



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

Submission by

Queensland Advocacy for Inclusion

to

The Commonwealth Department of Education

April 2023

About Queensland Advocacy for Inclusion

Queensland Advocacy for Inclusion (**QAI**) (formerly Queensland Advocacy Incorporated) is an independent, community-based advocacy organisation and community legal service that provides individual and systems advocacy for people with disability. Our purpose is to advocate for the protection and advancement of the fundamental needs, rights and lives of people with disability in Queensland. QAI's Management Committee is comprised of a majority of persons with disability, whose wisdom and lived experience is our foundation and guide.

QAI has been engaged in systems advocacy for over thirty years, advocating for change through campaigns directed at attitudinal, law and policy reform. QAI has also supported the development of a range of advocacy initiatives in this state. For over a decade, QAI has provided highly in-demand individual advocacy services. These services are currently provided through our four advocacy practices: the **Human Rights Advocacy Practice** (which provides legal advocacy in the areas of guardianship and administration, disability discrimination and human rights law and non-legal advocacy support with the Disability Royal Commission and the justice interface); the **Mental Health Advocacy Practice** (which supports people receiving involuntary treatment for mental illness); the **NDIS Advocacy Practice** (which provides support for people challenging decisions of the National Disability Insurance Agency and decision support to access the NDIS); and the **Disability Advocacy Practice** (which operates the Pathways information and referral phone line for all people with disability in Queensland, and provides non-legal advocacy support to young people with disability, including in relation to education). Our individual advocacy experience informs our understanding and prioritisation of systemic advocacy issues.

Since 1 January 2022, QAI has also been funded by the Queensland Government to establish and co-ordinate the Queensland Independent Disability Advocacy Network (QIDAN). QIDAN has three aims: member support, sector advocacy and systemic advocacy. Member organisations work collaboratively to raise the profile of disability advocacy while also working towards attitudinal, policy and legislative change for people with disability.

The objects of QAI's constitution are:

- To advocate for the protection and advancement of the needs, rights, and lives of people with disability in Queensland;
- To protect and advance human rights including the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD);
- To be accountable to the most disadvantaged people with disability in Queensland; and
- To advance the health, social and public wellbeing of disadvantaged people with disability.

Contents

About Queensland Advocacy for Inclusion	2
QAI's recommendations	4
Introduction	5
1. The educational experiences of school students with disability throughout the pandemic	5
2. The impact of those educational experiences on the wellbeing and education-related outcomes of school students with disability	6
3. How support for school students with disability has been managed by governments, education authorities and schools	7
Case study	8
Conclusion	8

QAI's recommendations

1. Where possible, government decisions to impose lockdown restrictions and to re-open schools should ensure students and their families are afforded the maximum time possible to prepare for online learning and the transition back to school.
2. Online and alternative learning options should be offered post-lockdown periods to students who require additional time to transition back to face-to-face learning.
3. Solutions, strategies and decisions made by schools and governments should involve meaningful collaboration and consultation with school students with disability and their families.
4. When making policy decisions, governments and schools should specifically consider the learning needs and support requirements of students with disability.
5. Governments and schools should prioritise providing practical supports to students with disability and their families during pandemics or other emergency crises.
6. Online educational tools should be more accessible to improve the learning experience and outcomes of all students, particularly students with disability.
7. Governments and schools should provide resources and training to parents to assist with the co-facilitation of online learning.
8. Governments and schools should clearly define a parent or legal guardian's role during online learning and set clear expectations for them.
9. Schools should offer greater support to students with disability who had reduced learning opportunities during the lockdown and transition periods.

Introduction

QAI offers a Young Peoples Program (YPP) that provides individual advocacy to young people with disability, supporting young people to uphold their rights and interests and increase control over their lives. During the COVID-19 pandemic, YPP supported countless young people to navigate education-related issues. From these experiences, QAI has determined that the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns disproportionately impacted the educational experience and wellbeing of school students with disability.

