



Australian Education Union

Federal Office

Phone : +61 (0)3 9693 1800

Fax : +61 (0)3 9693 1805

Email : aeu@aeufederal.org.au

Web : www.aeufederal.org.au

Ground Floor, 120 Clarendon Street, Southbank, Victoria, 3006
PO Box 1158, South Melbourne, Victoria, 3205
Federal Secretary : Kevin Bates
Federal President : Correna Haythorpe

15 December 2023

COVID-19 Response Inquiry Panel
c/o COVID-19 Response Inquiry Taskforce
The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

Email: COVID-19Inquiry@pmc.gov.au

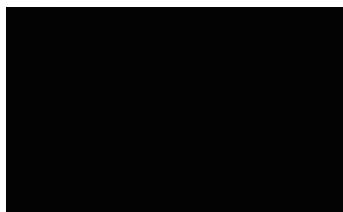
Dear Sir/Madam,

Re: AEU Submission to the Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry

Please find attached the Australian Education Union's submission to the Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry.

Please contact me if you have any questions in relation to our response.

Yours sincerely,



Kevin Bates
Federal Secretary



Submission
to the
Commonwealth Government
COVID-19 Response Inquiry

15 December 2023

[REDACTED]
Federal President

Kevin Bates
Federal Secretary

Australian Education Union

[REDACTED]

Telephone: [REDACTED]
Web: www.aeufederal.org.au
E-mail: [REDACTED]

Introduction

The Australian Education Union (“**AEU**”) makes this submission on behalf of over 193,000 AEU members employed in public primary, secondary, early childhood and TAFE sectors throughout Australia.

Throughout the pandemic, the AEU sought to work constructively with the federal Chief Medical Officer and state and territory Chief Health and Medical Officers with the paramount goal being upholding the safety and wellbeing of all employees of the preschool, school and TAFE sectors, and the students and community members who engage with those settings.

The AEU welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry. AEU members were and continue to be acutely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, it is appropriate that the Commonwealth, state and territory governments openly and fulsomely reflect on the decisions made which affect the work and personal lives of all involved in education.

This submission chronologically refers to and annexes key AEU documents providing a summary of the significant actions and advocacy of the AEU to the Commonwealth Government, and of Government’s responses. We conclude by identifying some of the key impacts the COVID-19 pandemic has had on public education and educators, and opportunities for improved policy responses in the future.

The AEU is affiliated to the Australian Council of Trade Unions (“**ACTU**”) and supports the recommendations made by the ACTU in its submission to this Inquiry.

Select chronology of actions taken by and advocacy of the AEU

19 March 2020 – correspondence to Prime Minister and National Cabinet – Annexure A

On 19 March 2020, the AEU communicated to the Prime Minister and the National Cabinet a list of key concerns and recommendations regarding the functioning of public schools. The AEU drew attention to significant issues affecting educators and students, issues which would remain the subject of policymaker and public debate throughout the pandemic, including:

- The provision and promotion of hygiene measures and material in schools, including personal protective equipment for educators, and increasing cleaning frequency.
- The key role of integrating workplace health and safety representatives in policy responses affecting workplaces and maintaining the relevance of occupational health and safety laws and processes in formulating and implementing school-related responses to COVID-19.
- The unique challenges of implementing public health recommendations in school and education settings, for example, the impracticability of staff and students maintaining 1.5 metre social distancing.
- Where schools are to remain physically open, that provision be made for the safe working conditions of particularly vulnerable cohorts of education workers, including working from home.
- Where schools are physically closed, and education is delivered virtually, that provision be made for equitable access to technology, particularly for regional, remote, and lower socio-economic status students, who may not have access to the necessary telecommunication technologies.¹

¹ Annexure A, p 1-2.

Of these and other concerns, the Commonwealth failed to provide an adequate response – the Commonwealth Government’s actions were characterised by delays and piecemeal arrangements, which left great uncertainty for the teaching profession who were dealing with the day-to-day reality of the pandemic. Despite the urgency of the situation and the need for clarity many political announcements were not followed-up with the necessary resourcing or practical implementations at a systemic level. On 16 April 2020, in response to an AEU demand that the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) provide detailed advice about how all public education settings were to minimise the risk to staff and students if they were to remain open, ‘seven National Principles for School Education’ were published.²

Unfortunately, these principles reflected a retreat from a nationally coordinated position, referring school management of the pandemic principally to individual state and territory government discretion, and which in any event provided for unclear and contradictory ‘principles’, including:

- Social distancing is required in all public situations – but is not required to the same standard in schools;
- It is safe for children to be at schools because they have low chance of infection, are not vectors for Coronavirus – but it was considered unsafe for them to visit grandparents because of the risk of infection; and
- Children cannot play on playground equipment in local parks – but can play on equipment within their school.

The consequence of the publication of these principles in education settings was widespread distress, anxiety, confusion, and anguish about personal health situations. During this time, the AEU resolved to follow the health advice of the AHPPC but it was our members in preschools, schools and TAFE settings who were carrying the burden of unclear policy settings and advice from governments and education departments.

Furthermore, the pandemic exposed the deep inequality that exists in Australian education. For many public schools, the rollout of the policy settings and principles highlighted the vast resource shortages and ongoing lack of capital works investment across the nation. Schools were tasked with operating within the health guidelines, yet many did not have access to appropriate sanitation, adequate hygiene and washroom facilities, protective equipment and adequate space to accommodate social distancing guidelines. This placed immense pressure on staff and stories of principals driving from shop to shop to secure sanitation products were common.

Unfortunately, for much of the pandemic the Commonwealth Government failed to provide clear directions for public education staff, despite repeated AEU requests for assistance and guidance to ensure the safety and health and wellbeing of staff and students.

The National Cabinet’s decision of 16 April 2020 was a milestone in moving from a nationally coordinated response, to an atomised, state-by-state, territory-by-territory response. In responding to individual state and territory decisions affecting public education, the AEU’s state and territory Branches and Associated Bodies extensively advocated and campaigned for the safety and wellbeing of public education students and staff. The decisions of such state and territory governments, and the AEU’s responses, are significant, however, are unfortunately excluded from the purview of this Inquiry. Such exclusions significantly diminish the utility of this Inquiry. To properly consider and evaluate Australia’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the actions of *all* governments must be considered, analysed, and be open to recommendations for reform.

² National Cabinet, Cabinet Minute, 16 April 2020, p 19 of 78, accessible [here](#).

28 May 2020 – submission to Senate Select Committee Inquiry into the Australian Government’s Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic – Annexure B

On 28 May 2020, the AEU, in its submission to the Senate Select Committee Inquiry into the Australian Government’s Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic, was critical of the Commonwealth Government inconsistent and contradictory advice to and expectations of the teaching profession. For example, notwithstanding significant government limitations on general gatherings, schools were expected to remain open – demonstrating a failure to attend to the workplace health and safety of education employees, or of the students and families exposed to infection risks not expected of the general Australian community.

In its submission, the AEU raised the matter of the inconsistent health advice provided by the Commonwealth Government regarding the physical opening and ongoing management of schools, and drew attention to evidence provided to the Inquiry which demonstrated that the Commonwealth Government’s advice varied not due to any changes in medical and scientific recommendations, but rather due to shifting partisan and political attitudes.

In its submission to the Inquiry, the AEU drew attention to other key education-related public health and education decisions by the Commonwealth Government, including:

- Private education-only hygiene measures, including the provision of \$10 million in funding for hygiene measures available only to non-government schools, unfairly excluding publicly educated children from learning in safe school settings.
- Negative statements made by government members about public education and educators, most notably by the then Chair of the House Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Training, who, in disregard for the nuances of safe school management, encouraged parents to leave their children unattended at school and to call the police if the principal refused to accept them.³
- A lack of understanding about the impact of the pandemic on students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and First Nations students who were disproportionately affected by school closures. Particularly so, due to the Coalition Government’s failure to ensure that public education was fully funded to the minimum Schooling Resource Standard.⁴
- Of the \$259 billion dollars of support payments announced by the Commonwealth Government, the vast majority was directed towards supporting business and individuals rather than the urgently needed investment in public education capital and ongoing funding – measures which would have had a significant economic stimulus effect.

24 June 2020 – AEU ‘Digital inclusion for all public school students’ report – Annexure C

On 24 June 2020, the AEU released the ‘Digital inclusion for all public school students’ report, written by Barbara Preston Research. The report highlighted the ‘digital divide’ between students with access to appropriate learning from home technology and resources and those who, as a result of lack of access to the preconditions for effective learning at home – for example, computer access, appropriate housing, and reliable internet – were being left behind by the transition to learning from home during the pandemic.

The report noted the following key national statistics reflecting this ‘digital divide’: that 125,000 public school students lived in dwellings without any internet access, with many more students

³ ‘Government MP tells parents to call the police on schools that won’t take students amid coronavirus’, *ABC News*, 30 April 2020, accessible [here](#).

⁴ Cobbold, T, “Public Schools are Defrauded by Billions Under New Funding Agreements”, 2019, accessible [here](#).

only able to access the internet via their own or a parent's mobile internet connection (an inadequate connection for a household's simultaneously access to videoconferencing).

Additionally, of the 125,000 students without access to the internet at home, such students were disproportionately from educationally disadvantaged student cohorts (including regional, remote, and lower-socioeconomic status students) – thereby having their pre-existing educational disadvantage compounded by the expectation that students would learn from home during the pandemic.⁵

June 2021 – AEU calls for vaccine prioritisation clarity – Annexures D and E

In June 2021, regarding the identification of priority cohorts for vaccine access, and following earlier correspondence to the Health Minister, the AEU made public calls for the prioritisation of all education employees during the vaccine rollout. The AEU recommended that education professionals should be given priority access due to the education workforce being frequently and significantly exposed to increased infection and transmission risks due education settings often being excluded from lockdown and other public health anti-transmission measures due to the essential role of education.

September 2021 – AEU calls for COVID-19 National School Recovery Plan – Annexure F and G

On 3 September 2021, the AEU called for a COVID-19 National School Recovery Plan to be developed by Education Ministers. The AEU called for a Plan that would:

- Prioritise teachers, principals, education support staff and students currently eligible for COVID-19 vaccination as a matter of urgency.
- Guide the reopening of schools, accommodating the needs of states and territories currently in lockdown and those that need to prepare for any future COVID-19 outbreaks.
- Identify and fund the infrastructure needs to allow schools to accommodate for social distancing, hygiene, ventilation and any other public health measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19.
- Consult with the teaching profession, through the AEU, to ensure the voices of teachers, principals and education support staff are heard throughout the process.

On 15 September 2021, the AEU Federal Executive passed a resolution calling for the creation of a COVID-19 National School Recovery Plan. In addition to the material called for by the AEU on 3 September 2021, the resolution called for key elements of the proposed Plan to include:

- Capital investment necessary for the safe running of schools (ventilation audits, air quality testing, air purifiers, masks, sanitation etc.) and physical modifications of buildings / learning spaces; and,
- Recurrent funding necessary to provide ongoing staffing and resources for the delivery of intensive learning and support programs for students. This will require the Commonwealth immediately providing the funding required to achieve 100% School Resource Standard funding for all public schools with the states/territories progressively providing their full investment.

However, in January 2022, the Prime Minister, despite advising that such a plan would be announced, failed to announce a plan, instead announcing a delay to the creation of the plan.⁶ Concerningly, the Prime Minister confirmed the extension of the close contact isolation

⁵ Annexure C, p 6.

⁶ 'PM fails to deliver national schools COVID-19 plan', AEU media release, 13 January 2022, accessible [here](#).

exemptions to include the education workforce, which the AEU noted would exacerbate the health and safety concerns already being expressed by AEU members.

22 September 2022 – AEU submission to the Senate Select Committee on Work and Care – Annexure H

In addition to the direct health impacts of COVID-19 and of Long COVID, public educators have reported experiencing significant mental health harms during the pandemic. In September 2022, the AEU's submission to the Senate Select Committee on Work and Care provided the following details regarding the impact of the pandemic on teachers' mental health, including its gendered harms:

Covid-19 has exacerbated the pre-existing mental health risks to educators. During the pandemic, the education workforce has been exposed to increased risk of stress, exhaustion, and anxiety.⁷ Indeed, in Victoria in 2020, teachers were the most likely workers to lodge mental health-related workers' compensation claims due to the impact of the pandemic.⁸ The high risk to educators is amplified by the gendered harms of the pandemic – international research indicating that women experienced higher mental health risks during the pandemic due to, among other factors, increased domestic and caring obligations.⁹ Women in Australian households with children reported spending approximately 43 more hours per week on childcare during the pandemic than men.¹⁰

This inequity was further exacerbated for women teachers who were often simultaneously attempting to teach online whilst also managing the care and remote learning of their own children. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the risks of workplace injuries to teachers and has amplified the health and safety risks experienced by teachers at work prior to the pandemic. The cost of these risks is evident in the results of the *State of our Schools* survey.¹¹ Nearly nine in 10 teachers (87%) said that the pandemic had impacted on their home of family life over the last 18 months and 83% said that it impacted on their personal morale at work, mirroring teacher's views on overall workforce morale as presented above. 84% of teachers said that teacher wellbeing has declined and 84% also said that teacher morale has declined, with 41% saying morale has significantly declined.

18 November 2022 – AEU submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health, Aged Care and Sport Inquiry into Long COVID and Repeated COVID Infections – Annexure I

On 18 November 2022, the AEU made a submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health, Aged Care and Sport Inquiry into Long COVID and Repeated COVID Infections. The submission referred to current research regarding the prevalence of Long COVID

⁷ Beames J, Christensen H and Werner-Seidler A, 'School Teachers: The Forgotten Frontline Workers of COVID-19', *Australian Psychiatry*, April 2021, accessible [here](#).

⁸ ABC News, 'Victorian teachers lodge more workcover claims for impacts of coronavirus pandemic than any other profession', 10 August 2020, accessible [here](#).

⁹ Di Blasi, et al, 'Factors Related to Women's Psychological Distress during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Evidence from a Two-Wave Longitudinal Study', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, November 2021, accessible [here](#).

¹⁰ Johnston R, Mohammed A, and van der Linden C, 'Evidence of Exacerbated Gender Inequality in Child Care Obligations in Canada and Australia during the COVID-19 Pandemic', December 2020, *Politics & Gender*, 16:4, p 1131, accessible [here](#).

¹¹ Australian Education Union, State of Our Schools Survey 2021.

among students in public education, and of the health and educational disadvantages experienced by children with Long COVID. The AEU noted that inadequate, non-standardised public education data collection practices fail to account for children with disability associated with Long COVID.

Regarding exposure to and experience of Long COVID by public educators, the AEU noted that “COVID-19 is a distinct workplace risk for teachers who spend hours each day in a single room with up to thirty students who are a) more likely to be asymptomatic b) less likely to be tested than the general population and c) particularly in primary schools and special education settings, less likely to effectively socially distance or to make effective use of mitigating measures such as masks.”¹²

Key impacts of COVID-19 on public education and educators

In addition to the direct health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the pandemic highlighted and exacerbated Australia’s education-related inequalities. The pandemic’s negative impacts were amplified by the then Commonwealth Government’s decade-long failure to properly fund public education, leading to education systems that, in addition to managing a pandemic, were forced to do so while grappling with systematic underfunding, staff shortages, and students’ educational disadvantages. Today, Australia’s public education systems continue to experience the harmful effects of COVID-19, with hundreds of thousands of teachers and students still affected by COVID-19 and Long COVID symptoms, with teachers burning out due to workload and work intensification issues relating to students’ experiences of the pandemic, and with ongoing vulnerability to the next pandemic due to failure to invest in transmission-reducing capital works.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, at the intersection of public health and public education, it is the AEU’s view that the Commonwealth Government failed to show national leadership. Despite the national scale of the pandemic, and the shared issues confronting all public education systems, public health and public education policymaking was devolved, ad hoc, to state and territory governments. The subsequent Commonwealth Government’s interventions – including confusing social distance guidelines, unclear vaccine rollouts, and delays in national school recovery plans – caused confusion and anxiety in public education settings.

It is critically important that an enduring national approach to avoid, prepare for, minimise, and respond to crises relating to the intersection of public health and public education is developed. Such an approach must centre public education voices – principals, teachers, students, and communities. A new national approach must account for how social inequalities influence the way Australians experience health and education, and it must provide for funding to rectify such inequalities, including improving access to technology to facilitate the ability to learn remotely, and ensuring that the built environment in education settings is modernised and safe. Regarding the mental health harms experienced by education employees and students during the COVID-19 pandemic, a new national approach must recognise that all education employees and students are placed under exceptional stress to ensure that high quality teaching and learning continues during public health crises, and therefore all governments must accordingly provide for physical and mental health support structures to support the delivery of public education in future crises.

¹² Annexure I, p 8.



Australian Education Union

Federal Office

Phone : +61 [REDACTED]
 Fax : +61 [REDACTED]
 Email : [REDACTED]
 Web : www.aeu.org.au

19 March 2020

The Hon Scott Morrison MP
 Prime Minister
 PO Box 6022
 House of Representatives
 Parliament House
 Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Prime Minister Morrison

RE: COVID-19

The Australian Education Union is gravely concerned about the ongoing impact of COVID-19 and the implementation of the decisions taken by the National Cabinet with respect to preschools, schools and TAFE.

We note that the National Cabinet has accepted the advice of the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) that schools should remain open at this time, that pre-emptive closures are not proportionate or effective as a public health intervention at this time and that further restrictions on social gatherings are in place.

We note that the AHPPC has stated that school closures for shorter defined periods of time may be considered as part of a suite of more stringent distancing measures. Further, that schools should implement a range of other strategies to reduce transmission, including the promotion of personal hygiene measures, frequent handwashing, reducing face to face contact, cough etiquette, physical distancing, reducing public gatherings, reducing the mixing of students, staggered lunchtimes and reduced after school activities and interschool activities.

We wish to raise the following matters for the urgent consideration of the National Cabinet meeting on Friday 20th March 2020.

That:

- at all levels of government, Work, Health and Safety obligations to employees must be met
- identified risks and hazards must have the appropriate level of control to mitigate them
- the National Cabinet and health officials at both a national and state/territory level have provided insufficient information and assurance to teachers, support staff, educators, principals and the AEU about the implementation of COVID-19 decisions and indeed, the safety of workplaces for employees and students
- social distancing requires staff and students to keep a distance of 1.5 metres, a requirement which is practically impossible in the vast majority of public education settings across the nation

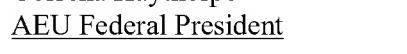
- the restrictions which have been placed on non-essential indoor gatherings of greater than 100 people have broad implications for public education settings across the country
- schools are reporting shortages of soap, alcohol-based sanitisers, toilet paper, tissues and infrastructure such as enough sinks and hygiene areas for staff and students to access frequently and systematically
- additional cleaning services must be implemented to ensure that all frequently touched surfaces and frequently used objects are cleaned and sanitized.
- there is widespread concern about the possibility of school closures but limited information available publicly on how such a decision would be made nationally
- the widespread community concern has already led to high levels of student absence in many states and territories
- working from home provisions must be immediately available to public education staff who are considered to be particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 due to their own or family members' underlying health conditions. In particular, those who have chronic illnesses, are immunocompromised, fall into high-risk categories and pregnant staff.
- there are specific workplace health and safety expectations arising from the additional needs of a wide range of students with individual circumstances requiring adjustment
- specific detail must be provided about working in more complex environments such as supporting students and people who have disabilities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, rural, regional and remote locations.
- maintenance of income including leave entitlements and leave arrangements must be guaranteed for all permanent, temporary and casual public education employees.
- we reject unrealistic expectations that alternative (virtual) learning episodes will be provided for students in the event that schools close – such expectations are inequitable in their impact particularly for students who come from low socio-economic backgrounds and regional and remote centres and unsustainable in an education system denied basic resources.

Given the deep ramifications for all public education employees and the 2.5 million students in their care, we formally request that the National Cabinet immediately provides detailed advice about how all public education settings are to minimise the risk to staff and students if they are to remain open.

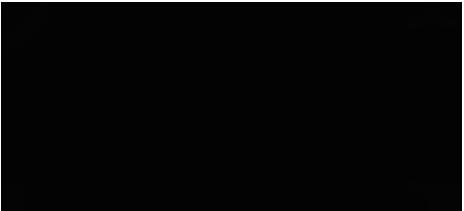
We expect that governments will directly advise the AEU, our members, parents and the broader community about what actions they will take if the above safety measures cannot be implemented.

Further, the AEU seeks an urgent briefing from the Chief Medical Officer or his representative, and the Federal Minister for Education [REDACTED] to discuss our concerns. We are happy to facilitate this meeting via video conferencing. Please contact [REDACTED] in my office on [REDACTED] or email to [REDACTED] to make the necessary arrangements.

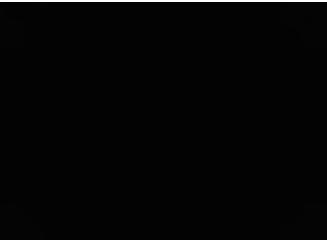
Yours sincerely



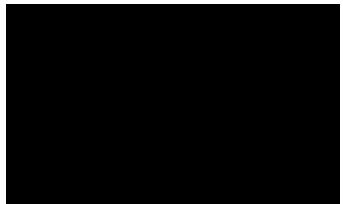
AEU Federal President



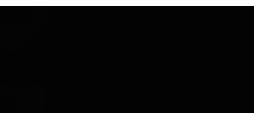
Branch Secretary
AEU ACT Branch



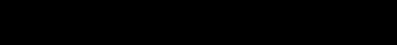
President
NSWTF Branch



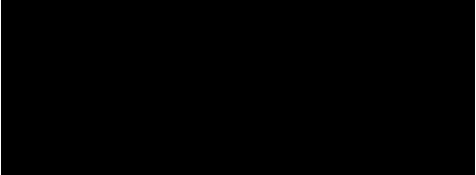
President
AEU NT Branch



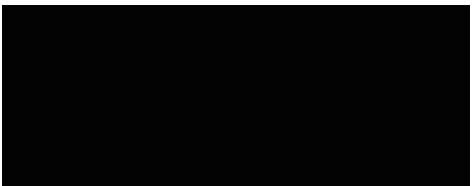
Kevin Bates
President
Queensland Teachers' Union



President
AEU SA Branch



President
AEU Tasmanian Branch



President
AEU Victorian Branch

President
SSTUWA

Cc National Cabinet via Prime Minister's office;
Daniel Andrews, Premier of Victoria
Gladys Berejiklian, Premier of New South Wales
Annastacia Palaszczuk, Premier of Queensland
Peter Gutwein, Premier of Tasmania
Steven Marshall, Premier of South Australia
Mark McGowan, Premier of Western Australia
Michael Gunner, Chief Minister of the Northern Territory
Andrew Barr, Chief Minister of the Australian Capital Territory

Professor Brendan Murphy, Chief Medical Officer
Dr Michelle Bruniges, Secretary of the Department of Education
Dan Tehan, Minister for Education
Tanya Plibersek, Shadow Minister for Education and Training
Senator Mehreen Faruqi, Australian Greens



Australian Education Union

Federal Office

Phone : +61 [REDACTED]
Fax : +61 [REDACTED]
Email : [REDACTED]
Web : www.aeu.org.au

28 May 2020

Senator Katy Gallagher
Chair Select Committee COVID19
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Email: [REDACTED]

Dear Senator Gallagher

Re: AEU Submission to the Senate Select Committee Inquiry into the Australian Government's Response to the COVID19 pandemic

Thank you for the opportunity to submit to the inquiry into the Australian Government's Response to the COVID19 pandemic.

Please find our submission attached.

Please contact me if you have any questions in relation to this submission.

Yours sincerely,

[REDACTED]

Federal Secretary



Submission to the

Senate Select Committee Inquiry into

the Australian Government's Response to the

COVID19 Pandemic

May 2020

[REDACTED]
Federal President

[REDACTED]
Federal Secretary

Australian Education Union
PO Box 1158
South Melbourne Vic 3205

Telephone: +61 [REDACTED]
Web: www.aeufederal.org.au
E-mail: [REDACTED]

Introduction

The Australian Education Union (AEU) represents over 189,000 educator members employed in the public primary, secondary, early childhood and TAFE sectors throughout Australia. The AEU members in all three sectors were at the frontline of the pandemic in Australia and as such the Commonwealth Government's response impacted on them significantly. Thus we welcome the opportunity to present our views on the Australian Government's response to the pandemic.

We note that the Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 heard evidence from the Department of Education, Skills and Employment on May 19, 2020 and we have included our consideration of that evidence in this submission.

Throughout this crisis the AEU has sought to work constructively with the Chief Medical Officer and state and territory Chief Health and Medical Officers to ensure that the safety and wellbeing of school staff and students is paramount.

This submission will address our views of the impact of the Australian Government's response on each of the school, early childhood education and TAFE sectors separately. We will detail how the issues raised by the AEU were subsequently handled by the Commonwealth Government and describe the measures that could have, and could still be taken to ensure that public schools, early childhood education providers and TAFEs have the support necessary to recover from the impacts of the pandemic and to assist with Australia's recovery.

Schools

From mid-March when cases of COVID-19 began rising swiftly and significantly in Australia, the Commonwealth Government's advice to teachers, school leaders and support staff was inconsistent and coupled with often contradictory expectations. There was a lack of early and clear communication for schools and this led to a high level of concern expressed by our members about their health, wellbeing and safety.

At that point the National Cabinet had accepted the advice of the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) that schools should remain open, that pre-emptive closures were not proportionate or effective as a public health intervention at that time. This led to multiple contradictions with concurrent guidance on social distancing and restrictions on gatherings, and revealed that the workplace health and safety of those working in schools had not been considered.

In order to gain much needed clarity, on March 19th the AEU wrote to the Prime Minister, (Appendix 1). The letter clearly outlined numerous issues for the urgent attention of the National Cabinet, which are detailed as follows:

- at all levels of government, Work, Health and Safety obligations to employees must be met
- identified risks and hazards must have the appropriate level of control to mitigate them

- the National Cabinet and health officials at both a national and state/territory level have provided insufficient information and assurance to teachers, support staff, educators, principals and the AEU about the implementation of COVID-19 decisions and indeed, the safety of workplaces for employees and students
- social distancing requires staff and students to keep a distance of 1.5 metres, a requirement which is practically impossible in the vast majority of public education settings across the nation
- the restrictions which have been placed on non-essential indoor gatherings of greater than 100 people have broad implications for public education settings across the country
- schools are reporting shortages of soap, alcohol-based sanitisers, toilet paper, tissues and infrastructure such as enough sinks and hygiene areas for staff and students to access frequently and systematically
- additional cleaning services must be implemented to ensure that all frequently touched surfaces and frequently used objects are cleaned and sanitized.
- there is widespread concern about the possibility of school closures but limited information available publicly on how such a decision would be made nationally
- the widespread community concern has already led to high levels of student absence in many states and territories
- working from home provisions must be immediately available to public education staff who are considered to be particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 due to their own or family members' underlying health conditions. In particular, those who have chronic illnesses, are immunocompromised, fall into high-risk categories and pregnant staff.
- there are specific workplace health and safety expectations arising from the additional needs of a wide range of students with individual circumstances requiring adjustment
- specific detail must be provided about working in more complex environments such as supporting students and people who have disabilities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, rural, regional and remote locations.
- maintenance of income including leave entitlements and leave arrangements must be guaranteed for all permanent, temporary and casual public education employees.
- we reject unrealistic expectations that alternative (virtual) learning episodes will be provided for students in the event that schools close – such expectations are inequitable in their impact particularly for students who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds and regional and remote centres and unsustainable in an education system denied basic resources.

