



**Hon Sue Ellery MLC**  
**Minister for Education and Training**  
**Leader of the Legislative Council**

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Our Ref: 61-22836

Dr John White  
Inquiry secretary  
Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training

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Dear Dr White

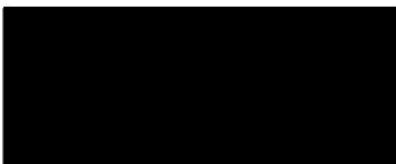
Thank you for your email dated 14 May 2020 regarding the Inquiry into Education in Remote and Complex Environments, seeking information about the complexities arising from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the response of Australian families and schools.

The Western Australian Government submission was forwarded to the Committee on 17 February 2020 and a response to additional questions was provided on 26 February 2020.

Please find attached information regarding the response to COVID-19 in Western Australian schools, for consideration with the previous advice.

I look forward to reading the report findings after the Inquiry has concluded.

Yours sincerely



SUE ELLERY MLC  
MINISTER FOR EDUCATION AND TRAINING  
15 JUN 2020

Att.

## **Inquiry into Education in Remote and Complex Environments**

### **The Western Australian response to support families and schools during the COVID-19 pandemic**

*Note: This information is for consideration with the previous Western Australian Government submission submitted on 17 February 2020 and a response to additional questions submitted on 26 February 2020.*

#### **Background Information**

In response to Western Australia's State of Emergency enacted due to COVID-19, the Western Australian Department of Education established a cross-sectoral COVID-19 Incident Management Team. The team's intents were to ensure continuity of student learning in Western Australia (WA), to reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19 at school sites and to ensure the provision of consistent, timely and appropriate advice relating to COVID-19. In recognition of the specific challenges faced by regional and remote settings, a specialist remote principal was appointed to the team. Regular updated advice was provided to principals, parents and school staff, including in relation to online and distance learning, and student wellbeing.

On 26 March 2020, the WA Government announced changes to learning arrangements from 30 March to 3 April in response to COVID-19. At that time, families were encouraged to keep their children at home if they were able to access the online or other learning resources for their education to continue. Parents who needed their children to attend school to enable them to maintain employment, and those children in vulnerable families, such as children living with grandparents, were encouraged to continue to attend school.

At the commencement of Term 2 (29 April 2020 for students), Western Australian public schools opened for all parents and carers who chose to send their children to school, with distance education packages or online resources provided for students who were learning at home. This arrangement lasted for three weeks, by the end of which, attendance on site at schools was around 84%.

From 5 May 2020, government-run school boarding residential facilities were reopened, subject to adherence with Australian Health Protection Principal Committee guidelines.

Since Monday, May 18 2020, all students have been required to return to school, except for those students who, based on medical advice, are being supported to learn from home. This decision was based on health advice that schools remain safe for staff and students and that they should remain open.

Enhanced school safety and cleaning regimes were put in place during this period, including more frequent environmental cleaning and disinfecting throughout the school day, such as high-touch surfaces and playground equipment, along with the reinforcement of hygiene measures. In addition, a range of measures was put in place across schools and residential facilities to support physical distancing, and safety and hygiene.



## **Initiatives to support schools, staff and students during the COVID-19 pandemic**

Student wellbeing is critical, especially at times of uncertainty. Students need to maintain connectedness with their school community even while learning from home. Maintaining relationships with teachers, their friends and the school community in the context of COVID-19 brings new challenges and opportunities. Resources were made available for teachers to build skills and knowledge on how to keep students connected, safe and engaged in their education. These include:

- resources and information related to the impact of COVID-19 on students' health and wellbeing and the impact on families; and
- information to understand how to best support students and families to access services and information.

Western Australian schools have:

- prepared learning packages, printed and online, depending on student access;
- established communication channels with students via both Department-provided and publicly available applications; and
- focussed on student wellbeing and connection to their school.

