40TH PARLIAMENT

Education and Health Standing Committee

Report 11

LESSONS FROM REMOTE LEARNING

COVID-19 follow-up to the
Inquiry into Digital Innovation in Secondary Education

Presented by
Ms J.M. Freeman, MLA

September 2020

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Education and Health Standing Committee

Lessons from remote learning

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Laid on the Table of the Legislative Assembly on 24 September 2020

Chair's Foreword

THE magic of literature, an interactive science experiment or investigating our history is underpinned by a teacher's attentiveness to students and their good preparation. A teacher's skills at planning ensure that students have the routine they need to settle, participate and learn. Like so many West Australians in March 2020, these plans and programs were thrown into uncertainty with the declaration on March 15 of a public health and state of emergency to deal with the coronavirus pandemic.

The COVID-19 'Stage 1' restrictions announced on March 23 saw the immediate closure of pubs, clubs, indoor sporting venues, cinemas, cultural institutions and places of worship, with restaurants and cafes restricted to takeaway. It is understandable that these actions were unsettling for teachers despite the reassurance of health advice and the determination of National Cabinet that schools should remain open until the end of term one.

The education unions expressed their concern at the anxiety of teachers, staff and cleaners. The Minister for Education, having announced additional cleaning protocols, also outlined to Parliament that various arrangements for staff were being made available and that 'decisions continue to be made on expert health advice, with the safety of school staff and students the number one priority.'[1]

Prior to the end of term one there was a clear commitment by the Government, the Department of Education and schools to the continuity of student learning, which included planning for how teaching and learning would occur in the event of school closures in term two. In particular, the Department of Education committed to 'extra technical support for teachers to deliver online, and expanded access to online teaching resources' in term two.[2]

Certainly, the schools in the area I represent took up the challenge of preparing resources in anticipation that the course of the pandemic may lead to remote learning. This dedication to student learning is appreciated and the Committee wants to take this opportunity to thank all the staff, teachers, cleaners and gardeners across Western Australia for their response in readying themselves for the possibility that schools would not return in term two.

Fortunately, through effective health management of the risks, students were able to return to school in term two. However, as the Department of Education's executive director of the Recovery portfolio, Melesha Sands, stated in the hearing: 'this [COVID-19] has been the biggest disruptor to education that we have known – we know that. What they [school principals and staff] have tried to do is now utilise that momentum to implement teaching and learning in digital learning environments.'[3]

Given this disruption from COVID-19 and the reliance on digital learning, the Committee agreed that a follow-up investigation to its November 2019 report, *A Better Connected Future: Opportunities for digital innovation in secondary education*, was warranted.

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1 The Hon. Sue Ellery MLC, Minister for Education and Training, Legislative Council, *Hansard*, 16 April 2020, p. 2200.

2 *ibid.*, 17 March, p. 1366.

3 *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 August 2020, p. 6.

A key recommendation of the 2019 report was that the Department of Education 'hasten its provision of guidance to secondary schools on the use of digital technologies'. Critical to this was delivery of an ICT vision and strategy, subsequently released in March 2020, shortly before government advice on the 30 March to keep students at home if possible.

This subsequent report illustrates that while there was much goodwill and effort from the teachers, principals and staff, the capacity to provide remote digital technology learning tools to WA students was patchy. While there are other methods of ensuring remote learning can be undertaken (in the form of 'hard packs'), the COVID-19 response highlighted the digital divide that persists throughout our education system.

This is in contrast to the 163 Catholic schools which, through their 'one digital ecosystem' and School Response Plans, identified access issues early and provided the tools for digital connection. This was in turn supported by a 'programme of professional learning to support school staff in delivering remote learning'[4] in week 10 of term one.

Dr Edward Simons, Catholic Education Western Australia's director of Governance and Digital Technology, said they had begun a digital transformation process four or five years ago which meant 'every student and every staff member gets access to the same digital resources'. Further, 'every one of our nearly 11,000 staff members – the fifth largest non-government employer in the state – can communicate, collaborate, share resources, and that stood us in fantastic stead with the challenges that were faced'.[5]

All education sectors reported inequities in the capacity to deliver remote learning through digital technology and in her evidence, Department of Education director general Lisa Rodgers acknowledges that with respect to remote learning 'we had 818 schools used to leading their own schools, which is a really good thing, but when push came to shove, they needed central support, and there needed to be parameters and frameworks for them to operate within. I think they needed a bit more direction.'[6]

Certainly, that was the Committee's view in its 2019 report; a 'one digital ecosystem' to address the digital divide should be the goal, especially in the planning required for any COVID-19 or other emergency-driven decision to shift to remote learning delivery.

Thank you to my fellow Committee members: Deputy Chair Zak Kirkup MLA, Ms Josie Farrer MLA, Mr Shane Love MLA (for part of the inquiry), Mr Ian Blayney MLA (for part of the inquiry) and Ms Sabine Winton MLA. Thanks go to the great work of the Committee's staff in the principal research officer Dr Sarah Palmer and research officer Jovita Hogan.

MS J.M. FREEMAN, MLA
CHAIR

4 Catholic Education Western Australia, Correspondence – Background information, 31 July 2020, p. 13.
5 *Transcript of Evidence*, 19 August 2020, p. 3.
6 *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 August 2020, p. 13.

Contents

Executive Summary

IN 2019, the Committee conducted an inquiry into Digital Innovation in Secondary Education which explored the potential for digital technology to increase equity of opportunity for students. The inquiry found that while that potential is being realised to some extent, the existing equity gap is magnified by a lack of access to the internet, digital technology hardware, education resources and skilled teachers. Similar findings have emerged from early reports on the impact of remote learning during COVID-19.

While West Australian school leaders and teachers adapted well to what was ultimately a short period of remote learning, the education sector needs to be prepared in the event that students are required to learn from home again. Keeping in mind the findings and recommendations of our November 2019 report, *A Better Connected Future: Opportunities for digital innovation in secondary education*, the Committee invited representatives from the Department of Education, Catholic Education Western Australia, the Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia and the Educational Computing Association of WA to discuss the challenges and successes of using digital technology for remote learning.

Establishing the period of remote learning is important since studies have found that learning loss increases with the length of time students are away from the classroom, and is magnified for students who are already disadvantaged. The Department of Education (DoE) has emphasised that schools did not shut down; even during a four-day period at the end of term one when students were told to stay home and were not provided lessons, those unable to be at home were supervised on the school campus. While arrangements varied slightly between the sectors (Catholic and Independent), the majority of students were back at school for the start of term two. Boarders took longer to return due to border restrictions.

What remote learning exposed

Students who remained at home in term two learnt from online resources and/or distance education packages. Some schools, mainly private, were also rolling out online learning at the end of term one. The ease with which schools transitioned to online learning was dependent on whether students had ready access to a device and the internet, and on the resources within the school. The students who struggled most to access digital technology were those in regional areas and those that are socio-economically disadvantaged. Devices were available on loan but we are not confident the DoE's application process was well understood, since they received only 12 applications and distributed 21 laptops.

While Telstra provided the DoE with 5000 SIM cards or SIM-enabled dongles, only 55 were distributed. While regional freight difficulties and the short period of remote learning may have been responsible, it is disappointing that no way of distributing the extra data to those in need in the metropolitan area was formulated. The department should consider maintaining a supply in regional areas for ease of distribution in the event of future remote learning periods.

Schools used a variety of learning management systems to communicate with students and parents and upload lessons. Catholic Education Western Australia noted the advantages of

all schools and students using a single platform – Microsoft Teams – and the Committee understands that the DoE is working on making this available to its students also. Public school teachers accessed multiple teaching resources via the department's online Connected Learning Hub, but witnesses said no educational software, apps or tools had come to the fore as a result of remote learning.

The move to online learning meant that many teachers had to learn new skills very quickly, highlighting a concern in our previous report that teacher participation in professional learning for digital technologies was limited. However, now that there was a clear reason to upskill, education sector representatives said that those who had been hesitant to embrace technology were now more willing to learn. The DoE should build on this recent exposure by promoting further opportunities for professional learning.

The Committee raised the need for clear leadership in implementing digital technology in its previous report. While the DoE provided planning guidelines to help principals prepare for online learning, the Committee heard that this was not always enough. Some needed more direction. The department agreed that its schools needed to be better connected to the department and that it should set clear parameters within which schools operate.

Reflecting the findings of our previous inquiry once again, not enough use was made of assistive technologies for students with disabilities. Further, while the DoE provided assistance from staff with expertise in this area and focused on how to deliver content remotely, it did not ensure schools were making adjustments to students' individual education plans. The department should maintain greater oversight of schools with special needs students to ensure they are properly catered for in situations such as COVID-19.

Preparations for future periods of remote learning

All education sectors are reviewing their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. The DoE has put in place contingencies in case any schools need to close during the ATAR exam period.

Identified areas for reform or development include flexible learning options for disengaged students; and broadening the role of the School of Isolated and Distance Education to deliver micro-credentials and VET programs. It was acknowledged that the new modes of teaching applied during remote learning opened the way to explore flexible delivery more broadly.

Given the importance of access to a laptop during periods of remote learning, the Committee believes the DoE should focus on ways to make laptops more affordable for secondary students. A laptop with the required specifications costs in excess of $1000, and older cheaper models are often not accepted. While lending school and department laptops may have helped to bridge the divide in the short term, a longer term solution is needed.

Better ways to monitor engagement during periods of remote learning are also needed, given reports that some students admitted to not completing schoolwork while at home. The DoE was unsure how many secondary students may need assistance to catch up as a result of disengagement. While some strategies are in place to help students to re-engage, the department might also monitor the success of tutoring programs in other jurisdictions, whereby university education students have gained employment tutoring students in need.