Initial lack of clarity and delay

The concerns of AEU members outlined in the letter were not adequately addressed, or were subject to delayed and heavily diluted action. The Commonwealth's response and subsequent actions were characterised by a serious lack of clarity. Political pronouncements were made with little regard for practicality, for the jurisdictional independence of states and territories and were followed by subsequent backpedalling which has caused significant anxiety and confusion for the teaching profession.

The AEU also sought urgent meetings with the Education Minister and the Chief Medical Officer. During these discussions, the AEU articulated the issues of concern during an “emergency mode of operations for schools” and sought commitments for health and safety guidelines for the teaching profession. Given the deep ramifications for all public education employees and the 2.6 million students in their care, we formally requested that the National Cabinet immediately provide detailed advice about how all public education settings were to minimise the risk to staff and students if they were to remain open.

The National Cabinet gave a commitment that the AHPPC would develop such guidelines, however it was four weeks later, on April 16 that the seven National Principles for School Education were published. In that time, and even following the publication of the National Principles, which clearly stated “State and Territory Governments and non-government sector authorities are responsible for managing and making operational decisions for their school systems respectively, subject to compliance with relevant funding agreements with the Commonwealth”¹, the Commonwealth Government was unable to muster a nationally consistent approach and took a series of contradictory and confusing positions for social distancing in schools, including that:

- social distancing is required in all public situations, but is not required to the same standard in schools;
- it is safe for children to be at schools because they have low chance of infection, are not vectors for Coronavirus, although it was considered unsafe for them to visit grandparents because of the risk of infection; and
- children can’t play on playground equipment in local parks but can play on equipment within their school.

Confusion and obfuscation on social distancing requirements in schools

Despite the State and Territory governments taking full responsibility for the decision making about schools at a jurisdictional level following the issuing of the National Principles for School Education, further confusion was caused by the Prime Minister’s frequently contradictory public messages.

After first advocating for school closures, on April 14 the Prime Minister stated via a recorded video message to teachers that “we cannot allow a situation where parents are forced to choose between putting food on the table through their employment to support their kids, and their kids’ education”. Following outcry from the teaching profession and the public, and the publication of the National principles two days later, the Prime Minister then reverted to confirming that the states and territories had ultimate control of the decisions affecting schools.

On April 24 the Prime Minister publicly expressed a desire to see schools return to on-site learning full time. Subsequently, and on the advice of the AHPPC the Commonwealth Government issued updated guidance that social distancing was not “appropriate or practical

¹ Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment, *COVID-19 National Principles for School Education*, retrieved from <https://www.dese.gov.au/covid-19/schools/national-principles-for-school-education>

in classrooms or corridors”, despite it being still considered necessary for teachers working in these same environments.

Evidence heard at the Senate Select Committee Hearing held on May 19 demonstrated how this official advice appeared to change, not according to changing scientific advice, but according to the Prime Minister’s desire to reopen schools. Senator Keneally asked the following:

Stakeholders have informed the opposition that the decision was made following a meeting between the education minister, the CMO and the heads of some school systems, where system heads advised the minister and the CMO that physical distancing was too difficult to enforce and couldn't be resourced. Can you confirm that?

The eventual response implied that the change in advice from the AHPPC on social distancing in schools after the Prime Minister’s intervention of April 24 appeared to follow from discussions between federal and state and territory public servants on the difficulty of maintaining social distancing in schools, rather than being based on any change to medical or scientific advice on the safety of abandoning the practice.²

The lack of consistency in the Commonwealth Government’s position on fully opening schools peaked on May 3, when contrary to the Prime Minister’s assertion of jurisdictional independence, the Federal Education Minister launched an extraordinary attack on the Victorian Premier, accusing him of a “failure of leadership” before subsequently withdrawing his statement.

The above examples demonstrate how in its response to COVID-19 in relation to schools, the Commonwealth Government acted without regard to the teaching profession, or for the clarity that was needed and repeatedly sought, and changed its position without regard for the impact of its decisions and the statements of its Ministers on students, teachers, school leaders, support staff, parents and wider school communities.

In relation to schools, the Commonwealth Government’s reaction to the pandemic could easily lead the objective observer to deduce that the Government was more interested in using the issue of schools in an attempt to score political points than it was in providing desperately needed leadership and clarity to teachers, families and the public.

Putting the economy before people’s health

The Commonwealth Government claimed that its drive to return all students to the classroom, regardless of their local circumstances and indeed the views of their state or territory Chief Medical or Health Advisors, was based on health advice from the AHPPC. However, there

²Hansard, Senate Select Committee on COVID-19, 19 May 2020, p.24, retrieved from https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/commsen/25fdbd8a-a6dc-4b78-9fb2-fa01684ea9eb/toc_pdf/Senate%20Select%20Committee%20on%20COVID-19_2020_05_19_7726.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%22committees/commsen/25fdbd8a-a6dc-4b78-9fb2-fa01684ea9eb/0000%22

was significant concern from the public and from school communities that it in fact resulted from the prioritisation of economic concerns over the population's health and welfare.

This concern was exacerbated at the Prime Minister's press conference of May 5, where he said of remote learning "It does impact on the productivity. Kids going back to school lifts productivity, helps people get back to work and helps the economy get back on its feet." This was followed on May 8 by a statement that "there will be outbreaks, there will be more cases, there will be setbacks... But we cannot allow our fear of going backwards from stopping us from going forwards."

Although recognising the "incredibly infectious" nature of Coronavirus, the Chief Medical Officer has stated that children have a much lower risk of transmission. This position does not seem to consider that according to paediatricians and epidemiologists school students, and particularly young children, will also have increased levels of exposure through physical proximity and play if in contact with a Coronavirus carrier.³ A recent study publicised in the journal *Science* on age profile and susceptibility to infection, on how social distancing alters age-specific contact patterns, and how these factors interact to affect transmission found that although children may be around a third as susceptible as adults to the novel coronavirus, children aged five to fifteen years also have three times as many close contacts, essentially evening out the risk of infection.⁴ Additionally, a recent study by the Berlin Institute of Virology has found that there is no significant difference between any pair of age categories including children in viral load, and in particular indicated that viral loads in the very young do not differ significantly from those of adults and that children may be as infectious as adults.⁵

During the peak of transmission from mid-March to mid-April the Commonwealth Government relied on a few small studies as evidence to support its position on school closures. Most notably, a New South Wales study was repeatedly cited as to justify the viability of restarting school based learning. That study was based on the monitoring of close contacts of only 18 cases, included numerous caveats and was conducted at a time when most students were not at school, having been encouraged by the Premier of New South Wales to not attend for the final weeks of Term 1, followed by school holidays.

No strings attached assistance for private schools only

Throughout the pandemic the Commonwealth Government has continued to favour private schools and has systematically excluded public schools from offers of assistance. The Commonwealth Government offered independent schools early part-payment of their annual funding, bringing 25% of total annual recurrent funding forward from July to May and June

³ Blyth,C., Cheng, A. & Bowen, A., "Worried about your child getting coronavirus? Here's what you need to know", *The Conversation*, 2020, retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/worried-about-your-child-getting-coronavirus-heres-what-you-need-to-know-131909>

⁴ Zhang, J., Litvinova, M., Liang, Y., Wang, Y. Wang, W., Zhao, S, Qianhui, W., Meler,S., Vboud, C., Vespiagnani, A., Ajelli, & M, Hongjie, Y., "Changes in contact patterns shape the dynamics of the COVID-19 outbreak in China", *Science*, April 2020, retrieved from <https://science.sciencemag.org/content/early/2020/05/04/science.abb8001.full>

⁵ Jones., Muhlemann, B., Veith,T., Zuchowski, M., Hofmann, J., Stein,A., Edelmann, A., Corman, V, & Drosten, C, "An analysis of SARS-CoV-2 viral load by patient age" retrieved from https://zoonosen.charite.de/fileadmin/user_upload/microsites/m_cc05/virologie-ccm/dateien_upload/Weitere Dateien/analysis-of-SARS-CoV-2-viral-load-by-patient-age.pdf

in exchange for committing to reopening schools for physical on site learning at the start of term two. Approximately one quarter of non-government schools accepted this offer. The select committee hearing of May 19 revealed that schools were eligible for early funding regardless of whether they had experienced any liquidity issues. It also revealed that the Commonwealth Government was not monitoring compliance with the terms of its offer to bring forward recurrent funding to private schools and that schools were merely required to provide a plan to reopen at the start of June, but not required to prove that they actually will. Additionally, and importantly, this incentive to private schools was offered without consideration for the protocols in place in the states and territories and in the case of Victoria in direct contradiction and with flagrant disregard for the advice of the state's Chief Health Officer.

This assistance was followed by a further announcement of an additional \$10 million in funding for increased hygiene measures, again available to non-government schools only. These arrangements further demonstrate the inequity of the Federal Governments' treatment of public schools, and its abdication of responsibility to public schools in its response to COVID-19. The Federal Government has a significant recurrent funding responsibility to public schools, and yet has, in its willingness to make alternative funding arrangements and additional funds available to non-government schools only at a time when all schools are in need, further entrenched the existing inequity in its treatment of public school students and staff.

The impact of the Federal Government's failings on schools

The Federal Government's approach to schools during the COVID-19 pandemic has repeatedly demonstrated a lack of concern for the health and wellbeing of students, teachers and broader school communities. At times, this has descended into outright disdain for the profession, as when the Chair of the House Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Training encouraged parents to leave their children unattended at school and to call the police if the principal refused to accept them.⁶ Instead of supporting teachers during this crisis the government has ignored teachers concerns and attempted to shift the blame for its poor response onto the teaching profession. This approach has severely impacted on teacher morale during a time when they are working in very difficult circumstances.

A newfound concern for disadvantaged and vulnerable students

Federal Education Minister Tahan invoked the impact of remote learning on economically disadvantaged and vulnerable students, stating that it "will be the vulnerable, poor, remote and Indigenous students who suffer the most."⁷ The Minister is correct that an extended period of remote learning under current funding arrangements and without additional and targeted support would have impacted on vulnerable students disproportionately. However, his assertion belies the fact that the coalition Commonwealth Government offered little support for these students, offering only temporary cheaper access to NBN and leaving the provision of ICT equipment to telecommunications companies, not for profit organisations and state

⁶ Retrieved from <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-30/government-mp-tells-parents-to-call-the-police-coronavirus/12201938>

⁷ Hunter, F, "Experts say half of students at risk from long-term remote learning" *The Sydney Morning Herald*, May 2020, retrieved from <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/experts-say-half-of-students-at-risk-from-long-term-remote-learning-20200502-p54p7m.html>

and territory governments. Further, the commonwealth and has for nearly seven years steadfastly ignored their plight by failing to implement the original Gonski funding model and by refusing to lift the arbitrarily imposed 20% cap on Commonwealth contributions to recurrent funding for public schools.

The most recent PISA results demonstrate the growing gap between socio-economically advantaged and disadvantaged students. The 2018 PISA results for Australia reveal that students from low socio-economic status (SES) households are highly segregated from their more advantaged peers and up to three years behind them:

- Australia's isolation index score of 0.20 for disadvantaged students is higher than the OECD average of 0.17 and higher than 51 of the 78 countries and economies included in PISA. This means that disadvantaged students are more concentrated in schools with other disadvantaged students in Australia than in most countries in the OECD.
- Across all domains students from high SES backgrounds performed better than those from low SES backgrounds.
- The proportion of high performers increased and the proportion of low performers decreased with each increase in SES quartile.
- In science the variance between average scores of highest and lowest SES quartiles was 82 points, with 30 points equivalent to one year of schooling, so the difference is approximately two and three-quarters years of schooling.
- In reading the variance between average scores of highest and lowest SES quartiles was 89 points, with 30 points equivalent to one year of schooling, so the difference is three years of schooling.
- In maths the variance between average scores of highest and lowest SES quartiles was 81 points, with 30 points equivalent to one year of schooling, so the difference is two and two-thirds years of schooling.⁸

The vast inequity in the way that the Commonwealth distributes funding to schools means that many students are not provided with the additional resources required to enable them to overcome their disadvantage, resulting in an increasingly wide gap in achievement between students from different backgrounds. Due to the 2017 Amendment to the Education Act, and the subsequent National School Reform Agreements (NSRAs) the Commonwealth signed with states and territories from late 2018 onwards, the ACT is now the only jurisdiction where funding will reach 100% of the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) for public schools by 2023. Further 99% of public schools in Australia will not reach 100% of SRS, the minimum required resource standard, by 2023.

Analysis of the impact of the 20% SRS cap on Commonwealth funding to public schools, in combination with the state and territory funding arrangements set out in the bilateral agreements shows that the total underfunding of public schools will reach \$16.3 billion during this Parliamentary term and \$22.7 billion dollars by the conclusion of the NSRA and its associated bilateral agreements in 2023.⁹

⁸ Thompson, S, De Bortoli L, Underwood C & Schmid, M. *PISA 2018, PISA in Brief: Student Performance*, Australian Council for Educational Research, 2019, p.18

⁹ Cobbold, T, "Public Schools are Defrauded by Billions Under New Funding Agreements", 2019, retrieved from <http://saveourschools.com.au/funding/public-schools-are-defrauded-by-billions-under-new-funding-agreements/>

Furthermore, in all jurisdictions except the ACT the bilateral agreements include an additional provision that allows the states/territories to artificially boost funding for public schools by incorporating various allowances into funding meant for recurrent school funding. Over this term of Parliament this “additional expenditure” clause will deprive public school students of an additional \$6.2 billion in recurrent funding. To the conclusion of the agreements in 2023 the total is \$9.0 billion.

The total underfunding from the Commonwealth cap, the bilateral agreements and the additional expenditure clause is \$22.5 billion during this Parliament and \$31.7 billion to the conclusion of the agreements in 2023. The failure of the Commonwealth and state and territory governments to meet the minimum funding standard means that on average every public school in Australia will miss out on \$8,700 per student in funding during this parliament and \$12,400 by the conclusion of the NSRAs in 2023.

Given the way the Morrison Government has systematically sought to deny the resources necessary for those students already falling behind, the Minister’s sudden concern about the impact that temporary remote learning may have on them seems disingenuous.

An immediate injection of funds to bring all public schools to 100% of SRS to repair the billions of dollars that public schools are currently missing out on each year is urgently required. Such an investment will not only assist schools in helping students who may have fallen behind during the period of remote learning but will also bridge the huge equity and achievement gaps between students from high and low SES households. Analysis has shown that an increase in the average PISA score of 25 points delivers to the economy, through improved skills, improved employment outcomes and reduced reliance on Commonwealth assistance, an average of \$65 billion per year, every year.¹⁰ An investment in public school funding to achieve that improvement not only leads to better life outcomes for individual students but enormous long term benefits to society, the economy and the entire country.

The way forward

The revised amount of \$259 billion announced by the Commonwealth in response to the COVID-19 pandemic has so far focused on supporting businesses and individuals during a period of time when large parts of the economy have stopped entirely, but the Government’s response has not yet entered the stimulus phase. Soon, a substantial economic stimulus program will be necessary to pull Australia out of a pending sharp and unprecedented downturn.

At around 20% of GDP Australia has incredibly low public debt by international standards. Many advanced economies consistently carried net debt loads of over 100% of GDP prior to the current pandemic, yet even with the additional debt expected to be accrued to fund *JobSeeker* and *JobKeeper* Australia’s net debt is expected to reach only 26% of GDP, still substantially lower than seven of the G8 nations.¹¹

¹⁰ Rorris, A., *Australian Schooling – The Price of Failure and Reward for Success*, 2016, p.6 retrieved from <http://www.aeufederal.org.au/application/files/3814/6172/5096/Rorris2016.pdf>

¹¹ Dawson, E. & Lloyd-Cape, M., *Some Facts about Debt: A Per Capita Discussion Paper*, 2020, p. 5.

Despite the Treasurer's assertion that "what we borrow today we will have to pay back tomorrow", the Prime Ministers' claim that borrowing to stimulate the economy is somehow akin to saving money on building a house and then "borrow[ing] the rest of the money to put a heated swimming pool on the roof"¹² and the frequent claims of those pushing austerity measures, it is widely recognised by economists that government debt is in no way the same as household debt and does not have to be repaid in the same manner. The International Monetary Fund has recently concluded that for advanced economies like Australia, so long as GDP is growing faster than the interest rate, a large public debt is very sustainable. The size of the debt is irrelevant, what matters is the debt service cost, and the current extended period of historically unprecedented low interest rates is the perfect time to borrow to increase Australia's productive capacity.¹³

If Australia is to recover and return to growth following the current economic shock, the upcoming 2020 Budget will have to provide very significant stimulus. This stimulus should be targeted where it can have the most immediate and long term impact. Thousands of public primary and secondary schools across the country are in critical need of infrastructure improvement and yet public schools do not have access to Commonwealth funds for capital works. The AEU asserts that a guaranteed long term federally funded capital works package is required to provide much needed improvements to public schools. In addition to providing much needed new classrooms, bathrooms, libraries, heating and cooling and sport facilities, an investment such as this, made when government borrowing is cheaper than ever, would provide a huge amount of stimulus to Australia's construction and manufacturing industries and drive employment.

Total public school enrolments have increased by 263,534 students in the decade to 2018, an increase of 10.3%, with the majority of this increase in primary school enrolments which will soon flow through to all levels of schooling.¹⁴ In addition to improving the capacity of existing public schools, new primary and secondary schools need to be built to accommodate these students. A federally funded school building program will have enormous stimulus value to the economy - it will provide immediate stimulus in terms of the construction and manufacturing required to build new schools, and it will flow on to house building, retail employment growth as communities congregate around these new schools.

Early Childhood Education

An opportunity to provide future certainty for preschools and parents

An extension of the Universal Access National Partnership (UANP) funding was announced the same day as the childcare relief package and has now been guaranteed for another single year to 2021. On May 26 the media reported that the review of the UANP commissioned by Education Council has found that these short term renewals (six one year extensions to date) of the agreement have adversely affected the scheme, but that despite the difficulty caused by annual funding uncertainty the UANP has had led to "remarkable achievements" with

¹² The Hon. Scott Morrison MP, *Transcript, Q7A, National Press Club, ACT 26 May 2020*, p.7.

¹³ Dawson, E. & Lloyd-Cape, M, *Op. cit.* p. 8.

¹⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *4221.0 – Schools, Australia, 2018*, retrieved from <https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/4221.02018?OpenDocument>

enrolment in 600 hours of preschool in the year before school increasing from 12% in 2008 to 95% in 2018.¹⁵

However, as noted in reports of the review's findings, the short term nature of this extension means that preschools cannot currently plan and invest effectively - "this means, for example, that good staff cannot be retained due to an inability to promise them longer-term employment, which in turn leads to higher turnover and associated administrative inefficiencies (in addition to affecting the quality of provision)."¹⁶ In addition to the benefits that a long term funding arrangement would offer to preschools, offering funding stability would provide families with ongoing certainty and confidence they need to re-engage with the workforce at a time when, in the words of the Prime Minister - "we now need to get one million Australians back to work – that is the curve we need to address"¹⁷

The AEU has long called on the Commonwealth Government to guarantee ongoing permanent UANP funding for four year olds, and we endorse the reported finding of the UANP review that "funding should be provided under a new five-year partnership starting in 2021, with ongoing national co-ordination by the federal government and reduced reliance on performance-based payments."¹⁸ We also support the reported recommendation that "a stronger national agreement, potentially underpinned by legislation, should then be introduced from 2026 and include more accountability for funding contributions by different governments."¹⁹

Australia lags behind much of the world when it comes to funding early childhood education. World Bank data²⁰ shows that in 2015, the vast majority of countries provide two or three years of pre-primary education. While most countries around the world offer their children two years of preschool as standard, Australia is one of only eleven countries to offer a single year early childhood education.

Early childhood education (ECE) is an area where a small investment can have a huge long term impact. A recent report by Price Waterhouse Coopers²¹ has shown that for every dollar invested in early childhood education Australia could receive two dollars back through higher tax revenues, higher wages and productivity and lower spending on welfare and criminal justice. The report concludes that annual investment for Universal Access to early childhood education generates double the invested amount in flow-on benefits to the economy.

¹⁵ Hunter, F., "COAG preschool review highlights 'adverse' effects of funding uncertainty", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, May 26 2020, retrieved from <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/coag-preschool-review-highlights-adverse-effects-of-funding-uncertainty-20200522-p54vjk.html>

¹⁶ Hunter, F., *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Crowe, D., & Wright, S., "Morrison says open up the economy to recapture one million lost jobs", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, May 5 2020, retrieved from <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/morrison-says-open-up-the-economy-to-recapture-one-million-lost-jobs-20200505-p54q1v.html>

¹⁸ Hunter, F., *Op. cit.*

¹⁹ Hunter, F., *Op. cit.*

²⁰ The World Bank, *Early Childhood Development*, retrieved from <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/earlychildhooddevelopment>

²¹ The Front Project, *A Smart Investment for a Smarter Australia: Economic analysis of universal early childhood education in the year before school in Australia*, June 2019, retrieved from https://www.thefrontproject.org.au/images/downloads/ECO_ANALYSIS_Full_Report.pdf

The educational and economic benefits of long term ECE funding for three and four year olds are clear, and we call on the Federal Government to extend this provision to three year olds nationally. We note that the UANP review found that two years of preschool is beneficial, particularly for vulnerable and disadvantaged children. Now, as the economy restarts, students return to school and parents go back to work, there is a prime opportunity to provide exactly that certainly for ECE providers and for parents.,

The Commonwealth Government must guarantee in the October 2020 Budget five years of funding for four year old preschool to 2026 as recommended in the UANP review report, and must undertake to legislate to make that funding permanent from 2026. Further, the Commonwealth must guarantee three year old preschool funding in the same way. The annual total cost of these two measures would be around one third of one percent of the total additional Commonwealth spending announced to support the economy in response to COVID-19,²² and would provide many times that in flow on benefits in employment and increased economic engagement of parents and carers, and improved long term outcomes for children.

TAFE

Federal funding to TAFE must be restored and guaranteed

For years prior to the current pandemic, the TAFE sector in Australia has existed in crisis, and unless governments act urgently and decisively to restore the gradual and systematic erosion of TAFE funding, its role in the Australian education system is under threat. The Mitchell Institute has recently reported that Australia's total investment in the VET sector is now at its lowest level in real terms since at least 2008.²³

Successive Australian governments have failed to address this systemic under-funding, and recent market “reforms” have further damaged TAFE. Even before the current crisis the Productivity Commission has said that the VET sector was a mess, echoing the concerns of all major stakeholders and²⁴ the Business Council of Australia warns that the residualisation of TAFE will ‘fail to deliver a good long term outcome’. They argue that governments need to define the role of the public provider in order to ‘maintain a sustainable TAFE network across the country’.²⁵

In 2018, states, territories and the Commonwealth spent a combined total of \$6.1 billion on vocational education, decrease of \$135 million when compared to 2017. The Commonwealth Government’s contribution to all vocational education fell by \$326 million (10.6%) in that single year and the NCVER has reported that Commonwealth Government contributions to public VET delivery fell by more than double that total, by 23.2%, in 2018.²⁶ TAFE has

²² Australian Government, *Economic Response to the Coronavirus*, retrieved from <https://treasury.gov.au/coronavirus>

²³ <http://www.mitchellinstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Australian-Investment-in-Education-VET.pdf>

²⁴ Productivity Commission 2017, *Shifting the Dial: 5 Year Productivity Review*, Report No. 84, Canberra p86

²⁵ Business Council of Australia 2017, *Future-proof: protecting Australians through education and skills*, Melbourne, Business Council of Australia, p. 77.

²⁶ <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/government-funding-of-vet-2018>

bore the brunt of this decline in spending as an ever increasing portion of government funding is directed towards training and often non-accredited courses offered by private Registered Training Organisations (RTOs).²⁷

In addition to the wholesale shift of public funds from the TAFE sector to many, often small, private for profit providers, the established TAFE and vocational education sector bears the burden of being the lowest funded of all the education sectors in Australia. Prior to the most recent cuts, funding was cut by more than 15% in the decade from 2007 to 2016 and government expenditure declined by 31.5% over that time.²⁸ This was swiftly followed by another cut of \$177 million in the 2017 federal budget and the further net cut to total funding of \$135 million in 2018. The damage inflicted on the sector, particularly as a result of chronic underfunding and attempts at privatisation have eroded the viability of TAFE colleges and undermined confidence in the system. As a result of this continual assault, TAFE enrolments have declined steadily in recent years, from nearly 800,000 in 2015 to 680,000 in 2017.²⁹

The number of government funded vocational education students has fallen by almost 17% since 2012 across all jurisdictions, but in TAFE, student numbers have fallen by 25%, as all states and territories endure cuts to campuses, courses and staff.³⁰ Most recently, in 2018 the total number of students enrolled in nationally-recognised programs (most frequently delivered by TAFE) decreased by 5.9% to two million people in 2018, compared with 2017, and decreased by 16.2% from 2015 to 2018. At the same time, students enrolled in subjects not delivered as part of a nationally-recognised program (usually delivered by private providers) increased by 4.9% to 2.5 million people in 2018, compared with 2017. Overall VET student numbers have also decreased by 1.5% to 4.1 million people in 2018, compared with 2017.

A strong TAFE sector is essential for a recovery

The Prime Minister has repeatedly stated his aim to get a million people back to work. Therefore it stands to reason that his government should make sure they are properly qualified and receive those qualifications from a high quality and consistent public provider, TAFE. However, to date the Commonwealth Government response in relation to vocational education has done nothing to recognise the integral part that TAFE must play in Australia's recovery.

In his address to the National Press Club on 26 May the Prime Minister referred to the "complexity of a vocational educational system that is clunky and unresponsive to skills demand... a funding system marred by inconsistency and incoherence with little accountability" and complained of "a lack of visibility of the quality of providers". He also said "I'm very interested in investing more in a better system".³¹ What he didn't

²⁷ National Centre for Vocational Education Research (2018), *Total VET Students and Courses 2017: data slicer*, retrieved from <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/data/all-data/total-vet-students-and-courses-2017-data-slicer>

²⁸ Australian Education Union, (2018), *Stop TAFE Cuts Manifesto*, p1.

²⁹National Centre for Vocational Education Research (2018), *Government Funding of VET 2017: data tables*, retrieved from <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/data/all-data/Government-funding-of-vet-2017-data-tables>

³⁰ NCVER 2017, *Students and Courses 2016*, NCVER Adelaide Table 2

³¹ Press club speech may 26

acknowledge is that the overwhelming majority of inconsistent, non-accredited and poor quality vocational education in Australia is conducted by a myriad of tiny private, for profit RTOs. TAFE offers the highest quality of vocational education across all levels of qualification, with nationally accredited programs, long standing industry links, and a highly qualified and experienced workforce of professional teachers and a national network of campus infrastructure. By contrast, the AEU has received reports that many private, for profit RTOs have simply shut their doors in response to the pandemic, abandoning students at the time that they need the greatest support.

Meaningless micro credentials and ripping up regulations will limit recovery

The Commonwealth Government's priority has so far been to push to increase the provision of free micro-credentials, marketed as a way for people to occupy themselves during the COVID-19 crisis, often with no accredited qualifications attached. Further, the numerous regulatory concessions made for Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) demonstrates the Commonwealth Government's preference for private for profit RTOs to expand provision. This shows no willingness on the part of the Federal Government to recognise the importance of TAFE in building a properly skilled and qualified workforce, or of the significant and long standing industry links and substantial infrastructure that TAFE provides.

