

MEDIA RELEASE

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THE COVID-19 EDUCATION IMPACT – ARE PARENTS MORE ENGAGED?

According to new research conducted for ACARA, COVID-19 has had a significant impact on parents' understanding of their children's education, with parents across Australia reporting that they have far greater insight now into their children's schooling, irrespective of the length of time families had spent on remote learning.

While experiences differed from school to school and family to family, remote learning gave parents surveyed a unique and often frustrating understanding into the mechanics of schooling and education, with many finding a new appreciation for teachers and their skills.

ACARA CEO, David de Carvalho, said COVID-19 had challenged parents and led them to consider schooling in new ways.

“What we found is that those periods of remote learning – regardless of how long – gave parents a far greater insight into their children's education, learning styles and where they struggle and thrive,” he said.

“COVID has given many parents a window into what goes on in classrooms, into the challenges of teaching, and that seems to have given them a sense of empowerment, understanding and greater engagement.”

The research, conducted with small focus groups, showed that pre-COVID, parents prominently relied on conversations with teachers to determine how their child is progressing, with school exams and standardised testing playing a lesser role.

Parents noted in the sessions that face-to-face channels were the most important forms of communication, and that as a result of the pandemic, they have a better understanding of student assessments such as NAPLAN and the ability to use results as a resource.

Many parents feel they now have a greater idea of the importance of social aspects of class learning, such as regular feedback on classwork, providing students with structure, sense of competitiveness and engagement with other students to motivate progress, as well as a general sense of belonging.

Among parents who had the capacity to spend time with their children in their learning, there emerged a stronger acknowledgement of the benefit of one-to-one homework/tuition support for their child. There was a greater understanding that, particularly for the first years of primary school, children who are struggling need more support and contact from educators.

Tennille Southcombe, mum to two children aged 14 and 16, from Ryde NSW, said that remote learning opened discussion for them at home, “For the first time, I got a close-up view of what they were learning about at school. We wouldn’t have known as much before COVID as they didn’t always talk about it.” Tennille’s kids each had their own space at home and could ask her questions if they needed it. “You could have further discussions as you had more time. I really appreciate the job teachers do. In their classrooms, there are 24 kids, each with different personalities and teachers need to think about how they can really engage with all of them with all sorts of distractions.”

Jenni Rickard from Australian Parents Council agrees that COVID does have some silver linings when it comes to education, “The shared understanding between teachers and parents on how far education has come and what is involved in educating our children has changed the landscape of the relationship between parents, school and student learning.”

Several parents felt that their children coped with remote learning relatively well and even progressed beyond expectations. But many others sensed that 2020 felt like a ‘write-off’ – their children largely disengaged or avoided learning and generally struggled without structure and face-to-face class time.

Mr de Carvalho said, “We expect that these experiences may mean that this year’s NAPLAN results will be eagerly anticipated, as parents, schools and schooling systems use the data, along with their school’s own assessments, to get a clearer picture about any impacts of the COVID disruptions on students learning and whether there were any differences in impact across the community.”

“We are hopeful that the first-hand glimpse into the curriculum and what their child is taught will encourage parents to take a look at the proposed revisions to the Foundation – Year 10 Australian Curriculum, which will be released on 29 April as part of public consultations, and take the time to tell us what they think,” he added.

Parents in Victoria reported feeling the most significant impacts, while parents in Western Australia and Queensland felt the least disrupted. In New South Wales, parents also experienced a sense of disruption and frustration, although sentiments were not as strong as in Victoria.

Key facts:

- Due to COVID-19, parents across Australia said that they have far greater insight and involvement now into their children’s learning, irrespective of the length of time families have been learning remotely.
- COVID-19 has challenged parents to consider schooling in new ways, refocusing on what is important and what they want out of student assessments and the ability to use those results as a resource.
- Many parents feel they now have a greater idea of what were previously implicit benefits of the importance of social aspects of class learning.
- The pandemic has assisted parents to consider what types of feedback parents and students consider to be the most valuable.
- Pre-COVID, parents prominently relied on conversations with teachers to determine how their child is progressing. As a result of COVID-19, some parents now feel more empowered to bring their own observations of their child to those conversations.
- Parents have a better understanding of student assessments such as NAPLAN and the ability to use results as a resource.
- There was more acknowledgement that, particularly for the first years of primary school, children who are struggling need more support and contact from educators.

Ends.

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The research was done in conjunction with EY Sweeney.

Quotes**Australian Parents Council (APC)**

Jenni Rickard, APC President: “COVID did have some silver linings when it comes to education. The shared understanding between teachers and parents on how far education has come and what is involved in educating our children has changed the landscape of the relationship between parents, school and student learning. Experts often talk about parent engagement, but COVID gave us a first-hand lesson of what that means in practice and highlighted the impact parents can have on children's achievement. Remote learning had many challenges and rewards, and parents are anxious to understand the impact of this on their child's progress.”

Catholic School Parents Australia (CSPA)

Karl Rodrigues, CSPA Chair: “Through the challenges to schooling brought on by COVID, many parents have developed a greater appreciation of what their school-age children learn, how they learn and how they interact with their teachers and peers. For some parents, the experience has been empowering and partnership-building, while for others, it has been frustrating, and they feel the shared care for the wellbeing of their children and young people has been compromised during this time. It has created, however, a lengthy snapshot in time that prompts reflection on how better to provide education opportunities that are equitable for all children and families.”

Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO)

Dianne Giblin, ACSSO Chief Executive Officer: “It became very clear during the 2020 remote learning that a time of crisis is not the time for schools to begin their family engagement strategy. This should be embedded in all practice. We will be seeking to work with educators and decision-makers to see how a solid family engagement strategy could help schools respond better and faster in crises like this pandemic.

“It was clear that generally schools did not know enough about the number and quality of family computing devices. Particularly in primary schools, where many families borrowed, bought, or did without the technology needed for remote learning. Equity of access to education was exacerbated during the remote learning period.

“Families acknowledged schools worked extremely hard in a short period of time, but there are some big lessons to be addressed with remote learning. Communication is key, there appeared to be a disconnect and some confusion for many families of what was expected or how to assist with challenges their child was experiencing. Having a device is not the same as saying it is good enough to cope in isolation for all learning needs.

“We share families concern for students’ wellbeing during the time when they were isolated from their social circle of friends – ACARA’s research aligns with the survey we conducted, which revealed that the educational, social, emotional and physical wellbeing was much lower for students who participated in remote learning.”