One voice for every
child in public education

Australian Council of State School Organisations Ltd

Covid-19 Response

June 2020

Introduction

Australian Council of State Schools Organisations (ACSSO) welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the discussion with regard to the events, processes and procedures during the Covid 19. We understand that these were uncertain times and information has been new and updated as the situation continued to unfold. We take this opportunity to discuss how families and children were receiving this information, what could have made it clearer and what needs immediate attention.

About us

ACSSO represent the interests of the families and communities of more than 2.53 million children and young people attending government schools in Australia. We are one of the oldest continuously operating parent organisations in Australia, possibly the world. Formed in 1947, we bring together various state and territory parent groups, plus other families with an interest in public education, to develop national policies reflecting the way families want public education to be offered for all children. Over time there have been some changes in the way our members in states and territory peak parent groups have approached national issues, as such membership varies – what is consistent is our commitment to ensuring equity and access for all young people attending government schools in Australia.

We believe that the primary obligation of governments, both Federal and State, is to establish and maintain government systems of education which:

- *engages with family and community at all levels of education;*
- *are of the highest standard and open to all, irrespective of race, gender, religion, social-economic status, geographic location, or ability;*
- *can respond to changing landscape of education in the 21st Century and respond and develop flexible and diverse programs necessary to meet student needs;*
- *discriminates in favour of those schools and individual students who are challenged with disadvantage and/or disability.*

Recommendations (in no particular order)

1) That the Federal and State governments identify lessons learned during these times and use them to inform and develop strategies for any other crisis management in the future. This would ensure a cohesive response. We expect cohesion between federal and state and territory governments in terms of messaging to parents and the community.
2) ACSSO calls on the Federal Government to immediately examine and fund the rapid deployment and release of laptops and effective internet access for all public-school students across the nation – all public school students must have access to this technology, as a matter of equity, if we want to move forward as a nation.
3) ACSSO call on governments for services, personnel and programs be put in place to ensure optimum student wellbeing and mental health - student wellbeing must be the priority as they return to full time school
4) ACSSO calls on the relevant bodies to ensure curriculum requirement priorities are identified and that only key elements to be covered this year to enable young people remain engaged in the learning continuum
5) We request family engagement become a priority for education, both in professional learning and implementation; the time to build home – school relationships cannot be effectively developed in a time of crisis, these relationships should already exist. Home school relationships must be priority post COVID.
6) ACSSO requests to contribute to discussions about more effective inclusion and support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, students with disability and students whose family's first language is not English. The challenges faced by these groups come with a bespoke set of requirements that need a more nuanced response.
7) That the Federal Government uses the ability to bulk buy via procurement safety materials for national use in future

8) Organise and gather feedback from students from a diverse group of backgrounds in education provide

We would request the opportunity to share with you our findings from our National Family Survey and would like to unpack the deeper findings that will give greater insight into families and how they have had varying degrees of success with online learning and school learning packs. Attached is a summary of the findings.

Whose responsibility?

ACSSO was pleased to see the establishment of National Cabinet. We applaud the addition of New Zealand into the discussion however the addition of Opposition MPs or other members of parliament would have made decisions far more visible, transparent and accountable.

The agreement of the seven principles for education gave families some certainty and consistency of messaging. However, Principle 4 was somewhat used loosely when applied to the non- government school sector. Despite the ongoing requests by the Minister for their schools to remain open, following the Chief Medical Officers advice, there was no movement by the non-government school sector until further funding incentives were provided.

The inequities of treatment between the government and non- government sectors were highlighted in a number of announcements by the Federal government. These special deals we believe will only exacerbate the equity tail.

Much of the non -government school sector fell into the small and medium business category. This already allowed them to access many of the eligible payments of up to $50,000 to support cash flow. They could also apply for JobKeeper assistance to maintain staff if fee payments or income dropped by 30%; in addition, they also had access to relaxed rules regarding creditor demands should they be trading insolvent. There was also an ability to apply for short term unsecured loans of up to $250,000 amongst other support available through their bank or the Australian Tax Office.