The rush to cut regulations and delay audits in response to the pandemic by the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) will only serve to encourage private RTOs to cut corners to seek increased profit, and combined with the rapid increase of non-accredited micro-credentialled units of study, is nothing but a recipe for another disaster on the scale of VET-FEE-HELP.

Instead, the Commonwealth Government has relied entirely on state and territory governments to ensure the ongoing viability of TAFEs during this crisis, and the Prime Minister has now stated that future federal contributions will be contingent on state and territory funding. It cannot be left up to states/territories alone to provide additional COVID-19 crisis funds to TAFE, if that is the case some jurisdictions will be protected through significant support packages and others may lose their TAFE sector entirely. While some states and territories, most notably Victoria, have provided significant support to their TAFE institutes, the level of action has been variable across the country. A coordinated plan for federal support to TAFE, to be delivered without ultimatums, is needed to ensure that TAFE institutes are well placed to provide the training needed for the post COVID-19 recovery

Additionally, the lack of focus and concern for the gaining of long term skills gained and employment is demonstrated by the proposed makeup of the emergency COVID-19 subcommittee of the Australian Industry and Skills Committee (AISC), which limits the union movement to a single ex-officio position and includes no direct representation from the TAFE sector.

The Commonwealth Government can still act to boost skills, qualifications and employment

In order to rebuild Australia's economy and workforce a clear and strongly supported national workforce strategy is required. This is particularly important for youth employment. TAFE qualifications offer a clear pathway from school to a career, unlike those gained through many private RTOs who may offer unaccredited fragments of qualifications, often with minimal ongoing support, and who will see the Federal Government's drive

towards micro credentials, coupled with a relaxation of regulation purely as an opportunity to profit.

A true strategy for workforce renewal can only be achieved through the national support for TAFEs, and by making use of TAFE's longstanding partnerships with industry. It cannot be left to private RTOs to rebuild Australia's skills base.

The October 2020 Budget provides a unique opportunity for the Commonwealth to move from the support of its economic response to COVID-19 to the stimulus phase and to guarantee the future of Australia's TAFEs. The AEU proposes that the Commonwealth Government take the following steps to guide Australia, and particularly young Australians, through the crisis:

- Launch a co-ordinated effort to put TAFE at the forefront of the recovery efforts through immediate increased federal funding support and investment in infrastructure, equipment, staffing and programs;
- Restore the more than \$3 billion funding cut from TAFE and training since 2013;
- Implement targeted support for the public VET provider, guaranteeing a minimum of 70% of all government VET funding to TAFE.

APPENDIX ONE



Australian Education Union

Federal Office

Phone : +61 [REDACTED]
Fax : +61 [REDACTED]
Email : [REDACTED]
Web : www.aeu.org.au

19 March 2020

The Hon Scott Morrison MP
Prime Minister
PO Box 6022
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Prime Minister Morrison

RE: COVID-19

The Australian Education Union is gravely concerned about the ongoing impact of COVID-19 and the implementation of the decisions taken by the National Cabinet with respect to preschools, schools and TAFE.

We note that the National Cabinet has accepted the advice of the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) that schools should remain open at this time, that pre-emptive closures are not proportionate or effective as a public health intervention at this time and that further restrictions on social gatherings are in place.

We note that the AHPPC has stated that school closures for shorter defined periods of time may be considered as part of a suite of more stringent distancing measures. Further, that schools should implement a range of other strategies to reduce transmission, including the promotion of personal hygiene measures, frequent handwashing, reducing face to face contact, cough etiquette, physical distancing, reducing public gatherings, reducing the mixing of students, staggered lunchtimes and reduced after school activities and interschool activities.

We wish to raise the following matters for the urgent consideration of the National Cabinet meeting on Friday 20th March 2020.

That:

- at all levels of government, Work, Health and Safety obligations to employees must be met
- identified risks and hazards must have the appropriate level of control to mitigate them
- the National Cabinet and health officials at both a national and state/territory level have provided insufficient information and assurance to teachers, support staff, educators, principals and the AEU about the implementation of COVID-19 decisions and indeed, the safety of workplaces for employees and students
- social distancing requires staff and students to keep a distance of 1.5 metres, a requirement which is practically impossible in the vast majority of public education settings across the nation

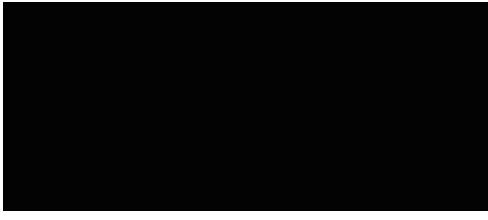
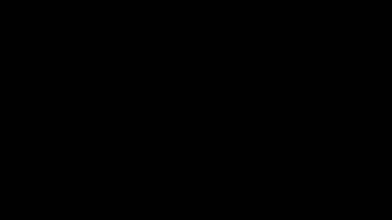
- the restrictions which have been placed on non-essential indoor gatherings of greater than 100 people have broad implications for public education settings across the country
- schools are reporting shortages of soap, alcohol-based sanitisers, toilet paper, tissues and infrastructure such as enough sinks and hygiene areas for staff and students to access frequently and systematically
- additional cleaning services must be implemented to ensure that all frequently touched surfaces and frequently used objects are cleaned and sanitized.
- there is widespread concern about the possibility of school closures but limited information available publicly on how such a decision would be made nationally
- the widespread community concern has already led to high levels of student absence in many states and territories
- working from home provisions must be immediately available to public education staff who are considered to be particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 due to their own or family members' underlying health conditions. In particular, those who have chronic illnesses, are immunocompromised, fall into high-risk categories and pregnant staff.
- there are specific workplace health and safety expectations arising from the additional needs of a wide range of students with individual circumstances requiring adjustment
- specific detail must be provided about working in more complex environments such as supporting students and people who have disabilities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, rural, regional and remote locations.
- maintenance of income including leave entitlements and leave arrangements must be guaranteed for all permanent, temporary and casual public education employees.
- we reject unrealistic expectations that alternative (virtual) learning episodes will be provided for students in the event that schools close – such expectations are inequitable in their impact particularly for students who come from low socio-economic backgrounds and regional and remote centres and unsustainable in an education system denied basic resources.

Given the deep ramifications for all public education employees and the 2.5 million students in their care, we formally request that the National Cabinet immediately provides detailed advice about how all public education settings are to minimise the risk to staff and students if they are to remain open.

We expect that governments will directly advise the AEU, our members, parents and the broader community about what actions they will take if the above safety measures cannot be implemented.

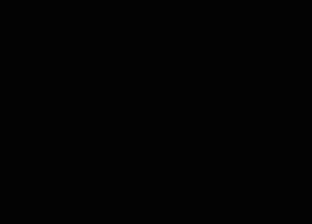
Further, the AEU seeks an urgent briefing from the Chief Medical Officer or his representative, and the Federal Minister for Education Dan Tehan to discuss our concerns. We are happy to facilitate this meeting via video conferencing. Please contact [REDACTED] in my office on [REDACTED] or email to [REDACTED] to make the necessary arrangements.

Yours sincerely



AEU Federal President

Branch Secretary
AEU ACT Branch



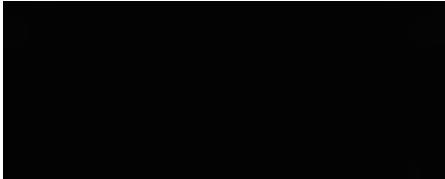
President
NSWTF Branch

President
AEU NT Branch



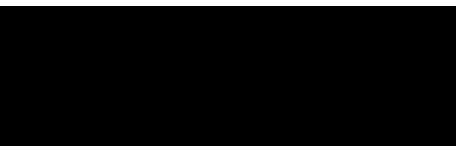
Kevin Bates
President
Queensland Teachers' Union

President
AEU SA Branch



President
AEU Tasmanian Branch

President
AEU Victorian Branch



President
SSTUWA

Cc National Cabinet via Prime Minister's office;
Daniel Andrews, Premier of Victoria
Gladys Berejiklian, Premier of New South Wales
Annastacia Palaszczuk, Premier of Queensland
Peter Gutwein, Premier of Tasmania
Steven Marshall, Premier of South Australia
Mark McGowan, Premier of Western Australia
Michael Gunner, Chief Minister of the Northern Territory
Andrew Barr, Chief Minister of the Australian Capital Territory

Professor Brendan Murphy, Chief Medical Officer
Dr Michelle Bruniges, Secretary of the Department of Education
Dan Tehan, Minister for Education
Tanya Plibersek, Shadow Minister for Education and Training
Senator Mehreen Faruqi, Australian Greens

Digital inclusion for all public school students

Home internet access, family income, remoteness, mobility, family type, English proficiency, disability, housing, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status, and the impact of the 2019-2020 bushfires

A report prepared for the Australian Education Union

Barbara Preston

June 2020

V 1.1

(see correction note p. iv)

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Correction note

V 1.1 corrects the previous version in which data on English proficiency were misclassified. Section 1.4 on home language and English proficiency and other references to the topic have been corrected.

Introduction

Government and family responses to COVID-19 resulted in a swift change in learning arrangements for public school students, including the rapid provision of schooling by remote modes. This was much more difficult for some students than for others. Justin Reich, director of the Teaching Systems Lab at MIT, writing in response to plans by many school authorities in the US to move to online learning because of COVID-19, noted that:

A growing body of evidence suggests that online learning works least well for our most vulnerable learners. If you are going online, the number one question is not: “What tech to use to teach online?” It should be: “How will you support your most struggling students?” (Reich, 2020, 12 March)

The sudden shift to remote learning brought into sharp focus the critically important, but often overlooked, problem of the lack of digital inclusion for many students. Access to the internet, and appropriate hardware, software and content are necessary, but not sufficient. Telstra provided 20,000 students and teachers with internet access to educational content (Ebeid, 2020, 7 April), the NBN offered at least \$50 million to assist with remote schooling for low income families (Cormann & Fletcher, 2020, 17 April), and other providers also gave support to low income families of school children. This was welcome. However, it is unlikely that these measures were sufficient to provide full internet access to the approximately 125,000 Australian students who did not have internet access at home (including via mobile devices or games consoles) in 2016 (see Section 1.1), and not enough to provide adequate internet access and affordability to the over one million public school students in the bottom third of family incomes (almost 1,400,000 students if those at Catholic and independent schools are included), and, more particularly, the almost 325,000 public school students in very low income families (just over 400,000 in total) (see Section 1.2). Even if such contributions did ensure adequate access and affordability, vulnerable students need full digital inclusion.

The Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) covers three aspects: access, affordability and *digital ability* (Thomas et al., 2019). Digital ability includes enthusiasm, confidence and a sense of control when using the internet, as well as experience, skills and knowledge in internet use (see Box 1). For vulnerable students (and their families and carers), this does not happen automatically, even if the students have experience with information and communication technology at school. “Digital Inclusion requires intentional strategies and investments to reduce and eliminate historical, institutional and structural barriers to access and use technology”, according to the US National Digital Inclusion Alliance (see Box 2).

Those with low *digital inclusion*, according to Thomas et al, include very low income households (Q5 – similar in amount to *very low* family incomes in this report), those who only access the internet via mobile devices, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians,

as well as adults with less than secondary education and those not in the labour force (Thomas, et al., 2019, p. 5)—which includes many public school students' parents or carers.

Box 1. The Australian Digital Inclusion Index

The Australian Digital Inclusion Index has three sub-indices, each made up of various components, which are in turn built up from underlying variables (survey questions).

The **Access** sub-index has three components:

- Internet Access: frequency, places, and number of access points
- Internet Technology: computers, mobile phones, mobile broadband, and fixed broadband
- Internet Data Allowance: mobile and fixed internet.

The **Affordability** sub-index has two components:

- Relative Expenditure: share of household income spent on internet access
- Value of Expenditure: total internet data allowance per dollar of expenditure.

The **Digital Ability** sub-index has three components:

- Attitudes: including notions of control, enthusiasm, learning, and confidence
- Basic Skills: including mobile phone, banking, shopping, community, and information skills
- Activities: including accessing content, communication, transactions, commerce, media, and information.

— *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2019* (Thomas, et al., 2019), p. 10

Box 2. Digital inclusion

“ Digital Inclusion refers to the activities necessary to ensure that all individuals and communities, including the most disadvantaged, have access to and use of information and communication technologies (ICTs). This includes 5 elements: 1) affordable, robust broadband internet service; 2) internet-enabled devices that meet the needs of the user; 3) access to digital literacy training; 4) quality technical support; and 5) applications and online content designed to enable and encourage self-sufficiency, participation and collaboration. Digital Inclusion must evolve as technology advances. Digital Inclusion requires intentional strategies and investments to reduce and eliminate historical, institutional and structural barriers to access and use technology. ”

— National Digital Inclusion Alliance (2020)

Even if students and their families have full digital inclusion, there are other reasons why remote learning was difficult or impossible for many students during the period of school closure related to COVID-19, and would be in similar circumstances in the future. These

reasons include household stress and domestic violence (in many cases arising from new circumstances of sudden unemployment and isolation at home, even if employed (Taub, 2020, 6 April)), overcrowded or insecure housing, and lack of proficiency in English.

The data set out in this report is intended to help inform policies to permanently address the digital inclusion gap that was highlighted by the need to urgently deploy remote learning solutions during April and May 2020. This will help ensure that vulnerable students receive the same quality education as their advantaged peers who have ready access to the equipment and home environment to support their learning. Addressing the digital inclusion gap would involve tailored school-based programs, and the provision of hardware, software and tailored support for school work and study at home—Involving care-givers as well as the students themselves. The report documents student characteristics that tend to result in a lack of digital inclusion, and is intended to help identify the numbers and, to some extent, general locations of vulnerable students.

It is important to recognise that the data used in this report identifies the persistent long term gap in access to the necessary resources experienced by many students. The disruption to regular schooling caused by COVID-19 was not the cause of the issue, but served to illuminate the severity of the existing structural problem.

This report does not provide research and information to inform remote learning practice—for such material see, for example, the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership's *Spotlight: What Works in Online/Distance Teaching and Learning?* (2020)

The analysis is based on data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2016 Census of Population and Housing, accessed via the online TableBuilder portal (ABS, 2017). The ABS Census undercounts school students, especially low income and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and the undercount is greater when a number of variables are combined (such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status, family income and internet access at home). The Census undercount is briefly outlined in the Technical Notes in this report, and discussed and calculated in the Technical Notes in the companion report (Preston, 2018 - see below). The ABS *Schools Australia* annual statistical report (2020) provides a more accurate count of Australian student numbers. For example, according to *Schools Australia* (2020), public school students were 65% of all students in 2016, not 63%, as Census data indicates. The Census undercounted public, Catholic and independent school students by 14%, 6% and 6% respectively. The public sector's share of enrolments had increased to 66% in 2019, and the number of students in public schools had increased over those three years by more than 4% from 2,483,802 to 2,594,830. In this report an estimate of the magnitude of the Census undercount is provided in notes to tables where relevant.

The data and analysis in this report is primarily concerned with, first, access to the internet from home, and, second, indicators of possible lack of support and facilities at home that are conducive to home study and school work—family income, family structure, English proficiency, disability, and housing. There is additional detail concerned with the circumstances of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. There is also a section on the

impact and implications of the 2019-2020 bushfires. All these factors were highlighted as areas of concern for disadvantaged students during the recent period of remote learning, but COVID-19 merely exacerbated pre-existing disadvantage which requires urgent and ongoing attention to ensure that all students have access to the tools needed to engage positively throughout their schooling.

The national data is mostly provided for public, Catholic and independent schools in each state and territory so that the circumstances of public schools can be considered in context.

This short report is a companion to the more detailed 2018 report, also based on 2016 Census data, *The social make-up of schools: Family income, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status, family type, religion, languages spoken, disability, home internet access, housing tenure, and geographic mobility of students in public, Catholic and independent schools* (Preston, 2018)—refer to that report for additional data and analysis, and technical information on data sources, interpretation, classifications and quality. It can be accessed at <http://www.aeufederal.org.au/application/files/7115/2090/2405/Preston2018.pdf>.

1. The national picture

In 2016 there were more than two million students in Australian schools, and almost two thirds were in public schools (see comments on the Census undercount in the Introduction). The Census data showed that the public sector share was least in Victoria and Western Australia, and greatest in Tasmania Northern Territory. The public sector share was greater at the primary than the secondary level (Tables 1 and 2).

The public sector share was less in the major cities than in regional and remote areas. In the major cities (where 71% of all students were located) the public sector share was 62%, and the share increases to 70% in outer regional, 74% in remote, and 85% in very remote (Table 3).

Table 1. Number of primary, secondary and all public school students, states, territories and Australia, 2016

	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT Australia
Primary	417 410	313 221	277 143	94 327	145 111	31 181	15 398	20 662 1 314 445
Secondary	269 287	201 113	176 165	52 661	88 190	17 966	8 288	13 613 827 267
Total	686 697	514 334	453 308	146 988	233 301	49 147	23 686	34 275 2 141 712
% of Aust.	32%	24%	21%	7%	11%	2%	1%	2% 100%

Source: ABS 2016 Census (2017). Census classifications: Type of Educational Institution Attending TYPP

Note: The ABS Census undercounts school students by 11% (public schools by 14%, Catholic schools by 6%, and independent schools by 6%).

Table 2. Percentage of all primary and secondary students in each state, territory and Australia, in public, Catholic and independent primary, 2016

	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT	Australia
Primary									
Public	69%	67%	69%	66%	69%	71%	75%	63%	68%
Catholic	20%	22%	18%	18%	18%	18%	13%	25%	20%
Independent	11%	11%	13%	16%	13%	10%	13%	12%	12%
Secondary									
Public	58%	55%	59%	57%	56%	61%	63%	56%	57%
Catholic	25%	24%	21%	21%	22%	22%	16%	26%	23%
Independent	17%	20%	20%	23%	22%	16%	21%	17%	19%
All schools									
Public	64%	62%	65%	62%	64%	67%	70%	60%	63%
Catholic	22%	23%	20%	19%	19%	20%	14%	25%	21%
Independent	14%	15%	16%	18%	17%	13%	16%	14%	15%

Source: ABS 2016 Census (2017). Census classifications: Type of Educational Institution Attending TYPP

Table 3. Public, Catholic and independent school students in each type of area classified by remoteness, Australia, 2016

	Major cities	Inner regional	Outer regional	Remote	Very remote	Total
Public	1 483 556	403 882	201 585	29 652	22 471	2 141 146
Catholic	512 916	137 300	59 208	7 026	2 447	718 897
Independent	391 547	88 280	27 582	3 123	1 503	512 035
All schools	2 388 025	629 448	288 394	39 804	26 431	3 372 102
% of Total	71%	19%	9%	1%	1%	100%
Percentage of students in each remoteness area type who are in public, Catholic and independent schools						
Public	62%	64%	70%	74%	85%	63%
Catholic	21%	22%	21%	18%	9%	21%
Independent	16%	14%	10%	8%	6%	15%
All schools	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: ABS 2016 Census (2017). Census classifications: Type of Educational Institution Attending TYPP; Remoteness Areas RA

Note: The ABS Census undercounts school students by 11% (public schools by 14%, Catholic schools by 6%, and independent schools by 6%)

1.1. Access to internet at home: school type, family income, remoteness and mobility

Around 125,000 public school students (adjusted for the Census undercount) lived in dwellings that were reported to have no internet access in 2016 (Table 5). This includes internet access via smart phones (3G/4G), gaming consoles and smart TVs, as well as other means (see Technical Notes at the end of this document for the wording of the Census questionnaire item). The breadth of this definition and the inadequacy of many such devices for educational purposes need to be considered when interpreting this data. The report on the Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) 2019 noted that:

More than four million Australians access the internet solely through a mobile connection – this means they have a mobile phone or mobile broadband device with a data allowance, but no fixed connection. In 2019, mobile-only users have an ADII score of 43.7, some 18.2 points lower than the national average (61.9). Being mobile-only not only diminishes Access, but also impacts on the Affordability and Digital Ability aspects of digital inclusion. Mobile-only use is linked with socio-economic factors, with people in the lowest household income quintile (30.7%), those with low levels of education (28.0%), and the unemployed (25.3%) more likely to be mobile-only (Thomas, et al., 2019, p. 6)

There has been a continued rollout of the NBN since 2016, and fixed broadband (and equivalent) providers facilitated connectivity to thousands of students in the context of COVID-19. This assisted in overcoming gaps in access and affordability in the ADII, but students still lacked digital ability because they and their parents and carers had not had

extensive internet experience, developing skills and confidence. They are very disadvantaged relative to their peers who have had broadband internet at home for some time.

Poverty continues to be a limitation on access to the internet, from data plans for smart phones, to installed broadband connections. While the roll-out of the NBN continued after the collection of 2016 Census data, the trend has been for an increasing percentage of Australian children to be living in poverty (Davidson, Saunders, Bradbury, & Wong, 2020) with around 17% of Australian children living in poverty in 2017 (p. 9). Thus, even if the NBN or other internet provision was available in a locality, it would tend not to be affordable by those living in poverty, and not a priority for many living close to poverty or in unstable housing.

Section 2 provides tables and maps of the numbers and percentages of public school students without access to the internet at home in 2016 in statistical areas in the states and territories.

Public school students were more than twice as likely as either Catholic or independent school students to have no internet access at home in 2016 (Table 4).

Table 4. Percentage of students without internet access at home, public, Catholic and independent schools, states, territories and Australia, 2016

	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT	Australia
Public	5%	4%	6%	6%	5%	7%	22%	2%	5%
Catholic	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	3%	14%	1%	2%
Independent	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	7%	1%	2%

Source: ABS 2016 Census (2017). Census classifications: Type of Educational Institution Attending TYPP; Internet access NEDD

Table 5. Number of primary, secondary and all public school students without internet access at home, states, territories and Australia, 2016

	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT	Australia
Primary	20 758	11 715	17 103	5 470	7 603	2 295	3 417	527	68 887
Secondary	12 385	7 104	9 541	2 882	4 439	1 210	1 511	299	39 375
All public schools	33 142	18 819	26 641	8 358	12 040	3 507	4 925	831	108 263

Source: ABS 2016 Census (2017). Census classifications: Type of Educational Institution Attending TYPP; Internet access NEDD

Note: The ABS Census undercounts public school students by internet access data by 15%. Thus the actual number without internet access at home in 2016 would have been around 125,000.

Public school primary students were more likely than secondary students to have no internet access at home. Students in the ACT, Victoria and then NSW were the least likely to have no internet access at home, while those in the NT then Tasmania were most likely to have no internet access at home (Table 6). While primary students were less likely than secondary students to have access to the internet at home, the difference was not great.

Table 6. Percentage of primary, secondary and all public school students without internet access at home, states, territories and Australia, 2016

	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT	Australia
Primary	5.1%	3.8%	6.3%	5.9%	5.3%	7.5%	22.9%	2.6%	5.3%
Secondary	4.7%	3.6%	5.5%	5.6%	5.2%	6.9%	19.2%	2.2%	4.9%
All public schools	4.9%	3.7%	6.0%	5.8%	5.3%	7.3%	21.6%	2.5%	5.1%

Source: ABS 2016 Census (2017). Census classifications: Type of Educational Institution Attending TYPP; Internet access NEDD

Public school students living in remote areas were much more likely to have no internet access at home – almost a third of the more than 20,000 living in very remote areas had no internet access at home (Table 7).

Table 7. Internet access at home, public school students in each type of area classified by remoteness, Australia, 2016

	Major cities	Inner regional	Outer regional	Remote	Very remote	Australia
Internet access	1 404 787	372 258	178 295	25 201	14 674	1 995 215
No internet access	55 669	24 812	17 378	3 509	6 891	108 259
Total	1 460 435	397 077	195 678	28 705	21 550	2 103 445
No internet access as % of all in area type	4%	6%	9%	12%	32%	5%

Source: ABS 2016 Census (2017). Census classifications: Type of Educational Institution Attending TYPP; Internet access NEDD
Note: The ABS Census undercounts public school students by internet access data by 15%.

Family income and mobility affect access to the internet at home (Table 8). Public school students with LOW family incomes were more likely to have moved in the past year than students with HIGH family incomes (that is, family income in roughly the top third of family incomes of all Australian school students): 19% of LOW family income of lived elsewhere a year earlier, while only 11% of HIGH family income students lived elsewhere a year earlier.

Nine percent of students with LOW family incomes have no internet access at home, while only 1% of students with HIGH family incomes did not have access to the internet at home. While 4% of students who had the same residential address as a year ago had no internet at home, around double that percentage of students who lived elsewhere a year earlier had no internet at home. Students with LOW family incomes who lived elsewhere a year early were most likely to have no access to the internet at home (11% compared with just 1% of HIGH family income students who had not moved)

Table 8. Public school students in LOW, MEDIUM and HIGH income families, by usual address one year previously and internet access at home, Australia, 2016

	Same as in 2016	Elsewhere in Australia in 2015	Overseas in 2015	Total
Percentage of students in each family income range by usual address one year ago				
LOW	81%	17%	2%	100%
MEDIUM	86%	13%	1%	100%
HIGH	89%	10%	1%	100%
Percentage of students without internet access at home by family income range and usual address one year ago				
LOW	8%	11%	11%	9%
MEDIUM	2%	4%	4%	2%
HIGH	1%	2%	2%	1%
All family income ranges	4%	7%	8%	5%

Source: ABS 2016 Census (2017). Census classifications: Usual Address One Year Ago Indicator UAI1; Family Income FINP; Internet access NEDD

1.2. Family income

Public school students were much more likely than Catholic or independent school students to have LOW family incomes (that is, family incomes in roughly the bottom third of family incomes of all Australian school students) or very low family incomes (Tables 9 and 10). Using the more accurate ABS *Schools Australia* (2020) data for 2016, and the percentages in the following tables, in 2016 there were over a million public school students in LOW income families (almost 1,400,000 including Catholic and independent school students), and almost 325,000 public school students in very low income families (just over 400,000 in total).

Low family income is associated with many factors that make studying at home more difficult. These include a lack of internet access and a lack of appropriate software and hardware, generally less well-educated parents who can help with school work at home, overcrowded or insecure housing without a regular place to carry out school work undisturbed, and the psychological stresses on family members arising out of financial stress and a lack of resources.

Table 9. Percentage of students in LOW income families, public, Catholic and independent schools, states, territories and Australia, 2016

	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT	Australia
Public	42%	43%	46%	50%	38%	53%	44%	26%	43%
Catholic	25%	29%	23%	31%	22%	32%	33%	12%	26%
Independent	25%	25%	25%	27%	22%	29%	15%	10%	24%

LOW family incomes are incomes in the approximate bottom third of the family incomes of all Australian school students in 2016: a weekly income of less than \$1,500

Source: ABS 2016 Census (2017). Census classifications: Type of Educational Institution Attending TYPP; Family Income FINP

Table 10. Percentage of students in very low income families, public, Catholic and independent schools, states, territories and Australia, 2016

	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT	Australia
Public	12%	13%	13%	15%	12%	16%	18%	8%	13%
Catholic	6%	7%	5%	8%	6%	7%	13%	3%	6%
Independent	7%	7%	7%	7%	7%	7%	5%	2%	7%

Very low family incomes are weekly incomes of less than \$650 in 2016. This is below the 2016 September quarter poverty line of a single working parent with one child (\$661), or a couple not in the workforce with one child (\$731) (Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, 2016)

Source: ABS 2016 Census (2017). Census classifications: Type of Educational Institution Attending TYPP; Family Income FINF

1.3. One parent families

Single parents have demands on their time and often lack resources necessary to provide effective support for students, whether undertaking school work from home as in the recent period of home learning, or assisting with homework and study generally. Almost a quarter of public school students live in one parent families, compared with 15% of Catholic school students and 13% of independent school students (Table 11).

