

## **Review of the impact of COVID-19 on school students with disability**

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Australian Government COVID-19 Review on the impact of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic on education for school students with disability. We offer a brief submission with some observations as follows:

### **Adaptions during lockdowns**

Across 2020 and 2021 Governments, NDIA and schools were slow to collaborate, recognise, flexibly adapt and fully fund the additional needs, requirements and costs involved in remote schooling and to support people to acquire adaptive kit like iPads or activity packs that were able to be used by children with disability including intellectual and cognitive disabilities. There should be intentional work to absorb and respond to learnings from the pandemic and contingency money set aside to implement them.

More work needs to be done to create accessible remote learning platforms, teaching techniques and packages that work for people with a range of disabilities from sensory disability to cognitive disability or Autism.

### **Learning from what worked**

We need to recognise that some students with disability actually thrived with remote learning and the adaptions made during the pandemic and we need to retain the capacity for students to learn remotely. Face to face learning is itself a barrier to some students gaining benefits from education.

### **Ongoing safety issues**

COVID is not over and students and families with family members who have a disability face ongoing risks of severe illness, additional disability and death from COVID19 while uncontrolled transmission continues across the community. Schools are places where respiratory infections regularly occur and this has always been problematic for students with disability and is now unacceptable given the level of risk to people from COVID. There needs to be an urgent focus on making schools safe for people with disability and families where parents have a disability. This includes masking with N95 masks, cleaning the air, testing of students and staff, encouraging, and preventing sick students and staff from

attending school, school hygiene, social sanitation and distancing and upgrades to school infrastructure so that people are not in crowded and poorly ventilated spaces. These issues are well canvassed in recommendations from OzSage and in AFI's White Paper on COVID: <https://www.advocacyforinclusion.org/white-paper-on-covid-19-and-people-with-disability/>

Students and families who are unsafe in face to face learning environments while uncontrolled transmission of COVID continues should not be forced to be in them until they are made safer or sterilising and highly effective vaccines and treatments eliminate the risk of death and severe disability from COVID19.

## **The ongoing impacts in ACT schools**

AFI also notes the need to address significant ongoing impacts on inclusion and education equity resulting from strained resources within ACT schools due to high levels of teacher absence due to illness as the pandemic continues. Over the past two years AFI has received an escalation of reports about instances of stigmatising and segregated practice within schools that is in part a response to decreased staff capacity.

We note with reports that the ACT Education Directorate is anticipating further staff shortages and has flagged measures like combined classrooms in response to ongoing teacher and staff shortages due to the pandemic. We note that measures like larger class sizes responding to staff shortages have a disproportionate impact on students with disabilities who benefit from one-to-one classroom support. A change in public health approaches and a return to a precautionary health response to COVID is needed to prevent further negative outcomes for students with disabilities.

Please feel free to contact AFI to discuss this submission with me via 0477 200 755 or [Craig@advocacyforinclusion.org](mailto:Craig@advocacyforinclusion.org).

Regards

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11 April 2023