



Australian Council of State School Organisations Limited

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF STATE SCHOOL ORGANISATIONS

SUBMISSION TO

The House of Representatives
Standing Committee on Health, Aged Care and Sport

Inquiry into Long COVID and Repeated COVID Infections

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Sharron Healy
President

Dianne Giblin
Chief Executive Officer

One voice for every child in government education

PO Box 8221 Werrington County NSW 2747

 0418 470 604 |  ceo@acsso.org.au |  acsso.org.au | ACN: 611 783 218



The Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) is the one voice for every child in public education in Australia. As an organisation, ACSSO thanks the Standing Committee for the opportunity to make a submission to the *Inquiry into Long COVID and Repeated COVID Infections*- Consultation.

ACSSO is committed to access, equality, equity of outcomes, excellence, and participatory democracy.

It is ACSSO's position that a social framework should exist which will enable every young Australian to:

- achieve a lifestyle which will provide sustenance, occupation, identity, and satisfaction.
- live effectively as a responsible member of the community.
- obtain training or further education as the need arises without suffering undue economic penalty.
- obtain a living wage / allowance.

It is the responsibility of governments to pursue and implement policies and provide the resources necessary to achieve these aims.

No student's educational progress should be obstructed through lack of proper health care.

It is ACSSO's position that the physical, mental, and educational development of the student is assisted by coordinated services and thus integrated health services must aim to provide preventative, corrective, and ongoing health care, for all students.

Whilst not wanting to limit its response, ACSSO will focus on *the health, social, educational, and economic impacts in Australia on individuals who develop long COVID and/or have repeated COVID infections, their families, and the broader community, including for groups that face a greater risk of serious illness due to factors such as age, existing health conditions, disability, and background.*

As the most disrupted two years of schooling have drawn to a close, ACSSO is pleased that the government is taking the time to take stock of the impact of the pandemic on student learning and well-being. Although the 2020–21 academic years ended on a high note—with rising vaccination rates, outdoor in-person graduations, and access to at least some in-person learning for 98 percent of students—they were perhaps some of the most challenging for parents, educators, and students in Australia's history. The pandemic widened pre-existing opportunity and achievement gaps, hitting historically disadvantaged students hardest.

ACSSO is aware that mild or moderate COVID-19 lasts about two weeks for most people. But others experience lingering health problems even after the fever and cough go away and they are no longer testing positive for the illness.

The coronavirus symptoms that persist or return three months after a person becomes ill from infection can include:

- Fatigue
- Shortness of breath, and
- Cognitive problems

The symptoms can come and go but have major impact on a young person's everyday functioning and cannot be explained by another health problem.

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After recovering from the coronavirus, we have anecdotal evidence that young people have been left with lingering anxiety, depression and other post-COVID mental health issues. Physical changes such as pain and weakness have been complicated by extended periods of isolation, stress from loss of face-to-face study, combined with financial difficulties experienced by families and in some instances by the student themselves.

Federal, State and Territory Jurisdictions, Schools and educators need to listen to parents/caregivers & students and understand what young people suffering from the lingering effects of COVID are experiencing. The sufferers of post-COVID conditions need to be heard if we are to understand the long-term consequences and recovery from COVID-19 for all Australians.

For those students who have not had any long-term conditions appear yet, their mental health will be negatively affected by the prospect of what may be heading their way. Particularly if they are aware of others who are currently experiencing related issues.

We know that resilience is the ability to recover from stress, adversity, failure, challenges, or even trauma. It is not something that our children/teenagers either have or do not have; it is a skill that young people develop as they grow.

Resilient youths are more likely to take healthy risks because they do not fear falling short of expectations. They are curious, brave, and trusting of their instincts and they know their limits and they push themselves to step outside of their comfort zones. This helps them reach for their long-term goals and it helps them solve problems independently.

But how is society helping our young people suffering from long COVID-19. At this time, we have been informed that treatment for long COVID-19 continues to be a multidisciplinary approach to manage each person's specific set of symptoms. This includes the use of medications, as well as physical and occupational therapy. We know that around seven million people – or 28% of the Australian population – live in rural and remote areas, which encompass many diverse locations and communities (ABS 2022). These people are facing unique challenges due to their geographic location and often have poorer health outcomes than people living in metropolitan areas.

How is the Australian Government enabling long COVID-19 sufferers in rural and remote areas of Australia access a multidisciplinary approach to manage each person's specific set of symptoms?

We know that the long-term impact of COVID-19 on patients who recover from the virus remains unknown.

Access to programs that assist parents and carers help young people suffering from long COVID, to build resilience and confront uncertainty by teaching them to resolve challenges independently is needed urgently. While the protective nature of parenting might be to leap in and help so that the young person avoids dealing with discomfort, this weakens resilience. We know that young people need to learn to work through challenges and develop their own critical thinking skills. Without this skill set in place, our youth can experience anxiety and shut down in the face of adversity. A toolkit for families to identify the signs and guide young people is imperative.

COVID-19 (Long and/or repeated) has highlighted our lack of age-appropriate mental health resources.

While it is not ideal that we needed a pandemic to have attention focused on Australia's youth mental health crisis, we hope it brings us into a new era where Australian governments prioritise young people's mental health. We need that now and moving forward.

With the goal being: -

- Optimal physical health is something that we all have;
- Optimal mental health is something that we all have; and
- Wellbeing is something we all deserve.

Optimal health is about being as healthy as only you can be when adopting behaviours and forming habits that are sustainable. Maintaining an optimal level of wellness is important to enable us to enjoy a higher quality of life. Wellness and wellbeing matters because our choices, actions and emotions felt, impacts on our wellbeing. In turn, our state of personal wellbeing affects our daily responses, actions, and emotions, in an ongoing loop. It is vital to achieve an optimal level of wellness to manage daily stress, reduce the risk of illness, ensure positive interactions, and enjoy the highest possible quality of life.

Fostering mental health and wellbeing needs to start early in a child's life. This includes monitoring social and emotional development in young children, in the same way a child's physical growth is regularly checked. It also means that parents require support, because providing support to parents, helps their children.

Whilst research shows that the pre-adolescent to early adult years is the time that presents many challenges or risks and mental ill-health begins, elevated levels of childhood anxiety are being identified in children attending primary school. We are doing very little to prepare and support families and the community, as a whole.

Whilst it is not the only answer, implementing online tools and services, will help create a foundation for the well-being and positive mental health of everyone, no matter where they live.

It is ACSSO's position when dealing with the effects of long term COVID-19 that *a whole-of-government response is required.*

There is a need to focus a new lens on the pandemic and its impact and direct much-needed attention and resources to long COVID. Taking care of affected young Australians presents challenges given the incompleteness of research, the lack of sufficient diagnostics support, and pervasive problems with access to services.

ACSSO looks forward to working with all relevant Australian Government Departments, including Health and Education, to support vibrant, liveable, and inclusive Australian communities that provide ample choices and opportunities for all to thrive, but this must begin with health, both mental and physical.