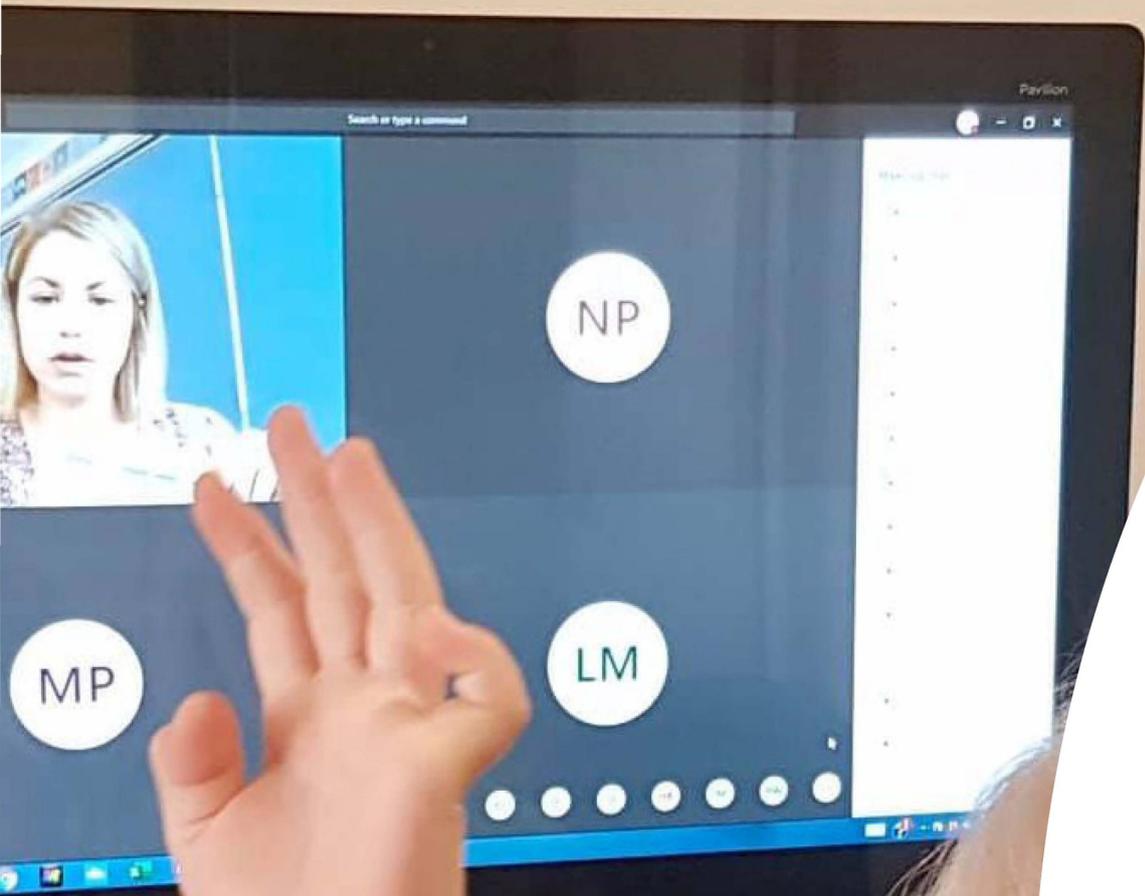


Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic

January – July 2020



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Acronyms/Glossary

Acronym	Meaning
AHPPC	Australian Health Protection Principal Committee
AISNSW	Association of Independent Schools NSW
CSNSW	Catholic Schools NSW
Digital Learning Device	Internet WiFi dongle, education suitable device including a desktop, laptop, notebook, chromebook or tablet device
EAL/D	English as an additional language or dialect
ECE	Early childhood education and care
Education System	Collective of Government, Catholic and Independent schools in NSW
NCIRS	National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance
Online Learning Tools	Third party curriculum online software
the Pandemic Plan	NSW Human Influenza Pandemic Plan
PPE	Personal protective equipment
Remote learning period	The period between 24 March and 25 May where a single unit of learning was delivered whether children were at home or in the classroom.
SCC	Student Care Coordination
School Community	School leaders, Teachers, Students, Non-Teaching staff and Parents/ Carers, Parents & Citizens (P&C) / Parents & Friends (P&F)
School leaders	School Executive (Principal, Deputy Principal, Assistant Principal, Head Teacher)
SEOC	State Emergency Operations Centre
SSP	School for Specific Purpose
WHO	World Health Organisation

Foreword – Mark Scott

While the word ‘unprecedented’ has likely been overused in recent months, it continues to be apt for the period of disruption that we have experienced in schools across the state, the nation and the world in 2020 so far. Coming off the back of the worst bushfire season in the state’s history and widespread flooding, COVID-19 brought unique challenges to learning and teaching in our schools.

The impact of COVID-19 on education is estimated to be affecting over a billion learners, or over 60% of all students worldwide through school closures¹. The steps taken to lessen the impact of COVID-19 on students’ in NSW schools, as detailed in this report, demonstrate the Department’s; and Education System’s commitment to ensuring every student is known, valued and cared for in our schools.

The migration to at-home learning, then a staged return followed by fully operational classrooms, marked an extremely challenging time. It also highlighted the incredible work that is done across the education system. Our schools remained open for students who needed them and both school and corporate staff worked to deliver platforms and materials to provide for continuity of a quality education for all students during that time.

We are grateful for all of the work of our school based staff who have made unprecedented changes to the way they worked to ensure the continuity of learning for our students. We now begin the work of how we can take the best aspects of this time, to continue to improve Education into the future.

Our work is essential to all our communities, more so now than ever. We must ensure we can continue to support our students. One of the Department’s key goals is that every student, every teacher, every leader and every school improves every year. Reflecting on the lessons learned during this time will help us to achieve that goal despite the disruption caused by COVID-19.

To all who have worked so hard supporting learning – be it in schools, early childhood centres, training colleges or by our corporate staff – thank you for your great professionalism, dedication and resourcefulness. On any given work day, there is no organisation that connects in such an important way, with so many people, than NSW Education.

¹ <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>



Executive Summary

The NSW Department of Education (the Department) has responsibility for the operation of 2,200 public schools educating over 800,000 students. Ensuring the safety and continuity of education for each of those students while responding to the COVID-19 pandemic demanded a tremendous effort from teachers, principals and staff in all of our schools. Our corporate staff in the Department worked creatively and collaboratively, in a co-ordinated effort to provide our schools with the support they needed through this period. The Department also worked with the non-government school and early childhood education (ECE) sectors to ensure they were also appropriately supported and equipped to respond to this emergency.

The COVID-19 pandemic immediately followed one of the worst bushfire events in this state's history and widespread flooding events throughout the state. The Department and our schools have been responding to crises since August 2019. Many of the same central teams required to respond to bushfire emergencies, were required for the COVID-19 response. While this review is focussed on the learnings from the response to COVID-19 in particular, this response cannot be wholly separated out from the context of these multiple crises. The depth of capacity required to respond to multiple emergencies simultaneously and/or concurrently is something that the Department, along with the rest of the NSW Government, will have to consider moving forward.

The current low case numbers as a result of the NSW Government's response in suppressing COVID-19 provided an opportunity to reflect on the response to date, and identify some of the innovative practices that should be retained as we transition to a 'new normal'. For the Department of Education in particular, our response has highlighted the capacity of the Department to be agile and responsive to emerging needs. As has been noted by the Premier, until we have a vaccine, COVID-19 is something we have to live with. Cases are likely to continue to occur, including in our schools, through the coming months. The response to date has positioned the Department to continue to effectively manage COVID-19 and any further changes as they arise.

One of the most striking learnings from the response to COVID-19 has been the willingness of individuals and teams throughout the Department to ensure the health, safety, learning and wellbeing of the students and staff across our school system. United in the crisis by the common purpose of supporting each and every student, we were able to work quickly and effectively with a solutions focused approach.