Yet their cries for assistance was also extended with an offer from the Federal Education Minister to have 25% advance of their 2021 allocation (cost of $3 billion) paid in this financial year. In addition, the Minister offered $10 million to provide handwash and other Personal Protection Equipment (PPE gear) if they opened schools and had in attendance only 50% of students by June 1 – these offers along with additional support is grossly unfair and further advantaged the non-government school sector.

Terminology and mixed messaging
ACSSO felt that early messaging and terminology was somewhat confusing and inconsistent. Definitions varied without explanation from situation to situation and from jurisdiction to jurisdiction.

- It was a clear perception by the majority of Australians that both state and federal government focused on finances/business first and safety second
- The term "adult" is often referred to as 18 plus – yet students that age were considered "safe";
- "Social distancing" was encouraged for "adults", less so for "children". Shops and other establishments had varying degrees of social distancing, some had temperature checks at the door yet the next shop may have had no obvious restraints apart from numbers allowed in the shop
- Children were "school safe" but could not attend friend's parties.
- What classifies a person as a "grandparent" or "elderly".
- Many who fell into that definition were "frontline workers".
- There also appeared to be confusion over what was a "frontline" and what was an "essential" worker.

Children have always been considered "safe at school" yet schools were closed for extensive periods of time and this time and ratio varied from state to state.

Education and schools

Families appreciated the efforts of teaching and school support staff during this time, many schools being extremely flexible. Of key concern for parents and carers was the fact that there was little dialogue with them in the decisions and transitions for "learning at home". It would be imperative that daily updates be a priority. Towards the end of the lockdown period there seemed to be a shift

Engagement with families was inadequate surrounding continuing education and this requires immediate attention. Work will be done to build effective teamwork between families and schools to meet a similar challenge which may arise in the future.

We have attached our summary from our National Survey however we offer the following:
- Online learning had varying degree of successes, students of limited capacity to access due to family ability to provide devices and access to internet. Equity of access is an immediate need that should be resourced
- A variety of approaches has been used while students were school learning at home. Some evaluation of the most effective approaches might be useful to inform our way forward for the future.
- Inconsistency between states and territories as to what is considered safe; in ability for parents to make the decision of whether to send their child to school unless there was a significant health issue (for the student)
- Unhelpful threats of absences being recorded and, in some jurisdictions, also announcing fines for unexplained absences. Many family situations made it difficult for students to "log in" at the desired time – there is a need to understand the complexities as to why this occured
- Inconsistency between states and territories for what processes are put in place with regard to students who are children of essential workers, cleaning, pick up and drop off procedures
- Many students rely on their time at school to provide breakfast and often lunch – there are concerns for families whose budgets can't provide

The Future
Our office received a significant number of phone calls of families confused, in distress or just unable to decide what to do. We heard from many families of children with additional needs where students were thriving others where they struggled greatly. Our key concern is that at no time were families consulted as to what worked for them. Governments, Education departments and teachers' unions failed to collaborate with the key partner in this – the families.

We would be pleased to expand on this further

Dianne Giblin
Chief Executive Officer
June 2020

Australian Family Survey on Schooling during the Covid-19 Pandemic

Duration and responses

The survey opened Monday 27 April and closed Wednesday 6 May (collectors closed 8 May).Collectors were created for a range of media, including ACSSO email campaigns and social media.

Of the **3335** total responses, nearly two-thirds (**1917**) were collected via links shared on Facebook organisation and personal accounts. **3030** respondents passed the main qualifiers and completed all (or most) of the survey.

The survey allowed several possible paths to completion. For example, Family A answers questions relating to additional needs students + home-based learning + adults working from home while supervising learning, while Family B skips the additional needs section and completed questions on children still attending school in person.