Ministerial Response

In accordance with Standing Order 277(1) of the Standing Orders of the Legislative Assembly, the Education and Health Standing Committee directs that the Minister representing the Minister for Education and Training report to the Assembly as to the action, if any, proposed to be taken by the Government with respect to the recommendations of the Committee.

Findings and Recommendations

Finding 7 **Page 22**

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.

Recommendation 4 **Page 22**

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.

Finding 8 **Page 27**

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.

Recommendation 5 **Page 27**

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.

Finding 9 **Page 29**

There appears to be no method of determining how many students have been disengaged from school, and for what period.

Recommendation 6 **Page 29**

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.

Lessons from remote learning

Interruptions in schooling are not unusual in Australia, as the 2019 bushfires demonstrated. Judicious investment in equitable access to technologies and learning resources, learning management systems, and building teacher capacity will pay dividends well into the future and contribute to a more equal and resilient education system.

Evidence of the Likely Impact on Educational Outcomes of Vulnerable Children Learning at Home during COVID-19, Australian Council for Educational Research

1 An opportunity to check in on how digital technology was used

Between June and November 2019, the Committee conducted an inquiry into Digital Innovation in Secondary Education. The inquiry explored the potential for digital technology to increase equity of opportunity for students, particularly for those with different learning needs and abilities and those experiencing socioeconomic, cultural and/or geographic disadvantage. While that potential exists and is already being realised to a limited extent, there was a parallel concern that lack of access to the internet, digital technology hardware, education resources and skilled teachers may magnify an existing equity gap.

In March 2020, West Australian schools hastily prepared to adjust their mode of lesson delivery as the prospect of school campus closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic loomed large. Schools ended term one anticipating a need for online learning methods for part of term two. School leaders and teaching staff are to be congratulated for their efforts in preparing in this time of uncertainty, and fortunately there were only five days of teaching restrictions. Despite only five days of no teaching, some students spent a longer period away from the school campus, learning from home. The period of remote learning, while comparatively short, has offered an opportunity to examine strengths and weaknesses. Further, the difficulty of managing and predicting the course of COVID-19 places a responsibility on the education sector to be prepared in the event that students are required to learn from home, as has been the situation in other Australian states.

By April, reports from early research into the impact of remote learning from across the nation were emerging, highlighting internet access issues, lack of digital learning and teaching skills, and predictions of a far greater negative impact on students who were already considered disadvantaged.

As a report by the Centre for Independent Studies notes, the use of technology has been far greater than could have been predicted pre-pandemic, forcing 'educators, parents, students and policymakers to critically consider the role of digital education'.[7]

In light of these reports and the findings of our previous inquiry, the Committee held follow-up hearings with the various education sectors to hear about the challenges and successes

7 B Joseph & G Fahey, *Pain without gain: Why school closures are bad policy*, Policy Paper 28, Centre for Independent Studies, Sydney, May 2020, p. 6.

of using digital technology for remote learning. How well did teachers and students manage, and how might the experiences of curating and delivering online lessons inform future approaches, including situations in which school closures are triggered by other events?

Hearings were held with the Department of Education (DoE), Catholic Education Western Australia (CEWA), the Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia (AISWA) and the Educational Computing Association of WA (ECAWA), whose representatives also appeared during last year's inquiry.

2 Setting the scene

2.1 The situation from 23 March to 18 May

Advice regarding how schools should operate in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic was constantly reassessed. Health and education authorities needed to determine the risk of infection posed by students and teachers attending school amid circumstances that were changing daily. On the 23 March 2020, St Andrews Grammar, a private school in Dianella, became the first school to close after a parent tested positive to coronavirus.[8] While public schools remained open, some parents did not wait for government advice issued on 30 March to keep children at home, resulting in declining attendance across all sectors from around March 23.

2.1.1 Government schools

The DoE was clear in its correspondence that public schools were at no stage shut down, but 'remained open and continued to provide teaching and learning programs to students regardless of whether they were at home or face-to-face in classrooms, learning online or through hard-copy work packages'.[9]

From March 30 (the second last week of term one), the government encouraged public school parents to keep children at home if they were able; however, schools were not officially closed and those that attended were still taught.

For the final week of term one (four days leading up to Good Friday) and a pupil-free day at the start of term two (Tuesday 28 April), students were told to stay home. These five days were designated additional school development days to allow teachers to prepare for a period of remote learning in term two, and students at home were not provided with lesson materials. Those who could not be cared for at home over those five days could attend school but were supervised, not taught.

Public school students were encouraged to return to school on Wednesday 29 April to begin term two. Around 60 per cent of students attended the first day, with the rate higher for

8 AAP, 'Coronavirus crisis: St Andrews Grammar School, Dianella first WA school to close after parent tests positive', *Perth Now* (web-based), 23 March 2020, accessed 11 September 2020, <www.perthnow.com.au>.

9 Ms Lisa Rodgers, Director General, Department of Education, Letter, 8 September 2020, p. 3.

year 11 and 12 students.[10] By week two attendance was around 90 per cent.[11] Any students remaining at home after this were directed by the State Government to return to school by 18 May, the start of week four.

During this period, where some students were home and some at school, teachers were told that they were not expected to teach using multiple modes simultaneously.[12] Thus, there was no period in which there was an expectation that remote teaching – whereby teachers use video technology to interact with students in real time to a set schedule – be implemented. Students who remained at home were expected to learn from online resources and/or distance education packages. Nevertheless, some schools did use video conferencing to deliver lectures to students – particularly in the senior years – as outlined in the case studies provided by the DoE.[13]

2.1.2 Catholic schools

CEWA monitored government announcements and advised its schools accordingly. As with public schools, attendance at Catholic schools began to decline in the weeks leading up to March 30. In this period, many schools provided a mixture of face-to-face and remote learning, but on March 30 remote learning commenced for all students.[14]

Year 11 and 12 students in particular were encouraged to return to the school campus at the start of term two, and approximately 85 per cent did so. Other year groups were not encouraged back to school and only around one-third of students in years 7 to 10 returned. By week three, however, more than 80 per cent of students were back at school. Students other than those in year 11 and 12 continued with online learning for the first four weeks of term, regardless of whether they were at school or at home.[15] By week four, however, all except medically-exempt students were back in the classroom since the government directive to return applied to all sectors.

2.1.3 Independent schools

A diverse group of 145 schools are members of AISWA, including those that are part of the Anglican Schools Commission, the Swan Christian Education Association, and the Adventist group of schools. There are other faith-based schools (Christian, Jewish, Islamic), secular schools, Montessori and Steiner schools, 14 remote community Aboriginal schools and seven Curriculum and Re-Engagement (CARE) schools. While AISWA provides advice and support, it does not direct schools; hence, while AISWA passed on government and Department of Education information, schools determined how they would manage remote learning on an individual basis. As with the other sectors, student attendance declined in the weeks leading

10 Frances Bell, 'WA schools resume for term two after coronavirus shutdown amid new health measures', *ABC News* (web-based), 29 April 2020, accessed 20 August 2020, <www.abc.net.au/news/>.
11 Ms Lisa Rodgers, Department of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 August 2020, p. 5.
12 Ms Lisa Rodgers, Department of Education, Letter, 8 September 2020, p. 1.
13 Department of Education, Correspondence – Background information, 11 August 2020, pp. 17-39.
14 Catholic Education Western Australia, Correspondence – Background information, 31 July 2020, p. 3.
15 Frances Bell, 'WA schools resume for term two after coronavirus shutdown amid new health measures', *ABC News* (web-based), 29 April 2020, accessed 20 August 2020, <www.abc.net.au/news/>.

up to the school holidays, and schools had implemented remote learning by the end of term one.

Many students returned on the first day of term two, particularly those who had less capacity to learn remotely. By week three, most schools had over 90 per cent attendance. Schools that had developed comprehensive online learning programs continued remote learning for longer, but, in line with the government directive, all independent school students returned to school in week four.

Some of the CARE schools remained open the entire time since they were the safest place for their students, some of whom are semi-homeless and many of whom do not have access to technology where they live.[16]

Table 2.1: Summary of remote learning arrangements by sector (Western Australia)

School sector	Start of remote learning/pupil-free days	Return to classroom (prior to government directive, May 18)
Public	6 April	29 April – not compulsory, approx. 60% attended
Catholic	30 March	29 April – staggered return by year group, approx. 85% of year 11&12 students and 30% of year 7-10 students attended
Independent	Towards the end of term one, depending on individual school decision	29 April – individual school decision, approx. 75% attended

Note: The first day of the official school holiday period was Friday 10 April (Good Friday public holiday) and the last day was Monday April 27 (Anzac Day public holiday).

2.1.4 Boarders

Students at boarding schools or boarding facilities were away from the school campus for longer than non-boarders, particularly those from remote communities. Boarders were required to return home and begin remote learning before most other students. While public boarding school students were allowed to return to boarding facilities in week two of term two if measures to keep students separated were in place and numbers could be safely managed, some schools in other sectors waited longer. For example, Scotch College did not allow senior students back until week three, and students in years 7 to 10 until week six.[17]

Border restrictions, the imposition of biosecurity zones and lack of transport delayed the return of students from the Kimberley in particular, with many of these students not returning to school until several weeks after other students. In mid-August, one Aboriginal boarding school still did not have all of its students, partly because parents were worried about risk of infection if they sent their children back.[18]

16 Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia, Correspondence – Background information, 4 August 2020, p. 2.

17 Benjamin Gubana & Joanna Menagh, 'Coronavirus disruption eases in some WA Catholic schools as face-to-face lessons resume', *ABC News* (web-based), 5 May 2020, accessed 21 August 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/>.

18 Ms Valerie Gould, Executive Director, Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia, *Transcript of Evidence*, 19 August 2020, p. 5.

