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**Submission to the Department of  
Education: Review of the Impact of  
COVID-19 on School Students with  
Disability**

March 2023

## About The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP)

The RACP trains, educates and advocates on behalf of over 20,000 physicians and 9,000 trainee physicians, across Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. The RACP represents a broad range of medical specialties including general medicine, paediatrics and child health, cardiology, respiratory medicine, neurology, oncology, public health medicine, infectious diseases medicine, occupational and environmental medicine, palliative medicine, sexual health medicine, rehabilitation medicine, geriatric medicine, and addiction medicine. Beyond the drive for medical excellence, the RACP is committed to developing health and social policies which bring vital improvements to the wellbeing of patients and the community.

Physicians from a range of specialities have specific interest in disability, including paediatrics and child health, rehabilitation, neurology, public health and general and acute care medicine.



*We acknowledge and pay respect to the Traditional Custodians and Elders – past, present and emerging – of the lands and waters on which RACP members and staff live, learn and work. The RACP acknowledges Māori as tangata whenua and Te Tiriti o Waitangi partners in Aotearoa New Zealand.*

## Executive Summary

The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP) warmly welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Department of Education's Review of the impact of COVID-19 on school students with disability.

The RACP recognises the overwhelming evidence that people with disability have poor mental and physical health compared to others in the community. People with disability are more likely to live in poverty, have poor-quality or insecure housing, low levels of education and workforce participation, and be socially excluded or marginalised. They are particularly vulnerable to violence and discrimination.<sup>1</sup>

It is estimated that 1 in 10 school students have a disability, and almost 1 in 18 have severe or profound disability.<sup>2</sup> Intellectual disability is the most common disability group affecting children (4.5%), followed by sensory and speech disability (3.1%) and psychosocial disability (2.7%).<sup>3</sup> It is reported that 89% of school students with disability go to a mainstream school, compared to 12% who attend Schools for Specific Purpose (SSP).<sup>4</sup>

Children and adolescents with disability are at increased risk of experiencing health inequities. These gaps widen as they grow, resulting in adverse adult health, educational and vocational outcomes. As schools reopened following closures during the COVID-19 pandemic, most students quickly transitioned back into the classroom, but students with disability, and particularly those who struggled prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, urgently need greater support to catch up.

Students with a disability have the same rights to education as other students. The [Disability Standards on Education 2005](#) (reviewed in 2020) sets out the obligations of schools and post school educational services to provide education without discrimination on the basis of disability. The RACP supports the aim of the Disability Standards on Education and related initiatives such as the [Positive Partnerships program](#), which provides professional development for teachers, principals, and other school staff to build their understanding, skills, and expertise in working with children and young people on the autism spectrum.

Non-inclusive education can have a significant negative impact on educational, employment and social outcomes for children and young people with a disability.<sup>5</sup> It problematically sends a message that students with disability are different and cannot be fully integrated with the rest of the community.<sup>6</sup>

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, school closures and remote learning have been challenging for many school students with disability or learning difficulties, as well as their

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<sup>1</sup> World Health Organisation & World Bank. (2011). World report on disability 2011. World Health Organisation. Available from: <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/44575>

<sup>2</sup> People with disability in Australia, engagement in Education [Internet]. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Available from: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/contents/education-and-skills/engagement-in-education>

<sup>3</sup> Disability, ageing and carers, Australia: Summary of findings, 2018 [Internet]. Australian Bureau of Statistics. Available from: <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/disability/disability-ageing-and-carers-australia-summary-findings/latest-release#children-with-disability>

<sup>4</sup> People with disability in Australia, engagement in Education [Internet]. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Available from: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/contents/education-and-skills/engagement-in-education>

<sup>5</sup> Covid catch-up: Helping disadvantaged students close the equity gap [Internet]. Grattan Institute. Available from: <https://grattan.edu.au/report/covid-catch-up/>

<sup>6</sup> Reducing stigma and discrimination against children with disabilities [Internet]. Available from: [https://www.unicef.org/media/120421/file/Social\\_and\\_Behavioural\\_Change\\_Interventions\\_to\\_Strengthen\\_Disability\\_Inclusive\\_Programming\\_Summary.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/media/120421/file/Social_and_Behavioural_Change_Interventions_to_Strengthen_Disability_Inclusive_Programming_Summary.pdf)

families and carers.<sup>7</sup> Students with disability have not only had their education interrupted, but the COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the existing inequality they face in their education.<sup>8</sup> Many have fallen behind in their learning and additional support is needed to help them catch up.<sup>9</sup>

It is essential that all educational policies and strategies specifically consider how the needs of students with disability will be met due to the impact of COVID-19.

