it's hard to parent a child with autism. The holiday period causes enormous anxiety because of the lack of structure and support they have. Going into another week for the parents' mental health that's going to have a huge concern. So, our campus will stay open as we did last time, being an independent school, I think we have that option to stay open. (Our other campus) will be another story, that is a different cohort." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

"Teachers spoke to parents pretty much daily to see how they were going." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

"We have really close communication with our parents anyway, our staff have daily communication with parents, we have them in the school working alongside staff, we really work at building the parents' capacity." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

As indicated, to relieve stress on parents and assist wellbeing, all principals made it clear to parents that they only had to do what they could.

- Access to services/ funding

"Our staff had huge concerns about those families whose children weren't with our school but other families we support around the state their children couldn't do online learning and the parents struggled to maintain in the home on a day to day basis. Those families would have support in the morning to get up and go to school and support in the afternoon to help them manage in the home.... if we were going to lock down again (we're concerned) how they'll manage. The NDIS don't pay for funding between nine and three." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

"Lots of the NDIS funded services were not available, lots of the respites closed and lots of the in- home support workers either didn't go into the homes some (who would normally) go into five or six homes a week they weren't able to do that they had to reduce it to one family and leave five other families without that support. It's those families who really struggled and will continue to struggle." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

"In Melbourne it's easier to get support workers. In regional Victoria it's probably more challenging. Access to quality support workers for some of these children who have behaviours of concern, they need trained staff in the home." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

"We had some students who were able to convert some their NDIS funding to have worker support." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

They noted that the NDIS workers weren't available because of safety concerns.

"Some services ceased because they felt the risk was too high and the other is the demand increased and (it's) already a workforce we don't have enough workers for." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

Teachers' and staff wellbeing

Mainstream school principals' views

Principals also said that, other than the planning, a big part of the success of the remote learning period was catering to staff wellbeing. The principals often commented on the ways they kept on top of staff morale, rewarded staff for their hard work and managed staff anxiety during the transition to online learning.

"I phoned every staff member every week as well because I think they felt a little bit isolated, to just make them feel a little bit supported and in the loop as well." (Group 9, Prim Principal, Female)

"We found that our staff are so dedicated and so hardworking, we wanted them to have a break, so what we did was 'wellbeing Wednesday'. Teachers absolutely loved it. The specialist teachers put their program up on a Wednesday, our teachers were told to rest…. The teachers said that was the best thing we could've done for them." (Group 9, Prim Principal, Female)

"On Microsoft Teams we created a virtual staffroom, to keep staff connected because we are very mindful of our staff wellbeing and their anxiety levels." (Group 9, Prim Principal, Female)

"I believe as a leader I became more visible to my staff and it helped me know what was happening more within our teams, and I feel I am more in tune to our school as a whole." (Group 9, Prim Principal, Female)

"It's absolutely vital you look at staff wellbeing." (Group 9, Prim Principal, Female)

"We've had many a conversation with staff about them feeling tired and depleted and they're really underperforming. So, I think it's about their level of engagement." (Group 9, Prim Principal, Female)

Teachers also frequently acknowledged the schools attempts to ensure staff wellbeing.

"We did have staff meetings quite regularly. All the people high up in leadership were given x amount of calls they had to make to check up on staff to check on our wellbeing." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

"Really quite supported. They take our side, obviously, with parents. My school had a policy where all parent communication had to go through the office first. That way we weren't flooded with emails and expected to respond super quick. That relieved a lot of pressure. Not dedicating a majority of time to interact with parents." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)

"They definitely were supportive in terms of our staff wellbeing. Every single check-in the principal would ask how we were personally. I felt like we were really supported." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)

"The communication and structure they had worked really well to ensure everything ran smoothly." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Male)

Special school principals' views on teacher/ staff wellbeing

"The big thing to come out from a staff perspective was the amount of time we had to manage and look after them and their mental health, particularly our education support staff who aren't involved in the planning and are used to being in front of the kids, doing their job and going home. Keeping them engaged in their own professional learning, in activities that promoted their mental health." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

"We increased the number of meetings which is counter-intuitive which meant we had more contact with each other. We set up a professional learning plan for six weeks where staff were to go off and do on-line learning and come back and we'd have a discussion about how we could implement this in our school now or when we're back on deck." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

