

Government response to Lessons from remote learning: COVID-19 follow-up to the Inquiry into Digital Innovation in Secondary Education

Report No. 11 of the Education and Health Standing Committee

1. Corrections to statements contained in the report:

PAGE REFERENCE	CORRECTION
<p>1. Page vii, just before the heading <i>What remote learning exposed</i>, it states “Boarders took longer to return due to border restrictions.”</p>	<p>Boarders took longer to return because the Department of Education was acting on advice from the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC), not because of border restrictions.</p> <p>From the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak in Australia, the AHPPC provided advice that boarding schools and residential colleges presented a higher level of risk than schools. That meant the rules for reopening them had to be different and more stringent than those for reopening schools.</p> <p>On 17 June 2020, the AHPPC released advice regarding boarding schools and school-based residential colleges. The advice included risk management strategies such as hygiene practices, physical distancing measures and cleaning regimes. On 18 June 2020, Dr Andrew Robertson, Western Australia’s Chief Health Officer, provided advice that when facilities met the AHPPC requirements, they would be able to return to full capacity to enable all eligible students to return to government-run boarding facilities in Western Australia. Following receipt of this advice, and on the same day, updated operational guidelines based on the AHPPC advice were provided to government-run, school-based residential colleges by the Department of Education.</p> <p>On 22 June 2020, the Premier announced Phase 4 of Western Australia’s COVID-19 Roadmap to recovery, including the further easing of restrictions in line with health advice. Amended guidelines were provided to schools and residential facilities.</p>
<p>2. Page vii, “<i>regional freight difficulties</i>” Page 11, “<i>At the hearing, the DoE cited regional freight difficulties and the short period of remote learning as reasons for the low level of distribution.</i>”</p> <p><i>It is disappointing that only 55 students (presumably all in the metropolitan area, since the SIMs could not be delivered elsewhere)...</i>”</p>	<p>The Department experienced no regional freight difficulties. This appears to be a misunderstanding of two quotes from Mr David Dans, Chief Information Officer from the transcript of evidence:</p> <p><i>“We are also doing the same thing with student-focused laptops. That is a program that was held up by freight.”</i></p> <p><i>“Freight was certainly one of those challenges that I think everybody had. We could purchase things but getting them into the country was one of the challenges that is only really coming out of that at the moment, and is still not back to normal.”</i></p> <p>Mr Dans was speaking only about laptops, and the Department’s difficulties with sourcing (rather than distributing) them. The issue was a lack of local stock during the pandemic, which resulted in significant delivery delays from suppliers that needed to source more laptops from overseas. When Mr Dans said “<i>into the country</i>” he meant “into Australia”, but the Committee appears to have interpreted it as “into regional areas” and drawn a conclusion that this meant there were difficulties in distributing equipment outside the metropolitan area. This was not the case.</p>
<p>3. Page 27, regarding Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) programs: “<i>Parents unable to afford a laptop are told their students will be provided with a device at school if one is available.</i>”</p>	<p>Schools have a responsibility to ensure that no student will be disadvantaged due to their financial situation, which includes participation in BYOD programs. Schools that require the use of a device at school must ensure that any child who does not have one has access to a compatible school-owned device at no cost.</p> <p>The “<i>if one is available</i>” at the end of this quote suggests that this is optional, which it is not.</p>

2. Response to findings and recommendations

The table below outlines the response of the State Government to each of the report's findings and recommendations.