Some of the boarders who had returned to regional/remote communities were allowed to attend local schools (usually primary) where they could access a computer and internet connection to complete their online lessons.[19]

2.1.5 Other states

Across the states, arrangements have been difficult to define as government decisions changed in response to a constantly evolving situation. Like WA, some states regarded their schools as having remained open for the entire period because students who were unable to stay home were allowed to attend school. Victoria, Tasmania, the ACT, New South Wales, and Queensland had the longest closures, ranging from 6 weeks (Queensland) to around 20 weeks (Victoria, due to its second wave).[20]

Table 2.2: Summary of remote learning arrangements by state (public schools only)

State	Start of remote learning/pupil-free days	Return to classroom
Western Australia	6 April*	29 April–18 May (full return)
New South Wales	23 March – remote learning encouraged but schools remained open	11 May for one day a week initially, increasing as the term progressed. 25 May – full return
Victoria	1st wave: 24 March 2nd wave: 20 July (for all but years 11 and 12 and children of essential workers/with special needs)	1st wave: 26 May–9 June (staggered return by year group) 2nd wave: 12 Oct (apart from students in years 3-10 in metropolitan Melbourne)
Queensland	30 March	11 May–25 May (staggered return by year group)
South Australia	Schools remained open, with online support provided for anyone who chose to stay home. Four pupil-free days April 6-9 essentially extended the school holidays	27 April (start of term 2)
Tasmania	1 April (schools remained open for students unable to be supervised or supported to learn from home)	25 May–9 June (staggered return by year group)
Northern Territory	6 April (attendance optional from 23 March)	20 April
Australian Capital Territory	24 March	2 June

* There were four pupil-free (school development) days from 6–9 April, and one pupil-free day on April 28. There were two weeks of school holidays between these dates, from Friday 10 April (Good Friday public holiday) until Monday April 27 (Anzac Day public holiday).

19 Dr Debra Sayce, Executive Director, Catholic Education Western Australia, *Transcript of Evidence*, 19 August 2020, p. 9; Department of Education, Correspondence – Background information, 11 August 2020, p. 4.

20 At the time of writing students in grades 3 to 10 in metropolitan Melbourne had not been given a return date, but there was potential for a staggered return from October 26 if the new case average was less than five per day.

2.2 Studies find disadvantaged students and those away longest most affected

Studies from other countries have attempted to quantify the impact of school closures on student learning – for example, over the long summer break, or when schools are closed due to weather events or teacher strikes. These have provided a basis for studies into the impact of remote learning due to COVID-19 in Australia and elsewhere. Early research in Australia has focused on the impact on disadvantaged or vulnerable students, rather than more broadly. In April the Federal Department of Education, Skills and Employment commissioned five universities/educational institutions to research the impact of the shift to remote learning on vulnerable students, and there have been several others in addition to these five.

One of the commissioned reports used a study of online learning at e-schools in Ohio, which typically enrol lower-achieving students, to estimate the impact of online delivery on Australian disadvantaged students. The study used NAPLAN scores to simulate the effects of online learning for a period of one term through to a full school year. The approximate impact of a term of school closures for disadvantaged students ranged from 1.5 weeks to 3.3 weeks of lost learning, depending on subject and year level.[21]

Consistent conclusions across the five commissioned reports[22] were:

- Relying on the internet for lesson delivery is not feasible because not enough children have access and too many lack the necessary equipment (computers, desks etcetera) at home
- Even if all children had access, teachers and students are not skilled in teaching/learning using online methods
- Students who are already socially and economically disadvantaged will be the most disadvantaged by learning from home; plus, a new cohort of vulnerable students could emerge from the COVID-19 crisis
- Full-time online learning (in any circumstances) is not a good replacement for face-to-face learning, but can be beneficial for students who cannot attend school for a variety of health or social reasons.

Another report by the Grattan Institute used findings from a UK literature review of the impact of schooling disruptions on disadvantaged children to model the learning losses during remote learning in Australian states and territories. It estimated that the equity gap

21 Mitchell Institute/Centre for International Research on Education Systems, *Impact of learning from home on educational outcomes for disadvantaged children*, Victoria University, April 2020.

22 The reports were, in addition to footnote 15: ACER (Australian Council for Educational Research), *Ministerial Briefing Paper on Evidence of the Likely Impact on Educational Outcomes of Vulnerable Children Learning at Home during COVID-19*, Melbourne, 22 April 2020; N Brown et al., *Learning at home during COVID-19: Effects on vulnerable young Australians. Independent Rapid Response Report*, Peter Underwood Centre for Educational Attainment, University of Tasmania, April 2020; C Drane, L Vernon & S O'Shea, *The impact of 'learning at home' on the educational outcomes of vulnerable children in Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic*, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University, April 2020; J Clinton, *Supporting Vulnerable Children in the Face of a Pandemic, Centre for Program Evaluation*, Centre for Program Evaluation, Melbourne Graduate School of Education, The University of Melbourne, April 2020.

grows at triple the rate during remote schooling. Many disadvantaged students were likely to have learnt at about 50 per cent of their regular rate.

In New South Wales where schools were closed for seven weeks, the difference in learning between disadvantaged students and all other students was expected to widen by six per cent. This was the equivalent of about five weeks' numeracy and literacy learning. In Western Australia where schools were officially not delivering lessons for five days, the widening of the literacy and numeracy gap was calculated as negligible.[23]

However, the report said the losses from remote learning during the school shutdowns should be kept in perspective, noting that the size of the existing achievement gap was much larger (about 10 times) than the learning losses caused by COVID-19.

It said the projections should serve as a rough guide only, given that the modelling is based on learning losses during summer holiday periods when remote learning does not take place; and efforts by schools and teachers to make remote learning work well were not taken into account.

However, on this second point, a national survey of teachers had shown that teachers believed students learnt at only around 50 to 75 per cent of their regular pace during remote schooling, or 25 to 50 per cent for disadvantaged students; and a survey of NSW teachers found that only 35 per cent of teachers in high SES schools and 18 per cent of teachers in low SES schools were confident students were learning well during remote schooling.

On this basis the authors did not believe that remote learning would have addressed the predicted learning losses for the most vulnerable children, and a catching-up strategy would be necessary.

Students with disability may have also learnt less. A report released in July which examined the findings of a national survey conducted by Children and Young People with Disability Australia found that there were significant reductions in the provision of usual supports for students with disability. More than half did not have curriculum and learning materials in accessible formats.[24]

The Centre for Independent Studies (CIS) report mentioned on page one says that while there is already a body of research on at-home learning, this has not been done in the context of school closures due to a pandemic. Home-schooling has typically referred to parents educating their children using their own curriculum in a flexible way that allows them to cater to specific educational needs.

The known benefits of home-schooling were unlikely to be realised during school closures, where parents are supervising their children to complete tasks given to them by the school using the standard curriculum — and often while also working from home. Similarly,

23 J Sonnemann & P Goss, *COVID catch-up: helping disadvantaged students close the equity gap*, Grattan Institute, June 2020, p. 16.

24 H Dickinson et al., *Not even remotely fair: Experiences of students with disability during COVID-19*, Report prepared for Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA), Melbourne, July 2020.

research based on teachers' integration of technology is usually in school settings with teacher support available, meaning it may not be transferable to remote learning.

The evidence around the value of technology for learning has been inconsistent, the report says, with some research showing large positive impacts and others recording small positive and even negative effects. Emerging evidence indicated technology is an effective supplement to face-to-face instruction, but not a replacement.

The CIS report says that even though no school system could have predicted the demands posed by the pandemic, Australia's school system should have been better prepared for the challenges. Recent significant public investments created an expectation that school systems would be more digitally ready.

The report asserts that Australia has a poor track record in large-scale online activity e.g. there was 'considerable resistance' to the online trial of NAPLAN in 2019, which also exposed a lack of capability to deal with connectivity problems in schools; and during the current school closures, online learning platforms had failed (Queensland's educational platform crashed on the first day of home-based learning).[25]

3 What remote learning exposed

3.1 The digital divide was laid bare

While the Committee's report, *A Better Connected Future: Opportunities for digital innovation in secondary education,* found some big disparities between schools and students in terms of access to digital technology, students without their own devices were at least afforded some access to a computer or iPad and the internet on the school campus. When these students are not attending school, the digital divide is suddenly more apparent.

There is a disparity between the students with access – some students cannot afford the latest devices and internet access and this poses challenges when schools increasingly expect them to access online resources

- 'Growing Up Digital',
Gonski Institute for Education

According to PISA data from 2018,[26] six per cent of Australian 15-year-olds in the lowest socio-economic status group (bottom 20 per cent) have no link to the internet. Eighteen per cent in this group have no computer for schoolwork, and 34 per cent have no educational software. Higher SES families have access to a range of equipment.[27] On average, Australians have two computers, 2.5 smartphones and 1.6 tablets per household.[28]

25 B Joseph & G Fahey, *Pain without gain: Why school closures are bad policy*, Policy Paper 28, Centre for Independent Studies, Sydney, May 2020.

26 The latest round of the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) surveyed 14,273 Australian 15-year-olds as part of its global assessment of 79 education systems.

27 Mitchell Institute/Centre for International Research on Education Systems, *Impact of learning from home on educational outcomes for disadvantaged children*, Victoria University, April 2020, pp. 4-5.

28 ABS, *Household Use of Information Technology: Australia 2016-17*, Datacube, 2018.

During the remote learning period, schools had to learn very quickly which students would not have access to a device and/or the internet so that alternative arrangements to online learning could be organised. In most cases hard copy work packs were delivered or posted to these students.

In the media and research reports, examples emerged of families with several school-age children sharing one computer between them and sometimes with their parents as well.[29] Where devices were available, the internet may not have been. This may have been a connectivity issue (particularly in rural areas) or an affordability issue, or both.