The Department expanded its provision of online tools and digital resources to support continuity of teaching and learning to students at home. Significant streamlined resource development and professional learning opportunities on the online tools and effective online pedagogy were provided to support staff to rapidly transition to remote learning. Over 5 000 teachers accessed training to improve their use of these tools, and over 500 learning packages for Kindergarten to Year 12 were made available for download and/or print.

A *Learning at Home* website was developed to provide parents and students with lessons that align with the curriculum. Education resources on the *Learning at Home* public website and resources for teachers have been significantly increased.

Information and Communications Technology (ICT) improvements include the provision of two online learning environments, Webex and Microsoft Teams; increased delivery capacity of servers for online learning; and bandwidth increases.

Where families had access to devices and internet access, students were involved in online and distance learning. Where possible, computers were arranged for students with no computer at home. Equipment included laptops and tablets, with mobile devices for free internet services.

Printed resources were provided by the Department for students to use where internet access was not possible. Schools delivered and collected work packages to homes or set up collection and drop-off points within schools, always maintaining hygiene practices and safe distances. Some schools have utilised opportunities in local and social media to engage with students and their families and provide learning experiences for students.

Schools developed and shared ideas, work packages, shared information on and utilised platforms to offer opportunities for engagement, such as Connect<sup>1</sup>, SeeSaw, Webex, Microsoft Teams and Apps such as Skoolbag, Facebook and Zoom.

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<sup>1</sup> WA Department of Education online teaching and learning platform.



Schools also ensured students and families were supported and felt connected throughout the uncertainty. Consistent and sustained contact by schools to parents via phone and email assisted student learning and engagement and identified the support available from a range of community agencies.

The Department's School Psychology Services were in regular contact with schools via phone, Webex or email providing up-to-date support information, including interagency contacts within the community. Interagency support offered to schools and families has been very positive. School staff could access support from the School of Special Educational Needs: Medical and Mental Health (SSEN:MMH) for students who could not attend school due to having a chronic medical condition or a compromised immune system during COVID-19, or a family member with these conditions.

For Term 2, re-engagement strategies commenced, with extra staff allocated to work with schools to assist with increasing attendance. Recognition of face-to-face learning with a focus on hygiene and staff safety is the most effective form of teaching and learning within the remote school community.

Staff support has been strengthened by:

- providing equipment, resources and templates to schools with students with special needs to procure and use appropriate personal protective equipment;
- daily updates to all staff regarding the latest advice from the Department of Health, and health promotion posters being placed in high-traffic areas;
- the Department maintaining the supply of essential hygiene products to schools centrally, where possible, with stocks being ordered and schools in regional areas being provided with additional supplies where possible;
- new cleaning guidelines, based on advice from the Department of Health, have been issued to schools to assure staff, students and parents that all precautions have been taken to make sure that high-contact areas are cleaned according to the latest advice to prevent exposure to the virus; and
- regional offices providing support for staff who were isolating; and the Department's Central Office providing fitness programs for staff in isolation and guidelines for their isolation period.

Strategies in remote regions included:

- Some programs funded under the BHP Pilbara Education Partnership in the Pilbara have adapted by delivering the programs using ICT.
- The Playgroup program under the BHP partnership delivers story time each week via Zoom, and the Playgroup Coordinator provides activities for children and families via a Facebook page. Additionally, the coordinator made activity packs and handed them out at the school gate weekly.
- The *Enrichment* program is delivered via Webex as the usual mode of delivery to small groups of students from four schools in the Pilbara all meeting at one school. By delivering via Webex, students at one of the schools can attend in person, while the other schools attend via Webex.
- In the Midwest Education Region, some schools adapted quickly to the evolving changes and were able to produce and offer modes of learning that catered for students and the needs of the families. Lead schools across the region assisted other schools, providing step by step ICT assistance in setting up a variety of platforms to suit the individual school community requesting support.