FINDINGS	RECOMMENDATIONS	RESPONSE	COMMENT
<p>1. Socio-economically disadvantaged students and those in regional areas struggled most to access the digital technology required for online learning.</p>	<p>1. The Department of Education should ensure that the application process for a laptop loan is transparent and well publicised in the event of a second wave of COVID-19.</p>	<p>Not supported. Laptop loan process already established.</p>	<p>The Department implemented both a strategy to ensure accessibility and a robust loan scheme during the pandemic for students to have access to a device during the short period that some students were learning at home.</p> <p>Schools were asked to lend any school-owned devices to students who needed them to access online learning at home, subject to a loan agreement. Any schools that did not have enough devices to cater for their students' educational needs could apply for more, which the Department filled from a central supply of devices that then became school property available for loan to students. The Department prioritised children in care, senior secondary and socially disadvantaged students. The strategy was widely communicated to schools and, while a small number of parents and carers contacted the Department directly for assistance, they were asked to speak to their school in the first instance. The school could then organise a loan of an existing device or submit an application if a device was not available.</p> <p>Principals may lend school-owned devices to students who do not have access to personally owned equipment to continue learning at home should there be a second wave of COVID-19. Information about how to manage and record the lending of devices to students is available for schools on Ikon (staff intranet). Schools assess the needs of their students and offer access to a device through a variety of communications including letters, newsletters and social media messaging, as well as direct contact from staff to families who are known to be in need.</p> <p>The Department has maintained ongoing communication with principals with a series of FAQs that are revised as required. The communication stream is complemented by the Department's Principal Advisory Group and the scheduling of principal update sessions through WebEx. These communication avenues provide opportunities through which the Department can communicate the application process for laptop loans.</p>
<p>2. Only around one per cent of SIM cards provided to the Department of Education to give to students in need were distributed.</p>	<p>2. The Department of Education should maintain a supply of SIM cards for internet access at regional offices so that they can be more easily distributed to regional students during periods of remote learning.</p>	<p>Not supported.</p>	<p>All known requests for SIM cards were met by the Department during the period where some students were learning at home as a result of the pandemic. In the event that the need for at-home learning arises again, the Department will utilise its existing arrangements with suppliers to obtain additional SIM cards for distribution as required to those in need. As noted in the correction above, this finding appears to be based on a misunderstanding – there were no issues with distributing SIMs or wireless dongles and, had there been a higher level of demand from schools, they would have been allocated and distributed rapidly. As a result, the Department does not accept this recommendation.</p> <p>There is no evidence to suggest that there was an unmet need, beyond the Committee's assertion "it seems unlikely that such a small number were experiencing difficulty accessing or affording an internet connection", and that the Department "might have been more proactive in identifying students who needed them most." Schools were made aware of the availability of centrally sourced equipment should any students have needed it, and every request for assistance was filled.</p> <p>From a technical standpoint, a SIM card is just one component of a remote service solution. To function, it also requires a wireless dongle and an active data plan that would incur ongoing costs while any supply sat on standby. The Department has a positive working relationship with suppliers (such as Telstra) and is confident it could source a supply of active SIMs at short notice.</p> <p>For these reasons, maintaining a supply of SIM cards at regional offices is not recommended.</p>