"We also made sure classroom teachers contacted their support staff at least a couple of times a week to see how they're going and if there's anything more we could be doing there." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

"My school also hired a resilience expert to run a weekly session for all staff to engage in…developing their resilience…investing in their mental health…obviously it came at a huge time and financial cost …we found the money; it was too important to pass up." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Male)

"Looking after the staff welfare was very important. We maintained our meeting schedule but changed the focus. We would have one whole staff meeting so everyone could be engaged on Webex and we used that to give out any information and staff acknowledgement…rewards for staff. Using weekly staff meetings to answer any questions they had." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

"We had other meetings in smaller groups to share what they were doing around remote learning and any challenges and shared problem solving. We also had some physical activities that staff could join in (via) Webex… a yoga session once a week that people could opt into…physical wellbeing and some social drinks after hours. A couple of trivia nights." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

"We also rotated people on site so everyone got a chance to be on site." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

"Because we were putting kits together, staff were coming in to make all the resources so that was quite a nice team building thing….it was hard to get the social distancing happening sometimes…a nice way of maintaining staff morale." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

"That's a really pertinent point about staff mental health, even being on campus the whole time not going to remote learning, their life become very insular, we work really hard with them to be able to switch off once they get home. In the COVID world there was nothing for them, some were living by themselves and going home to nothing, so it was important to offer additional support. Different for different staff. People missed that social contact like going to the pub for a drink. Not being able to do that was very difficult. We do a whole staff PD once a year where we take everyone away, people really look forward to that and that's something we've not been able to plan for." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

Principals' views on their and the leadership team's wellbeing

"The leadership, the workload increased enormously just to get through the daily COVID emails we received, through the cleaning procedures how often that had to be done. The purchasing of PPE. The stress the responsibility the OH&S risks that we run for our staff. There were enormous considerations we had to take in." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

"We have the department. The Department has the principal's advisory we can access. We've got the employee assistance program. It sounds terrible but you're almost too busy to be able to access it." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Male)

"People mainly used their colleagues as support. Collegial support is where most principals go. Everyone was very willing to share and very supportive of each other but you didn't have time to connect with people so that's probably the biggest challenge and I've never been so tired, in week 11." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

"School holidays, usually the workload's reduced and you can catch up on things but we were still so busy during that time and the anticipation of what was going to happen you didn't get to stop and take a breath." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

The principals said they already had a huge workload lined up for the next phase of the pandemic.

"I've got another four meetings after this one this week related to this remote learning COVID-19." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Male)

"We're dealing with families now that have got to crisis point that wouldn't have got to crisis point so the demand on our service has increased enormously. We're becoming more of a crisis service at the moment. Everything's at crisis point and for a long time everyone will be working in a crisis space rather than proactive." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

Relationship with mainstream schools

Some principals felt that the mainstream schools had relinquished responsibility for their special needs students and left it up to special schools. One thought the Catholic system was more responsible than the government system for special needs students.

"Our students who are in mainstream schools (the schools) left our kids and their learning to us, the feedback from families is they haven't been providing any work to do during remote learning period." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

"I have a much stronger and more productive relationship with my students who are enrolled in the Catholic system, dual-enrolled, rather than the government system. I'm not sure if that's a resourcing thing or a moral imperative…it's been a little more proactive from the Catholic schools than the government mainstream. I'd hope there'd be more onus and shared responsibility…there's a reason why the parents are dual-enrolling, why they feel their child has the capacity to be in the mainstream schools. The entire learning shouldn't be left up to the specialist setting…. I don't know how you resolve that situation." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Male)

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"Secondary schools seem to struggle more; the mainstream schools their individual learning plans aren't as high calibre as the ones in the primary schools. It's 'your kids in year 11, we keep them engaged as best we can while their on-site, while they're off site they get treated as an impossibility." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Male)

Learnings for on-site schooling

Greater emphasis on helping students learn than on administration tasks

Some principals noted that, during the remote learning phase, they and teachers were focused much more on helping the students learn and much less on meetings and administration. Many found this refreshing.