Table 11. Percentage of students in one parent families, public, Catholic and independent schools, states, territories and Australia, 2016

	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT	Australia
Public	23%	22%	26%	25%	21%	27%	24%	20%	23%
Catholic	15%	14%	15%	17%	14%	19%	18%	14%	15%
Independent	13%	12%	15%	14%	13%	15%	13%	10%	13%

Source: ABS 2016 Census (2017). Census classifications: Type of Educational Institution Attending TYPP; Family Composition FMCF

1.4. Home language and English proficiency

Students who speak a language other than English at home and do not speak English well or do not speak it at all can have difficulty with school work, whether they are physically at school or at home. Such students are also likely to have parents or carers who do not speak English well or at all. This would make undertaking school work at home especially difficult if parents or carers cannot easily understand written information or instructions from the school or regarding ICT hardware or software.

While the percentages of all students who did not speak English well or did not speak it at all was small (nationally around one percent in 2016), the number was still substantial (over 25,000 nationally), as was the percentage in the Northern Territory (more than 5% of primary public school students). Table 12 sets out the percentages who spoke a language other than English at home, and, of those, the percentages who did not speak English well or at all.

Table 12. Percentage of primary and secondary public school students who speak a language other than English at home, and of those, who speak English not well or not at all, states, territories and Australia, 2016

	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT	Australia
Percentage who speak a language other than English at home									
Primary	22%	22%	11%	15%	16%	4%	38%	22%	18%
Secondary	25%	26%	12%	16%	19%	5%	42%	22%	21%
Of those who spoke a language other than English at home, percentage who spoke English not well or not at all									
Primary	6%	6%	8%	9%	7%	15%	14%	5%	6%
Secondary	6%	6%	6%	10%	5%	14%	6%	6%	6%

Source: ABS 2016 Census (2017). Census classifications: Type of Educational Institution Attending TYPP; Proficiency in Spoken English ENGLP

1.5. Disability

Students who need assistance with core activities were likely to have difficulty with schooling at home, and their need for assistance would put extra stress on parents and other members of their households. Public school students are twice as likely as Catholic or independent school students to need assistance with core activities (Table 13).

Table 13. Percentage of students who need assistance with core activities, public, Catholic and independent schools, states, territories and Australia, 2016

	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT	Australia
Public	4%	4%	4%	5%	3%	4%	3%	4%	4%
Catholic	2%	2%	2%	3%	2%	3%	2%	2%	2%
Independent	3%	2%	2%	3%	2%	3%	2%	2%	2%

Source: ABS 2016 Census (2017). Census classifications: Type of Educational Institution Attending TYPP; Core Activity Need for Assistance ASSNP

1.6. Housing

Security and adequacy of housing are important for successful schooling. Thirty-seven percent of public school students lived in rented houses in 2016, twice the rate of Catholic and independent school students. The percentage of public school students in rented houses was especially high in Queensland (45%) and the NT (59%) (Table 14).

Students living in rented housing were around twice as likely to not have access to the internet at home – compare Tables 5 and 15. Public school students living in rented housing are almost twice as likely to have been without internet access at home as Catholic or independent school students living in rented housing (Table 15).

Table 14. Percentage of students in rented housing, public, Catholic and independent schools, states, territories and Australia, 2016

	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT	Australia
Public	36%	31%	45%	35%	35%	35%	59%	34%	37%
Catholic	19%	15%	20%	17%	16%	17%	46%	17%	18%
Independent	21%	17%	22%	16%	19%	16%	30%	16%	19%

Source: ABS 2016 Census (2017). Census classifications: Type of Educational Institution Attending TYPP; Tenure type TND

Table 15. Percentage of students in rented housing without internet access from home, public, Catholic, independent and all schools, states, territories and Australia, 2016

	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT	Australia
Public	10%	8%	10%	12%	11%	14%	31%	5%	10%
Catholic	5%	6%	5%	7%	7%	9%	27%	2%	6%
Independent	5%	4%	5%	6%	7%	7%	14%	2%	5%

Source: ABS 2016 Census (2017). Census classifications: Type of Educational Institution Attending TYPP; Tenure type TEND; Dwelling internet connection NEED

The Census classification of “unsuitable housing” is based on an insufficient number of bedrooms for the number and demographics of dwelling residents¹. Such unsuitable housing makes it difficult for students to have the space and quiet to successfully study, complete homework or undertake school work at home. Twelve percent of public school students lived in unsuitable housing (with insufficient bedrooms) in 2016, with higher percentages in the NT and NSW. In comparison, 7% of Catholic and independent school students lived in unsuitable housing (Table 16).

Table 16. Percentage of students in unsuitable housing, public, Catholic and independent schools, states, territories and Australia, 2016

	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT	Australia
Public	15%	11%	11%	11%	8%	10%	36%	8%	12%
Catholic	9%	7%	4%	7%	4%	6%	27%	4%	7%
Independent	8%	7%	5%	6%	5%	7%	12%	4%	7%

Source: ABS 2016 Census (2017). Census classifications: Type of Educational Institution Attending TYPP; Housing Suitability HOSD

¹ The Census variable of *Housing suitability* (HOSD) is a measure of housing utilisation based on a comparison of the number of bedrooms in a dwelling with a series of household demographics, such as the number of usual residents, their relationship to each other, age and sex. The criteria are based on the Canadian National Occupancy Standard. It can be used to identify if a dwelling is either under or over utilised (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016b).

Unsuitable housing is twice as likely as all housing to have no internet access for residents (compare Tables 5 and 17).

Table 17. Percentage of students in unsuitable housing without internet access from home, public, Catholic and independent schools, states, territories and Australia, 2016

	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT	Australia
Public	8%	7%	13%	12%	15%	12%	41%	6%	11%
Catholic	4%	5%	7%	6%	9%	7%	39%	3%	6%
Independent	5%	5%	7%	5%	10%	6%	33%	2%	6%

Source: ABS 2016 Census (2017). Census classifications: Type of Educational Institution Attending TYPP; Housing Suitability HOSD; Dwelling internet connection NEDD

Whether or not housing is classified as unsuitable, a large number of residents makes undertaking school work and studying at home more difficult—with noise, distractions and interruptions. Eighteen percent of public school students lived in dwellings with six or more residents in 2016. While only 3% nationally lived in dwellings with 8 or more residents, 17% of NT students did, and more than a third lived in dwellings with six or more residents. Queensland also had a higher than average percentage of public school students in dwellings with large numbers of residents (Table 18).

Table 18. Percentage of public school students in dwellings with six or more, seven or more, or eight or more persons usually resident, states and territories and Australia, 2016

	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT	Australia
6 or more	19%	17%	20%	15%	17%	15%	36%	14%	18%
7 or more	7%	6%	8%	6%	6%	5%	24%	5%	7%
8 or more	3%	3%	4%	3%	3%	2%	17%	2%	3%

Source: ABS 2016 Census (2017). Census classifications: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status INGP; Number of Persons usually Resident in Dwelling NRPD

1.7. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are much more likely than other students to experience the disadvantages that make undertaking school work and study at home difficult. Not all of these disadvantages are discussed in this section. Six percent of public school students were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander in 2016 (compared with 3% of Catholic school students and 2% of independent school students). The percentage was much higher in the NT (42%), Tasmania (10%) and Queensland (9%) (Table 19).

Table 19. Percentage of students who are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, public, Catholic and independent schools, states, territories and Australia, 2016

	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT	Australia
Public	7%	2%	9%	5%	6%	10%	42%	3%	6%
Catholic	3%	1%	4%	2%	3%	7%	32%	2%	3%
Independent	2%	1%	4%	2%	2%	4%	19%	1%	2%

Source: ABS 2016 Census (2017). Census classifications: Type of Educational Institution Attending TYPP; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status INGP

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were much more likely to have no internet access at home—21% compared with 5% for all public school students, and greater differences for Catholic and independent school Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander compared with all students (Tables 5 and 20). The percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public school students without internet access at home was higher in the NT (45%), South Australia (29%) and Western Australia (24%) (Table 20).

Table 20. Percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students without internet access at home, public, Catholic and independent schools, states, territories and Australia, 2016

	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT	Australia
Public	17%	13%	20%	24%	29%	13%	45%	10%	21%
Catholic	7%	6%	8%	6%	19%	6%	40%	3%	11%
Independent	10%	7%	14%	10%	28%	4%	35%	7%	15%

Source: ABS 2016 Census (2017). Census classifications: Type of Educational Institution Attending TYPP; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status INGP; Dwelling internet connection NEDD

An adequate family income facilitates many of the resources, facilities and circumstances necessary for successful school work at home. While around a third of all Australian school students had LOW family incomes in 2016, more than two thirds of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public school students had LOW family incomes. In the NT and Western Australia around three quarters of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public school students had LOW family incomes (Table 21).

Table 21. Percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in LOW income families, public, Catholic and independent schools, states, territories and Australia, 2016

	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT	Australia
Public	66%	67%	68%	76%	66%	71%	75%	52%	68%
Catholic	42%	47%	42%	50%	47%	43%	73%	20%	45%
Independent	48%	43%	53%	54%	55%	53%	49%	23%	51%

LOW family incomes are in the approximate bottom third of the family incomes of all Australian school students in 2016: a weekly income of less than \$1,500

Source: ABS 2016 Census (2017). Census classifications: Type of Educational Institution Attending TYPP; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status INGP; Family Income FINF

Almost a quarter of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public school students were in unsuitable housing (too few bedrooms for the number and demographics of the dwelling residents). In the NT 62% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public school students were in unsuitable housing (Table 22).

Table 22. Percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in unsuitable housing, public, Catholic and independent schools, states and territories and Australia, 2016

	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT	Australia
Public	17%	15%	23%	20%	23%	15%	62%	11%	23%
Catholic	16%	15%	21%	19%	23%	13%	60%	11%	21%
Independent	17%	15%	22%	20%	23%	14%	61%	11%	22%

Source: ABS 2016 Census (2017). Census classifications: Type of Educational Institution Attending TYPP; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status INGP; Housing Suitability HOSD

Whether or not housing was unsuitable, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public school students tended to live with many more people than other students in 2016. Ten percent lived in houses with eight or more people, and a third lived in houses with six or more. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public school students tended to live in especially larger households in the NT, and then South Australia and Queensland (Table 23).

Table 23. Percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public school students, in dwellings with six or more, seven or more, or eight or more persons usually resident, states and territories and Australia, 2016

	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT	Australia
6 or more	27%	23%	35%	27%	36%	21%	62%	21%	33%
7 or more	11%	9%	18%	11%	18%	8%	47%	7%	16%
8 or more	5%	4%	11%	6%	11%	4%	38%	3%	10%

Source: ABS 2016 Census (2017). Census classifications: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status INGP; Number of Persons usually Resident in Dwelling Nprd

1.8. The impact of the 2019-2020 bushfires

For many in governments, the media and the wider community, concern about COVID-19 overtook concern about the impact of the 2019-2020 bushfires. But the immediate and long term impact of the fires on school communities, students, their families and wider communities need to be taken into account in responses to COVID-19 and in forward planning to minimize the ongoing disruption to schooling for students affected by the fires.

The fires had a very substantial effect: over 17 million hectares were burnt and over 3,000 houses destroyed across NSW, Victoria, Queensland, ACT, Western Australia and South Australia (Richards, Brew, & Smith, 2020, 12 March). There were more than 200,000 school age children in the fire-affected areas of New South Wales and Victoria alone (estimated from Williamson, Markham, & Weir, 2020, 2 April). Bushfires and other disasters can have long-lasting effects on school students: physical dislocation, financial losses for many families, and on-going psychological effects on students and their families (Gibbs et al., 2019).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, especially children, were particularly affected. Williamson, Markham, and Weir researched the impact of the fires in New South Wales and Victoria on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (2020, p. 5; 2020, 2 April). They found that more than a quarter of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in those states lived in fire-affected areas (more than 84,000 people). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people made up 5% of the population in the fire-affected areas (compared with 2% in those states as a whole), and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children made up 10% of the more than 200,000 school-age children in the fire-affected areas in those two states—that is, a total of around 20,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait school age children in the fire-affected areas of New South Wales and Victoria. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in these localities were already disadvantaged. For example in 2016, 17% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in public schools in the fire-affected statistical areas² were in “unsuitable housing” (without sufficient bedrooms for the occupants)³, and two thirds were in LOW income families (up to 77% in LaTrobe-Gippsland and 74% in Mid North Coast) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016b).

Williamson, Markham, and Weir explained the particular impact of the fires on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people:

Aboriginal people hold significant legal rights and interests over lands and waters in the fire-affected areas.... The nature of these legal rights and interests means the bushfires have different consequences for Aboriginal rights-holders than for

² The ABS Statistical Area 4 (SA4) regions of Central Coast; Illawarra; Mid North Coast; Capital Region; Coffs Harbour – Grafton; Richmond – Tweed; Southern Highlands and Shoalhaven; Sydney - Outer West and Blue Mountains; Latrobe – Gippsland.

³ “The Census variable of *Housing suitability* is a measure of housing utilisation based on a comparison of the number of bedrooms in a dwelling with a series of household demographics, such as the number of usual residents, their relationship to each other, age and sex. The criteria are based on the Canadian National Occupancy Standard. It can be used to identify if a dwelling is either under or over utilised.” (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016b) The measure used here is needing at least one extra bedroom in the dwelling.

non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander landowners. Even where there's no formal recognition, all fire-affected lands have Aboriginal ownership held and passed down through songlines, languages and kinship networks.

Many non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land-owners in the fire-affected areas face the difficult decision of whether to stay and rebuild, or sell and move on. Traditional owners, on the other hand, are in a far more complex and unending situation. Traditional owners carry inter-generational responsibilities, practices and more that have been formed with the places they know as their Country. They can leave and live on someone else's Country, but their Country and any formally recognised communal land and water rights remain in the fire-affected area. (Williamson, et al., 2020, 2 April)

As schools and education authorities seek to restore effective schooling for all students post the initial COVID-19 crisis period, the particular circumstances of fire-affected students, especially Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, also need to be taken into full account on an ongoing basis.

2. State and territory summaries and internet access at home by statistical areas

In this section the data for each state and territory from the earlier sections are summarised, with important characteristics highlighted.

This is followed by data on the number and percentage of public school students who do not have internet access at home by statistical region, set out in tables and maps.

Either the Statistical Area Level 4 (SA4) or the Statistical Area Level 3 (SA3) is used (for the larger and smaller states and territories respectively). More rural and remote statistical areas have lower populations. The criteria for determining the boundaries of the areas are summarised by the ABS on the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) webpage (2018). The data ranges in the maps are based on “natural boundaries”—see Appendix: Technical notes.

2.1. New South Wales — summary and internet access at home by statistical areas

Almost a third of all Australian public school students were in New South Wales in 2016, . According to the data on student characteristics reported in earlier sections, New South Wales public school students were much the same or slightly less disadvantaged than students throughout Australia. Of New South Wales public school students:

- 5 % were without internet access at home (Australia 5%; Table 4)
- 42% were in LOW income families (Australia 43%; Table 9)
- 12% were in very low income families (Australia 13%; Table 10)
- 23% in one parent families (Australia 23%; Table 11)
- Of the 22% of primary students and 25% of secondary students who spoke a language other than English at home, 6% (primary and secondary) spoke English not well or not at all (Table 12)
- 4% needed assistance with core activities (Australia 4%; Table 13)
- 36% lived in rented housing (Australia 37%; Table 14)
- 10% who were in rented housing were without internet access (Australia 10%; Table 15)
- 15% were in unsuitable housing (insufficient bedrooms for the residents) (Australia 12%; Table 16)
- 8% who were in unsuitable housing were without internet (Australia 11%; Table 17)
- 19%, 7%, 3% were in dwellings with 6 or more, 7 or more or 8 or more usual residents respectively (Australia 18%, 7%, 3%; Table 18)
- 7% were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (Australia 6%; Table 19)

Of New South Wales Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students:

- 17% were without internet access at home (Australia 21%; Table 20)
- 66% were in LOW income families (Australia 68%; Table 21)
- 17% were in unsuitable housing (Australia 23% Table 22)
- 27%, 11%, 5% were in dwellings with 6 or more, 7 or more or 8 or more usual residents respectively (Australia 33%, 16%, 10%; Table 18)

The 2019-2020 bushfires severely affected many public schools students and their communities, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were around 10% of the more than 200,000 school age children areas affected by the fires in New South Wales and Victoria. The impact of the fires is discussed in section 1.8, and the special needs of affected students, then magnified by the impact of a lack of resources to effectively engage in schooling during the COVID-19 school closures, need to be taken into account.

In New South Wales in 2016 5% of public school students were without access to the internet at home, and the percentages in Statistical Areas SA4s ranged from just 1% in Sydney northern suburbs and Sutherland, to 15% in the Far West and Orana and 11% in New England and the Far West SA4 (Table 24 and Figures 1 and 2).

Table 24. Public school students' internet access from home, New South Wales, SA4

	Internet accessed	Internet not accessed	Total	% internet not accessed
Capital Region	19 107	1 327	20 437	6%
Central Coast	31 942	1 368	33 308	4%
Central West	18 238	1 676	19 913	8%
Coffs Harbour - Grafton	12 006	926	12 929	7%
Far West and Orana	9 070	1 551	10 626	15%
Hunter Valley exc Newcastle	5 189	1 898	27 090	7%
Illawarra	27 868	1 261	29 129	4%
Mid North Coast	16 701	1 483	18 183	8%
Murray	9 697	701	10 394	7%
New England and North West	15 702	1 987	17 689	11%
Newcastle and Lake Macquarie	33 230	1 615	34 847	5%
Richmond - Tweed	18 758	1 301	20 060	6%
Riverina	13 410	1 247	14 657	9%
Southern Highlands and Shoalhaven	12 769	704	13 478	5%
Sydney - Baulkham Hills & Hawkesbury	24 361	320	24 685	1%
Sydney - Blacktown	34 654	1 959	36 613	5%
Sydney - City and Inner South	11 187	427	11 613	4%
Sydney - Eastern Suburbs	11 216	231	11 446	2%
Sydney - Inner South West	46 878	2 089	48 969	4%
Sydney - Inner West	18 219	460	18 675	2%
Sydney - North Sydney and Hornsby	33 649	458	34 101	1%
Sydney - Northern Beaches	24 651	237	24 887	1%
Sydney - Outer South West	27 809	1 794	29 605	6%
Sydney - Outer West & Blue Mountains	28 669	1 185	29 851	4%
Sydney - Parramatta	38 569	1 727	40 296	4%
Sydney - Ryde	15 429	232	15 665	1%
Sydney - South West	40 226	2 689	42 915	6%
Sydney - Sutherland	21 775	293	22 068	1%
Total	640 982	33 142	674 127	5%

Source: ABS 2016 Census (2017) Census classifications: Main Statistical Area Structure SA4; Internet access NEED
Note: The ABS Census undercounts NSW public school students by internet access data by 14%.

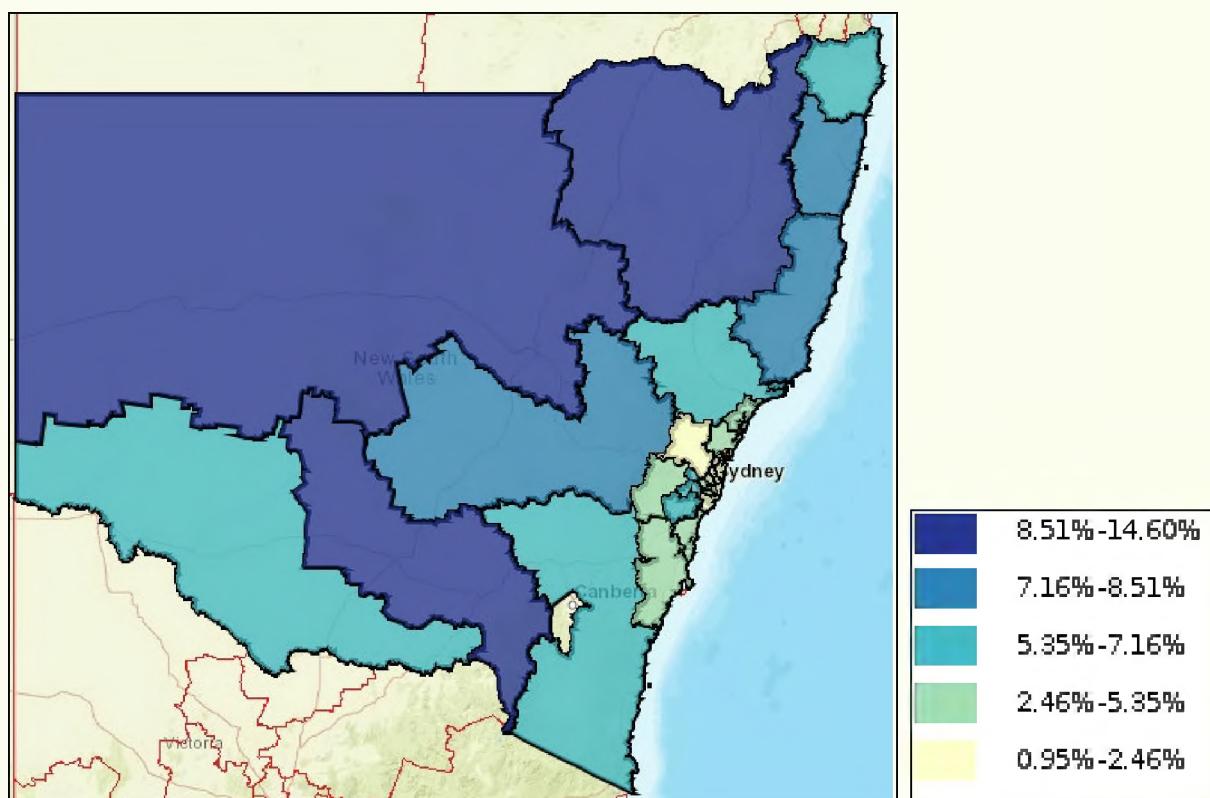


Figure 1 Percentage of public school students not accessing the internet, New South Wales, SA4, 2016. (Source: Table 24)

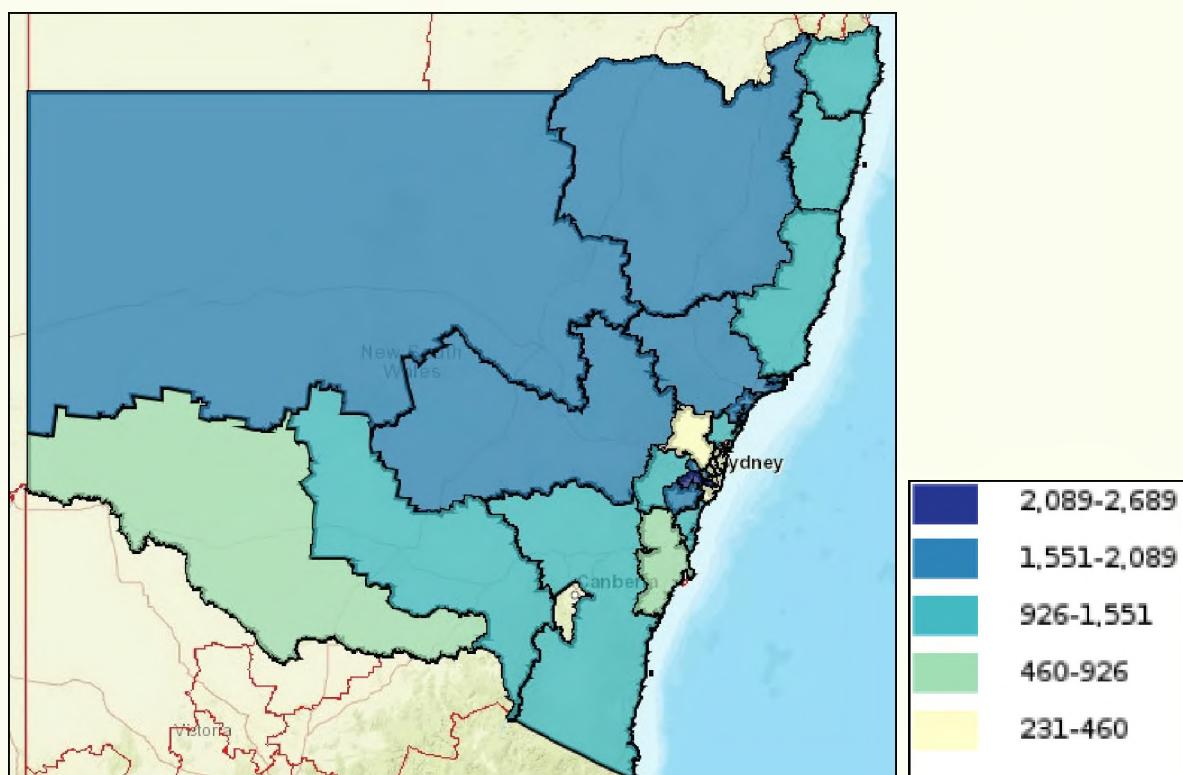


Figure 2 Number of public school students not accessing the internet, New South Wales SA4, 2016 (Source Table 24)

2.2. Victoria — summary and internet access at home by statistical areas

Almost a quarter of all Australian public school students were in Victoria in 2016. According to the data on characteristics reported in earlier sections, Victorian public school students were much the same or slightly less disadvantaged than students throughout Australia. Of Victorian public school students:

- 4 % were without internet access at home (Australia 5%; Table 4)
- 43% were in LOW income families (Australia 43%; Table 9)
- 13% were in very low income families (Australia 13%; Table 10)
- 22% in one parent families (Australia 23%; Table 11)
- Of the 22% of primary students and 26% of secondary students who spoke a language other than English at home, 6% (primary and secondary) spoke English not well or not at all (Table 12)
- 4% needed assistance with core activities (Australia 4%; Table 13)
- 31% lived in rented housing (Australia 37%; Table 14)
- 8% who were in rented housing were without internet access (Australia 10%; Table 15)
- 11% were in unsuitable housing (insufficient bedrooms for the residents) (Australia 12%; Table 16)
- 7% who were in unsuitable housing were without internet (Australia 11%; Table 17)
- 17%, 6%, 3% were in dwellings with 6 or more, 7 or more or 8 or more usual residents respectively (Australia 18%, 7%, 3%; Table 18)
- 2% were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (Australia 6%; Table 19)

Of Victorian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students:

- 13% were without internet access at home (Australia 21%; Table 20)
- 67% were in LOW income families (Australia 68%; Table 21)
- 15% were in unsuitable housing (Australia 23% Table 22)
- 23%, 9%, 4% in dwellings with 6 or more, 7 or more or 8 or more usual residents respectively (Australia 33%, 16%, 10%; Table 18)

The 2019-2020 bushfires severely affected many public schools students and their communities, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were around 10% of the more than 200,000 school age children areas affected by the fires in eastern Victoria and New South Wales. The impact of the fires is discussed in section 1.8, and the special needs of affected students, then magnified by the impact of a lack of resources to effectively engage in schooling during the COVID-19 school closures, need to be taken into account in the response to COVID-19. In Victoria in 2016 4% of public school students were without access to the internet at home, and the percentages ranged from just 1% in the Melbourne Inner South, to 7% in the North West SA4 (Table 25 and Figures 3 and 4).