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<p>3. Teachers hesitant to embrace technology who were forced to upskill now recognise the value of learning how to use digital technology in the classroom.</p>	<p>3. The Department of Education must build on the recent exposure teachers have had to digital technologies by continuing to promote further opportunities for professional learning in their use.</p>	<p>Supported.</p>	<p>One of the important initiatives being implemented through the Department's ICT vision and strategy is the development of a Digital Capability Framework, which will support and set expectations for teachers on the effective use of ICT in their classes.</p> <p>The strategy will also capitalise on the recent exposure of the need to be flexible and agile in relation to the use of technology through the delivery of training and support for teachers, whereby we will scale the Connected Learning model and harness the capacity of the School of Isolated and Distance Education to provide ongoing professional learning for teachers that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • improves Digital Technologies (DT) and ICT capability, skills and knowledge; • increases capacity to effectively integrate DT and ICT into teaching, learning and assessment; • improves capacity to address the learning support requirements of students with disability and other special needs; • increases confidence to use DT and ICT to solve problems and seize opportunities; • includes case studies, curated digital resources and classroom 'tools' for teaching and learning; • utilises ICT and remote delivery options to improve access to culture, language and on-country learning opportunities; • improves the appropriate use of assistive technologies; • supports teachers and leaders to understand the safety and security advantages of operating platforms recommended by the Department; and • provides them with digital resources for teaching and learning. <p>Also as a part of the strategy, the DigiTech Schools initiative is being expanded to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • model the use of ICT to increase student access, engagement, performance and progress across learning areas; • share a culture and practice of innovation through digital mentorship; • trial new and emerging technologies for delivery of the curriculum; • develop case studies of applying technologies in the collection and analysis of student achievement data, with a focus on teachers and students using data to improve learning outcomes; and • support teachers to understand how to use data analytics for improving student performance.
<p>4. The degree to which school leadership had embraced digital technology influenced how the school coped with remote learning.</p>		<p>Supported.</p>	<p>Through Connected Learning and the Leadership Institute, the Department will provide professional learning for school leaders that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • supports implementation of the Digital Capability Framework; • improves their knowledge and understanding of emerging technologies; and • supports them with whole-school planning. <p>The ICT vision and strategy includes the following initiatives:</p>
<p>5. Some schools were seeking more direction from the Department of Education in regard to implementing digital technology for online learning.</p>		<p>Supported.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a Digital Capability Advisory Group of education and technology experts to strategically guide the use of ICT across the public school system. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use the Digital Capability Advisory Group to assist in the early identification and assessment of emerging technologies and provide advice and support on the selection, evaluation and implementation of ICT in schools. • Develop a Digital Capability Framework to assist schools to self-assess and work towards more effective use of ICT to improve teaching and learning. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Share the Digital Capability Framework with pre-service institutions to inform their program design and delivery. • The development of a Digital Capability Framework will support and set expectations for principals on the effective use of ICT in their schools.
<p>6. Schools catering to students with special needs could make better use of assistive technologies.</p>		<p>Supported.</p>	<p>When determining how educational programs were to be presented to students with special educational needs in the context of remote delivery, schools considered the teaching and learning needs of their students. This included delivery through technology, through printed packages of work, through physical learning materials, or through a combination of these. Principals were able to authorise requests for equipment, including technological equipment, to be lent to students and/or families. Technological equipment lent included items such as laptops, iPads, and augmentative and alternative communication devices, such as voice output communication aids (VOCA).</p> <p>Schools that include students with disabilities are able to apply to lend equipment and resources from the School of Special Educational Needs: Disability. Despite COVID-19, during Terms 1 and 2 of 2020, ICT-related equipment was accessed by schools at approximately the same levels when compared to 2019.</p> <p>The Department's ICT strategy implementation plan includes providing training and support for teachers to improve the appropriate use of assistive technologies.</p>