- In the Kimberley Region, factors that determined the success of remote delivery lay not only in community infrastructure, but whether families could afford a connection and a device. Where schools implemented online delivery, it was generally believed to be effective and most students who should have joined a session did so. Hard copy work packages were provided where online learning was not possible. These included revision learning packs, some hands-on equipment and fun activities for students, including for the children in the KindiLink<sup>2</sup> age group. The Kimberley Region's only senior high school used packages for Years 7–10 and online for Years 11 and 12. Due to the relatively short time for which this was the delivery method, a long-term assessment of teaching and learning effectiveness is difficult to evaluate.
- A Kimberley school developed a 'teams approach', similar to a mine site, with one team teaching a week on and the second team developing the next week's work packages, then swapping roles. The teams were divided across all the phases of learning to ensure the students' learning needs were met. The team approach also ensured the school worksite was safe in terms of limiting the exposure to COVID-19, as the teaching teams were allocated separate work areas to limit contact between staff.

### **The challenges faced by regional and remote schooling providers at the time of COVID-19**

A key challenge influencing regional and remote schools during the remote delivery period was the infrastructure available for students. Many students do not have access to computers for use at home. In some families where there are several siblings, there may only be one computer, meaning that use of the machine has to be shared and this may not be compatible with the school online delivery timetable. Some parents lacked familiarity in the use of these resources and the technical know-how to support their child's home learning. School-owned devices were loaned to students who did not have access to their own devices.

Teacher capability to deliver lessons remotely has been enhanced through a Department-developed *Connected Learning Hub*, which provides teachers with curriculum resources and support to deliver online and distance learning to students, including:

- services and support for how to deliver lessons to students online;
- professional learning for distance learning;
- learning resources for all year levels;
- ongoing support for school leaders related to distance learning;
- differentiated learning support; and
- connectedness and care support.

Student skills to access the online learning, and the limited access to phone, internet and Wi-Fi coverage, proved barriers to online learning in some locations. Some remote communities have no mobile telephone reception, therefore internet access even via a dongle is problematic. The available community infrastructure and technical know-how and support in the home affected some students' access to online learning.

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<sup>2</sup> KindiLink is a play-and-learn initiative for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who are not old enough to enrol in school.



Further challenges included access to equipment (laptops and dongles) to be used in a home learning environment arriving later than expected.

The bandwidth where internet is available is also a consideration in the use of teleconferencing programs and video. These challenges also posed difficulties in maintaining communication with families.

For families who have not been able to access online learning, there were challenges around distribution and collection of work packages and other modes of learning due to distance, and some small communities were closed, meaning that getting booklets to students was difficult and collection of packages was limited. Due to the move back to on-site schooling, most schools had limited opportunities to effectively test the collection of the learning packages.

Parents' skills to access the online communication were a challenge for some families. Many Aboriginal parents in remote areas speak English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D), so developing the capacity of parents and carers in remote locations to support home learning is a challenge.

The movement of staff and students around remote communities has been affected by interstate and intrastate border closures, as well as the biosecurity areas declared under the Commonwealth *Biosecurity Act 2015*. Many educators were required to seek exemptions to travel, or decided to stay in their regional or remote community over the holiday period due to travel restrictions and the need to self-isolate, and consequently have not been able to take a break away or to see family. This has also required the establishment of isolation centres in regional towns for teachers who were required to self-isolate. There have been challenges for students in the biosecurity areas and the need to provide support for boarding school students who have returned to their home communities during the time that boarding facilities such as Broome Residential College were closed.

Attendance and re-engagement of students at school have been affected for reasons including border closures, families being out of the community for COVID-19 prevention reasons, some students living with medically vulnerable grandparents who are staying home, student transiency and students out of the habit of attending school.

Several regional schools report the cancellation of workplace learning opportunities, which has presented a significant planning and financial challenge for schools needing to accommodate these students back on school site until approval to recommence.