The Department's response to COVID-19 was focused on three key objectives:

- Ensuring continuity of quality education
- Ensuring every student is known, valued and cared for in our schools
- Keeping schools safe and clean



i. Ensuring continuity of quality education

The circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic required us, over a few short weeks, to turn the entire model of educational delivery in NSW on its head. On Tuesday 24 March, the Premier encouraged parents, where possible, to keep their children at home. NSW students transitioned to learning remotely quickly. By Monday 30 March over 90.67% students were learning remotely. By the last day of Term 1 it was 94%.

To support remote learning, the Department launched a Learning from Home hub to provide students, teaching staff and parents with a centralised bank of resources, support mechanisms and practical advice. Professional learning sessions for teachers and support staff in how best to utilise the Department's online digital tools were rolled out rapidly. The resources were continually updated and expanded to maintain teaching and learning throughout the COVID-19 response. The online capacities, innovations and collaborative practices developed through this period of remote learning and transition back to the classroom have the potential to hold many insights for our ongoing work in creating the best education system in the world. Exploring the ways to utilise technology and enhance collaborative teaching practices can support the Department's strategic agenda to improve student educational outcomes, is a clear opportunity from this experience.

To maintain both continuity and equity of access for all students, schools remained open for students who needed to attend. Every child was provided with access to the same learning activities regardless of their learning mode. This 'single unit of work' ensured equity and consistency in curriculum delivery.

ii. Ensuring every student is known, valued and cared for in our schools

The individual students across the NSW school system were central to our response during this time. Working to support the individual learning needs of each and every one of our students was a priority in our response. This was supported centrally, through the provision of additional devices and cross-agency work to identify and prioritise our students at greatest risk of disengaging with the Education System. However, as always, it is our staff in schools across the state that are best able to identify, engage and support individual students. We now have an opportunity to leverage the response to COVID-19 to not only ensure students aren't disadvantaged due to this period, but to more effectively alleviate educational disadvantage in our learning communities.

A significant moment in the response to COVID-19 was the announcement of the managed return to school during the school holiday period. The managed return to school plan sought to ensure every student is known, valued and cared for in our schools through the way in which it reinforced that every child should have an equal opportunity to attend school physically at least one day a week.

An important factor in the announcement of the managed return to school plan was not just that Education was leading the way to the recovery phase of COVID-19, but that our colleagues in the Catholic and Independent school sectors stood alongside us in announcing this unified, cross-sector approach to returning to school. The work across sectors for one Education System throughout this approach has been commendable, and gives us a roadmap for how these sectors can continue to work together for the best outcomes for students in the future.

This also highlighted the importance of our communication and engagement with all of our stakeholders from peak bodies to individual teachers. Rapidly emerging information about the nature and risks of COVID-19 meant we had to be agile in our response. For our schools, that generally plan months in advance, this changing landscape presented particular difficulties. Maintaining a single source of truth, and combatting misinformation, became critically important in this context to ensure our large school system could be on the same page at any point in time. Finding ways to better communicate directly with our teachers and to engage them in informing our response will be important in taking forward the learnings identified in this report.

iii. Keeping schools safe and clean

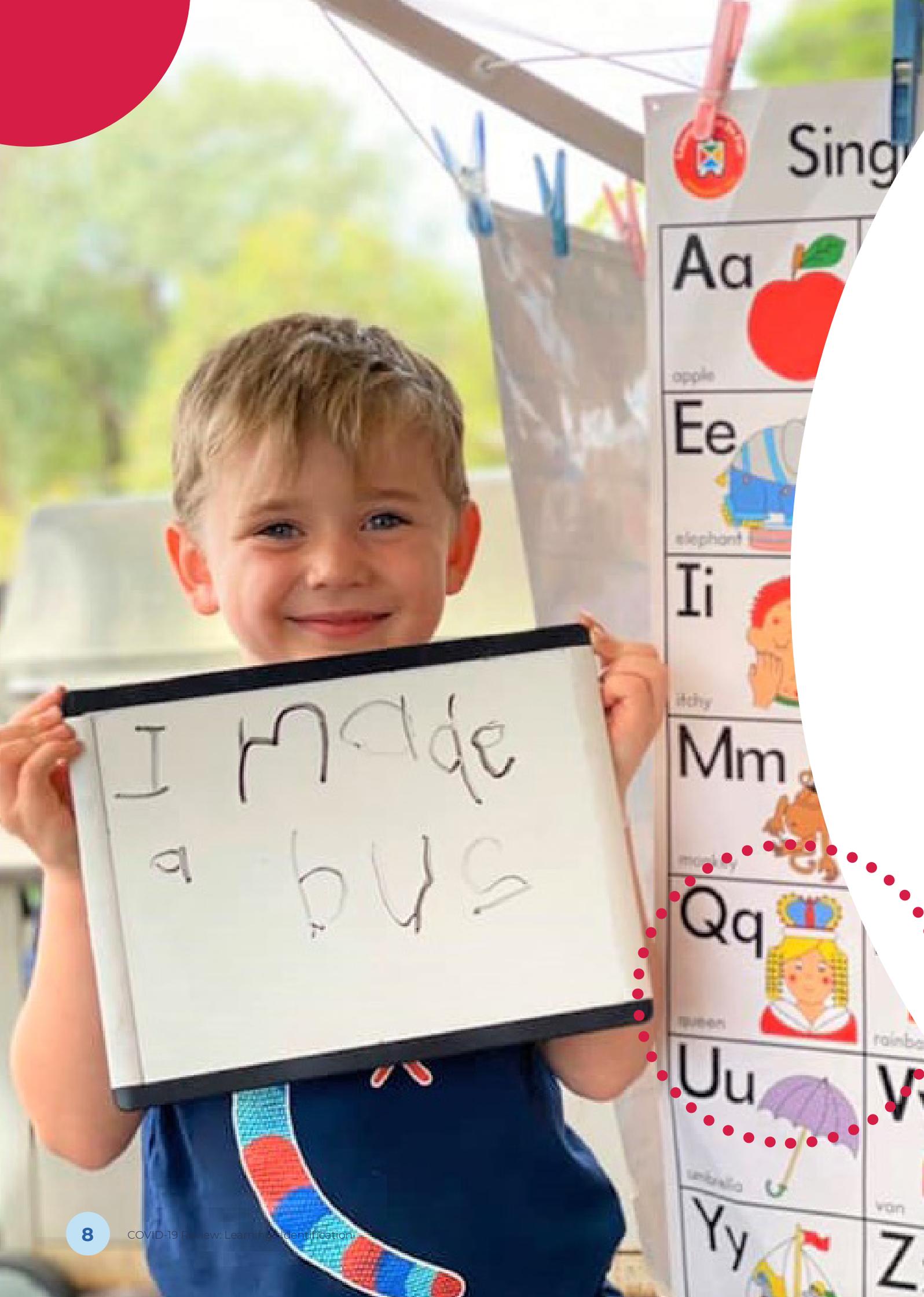
COVID-19 has created a clear focus across the Education System on the importance of reinforcing hygiene practices in schools, such as hand hygiene, that should be maintained. Significant efforts were focused on ensuring schools could effectively implement the advice from NSW Health and the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC). This included ensuring appropriate infection control procedures along with cleaning and hygiene measures were in place, as well as implementing procedures for identifying and responding to cases in our schools.

Pressure on supply chains affected our schools as well as the broader population. The Department responded by rapidly standing up a centralised supply distribution system to support the schools unable to locally source necessary hygiene products. The Department exceeded its responsibilities under the NSW Government Human Influenza Pandemic Plan, identifying and managing risks across the Education portfolio and beyond areas of operational and legislative accountability by ensuring non-government schools and the ECE sector had access to hygiene supplies.