"The government had to trust the Department of Education, the Department of Education had to trust principals, principals had to trust teachers and teachers had to trust students…that trust and the flexibility for doing what was right, combined with that strong sense of moral purpose we all knew what the work was and pushed other things away…we didn't have any meetings…so we could focus on what was incredibly important." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Female)

"For me it was an absolute pleasure to have six weeks where the only thing I talked about was teaching and learning…, the challenge of how do we go about teaching and how the kids are learning and how do we learn in this environment." (Group 9, Prim Principal, Male)

"As a principal, focusing on teaching and learning and to not have to worry about the other principal tasks, but as a principal to be in the school." (Group 9, Prim Principal, Female)

"It was a totally different thinking, because it was about 'what does each child need?' and 'how are we going to make that happen." (Group 9, Prim Principal, Female)

"A positive for me was the shorter staff meetings. Normally at school they'll find something to talk about but at home, there's nothing to keep you there." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)

Some characterised this approach during remote learning as being about 'learning rather than teaching'; students were left more to their own devices and needed to learn independently and teachers learned about what worked with students.

"It helped us to have a focus on learning rather than on teaching. If the teacher is not there then the student has got to work through those things so their self-regulation has developed over that time, we're working really hard to try to hold onto those things." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Female)

"We were able to support and professionally develop staff throughout this process, now what they were doing in remote learning I continue to see in classrooms. Recordings of lessons, video conferences. …It would be a shame if it went back to the old…it's the learning that's important…that we're able to support those students in this new space. How do we continue to do that...so we can provide connection and growth and development in students?" (Group 8, Sec Principal, Male)

Digital Platforms

- More use of online learning resources to improve the quality of education

  Parents, students, teachers and principals thought the remote learning period had revealed the vast potential for enhancing the learning experience through on-line resources. They wanted more use of on-line methods such as:

  - **Streamed classes**

    "I like to see the option continue, but structured a bit differently. They should be streaming classes the way they do for university, teachers in a classroom with a blackboard or a whiteboard these days, actually teaching and streaming instead of a bunch of tasks." (Group 5, Parent, Y3-6, Male)

    "The only way a school and a teacher can do both in-class and online learning is through having a class that their teaching (is) streaming." (Group 5, Parent, Y3-6, Male)

    "We've got a number of students who are vulnerable and they're not coming to school through this time so for all of our Year 11 and 12 classes if there's a student away they are streaming their lessons so the student can come in virtually. That will allow us to hold onto the skillset that teachers have developed." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Female)

  - **Video links**

    Some thought these could even include overseas guest speakers.

    "A group of staff say to me 'we are the last people who thought we would manage this we're not IT savvy' but they're innovative and creative…instead of having visitors to the school we had people beaming in from London to talk to our kids and why would we not do that when we're back on site. It's been a disruptive change for our staff that we really want to foster and keep moving forward." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Male)

    "We've come out of this with our learning accelerated. Previously, if we'd gone to film a teacher instructing, we would've had to go through all this privacy. We probably would've been held accountable by every union known to mankind. However, now we're allowed to film our practice, talk about our practice, share our feedback. In this short amount of time we've been able to put into practice what we've wanted to for a very long time." (Group 9, Prim Principal, Female)

  - **Recorded classes**

    Many wanted better systems for tracking the work and recorded, online versions of classes (as was done in universities) to complement the one-on-ones in class as students could go home and watch the recorded version.

    "I'd like teachers to put things on Canvas so, if you're away, you know what you have to catch up on. Because teachers did that all the time what we had to do for that class but now that we're back on campus, I think if they continued to put that stuff up for the kids that aren't at school, that would be really good." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

    "The kid can go home and say 'Oh I didn't quite understand that maths equation in class' and they can just go and watch the video. Maybe not for primary but for secondary it could be very useful." (Group 5, Parent, Y3-6, Male)

    "(If) they couldn't be there they needed to have pre-recording or a lesson plan on Compass that would allow the students to work independently…they'd catch that up. The students were the same, if they couldn't access that lesson, they'd do it later in the day…that was really successful." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Female)

    "Like university, you have all your lessons on-line so your kids can go back…in the past if kids miss that class, they miss that knowledge." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Male)

"I never (usually) put videos up but I have three Year 12's with medical conditions so I'm sharing my screen. I've got a microphone so they can hear me, I'm recording it so I have a video now for every lesson." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

"With our lessons that ran every day, often the instructional part the first five to 15 minutes the teacher would record and the absent kids (and those) who didn't understand could go back and watch that. For us to be able to do this internally…was a great thing." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Female)

"Definitely, the recording of lessons, that's been a great boon." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Male)

Special school principals also noted that learning methods such as using videos that students could replay were very useful innovations.