Limitations

- Due to time and financial constraints, the survey could not be translated into languages other than English and so potentially excluded many families who may be facing even greater difficulties in schooling during isolation conditions.
- The brief testing period resulted in some limitations not being exposed before release. In particular, a subset of parents who are leaving home to work while their children study alone at home were unable to answer certain questions in the survey, but were still able to submit their comments.
- Respondents without personal experience of children's learning during the pandemic were not excluded from participation, but they were skipped from initial qualifying questions to the final page where they were invited to contribute more general comments.
- The survey focus is on individual family experiences not systemic responses. The complexity of family schooling choices makes it impossible to extract complete data sets exclusively for any one school system. Collections of individual responses can be prepared for all families who nominated a child attending, for example, a Catholic school, but these families may also be answering for children in government or independent schools.

Jurisdiction

State and territory of origin were tracked for the 3027 respondents who recorded a valid postcode.

About one-third were from NSW (**1036**), followed by Queensland (**547**), South Australia (**471**) and Victoria (**436**), ACT (**337**), Western Australia (**133**), and Tasmania (**67**).

No responses were recorded from the Northern Territory, which is unsurprising given NT's uninterrupted school arrangements and small population.

While not fully explored, ACT respondents have reported unhappiness about the 'hub' school supervision. Sentiments include 'disappointing', 'a joke', 'harmful' and 'better off at home'.
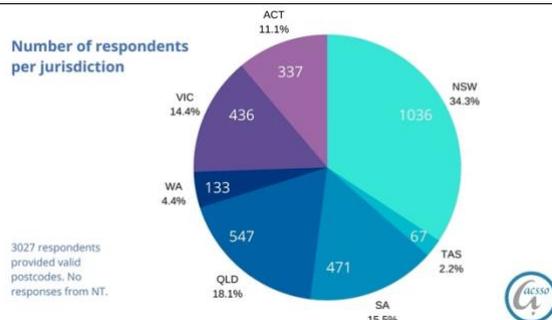

*Currently ACT public schools have the most appalling arrangements for children in the entire country. They have clearly not considered the experience of children in the arrangements where they have closed all schools except for a few hubs. It has been a total mess – **ACT parent, govt primary***

Relationship to children, living arrangements

More than **90**% of respondents were parents and about **75**% live with a partner and the children full time. Grandparents (**3.45**%) and other carers and guardians (**2.8**%) were also identified.

About **13**% were sole carers and more than **6**% lived with extended family (with or without partners).

Comments on additional family stressors appear in many different parts of the survey:

- *I've had to borrow my son's father's iPad but that is stressful because he uses it to hold over me and put me down*
- *Our family has split up to care for elderly relatives.*
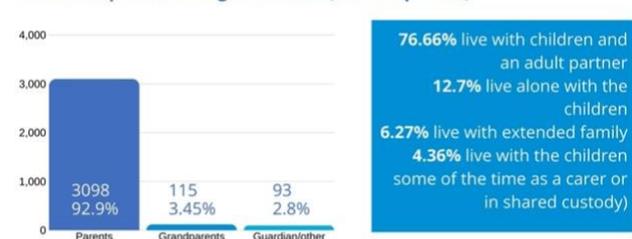
Number of children in family

The survey responses cover families with a total of **4015** school-aged children and **674** younger children/infants (*chart, right*).

Nearly half the respondents (**46.8%**) had two school-aged children, **32%** had one child and **16%** had three. Only **5%** cared for four or more children.

Of the **16%** of respondents who also had younger children, most (**81%**) had one preschool-aged child or infant and **15%** had two.

School years and systems

Respondents reported caring for **2285** primary and **1730** secondary students. About a third of respondents had children in both primary and secondary schools. As primary and secondary school contexts are often distinctive, many questions allowed different responses for each.

More than **70**% of respondents had children in government schools, **15.7%** in independent schools, and **12.9%** in Catholic schools. It can be assumed that many families take up more than one school system for their children.