While NSW has been remarkably successful in suppressing the COVID-19 pandemic to date, the continued rise in cases worldwide highlights that the threat has not yet passed. We must remain vigilant to ensure we are playing our part in minimising the spread. The fact that we are still in the midst of responding to COVID-19, means that it is not yet possible to understand the full impact of COVID-19 on our students' learning or the effectiveness of our response. There will clearly be a need for a thorough review of the overall response in future.

For now, what is important is that we don't lose sight of the excellent achievements and innovations that have emerged from this unprecedented time. The pandemic has fast tracked innovation which may fundamentally change and improve the way we deliver education into the future. We can immediately start the work of capturing, sharing and embedding those innovations in the way we deliver education.





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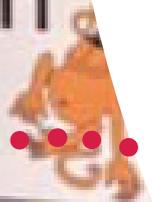
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Introduction

Context of COVID-19 and schools

On 22 January 2020, NSW Health advised that they had activated a public health response to prepare for the novel coronavirus that had emerged from Wuhan, China, now COVID-19. Under the Australian Health Management Plan for Pandemic Influenza the AHPPC provides advice on appropriate actions which helped to inform the Department's response throughout the pandemic.

The first recorded case of COVID-19 in Australia was recorded just prior to the commencement of the school year on 25 January 2020. The Department was working with the Australian Department of Home Affairs at this time to ensure students who had travelled to affected areas were appropriately advised to self-isolate and not attend school.

On 30 January 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) classified COVID-19 as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. At this point, on 31 January 2020 public advice from the Department advised students not to attend school or ECE services until 14 days after their departure from China.

The Australian Government activated the Australian Health Sector Emergency Response Plan for COVID-19 on 27 February 2020, and the first cases of community transmission in Australia were identified on 2 March 2020.

COVID-19 was declared a pandemic on 11 March 2020 by the WHO.

On 15 March, the Department ordered that, effective immediately, New South Wales schools introduce social distancing measures to reduce the spread of coronavirus. At this point, it remained the advice of both the AHPPC and NSW Health that school closures were not a necessary response to the pandemic.

However, following the WHO's announcement, student attendance fell significantly. The usual rate of student absence is approximately 7-8 per cent at that time of year. By Friday 20 March it had increased to 27 per cent.

On 24 March 2020 the NSW Premier encouraged parents to keep their children at home where possible, noting that schools would remain open and no child would be turned away.

Until 25 May students engaged in a 'single unit of work' whether they were at home or school, with rapid deployment of online materials and other adaptations to learning.

During the school holidays, a 'managed return to school' plan was announced, with students set to return to school for at least one day a week from week 3 term 2 (11 May 2020). Due to reduced community transmission, the success of this return and the capacity of schools to meet AHPPC guidelines, the full time return to face-to-face learning was announced on 19 May 2020 to commence from 25 May 2020.



Department of Education Response

The Department's approach to COVID-19 has focused on three key objectives which are explored through this report:

1. Continuity of quality education
2. Every student is known, valued and cared for
3. Keeping schools safe and clean

The common focus on these key objectives helped to facilitate the effective response to COVID-19 for our Education System. The approach focused on these objectives over the key stages of the NSW Human Influenza Pandemic Plan² (the Pandemic Plan): prevention, preparedness, response and recovery. This report will contribute to the continued recovery phase as well as providing learnings which will assist with prevention, preparedness and response for any future emergencies.

It should be noted that COVID-19 is still a global pandemic. There are still Public Health Orders in place, and the Department is continuing to work with NSW Health and schools in the response to COVID-19 where needed, and in response to any emerging cases.

This report is not a full implementation review as the response to COVID-19 is ongoing. This initial review is intended to capture key learnings that can be taken from the response to the pandemic to date. This is to ensure that innovations and opportunities for improvement developed through the remote learning period and subsequent managed return to school are captured in a timely way.

Under the Pandemic Plan, the Department is primarily responsible for ensuring continuity of education.

Our key responsibilities under the plan are:

- working with NSW Health and other government agencies to prevent and slow the spread of the pandemic in NSW public schools;

- supporting the NSW community by reinforcing messages from NSW Health to staff, students and parents/carers,
- continuing to provide educational services
- preparing for NSW public schools to return to normal through an effective recovery phase;
- providing communication links with the early childhood education sector; and
- supporting communication links with the Catholic Schools NSW and the Association of Independent Schools NSW

The Department has in place an Influenza Pandemic Plan that aligns to the National Plan and the NSW Human Influenza Pandemic Plan. The Department's Pandemic Plan sets out the preparation, decision making and response actions required by the Department in the event of an influenza pandemic.

The Department's Pandemic Plan was activated in January, and relevant action was taken based on advice from NSW Health. In line with the Department's Pandemic Plan, the Department established a Pandemic Working Group to drive the planning process, make strategic recommendations and to support the implementation of actions across the Department. To deal with the current situation, the Department developed the Response and Action Plan for the Novel Coronavirus. This plan adopts the key principles of the Pandemic Plan but is tailored to COVID-19 and leverages off systems already in place across the Department to maintain normal business functions and minimise disruption to operations where possible. Additionally, this supported regular meetings of the Department executive to ensure the entire Department was informed and able to respond to emerging issues.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department had in place comprehensive infection control measures and hygiene practice resources developed in partnership with NSW Health. Government and non-government schools and the ECE sector were supported with advice and guidance, provided through regular communication with principals and school leaders.

² <https://www.emergency.nsw.gov.au/Documents/plans/sub-plans/subplan-human-influenza-pandemic.pdf>

Working with NSW Health, the Department had also developed protocols to manage and respond to confirmed cases of COVID-19. The Department developed response protocols for any confirmed case of COVID-19 in partnership with NSW Health, Catholic Schools NSW (CSNSW), the Association of Independent Schools of NSW (AISNSW) and TAFE to ensure it was ready to respond to any cases that may emerge across the Education System.

The Department's Incident Report and Support Hotline is operational 24/7 for all reportable incidents, general health and safety enquiries, training registration for mandatory and compliance training programs, complex case management services, and injury management services.

Preparations were underway early in term 1 to develop resources to support government schools in the event of short or longer-term closures if necessary. In line with this, AISNSW and CSNSW also began preparing their schools for possible closures.

In the initial stages of the pandemic specific schools were made non-operational in consultation with NSW Health where a positive case of COVID-19 was identified to have attended the school site. In the context of significant impacts on international school systems from COVID-19 and the first cases of community transmission in NSW in early March, the Department formed a central COVID-19 taskforce to provide strategic advice on the continuing response to COVID-19.

A Learning from Home hub was launched in early March in anticipation of a potential move to remote learning. This was to enable the continuity of learning for students. On 24 March 2020, the Premier requested parents and carers to keep their children at home wherever possible.

The Department was required to address new needs that arose that were necessary to support the continuity of learning. For example, supporting schools to access digital devices was critical to enabling those students to access learning resources. Additionally, addressing issues in the supply chain for schools in accessing essential hygiene supplies as well as ensuring appropriate levels of cleaning, supported workforce and community confidence in the safety of school sites through the managed return to school.

In its response the Department collaborated with the Catholic and Independent schools sectors as well as key stakeholders to support a cohesive Education System response. This included sharing resources and procedures. This collaborative approach to responding to COVID-19 was exemplified through the announcement of the return to face-to-face learning which was made with representatives of all three sectors.

While the response to COVID-19 is continuing, the Department's focus has shifted to the recovery phase. Some key elements of this include amendments to the assessment and reporting processes to reflect the disruptions to school based learning this year, and identifying learnings to support ongoing recovery and preparation for future emergencies. Individual schools may continue to be made non-operational in consultation with NSW Health where a positive case is identified. These processes have now been embedded within business as usual practice, with schools enabled to quickly pivot back to remote learning where necessary.





Methodology

This initial review is intended to identify some of the key innovations and learning opportunities arising from the Department's response to COVID-19 to date.

This review is focused on the response in schools. The review is not a full implementation review of the Department's response to COVID-19, as the situation is still progressing and NSW and is still operating under a Public Health Order. Additionally, the managed return to school policy and impacts on higher education and early childhood education sectors are out of scope of this review.