"Practical subjects, we found with remote learning worked really well like the sports teacher did video for kids with exercise routines, the living skills teacher did different videos, mowing the lawns etc. Trying to engage the kids in fun activities. Making videos so the kids could actually watch it listen to it and replay it again and again if they didn't get the information the first time." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

"The only thing we did do was that video learning we put up a few YouTube clips for PE and art and music that wasn't something we had planned for until we were in the remote learning space." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Male)

"We put more effort into videos…there were options to do the videos or the Webex lessons so there was a whole range of options." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

Some parents thought that, from now on, time should be dedicated each week to students learning remotely as this would acclimatise them to learning that way should there be another lockdown. It would also equip them with better skills to function in a digitally connected world.

"One of the learnings that the schools could take on with this is having at least one hour a week online when things go back to normal. Get kids familiar with the technology because the way things are going a lot of education is going to move online so it's going to be the future of learning anyway. God forbid something like this happens again the kids are prepared to face that with the technology that they have been using at school or at home." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Male)

"The positive out of this is being able to connect even not being there physically. So, you've got the option of, let's say the child has an appointment, instead of going into school they can actually do it online. There's an opportunity there to have a physical presence but also an online presence." (Group 5, Parent, Y3-6, Male)

- More use of online learning resources to engage unconfident and troubled students

Some principals thought remote learning was particularly beneficial for less confident students. They felt that on-line learning was a way of by-passing adolescent classroom hierarchies that normally prevented quieter students speaking up.

"We used Microsoft Teams and one of things that was incredibly successful was in each team we had a private channel for each student so they could interact and get answers without it being public. Those classroom structures that are very set, the social norms of adolescence are pretty strong and the dominant people in the classroom set that, it's quite a risk for students to step out of those norms, they're very controlled in the face-to-face class but in remote learning there was no role model or prior experience for 'who am I in this as a learner and as a teacher' so a lot of students discovered things about themselves. A lot of vulnerable students who might have their learning interrupted by noise…that flexibility was incredibly powerful." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Female)

"We had a particular group of (high anxiety) students who actually did better in this environment and have re-engaged back at school better as a result. They were able to step away from the social interactions that happen in a classroom and to be themselves. A group who have probably done more work in that six-week period of remote learning than they've done in six months previously." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Male)

"It was easier to confide with them privately when I was online. My teacher really helped with that in one of my subjects." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"My teacher called to check in and also did one-on-one Google meetings. They usually wouldn't have offered. Especially on weekends. I felt they were helping a lot more than ever on weekends. I think it's just because it's online (and wouldn't work in person)." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"I found it easier to approach the teachers in school. I'm not very confident and I don't like to put my hand up, so, it was easier to message them and ask privately." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

Some students also said they preferred on line contact with teachers.

"I found it easier to contact online than at school." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

Principals and teachers also noted that some normally disengaged students (often from troubled backgrounds) had been more engaged with remote learning. They thought it would be valuable to investigate why this worked and to possibly maintain some remote learning alongside classroom learning to help these students. They felt this might require collaboration between schools as one school may not be able to manage a parallel learning program like this.

"(In our area) we're going to hire a consultant and look really closely at what each of our seven schools has done and what's worked well for those disengaged students who came to every single remote class got more work completed than they've ever done. As an individual school it seems like a bridge too far to have students who are learning remotely and students who are learning face-to-face, one teacher has to do two different lessons but as a network of schools we could perhaps come together and create an ongoing remote environment for those students." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Female)

"Two boys, we've spent 12 months getting them to a handful of days of school attendance and yet they attended almost all the sessions on-line. (So) where does an online environment fit in our re-engagement tool? Is it part of that first step for students with high anxiety to begin engaging with education...and what's the blended learning model?" (Group 8, Sec Principal, Male)

Still, some principals warned that remote learning should only be a component of education and not a replacement for face-to-face learning as being at school provided students with unique and vital aspects of education and socialisation.

"We're talking about whether we want to continue with that ...which we want to do, but then we're worried if we make it too easy for some of these students, we're going to have half of them stay home and they're going to enjoy it too much, and they're not going to get that socialisation that they would get by coming in." (Group 9, Prim Principal, Female)

"If we did go back into lockdown...we need to consider ... there were kids that flourished but ... there were a lot of kids, even though they are getting support and doing the work at home, that were probably at risk of not doing as well as if they were on site." (Group 9, Prim Principal, Female)

- One-on-one interaction with teachers

Students wanted more opportunities to access individual support from teachers including one-on-one catch-ups and continuing the digital accessibility to teachers established in the period of learning from home.

