

Message from the President, March 2020

Pandemic, and hope in our schools

As I write, our nation is embroiled in an international pandemic. Many events have been cancelled, travellers have been self-isolated, and our markets have continued their downward trend.

Our schools remain open and this week the Prime Minister suggested there would be no wholesale shutdown in education. While many parents still expect this may occur, others reason that it will not because:

1. school aged children as a group are among the least susceptible to the virus in our population
2. school staff are known to be highly capable managers of all kinds of daily gatherings of children and adults
3. the effect of school closures on the activity of our adult workforce - especially health workers - could be enormous.

We continue to head into 2020 with an unusually high number of incidents affecting our livelihood and our communities. It is a confusing and upsetting time for parents, teachers, principals and children. We are experiencing further assaults on our health and well-being and our most vulnerable in society in greatest need.

Parental decisions respected

Schools may remain open but if parents choose to withdraw their children in these unusual circumstances, schools should respect that decision and not, as has been reported in some cases, pursue truancy provisions.

School staff might not be aware of home issues, like elderly relatives or an immune-suppressed parent, that make voluntary self-isolation a necessary move. Some highly anxious parents, too, need understanding and support rather than threats at this time.

Families should be able to work with their school in a mutually respectful way to agree on flexible arrangements that cover all contingencies. Pandemics or less dramatic waves of illness; bushfires and smoke pollution; floods or severe storms; industrial action or traffic dramas - all these events can disrupt school and family routines.

We should be able to manage them while students continue their education with guidance from our world leading teachers. Can we?

New skills & ideas in difficult times

Schools may not close, but even if individual families self-isolate it causes us to think about the effect of distance in education. In this area, our regional communities may help us understand how to effectively function in a remote learning capacity.

Distance learning methods are foreign to many metropolitan families, but native to many of our regional teachers and students.

The prospect of remote learning also highlights inequities present in resourcing across all of Australia's school systems. For example, in the ACT, all secondary students are allocated free digital devices which substantially improve their ability to work outside the school's premises.

Any teacher or student who has experience in distance education will tell you it takes more than equipment to make it work. How ready are the majority of our classroom teachers to deliver education through a small screen, perhaps without even seeing students' faces on the other side?

There's a skill in this form of teaching, and it would be good to think the current situation has many educators considering the adequacy of, say, their voice alone in supporting quality learning.

Unfair internet access

However, even access to a free device and willing teacher won't help students if their family does not have reliable access to the internet. When we think about the consequences of any student being isolated from their normal classroom access, we can see that connectivity is a necessity, not a luxury.

Will our school communities need to innovate more to support individual or whole-school diversions to 'home schooling'? For example, we've seen some international education institutions park WiFi-enabled buses in central residential areas as makeshift portable hot spots. What might your local school community do? Have you already had to explore these options because of bushfire damage?

What is certain is that, in that situation, family engagement in education within the home would be more critical than ever. This is an anxious time for all involved, and I trust and expect that our teachers and principals will be up to the task of identifying ways to support our students.

Impact on fundraising

The environment we're currently in may affect your ability to fundraise or access other parent support in a number of ways.

- Limits on 'non-essential' mass gatherings might mean you are unable to hold scheduled public or parent events such as fetes or working bees.

- Parents whose work is curtailed because of virus restrictions (like travel agents, or bar staff) are likely to be among the first to feel the bite of lost revenue and this will affect their capacity to donate financially.
- Parents and community members in self-isolation or mandatory quarantine will be unavailable for normal volunteering in canteens, the uniform shop or reading groups.

Our volunteers are already stretched thin - and now it's even harder. This environment presents a daunting task for anyone supporting their local school. It may drive away volunteers and remove our focus from community to organisational sustainability instead.

And yet, amid all this, can you imagine what it would be like if your school engagement committee focused on community events purely for the sake of community, and not for financial gain? Yet again, government schools have been hit with limited funding increases compared to our non-government institutions. Yet again, the latest federal funding bill leaves the neediest schools in need.

When will we be in a position where funding is truly needs based and is fair, simple and transparent?

Andrew Bidwell

Chair

Australian Council of State School Organisations

March 2020

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