The methodology was focused on identifying learnings as close in time to the peak of the response as possible. While we have endeavoured to ensure a significant cross-section of views are able to be represented in this report, the priority is to provide the report in a timely manner, with actionable learnings for the NSW Education System.

The overarching questions for this review are:

1. What worked well in the response to COVID-19?
2. What did we learn through the response (both innovations and gaps)?
3. How can we leverage any of those learning as we move back into the "new normal" of living with COVID-19?

A variety of approaches have been taken to answering these questions for each of the key objectives of the Department. Primarily this has been through an internal desktop review encompassing the Department's response and relevant documentation and data held by the Department.

In addition, each member of the Department's Executive Leadership Group was invited to provide a submission to the review identifying the ways in which their directorate responded to COVID-19 including any changes that they would like to keep.

A cross-sector advisory panel was formed for the review to ensure that views from the non-government sectors were able to be heard in the report, as well as ensuring a direct voice from principals, teachers and school communities into the review.

Organisation

NSW Teachers Federation

Public Service Association NSW

Secondary Principal Committee

Primary Principal Association

Association of Independent Schools NSW

Catholic Schools NSW

Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of NSW (P&C Federation)

NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group

The cross-sector advisory panel were invited to provide a submission to the review on their response to COVID-19, including changes they wished to keep, the interaction with the Department's systems and approach and anything else that could have been done to assist in the response.

In addition to the formal submissions across the Department and sector, there was an open call for examples of innovative practice during the remote learning and managed return to school periods. Submissions were open to principals and teachers from both the public and non-government school sectors.

Continuity of quality education

The most critical responsibility for the Department under the Pandemic Plan is the continuity of education. The Pandemic Plan acknowledges the possibility that this learning may need to take place outside of schools through alternative education options such as work sent home. The value of face-to-face learning was clear throughout the response and cannot be replaced. The connection between teachers and their students is essential.

The work to ensure the continuity of learning was not able to replicate the in classroom experience for all students, however the Education System response sought to ensure that students were provided with opportunities to continue to engage with learning either at home or at school. Through innovative practices at the system and local school level an opportunity has been created to look at ways in which to provide similar flexibility into the future.

What was done?

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, schools across NSW remained open to any student needing to attend. However, from 24 March parents and carers were encouraged to keep their children at home wherever possible. From this time until the full return to face-to-face learning on 25 May 2020, teachers were teaching from virtual and physical classrooms often with a mixed mode of delivery to students who were either learning from a classroom or from home. 'Single units of work' were delivered to ensure equity and consistency in curriculum. Delivery during this time was through a variety of channels,

including online lesson delivery, printed learning packs and face-to-face delivery. This highlighted how essential the connection between teachers and their students is to our students' learning.

Key steps put in place across the Education System to ensure for the continuity of quality education during COVID-19 included:

- Standing up a centralised online system (single source of truth) with information and resources to support school communities
- Rapid mobilisation to develop teaching and learning resources (digital and printed) to ensure inclusivity of all students to continue learning progressions.
- Professional learning to develop new skills and support teachers on the use and integration of technology into curriculum delivery across each of the learning stages (Early Stage 1 through to Stage 6)
- Rapid procurement of digital learning devices and digital learning tools to complement and enable the delivery of online learning
- A connectedness across the whole NSW Education System and other jurisdictions working in collaboration to ensure the focus remained on the outcomes for students and teachers during this time.





In order to effectively deliver continuity of education through the above mechanisms, the Department stood up an expert, multidisciplinary team who were able to rapidly understand the challenge of remote learning and quickly respond. The COVID-19 environment caused a heightened focus on delivery, with teaching and educational expertise guiding its design.

Centralised Online System

To support those learning remotely the Department, AISNSW and CSNSW all rapidly mobilised a program of remote learning with the launch of the Learning from Home hub (or similar) providing school leaders, teaching staff, students, parents and carers with information, learning resources, emotional wellbeing support mechanisms and operational advice. Access to and sharing of resources across sectors was reciprocated to support all NSW students and teachers responding to the changing teaching and learning landscape.

The hub included a wide variety of resources across Key Learning Areas and catered to a broad range of student needs. The Department was able to get the hub online within 10 days by initially leveraging content from the Distance Education Support Unit who have delivered remote learning to distance education students for over 25 years. Both the system and individual teachers were able to pivot to developing digital curriculum content resources to support students and ensure inclusiveness for those students with a range of disabilities and learning support needs.

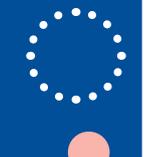
By late June 2020 there were over 400 teaching and learning resources in one location. This innovative response has resulted in one of the largest single online digital repositories of materials of this nature.

The resources on the Learning from Home hub were shared with CSNSW and AISNSW as well as other education jurisdictions across Australia under a Memorandum of Understanding. Both CSNSW and AISNSW acknowledged and thanked the Department for providing access to their resources and ensuring return to schools advice was inclusive of all sectors, particularly



Learning in action

HSC Hub



The online capabilities developed through the remote learning period are already being leveraged by the Department to provide further support to NSW students. On 18 June 2020, the HSC Hub was launched. The platform includes high-quality on-demand support modules that teachers can provide to their students to help them prepare for their exams.

around legislated requirements for all school sectors such as attendance.

From a Department perspective, it is important to know that the information and resources published and made available on the Learning from Home hub were there as supplementary materials to support what schools were publishing through their own school website service or other parent/carer communication and engagement tools. The hub was specifically intended to suggest or guide practice rather than to direct schools. This supported the work of schools, while empowering school principals to cater to the particular needs of their school community.

Rapid mobilisation of teaching and learning resources

Schools carefully planned their learning from home packages, taking into account what access students had to digital learning devices and internet at home. It was a deliberate strategy across the Education System to allow each school to be responsible for determining the methods of delivering learning as they are in the best position to understand what will best meet their student's needs at a local level. Options included online and digital learning, provision of printed packages, and a range of mixed/hybrid approaches.

One of the challenges the NSW Education System faced, along with every Education System globally, was the limited access to digital learning devices and internet access for teachers and students. These challenges can be attributed to a multitude of factors causing a digital divide within our communities as has been widely reported through the media and Think Tank research papers. COVID-19 has highlighted the challenges of the digital divide which have long been impacting on NSW families prior to COVID-19.

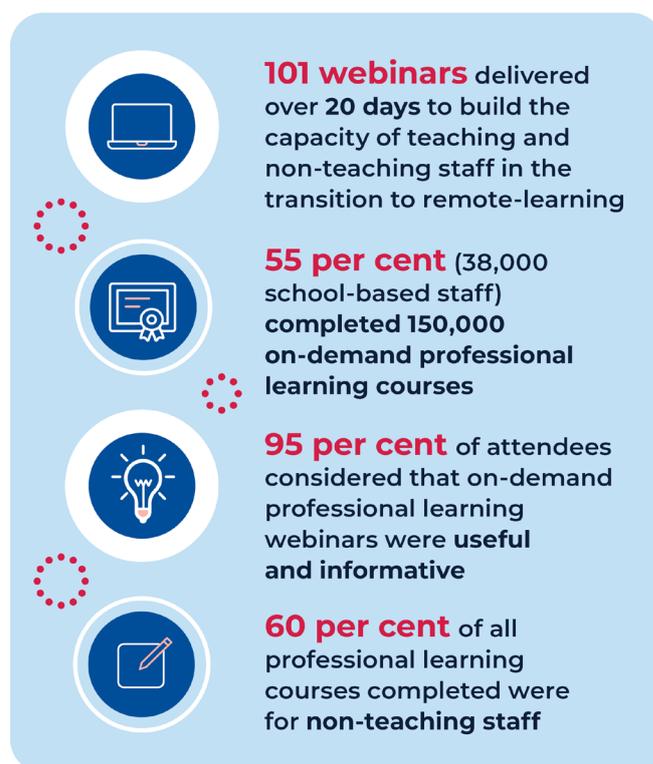
The Department understood the priority of ensuring continuity of learning for those students who did not have access to a device or the internet. In order to support Schools to reach these students, the Department produced a range of hardcopy packs that could be adapted by individual schools and teachers in line with their students. Whilst schools often edited and adapted the material before printing, these hardcopy packs provided a backstop to ensure continuity of learning with schools printing and mailing these to students weekly or even daily.