Table 25. Public school students' internet access from home, Victoria, SA4, 2016

	Internet accessed	Internet not accessed	Total	% internet not accessed
Ballarat	12 226	689	12 913	5%
Bendigo	13 119	632	13 751	5%
Geelong	22 609	946	23 548	4%
Hume	13 734	905	14 646	6%
Latrobe - Gippsland	22 851	1 460	24 314	6%
Melbourne - Inner	25 420	667	26 096	3%
Melbourne - Inner East	29 091	450	29 542	2%
Melbourne - Inner South	29 225	362	29 587	1%
Melbourne - North East	44 073	1 365	45 440	3%
Melbourne - North West	29 845	1 431	31 273	5%
Melbourne - Outer East	48 347	938	49 284	2%
Melbourne - South East	71 036	2 643	73 676	4%
Melbourne - West	64 180	3 200	67 387	5%
Mornington Peninsula	27 209	865	28 068	3%
North West	13 890	1 032	14 925	7%
Shepparton	10 517	650	11 166	6%
Warrnambool and South West	9 834	582	10 418	6%
Total	487 208	18 819	506 024	4%

Source: ABS 2016 Census (2017) Census classifications: Main Statistical Area Structure SA4; Internet access NEDD

Note: The ABS Census undercounts Victorian public school students by internet access data by 14%.

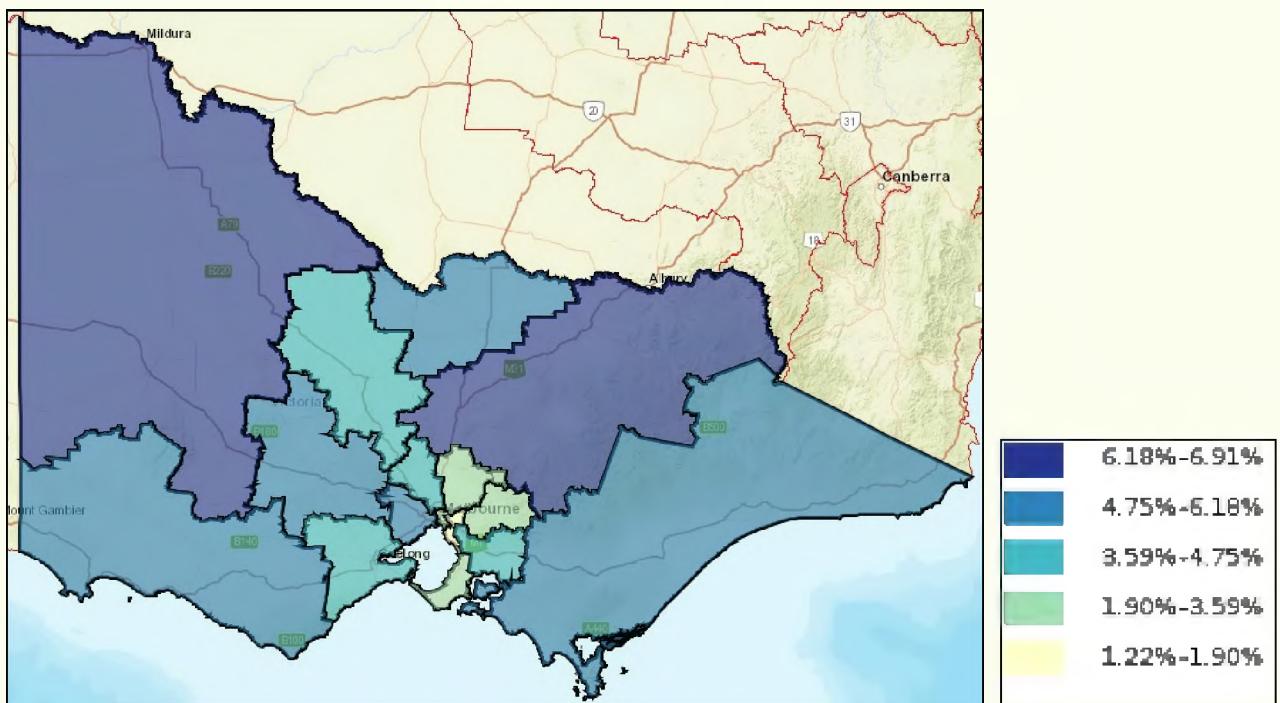


Figure 3 Percentage of public school students not accessing the internet, Victoria, SA4, 2016 (Source: Table 25)

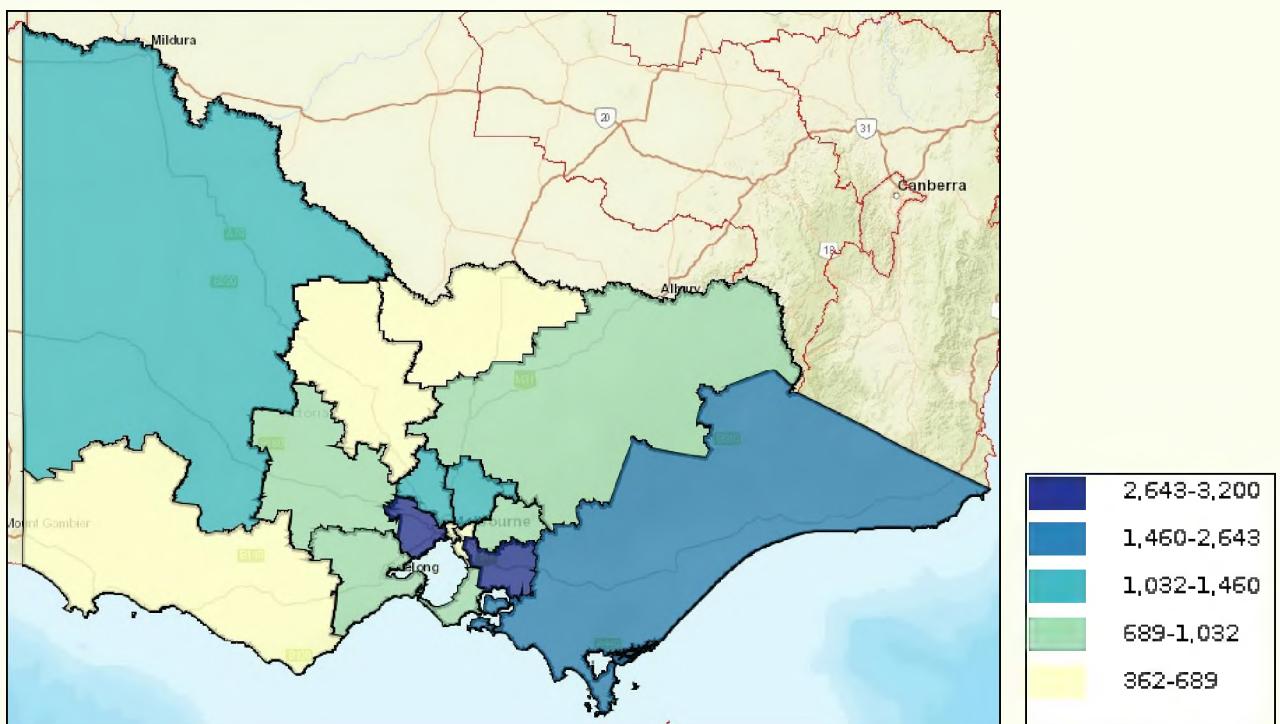


Figure 4 Number of public school students not accessing the internet, Victoria, SA4, 2016 (Source: Table 25)

2.3. Queensland — summary and internet access at home by statistical areas

Twenty one percent of all Australian public school students were in Queensland in 2016. According to the data on characteristics reported in earlier sections, in Queensland public school students were generally more disadvantaged than students throughout Australia, in particular, a substantially higher percentage in rented housing. Of Queensland public school students:

- 6 % were without internet access at home (Australia 5%; Table 4)
- 46% were in LOW income families (Australia 43%; Table 9)
- 13% were in very low income families (Australia 13%; Table 10)
- 26% in one parent families (Australia 23%; Table 11)
- Of the 11% of primary students and 12% of secondary students who spoke a language other than English at home, 8% (primary) and 6% (secondary) spoke English not well or not at all (Table 12)
- 4% needed assistance with core activities (Australia 4%; Table 13)
- 45% lived in rented housing (Australia 37%; Table 14)
- 10% who were in rented housing were without internet access (Australia 10%; Table 15)
- 11% were in unsuitable housing (insufficient bedrooms for the residents) (Australia 12%; Table 16)
- 13% who were in unsuitable housing were without internet (Australia 11%; Table 17)
- 20%, 8%, 4% were in dwellings with 6 or more, 7 or more or 8 or more usual residents respectively (Australia 18%, 7%, 3%; Table 18)
- 9% were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (Australia 6%; Table 19)

Of Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students:

- 20% were without internet access at home (Australia 21%; Table 20)
- 68% were in LOW income families (Australia 68%; Table 21)
- 23% were in unsuitable housing (Australia 23% Table 22)
- 35%, 18%, 11% in dwellings with 6 or more, 7 or more or 8 or more usual residents respectively (Australia 33%, 16%, 10%; Table 18)

In Queensland in 2016 6% of public school students were without access to the internet at home, and the percentages ranged from just 1% in Brisbane West, to 20% in the Queensland Outback (see Table 26 and Figures 5 and 6).

Table 26. Public school students' internet access from home, Queensland, SA4, 2016

	Internet accessed	Internet not accessed	Total	% internet not accessed
Brisbane - East	19 406	664	20 073	3%
Brisbane-North	14 833	546	15 375	4%
Brisbane-South	27 030	787	27 813	3%
Brisbane-West	16 775	223	17 001	1%
BrisbaneInnerCity	12 509	216	12 730	2%
Cairns	20 511	2 675	23 178	12%
DarlingDowns-Maranoa	12 153	1 098	13 246	8%
CentralQueensland	20 730	1 706	22 433	8%
GoldCoast	48 189	1 840	50 031	4%
Ipswich	33 645	2 749	36 397	8%
Logan-Beaudesert	33 708	2 695	36 403	7%
Mackay-Isaac-Whitsunday	16 967	1 070	18 039	6%
MoretonBay-North	23 754	1 574	25 325	6%
MoretonBay-South	21 579	614	22 190	3%
Queensland-Outback	7 457	1 810	9 263	20%
SunshineCoast	31 777	1 218	32 993	4%
Toowoomba	12 653	792	13 448	6%
Townsville	17 963	1 881	19 843	9%
WideBay	26 442	2 494	28 933	9%
Total	418 090	26641	444732	6%

Source: ABS 2016 Census (2017) Census classifications: Main Statistical Area Structure SA4; Internet access NEED
Note: The ABS Census undercounts Victorian public school students by internet access data by 14%.

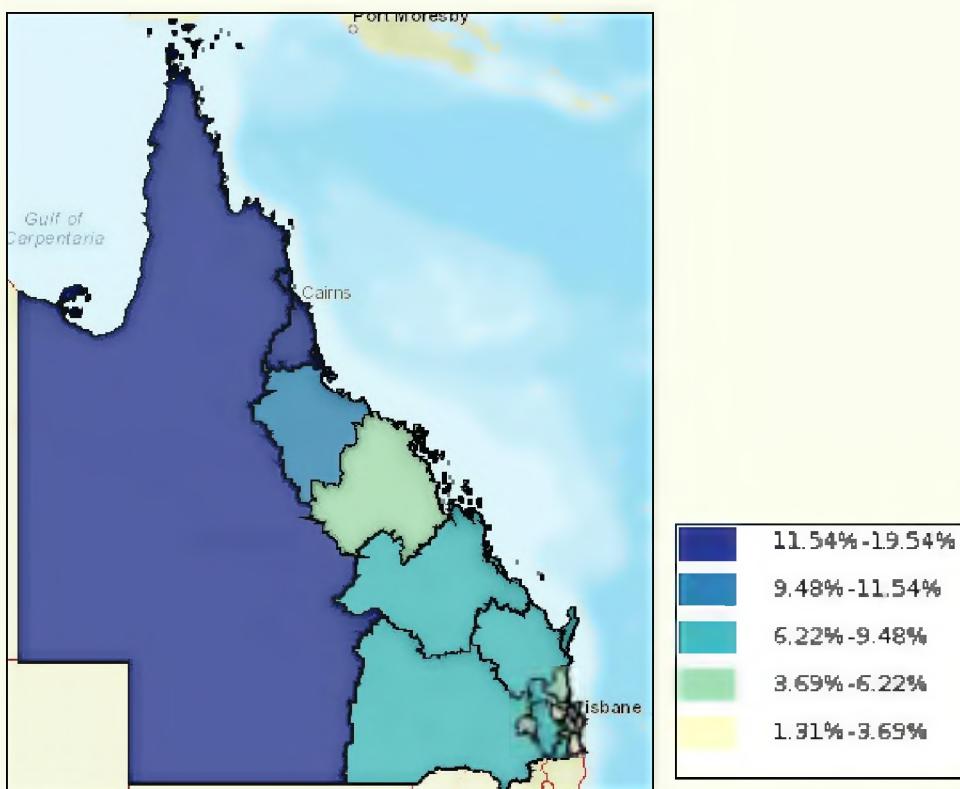


Figure 5 Percentage of public school students not accessing the internet, Queensland, SA4, 2016 (Source: Table 26)

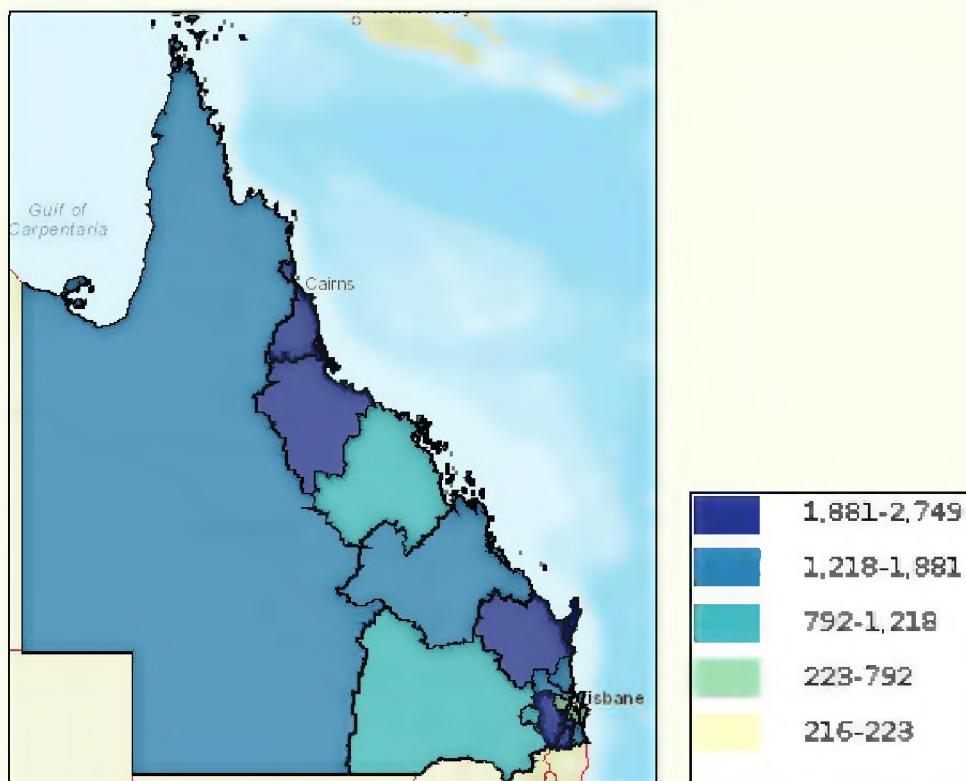


Figure 6 Number of public school students not accessing the internet, Queensland, SA4, 2016 (Source: Table 26)

2.4. South Australia — summary and internet access at home by statistical areas

Seven percent of all Australian public school students were in South Australia in 2016. According to the data on characteristics reported in earlier sections, South Australian public school students were generally more disadvantaged than students throughout Australia. Of South Australian public school students:

- 6% were without internet access at home (Australia 5%; Table 4)
- 50% were in LOW income families (Australia 43%; Table 9)
- 15% were in very low income families (Australia 13%; Table 10)
- 25% in one parent families (Australia 23%; Table 11)
- Of the 15% of primary students and 16% of secondary students who spoke a language other than English at home, 9% (primary) and 10% (secondary) spoke English not well or not at all (Table 12)
- 5% needed assistance with core activities (Australia 4%; Table 13)
- 35% lived in rented housing (Australia 37%; Table 14)
- 12% who were in rented housing were without internet access (Australia 10%; Table 15)
- 11% were in unsuitable housing (insufficient bedrooms for the residents) (Australia 12%; Table 16)
- 12% who were in unsuitable housing were without internet (Australia 11%; Table 17)
- 15%, 6%, 3% were in dwellings with 6 or more, 7 or more or 8 or more usual residents respectively (Australia 18%, 7%, 3%; Table 18)
- 5% were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (Australia 6%; Table 19)

Of South Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students:

- 24% were without internet access at home (Australia 21%; Table 20)
- 76% were in LOW income families (Australia 68%; Table 21)
- 20% were in unsuitable housing (Australia 23%; Table 22)
- 27%, 11%, 6% in dwellings with 6 or more, 7 or more or 8 or more usual residents respectively (Australia 33%, 16%, 10%; Table 18)

In South Australia in 2016 6% of public school students were without access to the internet at home, and the percentages ranged from 2% in Adelaide Central and Hills, to 23% in the Outback North and East (Table 27, Figures 7 or 8).

Table 27. Public school students' internet access from home, South Australia, SA4 and SA3, 2016

	Internet accessed	Internet not accessed	Total	% internet not accessed
Adelaide metropolitan - SA4				
Adelaide - Central and Hills	21 169	481	21 653	2%
Adelaide - North	34 917	2 645	37 563	7%
Adelaide - South	30 276	1 208	31 485	4%
Adelaide - West	14 411	889	15 301	6%
Rest of state - SA3				
Barossa	3 489	147	3 640	4%
Lower North	2 218	139	2 360	6%
Mid North	2 274	231	2 505	9%
Yorke Peninsula	2 241	172	2 410	7%
Eyre Peninsula and South West	5 545	574	6 118	9%
Outback - North and East	2 085	622	2 705	23%
Fleurieu - Kangaroo Island	4 016	193	4 211	5%
Limestone Coast	6 955	535	7 488	7%
Total	136 438	8 349	144 790	6%

Source: ABS 2016 Census (2017) Census classifications: Main Statistical Area Structure SA4 and SA3; Internet access NEED

Note: The ABS Census undercounts Victorian public school students by internet access data by 14%.

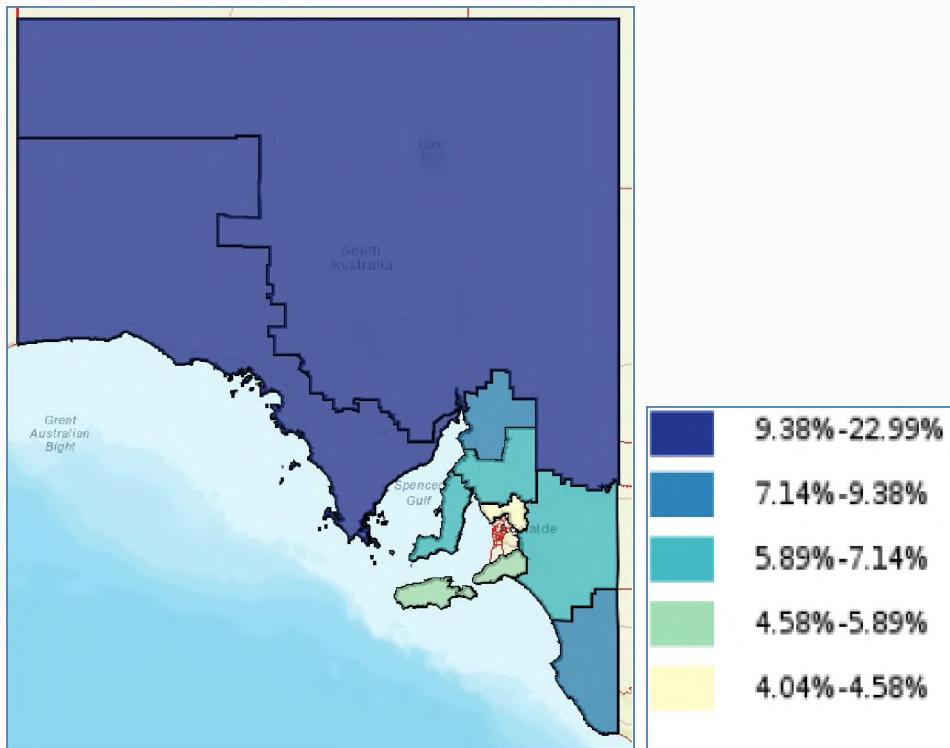


Figure 7 Percentage of public school students not accessing the internet, South Australia (non-metro), SA3, 2016 (Source: Table 27)

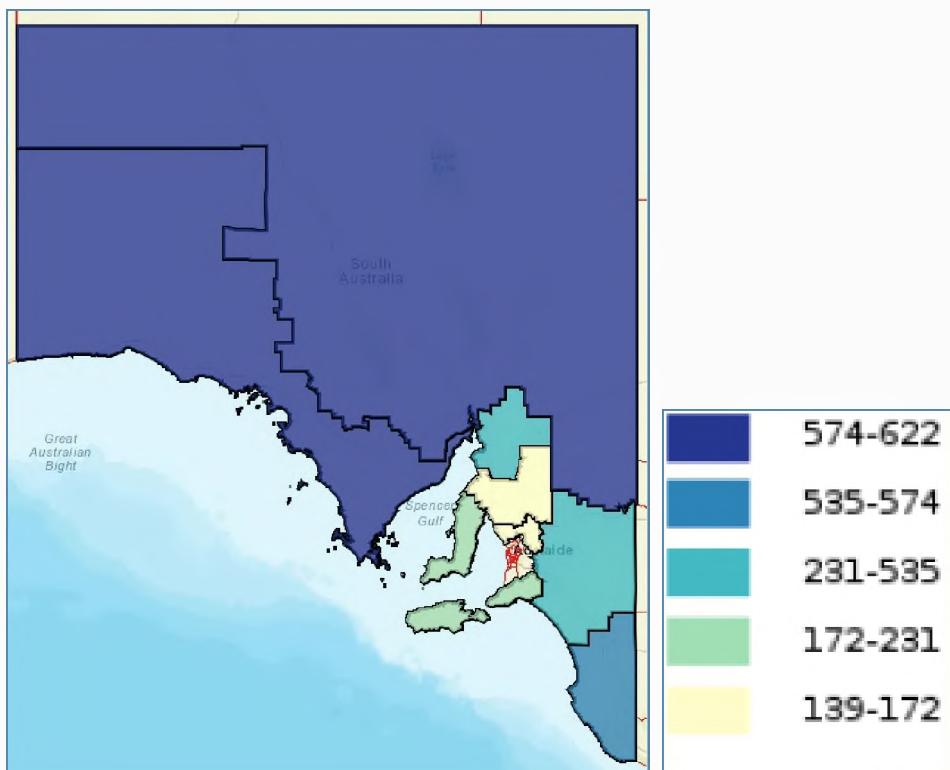


Figure 8 Number of public school students not accessing the internet, South Australia (non-metro), SA3, 2016 (Source: Table 27)

2.5. Western Australia — summary and internet access at home by statistical areas

Eleven percent of all Australian public school students were in Western Australia in 2016. According to the data on characteristics reported in earlier sections, Western Australian public school students were generally slightly less disadvantaged than students throughout Australia, though Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were more likely not to have internet access at home and to live in crowded houses. Of Western Australian public school students:

- 5 % were without internet access at home (Australia 5%; Table 4)
- 38% were in LOW income families (Australia 43%; Table 9)
- 12% were in very low income families (Australia 13%; Table 10)
- 21% in one parent families (Australia 23%; Table 11)
- Of the 16% of primary students and 19% of secondary students who spoke a language other than English at home, 7% (primary) and 5% (secondary) spoke English not well or not at all (Table 12)
- 3% needed assistance with core activities (Australia 4%; Table 13)
- 35% lived in rented housing (Australia 37%; Table 14)
- 11% who were in rented housing were without internet access (Australia 10%; Table 15)
- 8% were in unsuitable housing (insufficient bedrooms for the residents) (Australia 12%; Table 16)
- 15% who were in unsuitable housing were without internet (Australia 11%; Table 17)
- 17%, 6%, 3% were in dwellings with 6 or more, 7 or more or 8 or more usual residents respectively (Australia 18%, 7%, 3%; Table 18)
- 6% were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (Australia 6%; Table 19)

Of Western Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students:

- 29% were without internet access at home (Australia 21%; Table 20)
- 66% were in LOW income families (Australia 68%; Table 21)
- 23% were in unsuitable housing (Australia 23% Table 22)
- 36%, 18%, 11% were in dwellings with 6 or more, 7 or more or 8 or more usual residents respectively (Australia 33%, 16%, 10%; Table 18)

In Western Australia in 2016 5% of public school students were without access to the internet at home, and the percentages ranged from just 1% in Perth Inner, to 24% in the Kimberley and 22% in Gascoyne SA3 (Table 28 and Figures 9 and 10).

Table 28. Public school students' internet access from home, Western Australia, SA4 and SA3, 2016

	Internet accessed	Internet not accessed	Total	% internet not accessed
Perth metropolitan - SA4				
Perth - Inner	10 720	111	10 830	1%
Perth - North East	20 477	989	21 461	5%
Perth - North West	48 534	1 646	50 174	3%
Perth - South East	43 330	2 070	45 396	5%
Perth - South West	38 122	1 481	39 605	4%
Rest of state - SA3				
Augusta - Margaret River - Busselton	4 705	202	4 912	4%
Bunbury	10 465	709	11 177	6%
Manjimup	2 063	158	2 228	7%
Mandurah	7 856	499	8 351	6%
Albany	5 335	481	5 817	8%
Wheat Belt - North	4 965	424	5 389	8%
Wheat Belt - South	2 071	197	2 262	9%
Kimberley	2 952	948	3 898	24%
East Pilbara	2 226	357	2 587	14%
West Pilbara	3 256	320	3 573	9%
Esperance	1 794	115	1 904	6%
Gascoyne	658	183	836	22%
Goldfields	3 573	526	4 096	13%
Mid West	4 032	638	4 667	14%
Total	217 134	12 054	229 163	5%

Source: ABS 2016 Census (2017) Census classifications: Main Statistical Area Structure SA4 and SA3; Internet access NEED

Note: The ABS Census undercounts Victorian public school students by internet access data by 14%.