Evidence from the State's education sectors confirmed this. The DoE provided case study examples of a range of secondary schools, which revealed that students at regional and lower SES metropolitan schools were worse off than others. For example: Central Midlands SHS (in Moora) said that 50 per cent of its students did not have reliable internet at home; Merredin College said online learning was challenging for many farming families who rely on satellite services for internet access; Wananami Remote Community School said internet connection and access to technology within the communities was limited; Coodanup College (in Mandurah) said a 'significant proportion' of its families did not have internet available at home or access to technology; and Thornlie SHS said about 10 per cent of students were unable to engage in online learning.[30]

CEWA confirmed that some students in Catholic low SES schools, CARE schools and remote schools did not have their own devices,[31] and it was a similar story for the same types of schools in the independent sector.

AISWA executive director Valerie Gould said the move to remote learning had clearly shown the extent of inequitable access to digital technology, stating: 'we always knew that but it has really, really flagged it.'[32]

Educational Computing Association of WA (ECAWA) president Michael King said the digital divide was clear. Some schools and areas of the state had better access to technology and the internet that made it easier to engage in the digital space.[33]

According to ECAWA professional development coordinator Shaloni Naik, such big differences in technology access changed the outcome for the student.[34]

Finding 1

Socio-economically disadvantaged students and those in regional areas struggled most to access the digital technology required for online learning.

29 For example: Emma Taylor, 'Online panacea still long way off', *The Countryman*, 11 June 2020; N Brown et al., *Learning at home during COVID-19: Effects on vulnerable young Australians. Independent Rapid Response Report*, Peter Underwood Centre for Educational Attainment, University of Tasmania, April 2020.

30 Department of Education, Correspondence – Background information, 11 August 2020, pp. 17-39.

31 Catholic Education Western Australia, Correspondence – Background information, 31 July 2020, p. 1.

32 *Transcript of Evidence*, 19 August 2020, p. 7.

33 *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 August 2020, p. 1.

34 *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 August 2020, p. 10.

3.1.1 Some students had to borrow devices in order to learn at home

The DoE gave schools the authority to loan any spare laptops to students. Some higher SES schools operating BYOD programs may have loaned only a handful of laptops, while other schools needed to loan out every device they could muster, including those borrowed from other schools.[35]

Schools that did not have enough devices could apply to the DoE for more, sourced from a central supply of devices (number not disclosed) which then became school property, available for loan. The DoE said it received only 12 applications, resulting in 21 laptops being distributed to schools. Its COVID management team was not aware of any schools with secondary students that did not have access to a computer or other device.[36]

We were not given a figure for the combined total of devices loaned by schools and by the department to secondary students, but given that the number of laptops loaned in other states is in the thousands,[37] it is hard to believe that every student requiring a laptop received one from their school. Around 40 per cent of schools do not operate a BYOD program, meaning students at these schools are less likely to own a suitable device. Based on the low number of applications and what we have heard anecdotally, it may be the case that the application process was not promoted and/or was not transparent. The short period in which students were asked to learn from home may also mean students did not ask their schools for laptops – or, in the reverse case, the lack of a suitable device meant students returned to school as soon as they were able.

The DoE says it has purchased a 'significant number' of new laptops targeted for at-home use by students in the event of a second wave of COVID-19, which would be available through a structured needs-based process.[38] We suggest that schools and students be made fully aware of the existence of the laptops and the process of applying for one.

Recommendation 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.

Catholic and independent secondary schools also gave students without computers access to school devices. AISWA said some schools had to purchase quite a few devices for students, making online learning more expensive to deliver than face-to-face learning (despite perceptions that online delivery may be costing private schools less).[39]

While schools, community members and charity organisations were keen to donate laptops to students in need, any that were more than three or four years old may have been

35 Ms Melesha Sands, Executive Director – Recovery, Department of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 August 2020, p. 8; Mrs Shaloni Naik, ECAWA, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 August 2020, p. 4.
36 Ms Lisa Rodgers, Department of Education, Letter, 8 September 2020, p. 2.
37 More than 12,500 loaned to secondary students in Victoria; 2700 in Tasmania as of 30 April; 3400 distributed in Queensland; 11,166 additional devices distributed in New South Wales.
38 Department of Education, Correspondence – Background information, 11 August 2020, p. 9.
39 Ms Valerie Gould, AISWA, *Transcript of Evidence*, 19 August 2020, p. 2.

rejected due to not meeting the specifications required to run essential software and applications.

Ms Gould said that some of the larger independent schools offered slightly older devices to schools in need but they were not as useful as they initially appeared because of their age.[40]

Mr King said ECAWA members had indicated that if the technology to connect to the school network was too old it could compromise the connection for all student computers. Older computers may also require extra maintenance which IT technicians, already pressed for time, may be unable to perform. Security settings on older devices was also of concern.[41]

Students without access to a laptop at home used a mobile phone for some activities. For example, Broome SHS students without a computer used phones to access classes delivered via Webex, the video-conferencing platform used by the DoE. It is available as a mobile phone app as well as for computers.[42]

CEWA said that at least one CARE school used social media platforms to communicate and disseminate work, since its students generally used their phones for access and were more likely to use social media than other system platforms.[43]

However, as Ms Gould notes: '… you cannot really do good online learning on a phone. You can do bits, but it is not like having a computer with a proper screen and a camera and all those sorts of things.'[44]

3.1.2 Very few students received devices to connect to the internet

The DoE has been expanding the bandwidth capacity it provides to schools around the state since last year, and this was no doubt helpful for teachers on site who were using Connect and Webex to deliver lessons. Notwithstanding, one teacher noted that the internet struggled when multiple teachers were simultaneously trying to upload two weeks' worth of lessons to the Connect site.[45]

The greater challenge, as noted above, was for the students at home without a reliable fixed line internet connection. The DoE secured 5000 SIM cards/dongles from Telstra aimed at assisting disadvantaged students; however, only 55 – just over one per cent – were distributed.[46] At the hearing, the DoE cited regional freight difficulties and the short period of remote learning as reasons for the low level of distribution.

It is disappointing that only 55 students (presumably all in the metropolitan area, since the SIMs could not be delivered elsewhere) were able to benefit from a boost to internet data. It seems unlikely that that such a small number were experiencing difficulty accessing or

40 Ms Valerie Gould, AISWA, *Transcript of Evidence*, 19 August 2020, p. 8.
41 *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 August 2020, p. 3.
42 Department of Education, Correspondence – Background information, 11 August 2020, p. 9.
43 Catholic Education Western Australia, Correspondence – Background information, 31 July 2020, p. 2.
44 *Transcript of Evidence*, 19 August 2020, p. 8.
45 Mrs Shaloni Naik, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 August 2020, p. 4.
46 Ms Lisa Rodgers, Department of Education, Letter, 8 September 2020, p. 2.

affording an internet connection. With so many SIM cards waiting to be used, the DoE might have been more proactive in identifying students who needed them most.

In Boulder, near Kalgoorlie, more than 100 local families were expected to benefit from donated computers and pre-paid SIM cards organised by the Rotary Club of Boulder,[47] signifying that the need was there.

Given the prospect of intrastate border closures being enacted in the event of future outbreaks, it would also be sensible to store a supply of devices in regional centres to make distribution easier.

CEWA surveyed its secondary schools to ascertain the number of students without suitable access to the internet and provided dongles to students who needed them, and independent schools also purchased dongles to send home to students.[48]

These may have also been used in cases where the fixed line or mobile data allowance was not sufficient. AISWA had reports that some families used their month's internet download capacity in the first week.[49]

Mr King said that some boarders from the school where he teaches who had returned home could only connect to the internet via cellular technologies and their data allowance was rapidly consumed. He said where possible the school uploaded content to platforms like Stream or YouTube so that students could download material in off-peak periods.[50]

AISWA said that due to data limits and connectivity problems, some schools were asked to provide apps that did not use the internet.[51]

Families forced to use mobile data (i.e. using their mobile as a WiFi hotspot, otherwise known as WiFi tethering) to connect to the internet are significantly disadvantaged since mobile plans have lower download limits and are more expensive. Around 30 per cent of households in the lowest income quartile use mobile-only plans.[52]

Students with no (or poor) fixed line internet access who were also in mobile blackspots were particularly disadvantaged. A news article gave examples of students forced back to their rural homes who were unable to get consistent coverage, some relying on signal boosters or having to drive into town to connect.[53]

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47 Jason Mennell, 'Making sure all kids can access online learning', *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 11 April 2020.

48 Catholic Education Western Australia, Correspondence – Background information, 31 July 2020, p. 1; Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia, Correspondence – Background information, 4 August 2020, p. 1.

49 Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia, Correspondence – Background information, 4 August 2020, p. 1.

50 *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 August 2020, p. 5.

51 Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia, Correspondence – Background information, 4 August 2020, p. 1.

52 J Thomas et al., *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2019*, RMIT University and Swinburne University of Technology, for Telstra, 2019.

53 Emma Taylor, 'Online panacea still long way off', *The Countryman*, 11 June 2020.

The Committee wrote to Telstra and NBN to ask what extra provisions had been made for students. Aside from the 5000 SIM cards it provided, Telstra said it provided 'a reliable and resilient network throughout the COVID-19 crisis when demand increased', and the capacity to reliably deliver digital education programs would be pivotal in preparing for further pandemics. It was also investigating unmetered (no cost) mobile content for students to use on specific educational programs such as Reading Eggs and Mathletics.[54]

NBN directed approximately $50 million to help internet providers support low income households without an NBN connection. NBN Co said it worked with the DoE and schools to ensure this initiative reached those most in need.[55]

Finding 2

Only around one per cent of SIM cards provided to the Department of Education to give to students in need were distributed.

Recommendation 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.