In addition, the Department partnered with ABC Education to provide over 5 hours of education content per school day and the creation of the learning support resources by Department curriculum experts. This included an innovative co-production relationship with ABC Education to produce mini-lessons in literacy, numeracy and science. The ABC leveraged learning materials developed by the Department's curriculum team and six of the Department's expert teachers delivered the material, resulting in highly positive feedback and plans to continue this form of delivery in the future.

As the time progressed, new information and resources were constantly updated on the Learning from Home hub including assessment frameworks to inform and track learning progress. The Assessment and Reporting templates and information were within the top 3 page views as at 19 June 2020. Consultation regarding ways to assess students was undertaken at a sector and national level to inform the published materials.

Professional learning to develop new skills and support teachers

There is a significant variation of digital skills, capacity and capabilities across school based staff. During the initial stages of COVID-19 it was quickly identified that to enable teachers who were used to teaching in a classroom to quickly pivot to delivering an online or digital lesson, appropriate on-demand professional learning would be required.



On-demand professional learning webinars provided staff with a large range of easy-access learning to be completed at their own pace and within their own timeframes. This was a consistent response across sectors with AISNSW, CSNSW and the Department all independently delivering Professional Learning to teaching staff online.

Teachers were further supported in their professional networking with the creation of over twenty virtual staffrooms where sharing of digital resources occurred, many of which were subsequently included on the Learning from

Home hub. This was complemented by the seven livestream meetings to provide ongoing and timely advice to school leaders from key Department Senior Executive.

The success of the virtual staffrooms was driven by the individual teachers engaging with them. This typifies the response to COVID-19 where the Department used appropriate expertise to centrally design and deliver effective platforms, which were then made successful by their use and contextualisation by teachers and principals.

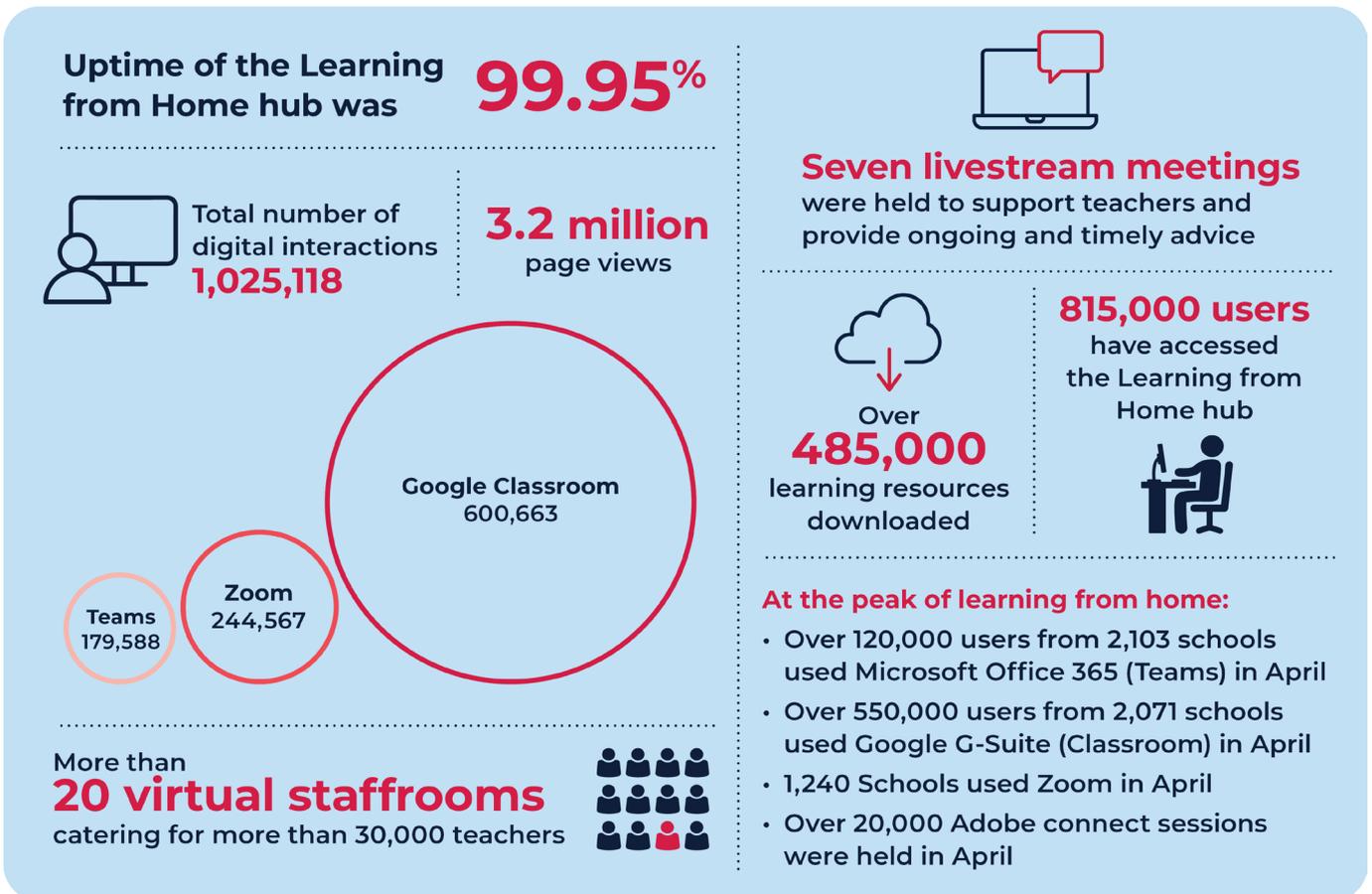
Rapid Procurement of online learning tools

To ensure that all schools were able to access online learning programs, the Department made several collaboration platforms available to schools, such as Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams and Zoom. Many schools were able to

utilise the digital collaboration platforms as a method of delivery to varying degree with some schools making a conscious decision to stick with printed learning materials.

In addition to these collaboration platforms, the Department also committed to providing extra support and functionality to staff through a range of other third party tools. The Department rapidly identified and procured a selection of appropriate third party tools and products to increase equitable access to learning for NSW students.

The expedited procurement process incorporated a level of rigour to ensure resources met the quality standards for the NSW Curriculum along with targeted cyber security, data privacy and integration aspects with our IT eco-system.



Source: 'School use of Online tools' provided by The Department. Data as of 19 June 2020.

What was the impact?

While the Education System has now returned to full time face-to-face learning, many teachers continue to incorporate the use of online learning with digital learning tools as part of their teaching. There has been a shift in perceptions of technology towards an increasing willingness to incorporate digital learning tools in delivering education.

Remote learning allowed schools to identify the particular assistance and support needs of their students when learning remotely. While students had many different ways of staying connected with their teacher, whether that be in person, via telephone, through a letter, email or on camera in a live virtual classroom, the impact on students learning progressions are still yet to be determined.

The Department also developed new assessments, particularly focused on literacy, numeracy and science, which schools began to use as soon as the transitional return to face-to-face learning began. This will help teachers to understand their students' progress, identify learning gaps and adjust the curriculum and supports accordingly as they returned to school. Within the Department, aggregated and anonymised information from these assessments will be instructive in our own diagnostics as we look more deeply at what we did well and what we have learned for the future.

The Department has been approached on numerous occasions to share our practice, our experience and our learnings with other jurisdictions, including internationally with meetings taking place as the Department was still responding.