Due to the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, YPP has observed school students with disability experience reduced learning opportunities; increased mental health issues; social isolation; and to lose trust in their school. QAI recognises the challenging circumstances of the pandemic and that governments, education authorities and schools offered some support to students with disability during the pandemic. However, YPP observed some students with disability who failed to receive the support that they needed.

This submission addresses the three questions being asked by the Department of Education regarding the impact of COVID-19 on school students with disability. QAI offers several recommendations to strengthen the capabilities of schools to support students with disability in future emergency events. QAI's recommendations have been informed by the lived experiences of students with disability and their families supported by YPP.

1. The educational experiences of school students with disability throughout the pandemic

QAI found that lockdown periods caused significant issues for students with disability, particularly for students who were not provided reasonable adjustments prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The transition to online learning during the lockdowns involved a reduction in the implementation, facilitation, and provision of curriculum for all students. For some students with disability, this reduced the accessibility and quality of their learning experience. Moreover, students were expected to engage in a curriculum that they already found challenging but without the support found in the classroom. QAI observed that parents were often expected to personally make reasonable adjustments to the curriculum without any support or guidance from their child's school. Furthermore, parents reported a general lack of training, information and support provided by schools for the online learning periods.

QAI has identified several factors that increased the barriers to equitable education during lockdown periods. Students with disability who did not have access to appropriate technology, equipment or internet connection experienced considerable limitations in accessing their online learning. Families in this situation often had to rely on their schools or community services to provide equipment. However, this type of support was not available to all families. Likewise, students with disability whose parents or guardians did not have experience using technology faced additional barriers to accessing online learning. Parents were expected to co-facilitate online learning during lockdowns,

but this was not always achievable. QAI notes that students living in out-of-home care and residential facilities were particularly disadvantaged, with reports of youth workers avoiding involvement in facilitating online learning. Students with disability who experienced these barriers to their schooling have reported falling behind in their learning journey. Often, students who fell behind have not been provided with adequate support to get back on course.

A concerning issue faced by many students with disability during lockdowns was the experience of social isolation. The lockdowns drastically changed how school students could interact, and for some students with disability, the transition to online interaction was particularly challenging, for example if they had little experience interacting online with the peers prior the lockdown. In addition, the school setting allows for facilitated peer interactions between students. Unfortunately, the change to online learning reduced the opportunities for staff to facilitate student connections with many sporting and social clubs having only recommenced more recently.

QAI notes that the transition from lockdown back to a face-to-face learning environment posed significant issues for many school students with disability. Families have reported that transitioning to the physical school setting was challenging, and they often felt unprepared and unsupported despite several attempts to communicate this with the school. Some students with disability, particularly those with autism spectrum disorder, reported that it was difficult managing the inconsistencies and constant changes to their routine. Families have informed QAI that they required more time to prepare for the significant change. Furthermore, students with an increased risk of COVID-19 infection faced further anxiety returning to school. QAI also found that some students with disability benefited from the opportunity to engage in online learning. However, online learning options were often not provided past the end of the lockdown periods. Continuing online learning access would be valuable for some students who find it difficult to suddenly transition back to face-to-face learning.

2. The impact of those educational experiences on the wellbeing and education-related outcomes of school students with disability

QAI has found that the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have significantly impacted the wellbeing of school students with disability and their families. Some students have reported feeling undervalued and unsupported by their schools, particularly those who experienced difficulties transitioning back to face-to-face learning. Students also felt unsafe and uncomfortable at school due to the risk of COVID-19 infection. Having worked with countless families during and post the pandemic, QAI has observed a significant increase in the development of, and exacerbation of, mental health issues, particularly anxiety. QAI has also observed a rise in the rate of school avoidance by some students with disability. In addition, family members of students with disability have described the negative impact that the educational experience has had on the family unit. The pressure of co-facilitating online learning, particularly for those students who require reasonable adjustments, has caused mounting distress and anguish, especially for parents who were trying to maintain their employment at the same time.