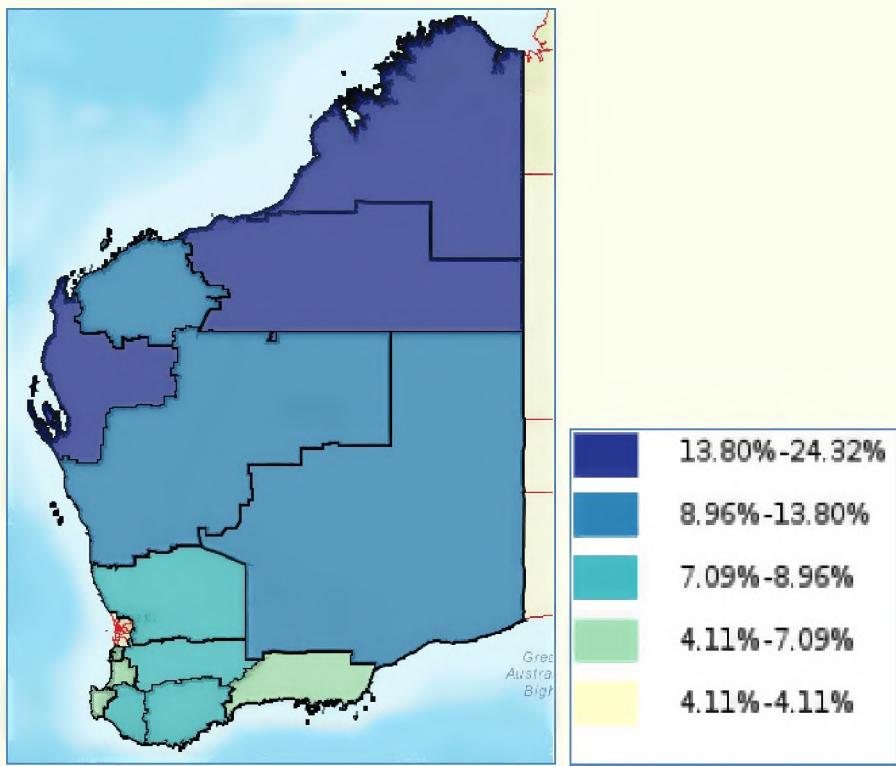
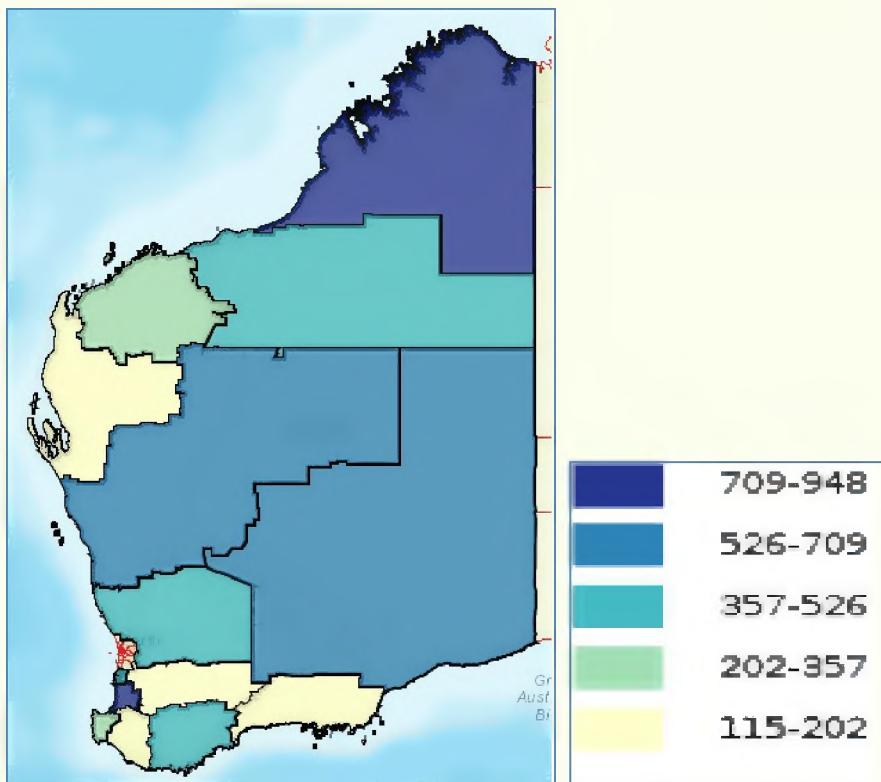


Figure 9 Percentage of public school students not accessing the internet, Western Australia (non-metro), SA3, 2016 (Source Table 28)



2.6. Tasmania —summary and internet access at home by statistical areas

Two percent of all Australian public school students were in Tasmania in 2016. According to the data on characteristics reported in earlier sections, Tasmanian public school students were generally more disadvantaged than students throughout Australia, especially in family income, though internet access and housing were better for Tasmanian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students than other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Of Tasmanian public school students:

- 7 % were without internet access at home (Australia 5%; Table 4)
- 53% were in LOW income families (Australia 43%; Table 9)
- 16% were in very low income families (Australia 13%; Table 10)
- 27% were in one parent families (Australia 23%; Table 11)
- Of the 4% of primary students and 5% of secondary students who spoke a language other than English at home, 15% (primary) and 14% (secondary) spoke English not well or not at all (Table 12)
- 4% needed assistance with core activities (Australia 4%; Table 13)
- 35% lived in rented housing (Australia 37%; Table 14)
- 14% who were in rented housing were without internet access (Australia 10%; Table 15)
- 10% were in unsuitable housing (insufficient bedrooms for the residents) (Australia 12%; Table 16)
- 12% who were in unsuitable housing were without internet (Australia 11%; Table 17)
- 15%, 5%, 2% were in dwellings with 6 or more, 7 or more or 8 or more usual residents respectively (Australia 18%, 7%, 3%; Table 18)
- 10% were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (Australia 6%; Table 19)

Of Tasmanian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students:

- 13% were without internet access at home (Australia 21%; Table 20)
- 71% were in LOW income families (Australia 68%; Table 21)
- 15% were in unsuitable housing (Australia 23% Table 22)
- 21%, 8%, 4% were in dwellings with 6 or more, 7 or more or 8 or more usual residents respectively (Australia 33%, 16%, 10%; Table 18)

In Tasmania in 2016 7% of public school students were without access to the internet at home, and the percentages ranged from 2% in Hobart Inner, to 14% in Brighton and 13% in the Central Highlands SA3.

Table 29. Public school students' internet access from home, Tasmania SA3, 2016

	Internet accessed	Internet not accessed	Total	% internet not accessed
Brighton	1 625	261	1 886	14%
Hobart - North East	4 582	280	4 867	6%
Hobart - North West	4 417	519	4 934	11%
Hobart - South and West	3 262	115	3 375	3%
Hobart Inner	3 444	73	3 513	2%
Sorell - Dodges Ferry	1 466	100	1 571	6%
Launceston	7 211	491	7 704	6%
Meander Valley - West Tamar	2 097	142	2 240	6%
North East	3 492	324	3 813	8%
Central Highlands (Tas.)	979	142	1 121	13%
Huon - Bruny Island	1 548	115	1 666	7%
South East Coast	486	64	546	12%
Burnie - Ulverstone	4 404	380	4 791	8%
Devonport	4 277	339	4 619	7%
Total	44 712	3 507	48 218	7%

Source: ABS 2016 Census (2017) Census classifications: Main Statistical Area Structure SA3; Internet access NEDD

Note: The ABS Census undercounts Victorian public school students by internet access data by 14%.

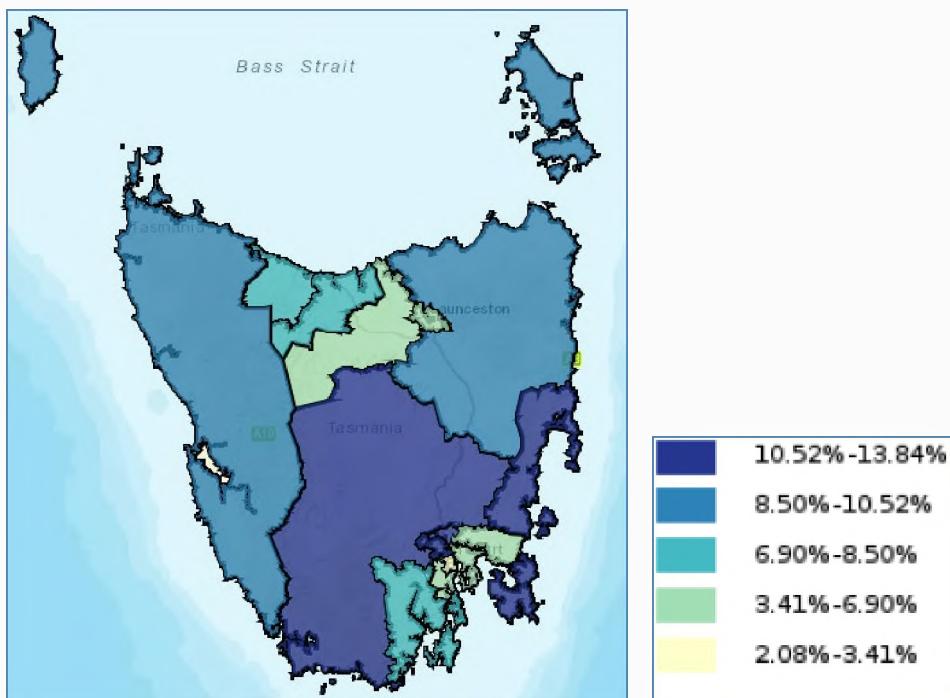


Figure 11 Percentage of public school students not accessing the internet, Tasmania, SA3, 2016 (Source: Table 29)

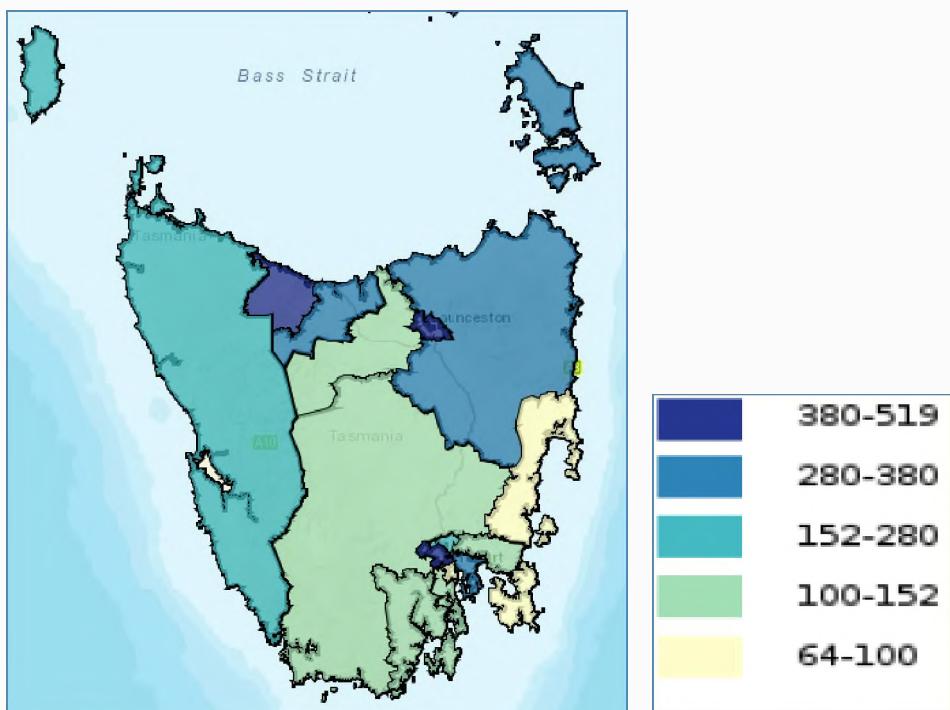


Figure 12 Number of public school students not accessing the internet, Tasmania, SA3, 2016 (Source: Table 29)

2.7. Northern Territory — summary and internet access at home by statistical areas

One percent of all Australian public school students were in the Northern Territory in 2016. According to the data on characteristics reported in earlier sections, Northern Territory public school students were substantially more disadvantaged than students throughout Australia (though not students who were not Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander). Forty two percent of Northern Territory students were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students, and they were much more disadvantaged than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students elsewhere in Australia in internet access at home, family income and house suitability and number of residents. Of all Northern Territory public school students:

- 22 % were without internet access at home (Australia 5%; Table 4)
- 44% were in LOW income families (Australia 43%; Table 9)
- 18% were in very low income families (Australia 13%; Table 10)
- 24% were in one parent families (Australia 23%; Table 11)
- Of the 38% of primary students and 42% of secondary students who spoke a language other than English at home, 14% (primary) and 6% (secondary) spoke English not well or not at all (Table 12)
- 3% needed assistance with core activities (Australia 4%; Table 13)
- 59% lived in rented housing (Australia 37%; Table 14)
- 31% who were in rented housing were without internet access (Australia 10%; Table 15)
- 36% were in unsuitable housing (insufficient bedrooms for the residents) (Australia 12%; Table 16)
- 41% who were in unsuitable housing were without internet (Australia 11%; Table 17)
- 36%, 24%, 17% were in dwellings with 6 or more, 7 or more or 8 or more usual residents respectively (Australia 18%, 7%, 3%; Table 18)
- 42% were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (Australia 6%; Table 19)

Of Northern Territory Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students:

- 45% were without internet access at home (Australia 21%; Table 20)
- 75% were in LOW income families (Australia 68%; Table 21)
- 62% were in unsuitable housing (Australia 23% Table 22)
- 62%, 47%, 38% in dwellings with 6 or more, 7 or more or 8 or more usual residents respectively (Australia 33%, 16%, 10%; Table 18)

In the Northern Territory in 2016 22% of public school students were without access to the internet at home, and the percentages ranged from 4% in Darwin City, to 51% in the Barkly and 43% in Alice Springs SA3 (Table 30 and Figures 13 and 14).

Table 30. Public school students' internet access from home, Northern Territory, SA3, 2016

	Internet accessed	Internet not accessed	Total	% internet not accessed
Darwin City	1 662	77	1 742	4%
Darwin Suburbs	4 888	362	5 247	7%
Litchfield	1 857	148	2 007	7%
Palmerston	3 294	313	3 608	9%
Alice Springs	1 764	1 316	3 079	43%
Barkly	395	407	801	51%
Daly - Tiwi - West Arnhem	1 015	633	1 644	39%
East Arnhem	1 521	713	2 231	32%
Katherine	1 484	961	2 445	39%
Total	17 878	4 925	22 802	22%

Source: ABS 2016 Census (2017) Census classifications: Main Statistical Area Structure SA3; Internet access NEDD

Note: The ABS Census undercounts Victorian public school students by internet access data by 14%.

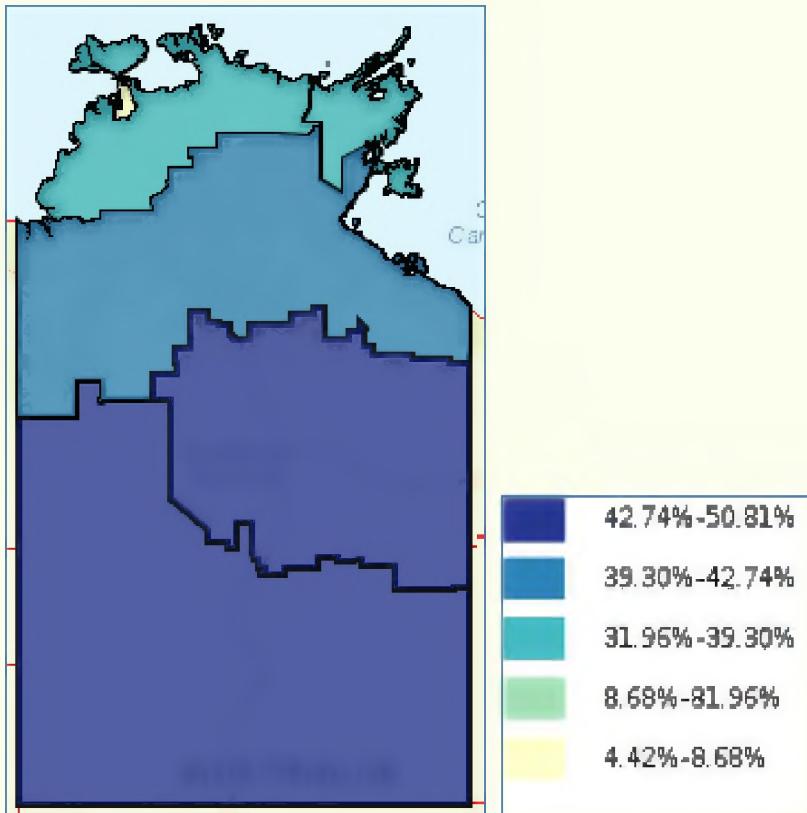


Figure 13 Percentage of public school students not accessing the internet, Northern Territory, SA3, 2016 (Source: Table 30)

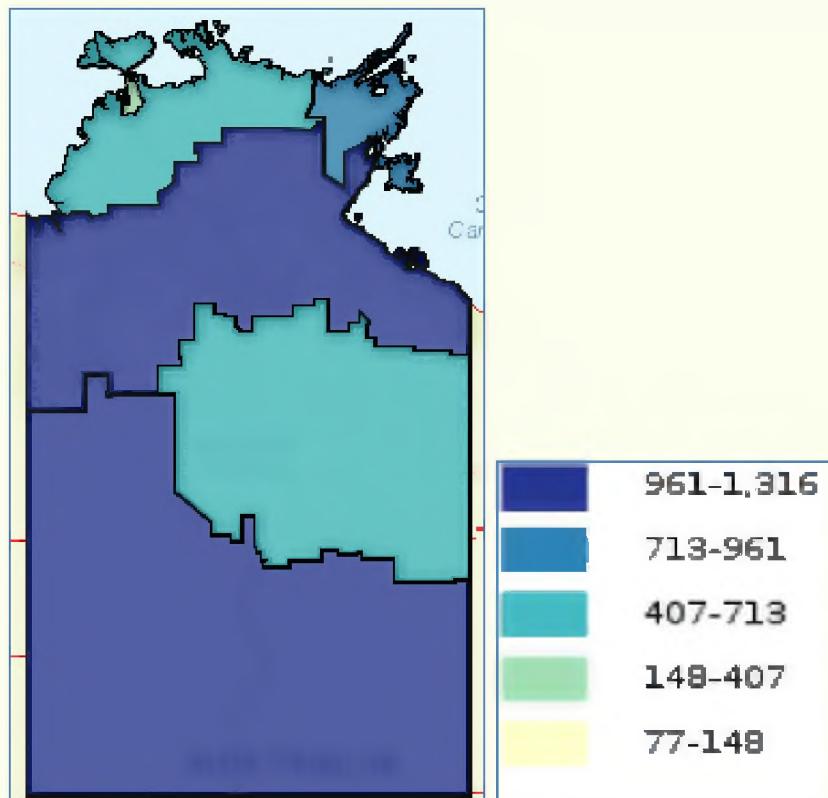


Figure 14 Number of public school students not accessing the internet, Northern Territory, SA3, 2016 (Source: Table 30)

2.8. Australian Capital Territory — summary and internet access at home by statistical areas

Two percent of all Australian public school students were in the Australian Capital Territory in 2016. According to the data on characteristics reported in earlier sections, Australian Capital Territory public school students were substantially more advantaged than students throughout Australia, though Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Of Australian Capital Territory public school students:

- 2 % were without internet access at home (Australia 5%; Table 4)
- 26% were in LOW income families (Australia 43%; Table 9)
- 8% were in very low income families (Australia 13%; Table 10)
- 20% were in one parent families (Australia 23%; Table 11)
- Of the 22% of primary students and secondary students who spoke a language other than English at home, 5% (primary) and 6% (secondary) spoke English not well or not at all (Table 12)
- 4% needed assistance with core activities (Australia 4%; Table 13)
- 34% lived in rented housing (Australia 37%; Table 14)
- 5% who were in rented housing were without internet access (Australia 10%; Table 15)
- 8% were in unsuitable housing (insufficient bedrooms for the residents) (Australia 12%; Table 16)
- 6% who were in unsuitable housing were without internet (Australia 11%; Table 17)
- 14%, 5%, 2% were in dwellings with 6 or more, 7 or more or 8 or more usual residents respectively (Australia 18%, 7%, 3%; Table 18)
- 3% were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (Australia 6%; Table 19)

Of Northern Territory Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students:

- 10% were without internet access at home (Australia 21%; Table 20)
- 52% were in LOW income families (Australia 68%; Table 21)
- 11% were in unsuitable housing (Australia 23% Table 22)
- 21%, 7%, 3% in dwellings with 6 or more, 7 or more or 8 or more usual residents respectively (Australia 33%, 16%, 10%; Table 18)

In the Australian Capital Territory the percentage of public school students without access to the internet at home was 3% or below in all statistical areas, ranging up to 3% in Tuggeranong, Belconnen, and the Inner North SA3 (see Table 31 and Figures 15 and 16).

Table 31. Public school students' internet access from home, Australian Capital Territory, SA3, 2016

	Internet accessed	Internet not accessed	Total	% internet not accessed
Belconnen	8 646	259	8 901	3%
Canberra East	47	-	42	0%
Gungahlin	6 820	104	6 920	2%
North Canberra	3 216	87	3 304	3%
South Canberra	1 735	44	1 774	2%
Tuggeranong	7 278	218	7 501	3%
Weston Creek	1 994	47	2 043	2%
Woden Valley	2 816	60	2 873	2%
Molonglo	359	5	366	1%
Urriarra - Namadgi	55	-	55	0%
Total	32 956	831	33 783	2%

Source: ABS 2016 Census (2017) Census classifications: Main Statistical Area Structure SA3; Internet access NEED

Note: The ABS Census undercounts Victorian public school students by internet access data by 14%.

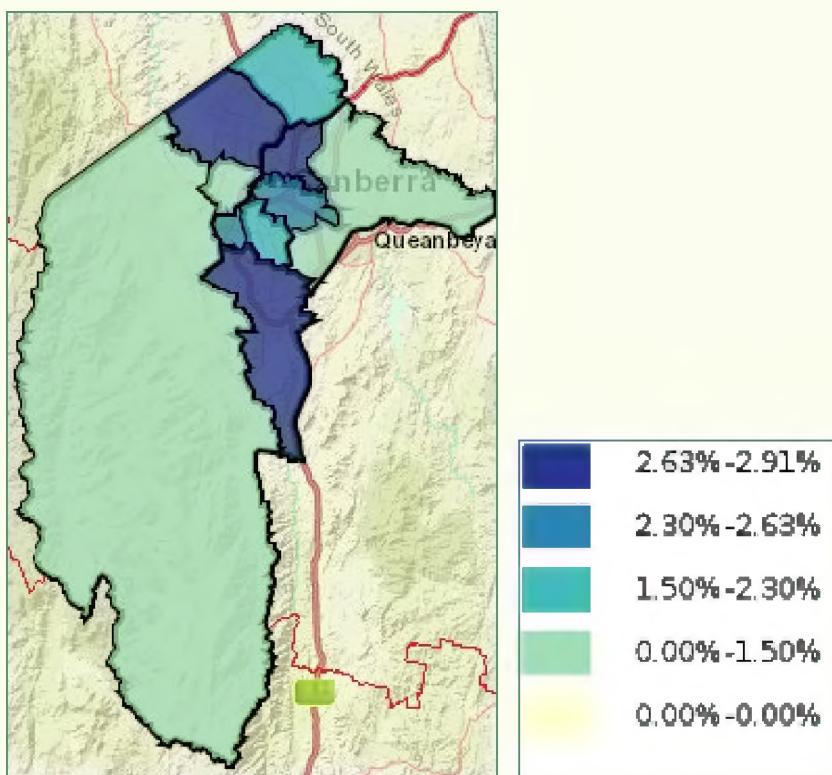


Figure 15 Percentage of public school students not accessing the internet, Australian Capital Territory, SA3, 2016 Source: Table 30)

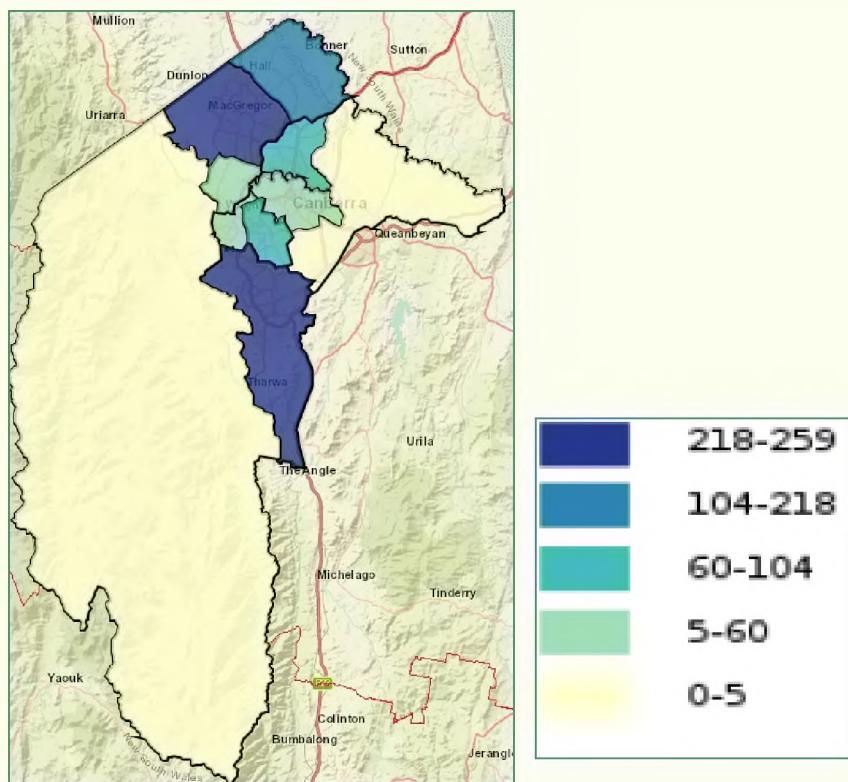


Figure 16 Number of public school students not accessing the internet, Australian Capital Territory, SA3, 2016 (Source: Table 30)

Technical notes

ABS Census undercount

The ABS Census undercounts school students, and the undercount is greater when other variables (such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status, family income or internet access at home) are involved. The undercount is discussed and calculated in the Technical Notes in the companion report (Preston, 2018 - see below). ABS *Schools Australia* (2020) provides a more accurate count of Australian student numbers. In this report an estimate of the magnitude of the undercount is provided in notes to tables where relevant. For example, the Census data on school students' internet access at home undercounts by 13%—the Census count for all students with or without internet access at home in 2016 is 3,302,504, while the total school enrolments for 2016 reported in Schools Australia (Table 42b) is 3,798,226.

Internet access from home

Internet access from home data is derived from Question 59 in the 2016 Census Household Form (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016a). The definition of internet access is broad—the question is as follows:

Does any member of this household access the internet from this dwelling?

- Include internet access using desktop/laptop computers, mobile or smart phones, tablets, music or video players, gaming consoles, smart TVs etc.
- Include internet access through any type of connection including ADSL, fibre, cable, wireless, satellite and mobile broadband (3G/4G).

Accessing the internet solely via a mobile phone with a data allowance is included in the Census category of internet access from home. Yet this is very different from accessing the internet via a fixed broadband connection to a computer.

Data ranges in state maps

The data ranges in the maps are classified according to 'Natural Breaks'. These are explained by ABS as follows:

TableBuilder calculates the ranges automatically based on natural breaks in the data. The natural breaks are calculated using the Dalenius Hodges Algorithm...

This option is a good choice when the data is not evenly distributed. This algorithm groups data into classes that are themselves as separate as possible, but where the data values within each class are fairly close together. That is, it maximises the differences between the classes and minimises the differences within the classes. This classification can be used to discover spatial patterns within the data, but it can lead to some classes being populated by low numbers of observations. (2016c, Map View)

Other technical notes

For all other technical notes see the companion report, *The social make-up of schools: Family income, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status, family type, religion, languages spoken, disability, home internet access, housing tenure, and geographic mobility of students in public, Catholic and independent schools* (Preston, 2018), which can be accessed at <http://www.aeufederal.org.au/application/files/7115/2090/2405/Preston2018.pdf>.