As highlighted by all parts of the Education System, we were able to generate a centralised resource with the Department's Learning from Home hub utilised by government, Catholic and



Learning in action

Shared collaboration and alignment across the education sector, keeping teachers and students at the forefront

COVID 19 was indiscriminate and while leaving educational leaders vulnerable to a loss of control it enabled an alignment that saw unprecedented collaboration of resources and engagement. To continue providing a world class educational service to all NSW students regardless of education sector this opportunity needs to be further explored along with the collaboration with other educational jurisdictions.

Independent school communities throughout the time where students were asked to remain home if possible.

The Department has hosted a series of Teach Meets run by principals, for principals across the state highlighting models of best practice in areas such as assessment, student wellbeing and graduated return to face-to-face teaching. Close to 200 Principals joined the livestreams over the 3 events. Those unable to join were able to access recorded vision.

Where schools opted in for the third party online learning tools, they were able to supplement their own resources with these additional resources for their students including being able to include resources in the printed learning packs.

What should be kept or changed as a result?

The learnings identified through this chapter could have applicability across a range of Department initiatives. Most significantly, these ‘ways of learning and working’ should be leveraged in line with the *NSW Curriculum Review*. That review recommends ways to streamline what is taught in schools. Importantly, these learnings allow further consider of how teaching and learning occurs.

There are a number of other projects underway to further identify possible improvements to education, and these should be considered in taking forward the recommended actions. In particular, the *Education for a Changing World* “Learning from COVID” project identifies further opportunities for learning from the student perspective.



Learning 1

There are opportunities to re-imagine the way learning is delivered to meet the contextual and individual needs of student and staff.

Learning 2

The Department rapidly responded to the shift to remote and hybrid learning. Online resources developed by the Department proved popular. There are opportunities to leverage the Learning from Home hub as a more permanent resource, driving innovation in practice and housing new content for use by staff, students and parents.

Learning 3

Virtual staffrooms helped teachers adjust to remote teaching, facilitated collaboration and provided a space to access evidence based expertise in key learning areas. There may be opportunities to continue and improve this platform.

Learning 4

Schools and teachers continued to have flexibility to adapt central resources to their school communities, but they had varied capacity and capability to respond to the challenge. There are opportunities to improve frameworks to ensure the capacity for local decisions at the school level is balanced with appropriate support measures for schools, leaders and teachers.

Learning 5

Continuity of learning was supported by readily available online and on-demand professional learning. These online and blended models for professional learning should be considered moving forward.

Learning 6

Many parents contributed significantly to the learning of children during this period, continued parent engagement should be leveraged to continue to support student outcomes.

Every student is known

Ensuring a response that was equitable was a key priority in responding to COVID-19. This underpinned the approach in the managed return to school which ensured that every child would receive at least one day a week of face-to-face contact with their school. Schools remained open throughout the pandemic and students who were not able to learn from home could attend. This was also critical to ensure students always had a safe place to undertake their learning.

What was done?

Provision of digital devices

To facilitate student's access to online and digital learning resources while learning remotely the Department complemented the existing provision of more than 200,000 devices in schools purchased through the 4 year Computer Equipment Refresh program. The Department ordered 23,574 digital learning devices to supplement those schools who did not have enough equipment to share with their highly vulnerable students. This included Stage 6 students as a priority focus. As well as laptops and tablets, around 5,500 dongles and modems were secured to assist students to connect to the online or digital learning materials.

There were significant challenges in distributing these devices to schools in a timely manner.

These were primarily external including:

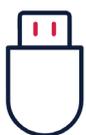
- procurement pressures to secure devices in competition with large organisations transitioning to remote working
- supply chain constraints impacting on equipment manufacturers such as Dell and Acer, delaying delivery of an order for 10,900 devices

These external challenges were exacerbated by a lack of central asset management about available devices and specific needs. This resulted in many schools not receiving their digital learning devices until the return of school in Term 2, 2020 as the decision was made for students and teachers to return to the classroom.

These experiences were very similar to CSNSW and AISNSW with many Principals working closely with their school community to identify students in need prior to submitting their data through an online ICT survey in the week of 23rd March 2020.

A number of existing Department programs continue to seek to address the divide in access to devices and online environments. This includes the completed *Connecting Country Schools* program. Schools are also able to use their existing school budgets to supplement their equipment inventory to support students in need.

New devices delivered during COVID-19



8,110
4G dongles



9,407
computers

Previous 9 months



52,400
computers



Schools have access to **existing devices** via the Computer Equipment Refresh program and the Resource Allocation Model

Students could also elect to use their own devices and, subject to some policy guidelines, have the same experience as those who use Departmental equipment. This policy freed up devices for use by students who did not have access to personal equipment. Additionally, schools were able to deliver remote learning in offline or blended formats to support the particular circumstances of their students.

The challenges of full digital access across NSW cannot be solved by the Education System alone. However the Education System can be a part of the solution and should continue to engage with other government and non-government agencies in addressing this ongoing issue. Improved central data on the device holdings and gaps across all schools will assist in this work. COVID-19 provides an impetus to truly address the digital divide and to narrow the gap with an aim to close that gap within a reasonable specified timeframe once and for all. This would place our Education System as an educational world leader in this area and ensure equity of access to all NSW students is achieved, regardless of geographical location or socio-economic standing.

Additional supports for vulnerable students

A state-wide model supports schools where highly vulnerable students have been identified. Local School Services staff and Child Wellbeing Unit staff coordinated support for highly vulnerable students. The Student Support Coordination process continued to support

schools with students at potential risk of becoming disengaged from their learning throughout COVID-19.

Student Support Coordination provides on the ground support to schools, including linking them into local and other Department supports and external services, when issues are beyond the schools resources or the school has exhausted the levers available to them. This coordination continues to be a key resource to schools as they support students who may be at risk of educational disadvantage now that students are learning face-to-face again.

The Department has monitored student attendance throughout the period of COVID-19. Now that face-to-face learning has resumed it has become apparent that some students may have found it more difficult to re-engage in school on a full-time basis. This includes students who have anxiety, those whose family's circumstances has been impacted by COVID-19, those with disability or who have difficulty regulating their behaviour. The Department is working very closely with these students and their families on an individual basis to support a return to school. It should be noted that less than 1% of students in public schools have not returned to onsite learning since 25 May 2020, a number of which are related to pre-existing health conditions that make the student more vulnerable at this time. Some of these students could greatly benefit from a flexible learning model so they remain engaged in their learning and stay connected with peers.



Student care coordination
546 students supported



Remote counselling
Telehealth platform acquired



Flexible learning support and guidance for teachers



2,140 staff in the disability support and learning virtual staffroom

During the remote learning period, some students became more engaged in their learning, experienced less anxiety and received more immediate feedback from their teachers and that this enhanced their learning. This includes students who may have otherwise be at increased risk of being disengaged from their leaning.

Across the Education System, there are rich examples of schools adjusting their operations to maintain strong connections with their school community over the remote learning period. For example, one Connected Communities public school assisted in maintaining a sense of school community during the pandemic, through delivering boxes of ingredients to families for a cooking challenge. The initiative provided practical support to families, as well as supporting student's education and life skills development.

Work to maintain connections was highlighted across sectors, including one catholic primary school in inner city Sydney which remained open to provide food and other material support, including a space to wash clothes, for its families. Throughout the COVID-19 period, support quickly widened to other families in need in the area. For a period of time, the school effectively transformed into social service to support local families. The approach meant that students remained connected to the school and aided in the return to face-to-face learning programs.

The Department has expanded its existing strategies, and launched new ones, to support the mental health and wellbeing of staff and students during the COVID-19 response. This initiative was expanded to include the role of school leaders and parents and carers in the process of learning remotely.

Education systems identified quickly that they needed to maintain ongoing delivery of student counselling services. The establishment of tele (telephone) counselling and online counselling services to maintain and deliver support during the period of remote learning became critical to ensuring students had a person to speak to, and for any additional referrals to take place across other government agencies to support that child.