Type of schooling
Around one third of respondents had children in both primary and secondary schools.
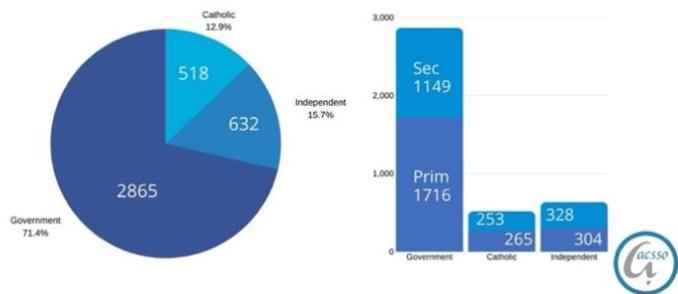
Children attending school

571 families said their children were still attending a school in person (*see chart, right*).
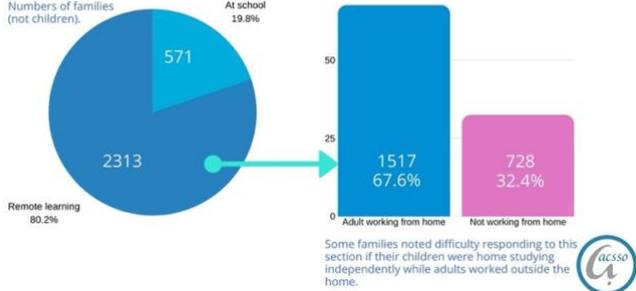
Families could choose more than one reason for children being in school. The most common reasons:
- **51%** child needs structure to study
- **49%** adult/s in 'essential' work
- **36%** school encouraging attendance
- **31%** virus poses little danger to children

Notably, many school staff complained of being 'forced' to take children to school.

Learning arrangements April/May 2020
Numbers of families (not children).

Some families noted difficulty responding to this section if their children were home studying independently while adults worked outside the home.

Children requiring additional support

More than **22%** of respondents (**683**) completed questions about children who normally received additional support at school. To allow for the complexity of individual needs, respondents were able to choose multiple responses to best describe the child/ren they cared for. The largest single response group was for 'mainly required learning support' (**75%**) while nearly one-third of respondents said their child/ren required 'psychological support'.

Nearly half the respondents (**49%**) said their child/ren could manage social distancing independently, while **22%** said they could manage if accompanied and **15%** said they could not comply.

## Remote learning with additional needs

The lack of consistency and changes in routines have impacted my ASD children significantly… focus is lost extremely quickly – **NSW Catholic primary and secondary schools.**

Learn at home content … confusing and very time consuming for working parents to work through – **QLD govt primary.**

Doing well following the provided schedule and without the distraction of physical school – **NSW govt primary.**

It's a hands-on day with me going from each side of the table until we finish. If you have trouble [with] reading and comprehension it's tough but … all 3 are happy with what they are achieving and communication from school – **VIC govt primary, Catholic secondary**

Concern about losing additional needs support in isolation
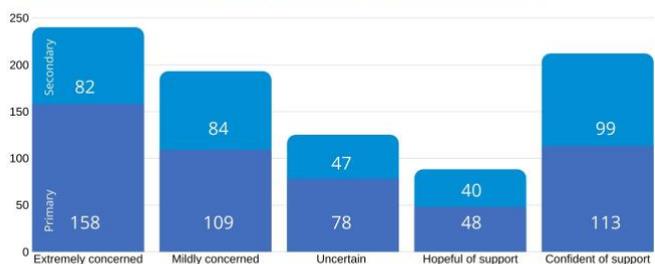
683 families of additional needs students responded to this question. 56% were 'extremely' or 'mildly' concerned they would lose school support in isolation, while 41% were 'hopeful' or 'confident' of continued support. Families were somewhat less confident (22%) that primary schools would continue to support students during isolation and somewhat more confident of secondary school support (28%).

Access to devices, internet

95% of remote learning families reported reliable access to the internet.

77% of families also said their school's servers were reliable, although this varied considerably between primary (**73**% reliable) and secondary (**51**%).