3.1.3 Online applications

As would be expected, the DoE experienced an increase in demand for its online teacher/parent/student collaboration platform Connect, the Cisco Webex video conferencing platform and Microsoft Teams. In response, it rapidly expanded the infrastructure supporting Connect.[56]

While the Committee's 2019 inquiry was told of dissatisfaction with the Connect platform, we were not made aware of any particularly negative reports regarding Connect during remote learning. It appears to have been widely used, although some public schools do use other learning management systems such as SEQTA, Moodle and Google Classroom.

AISWA, which acts for schools with a wide range of educational systems and philosophies, provides guidance on digital platforms but it is up to the individual school to decide which to use. Conversely, CEWA, which operates as a system like the DoE, has implemented a single digital ecosystem across all of its schools. All Catholic schools – staff and students – use Microsoft Teams.

Microsoft Teams is also being used by DoE teaching staff, but it has not yet been rolled out for public school students. The DoE had been piloting Microsoft Teams and it was fast-tracked for staff use. However, given it is an online collaboration tool, work was still being performed to ensure it would not expose students to cyberbullying. The DoE has been

54 Mr Malcolm DeSilva, Telstra, Letter, 18 June 2020, p. 2.
55 Ms Jane McNamara, nbn Local, Email, 8 June 2020.
56 Department of Education, Correspondence – Background information, 11 August 2020, p. 9.

working with CEWA, which began its system-wide digital transformation process four or five years ago.[57]

CEWA believes its previous work in the digital space stood it in good stead during the pandemic. Every student and every staff member is provided access to the same digital resources (Microsoft Office 365, Teams and Stream). CEWA director of governance and digital technology Dr Edward Simons said the decision was made to 'sweep all the legacy platforms aside' and create a uniform system for security, analytics and ease of collaboration.

'That came about to try to safeguard those schools that for resource or geographical settings just have not had access to that opportunity,' he said.[58]

Dr Simons said the CEWA digital ecosystem case study is referred to globally because of what it has achieved. 'We evolved from about 12,000 active users on Microsoft Teams, which is the hero product that we have used, to about 55,000 in the space of a couple of weeks, and that bolted together pretty seamlessly.'[59]

Schools were also able to request access to resources that had been curated for the CEWA Virtual Schools Network (ViSN) (the equivalent of SIDE) through which some students access online Year 11 and 12 courses.[60]

In *A Better Connected Future*, the Committee reported on the plethora of software, apps, educational games, and web-based tools and courses that are part of a burgeoning edtech industry. We asked DoE, CEWA and ECAWA whether any particular educational software, apps or tools had come to the fore as a result of remote learning, but it was mainly the mainstream tools that were spoken about (e.g. the Microsoft tools already mentioned, Connect, SEQTA, Webex, Zoom, YouTube and Google Suite for Education). Many secondary schools also used subject-specific tools with elements such as online tutoring, adaptive learning and video tutorials.

The DoE said that while schools made local decisions about which digital tools to use during COVID-19 restrictions, anecdotal feedback suggested an increase in the use of familiar tools rather than new tools. Nevertheless, even after students returned to onsite learning, the DoE said some systems were being used more than they were before COVID-19, suggesting teachers and students had found value in their continued use.[61]

Parents, teachers and older students no doubt accessed apps on the recommendation of peers, but there does not seem to be a formal mechanism for determining which proved most useful.

57 Mr David Dans, Chief Information Officer, Department of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 August 2020, pp. 8-9.
58 *Transcript of Evidence*, 19 August 2020, p. 3.
59 *ibid*., p. 6.
60 Catholic Education Western Australia, Correspondence – Background information, 31 July 2020, p. 4.
61 Ms Lisa Rodgers, Department of Education, Letter, 8 September 2020, p. 4.

The DoE provided an online Connected Learning Hub, whereby teachers could upload resources and share them with other teachers. More than 14,000 resources were contributed.

The department also provided the following resources for download and use with any learning management system (e.g. Connect, SEQTA).

- 443 learning packages across K-12 and all learning areas (also printable)
- 71 digital modules (mainly mapped to senior secondary courses)
- 162 Connect communities providing primary, secondary, special educational needs and student wellbeing support and resources (linked to the Hub)
- hundreds of worksheets, activities, digital objects and other learning materials linked to year levels and learning areas/subjects.[62]

3.2 Teachers are now more receptive to professional learning in ICT

As well as emphasising the digital divide, the transition to remote learning has exposed the gap in teachers' digital technology skills. The Committee's inquiry report identified this as an issue which should be addressed. Our report also noted that teacher participation in professional learning for digital technologies was limited, despite opportunities provided by the DoE.

The move to online learning meant that many teachers had to learn new skills very quickly. The DoE and CEWA increased their professional learning offerings towards the end of term one, delivered in multiple formats e.g. face-to-face professional development training, webinars from external providers such as Microsoft and Google, online self-paced programs, recorded sessions for on-demand viewing. AISWA offered samples of online lesson plans more so than training for particular platforms. Since there are a wide variety of school systems within the independent sector, providing overarching training was not feasible and schools (or groups of schools e.g. Anglican) may have provided this independently.[63]

In addition to formal training, many teachers learnt from their peers in person or in online forums. ECAWA president Michael King said staff who were confident using particular types of technology or products helped out their colleagues. He said the way in which internal training was approached would have been dependent on the school. His school, part of the Catholic system, ran afternoon sessions for teachers covering baseline skills from week six of term one, so that everyone had enough time to learn.[64]

But professional learning was not confined to WA. The degree of international and domestic collaboration in online teaching was 'staggering' and the rate of change in teaching technique had been 'amazing', according to a Sydney teacher.[65]

62 Department of Education, Correspondence – Background information, 11 August 2020, p. 10.
63 Ms Valerie Gould, AISWA, *Transcript of Evidence*, 19 August 2020, p. 11.
64 *Transcript of Evidence*, 19 August 2020, p. 10.
65 Robert Bolton, 'Teaching will never be the same again', *Australian Financial Review*, 23 March 2020, p. 16.

To deliver remote teaching well, teachers needed upskilling in both online teaching and online learning design, according to the Australian Council for Educational Research.[66] The Grattan Institute noted that teachers had switched to remote schooling without a solid evidence base for how to teach well online.[67]

CEWA noted that many teachers were just beginning to gain confidence with online learning and to explore digital pedagogies when face-to-face learning resumed. While there had been some rapid gains in the digital skills of staff and students, the next stage of learning should focus further on digital pedagogies.[68]

While the demands on teachers to suddenly provide lessons digitally were intense, it did at least highlight to teachers the relevance of learning digital skills. As DoE's executive director of Recovery said, it provided 'the best reason for change that we have seen in terms of moves to digital platforms'.[69]

ECAWA professional development coordinator Shaloni Naik said teachers were pushed to upskill and then realised how important it is to embed ICT and use technology, 'so they had to change their mindset'.[70]

Mr King said there was 'a phenomenal amount' of professional learning being undertaken by all teachers to try to prepare for digital learning during the phase 2 restrictions and it was 'really impressive' to see people who had previously been hesitant to embrace technology engaging in that space.[71]

DoE chief information officer David Dans said the value of investment in technology such as Webex was now being realised:

> people have latched on to those digital technologies now and are actually leveraging real value out of them in the schools. That is something that was a lot of push pre-COVID, and now we have got schools pulling, which is a much better place to be in because we can respond to the demand.[72]

The DoE says that professional learning on the use of the department's online services, such as Connect and Microsoft 365, is being refocused to help teachers implement blended models of learning that can build on what they have learned during COVID-19, to make more effective use of online learning opportunities to supplement face-to-face teaching.[73]

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66 ACER (Australian Council for Educational Research*), Ministerial Briefing Paper on Evidence of the Likely Impact on Educational Outcomes of Vulnerable Children Learning at Home during COVID-19*, Melbourne, 22 April 2020.

67 J Sonnemann & P Goss, *COVID catch-up: Helping disadvantaged students close the equity gap*, Grattan Institute, June 2020.

68 Catholic Education Western Australia, Correspondence – Background information, 31 July 2020, p. 5.

69 Ms Melesha Sands, Department of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 August 2020, p. 13.

70 *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 August 2020, p. 10.

71 *ibid*.

72 *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 August 2020, p. 13.

73 Ms Lisa Rodgers, Department of Education, Letter, 8 September 2020, p. 4.

Finding 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.

Recommendation 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.

3.3 Schools need clear leadership and more departmental direction

In its 2019 inquiry, the Committee found that there was a relationship between the progress of school leaders in establishing an ICT focus and strategy and the extent to which digital technology was adopted and embraced within a school. Opportunities for digital learning were also often dependent on the knowledge and enthusiasm of a particular teacher or teachers.[74]

As outlined in the previous section, teachers were often dependent on specific teachers with digital technology skills within their school to teach them the various aspects of online teaching. Learning from peers may be reasonable and logical so long as there are enough teachers within a school that are sufficiently skilled – and this may depend on the principal's attitude to the role of digital technology and his/her level of understanding.

The engagement of retired principals with expertise in leading digital schools to develop frameworks, templates and support materials for school leaders was an indication that the DoE had in fact recognised that not all principals have the same level of digital technology experience. The DoE also redeployed principals working in non-school roles to a principal helpline, which was praised for its ability to provide 'collegiate advice from people who understood the role, with no judgement'.[75]

There was also acknowledgement that sharing of professional practice through principal network groups could assist the implementation of the *Information and Communication Technologies Strategy (2020-2024)* and help drive reform.[76]

But these initiatives did not necessarily have an immediate impact. The Committee was given the example of two public secondary schools whose leadership dealt with the transition very differently. At one, a specialist technology school in the northern suburbs, the principal met with the heads of each learning area in week eight of term one to review each Connect group and check for consistency and ease of use. A standard communication template was developed for use across all learning areas. All classes were delivered online, and all teachers used the same guide for instructing students on web camera, avatar and

74 Education and Health Standing Committee, *A Better Connected Future: Opportunities for digital innovation in secondary education*, Legislative Assembly, Parliament of Western Australia, Perth, November 2019, pp. 48-49.

