

The COVID-19 pandemic is a once-in-a-century event. It also presents a rare opportunity to deliver compelling and lasting change for the education sector.

While students have returned to the classroom in a number of Australian states and territories, in Victoria over 2000 schools and 980,000 students continue to be engaged in school-led remote learning.¹ In New South Wales, South Australia and Queensland, smaller outbreaks have forced the continued, temporary closure of individual schools.

Over the past month, we have met with stakeholders from across the country from state and federal education departments, national education bodies and frontline staff. Where perspectives have differed, it appears to be primarily attributable to the differences in COVID-19 restrictions across the country. We expect these local variations will continue to exist and evolve for the foreseeable future. However, there were a number of unifying themes in the feedback received through these consultations.

Across Australia, the resilience and agility of educators has been continually challenged as they seek to support student learning and development during the pandemic. This, and the emerging groups of disadvantaged students, is placing further strain on a workforce already experiencing high attrition rates and difficulty in attracting new teachers to the industry.

In the absence of a vaccine, there is still no clear end to the pandemic in sight. What we have witnessed is the vital role teachers have played during this time – serving at the frontline of the COVID-19 response along with our healthcare professionals; their role is to be celebrated.

We have seen the important role that culture and leadership plays in building resilience and implementing agile and innovative responses to challenging events. This sentiment was consistently noted across states, highlighting the fact that “our teachers and leaders in schools have gone above and beyond, instilling confidence in communities they serve, with children at the centre and education continuity at the forefront”.² A survey of teachers conducted by the University of Melbourne shows that while the pressure is very real, teachers are reporting some genuinely positive outcomes: “I believe that there will be many opportunities to challenge the many rigid practices of teaching which haven’t changed for years ... it is a great opportunity for us to look at education as a whole and ask ourselves – What do we truly value in education? What are we doing well? What can we do better and grow?”³

These are pertinent questions, and we should challenge ourselves to take the best of what we have seen from this crisis and apply it for the betterment of our children’s education in Australia. COVID-19 has provided momentum for change and offers the education sector a unique opportunity to implement long-term structural reform in how we deliver education to students, and how we empower our teacher workforce.

Reimagining the teaching workforce

The active engagement and involvement of parents and caregivers in a child’s education has been consistently recognised as a key lever in improving educational outcomes. COVID-19 has provided real possibilities ‘to explore alternative education organisation approaches that bring schools and homes closer together, that foster the autonomy of students to manage their own learning, and provide additional support to those at a disadvantage.’⁴ According to James Pietsch, COVID-19 has presented an “opportunity to break down the belief that teaching has to be confined to the four walls of a school.”⁵ It has provided a disruption and opened up a dialogue for what the role of an educator can

be, as well as the important role parents and communities play when they are welcomed into the classroom, even if it is remotely.

There has also been a new-found appreciation for teachers and an acknowledgement that there is so much more to their role than just teaching. They are educators, facilitators, mentors and leaders. We know that “teacher education and teacher quality is one of the biggest determinants in child learning outcomes”.⁶ So it should be particularly concerning that our teachers are leaving the profession at a faster rate than we are training new ones to take their place.⁷ For some teachers, the recent further intensification of their workload and broadening of their role might simply be the final straw. On the other hand as reported in the Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE), ‘many teachers have reacted positively to the challenges of COVID-19, not just because teaching is a reasonably secure source of income, but because it has also given them a renewed passion for the profession’.⁸ It has also provided an opportunity to look at new ways to engage their students.

Just as health professionals have been (quite rightly) celebrated for their important role during this crisis, we have a genuine opportunity to raise the status of the teaching profession. AITSL has developed a National Teacher Workforce Strategy which is due to be released at the end of August. The strategy will provide a data-driven view of what the teacher workforce of the future needs in order to attract and retain quality teachers. It is anticipated the strategy will prioritise specific areas, including identifying and developing ‘educators of the future’ in light of the impacts of COVID-19.⁹

Preliminary results from a national survey of over 10,000 Australian teachers conducted during April 2020 show only 30% of teachers had been trained to deliver remote learning prior to the crisis, and the majority (80%) felt unprepared for the transition, particularly in non-metropolitan areas.¹⁰

Feedback from industry experts suggests that schools with an effective culture and leadership were more likely to succeed during this period: “Strength in leadership was critical - without a strong team who aren't prepared to be agile, collaborate and embrace new ways of working we would have really found it difficult”.¹¹ We have seen examples of schools shifting rapidly to support their students and deliver remote learning, and instances where ‘learning hubs’ and collaboration across government and independent sectors has flourished. Things that were previously seen as impossible suddenly became a reality, such as the large-scale distribution of laptops and dongles to students and teachers in a matter of weeks in NSW. One interviewee observed that schools were able to adopt new technologies and transition to digital learning platforms in just a few weeks – something that might otherwise have taken months or even years.

Success was not always determined by a school’s ability to adapt to new technologies. One school in the Fairfield area, NSW, where 86% of students are from language backgrounds other than English, and 30% of families have either no internet or lack the technology to access digital learning platforms had to respond quickly and differently for their community. The school decided it would be more effective to take a paper-based approach that was supported by technology – rather than rely on technology alone. Every teacher prepared paper books for their students which could be submitted using an online platform. Importantly, the school conducted regular sessions with parents and caregivers to ensure the school community was supported and informed about the approach. This school adopted an approach that worked for their community, rather than pursuing a more technology-centric approach that would have left behind a significant proportion of their students.