"Checking up out of school hours. At home it was easy to communicate with teachers. If I were to bring something to school it would be better outside hours contact." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"Communicating more. More after-class questions and checking in from teachers." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Male)

"If we had more catch-ups, like once a week to see how we're going." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

- Diversity and creativity of teaching methods

Some teachers said they found creative approaches and more effective methods - such as making entertaining videos, using different programs to improve learning and sharing lecture notes digitally - to keep students engaged.

"Drama is very practical so I created lots of videos, I tried to make them quite fun. I thought that would connect to them a lot better and the kids really loved them." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Female)

- After school classes/ discussion

"Things like after school classes. Even though they're back at school now they may have class after school where a teacher will say 'at five o'clock I'll log on if anyone wants to log on and continue to discuss something'. It's going to continue to be used in a positive way. Now they can do it on Zoom." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Female)

"I'm sure that's available but it's not a service they offered." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Female)

"After hours on-line that would be a good thing so they can keep in touch." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Female)

- On-line meetings/ parent-teacher nights

Teachers and principals of both mainstream and special schools also thought remote communication could extend to areas like parent-teacher nights and professional development.

"We've started doing our webinars for parents instead of trying to get them to come in for information nights. We've noticed there's so many parents logging in at home. If it's six o'clock on a Tuesday night they don't want to come out. Instead of 30 families we're getting 100 to 120 rocking up. It's been really good." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Male)

"Next year when we have information evening, we're still going to provide an on-line component. On a cold winter's evening you get a lot more (families) when it's remote." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Male)

"We also streamed our last school assembly through YouTube chat." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Male)

"We're considering using remote learning to help facilitate professional learning days, so classes could be set up (for students at home) and students still undertaking learning while the staff are also undertaking professional learning." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Female)

"I think we'll use Webex a lot more to engage with families and to SSG meetings it's often difficult to get parents in to have meetings. This is a good way to engage face to face and model some things too." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

"We did a couple of assemblies via Webex and we had the most parents so we'll continue to do Webex option for our assemblies so parents don't have to be on site." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

"We did a number of assemblies remotely and a lot more parents tuning into those and being interested in what's happening, we're going to do more of that sort of stuff. It's allowed us to understand especially with parent/ teacher interviews and being able to access people. It's proven to us that that's something that can be done quite easily." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Male)

"We often do a lot of driving to get to meetings and that will be reduced because we've seen the benefits of (Zoom) meetings." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

"This is a double-edge sword...I'm really accessible I find I'm having three or four meetings a day and that is really adding to my workload." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Male)

Some noted, however, that there was limited internet connectivity in remote regional areas.

"I had a meeting Friday and it kept dropping out." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Male)

- Impact of technology for teachers' professional development

Similarly, teachers at both mainstream and special schools acknowledged that greater use of technology during the remote learning period was important professional development that would greatly improve their IT skills and provide long-term career benefits.

> *"Accelerating some of our knowledge in using on-line platforms. We're still discussing what we might keep. We had varied responses from student in how they coped…some loved it and it really worked for them, other kids we really had to council back into school. We used Google Docs, students used an individual one, Year 12's could put SAC answers on there we could give feedback straight away. It increased our workload but it was something we could do without being face-to-face. I still use (it) now." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)*

> *"We are also so tech savvy now, we know so many different platforms and ways to communicate." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Female)*

> *"Just the use of Teams, in the last year we've kind of used Teams but every teacher's (now) been forced to use it." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)*

> *"(Teachers) did (get something valuable out of remote learning) … we all got a lot better at using video conferencing on different platforms and teachers did have to be really creative about ways to engage students remotely. Staff made video lessons; some have alternative careers in the entertainment industry…some really enjoyed making those videos." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)*

Student Lead Learning

Throughout the research students made frequent reference to the flexibility they experienced during the lockdown and home-schooling phase. For some students this was about the way in which the timetable was structured and consequently how they organised their school day. Students enjoyed being able to switch between subjects rather than being required to work on a particular subject at a designated time. Some thought this showed that more free periods at school would be useful.

