

Identifying key learnings from responding to COVID-19

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Introduction

Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of New South Wales (P&C Federation) is thankful for this opportunity to contribute to this inquiry. P&C Federation supports the position that individual educational and developmental needs should be met by a range of differentiated services expressed through appropriate and well-planned curricula, programs and environments and provided by sensitive and well-trained personnel in conjunction with parents¹ and families.

Commonwealth and State/Territory Governments are committed to ensuring equitable access to quality schooling for all students, in accordance with Australian legislation, national commitments via the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration, and international treaties such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

P&C Federation Feedback on Response to COVID-19

Recommendation 1: Clear and consistent strategies are communicated to continue students' education in the crisis

Our primary concern with the Government's response was the communication of strategies for how students would continue to receive their education during the height of the first wave of the pandemic. According to a P&C Federation survey of parents about overall communication during the pandemic (Figure 1), most rated communication from their child's school very highly, with nearly 77% of respondents rating communication from their child's school as either 'Excellent' or 'Good', and only approximately 7% rating it 'Poor' or 'Very Poor'.

The rating of communication from the NSW Government and Education Department was more mixed, with over 17% of respondents ranking communication from the Education Department 'Poor' or 'Very Poor'.

From P&C Federation's perspective, from the period between 23 March to 25 May, the strategies and advice regarding how students would continue their education during the crisis were frequently conflicting and rapidly shifting. The advice of the Federal Government since March was that schools are not a health risk and should remain open, and NSW schools never officially closed. However, the NSW Government effectively overturned the Federal Government's advice by asking parents in March to keep their children out of school where possible and to transition to online learning.

Contradictions became especially acute around the start of Term 2, when the NSW Government ostensibly agreed with the Federal advice that schools are safe but was nonetheless reluctant to allow a return to fulltime face-to-face learning. Instead, the NSW Government initially opted for a 'staggered' return to school, with cohorts of students

¹ "Parent" refers to anyone with legal care of a child, such as a parent, carer or legal guardian

attending school on different days of the week while the rest continued learning from home, with a view to returning to fulltime classroom attendance in July. However, the NSW Government abandoned the 'staggered return' strategy on 18 May when it announced that all students were to return fulltime from 25 May.

Why a staggered return was deemed necessary when the Government simultaneously argued that schools were not a health risk was never clearly explained. Should a similar crisis arise again, it is critical that there be a clearer and more unified strategy from the Federal and NSW Governments for how children will continue their education.

Recommendation 2: Take steps to ensure proper consultation and information flow to P&C Associations.

The impact on many P&C Associations has been far reaching. Many P&C Associations were forced to postpone their Annual General Meetings due to the restrictions on gatherings (over 35% of respondents to our survey were in this position), while all were essentially in limbo for weeks as they were unable to meet to make key decisions.

Due to the Constitution of P&C Associations having no enabler for virtual meetings, the only properly convened meetings were face-to-face, at which a quorum of members is physically present. In response to the crisis, P&C Federation drafted changes to the Constitution of P&C Associations to allow for virtual meetings. These changes were drafted in March and sent to the NSW Minister for Education with an acknowledgement that the changes were urgent, although the changes took eight weeks to be gazetted. We are unsure why this process took so long to resolve. It would be of enormous benefit to our members if governments responded more swiftly to urgent changes critical to operating under any pandemic situation.

Another significant concern of the P&C Federation was the rapid closure of canteens and uniform shops without any prior warning or consultation. On 24 March, the NSW Department of Education ordered school canteens and other operations such as uniform shops to cease their normal operations. Many of these are operated by P&C Associations and found themselves having to turn staff away and deal with remaining stock. P&C Federation would have appreciated some advance information or consultation in consideration that a Covid-19 Response group had already been set up within the department.

More than half of respondents to the survey operate a canteen and/or a uniform shop, and have been impacted in some way by these decisions. Moreover, when asked by our survey if they were able to operate their facilities in Term 2, over a fifth of respondents answered no. This is presumably because the Education Department's directives give leeway to school principals to decide when these facilities would open. As a result of this, many canteens and uniform shops closed and stood staff down, resulting in economic insecurity for those workers. This was compounded by issues relating to access to JobKeeper subsidies. Schools too were economically impacted, as funds raised through these avenues have been lost. We suggest the Government ensure that if a similar crisis arises, there is a more equitable return to normal operations for community groups and charities to help offset these disruptions.

The significant impact of not being able to fundraise, as well as uncertainty about the possibility of fundraising activities for the remainder of this year, will impact many P&C

Associations financially and their ability to support their schools, though we have yet to fully quantify this impact.

Recommendation 3: Improve the quality and accessibility of online learning for students, teachers and parents

As student attendance at school plummeted in March and April, there was considerable effort by schools to pivot toward remote learning from home. However, there are serious issues surrounding the suitability of remote learning given the huge inequity in access to technology across schools and within households in NSW. Further compounding this inequity is the ongoing challenges faced by lack of suitable technology and professional development across NSW public schools. A 2017 report by the NSW Auditor-General found numerous challenges with technology infrastructure in schools, such that “*many school wireless networks do not have the capacity to deal with current and future needs*”, and that half of all devices in New South Wales public schools are five years or older.² The inadequacies of technological infrastructure are especially clear in non-metropolitan areas, where internet coverage is less reliable. This problem is particularly manifest in lower income areas, where households often have fewer technological devices³, households with one device must share their devices, or there is limited or no access to data at all.

P&C Federation has frequently raised these issues with the Department, and they have become especially obvious in March to May period this year when most NSW students were learning from home and the nation’s internet infrastructure was severely strained. As most students are now returning to school fulltime, we are concerned these issues will be deprioritised by government. However, while we hope that widespread school closures will not occur in future, they cannot be ruled out while Australia is still officially in a pandemic, so the issues with remote learning will continue to be an issue in need of redress.

In our survey of parents and P&C Associations, most indicated school work was provided via video conferencing, Google Classrooms, etc. 42% of respondents stated that work was provided via papers being sent to the students’ home.

When asked in our survey what else would have helped their child's learning from home, some respondents were very complimentary of their school’s efforts and stated that nothing further was necessary. However, in the responses that wanted other steps taken, the most common responses were for more teacher-student interaction (such as via Zoom), a call for more structure in the work given, and a general feeling that a lot of work was being provided to their children with little guidance of how parents can support their children to learn. Should

² NSW Auditor-General. 2017. *Information and Communication Technologies in schools for teaching and learning*

³ Julian Thomas, Chris K Wilson, and Sora Park. Australia’s digital divide is not going away. *The Conversation*. 29 March 2018

a similar need to learn from home arise, the P&C Federation recommends that these factors be taken into account.

Other Matters

It is worth noting that many respondents to our survey reported a high degree of satisfaction about steps taken by their school, with 90% of respondents stating they were satisfied with their school's measures to ensure their children were safe. Most respondents cited the increase in soap and hand sanitisers on school grounds, as well as more active cleaning.