In addition, disruptions to education have also affected education-related outcomes of students with disability. QAI reports that students have found maintaining friendships with other students during and after the lockdowns to be challenging. Factors such as reduced facilitation of peer interaction and the transition back to face-to-face learning have impacted students' opportunities to develop and foster friendships with their peers. As previously mentioned, students with disability have not always had the same learning opportunities as their peers during the lockdown and transition periods, significantly affecting their educational outcomes and achievements. Families have reported that students feel increasingly anxious and embarrassed when they fall behind their peers.

Finally, QAI has been particularly concerned about the experiences of students who have not been provided with adequate reasonable adjustments. During the lockdown periods, students engaged with alternative online learning, and for some, this was a beneficial experience. Many parents developed strategies and adjustments for their child's learning that were successfully employed. Unfortunately, many schools completely removed alternative and online learning options after the lockdown periods ended. Furthermore, effective strategies developed by parents were often dismissed by their child's school. Transitioning back to face-to-face learning was daunting for many students with disability, and the experience was compounded by a schools' refusal to provide adjustments. In these situations, QAI has observed increased school avoidance, decreasing grades, repeated use of medical exemptions, and poor mental health outcomes.

3. How support for school students with disability has been managed by governments, education authorities and schools

Measures taken by governments, education authorities and schools have provided some support to students with disability throughout the pandemic. Access to online curriculum during the lockdowns provided students and families with an alternative way of learning. For some students, this type of learning is preferable and has led to successful outcomes. Schools also offered small classrooms for students who could not learn from home. However, certain cohorts of students could not access their schools during lockdown. For instance, QAI observed that some students with parents with disability were unable to access the school as all transportation services were temporarily suspended. Furthermore, students with health conditions and a higher risk of infection could not attend the small classroom setups. QAI believes that there is room for improvement to the support offered to school students with disability during emergency situations such as a pandemic.

Case study

Katie's Story

Katie* is a high school student in rural Queensland with a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, generalised anxiety disorder, Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, and tick disorder. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Katie struggled with schooling and experienced exhaustion and difficulties with attendance and engaging with her learning. At the time, Katie's treating specialists provided recommendations for reasonable adjustments to her school. However, the adjustments were consistently refused by the school.

During the "learning from home" period amid the pandemic, Katie was given a USB of work from her school each week. Katie's family and specialists observed that her engagement with her learning noticeably improved during this time. Katie's mother, Lucinda*, advised the school numerous times that Katie would struggle to return to school physically after the "learning from home" period. Lucinda also advised the school that Katie benefited from learning from home and from receiving the curriculum by USB. Lucinda requested the continuation of alternative learning options during Katie's transition, though long-term distance education or home schooling was not the goal due to the risk of social isolation. The school agreed to an interim plan for Katie's transition but only provided her with schoolwork via USB on four occasions over a two-month period. During these four occasions, Katie was not offered any feedback from her teachers on her work and the school refused to grade her work. Without feedback or acknowledgement, Katie felt her efforts were meaningless and unvalued.

Lucinda and Katie's team of specialists continuously asked the school to provide Katie with reasonable adjustments and requested an interim transition plan that offered alternative learning options. The school ignored the specialists' recommendations and did not appropriately engage in the interim plan. The situation escalated to Lucinda's official complaint to the Department of Education.

Katie's challenges returning to school after the "learning from home" period were exacerbated by the school's denial of reasonable adjustments. Consequently, Katie could not return to face-to-face learning and received a medical exemption for the remainder of the school year. Katie reports that she felt her school did not value her and that she felt uncomfortable and unsafe in the physical school environment. These experiences have significantly impacted Katie's learning and well-being.

*Names have been changed to protect confidentiality

Conclusion

QAI thanks the Department of Education for the opportunity to contribute to this review. We are happy to provide further information or clarification of any of the matters raised in this submission upon request.