> *"Having a plan where the teachers teach for 10 minutes and then the rest is free to work and ask questions if you want." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)*

> *"Some free periods for people where if they choose to use them responsibly." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)*

> *"The flexibility of being able to work through my work whenever I want to." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)*

> *"I think the flexibility, and the time to work on things." (Group 5, Parent, Y3-6, Female)*

> *"I would probably just continue with flexibility and understanding. My teachers have been really understanding throughout the whole year and they just became more understanding throughout quarantine." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)*

> *"Our senior kids would prefer to learn like that." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)*

Also, most secondary students said they enjoyed starting their learning day later as they found they were more productive at this time. Some parents also felt there needed to be more flexibility in the timetable to accommodate adolescents' needs including sleep and their most productive hours. While students agreed school should start later, principals weren't sure this was feasible. There was also some hesitation as starting later meant finishing later.

> *"If I could choose, I would make school start at 10am and not 8.45am." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Male)*

"I'm less productive with an early start, so I know it's unlikely but a later start, or even the option to do night school which I know some schools offer but mine doesn't." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"I wouldn't if that meant we didn't finish school until four or five." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"My son was so happy to sleep in every day. Mine are night owls. I felt they were happier because they had more sleep." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Female)

"I'd be keen to but there's a real challenge around that, unless you're an isolated school...for example we've got a primary school next door and a lot of our elder siblings have the younger ones at the primary and then you've got things like bus routes there's a lot of factors that go into it I don't know it would be easy for a school to do it in isolation unless the school was by definition isolated." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Male)

- Student independence

Students appreciated having a greater sense of trust from their teachers and school to learn independently during the lockdown. They felt this engendered a sense of personal agency and responsibility for their learning that was important preparation for university.

"Just taking responsibility for your own learning, which is obviously very important in Year 12 because some of us about to go to university and a lot of that is taking responsibility for your own learning. So, hopefully it's strengthened a few people and made them realise they need to have self-motivation when doing work sometimes." (Group 3, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"For a lot of students, it forced them to be more independent, a lot of time because we're right there they ask a question before they think about (it) for themselves. They could use a lot of those skills going into VCE...when they go to university or get a job...that was a definite positive." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

"I teach VCE, the kids showed a lot of independence and resilience and pushed themselves." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Male)

- Weekly lesson plans and clear expectations from teachers

Students found it easier to apply themselves during remote learning when their teachers gave them clear timelines and expectations (for work due dates etc). These included Weekly plans being handed out. They would like to see this incorporated into face-to-face learning.

"Weekly schedules and specific checklists for what should be done. In maths you can fall behind really quickly so that helped." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

"Getting a weekly plan from teachers. I got it from my school and it really helped to see what I had to do by the end of the week." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Male)

Student/ staff welfare/ Mental health check in

- Students and parents valued the checks made on student welfare during remote learning and felt this approach should continue.

"It could be a really helpful idea; we had the teacher who made us fill out a form. But I wouldn't feel like opening up to every single teacher, it wouldn't work for everyone." (Group 1, Student, Y10-12, Female)

A parent whose child had special needs appreciated having greater contact with his teacher and thought this should continue.

"I feel like I'm closer with their teachers because there was a lot of contact...I just text this poor teacher all the time, that's been a good thing." (Group 2, Parent, Y10-12, Female)

Principals also felt a continued emphasis on staff welfare was essential.

"Being really mindful of staff wellbeing, so that they've been able to make it through to the rest of this term, has been my top shelf work." (Group 9, Prim Principal, Female)

Principals at special schools said it had been important to let struggling students come onto campus during the lockdown.

"We had a lot of teacher-parent communication from the get go especially with the younger students who were newer to the school. So, it was just an extension of that, most people understand that the more time you invest in that in the normal term the better things become. People realised it was crucial, especially knowing the anxiety issues students had, it was best to talk to people as soon as possible try to ascertain who was having difficulty and do whatever we could do….like encouraging those students to come to school just to sit in the yard for an hour a couple of days a week. We started with five that went to 10 to 15…. that worked quite well. Out of the 130 we had between 10 to 20 students two or three times a week would come in for a two-hour session…sit in the yard or do some art therapy. Just to connect with some of the teachers and some of the other students." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Male)

"Some of these kids are going to be stressed to the max with the thought of not being able to go to school and not have their normal routine because they're so routine driven, they would be so out of place." (Group 10, Special School Prin, Female)

- Teachers having the opportunity to work from home/ communicate/ learn remotely

Some teachers said they now had more flexibility and opportunities to work from home when not taking a class and this was something, they hoped continued as part of their job.