## Recommendations

1. **Increased access to appropriate services** to support individual children with complex disability, including improving access to applied behavioural analytic services and interagency school clinics/case conferences.
2. **Early identification and appropriate support** for children with disability who may experience further disadvantage due to a vulnerable population status e.g. First Nations, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities, refugees and asylum seekers, low socioeconomic background, rural and remote location, domestic/family violence.
3. **Increased school funding** to improve the capacity and resourcing of schools to provide quality and individualised teaching to students with disability.
4. **Investment in additional supports, such as tutoring**, for students with disability to catch up on lost learning and social opportunities.
5. **Investment in tailored mental health support** for students with disability and their families during and post-crisis events.
6. **Additional support to access and utilise appropriate digital technology** for students with disability and their families and carers.
7. **Inclusion of students with disability** and their families and carers in emergency preparedness, response and communications.
8. **Future pandemic planning** to ensure that the needs of students with disability are considered in the development of remote learning policy and guidelines
9. **Collaborative multi-sector approach** to the education and wellbeing of students with disability which recognises the intersection between education, health, disability and social services and the need for integrated education policy.
10. **Improved guidance and support to navigate the NDIS** so families and carers can utilise NDIS funding and other supports during emergencies.

The RACP urges swift action to improve the wellbeing of students with disability and reduce the clear and present educational disparities. This submission outlines the key areas the RACP believes students with disability were impacted most and calls on the Department of Education to consider and address these areas to support recovery from the impact of COVID-19 and ensure equitable access to education.

## Access to learning

During the COVID-19 pandemic, lockdowns were enforced to minimise the spread of infection and saw the closure of schools all over the country. The sudden nature of public health orders meant there was little to no planning involved in the rapid pivot to remote learning. While the COVID-19 pandemic affected the education of virtually all school

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<sup>7</sup> Not even remotely fair: Experiences of students with disability during COVID-19 [Internet]. Children and Young People with Disability Australia. Available from: [https://www.cyda.org.au/images/pdf/not\\_even\\_remotely\\_fair\\_cyda\\_education\\_report.pdf](https://www.cyda.org.au/images/pdf/not_even_remotely_fair_cyda_education_report.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Covid catch-up: Helping disadvantaged students close the equity gap [Internet]. Grattan Institute. Available from: <https://grattan.edu.au/report/covid-catch-up/>

<sup>9</sup> Covid catch-up: Helping disadvantaged students close the equity gap [Internet]. Grattan Institute. Available from: <https://grattan.edu.au/report/covid-catch-up/>

children, it became clear early on that pandemic-related school closures did not affect all children in equal ways.

Remote learning required students to work through large parts of the school curriculum independently. Most students struggled to pace themselves due to disrupted routines, lack of motivation, lack of supervision, poor home environments and set-ups for schooling, lack of access to information and communication technology (ICT) devices, as well as limited ICT literacy of the programs and devices suddenly being used to facilitate remote learning. It was especially hard for students with disability, many of whom were incapable of working through set activities independently. For many students with disability, the daily routine of school provides stability, support, and structure; however, lockdowns and the rapid transition to remote learning impacted this balance greatly for many.

According to a report by the Grattan Institute<sup>10</sup>, Australian teachers believe students learnt at only about 50-75% of their usual pace during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Disadvantaged students, who were already falling behind before the COVID-19 pandemic, will have slipped further behind. If concepts are missed in learning opportunities, it can be hard to develop new skills down the track. If students do not catch-up, there are real, life-long consequences. Low achievement at school can limit options for further study and work life. Students with disability who are not provided support to catch up from the impact of COVID-19 face an adverse double-effect on their future prospects due to the additional barriers faced by people with disability.

Students from vulnerable population groups who enter the school system are often developmentally disadvantaged compared to their peers and struggle to catch up. These include children from First Nations communities, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities, refugees and asylum seekers, low socioeconomic backgrounds, rural and remote locations and those living in domestic/family violence situations. The existing inequity faced by these students from vulnerable populations was further amplified for those who also have a disability as these students often struggled to access remote learning during COVID-related school closures due to a range of family and community factors including unsafe or inadequate home environments, access to or provision of ICT, and familial responsibilities of parents, carers and siblings. While students with disability require extra support in school to catch up to their peers, those who also face disadvantage due to vulnerability need even greater support both in and outside of the classroom, and this support may need to be provided for an extended period.

## Reduced learning supports

Students with disability were disproportionately affected by school closures, many of whom found themselves without access to the services and accommodations they normally receive in the classroom. This included teachers and teacher aides/supports and allied health professionals who have the training and skills to adapt learning activities to the needs of students with disability. According to a 2020 survey by the Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA), 61% of parents surveyed said students with disability had not received adequate educational support during the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>11</sup>.