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Australian Education Union - Federal Office

Phone : +61 [REDACTED] Fax : +61 [REDACTED]

Email : [REDACTED] Website : www.aeufederal.org.au

MEDIA RELEASE

EDUCATION WORKERS NEEDS PRIORITY ACCESS TO COVID-19 VACCINATION: AEU

Monday, 7 June 2021

The Australian Education Union is calling on the Federal Government to make the education workforce a priority for COVID-19 vaccination.

"Teachers and education support personnel in early childhood settings, schools and TAFEs are frontline workers, providing an essential service in our community; the education of our children and young people," Australian Education Union Federal President Correna Haythorpe said.

"Education workers around the country are ready to roll up their sleeves and get the jab because they know it's the best way to protect themselves and their communities.

"The Federal Government must move urgently to prioritise teachers, principals and education support staff for the COVID-19 vaccination. This would help protect staff, students and families from the risks of contracting COVID-19 and mitigate the risk of further school closures."

The Australian Education Union has previously written to the Federal Health Minister, Greg Hunt calling for teachers, principals and support staff across all education settings to be included in the COVID-19 vaccination priority groups.

"It is proper that vulnerable groups have been prioritised for vaccination," Ms Haythorpe said.

"However, the Federal Government must now make the timetable for vaccinating education staff clear.

"Teachers, principals and support staff are dedicated professionals. They will continue to do the job the community rightly asks them to do. In return, the Federal Government must move to immediately ensure principals, teachers and support staff are as safe as possible from COVID-19 by prioritising their vaccination."

-ENDS

Media contact: Alys Gagnon, [REDACTED]



Australian Education Union - Federal Office

Ground Floor, 120 Clarendon Street, Southbank, Victoria, 3006

Phone : +61 [REDACTED] Fax : +61 [REDACTED]

Email : [REDACTED] Website : www.aeufederal.org.au

MEDIA RELEASE

TEACHERS AND EDUCATION WORKERS CALL FOR VACCINE CLARITY

Tuesday, 29 June 2021

The Australian Education Union is calling on the Federal Government to provide clarity on the current COVID-19 vaccination arrangements, the priority group arrangements and the future roll out of the vaccine.

"We have sought a commitment that the education workforce has priority access to the COVID-19 vaccination in recognition of their status as essential workers," Australian Education Union Federal President Correna Haythorpe said.

"However, at no point has the Federal Government given education workers the courtesy of making clear when they will receive a vaccine.

"Last night's announcement that all Australians under 40 can speak to their GP about receiving the Astra Zeneca vaccine has caused enormous confusion about when, where and how education workers will receive a vaccine.

"It has always been the strong advice of the AEU to members to follow the advice of public health authorities. However, there is now confusion about what that advice is.

"There are currently thousands of families in lockdown due to COVID-19 transmission in schools, including the families of teachers, principals and education support staff. This highlights the urgency of ensuring that the education workforce is as safe as possible from COVID-19, by prioritising their vaccination.

"We need the Federal Government to make it crystal clear.

"What are the current priority group arrangements?

"What is the current public health advice with respect to the Astra Zeneca vaccine?

"When will education workers in schools, early childhood settings and TAFE receive a COVID-19 vaccine and the greater level of safety from COVID-19 that comes with it?"

-ENDS

Media contact: Alys Gagnon, [REDACTED] [REDACTED]



Australian Education Union - Federal Office

Ground Floor, 120 Clarendon Street, Southbank, Victoria, 3006

Phone : +61 [REDACTED] Fax : +61 [REDACTED]

Email : [REDACTED] Website : www.aeufederal.org.au

MEDIA RELEASE

EDUCATION MINISTERS MUST PRIORITISE SCHOOL COVID-19 RECOVERY PLANNING: AEU

Friday, 3 September 2021

The AEU is calling on Education Ministers to urgently develop a national plan for school COVID-19 recovery as a priority agenda item for the Education Ministers meeting today.

"There are a number of matters that must be urgently addressed by governments to ensure the safe return to on-site learning in states and territories currently locked down, and to prepare schools in other states and territories for any future COVID-19 outbreaks," AEU Federal President Correna Haythorpe said.

"These include the need to prioritise the vaccination of teachers, principals, education support staff and currently eligible students, the safe re-opening of schools and identifying and funding the school infrastructure required to meet public health requirements."

The AEU is calling on the Education Ministers meeting to develop and implement a national plan to:

1. Prioritise teachers, principals, education support staff and students currently eligible for COVID-19 vaccination as a matter of urgency.
2. Guide the reopening of schools, accommodating the needs of states and territories currently in lockdown and those that need to prepare for any future COVID-19 outbreaks.
3. Identify and fund the infrastructure needs to allow schools to accommodate for social distancing, hygiene, ventilation and any other public health measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19.
4. Consult with the teaching profession, through the AEU, to ensure the voices of teachers, principals and education support staff are heard throughout the process.

"School COVID-19 recovery is one of the biggest concerns for parents and school communities," Ms Haythorpe said.

"Developing a national plan will require strong national leadership. We call on Minister Tudge, as chair of the meeting and as Federal Education Minister, to step up and make school COVID-19 recovery his number one priority."

"He must work with his Federal Health counterparts to ensure there is enough supply of the COVID-19 vaccinations and that there is a clear, fair and transparent roll out plan."

"Teachers, principals and education support staff in locked down states and territories are eager to return to on-site learning as soon as it is safe to do so.

"Their colleagues in other states and territories want to ensure they can appropriately prepare in order to minimise the disruptions that naturally occur during outbreaks of COVID-19.

"The urgent development of a school COVID-19 recovery plan would be the best way for all Education Ministers to ensure that the education workforce and students are protected and supported during this extraordinary time.

-ENDS

Media contact: Alys Gagnon, [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

AEU Federal Executive – select resolution – 15 September 2021

We want our schools back, we want them safe, and we want the resources now to deliver the education our children deserve.

As the COVID pandemic continues to seriously impact our students, members and the communities we serve, the AEU reiterates its preparedness to work constructively with Federal and State/Territory governments in the development of a COVID-19 National School Recovery Plan for school education. The key elements of such a plan must include:

1. Capital investment necessary for the Safe Running of Schools (ventilation audits, air quality testing, air purifiers, masks, sanitation etc.) and physical modifications of buildings / learning spaces.
2. Recurrent funding necessary to provide ongoing staffing and resources for the delivery of intensive learning and support programs for students. This will require the Commonwealth immediately providing the funding required to achieve 100% SRS Funding for all Public Schools with the states/territories progressively providing their full investment.

The total commitment by the Commonwealth is significantly less compared to the billions governments are now spending every week and being lost from the community as a result of economic consequences of lockdowns.



**Submission
to the
Senate Select Committee on Work and Care
September 2022**

[REDACTED]
Federal President

Kevin Bates
Federal Secretary

Australian Education Union

Telephone: +61 [REDACTED]
Facsimile: +61 [REDACTED]
Web: www.acufederal.org.au
E-mail: [REDACTED]

Introduction

The Australian Education Union (“AEU”) makes this submission on behalf of over 198,000 AEU members employed in the public primary, secondary, early childhood and TAFE sectors throughout Australia.

This submission demonstrates that AEU members in all education sectors – from early education, to schools, to post-secondary education in TAFE institutions – are experiencing the most acute effects of Australia’s intersecting work and care crises.

The AEU recommends that governments take urgent action to address these crises by addressing the gendered inequities in caring obligations experienced by the predominantly female educator workforce; ending the self-defeating pay freeze and pay cap policies of education employers that disproportionately impact on women and result in circumstances that are driving educators out of their profession; and committing to fully and equitably funding public education.

Additionally, this submission provides examples of provisions in AEU workplace agreements positively affecting AEU members’ work and care responsibilities, and which the AEU encourage policymakers to more broadly adopt.

Gendered assumptions in work and care

Patriarchal attitudes and institutions in Australia

By way of introduction, this section draws attention to the historical and current social and cultural assumptions, institutional frameworks, and policy settings regarding gender, work, and care in Australia. It demonstrates that, despite women now participating in the paid workforce at similar rates to men, Australia’s institutions and culture retains two patriarchal assumptions regarding work and care: first, that the ideal worker is a male breadwinner with minimal care and cultural obligations, and that women’s work is worth less than men’s work; second, that the ideal carer is expected to be woman, and that this is an unpaid private responsibility. The AEU urges governments to acknowledge and address Australia’s deeply gendered cultural and institutional assumptions of work and care.

Australia’s early industrial institutions and norms reflected the prevailing division of labour by gender, and particularly reflected perceived gender-appropriate roles: men as paid, formal workers, and women as unpaid, informal carers. This gendered division of labour was a cultural ideal, and even during this period failed to account for the large minority of Australian women working in paid employment until the mid-20th century.¹ Institutional support for this ideal is demonstrated in two key early decisions of the Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration (“CCCA”). In 1907, in the landmark “Harvester Case”, the CCCA found that a “fair and reasonable wage” was to be determined by reference to the quality of life available to family with a male breadwinner, a dependent wife, and three children.² Subsequently, in 1912 and 1919, the CCCA in the “Fruit Pickers” and “Clothing Trades Case” set a “living wage” for

¹ Frane R, Kealey L, and Sangster J, ‘Women and Wage Labour in Australia and Canada, 1880-1980’, *Australia and Canada: Labour Compared*, November 1996, 71, p 54.

² *Ex parte H.V. McKay*, (1907) 2 CAR 1.

women workers – finding that a woman worker required only 54% of the wages of a male worker.³

Both CCCA decisions provided longstanding institutional support for patriarchal social attitudes, gender discrimination, and female workers' economic inequality. Only in 1969 and 1972, in a series of equal pay cases, did Australia's industrial institutions resile from these previous endorsements of gender pay discrimination by implementing a limited form of equal pay for equal work.⁴ However, since the 1970s, despite women being protected from being paid less for performing *the same work* as a man, unequal pay between men and women persists, with the latest data indicating that the gender pay gap is increasing.⁵ Australia's equal remuneration laws, intended to address this gender pay gap, have proven ineffectual: of the 21 applications for equal remuneration orders since 1994, only one has been successful.

For most of Australia's post-federation history its industrial institutions have codified patriarchal social attitudes and provided for explicitly gender discriminatory wages. In recent decades, despite ending formal pay discrimination against women, Australia's industrial laws have failed to reduce the gender pay gap. Australian women have and continue to be disadvantaged by assumptions built into Australia's industrial institutions.

Women's 'double duty' as workers and carers

Over the last half-century, Australian women's workforce participation has significantly increased, and continues to increase. Whereas in 1966 two-thirds of women in Australia were not in formal paid employment, and instead performed informal, unpaid labour at home and in providing care, today the participation of women in the paid, formal workforce is currently at approximately 62.2%.⁶

Despite the significant increase in women's participation in the formal workforce, there has not been an equivalent reduction in the expectation that women will perform more informal caring and unpaid household labour than men. Instead, women still perform more informal caring and unpaid household labour than men.⁷ This double expectation on women to perform more caring and domestic labour than men despite participating in the workforce at an increasingly similar rate to men burdens women with the dual obligations as workers and carers. Sections below provide further details regarding the significant negative social and economic effects of this 'double duty' on AEU members.

The role of government in creating and addressing the work and care crisis

This submission demonstrates that the crises of work and care affecting AEU members are driven by decisions and omissions of government. Accordingly, it is the role of government to take action to change its positions, and to address these crises.

Most directly, governments have the power, as funders and employers of public educators, to

³ *The Rural Workers Union v Renmark Fruit Growers*, (1912) 6 CAR 61; *The Federated Clothing Trades of the Commonwealth of Australia v J.A. Archer and others*, (1919) 13 CAR 647.

⁴ Equal pay cases: (1969) 127 CAR 1142; (1972) 147 CAR 172.

⁵ Workplace Gender Equality Agency ("WGEA"), 'Gender Pay Gap Data' webpage, accessible [here](#).

⁶ Parliamentary Library, *Budget Review 2018-19: Workforce Participation Index*, accessible [here](#) and Workplace Gender Equality Agency, *Gender equality workplace statistics at a glance 2022*, accessible [here](#).

⁷ Australian Institute of Family Studies, 'Towards COVID normal: Sharing of housework in couple families', September 2020, accessible [here](#); and, WGEA, 'Gender equality and caring' webpage, accessible [here](#).

directly affect the salaries, working conditions, and professional autonomy of its educator workforce. However, the majority of state and territory governments have introduced legislative or executive-ordered pay caps and pay freezes on educators' pay and have adopted positions during collective bargaining that fail to improve teachers' working conditions and continue to impose burdensome workloads and excessive hours of work on educators.

Regarding the work and care crisis in post-secondary education, the federal government, as a key funder of post-secondary education, has over the last decade cut billions of dollars in funding from public post-secondary education – TAFE institutions. Moreover, during this time, as TAFE institutions almost entirely casualised the TAFE teaching workforce, governments failed to intervene in the affairs of TAFE institutions to ensure the secure, ongoing employment of this nationally significant teaching workforce.

Regarding the elimination of systemic sexism and racism in the workplace, governments have failed to address the gendered pay and superannuation gaps in public education workforces, educators are inadequately supported in their caring roles, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators are not properly respected and remunerated for their cultural and community roles.

Regarding the proper funding of public education in bilateral federal, state and territory funding arrangements, almost all governments have failed to provide the funding required to meet the minimum needs of school students in public education.

Accordingly, it has been due to the actions and inaction of governments that AEU members are experiencing work and care crises, which in turn negatively affect the right of Australian children to accessible, quality public education.

AEU members' experiences of the work and care crises

Gender and age-based inequities in caring responsibilities

The Productivity Commission, in an Issues Paper in a current inquiry into expanding the definition of carer leave in the National Employment Standards, recognised that carers tended to be women and older Australians.⁸ Carers perform vital social and familial roles, yet they have reduced opportunities to perform paid work: workers with caring responsibilities experience reduced earning capacity, leave accrual, and superannuation accrual.⁹ The AEU's membership reflects the demographics of public education workforce: predominantly female, and tending to be older than the average Australian worker.¹⁰ The gender pay gap and gendered insecure work reduces the superannuation payments made to women, and increases women's financial security in retirement.¹¹ Women and older workers, due to their unpaid caring roles, are themselves more likely to be exposed to financial precarity in their old age. AEU members, due to their age and gender, are more likely to have caring responsibilities, and experience the associated financial disadvantages and precarity.

⁸ Productivity Commission, Carer Leave Issues Paper, July 2022, p 3-4, accessible [here](#).

⁹ Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 'Unpaid care work and the labour market', p 5, accessible [here](#).

¹⁰ The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership ("AITSL"), Australian Teacher Workforce Data: National Teacher Workforce Characteristics Report December 2021, December 2021, p 46, accessible [here](#); Australian Public Service Commission, 'All employees average age by year 2001-2021' webpage, accessible [here](#).

¹¹ Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 'Women's economic security in retirement: insight paper', 2017, accessible [here](#).

Throughout their working lives, AEU members with caring responsibilities must make challenging decisions about balancing their ability to earn an income while providing care: to perform both roles, an educator must either perform their caring responsibilities in addition to their hours of remunerated work; or change their working arrangements to alter or reduce their hours of work to account for their caring responsibilities; or, where neither option is possible, leave paid employment to perform their caring role. The pressure to take time away from work to perform caring roles negatively affects women teachers' career progression – this is reflected in the disproportionately lower representation of women in educational leadership roles.¹²

The teacher shortage crisis

The breadth and severity of Australia's teacher shortage crisis was recently acknowledged by Australia's governments when, on 12 August 2022, Australia's Education Ministers met to discuss and issued a communique acknowledging the crisis.¹³ Teacher shortages increase the hours of work and intensify the workload of the remaining teacher workforce. For teachers with caring obligations, these pressures exacerbate the challenges of balancing work and care.

The AEU has long campaigned for a recognition and addressal of the teacher shortage crisis: the profession is becoming less attractive to prospective teachers, and more teachers are leaving the profession.¹⁴ This has precipitated both current and looming teacher shortage crises: in NSW alone, significant teacher shortages exist in key subject areas and in particular geographic locations,¹⁵ and it is projected that by 2030 11,000 new teachers are required just to meet the number of public school enrolments.¹⁶

A mutually reinforcing cause and effect of the teacher shortage is the excessive workloads and hours of work performed by teachers. Teachers report performing significantly more than their contracted hours of work – working between 50 and 60 hours per week for a teacher in full-time employment,¹⁷ and the AEU's 'State of our Schools 2021' survey found that the majority of teachers report that their mental health suffers as a result of high workloads; and most teachers report that they never or rarely have a satisfactory work-life balance.¹⁸ Consistent with AEU survey findings relating to excessive workload and hours of work, a 2021 teaching workforce report found that teachers worked over 140% more hours of work than their contracted hours of work.¹⁹ These deteriorating work conditions are further exacerbated for an older and feminised teaching workforce with disproportionately higher caring obligations who must, in addition to their work obligations, perform 'double duty' as carers in their family and community lives.

The teacher shortage is driven by continuing the erosion of teachers' working conditions. Nationally, teachers' average weekly hours of work has now reached 57 hours – far beyond the

¹² Above n 10, AITS, p 167, accessible [here](#).

¹³ Education Ministers Meeting Communique, 'National Action Plan on Teacher Shortage', 12 August 2022, accessible [here](#).

¹⁴ Gallop G. AC (Chair), *Valuing the Teaching Profession: an Independent Inquiry*, February 2021, p 90, accessible [here](#).

¹⁵ Ibid, p 91.

¹⁶ Morris A., 'Impact of Enrolment Growth on Demand for Teachers', NSWTF, June 2021, accessible [here](#).

¹⁷ Above n 10, p 22, accessible [here](#).

¹⁸ Australian Education Union, State of Our Schools Survey 2021.

¹⁹ Above n 10, p 22.

national maximum 38 hours of work per week.²⁰ Workload and work intensification are equally extreme, with hours, range of tasks, and work complexity increasing.²¹ The 2021 Gallop Report, the outcome of an independent inquiry into the state of the teaching profession in NSW public schools, found that new work processes and tasks include: higher administration workloads; increased contact with parents and students; increased mandated accreditation and professional learning; significant workload increases related to the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN); increased provision of increasingly personalised learning plans for students; increased work expectations caused by rapid changes in technology (particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic); increased provision of student welfare and behaviour support; increased ongoing assessment reporting and data collection; and increased pace of policy and curriculum changes.²² Reflecting the even higher demands on teachers in school leadership positions, the Gallop Report found that on average school principals work 62 hours per week.²³ Crucially, despite the significant increase in workloads, the Gallop Report found that teachers' salaries did not proportionally increase.²⁴

The undervaluing of teachers' work and the increase in teachers' workloads was recently recognised in a significant decision of a Full Bench of the Fair Work Commission regarding the historical and current undervaluing of early childhood teachers' work.²⁵ The Commission held that the rates of pay for such teachers were never properly set, with the rates of pay failing to reflect teachers' work value as degree-qualified professionals.²⁶ In addition to recognising this historic injustice, the Commission went on to detail the increased work value of teachers in the sector since 1996, highlighting the increase in training requirements required to enter the profession; the increasing professional accountability (particularly greatly increased expectations regarding reporting and being accessible to parents and families); the increasing complexity of the work (e.g. outcomes-based education and differentiated teaching, with associated increases in documentation and analysis of students' individual educational progress); and the teaching and caring for a more diverse student population (particularly for children with additional needs).²⁷

Teacher shortages amplify the crises of work and care for the remaining teacher cohort. The overworking and undervaluing of the teaching profession is a key driver of the teacher shortage. Accordingly, to address the work and care crises affecting teachers, teachers' work must be properly valued, and they must be provided with reasonable workloads. In line with the Gallop Report's recommendation of significant increases to teacher salaries, the AEU recommends urgent and significant improvements to teachers' wages and conditions to properly respect, reward and value teachers' work.²⁸ Unfortunately, many state and territory governments continue to pursue public sector-wide pay freeze or pay cap policies. Such policies amplify the crisis of the undervalued work of teachers and are self-defeating and unsustainable, particularly considering the ongoing and significant increases to the cost of living. The AEU calls for state and territory pay freeze and pay cap policies to be abandoned.

²⁰ Gavin M., Stavey M. 'Why we never want to be in Kansas', Australian Association for Research in Education, 18 January 2022, accessible [here](#), summarising findings in Gavin M. et al, *Teacher Workload in Australia: National Reports Of Intensification And Its Threats To Democracy* (Routledge, 2021).

²¹ Ibid.

²² Gallop Inquiry Factsheet: Workload, February 2021, accessible [here](#). The full Gallop Report is accessible [here](#).

²³ Ibid, Gallop Report, p 103.

²⁴ Ibid, p 126.

²⁵ 'Equal Remuneration and Work Value Decision' [2021] FWCFB 2051, accessible [here](#).

²⁶ Ibid, at [645].

²⁷ Ibid, at [604]-[644].

²⁸ Above n 31, p 14.

Educators' occupational safety, workers' compensation, and the impact of Covid-19

Teachers and education support personnel are exposed to significant risk of occupational violence, gendered violence, harassment, and vicarious trauma, with the education workforce having among the highest mental health-related workers' compensation claim rates in Australia.²⁹ The risk of violence, burnout, and overwork has profound impacts on the teaching workforce: a recent survey of teachers found that more than half of the respondents found their job extremely stressful, and that almost 60% of teachers were considering leaving the profession.³⁰ Illustrating the significant risks teachers experience at work, a recent decision by WorkSafe ACT found that due to high risk of occupational violence, teacher shortages, and fire risks a secondary school was ordered to prevent all students from multiple year levels from attending school, forcing the school into remote learning pending the safety issues being addressed.³¹

Covid-19 has exacerbated the pre-existing mental health risks to educators. During the pandemic, the education workforce has been exposed to increased risk of stress, exhaustion, and anxiety.³² Indeed, in Victoria in 2020, teachers were the most likely workers to lodge mental health-related workers' compensation claims due to the impact of the pandemic.³³ The high risk to educators is amplified by the gendered harms of the pandemic – international research indicating that women experienced higher mental health risks during the pandemic due to, among other factors, increased domestic and caring obligations.³⁴ Women in Australian households with children reported spending approximately 43 more hours per week on childcare during the pandemic than men.³⁵ This inequity was further exacerbated for women teachers who were often simultaneously attempting to teach online whilst also managing the care and remote learning of their own children. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the risks of workplace injuries to teachers and has amplified the health and safety risks experienced by teachers at work prior to the pandemic. The cost of these risks is evident in the results of the *State of our Schools* survey. Nearly nine in 10 teachers (87%) said that the pandemic had impacted on their home of family life over the last 18 months and 83% said that it impacted on their personal morale at work, mirroring teacher's views on overall workforce morale as presented above. 84% of teachers said that teacher wellbeing has declined and 84% also said that teacher morale has declined, with 41% saying morale has significantly declined.

A properly funded, securely employed TAFE workforce is needed to train Australia's growing early childhood education and aged care workforces

Australia's work and care crises can only be addressed by supporting AEU members in TAFE

²⁹ Productivity Commission, Report: Mental Health (Overview), June 2020, p 51, accessible [here](#).

³⁰ Carroll A, et al, 'Teacher stress and burnout in Australia: examining the role', Social Psychology of Education, February 2022, accessible [here](#).

³¹ ABC News, 'Students at Calwell High School forced into remote learning after WorkSafe ACT details fighting, assaults on campus', 6 April 2022, accessible [here](#).

³² Beames J, Christensen H and Werner-Seidler A, 'School Teachers: The Forgotten Frontline Workers of COVID-19', *Australian Psychiatry*, April 2021, accessible [here](#).

³³ ABC News, 'Victorian teachers lodge more workcover claims for impacts of coronavirus pandemic than any other profession', 10 August 2020, accessible [here](#).

³⁴ Di Blasi, et al, 'Factors Related to Women's Psychological Distress during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Evidence from a Two-Wave Longitudinal Study', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, November 2021, accessible [here](#).

³⁵ Johnston R, Mohammed A, and van der Linden C, 'Evidence of Exacerbated Gender Inequality in Child Care Obligations in Canada and Australia during the COVID-19 Pandemic', December 2020, *Politics & Gender*, 16:4, p 1131, accessible [here](#).

to train our future caring workforces. In addition to the above-discussed teacher and education support personnel shortages, the National Skills Priority List 2022 identifies early childhood educators and aged carers in its 10 most in-demand professions over the next five years.³⁶ The Australian Children’s Education & Care Quality Authority estimates that the early childhood sector will require an additional 16,000 educators by November 2025.³⁷

Only properly funded, securely employed TAFE teachers can provide quality, accessible education to the diverse communities needed to join these education and caring workforces. TAFE is the centrepiece of Australian vocational education and training system, and TAFE makes broad, significant contributions to Australia’s broad social and economic development, particularly in response to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. TAFE promotes regional labour market outcomes, bridges access to jobs pathways, promotes social cohesion, reduces income inequality, and compared to other VET providers, provides greater access to and better supported education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students with disability.³⁸

Unfortunately, TAFE has experienced significant funding cuts and the casualisation of its workforce. In the past decade, billions of dollars of federal funding has been cut from TAFE institutions, intensifying in the period of 2018-2021, when the federal government cut \$438 million from TAFE funding.³⁹ During this period TAFE institutions have casualised their TAFE teacher workforce: for example, in 2010, in TAFE NSW, 73% of its teaching workforce was engaged in casual or sessional employment,⁴⁰ and employer demand for casual and temporary forms of employment in the TAFE sector is increasing.⁴¹ TAFE teachers report exceedingly long duration of casual contracts, with reports of workers engaged for 10, even 20 years in casual employment arrangements.

Nevertheless, in its significant 2020 report regarding the contribution of TAFE to Australia’s national wealth and wellbeing, the Centre for Future Work at the Australia Institute found that, despite years of significant funding cuts and “policy vandalism”, the TAFE system continues to make a strong and disproportionate economic and social contribution to Australia.⁴² The AEU supports the restoring of the billions of dollars of cut funding to TAFE, and urges action to move the TAFE teacher workforce into secure employment. Unless governments commit to ensuring TAFE can meet the growing need for early childhood educators and aged carers, the same patterns and implications of the current teacher shortage will be replicated in the early education and care sectors.

The work and care crises affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators make significant contributions to public education, including bringing cultural and historical knowledge, proficiencies in languages

³⁶ Women’s Agenda, ‘Australia’s top 10 most ‘in demand’ professions tell story of care work being undervalued’, 22 August 2022, accessible [here](#).

³⁷ Australian Children’s Education & Care Quality Authority, National Children’s Education and Care Workforce Strategy (2022-2031), September 2021, p 11, accessible [here](#).

³⁸ Pennington A., ‘The Economic and Social Benefits of the TAFE System’, *The Australian TAFE Teacher*, Spring 2020, accessible [here](#).

³⁹ ‘Decade of neglect leaves TAFE with fewer courses and demoralised teachers — how will it lead the coronavirus recovery?’, ABC News, 9 July 2020, accessible [here](#).

⁴⁰ Submission by the NSW Teachers Federation to the Productivity Commission Vocational Education and Training Workforce, July 2010, p 5, accessible [here](#).

⁴¹ ‘Safe and secure?’, *AEU News*, 6 November 2020, accessible [here](#).

⁴² Above n 38, p 8.

other than English, an understanding of cultural and community context to the classroom, and improving the learning outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.⁴³ However, despite Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples making up approximately 3.2% of the Australian population,⁴⁴ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples make up only 2% of the teaching profession.⁴⁵ A systematic action plan to increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators is urgently required. Disappointingly, the Education Ministers Meeting Communiqué of 12 August 2022 failed to mention Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, students, or educators.