75 Department of Education, Correspondence – Background information, 11 August 2020, p. 4.

76 *ibid*., p. 6.

microphone use.[77] At another school with lower levels of technology engagement, teachers were reportedly not given direction on which platform to use or given guidance on online conferencing, or even instructed on how to monitor attendance.[78]

Further to this, Mr King said that while his (Catholic) school provided baseline expectations for teachers, he had heard from other schools that teachers were receiving multiple emails with suggestions for different things to try. He said that some of those things were 'overlapping' which 'confused teachers in what they were expected to be able to do'.[79]

As noted by ECAWA representative Shaloni Naik:

> When the schools have a good leadership team, they will mandate downwards: this is the way we are going to operate, this is the way we will run, these are the expectations for communication. But if they do not have that experience or knowledge, then how were they able to pass that down to the staff?[80]

The DoE created the Connected Learning Hub to provide teachers and school leaders with resources, tools, advice and strategies to adopt and/or adapt to suit their context. Planning guidelines and tools were also published to support principals to lead preparations for online/distance learning with their teachers and school communities.[81]

But this may not be prescriptive enough. Mrs Naik advocated looking at best practice globally to determine the most appropriate tools and then mandating their use across Western Australia to ensure 'it gets given to everybody' (much the same as the CEWA model).[82]

The issue of more direction for principals is not simple since some may feel unable to act without department directives and others may favour greater autonomy.

Public schools have the freedom to select resources and programs that best meet the needs of their students, but the DoE agreed that it should provide set parameters within which they operate.[83]

DoE director general Lisa Rodgers said that its 818 autonomous schools needed to be better connected to the department. The department needed 'to take a position on particular things' and the remote learning experience had provided the opportunity.

> Principals are saying they want that response from the centre. There will be a tension between local autonomy and local decision-making and some of the conditions that we might require to be put in place, but actually I think this has given us the impetus to do that and the reason to do that.[84]

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77 Department of Education, Correspondence – Background information, 11 August 2020, p. 17.
78 Mrs Shaloni Naik, ECAWA, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 August 2020, pp. 7, 11.
79 ECAWA, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 August 2020, p. 11.
80 *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 August 2020, p. 8.
81 Department of Education, Correspondence – Background information, 11 August 2020, pp. 4, 10, 11.
82 ECAWA, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 August 2020, p. 11.
83 Ms Lisa Rodgers, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 August 2020, p. 8.
84 *ibid*.

Finding 4

The degree to which school leadership had embraced digital technology influenced how the school coped with remote learning.

Finding 5

Some schools were seeking more direction from the Department of Education in regard to implementing digital technology for online learning.

3.4 More can be done to assist students with special needs

The Committee's 2019 inquiry found encouraging examples of how digital technology is used to assist students with physical or sensory disabilities and those with learning difficulties. However, we found that while the DoE provides assistive technologies and some professional learning support in their use for staff, the tools are reportedly under-used. We recommended that the effective use of assistive technologies in secondary schools be part of the DoE's ICT vision statement, and are pleased to see that the *ICT Vision for Teaching and Learning in Public Schools 2020-2024* released in March includes: 'Enable access to effective assistive technologies to promote equity and opportunity.'

The *Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) Strategy 2020-2024* released at the same time expects that teachers will be able to strategically select and use appropriate learning technologies, including assistive technologies, to help deliver digital literacy; and that the ICT platform and systems will support differentiated learning.

In its response to our report, the DoE said that 'decisions regarding how devices/software can best match the needs of an individual student are best made by the school and teacher in collaboration with the student and their family', but that the department would strengthen advice and guidance to schools to inform these decisions.

Again, the pandemic lockdown made these considerations more urgent. The DoE said it was recognised that some students may require their curriculum to be adjusted to meet their special educational needs. Teachers of students with special educational needs could access materials through the department's Connected Learning Hub which they could develop as individualised and targeted learning programs. The DoE said support to help schools differentiate the curriculum and develop individualised learning packages was also available from consulting teachers from the School of Special Educational Needs: Disability and visiting teachers from the School of Special Educational Needs: Sensory.[85]

While we have not directly canvassed special needs families in WA, a report examining the findings of a national survey[86] conducted by Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) found that there were significant reductions in the provision of usual supports for students with disability. More than half did not have curriculum and learning materials in accessible formats and individual education plans had not been amended. A

85 Department of Education, Correspondence – Background information, 11 August 2020, p. 13.
86 Eight per cent of respondents were from Western Australia.

number of respondents commented that their support was not worse during the pandemic, but this was because it had not been good before.[87]

The DoE's acting director of Disability and Inclusion Stuart Percival acknowledged that the department had focused on content and how to deliver – ensuring that teachers had ready access to materials and an understanding of how implementation might be different in a remote context. They were less focused on personalised planning and making adjustments to individual education plans as they 'made an assumption that personalised planning was something that schools were automatically doing'.[88]

Mr Percival said that as a result of the CYDA findings they were now looking at incorporating that element into the process. Had this not been highlighted by the CYDA report it is unclear when the DoE would have become aware that the schools were not necessarily taking responsibility for amending individual education plans. This may be a school resourcing issue, but it also may be a case of school autonomy leading to insufficient accountability in this area.

The CYDA report noted that online studies offered new opportunities to network and connect, but it was important to consider the additional modifications that might be needed, such as closed captioning, speech to text, and text to speech. These technologies were often purchasable upgrades or required additional installation. Educators needed to make sure students with disability were socially connected to their peers and the school and to create accessible online spaces underpinned by Universal Design for Learning.[89]

Universal Design for Learning principles include providing multiple modes of engagement, representation, action and expression. In its submission to our Digital Innovation in Secondary Education inquiry last year, CEWA noted that digital technology helps educators meet these principles. In the recent period of remote learning, CEWA executive director Dr Sayce said digital tools enabled face-to-face interactions which were important for many students with disability who learn by facial cues.[90]

The use of video allowed teachers to pick up verbal and physical cues and gauge the student's confidence and understanding during online instruction. Regular contact with the families and the students had also helped.

> It is that level of one to one that I think, sticking with the individual education plan that schools are able to say, 'Okay; this child needs these sorts of things and these are the types of activities or arrangements that need to be provided.' In that space, it was really hats off to those educators who work with the children, because they

87 H Dickinson et al., *Not even remotely fair: Experiences of students with disability during COVID-19*, Report prepared for Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA), Melbourne, July 2020.
88 *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 August 2020, p. 12.
89 H Dickinson et al., *Not even remotely fair: Experiences of students with disability during COVID-19*, Report prepared for Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA), Melbourne, July 2020.
90 *Transcript of Evidence*, 19 August 2020, p. 11.

> worked in earnest with that child, always listening to the parent, always wanting to support that child.[91]

Nevertheless, Dr Sayce said most children with special needs returned to school at the first opportunity 'because they needed to'.

AISWA's executive director said COVID-19 had proved 'really, really challenging' for those with more significant learning difficulties. Funding for students with disability in the independent sector was less than in the government sector and did not cover the cost of having an education assistant work one-on-one with the student.[92]

> I know that in some schools the teachers have actually been going out to the home to try and work with the parents to try and … support that child. Yes, I think they have tried very, very hard but it is difficult … Visually challenged students have always had computers with large type—that was easy; you just move it home. It really varies by the type of disability, but it is those with severe learning difficulties and severe behavioural difficulties that have found it really hard because they do not have that one-on-one attention.[93]

Mr King said some of the technologies relied upon during COVID-19 can assist students with mobility issues and those who cannot or do not wish to attend a school campus. These and other technologies would go some way to levelling the playing field for some of the most vulnerable students. For example, text to speech software could assist students who felt more confident talking about a subject than writing it and live transcription of video could assist whose first language is not English. But people needed to be made aware of how assistive devices could be beneficial.

> This may be an opportunity where many people have made great strides in their engagement with technology and would be open to implementing assistive technologies. I hope that teachers had good experiences using technology during COVID-19 and that they would be open to implementing the assistive technologies in their practice.[94]

The Gonski Institute's *Growing Up Digital* report notes that 60 per cent of teachers (from a national survey) believe technology has positively impacted the learning experience for students with disabilities.[95] (Note, this was referring to a survey conducted before COVID-19).

Finding 6

Schools catering to students with special needs could make better use of assistive technologies.

91 Dr Debra Sayce, Catholic Education Western Australia, *Transcript of Evidence*, 19 August 2020, p. 11.
92 Ms Valerie Gould, AISWA, *Transcript of Evidence*, 19 August 2020, p. 12.
93 *ibid*.
94 Mr Michael King, ECAWA, Email, 28 August 2020.
95 Gonski Institute for Education, *Growing Up Digital (Australia): Phase 1 technical report*, Prepared by Amy Graham and Pasi Sahlberg, Gonski Institute for Education, UNSW, Sydney, April 2020, p. 18.

Finding 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.

Recommendation 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.

4 Preparations for future periods of remote learning are underway

4.1 Responses are being reviewed

All sectors are assessing what worked well and how the experiences of online learning might inform future approaches. In a structural sense, the DoE has said it is reviewing its emergency procedures and framework in response to COVID-19 and are in the process of preparing a 'considerations' list for principals.[96]

The DoE's incident management team (IMT) was formally activated on 17 March in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the return to face-to-face teaching the IMT remains active, though now to a lesser degree.[97]

The disruption to face-to-face teaching practices has identified a number of areas for reform or development to inform future practices. Some highlighted by the DoE include:

- increased capability to provide continuity of teaching and learning in response to a number of possible scenarios, including floods, fires, cyclones and localised outbreaks of COVID-19
- adaptation of the model of online learning support delivered to medically vulnerable students to provide flexible learning options for disengaged students
- harnessing the School of Isolated and Distance Education's (SIDE) expertise in non-classroom teaching to lead innovation in flexible delivery of learning.[98]

In terms of ongoing preparedness for any future return to remote learning, the Director General said there were two key variables for any scenario: context (for example whether it was a particular school or specific year groups that were being shut down) and timing.