While the available support services in Australian schools are welcomed, accessing assistance within the education system was difficult for many prior to the COVID-19

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<sup>10</sup> Covid catch-up: Helping disadvantaged students close the equity gap [Internet]. Grattan Institute. Available from: <https://grattan.edu.au/report/covid-catch-up/>

<sup>11</sup> Not even remotely fair: Experiences of students with disability during COVID-19 [Internet]. Children and Young People with Disability Australia. Available from: [https://www.cyda.org.au/images/pdf/not\\_even\\_remotely\\_fair\\_cyda\\_education\\_report.pdf](https://www.cyda.org.au/images/pdf/not_even_remotely_fair_cyda_education_report.pdf)

pandemic. A 2019 survey by the CYDA<sup>12</sup> found that students with disability are routinely excluded in their education. COVID-19 exacerbated these issues with many caregivers reporting further decreased and disrupted supports during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Early intervention for children with disability and/or learning difficulties involves timely provision of an optimal nurturing and learning environments and evidence-informed interventions that aim to maximise developmental and health outcomes and reduce the degree of functional limitations. Additional learning supports that are evidence-informed enable children to re-engage with school and their peers. For example, small group tutoring has been shown to be an effective method for helping students overcome learning losses. A Productivity Commission report<sup>13</sup> on school funding states an analysis of studies of small-group tuition identified that it could improve learning outcomes in reading by up to four months, and mathematics outcomes by up to three months.

In addition to ensuring there are appropriate support services available in schools for students with disability, it is essential that the individual learning needs of students with disabilities are recognised. Our physicians reported increased numbers of students with disability who have struggled to return to school post-COVID lockdowns and who have been met with responses that mandate physical return to school, at times in contradiction to specialist medical advice. Inclusive education policy must consider the individual learning needs of children, recognising the barriers to inclusive learning as well as understanding the factors that make school a meaningful and safe community space where all students want to engage.

## Loss of social connection

COVID-19 pandemic restrictions impacted the social connectedness of people globally. The closure of schools to limit the spread of COVID-19 meant that social and peer-to-peer interactions were significantly reduced during a time of important cognitive and social development for children.

Students with disability face a range of physical, learning, behavioural and communication challenges that can act as barriers to social connection with their peers. The interactions experienced in the school setting allow students with disability to develop and practice their social skills daily. Lockdowns and extended periods of remote learning impacted the development of these vital skills, with many finding it difficult to transition or develop these skills in an online setting.

According to the 2020 CYDA survey<sup>14</sup>, many students with disability were unable to engage online and so missed out on being part of a learning community with parents feeling that schools had not done enough to facilitate access to these key opportunities. As a result, nearly three quarters of respondents reported that students with disability felt socially isolated from their peers.

Our physicians reported increasing concerns from parents that children with intellectual and behavioural disabilities have regressed in important life and social skills due to COVID-19 restrictions preventing them from attending school in person.

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<sup>12</sup> Towards inclusive education: A necessary process of transformation [Internet]. Children and Young People with Disability Australia. Available from: <https://www.cyda.org.au/resources/details/62/towards-inclusive-education-a-necessary-process-of-transformation>

<sup>13</sup> Review of the National School Reform Agreement: Study report overview [Internet]. Australian Government Productivity Commission. Available from: <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/school-agreement/report/school-agreement-overview.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Not even remotely fair: Experiences of students with disability during COVID-19 [Internet]. Children and Young People with Disability Australia. Available from: [https://www.cyda.org.au/images/pdf/not\\_even\\_remotely\\_fair\\_cyda\\_education\\_report.pdf](https://www.cyda.org.au/images/pdf/not_even_remotely_fair_cyda_education_report.pdf)

While students have returned to the classroom, the social skills of many students with disability who were already struggling to connect with peers prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, has suffered due to prolonged lockdowns and loss of interaction with peers in the school setting.

## Mental health and wellbeing

Now, more than ever, Australian students need support with their mental health and wellbeing. The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the urgency of understanding and addressing student wellbeing in Australia, inclusive of children and young people with disability.

Emerging research is showing how the COVID-19 pandemic's unprecedented challenges have had negative repercussions for the wellbeing of Australian youth, with many families with children reporting negative impacts on mental health.<sup>15</sup> The Kids Helpline reported that duty of care interventions, in which police or ambulance responds to a child at imminent risk, were 99% higher across Australia in the first six months of 2021 than they were for the same period in 2020; the most common reasons for intervention were suicide attempts and child abuse.<sup>16</sup>

According to the World Health Organization, in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, global prevalence of anxiety and depression increased by 25%.<sup>17</sup> A 2020 CYDA survey of 700 parents with children with disability by found that half of the respondents experienced a decline in their mental health either for themselves or for their child or young person with disability<sup>18</sup>.