Workforce support and empowerment

What we have seen so far during COVID-19 is a workforce that is capable of flexibility and resilience. In order to capitalise on these attributes to turn around Australia's decline in educational outcomes, we need to empower the workforce by providing the right support. We must encourage conditions that give our frontline educators autonomy and flexibility to act collaboratively, as this will ultimately lead to better learning outcomes for students.¹² We see three key priorities for change:

1. We expect a lot of our teachers, particularly in an increasingly complex and digitised world. We need to address ongoing professional development needs, including training to provide teachers with the skills required to operate in an accelerated digital environment. To use digital resources to underpin and support critical teaching skills not replace as we saw in Fairfield.
2. Educational pathways for teachers (both through university and professional development) need to develop and reinforce the importance of agility and leadership skills. These were two hallmarks of success in terms of how both teachers and their students have been able to navigate this challenging time.

Educators will, as frontline staff, continue to need to respond to societal challenges; leadership and agility will be crucial.

3. A greater focus on teacher wellbeing and sustainability is vital to underpinning a resilient workforce and reducing attrition rates. We need to make appropriate support services available to teachers and recognise not just the effect major traumatic events such as this pandemic or the recent bushfires have for them directly, but also the important role teachers play in supporting their students in the immediate aftermath and during the longer-term recovery from these events.¹³

Rethinking the education delivery model

School closures nationwide in the wake of COVID-19 resulted in an unprecedented rate of transformative change in the way learning was delivered. As highlighted in our first article, COVID-19 and education: how Australian schools are responding and what happens next, school-led remote learning is not a completely new concept, but the speed and scale of the transformation forced by COVID-19 has presented substantial challenges, including:

- availability of the necessary technology infrastructure (connectivity, applications and devices)
- ability to provide physical support and engagement (especially for young learners and children with additional needs)
- impact on student's mental health and wellbeing
- difficulty in striking the right balance between digital and screen-free activities
- impacts to student engagement and attendance.

As states and territories return to onsite face-to-face learning in term 3, there's the risk that the innovation, collaboration and creativity used to adapt to these challenges is then forgotten. COVID-19 has been a great challenge for schools, but also a huge opportunity to change the way the curriculum is delivered, and how students, staff, parents/carers and the broader community are engaged and supported.

Greater collaboration

The rapid move to remote learning led to greater collaboration between schools and across sectors. There were a number of examples where organisations such as AITSL and the education departments in New South Wales and Western Australia were able to provide resource hubs to support teachers making the rapid shift to remote learning. Greater collaboration and sharing of resources allowed for sharing of best practice, teacher upskilling and reduced duplication of effort – which in turn freed up teacher capacity to 'teach' during and post-school closure.

How can schooling systems adopt a collaborative approach, setting up curated hubs and forums to upskill staff and provide better teaching resources to improve student outcomes?

Blended learning

There is a real role for technology in addressing some of the barriers that are presented in the traditional face-to-face classroom style of teaching. In some cases, the access to online learning during COVID-19-related school closures enabled students to learn with greater autonomy and at their own pace, either going back to cover prior content or accelerating through content they are comfortable with – a personalised approach to learning. According to Rosemary Conn from Australian Schools Plus, there were examples of some older children from more disadvantaged home environments who have fared better from greater autonomous learning.

In more remote areas, where the teacher workforce tends to be more transient, remote learning channels are used to connect students with a dedicated teaching group for certain core subjects. This 'blended' approach – using a combination of remote and face-to-face learning – could become a model for assisting students to access better and broader learning opportunities.

Blended learning can also include other mediums for learning, including television and radio programming. The Queensland Education Department partnered with the Seven, 10 and Nine networks to deliver three television programs to support home-based learning for students across Queensland during the coronavirus pandemic. The learning@home TV, reading@home TV and coding@home TV programs were developed in collaboration with teaching and learning specialists, and offered engaging curriculum-based content for kindergarten to Year 12 students. Episodes continue to provide a valuable learning resource for teachers, parents and students.¹⁴

How can schools move towards a more blended delivery of learning by leveraging technology to give teachers greater flexibility and agility, including tailoring learning to each child?

Supporting the school community

The COVID-19 response has highlighted the fact that schools deliver a wide range of services beyond teaching and learning. In an increasingly complex society, the role of schools is changing. The vital role of parents and caregivers and the home environment in supporting education is well proven, and this became more obvious and necessary during COVID-19.

Major incidents such as the coronavirus pandemic can negatively impact mental health and wellbeing. It is normal for children and young people to show signs of distress, reaching out to the safety of schools for support. The Victorian Education Department's Mental Health Toolkit for Victorian schools provides expert guidance and resources for maintaining mental health and was developed to support schools and school communities, health and wellbeing workforces and mental health practitioners.

How can departments use the learnings from this crisis to build an allied model in education, where health and mental health professionals linked to the school work with students, parents and the school community, providing a number of services in addition to teaching and learning?

What comes next?

COVID-19 has provided momentum for change and offers the education sector a unique opportunity to implement long-term structural reform in how education is delivered, and for

the workforce delivering it. The challenge lies in taking the best of what we have seen from this crisis and applying these lessons more broadly.

In subsequent articles, we'll look more closely at the pivotal role technology can play in lifting and transforming the education sector. We'll also examine the ongoing need to safeguard the health and wellbeing of students and educators, both during and beyond the current pandemic.