"(Things) have (changed) for me. We have not a lot of space at school so it's quite hard for staff to socially distance so we have flexibility at the moment to work from home when we're not teaching. I'm hoping a few of these changes might stick around." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

"Not so much in the classroom but…the flexibility to be able to attend meetings on-line." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

"The flexibility of meetings, we're allowed to go home now if you think you can get home before the meeting starts. I hope that continues once restrictions are gone." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

"Recording the meeting as well so if you need to watch it later you can." (Group 4, Sec Teacher, Female)

Parents' views on improving learning for special needs students

Many parents of students with special needs felt that the education system currently in place for their children - pandemic or not - was not enough. They said the problems with the system had been exaggerated with home learning. They felt there was not enough support for the children and parents at home, with both struggling to understand what to do.
Parents also struggled to balance their child's needs with working from home. Many parents said that more one-on-one support, via aides and carers, was needed.

"It is really depressing and really discouraging and so frustrating what all of our special needs kids are (experiencing), it's just simply not good enough. It's not good enough even when we're not in a pandemic. Our kids are always falling between the cracks and they're always being let down." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

"It's really broken how we deliver education to children with disabilities." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

"I think the interaction, even the integration aids being trained for Zoom and ways that they could connect, not all day, but certain points throughout the day with him, to facilitate some sort of activity." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

"They dropped some games off once and some books. I felt that they didn't know what to do. These aids, maybe they can take the kids to the park to learn." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

"You've really gotta redeploy those integration aids immediately and I know a lot of disability support workers aren't trained but there was a lot of disability support workers with nothing to do that could've been providing some support." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

"Keeping schools open for as many kids as possible and redeploying those aids." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

Some parents talked about a lack of funding.

"It goes back to funding; it goes back to these people really organizing. When I look at how much money (my son) is now receiving on NDIS, it is skyrocketing above what the department is giving (him). Weighing that up about the quality of care, the quality of education, the quality of his life at home, it used to be the other way around." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

Some suggested that, with internet connectivity problems in regional Victoria, the Education Department needed to have other teaching methods immediately available.

"I'll just say to the Education Department, if they are going to send us home they need to send the teachers and teams of teachers out to houses to basically sit and say 'this is the things for the week, this is the worksheets that you can try' because if technology falls over like it did for us and a lot of us in regional Victoria, there needs to be other ways to do it." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

"I echo that regional areas are not being supported enough. If you have a child with significant physical disabilities there's not enough support for our kids." (Group 11, Parents, Female)

Clear/ consistent directions from the Department

Some teachers also wanted more definite statements and direction from the government about the teaching methods, technology etc that would be employed if remote learning was again required. Similarly, some felt the need for clearer directives from the Education Department to ensure processes and standards were consistent between schools.

"They need to release a uniform, across the board statement to the parents and it doesn't matter whether you're at state, Catholic or private, it should just be a consistent message to all the parents." (Group 7, Parent, Prep-2, Female)

"If we did have to do it for longer or they were going to continue this, I would hope there would be a bit more continuity between schools. The Department's message was very open to interpretation but if it was more formalised, then schools could be more consistent with the workload and delivery." (Group 6, Prim Teacher, Male)

Also, some principals mentioned difficulties for teachers who had children at home but were deemed essential and needed to be at school to teach. They felt that this situation required guidance and clarity from the Department.

"We had some issues in the interpretation of essential workers…we needed all our staff back at school…(their children's schools said) 'as an educator you're not an essential worker' I found myself ringing schools on behalf of staff saying 'our students will be here, I'd prefer not to call the Education Department and query your judgment that my staff member can't send their kids to school'…for our staff that put them in a really difficult position." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Male)

"The idea that we stand alone doesn't work, we're all connected…we might have been making our own decisions as an independent school…we needed to follow a common lead which came from government." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Male)

"I said to any family in my community 'if you need to work, you're essential' so I had anywhere from 10 to 15% of students on site at any one time." (Group 8, Sec Principal, Female)

The authors of this report are John Armitage and Sue Loukomitis.