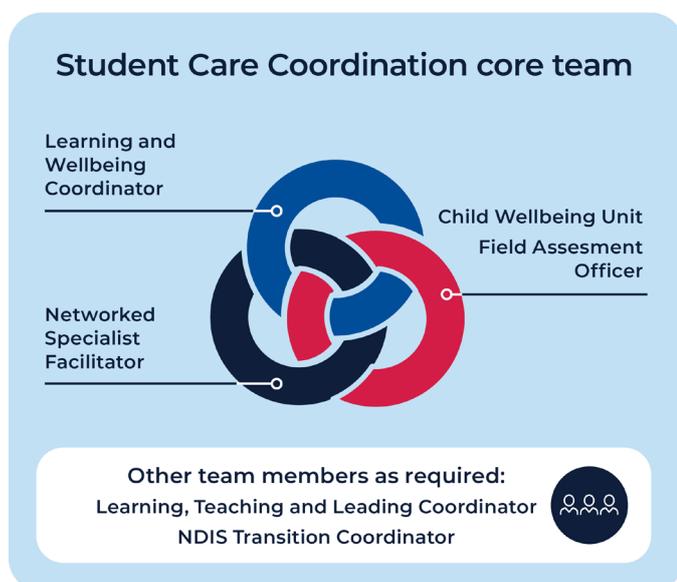
Teachers made regular and frequent contact with students to monitor student learning progress and overall wellbeing through telephone calls, line of sight live video conference calls, email and in some of the smaller communities by driving past students homes.

A virtual online wellbeing staffroom was established for teachers and school staff to share ideas and resources to support wellbeing of students. The staffroom is also connecting staff with each other to reduce isolation for people who may be working in rural and remote locations.

New or expanded initiatives were underpinned by targeted, collaborative multidisciplinary core teams. Education staff indicated that initiatives for vulnerable students worked well because they were driven by small Student Care Coordination (SCC) teams with differing and complementary skillsets, areas of expertise and connections. The collaborative, multidisciplinary approach of individual teams extended to their workings with other areas of the Department and external agencies. Stakeholders reported that cross-department partnerships and collaborations emerged that broke down silos across business units and across levels. Moreover, stakeholders reported that there was strong collaboration and data sharing with other relevant agencies such as the Department of Communities and Justice and Ministry of Health.



These multidisciplinary teams were empowered to act autonomously and speedily, increasing their effectiveness and impact on students and their families. For example, the team responsible for supporting the delivery of the telecounselling services was able to secure the online telehealth platform, Covue, through an expedited procurement process. The efficiencies created by these new ways of working may present opportunities to further optimise business processes and ways of working in the future.



The Department's commitment to delivering an inclusive school system that meets the needs of all students remained consistent throughout COVID-19. Inclusion means that all students, regardless of disability, can access and fully participate in learning alongside their peers, with reasonable adjustments and tailored teaching strategies aligned to their individual needs. To ensure all students were appropriately supported and included during the remote learning period, the Department undertook several initiatives to support flexible learning modes. The virtual state-wide staffroom for Disability Learning and Support teachers and support staff was one of the largest staffrooms initiated by the Department. This enabled staff to share ideas, experiences and curriculum resources and maintain connections with colleagues.

The rapid rollout of initiatives during this period often meant that the opportunity to collect rich data to assess the impact and success was

missed. There was often a tension in maintaining the balance between providing schools with sufficient support for students with additional learning needs and not impinging on school autonomy. There may be an opportunity to examine the wrap around supports provided to teachers to fulfil their responsibility to adequately support their students, including delivering personalised learning plans for students with disability, learning and support needs. There is an opportunity to also explore how successful the SCC initiative was and whether this should continue.

Support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students

Throughout the COVID-19 period, the Education System continued to provide a wide range of academic and cultural supports to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students. This included reinforcing existing programs and developing new modes of delivery. For example, the Department's Aboriginal Education and Communities Directorate, in partnership with the Clontarf Foundation and Role Models and Leaders Australia, formulated a 'high tech, low tech, no tech' engagement model for external contractors to ensure that all Aboriginal students were supported and engaged while learning remotely. Similarly Aboriginal Education Workers with CSNSW developed resources and provided information for teachers and parents so that the needs of students were being addressed, and Aboriginal Cultural Advisors continued to provide cultural lessons online. In some instances this led to improved relationships with families.

Support for students with English as an additional language or dialect

Maintaining continuity of English learning, providing additional support in community languages and combatting online racism was critical to ensuring students with English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D) and refugee students continued to succeed. The Department extended intensive English support for students whose English language development and learning may have been impacted by COVID-19. It also engaged Multicultural Education advisors to provide

professional learning, support and curriculum resources for teachers of EAL/D and refugee students, and published new translations in up to 35 community languages to assist schools in communicating key COVID-19 messages to families.

Support for international students

DE International supported international students to continue learning from abroad or from the homes of relatives or homestays in NSW. As at 22 June 2020, there were 197 international students offshore, unable to commence or resume their studies in NSW due to COVID-19 travel bans. There were also 448 international students over 18 and not living with a relative or homestay carer who required additional support. In response, DE International undertook several initiatives including providing local language support to parents of international students through online information sessions, issuing direct communications to homestay providers for distribution to students and homestay families, and establishing a WeChat information and support group for students in China which is monitored daily. The team worked closely with a number of schools to setup Microsoft Teams classrooms. The Microsoft Teams platform was tested to ensure it would work behind foreign government firewalls so students could remain connected with their teachers and peers when they were unable to access other online Department platforms.

What was the impact?

Estimates indicate that the remote learning period may have increased the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students.³ The rollout of additional assessment and reporting supports will assist the Department and individual schools in understanding the impact of the remote learning period on individual students over time.

There have been a significant number of examples where the remote learning period provided an environment where otherwise disengaged students have been able to thrive.



Learning in action

Schools Digital Strategy

The importance of ensuring the NSW Education System is equipped with the digital skills needed in the future, including through device equity, had been identified prior to COVID 19 through the Schools Digital Strategy.⁴ This seven year strategy aims to empower schools to determine their own digital future and be supported with the digital skills and tools they need to succeed. COVID 19 necessarily expedited some of the longer term visions of the strategy, such as virtual learning spaces. Consideration of the learnings from COVID 19 will inform the continued development of the Schools Digital Strategy, including reinforcing the importance of digital equity.

- ³ Julie Sonnemann and Peter Goss, 2020, COVID catch-up, Grattan Institute.
⁴ <https://education.nsw.gov.au/about-us/strategies-and-reports/schools-digital-strategy>

What should be kept or changed as a result?



Learning 7

The Department quickly identified that the impacts of COVID 19 would heighten the needs of students already identified as being vulnerable, and make other students vulnerable for the first time. There is an opportunity to continue and expand the supports put in place to support these students.

Learning 8

The remote learning period created barriers for some students, while removing barriers for others. Consideration should be given to adapting or enhancing flexible learning modes to create a more inclusive Education System.

Learning 9

Multidisciplinary teams, cross-departmental collaborations and streamlined ways of working were critical to success in supporting vulnerable students. The Department should consider ways to continue outcomes-driven and customer-focused teams and collaborative projects.

Learning 10

Infrastructure and supply chain challenges meant that not all teachers and students had access to an appropriate web enabled device to participate in online learning. Schools were enabled to respond to their particular community needs. The learnings from this period should inform the continued rollout of the Schools Digital Strategy, including considering implementation of a 1:1 student to device ratios and improving central visibility of devices held across the Department and their loan status.

Keeping schools safe and clean

Disruptions to supply chains and the push for increased hand hygiene and cleaning measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19 presented distinct challenges for the Education System prior to students being encouraged to learn from home. Detailed guidance from the AHPPC in April was required to be fully met before the full return of students to face-to-face learning in May 2020. The success of returning students to school was largely based on parent confidence that schools would be clean and safe places for their children. The Department has worked closely with NSW Health and the Australian Government to ensure the best possible measures are in place to ensure the health, safety and wellbeing of students and staff in our public schools.