Other challenges include:

- fear and anxiety about returning to school and students requiring reassurance that school is a safe place;
- Aboriginal staff who are at home or working from home due to medical reasons being unable to provide the same support to students as previously;
- Aboriginal staff wanting to access their superannuation, which was an unintended consequence;
- the distance from schools – school bus services have been disrupted, which affects those students still attending school who relied on the bus service; and
- work packages often do not suit the learning needs of Aboriginal students or engage the family in this process.



Community engagement and relationships have been highlighted as essential to improving student attendance and re-engagement in a timely and efficient manner.

The COVID-19 situation has highlighted a significant gap for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, including Aboriginal students, in their ability to access support for home learning. This is an indication that school is the best place for learning to occur, particularly for vulnerable students.

### **Support for vulnerable children at this time**

Schools remained open for vulnerable students or for those whose parents were essential workers. Schools endeavoured to make regular personal contact with students to maintain their connection to school and teachers. Medically vulnerable students have been provided with their education through the SSEN:MMH. The Department provided information and support to schools to maintain connection and care during school closures.

For schools:

- access was provided to digital devices;
- hard copy packages of learning programs have been provided;
- a specific structure was created to support principals in re-engaging Aboriginal children and those in remote schools;
- an enhanced level of support for schools servicing students with special educational needs was created;
- a focus on ensuring that learning and wellbeing needs were met and were the priority in a school's post-COVID-19 planning;
- a time-limited Remote and Aboriginal Schooling team was created to provide advice and guidance to school leaders and share resources amongst schools;
- online professional learning was provided for school leaders and teachers, including a new module on student engagement;
- a short video was produced that provides a message to Aboriginal staff, parents and community members about these challenging times from both a system level and Aboriginal perspective; and
- there was collaboration and sharing of teaching and learning in an online environment across the State – for example, a physics lesson in a metropolitan school being broadcast via Webex to regional schools.

In the Pilbara, Goldfields, Kimberley and Midwest education regions, access to school for vulnerable students remained available throughout the pandemic, though many did not attend. Opportunities have been provided for three modes of learning (online, work packages and face-to-face). Schools implemented check-in systems with their school communities, providing face-to-face, telephone and online support from teachers and other school staff.

Interagency networks and collaboration between the Departments of Police, Health and Education have been enhanced. School Psychology Services provided support information for distribution to all families. The Department's *Health and Wellbeing Hub* and *Connected Learning Hub* provided resources for school staff. Media promotion, including targeted radio messages for Aboriginal communities, and regular updates have kept everyone informed on the situation. These communications were daily in the initial stages. Schools have made tremendous efforts to keep in contact with all of their families throughout the COVID-19 situation.



The regions provided school psychologist support, but the effect is difficult to assess, as the remote learning period was relatively short.

Online or telephone counselling was available, but where there were infrastructure issues, a telephone service may have been provided. It is acknowledged that in some communities there is no telephone access and school psychologist support would not have been possible.

In the Goldfields, online learning, work packs and support from school staff was available, especially in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands where, in some cases, education assistants went to each household.

In the Kimberley, one school organised weekly drop-offs to the feeder communities. The teachers included personalised notes and instructions specific to the students' individual learning needs. Daily phone/email/Zoom contact was maintained by the school and staff as access to the community was very limited during COVID-19. Schools sought to provide learning materials, and student wellbeing is also paramount in considering the potential challenges around anxiety, loneliness and isolation that may have an impact on the capacity to undertake school work. While schools provided work packages, some students in remote communities may have found the work difficult without the explanations and other assistance provided by a teacher. Some of these students would possibly have found accessing this support from home difficult, as their parents may not have completed schooling themselves.

### **Flexible ways to meet local learning needs and interests of remote students at this time**

Students who reside in remote locations, but usually board in a residential facility to access schooling, were provided access to their regular school program through their local remote community school once schools reopened but boarding facilities remained closed.

Schools had a strong focus on working with the local community regarding expectations, managing connection and wellbeing, and providing learning activities that could be undertaken at home. Some of this involved the use of social media platforms to get information and support to parents of very young children. Schools responded to the needs of individual students by providing print materials when required.