This may relate to the much higher dependence on 'live' online classes reported as the main form of educational delivery for secondary schools (**58**%) compared to primary schools (**18**%).

Access to sufficient computing devices for remote learning

82% of families reported already owning sufficient devices for secondary students, but only **62%** already owned enough devices for primary students.
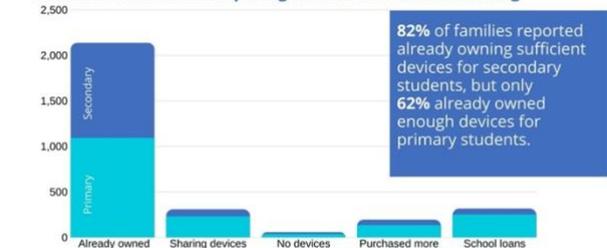
Many comments related to existing, older devices not coping with the new demands of remote learning - in particular the streaming of live classes or recorded videos. Some families of children with additional needs reported losing access to vital IT equipment at school, such as C-Pens for dyslexia.

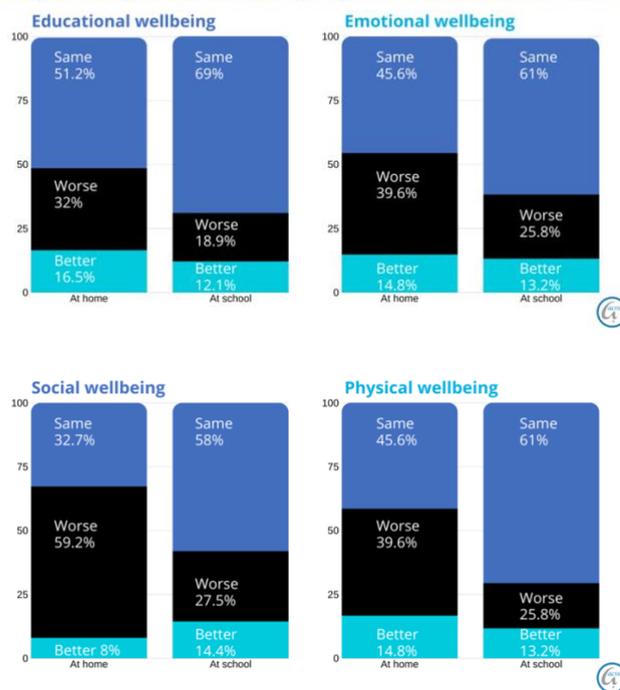## Family wellbeing during isolation

A number of the survey's questions addressed family wellbeing and the responses will be explored more in the final report.

- **72%** of remote learning families felt 'supported' by schools, but many comments referred to complex systems, poor communication, and unrealistic school expectations
- **40%** of remote learning families were unhappy their children's learning days had either too much or too little structure
- **56%** of families of children with additional needs were concerned they would lose school support through remote learning
- At-home families were much more likely to report *'worse than usual'* wellbeing than at-school families (charts, right).

*[Feeling] stressed, anxious. Schools should … have better systems in place to teach by now. Every workplace has had to adapt not just them – **VIC parent, govt primary***

*We have coped remarkably well, lots of online social interactions have helped – **NSW parent, govt secondary***

Family wellbeing since isolation, comparing at-home and at-school contexts

Educational wellbeing

At home	At school
Same 51.2%	Same 69%
Worse 32%	Worse 18.9%
Better 16.5%	Better 12.1%

Emotional wellbeing

At home	At school
Same 45.6%	Same 61%
Worse 39.6%	Worse 25.8%
Better 14.8%	Better 13.2%

Social wellbeing

At home	At school
Same 32.7%	Same 58%
Worse 59.2%	Worse 27.5%
Better 8%	Better 14.4%

Physical wellbeing

At home	At school
Same 45.6%	Same 61%
Worse 39.6%	Worse 25.8%
Better 14.8%	Better 13.2%

Reasons to return to school

Families in home-based learning were asked to rank reasons to return to school from 'most convincing' to least.