> So, are we shutting down a school, for example, for one day for a clean or are we shutting down a community for a certain period of time, or are we shutting down the state? Those two variables are the things that we cannot anticipate so we have various scenarios in regard to that.
>
> Underpinning the scenario planning are a series of principles that we have put in place as a result of how we ran in the middle of the coronavirus response in regard

96 Ms Melesha Sands, Department of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 August 2020, p. 8.
97 Ms Lisa Rodgers, Department of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 August 2020, pp. 4-5.
98 Department of Education, Correspondence – Background information, 11 August 2020, p. 6.

> to flexible working arrangements, health and hygiene, provision of online learning, and continuity of care for our students. There are a series of principles that sit underneath those scenarios that we will just draw on, depending on what happens with the virus in WA.[99]

To reflect the disruption to learning during the pandemic there has already been adjustment in activities for the senior school cohort. For example, the number of assessments have been reduced, as have the number of excursions and camps. Schools have had some flexibility in the way this has been managed with some opting for multiple tests in lieu of one exam.

In the case of practical examinations in areas such as dance, drama, and music, the size of the examination rooms has been increased to allow for social distancing. There is also the option for students taking examinations in areas that require contact with others (e.g. physical education) to be tested using viewing and commentary methods.[100]

There have been a number of contingencies made in preparation for final written examinations. For instance, should a small cohort be unable to sit the exams, the processes employed for sickness and misadventure can be adapted whereby the final Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) grade is generated using school marks. Should a school or cluster of schools need to close, arrangements have been made to use a large exhibition centre. If the exams should not proceed for any reason, a mathematical process would be used to generate an ATAR.[101]

School systems should stocktake what has worked and what has not worked during this period of online education. Given the possibility of a second wave of coronavirus infections or future natural disasters, this should be part of a proactive and evidence-based approach to educational technology.

- 'Pain without gain: Why school closures are bad policy', Centre for Independent Studies

At the time of the hearing in August, CEWA said it had just completed a 10-forum roadshow talking to all of its principals throughout the state, and were still collating the data. The forums had highlighted the different capacities of schools and reinforced that they required different responses.[102]

CEWA has also been reviewing the performance of the Microsoft Teams platform for education in collaboration with Microsoft management in the United States. Dr Simons said there had been challenges in a number of education systems nationally in delivering what CEWA had, and educators were requesting changes to the product. Dr Simons said: 'We know those come internationally, but we are really well placed to shape what Microsoft is doing in this space.[103]

AISWA said while it had not conducted a formal audit, it had conducted online meetings with almost every school which had provided a lot of feedback. Several sub-committees had also

99 Ms Lisa Rodgers, Department of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 August 2020, p. 5.
100 Mr Allan Blagaich, Department of Education, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 August 2020, p. 10.
101 *ibid.,* pp. 10-11.
102 Dr Debra Sayce, Catholic Education Western Australia, *Transcript of Evidence*, 19 August 2020, p. 3.
103 *Transcript of Evidence*, 19 August 2020, p. 12.

been examining the COVID-19 response, and AISWA has been involved in cross-sector planning meetings with government departments. Residential colleges and boarding schools had been involved in planning for different scenarios and updating risk emergency plans.[104]

4.1.1 Other jurisdictions

Two other jurisdictions have established comprehensive reviews of learning during COVID-19.

New South Wales

The New South Wales Department of Education sought to capture examples of innovation in education implemented by schools and teachers during the recent COVID-19 upheaval, with a view to retaining initiatives that represent an improvement on existing practices.

The department's COVID-19 Taskforce called for examples of innovative practice across the NSW education sector that showcase:

- new teaching practices which significantly improved learning outcomes for students
- student-led initiatives which had great learning outcomes
- initiatives to support equitable access to high-quality education throughout COVID-19
- students who thrived in the different learning environments, and how that's been maintained with the return to face-to-face learning
- partnerships between families and schools that supported improved learning outcomes for students.

The collection of case studies will be published, with the most effective approaches examined in a wider review that will look at key findings for education during the pandemic.[105]

Victoria

The Victorian Government has announced an independent analysis of remote learning at schools across the state as well as a summit to discuss lessons learnt and investigate what improvements can be made to the education system as a result of the remote teaching and learning period.

In addition, principals, teachers, parents and students are being encouraged to provide feedback on what lessons were learned during remote and flexible learning, and the challenges or opportunities to consider for strengthening the future of school education in Victoria. An online portal has been established and promoted for this purpose. The information gathered will be used to inform the discussion at the Lessons from Remote and Flexible Learning Summit. The summit, initially scheduled for July, has been postponed.[106]

104 Ms Valerie Gould, AISWA, *Transcript of Evidence*, 19 August 2020, p. 4.

105 NSW Government – Education, *Capturing the innovations of learning from home*, 2 July 2020, accessed 20 July 2020, < https://education.nsw.gov.au/news/>.

106 Department of Education and Training, *The Education State: Lessons from Remote and Flexible Learning,* accessed 28 August 2020, < https://engage.vic.gov.au/lessons-remote-and-flexible-learning>.

Parliamentary Secretary for Schools Tim Richardson and Parliamentary Secretary for Early Childhood Education Sonya Kilkenny are also expected to produce reports on the remote learning experience.[107]

The Victorian Pubic Accounts and Estimates Committee tabled an interim report on its *Inquiry into the Victorian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic*. As part of its wider review, the Committee considered the impact on education in Victoria including early childhood learning and tertiary education. The Committee is expected to present its second report on the inquiry by the end of October 2020.[108]

4.2 New modes of teaching may be applied more broadly

It is possible to adapt the new modes of teaching applied during the period of remote learning to a range of situations. CEWA identified that learning online can be adapted to better support students who may not be able to attend school for a variety of reasons:

> The 'new normal' may be very different to pre-COVID-19 days, with schools suggesting that the skills learned during recent months will enable them to deliver education differently in the future. Lessons learned since February include, students who are absent from school for a variety of reasons are likely to be better equipped and better supported by teachers in learning remotely during the course of any absence – provided their health condition allows them to study online and they have access to devices and the internet.[109]

The DoE came to a similar conclusion:

> Prior to COVID-19, continuity of teaching and learning in emergency/critical management situations was restricted. Typically, in these circumstances, schools may have temporarily closed or students redirected to other schools where possible. Schools and the Department's increased capability to deliver online any time, anywhere will provide greater options for school communities that may have suffered floods, fires, cyclones or localised outbreaks of COVID-19, for example.[110]

The DoE has flagged broadening the role of SIDE to deliver micro-credentials and VET programs to students whose learning may not be met through the usual curriculum.[111]

Options for different delivery were also being discussed in the independent school sector. AISWA's executive director said that some of the smaller schools in that sector were considering combining some smaller classes in the senior subjects (such as specialist maths) across two or three schools, using digital technology. Another idea being discussed is a

107 Hon. James Merlino MP, Minister for Education (Vic), *Have Your Say On Remote and Flexible Learning,* media release, 9 June 2020.
108 Pubic Accounts and Estimates Committee (Vic), *Inquiry into the Victorian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic*, July 2020, p. 2.
109 Catholic Education Western Australia, Correspondence – Background information, 31 July 2020, p. 5.
110 Department of Education, Correspondence – Background information, 11 August 2020, p. 6.
111 *ibid.*

blended learning model for the older cohort where they do not attend the school campus every school day and instead work at home on some days.[112]

CEWA's team leader for Digital Learning Matthew Ferrinda said while initial efforts had focused on replicating face-to-face delivery, a deeper examination of what remote learning means was needed.

> If we had to go again, what are the capabilities that we want to focus on? … Is that focus on our digital skills, critical thinking, independence, collaboration? So, we are actually looking at how we deliver our curriculum and deliver the teaching and learning experience differently, so rather than just going from a straight face-to-face to an online forum.[113]

Mr Ferrinda said in the main, the period of remote learning had not been long enough to get teachers thinking creatively and critically around how to construct the online learning experience for their classes.[114]

Dr Simons added that digital learning meant that there is room for exploration about what school is, where it is delivered, in what way, by which teacher to what set of students. [115]

We have to expose our young people to different forms of learning. Technology is one important piece going forward

- Dr Debra Sayce, Catholic Education Western Australia

4.3 Ways to address the digital divide need consideration

Around a third of disadvantaged students have devices without sufficient computing capacity and half do not have sufficient internet bandwidth or speeds.[116] The disparity in the adequacy of devices was raised in the Committee's *Better Connected Future* report, along with concerns that the BYOD schemes increasingly favoured by schools can disadvantage students who are unable to afford newer and/or more capable devices. While the concern in our previous inquiry centred on devices being used at school, the same concerns apply if students are learning remotely.

CEWA said it was exploring ways to provide greater access to digital resources for students and families in its 13 Kimberley schools. Director of governance and digital technology Dr Simons said technology businesses were also exploring how to bring down prices to enable greater access for all.

> Obviously, we work very close with Microsoft and Apple in that technology space, and I think it is one that, across all system sectors in Western Australia and

112 Ms Valerie Gould, AISWA, *Transcript of Evidence*, 19 August 2020, pp. 11-12.
113 Mr Matthew Ferrinda, Digital Learning Team Leader, Catholic Education Western Australia, *Transcript of Evidence*, 19 August 2020, p. 4.
114 *ibid.*, p. 8.
115 *Transcript of Evidence*, 19 August 2020, p. 12.
116 B Joseph & G Fahey '*Pain without gain: Why school closures are bad policy*', Centre for Independent Studies, no. 28, May 2020, p. 9.