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<p>7. Some schools did not amend individual education plans for students with special needs during the period of remote learning, even though the changed circumstances may have warranted this.</p>	<p>4. The Department of Education should maintain greater oversight of schools with special needs students to ensure they are properly catered for in times of crisis such as COVID-19.</p>	<p>Supported.</p>	<p>The Department's Connected Learning hub includes a dedicated section for Special Educational Needs (SEN). This section of Connected Learning includes a broad range of information designed to support teachers of students with SEN to develop individualised and/or differentiated programs and includes five components including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curriculum and Support materials; • Teaching and Learning resources; • Teaching Strategies and Professional Knowledge; • Talking about COVID; and • Interagency Support. <p>The Teaching Strategies and Professional Learning component of the Connected Learning hub has been updated to include further information related to documented planning processes.</p> <p>A Connect Community now includes information related to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Universal Design for Learning • Differentiated Teaching Practice • Illustrations of Practice: Curriculum Adjustments • Illustrations of Practice: Instructional Adjustments • Illustrations of Practice: Environmental Adjustments <p>The Illustration of Practice: Curriculum Adjustments information includes a video in which a primary teacher and Learning Support Coordinator discuss and review a documented plan as part of their plan-act-review teaching cycle. These enhancements will be communicated to consulting teachers from the School of Special Educational Needs: Disability. During COVID-19, systems were established through which consulting teachers were able to provide support to schools remotely.</p> <p>The Department's Reporting to Parents: Special Educational Needs (RTP: SEN) system has been enhanced to make it easier for teachers to link their learning intentions to examples of practice. This has been achieved by linking learning intentions in RTP: SEN to the teaching and learning resources in the SEN section of the Connected Learning hub. Teachers working in a remote context will have access to teaching and learning resources that are developmentally organised through either the Connected Learning hub or through RTP: SEN. The number of teaching and learning resources that can be accessed through RTP: SEN grows as the Connected Learning hub expands.</p> <p>During COVID-19, the Department maintains ongoing communication with principals with a series of FAQs that are revised as required. These include a dedicated set of SEN questions. The communication stream is complemented by the Department's Principal Advisory Group, which includes representation from the education support sector, and the scheduling of principal update sessions through WebEx. These communication avenues provide opportunities through which the Department can communicate and emphasise the need to ensure that, where required, documented plans should be reviewed.</p>
<p>8. The Department of Education does not appear to have a clear strategy in place to ensure that laptops for home use are accessible to all secondary students.</p>	<p>5. Given the importance of access to a laptop during periods of remote learning, the Department of Education should focus on ways to make laptops more affordable for secondary students and institute a robust loan scheme that will ensure laptops reach those in need.</p>	<p>Partially supported. Laptop loan process already established.</p>	<p>The Department has a strategy to ensure accessibility and it also has a robust loan scheme that, during the pandemic, allowed some students who were learning at home to have access to a device. Schools were asked to lend any school-owned devices to students who needed them to access online learning at home, subject to a loan agreement and with the reassurance that the Department would reimburse the cost of repair or replacement if a school device was damaged or lost. Any schools that did not have enough devices to cater for their students' educational needs could apply for more, which the Department filled from a central supply of devices that then became school property available for loan to students. The Department prioritised children in care, senior secondary and socially disadvantaged students.</p> <p>The Department also intends to allocate any surplus devices remaining after the pandemic to students most in need. Maintaining a fleet of surplus devices indefinitely would not be cost-effective, not least because they have a finite life and would need to be replaced on a regular basis.</p>

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<p>9. There appears to be no method of determining how many students have been disengaged from school, and for what period.</p>	<p>6. The Department of Education should implement a robust method of tracking school attendance (whether in person or online) for use in future periods of remote learning.</p>	<p>Partially supported. Process already established.</p>	<p>Schools are able to determine how many students have disengaged and for what period. This is recorded centrally through the use of absence codes, although it should be noted that while attendance is a necessary condition, it is not a measure of engagement. That is, the record that a student attended school is not a record that they were engaged in a productive educational program.</p> <p>Evidence from the attendance data for Semester 1, 2020 shows that, with the exception of remote community schools, attendance levels have returned to normal.</p> <p>The Department already has a robust system of tracking school attendance, whether a student is attending online or face-to-face. The E code, indicating that the student is involved in an approved educational activity off the school site, records the student as present. Schools were advised to use this code for remote or online learning. Schools will be provided with clearer advice about how and when to use the E code and what counts as evidence that a student is participating in remote learning.</p> <p>Since very early in the pandemic, the Department's system has enabled it to provide regular attendance data for over 800 schools to the Corporate Executive and the Minister. In Term 2, this data was provided daily, and in Term 3 it has been provided weekly. The data is able to be configured into a variety of reports, allowing comparison of data by education region, school type and overall. It is this ability to track attendance that allowed the Department to identify schools and, in turn, students, where return to school may have been lagging. Resources were then provided to the affected schools via the regional offices to target support for the students who needed help to return to normal attendance.</p>