In addition to their positive contributions in the classroom, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators have diverse and additional cultural, community and caring responsibilities. These roles and obligations must be recognised, respected, and supported by employers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators. For example, the concept of family in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander society, and the related caring roles and responsibilities, are broader than in Western cultures. Among other actions, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators can be better supported in their caring and community roles by increasing access to cultural, community and bereavement leave, properly remunerating and adjusting workloads to take into account the cultural labour performed and load borne by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators; providing allowances for educators teaching in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages; and training staff in eliminating racism and promoting cultural awareness.

The crisis of underfunded public education

In addition to educators confronting crises in their pay and conditions, public educators' ability to deliver quality education within reasonable working hours and levels of workload intensity, and thus their ability to adequately maintain both their careers and their caring responsibilities is intrinsically linked to and threatened by the systematic failure of federal, state, and territory governments to properly fund public schools. This funding shortfall is demonstrated by reference to the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) benchmark for assessing equitable school funding: the SRS – a concept introduced in the 2011 Review of Funding for Schooling known as the 'Gonski Report' – provides an estimate of the minimum public funding a school needs to meet its students' minimal educational needs.⁴⁶

Australia's public education system is significantly underfunded: by 2023, with the exception of schools in the Australian Capital Territory, all other states and territories' public schools will be 5-20% below the minimum funding required by the SRS.⁴⁷ By 2023 only 1.3% of public schools will receive funding which meets the SRS from combined federal, state and territory government contributions – this contrasts with over 90% of private schools predicted to meet minimum funding standards.⁴⁸ The combination of *almost all private schools* and *almost no public schools* meeting minimum funding standards perpetuates and increases the effect of socio-economic status on educational outcomes.⁴⁹

⁴³ AITSL, 'Spotlight: The impact of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators', June 2021, accessible [here](#).

⁴⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples', July 2022, accessible [here](#).

⁴⁵ Above n 43, AITSL, 'Spotlight'.

⁴⁶ Gonski D. AC (Chair), Review of Funding for Schooling, December 2011, accessible [here](#).

⁴⁷ Rorris A., The Schooling Resource Standard in Australia 2020-23, September 2020, p 5, accessible [here](#).

⁴⁸ AEU, Pre-Budget submission to the Department of Treasury on priorities for the 2019-2020 Budget, February 2019, p 2, accessible [here](#).

⁴⁹ Mitchell Institute, 'Factsheet: a persistent link between socio-economic status and educational opportunity', 2020, p 1, accessible [here](#).

In addition to SRS funding shortfalls, recent bilateral schools funding agreements made between the federal, state and territory governments in 2018 and 2019, apart from the ACT, include an accounting practice that deprives public schools of significant funding. The agreements permit “additional expenditure items” such as capital depreciation charges and transport costs to be accounted for within SRS calculations *for public schools only*. These items have never previously been included in SRS calculations and are not included in national SRS calculations. This narrows the gap between actual spending and the SRS goals by an additional four percentage points and further reduces the actual effective SRS contribution made by each state or territory.

The total effect of SRS funding shortfalls including the “additional expenditure items” provisions – in the 2018 and 2019 bilateral funding agreements, is that, over 2020-23, public schools will be underfunded by \$19 billion.⁵⁰

Currently, the Productivity Commission is reviewing the National Schools Reform Agreement (NSRA) – the NSRA is the foundation for bi-lateral agreements between the Commonwealth and the states and territories, setting out goals for student performance and outcomes for students with additional needs, and minimum funding contributions. However, the terms of reference for this review exclude any analysis of funding arrangements or the impact of funding on the work and non-work lives of teachers. The AEU urges the Senate Select Committee on Work and Care to consider that the way in which these funding arrangements are and public-school funding shortfalls impact on the work and care responsibilities of teachers. To ensure that public schools are adequately resourced, all governments must commit to fully funding public schools in accordance with the SRS.

The crisis of insecure work in public education amplifies educators' work and care crises

Preschools and TAFE are all increasingly experiencing a crisis of precarious, insecure work. The insecure work crisis amplifies the work and care crises experienced by AEU members. Casual employees are unable to access paid carer and other forms of leave, and casual and fixed term employees lacking a secure job around which to plan their lives including securing regular and reliably accessible childcare.

Despite of the permanent nature of most educators' work, increasingly, teachers and education support personnel are employed on casual and fixed-term contracts. Most acutely, 72 per cent of new teachers are beginning their careers in temporary positions,⁵¹ and recent media and academic coverage has documented employers' inappropriate engagement of teachers in ongoing casual and ‘rolling’ fixed-term employment to perform what are effectively permanent roles.⁵²

The Gallop Report made numerous findings and recommendations regarding the misuse of casual and fixed term employment in schools, and its particularly negative impact on new teacher accreditation and retention. Regarding the challenges of transitioning from provisional

⁵⁰ Above n 47 p 8.

⁵¹ Sullivan A, Johnson B., Simons M, *Attracting and Keeping the Best Teachers: Issues and Opportunities*, (Springer, 2019), p 171.

⁵² Stacey M et al, ‘Teachers, fixed-term contracts and school leadership: Toeing the line and jumping through hoops’, 29 March 2021, Journal of Educational Administration and History, accessible [here](#), and ‘Everyone’s bailing’: Australian teachers speak on stress and uncertainty of increasing casual contracts’, The Guardian, 4 July 2021, accessible [here](#), and ‘It is unsustainable’: Guardian readers on the crisis of Australian teacher shortages’, The Guardian, 30 June 2021, accessible [here](#).

to proficient accreditation as a new teacher when engaged as casual or fixed-term employee, the Report found that: “[M]any casual and temporary teachers struggle to have their teaching practice considered by busy principals when they are only present for limited periods of time”.⁵³ The Report recommended the restriction of insecure work in teaching: “In respect of staffing matters the Department of Education should address as a matter of priority staffing levels and processes that address the excessive use of temporary teacher employment, in particular of beginning teachers”.⁵⁴

In early childhood education, teachers tend to be more precariously employed than in schools. For example, in South Australia, whereas 81% of teachers in schools are employed in secure work arrangements, only 66% of preschool and children’s services teachers have secure work.⁵⁵

It is unfair that educators, despite performing substantively permanent roles, are engaged in casual and fixed term employment, and deprived of the benefits of permanent employment. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the public health-related effects of insecure work: educators in casual employment are financially disadvantaged when staying home sick without paid personal leave and are more likely to be compelled to attend the workplace, and more likely to spread the virus.⁵⁶

To address insecure work in public education and its impact on all aspects of insecurely employed educators’ lives including their ability to manage both their work and caring responsibilities, the AEU recommends that federal, state and territory governments: create meaningful conversion entitlements for the public education workforce; impose stronger obligations on employers to offer conversion to employees inappropriately engaged in casual and fixed-term employment; amend the definition of ‘casual employee’ in the FW Act to better take into account the substance of employment relationships, not just how the relationship is labelled by the employer; and oblige employers to regularly review the use of casual and fixed-term employment in their education workforces, and to consult with the relevant unions when doing so.

AEU advocacy for carers’ rights at work

This section provides examples of AEU members’ successful bargaining and campaigning for improvements to carers’ rights at work.

Improving personal and carer leave entitlements

AEU members have successfully negotiated with state and territory governments and public education employers for improved carer leave provisions. For example, the Western Australia *School Education Act Employees' (Teachers and Administrators) General Agreement 2021* provides for 15 days paid personal leave (which may be used to take carer leave).⁵⁷ The same agreement also provides for the payment of up to 12 weeks’ superannuation during unpaid parental leave, reducing the gendered financial harm of women disproportionately taking

⁵³ Above n 22, p 15.

⁵⁴ Ibid, p 11.

⁵⁵ Department of Education, ‘Workforce Profile Issue 10 – June 2020’, p 4, accessible [here](#).

⁵⁶ Stanford J., *Shock Troops of the Pandemic: Casual and Insecure Work in COVID and Beyond*, Centre for Future Work at the Australia Institute, October 2021, p 5, accessible [here](#).

⁵⁷ *School Education Act Employees' (Teachers and Administrators) General Agreement 2021*, cl 33, accessible [here](#).

unpaid parental leave.⁵⁸

Improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educator entitlements

AEU members in Victoria successfully bargained for improved cultural, community, and ceremonial leave for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators in the *Victorian Government Schools Agreement 2022*, including the provision of paid leave to attend National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) week events; paid leave to attend Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community meetings; paid leave to attend general meetings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations; paid leave to attend bereavement and other ceremonial obligations; and paid leave to attend the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria, the body representing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in negotiations for a treaty with Victoria.⁵⁹ This agreement also accounts for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators' cultural labour and load by providing for reduced workloads or increased pay where an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educator performs work requiring a cultural responsibility.⁶⁰ This agreement provides for paid "Aboriginal Kinship Leave" where an employee provides temporary care for and is a friend or relative of an Aboriginal child, and "where Aboriginal family/community/culture are valued as central to child's safety".⁶¹

AEU members employed in Charles Darwin University secured agreement with their employer to create an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Workforce Strategy, with detailed employment targets, consultation principles, and provision for a dedicated role in senior management – the occupier of which role must be an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander employee – responsible for its implementation.⁶² This agreement also provides for a multi-tiered language allowance for employees teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages.⁶³

Reforming pro rata-based yearly pay progression to better support part-time employees

In workplace arrangements where an employee's salary classification increases according to years of service, such progression may be caveated that part-time employees have a pro rata reduction in progression, due to their reduced hours of work. These pro rata reduction in part-time employees' progression disproportionately affects women teachers, who are more likely to work part-time due to gender caring obligations. To address this inequity, AEU members in Queensland have successfully bargained for the elimination of pro rata salary progression.⁶⁴ Accordingly, in Queensland state schools, part-time teachers progress through the time-based salary scales at the same speed as full-time teachers.

⁵⁸ Ibid, cl 27.

⁵⁹ *Victorian Government Schools Agreement 2022*, cl 26, accessible [here](#).

⁶⁰ Ibid, cl 14.

⁶¹ Ibid, cl 26.

⁶² *Charles Darwin University and Union Enterprise Agreement 2018*, cl 5, accessible [here](#).

⁶³ Ibid, cl 27.

⁶⁴ *Department of Education State School Teachers' Certified Agreement 2019*, cl 5.9.2, accessible [here](#).

Improving access to secure employment

AEU members in South Australia successfully bargained for the creation of Personnel Advisory Committees, school-based human resources committees with identified AEU representation, which make recommendations as to whether to convert a temporary teacher to permanency.⁶⁵

In Western Australia, AEU members in schools and TAFE have promoted secure employment by successfully imposing obligations on public education employers to disclose information to fixed-term employees about the nature of their employment and the reason why their engagement was on a fixed-term basis.⁶⁶ The greater level of transparency encourages secure employment practices and allowed members and the union greater capacity to identify and resolve potential misuses of casual or fixed-term employment.

Also in Western Australia, AEU members successfully campaigned for the publishing of the Public Sector Commissioner's Instruction 23. This document outlines the WA Government's commitment to permanent employment for public sector employees, including requiring agencies to adopt practices and processes that supported permanent employment wherever possible, limiting the use of fixed term contract and casual arrangements only for limited and specific reasons, and creating reporting requirements for how the conversion processes are conducted.⁶⁷

Conclusion

AEU members in all sectors of public education experience various, significant work and care crises. These crises particularly affect women and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators, who are structurally disadvantaged by outdated yet broad social norms and industrial laws that operate on the false premise that a typical worker is a male breadwinner with minimal care and cultural obligations. The Australia-wide teacher and education support personnel shortages are driven by government decisions and omissions that cap educators' wages, increase workloads and hours of work, fail to provide secure employment, and fail to properly fund public education. These shortages amplify the workloads of and health and safety risks to the remaining public sector education workforce.

The AEU urges governments to fully fund public education by restoring the billions of dollars in funding cut to TAFE institutions in the past decade, and by fully funding public schools in accordance with the SRS. To address the teacher shortage crisis, governments must take action to improve the pay and conditions of public educators, including by removing state and territory governments' pay cap and pay freeze policies, and tackling insecure work by providing secure employment offers and conversion options to educators, particularly to new teachers and to the TAFE teaching workforce.

⁶⁵ *South Australian School and Preschool Education Staff Enterprise Agreement 2020*, cl 3.5, accessible [here](#).

⁶⁶ For example, *TAFE General Agreement 2019*, see cl 18 and cl 19, accessible [here](#).

⁶⁷ Public Sector Commissioner's Instructions 23, August 2018, various documents, accessible [here](#).



Australian Education Union

Federal Office
Phone : +61 [REDACTED]
Fax : +61 [REDACTED]
Email : [REDACTED]
Web : www.aeu.org.au

18 November 2022

Dr Mike Frelander MP
Chair
House Standing Committee
on Health, Aged Care and Sport
c/o Committee Secretariat
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Email: [REDACTED]

Dear Minister,

Re: AEU submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health, Aged Care and Sport Inquiry into Long COVID and Repeated COVID Infections

Please find attached the Australian Education Union's submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health, Aged Care and Sport Inquiry into Long COVID and Repeated COVID Infections.

Please contact me if you have any questions in relation to this submission.

Yours sincerely,

[REDACTED]

Kevin Bates
Federal Secretary



**Submission
to the**

**House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health,
Aged Care and Sport Inquiry into Long COVID and
Repeated COVID Infections**

18 November 2022

[REDACTED]
Federal President

Kevin Bates
Federal Secretary

[REDACTED]

Telephone: +61 [REDACTED]
Facsimile: +61 [REDACTED]
Web: www.aeu.org.au
E-mail: [REDACTED]

The Australian Education Union (AEU) represents over 198,000 educator members employed in the public primary, secondary, early childhood and TAFE sectors throughout Australia. The AEU members in all three sectors have been at the frontline of the pandemic in Australia since early 2020 and the potential for recurrent infection and long COVID has impacted on educators significantly since that time. This remains the case with the emergence of the current Omicron XBB variant wave of COVID and the resulting increase in infections in Australia throughout October and November 2022. Thus, the AEU welcomes the opportunity to present our views to the Inquiry. This submission will focus on the fourth of the Inquiry's Terms of Reference, particularly the educational impacts of long COVID and repeated COVID infections for both students and staff in Australia's public education system.

The impact on students of Long COVID and repeated COVID infections on students

There is a lack of clarity on the impact of COVID on the long term health of children who are infected. Early research in 2020 estimated the instance of long COVID in children at levels between 2% and 14% of all infections. A small study of young children with a median age of three years who had contracted COVID in Melbourne found that 8% had persistent symptoms lasting up to 8 weeks, with all eventually recovering.¹ Conversely a study by the Office of National Statistics in the UK estimated that 119,000 children and young people are living with Long COVID; 21,000 of whom are still experiencing symptoms after 12 months, with two thirds of those saying that it significantly impacts their day-to-day life.²

More recent data collected by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and the UK Health Security Agency shows that 1.8% of primary school students and 4.8% of secondary school students experienced long COVID following their most recent COVID-19 infection, taken from March 2020 onwards.³ Australia has a higher rate of reported COVID infections than the UK, at 400,315 per one million people, compared to 354,830 per one million people in the UK.⁴ Accounting for this difference in infection rates, and presuming a similar prevalence of long COVID among school students, there could be over 46,000 primary school students and over 95,000 secondary school students currently experiencing long COVID in Australia, more than 140,000 thousand students in total.⁵

Despite the ongoing difficulty in identifying and monitoring the total number of long COVID cases, based on the extrapolation above there is no doubt that short and long term educational impacts of long COVID on Australian students will continue to present a significant challenge. As noted by OzSAGE "if many Australian children are infected, we can expect the number of children affected by long COVID to be large in absolute terms, even if the proportion who develop long COVID-19 is small."⁶

¹ Protecting children from COVID-19 and making schools and childcare safer, OzSAGE Working Group, 2021, p.3.

² Long COVID kids: Shining a light on Long Covid in Children & Young People, 2021, p.19.

³ Henderson, E., Survey data provides insights into how many students are experiencing long COVID, 2022, p.1

⁴ Retrieved from <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-cases>

⁵ Retrieved from <https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia-data-portal/student-numbers#view1>

⁶ OZSAGE Working Group, *Op. cit*, p.3.

The OzSAGE working group report *Protecting children from COVID-19 and making schools and childcare safer* emphasises the absolute importance of taking all available measures to protect children from COVID infection, despite the relatively mild immediate symptoms reported by most children who are infected and draws comparisons between the measures still taken today to protect children from historical epidemics. They state:

It seems clear that we should endeavour to protect children, in order to avoid the potentially catastrophic outcomes of not doing so. To put this in context, we work hard to protect children from many illnesses that are mild in most cases. For instance, polio is mild or asymptomatic in 99% of children. At the peak of polio in Australia, we had 357 deaths in 1951. Now, 70 years later, we still protect children against polio. From 1956-1975 we had 356 deaths from measles in Australia. That is less than 20 deaths a year, and we think it is worth protecting children from measles. There were 290 deaths a year between 1910 and 1942 from whooping cough. To be consistent with the high value we place on protecting the health of children against other infections, we must do what we can to protect the children who are going back to school unvaccinated against COVID-19.⁷

These comparisons are particularly pertinent in light of the political and societal impetus to “get back to normal” and the removal of all but the most basic of precautionary measures in Australia’s schools, preschools and TAFEs. Testing and isolation are the cornerstone of preventing COVID infection and the relaxation of isolation requirements that mean that a school can no longer compel a COVID positive student not to attend will no doubt contribute to a significant increase in infections among students and result in an increase in repeat infections and long COVID among the school age population. Similarly, the recent cessation of the distribution of Rapid Antigen Tests through schools will undoubtedly lead to an increase in the number of students attending school whilst COVID positive.

As noted by many public health experts, COVID is expected to evolve into an endemic disease with a prevalence akin “to the role in the infection dynamics of seasonal respiratory infections schools may become reservoirs of SARS-CoV-2 due to their dense social setting if sufficient protective measures are not taken to limit the propagation of natural infections among susceptible individuals.”⁸ However, and despite the current paucity of conclusive evidence of the impact of Long COVID and repeated infections on the long term health of children, it is highly likely that repeated exposure to COVID at school will lead to increased long term harm through cumulative effects of repeated infections and through an increase in the prevalence of long COVID among students.

Current COVID mitigation measures in many public schools are not adequate and a lack of capital investment in public schools since 2017 means that conditions are often cramped with inadequate air flow. Despite State and Territory investment in air filtration systems and despite the \$32 million for ventilation improvements this financial year announced in the recent October Commonwealth Budget as part of the larger School Upgrade Fund, the close continuous proximity of school students and staff is very likely to lead to an increase in the COVID infection rate in schools as the Omicron XBB variant wave continues.

⁷ OZSAGE Working Group, *Op. cit*, p.5.

⁸ Lordan, R., et.al, *Considerations for the Safe Operation of Schools During the Coronavirus Pandemic*, 2021, Frontiers in Public Health 9:751451. doi: 10.3389/fpubh.2021.751451

Previous studies have shown that asymptomatic testing in schools in conjunction with “school gate” measures restricting the attendance of those infected with COVID at school is effective in limiting schools based transmission of COVID.⁹ The preventative impact of isolation measures, regular asymptomatic testing, mask wearing, good ventilation, small class sizes and well-spaced classrooms is essential to mitigating the spread of COVID in schools.¹⁰

For many families in public schools the cost of Rapid Antigen Tests is prohibitive, and a lot of potentially causal moments of transmission are no doubt currently not detected or recorded. The increased likelihood that children and young people are asymptomatic or display mild symptoms exacerbates the AEU’s concern that many COVID infections in schools are going unrecorded.

It is for these reasons that the AEU posits that the Committee should recommend that a regular asymptomatic testing program be reinstated in all educational settings, and that mandated isolation from the school or other educational setting is reintroduced for students or school staff who are infected with COVID.

Supporting students with long COVID now and in the future

Current Government approaches to limiting COVID infection, repeat infection and long COVID demonstrates a lack of concern for the health and wellbeing of students, teachers and broader school communities. There are no established measures in place in public schools in any state or territory to deal specifically with the impact of long COVID. Students who acquire disability through COVID are currently required to be assessed through the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD) framework. The NCCD allocates funding based on the level of the four NCCD adjustments being determined and delivered by schools for at least ten weeks over the previous twelve month period. The lowest level of adjustment - quality differentiated teaching practice – receives no additional funding. Essentially, this category recognises when a student has disability but offers no additional resource to allow schools to support them. The three loading amounts for students with disability that do receive funding for their adjustments were based on per-student spending identified for selected students in a national sample of schools. The loading amounts are shown at table 1 below in relation to the full Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) amount of recurrent funding that each student receives for their education each school year.

⁹ Hargreaves, J.R, et.al, *Epidemiology of SARS-CoV-2 infection among staff and students in a cohort of English primary and secondary schools during 2020–2021*, The Lancet Regional Health – Europe 2022;21: 100471 Published online 24 August 2022 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lanepe.2022.100471>

¹⁰ Altmann, D M, *Children and the return to school: how much should we worry about covid-19 and long covid?* Cite this as: BMJ 2021;372:n701 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n701> Published: 15 March 2021

Table 1: 2019 students with disability loading by NCCD level of adjustment

	Base per student amount in 2019	Supplementary	Substantial	Extensive
Primary student	\$11,343	42%	146%	312%
		(\$4,764)	(\$16,561)	(\$35,390)
Secondary student	\$14,254	33%	116%	248%
		(\$4,704)	(\$16,535)	(\$35,350)

The most common symptoms of long COVID in children are headache, fatigue, and sleep difficulties, but a broad range of other ailments have been linked to the virus. They include “brain fog”, heart palpitations, shortness of breath, joint or muscle pain, gastrointestinal issues, anxiety, and orthostatic intolerance—a drop in blood pressure when someone moves from a prone to an upright position.¹¹ Based on the current criteria for accessing one of the three funded NCCD categories, it is likely that, if indeed assessed as having disability, many students experiencing long COVID would be categorized as requiring unfunded Quality Differentiated Teaching Practice. Relying on the existing mechanism for meeting the needs of disabled students’ risks many thousands missing out the support they need to thrive at school. Recent studies have predicted that the academic, personal and economic impact “of the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic on a generation of children can be anticipated to be extensive and long-lasting.”¹²

As the existing loading mechanisms in place to support students with disability are likely to be insufficient to meet the needs of students with long COVID, the AEU draws the Committee’s attention to measures that are currently proposed as best practice to assist students with long COVID. These measures must be accompanied by a commensurate increase in new funding allocated to students experiencing long COVID. The recommended support for schools, as detailed by Davies et.al, are:

1. A collaborative care model in which parents, teachers and doctors work together to support the child’s recovery.
2. There should be a school “COVID leader” who serves as the central communicator for everyone involved in the student’s care. This person can oversee the environmental and academic accommodations, disseminating them to teachers and communicating with the family and community-based healthcare providers. School will require additional resources to fulfil this duty.

¹¹ Gewertz, C, *Thousands of Students Will Face Long COVID. Schools Need to Plan Now*, Education Week; Bethesda Vol. 41, Iss. 37, (2022). P 1

¹² *Ibid.*

3. Temporary and/or longer-term accommodations and adjustments for students, including but not limited to:
 - a. a flexible attendance schedule with adequate breaks to minimise fatigue.
 - b. Reduce physical activity and minimize exposure to overstimulating environments to prevent fatigue and headaches.
 - c. Modify students' workload. This might include, for example, removing high-stakes projects and nonessential work, providing alternate assignments and allowing the secondary students to withdraw from classes without penalty. Adjust assessments and grading as necessary to offset cognitive and memory problems.
 - d. Provide extra time to complete assignments and tests so a child with brain fog can process information.
 - e. Develop an emotional support plan for the student to prevent anxiety and depression.
 - f. Encourage the student to explore alternative extracurricular activities that are nonphysical and not cognitively taxing.¹³

Davis and Messenger recommend adjustments for students with long COVID are front loaded and gradually withdrawn as the student recovers, and they emphasise that “the symptoms, recovery rate and trajectory will vary for each student. Therefore, a gradual and monitored return to activity is important to help ensure that symptoms don’t worsen when students engage in more activity. If symptoms do get worse, then accommodations should resume.”¹⁴

The AEU commends this approach to supporting students with long COVID to the Committee and urges the Committee to consider recommending a national framework to support students with long COVID in their education.

The AEU is clear that the resources required to support students with long COVID in schools must be additional to those already provided through the SRS and its associated loadings for disadvantage. A significant injection of funding will be required to ensure that the estimated 140,000 Australian students who currently experience long COVID, and the hundreds of thousands more who will experience it in the coming years, are adequately supported in their education.

Supporting educational staff with long COVID and steps to prevent repeat infections

In recent months the AEU has received reports of members in schools experiencing long COVID who have exhausted their sick leave entitlements and have submitted workplace compensation claims. The AEU expects that this number of workplace compensation claims

¹³ Davies, S.C, Walsh-Messinger, J & Greenspan, N. *Supporting Students With Post-Acute Sequelae of SARSCoV-2 Infection: Applying Lessons Learned From Postconcussion Symptoms*, National Association of School Psychologists Communiqué, Vol. 50, No. 1, 2021, p.1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

for long COVID from teachers and school staff will increase throughout the current and subsequent waves of the pandemic, as repeated infections increase the likelihood and potential severity of experiencing long COVID.

A significant issue for teachers and school staff is that although COVID is a distinct workplace risk for teachers who spend hours each day in a single room with up to thirty students who are a) more likely to be asymptomatic b) less likely to be tested than the general population and c) particularly in primary schools and special education settings, less likely to effectively socially distance or to make effective use of mitigating measures such as masks. For these reasons additional workplace protections are needed for teachers who are diagnosed with long COVID.

Under current guidelines it is often difficult to prove decisively that a teacher was infected with COVID whilst at work. It is the view of the AEU that for teachers, other school staff and all educators working in close contact with students, repeated COVID infections and long COVID should be regarded as a disease where it is presumed to have arisen from workplace contact, for the purposes of workers compensation, in the same way that similar clauses exist for some cancers suffered by fire fighters and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is considered to be a presumed workplace injury for police.

Recommendations

In terms of protecting educators from COVID infection, the AEU endorses many of the recommendations for school staff made by OzSAGE, including that:

- All school staff are vaccinated
- Recommend all staff have priority access to vaccination and boosters.
- Use centralised IT systems to be aware of LGA's that staff pool is drawn from and anticipate incursions
- Staff to be supported financially for testing and isolation periods if unwell. This should be at a level that removes any motivation to attend work while unwell and include casual staff and visiting staff.¹⁵

The risk of repeated COVID infections, and thus the risk of developing long COVID as a result of asymptomatic spread among students in a school setting is high. To counter this risk the AEU further makes several recommendations to the Committee:

1. That regular asymptomatic testing of all students and school staff is reinstated through the provision of Rapid Antigen Tests to schools and to families of school students.
2. That the reporting of positive COVID tests for school staff and students is mandated
3. That a secure and up to date database of COVID infections in school settings is established and maintained so that outbreaks can be monitored and contained, and so that the prevalence of repeat infections can be monitored.
4. That public schools are provided with additional funds to engage a collaborative care model to support the education of students with long COVID.
5. That the prevalence of long COVID diagnoses among teachers and school staff is monitored and analysed on an ongoing basis.
6. That ongoing illness or disability of teachers and school workers arising from long COVID should be regarded as a workplace injury with the presumption that the disease was contracted in the workplace for the purpose of compensation claims.

¹⁵ OZSAGE Working Group, *Op. cit*, pp.17-18.