It is well-known that people with disability experience poorer mental health outcomes, e.g. the prevalence of self-reported anxiety-related problems in people with severe or profound disability is 42% and in people with other forms of disability it is 33%, compared with 12% of people without disability.<sup>19</sup> Restricted access to education, learning supports and social connection has further isolated students with disability and exacerbated stress, mental health and wellbeing issues. Our physicians have reported increased cases of poorer mental health in students with disability, with increasing anxiety and behavioural issues also noted.

While schools have reopened, many students with disability have struggled to transition back into the classroom. Our physicians have reported that school policy responses to COVID-19, in particular requesting students back to school face-to-face full time in conjunction with pressures on students and staff to catch up on the curriculum and missed learning opportunities, has contributed to a further wave of student vulnerability in the post-COVID-19 return to school process.

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<sup>15</sup> Evans S, Mikocka-Walus A, Klas A, Olive L, Sciberras E, Karantzas G, et al. From "it has stopped our lives" to "spending more time together has strengthened bonds": The varied experiences of Australian families during COVID-19. *Frontiers in Psychology*. 2020;11.

<sup>16</sup> New Kids Helpline Data reveals spike in duty of care interventions [Internet]. yourtown.. Available from: <https://www.yourtown.com.au/media-centre/new-kids-helpline-data-reveals-spike-duty-care-interventions>

<sup>17</sup> Covid-19 pandemic triggers 25% increase in prevalence of anxiety and depression worldwide [Internet]. World Health Organization. World Health Organization. Available from: <https://www.who.int/news/item/02-03-2022-covid-19-pandemic-triggers-25-increase-in-prevalence-of-anxiety-and-depression-worldwide>

<sup>18</sup> Not even remotely fair: Experiences of students with disability during COVID-19 [Internet]. Children and Young People with Disability Australia. Available from: [https://www.cyda.org.au/images/pdf/not\\_even\\_remotely\\_fair\\_cyda\\_education\\_report.pdf](https://www.cyda.org.au/images/pdf/not_even_remotely_fair_cyda_education_report.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> Health of people with disability [Internet]. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Available from: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-health/health-of-people-with-disability>

## Increased family stress/pressure

People across Australia experienced work, employment and income disruption, supply shortages and educational difficulties. However, all these disruptions were exacerbated for the families of children and young people with disability.

COVID-19 placed additional carer burden on parents, siblings, and carers to meet the needs of students with disability in addition to other family needs and their own work. For some families this struggle was so significant that it led to breakdown in family relationships and increased challenging behaviours in the child with disability, with our physicians reporting that these behaviours have been difficult to improve post-COVID-19 as parents are burnt out.

The individualised learning supports available and provided in schools were not available for many as online learning began, leaving parents to fill the role of the experts who normally supported their children's learning. As mentioned earlier, a survey conducted in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>20</sup> found that 61% of parents felt they had not received adequate educational support during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to another survey of parents conducted by the CYDA<sup>21</sup>, many parents reported having to do significant work to translate learning materials into a useful format for their children. Some reported receiving the same materials and support as those provided to students without disability, with the onus entirely on parents to make the necessary adjustments. This caused some family members to feel they were letting students with disability down because they did not have the skills required to adjust the materials appropriately and support their child's learning.

The increased responsibility placed on parents to support learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns often made managing already stretched caring and work responsibilities even more challenging. Loss of work-life balance resulted in parents choosing between supporting students' learning, wellbeing or completing work-related tasks. These issues were compounded by financial hardship and the emotional toll on relationships that were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Contact

The RACP welcomes the opportunity to discuss further with the Department of Education the progress of the Review and believe that our expert input would be of significant benefit.

Please contact [Policy@racp.edu.au](mailto:Policy@racp.edu.au) for further engagement.

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<sup>20</sup> More than isolated: The experience of children and young people with disability and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic. [Internet]. Children and Young People with Disability Australia. Available from: [https://www.cyda.org.au/images/pdf/covid\\_report\\_compressed\\_1.pdf](https://www.cyda.org.au/images/pdf/covid_report_compressed_1.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> Not even remotely fair: Experiences of students with disability during COVID-19 [Internet]. Children and Young People with Disability Australia. Available from: [https://www.cyda.org.au/images/pdf/not\\_even\\_remotely\\_fair\\_cyda\\_education\\_report.pdf](https://www.cyda.org.au/images/pdf/not_even_remotely_fair_cyda_education_report.pdf)