Access to support for EAL/D learners, their parents, communities and schools during COVID-19 has been available through translating documents, interpreting services and access to EAL/D resources.

For Aboriginal students in remote locations, there has been:

- greater use of local and social media, local community radio and TV;
- an enhanced role by Aboriginal support workers in maintaining contact with students and their families;
- resource sharing across education sectors (e.g. non-public school students attending local public schools);
- a two-way CSIRO science program as a focus for home learning programs; and
- additional support through additional staff and funding to regional offices for allocation to targeted schools.



In the Pilbara, schools continue to upskill staff, students and families in the use of the different platforms, including Microsoft Teams, Webex and Zoom. Roebourne District High School collaborated with Ngaarda Media to broadcast on local radio.

In the Goldfields, reading books have been put on to video. The use of platforms such as Webex and Zoom has been effective.

In the Kimberley, a school with an intake zone of 17 remote feeder communities utilised its staff and school partners, such as Clontarf, to develop a logistics team that coordinated the home delivery of over 200 work packages weekly. Strong community-school relationships were maintained by the nomination of a community coordinator who, due to restrictions on the school's staff, distributed the work packages to the individual student households. The community contact also arranged the collection for pick-up and return of work packages. Incentives linked to a whole-school program were offered to students who returned completed work packages to encourage their completion.

Schools participating in the Kimberley Schools Project were provided with a large number of videos showcasing the pedagogy of explicit Targeted Teaching, as well as packages to distribute to students. Schools delivering the Kimberley Schools Project KindiLink program, like other schools involved with KindiLink, provided packages of materials for parents to use at home. These materials were provided by the Project's professional staff and augmented the resources produced by schools.

In the Midwest region, remote schools initiated face-to-face learning and contact with space restrictions. Promoting hygiene became the focus of many lessons. Limited to no internet connections make learning from home with digital technology difficult in remote areas. Community cooperation in the remote community school has been increased, with less conflict and more support of each other. This assists in creating a cohesive community and encourages attendance in a classroom environment.

### **How new flexible approaches might continue to be applied in remote and complex environments after schools return to face-to-face teaching**

Western Australian schools have returned to classroom teaching. Some of the flexible approaches that can continue to be applied in remote and complex enrolments to benefit students and staff include:

- continued support for schools working together to deliver curriculum rather than in isolation with an individual school's resources and expertise;
- stepping outside the traditional definitions of attendance, to allow access to learning at times and through means that prioritise student and family learning preferences;
- the creation of a structure of experienced remote principals, supported by an advisory group, to provide direct advice and guidance to remote school principals and to identify systemic issues that require addressing will benefit students and staff;
- on-country learning;
- the sharing of resources across the education sectors;
- interagency collaboration; and

- re-examination of system-level policies, for example, the *Excursion Policy*, to cater to the unique and local contexts of regional and remote schools.

This consideration has been addressed as the need for engagement and re-engagement of students as a priority.

In the Pilbara region, some schools developed online learning platforms that will continue to be used within the classrooms to differentiate learning. Also, transient or travelling students can remain 'connected' to their school while away. Planning is underway for both programs to continue to be delivered remotely.

In the Goldfields region, the extension of resources will allow schools to pick and choose their most effective measures.

In the Midwest region, families have a better understanding of the need for students to attend school in a face-to-face mode. Schools aim to maintain positive and cooperative relationships with parents and community members to ensure support with their child's education.

In the Kimberley region, a multi-modal approach of face-to-face and work packages may benefit students who are cut off from school due to rain and floodwaters during the wet season in the Kimberley region. A "teams" approach proved very successful and helped with team bonding and improved staff morale. It will be utilised in future pandemic situations. Teachers have noted that the students are highly engaged with the devices available for use within school and there are great apps and programs available to support home-school connections.

The availability of infrastructure is central to the delivery of an effective online and distance education delivery system in very remote areas.