The chart to the right combines the top three votes for each popular reason, separating those which fall more clearly in the educational domain.
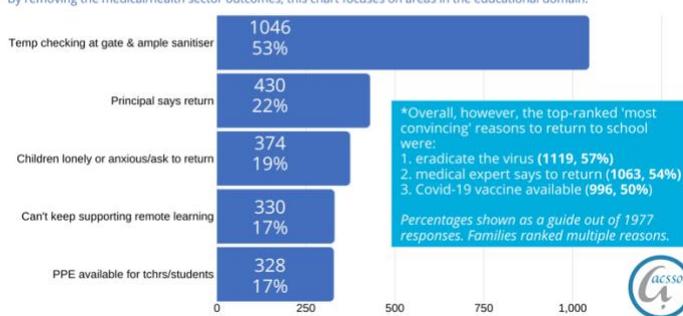
*I would be sending them now but have no option as in ACT they can't attend their own school – **ACT parent, govt secondary***

*I think that if students and teachers get to the point where masks need to be worn that is ridiculous and schools must be closed – **NSW parent, govt secondary***

*Without vaccine sending kids back to school is too dangerous to be considered – **QLD parent Catholic primary, govt secondary***

Sentiment ranking of non-medical* reasons to return to school

Families ranked reasons to return children to school by 'most convincing' to least. Results show top three votes combined for each reason.
By removing the medical/health sector outcomes, this chart focuses on areas in the educational domain.

Reason	Votes	%
Temp checking at gate & ample sanitiser	1046	53%
Principal says return	430	22%
Children lonely or anxious/ask to return	374	19%
Can't keep supporting remote learning	330	17%
PPE available for tchrs/students	328	17%

*Overall, however, the top-ranked 'most convincing' reasons to return to school were:
1. *eradicate the virus (**1119, 57%**)*
2. *medical expert says to return (**1063, 54%**)*
3. *Covid-19 vaccine available (**996, 50%**)*

Percentages shown as a guide out of 1977 responses. Families ranked multiple reasons.

Comment snapshots

*My son is struggling to focus when normally he's fine. Missing the interpersonal contact. My daughter is quite happy but falling behind in a lot of work! She normally keeps up – **VIC parent, govt and Catholic secondary***

*Not racing around to attend extracurricular activities has been beneficial for my mental and emotional health as a parent, and reduced the stress and time pressure on my child – **QLD parent, independent primary***

*We use the hub schools in ACT and they are terrible. Staff are lovely, the process is a joke. The supervision of learning is a joke and don't even get me started on before/after school care – **ACT parent, govt primary***

*It's been really hard on the kids and I think they are the group in community who is having the most asked of them at the moment – **VIC parent, govt primary***

*I believe children should be back at school now. It is not feasible for parents to work from home, supervise children. and after 8 weeks kids need to get back to school and our economy needs to be restarted – **NSW parent, Catholic primary***

*Struggling to get children to focus on school at home & manage full time workload. Made the decision to send children back to school two days a week. Our school will not take any child who has a parent working from home so I'm forced to go into the office. When we're at home, I'm only doing supervision with education apps. I simply don't have the time for the lesson plans the school sent home – **QLD parent, govt primary**.*

*I would very much like to see a staggered return to school with lower numbers of students 1 - 2 days a week. With fewer students more ability to keep safe distance but kids still get some interaction with peers. Best of both worlds. Not happy to have 30 in a classroom at any 1 time – **NSW parent, govt primary***

*If I didn't have to work I would happily home school the kids. Access to technology devices is also an issue. I take my computer to work. Some work they send home is links to websites but they don't have access to technology until I'm home – **NSW parent, govt primary and secondary***

*My ex-husband has extreme health anxiety and a history of being very intimidating when he chooses to communicate with me. The SA education union is against on-site schooling and his fear of COVID-19 means the union reinforces his justification to refuse to allow our son to school on site – **SA parent, govt primary***