> probably across Australia, we need to be clearer on who gets access, in what way, at what cost, at what age group, what security settings are in place.[117]

Schools implement a variety of arrangements for computer use at school. Half of all public secondary schools have a BYOD agreement in place and more than half (around 60 per cent) have a BYOD program. Some schools mandate use of a particular model or set of specifications while others accept a wider variety of devices. Specified models typically cost $1100 to $1400. While some schools may accept cheaper devices, they still need to meet minimum specification requirements.[118] Parents unable to afford a laptop are told their students will be provided with a device at school if one is available.

Other options, such as purchasing in instalments and leasing agreements, are not available at all schools. A leased device may still be unaffordable for some. As an example, leasing costs at a particular Catholic secondary school are $610 per year, with the device replaced after three years. While the cost includes servicing, insurance and all required software, the total for three years is $1830 – more than the upfront cost of purchasing a laptop suitable for secondary school.[119]

Ways to make it easier for students to buy or access laptops need further consideration. Lending school and department laptops to students may have helped to bridge the divide in the short term, but a longer term solution is needed.

Finding 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.

Recommendation 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.

4.4 Better ways to monitor attendance could help mitigate the effects of disengagement

As discussed previously, learning loss was expected to be greater for students who were away from the classroom the longest, and for disadvantaged students. These two cohorts may, of course, overlap.

While most students in WA were learning remotely for only a week or two, some students spent a much longer period away from the classroom. Some boarders, for example,

117 *Transcript of Evidence*, 19 August 2020, p. 5.
118 Mrs Shaloni Naik, ECAWA, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 August 2020, p. 3.
119 Mr Michael King, ECAWA, Email, 28 August 2020.

remained in their Kimberley communities – where internet access was not guaranteed – until mid-August (a period of about 13 weeks).

For the first three weeks of term 2, attendance was encouraged but was not compulsory. Hence, a small proportion of students remained at home. Monitoring attendance and determining whether students were actively learning from home was not straightforward.

The DoE director general said that principals were required to report their attendance rates every day via a direct link to the department's data team. But ECAWA professional development coordinator Shaloni Naik claimed that teachers only monitored attendance if directed by their principal.[120]

It is difficult to know whether work packages were completed and collected, and it is not clear whether they were assessed. Even if students were learning online, there were reports that monitoring engagement was difficult. Mrs Naik said teachers predominantly monitored via the submissions on the platform they were using. She said if an assessment was due and was not handed in, teachers would find out that that student had not been doing any of the work.[121] However, the school in question maintains that weekly contact was made with students learning at home and home visits were made to students whose attendance did not improve.[122]

Similarly, ECAWA's president commented that some students turned up at the start of the lesson and then were not very engaged: 'we had some kids that came back and were pretty honest with me and said, "Yeah, I took a couple of weeks off."'[123]

ECAWA had received feedback that engagement was low, particularly for students with low ability or who were already unengaged.

> it was a little bit heartbreaking that [teachers] were putting so much time and effort into having these lessons created for them so they could learn from home, but they had limited engagement. And then support from parents was patchy in that [teachers] would follow up things and then parents might not be fully supportive.[124]

The DoE is unsure of how many secondary students have needed/will need assistance to catch up as a result of disengagement, since this information is not kept centrally. Any student requiring assistance is identified by their school and supported on a case-by-case basis, depending on the identified need or curriculum.[125]

DoE said that between 18 May (when attendance was once again compulsory) and 20 August, 91 enrolled secondary school students did not attend school compared with 78 in

120 *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 August 2020, p. 7.
121 *ibid.,* p. 8.
122 Ms Lisa Rodgers, Department of Education, Letter, 11 September 2020, p. 2.
123 Mr Michael King, ECAWA, *Transcript of Evidence*, 12 August 2020, p. 7.
124 *ibid*., p. 6.
125 Ms Lisa Rodgers, Department of Education, Letter, 8 September 2020, p. 2.

the same period in 2019. They were unable to determine whether COVID-19 was responsible for the 2020 figures.[126]

Finding 9

There appears to be no method of determining how many students have been disengaged from school, and for what period.

Recommendation 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.

The DoE has funded the equivalent of 36 FTE additional staff positions to help students who need extra support to re-engage with their school. Some of the other measures to assist with engagement include the appointment of a short-term attendance officer, funding of extra hours so that Aboriginal and Islander education officers can make visits to students' families, extension of social worker contracts and additional chaplaincy and psychologist support. Some schools had used funding for specific re-engagement strategies rather than additional staff hours, such as paying for a bus to support home pick-ups.[127]

The Grattan Institute has recommended small group tuition to help students catch up post-COVID. Its report estimates that about 100,000 tutors will be needed to assist 1,000,000 disadvantaged students Australia-wide. Tutoring sessions would ideally be delivered in groups of about three for three to five times a week for up to three months, either during regular school hours or before or after school.[128]

The institute recommends that young university graduates and pre-service teachers who have been hit hard by job and income losses be used as tutors, as well as teachers and teacher aides who work part-time.

This idea has gained traction in some overseas jurisdictions. In the Netherlands, the government has announced a program in which higher education students will be allowed to assist teachers in helping high school and elementary school students who have fallen behind. It is proposed this assistance will be customised to the individual student and take place either at the end of the school day or during a summer school period. The student teachers would be specially trained for the tutoring role, and may earn credits for their course.[129]

The UK government too has announced a year-long national tutoring program aimed at helping students in England catch up on lost learning. Schools will be funded to hire private tutors from approved agencies to deliver one-to-one and small group lessons. These too were designed to take place either during term time or over a summer school program. In

126 Ms Lisa Rodgers, Department of Education, Letter, 8 September 2020, p. 3.
127 *ibid.*
128 J Sonnemann & P Goss, *COVID catch-up: helping disadvantaged students close the equity gap*, Grattan Institute, no 2020-08, June 2020, p. 24.
129 Arie Slob, Education Minister, Government of the Netherlands, *Students help students to catch up*, media release, 11 June 2020.

addition to the universal program, additional funding is being provided for disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. Schools are able to use the funding as they see fit and a support guide has been produced to assist in the process.[130]

And in the United States, the Tennessee Tutoring Corps was formed to run a program pairing college students with schoolchildren over the summer period to reduce COVID-19 learning loss. The charitable organisation planned to recruit 1000 college students as tutors. Tutors were expected to work with two to five students for 10 to 12 hours per week.[131] In addition to the benefits to the school students, employing college students and recent graduates as tutors was likely to be successful as an economic stimulus policy and expose tutors to a potential career in education.[132]

The success of these tutoring initiatives could be monitored by the DoE and considered in the event of a more protracted period of remote learning.

4.5 In conclusion

Western Australia was fortunate in that most students were not impacted by COVID-19 disruptions for a protracted period of time. Nevertheless, valuable lessons can be taken from this period and from the weeks of preparation for remote learning. In addition, Western Australia can watch and learn from the experiences of other states. The follow-up hearings held in August indicate that the Department of Education and the private education sectors are conducting detailed reviews of their responses and assessing strengths and weaknesses. We hope the recommendations made in this report will be taken into account in future planning for pandemics or other events that necessitate learning from home, where digital technology will play an important role.

MS J.M. FREEMAN, MLA
CHAIR

130 GOV UK, *Coronavirus (COVID-19) catch-up premium*, July 2020, accessed 1 September 2020, <www.gov.uk>; Education Endowment Foundation, *COVID-10 Support guide for schools*, Education Endowment Foundation, UK, June 2020.

131 Tennessee Tutoring Corps, accessed 1 September 2020, < https://tntutoringcorps.org/

132 M Craft & M Goldstein, *Getting tutoring right to reduce COVID-19 learning loss*, 21 May 2020, accessed 1 September 2020, < https://www.brookings.edu>.

Appendix One

Committee's functions and powers

The functions of the Committee are to review and report to the Assembly on:

a) the outcomes and administration of the departments within the Committee's portfolio responsibilities;

b) annual reports of government departments laid on the Table of the House;

c) the adequacy of legislation and regulations within its jurisdiction; and

d) any matters referred to it by the Assembly including a bill, motion, petition, vote or expenditure, other financial matter, report or paper.

At the commencement of each Parliament and as often thereafter as the Speaker considers necessary, the Speaker will determine and table a schedule showing the portfolio responsibilities for each committee. Annual reports of government departments and authorities tabled in the Assembly will stand referred to the relevant committee for any inquiry the committee may make.

Whenever a committee receives or determines for itself fresh or amended terms of reference, the committee will forward them to each standing and select committee of the Assembly and Joint Committee of the Assembly and Council. The Speaker will announce them to the Assembly at the next opportunity and arrange for them to be placed on the notice boards of the Assembly.

Appendix Two

Hearings

Date	Name	Position	Organisation
12 August 2020	Mr Michael King	President	Educational Computing Association of Western Australia
	Mrs Shaloni Naik	Professional Development Coordinator	
	Ms Lisa Rodgers	Director General	Department of Education
	Ms Melesha Sands	Executive Director, Recovery	
	Mr Martin Clery	Assistant Executive Director, Statewide Services	
	Mr David Dans	Chief Information Officer	
	Mr Stuart Percival	Acting Director, Disability and Inclusion	
	Mr Caleb Jones	Principal, School of Special Educational Needs: Medical and Mental Health	
	Mr Allan Blagaich	Executive Director, School Curriculum and Standards Authority	
19 August 2020	Dr Debra Sayce	Executive Director	Catholic Education Western Australia
	Mr Matthew Ferrinda	Team Leader, Digital Learning	
	Dr Edward Simons	Director, Governance and Digital Technology	
	Ms Valerie Gould	Executive Director	Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia

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