Health and safety

What was done?

The Department worked to ensure schools were a safe place throughout COVID-19 by:

- Working in collaboration with other agencies, particularly through the State Emergency Operations Centre (SEOC);
- Providing infection control procedures and support to schools and staff;
- Supporting schools in preventing the transmission of COVID-19 in their school community as well as responding to specific incidents of COVID-19;
- Supporting the health, safety and wellbeing of staff, in particular vulnerable staff; and
- Supported health, safety and wellbeing of students, including students with disability and those students attending boarding schools

Collaboration across multiple tiers of government

The Department worked in partnership with NSW Government and Australian Government agencies to deliver a coordinated public health response. At the national level, the Department was represented on the Education and Employment Sector Pandemic Preparedness Committee, where it was able to share information and resources, influencing the development of resources at the national level. Pandemic planning and response sessions were later undertaken with the Commonwealth Department of Education Skills and Employment.

Policies and procedures were developed and revised in line with advice from NSW Health and the AHPPC, including protocols for responding to confirmed cases of COVID-19, infection control and hygiene, cleaning of schools and physical distancing.





Education Liaison Officers were activated within the SEOC to provide daily situation reports on affected government and non-government schools, ECE services and TAFE sites informing the whole of government situation report.

The Department engaged in multi-agency collaboration to resolve a number of complex issues. For example:

- continuity of education and access of teaching staff to and from rural and remote areas during COVID-19 restrictions (Police/Health/Education);
- the use and application of alternate and suitable hygiene and PPE items in an educational setting, including the successful negotiation with NSW Health for 100,000 masks to support the return to face-to-face learning (Health/Education); and
- collaboration with Transport NSW to manage public transport arrangements for school students during the return to face-to-face learning (Health/Transport NSW).

Infection control procedures and the implementation of AHPPC and NSW Health advice

The Department led the health and safety response across the education portfolio. Advice, guidance and resources developed by the Department to support compliance with AHPPC and NSW Health advice were shared with the non-government schools and ECE sectors, ensuring a consistent approach across NSW.

The Department had infection control policies, procedures and resources in place prior to the COVID-19 pandemic which provided guidance on a planned and managed approach to infection control practices in schools and workplaces. As community transmission of COVID-19 increased, these resources were adapted to reflect new and enhanced practical guidance on infection control.

This also included reinforcing the importance of regular hygiene measures, such as hand hygiene, through the provision of posters and other communications to schools to use for their staff and students.

Procedures for responding to suspected and confirmed COVID-19 cases

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, a specific Confirmed Case Protocol was developed in consultation with NSW Health. This protocol leveraged systems and processes already in place to notify and respond to incidents and emergency events and to temporarily cease operations in a school or workplace. The Protocol outlines the process by which the Department works with NSW Health in response to a confirmed case, including contact tracing and notification of close contacts, communication with parents and the wider community and the requirements for environmental cleaning prior to the school resuming onsite learning.

The Confirmed Case Protocol was in place prior to the first confirmed case in a NSW government school, which meant a timely coordinated response and seamless support to the school and its community with minimal disruption.

Incident notification and response mechanisms

The Department's Incident Report and Support Hotline service provides support and advice to schools and workplaces on responding to and reporting incidents in line with incident notification and response procedures. A separate public inquiries line was established in ED Connect to manage parent, carer and community contacts. As detailed below, throughout the response the volume of calls received increased significantly.

Staff health and wellbeing

Throughout the response, the Department supported vulnerable staff to work from home, in line with the advice of the AHPPC. The AHPPC identified the following vulnerable populations at risk of serious illness if infected with COVID-19:

- people aged 70 years and over;
- people aged 65 years and over with chronic medical conditions;

Total calls received to the Health and Safety helpline



Average daily calls from 300 to 900 per day during COVID



10
additional
hotline operators

- all people with compromised immune systems; and
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people over the age of 50 with chronic medical conditions.

The Department does not hold centralised information to estimate the number of staff that may fall into the categories of vulnerability defined by the AHPPC and may therefore need to take advantage of remote working arrangements. As such, workforce supply was identified as a potential issue, although the Department remained confident that it could maintain continuity of education even if absenteeism was to reach up to 20%. The staffing mix at individual schools varies and therefore some schools, particularly in regional areas may have a higher percentage of their workforce identified as at increased risk. The Department developed a number of mitigation strategies and support mechanisms, including:

1. Casual staff support package

The Department implemented a support program to provide all casual staff who were engaged for a minimum of 10 days in Term 1, at least 2 days a week work throughout Term 2. In addition, staff with temporary engagements that were due to end, had their engagements extended through Term 2. Principals were also able to engage casuals as needed for their specific school context. There is a significant casual workforce to support absenteeism in schools and as at 30 June 2020, 7,122 casual staff were working across the state.

2. Workforce planning

A range of contingency plans were developed in the event of higher rates of absenteeism or circumstances in which a significant portion of the casual workforce was unable to work in schools. This planning sought to leverage existing support mechanisms and staffing strategies. This also included consideration of how the Department could utilise existing appropriate workforces with working with children checks to support school operations.



Importantly, this planning included consideration of the managed return of staff back to school sites in line with the managed return to school policy. Clear documentation was distributed to staff and published on the intranet to inform staff of the Department policies for returning to work in schools, including available leave provisions.

3. Workforce support and wellbeing

A website consolidating resources to support staff wellbeing was launched. It includes guides to working remotely, information on physical and psychological self-care, tools for staying connected to managers and colleagues and information for staff who may be particularly vulnerable to the risks of COVID-19.

The Being Well Program website, launched in October 2019, which consolidates a range of resources to support staff wellbeing, was updated with resources on remote learning and leadership. The Employee Assistance Program – Supporting You was also expanded to support casual staff.

The particular burden on many staff of dealing with multiple emergencies back to back, or even concurrently, highlighted the need for strong employee wellbeing programs, as well as mechanisms to relieve staff and work areas appropriately. A capacity to rapidly deploy staff to key functions was demonstrated in the response, however further work should be undertaken to ensure that surge staffing is available to support business critical areas.

Ongoing work of the Department to ensure a single source of truth human resources system, and strategic workforce planning will assist in supporting the Department's future staffing arrangements.

Students with disability

Throughout the pandemic response, the Department has remained committed to delivering an inclusive school system that meets the needs of all students.

In line with advice from NSW Health, the Department continued to provide a high level of care to students with disability or high health

needs, in accordance with the schools' operating practices. Standard precautions for hygiene and infection control were in place and a specific Infection Control Practical Guide for Schools for Specific Purposes (SSPs) was developed.

To support students with additional health needs and to ensure the safety of school staff at the commencement of the managed return to school, over 700 deliveries of personal protective equipment (PPE) were distributed to all SSPs and mainstream schools with support classes.

Students in boarding schools

A specific response strategy was developed for Department schools with boarding facilities to support the health and safety of staff and students during the managed return to school. The Department engaged an external risk management professional to work with schools to complete a risk assessment to determine whether it was safe for boarding students to return, as well as protocols to manage a confirmed case of COVID-19 in a boarding facility. The risk assessments, and the AHPPC advice, informed the development of guidelines to support the return to face-to-face learning. The guidelines were shared with the non-government schools sectors to ensure a consistent approach across the Education System.

What was the impact?

The health, safety and wellbeing measures the Department rapidly developed and implemented enabled schools to remain open and operational for parents and carers who needed their children to attend throughout the COVID-19 response.

Targeted advice, guidance and resources were developed and communicated to students, staff and parents at each stage of the response, including on:

- the managed return to school
- the return to full time face-to-face learning and resumption of school activities
- implementation of AHPPC advice in schools
- physical distancing for staff
- staff returning to work
- community and visitor guidelines

Teachers and school staff were well-supported to implement new measures at each stage of the response and to seek advice to manage new and emerging issues if they arose.

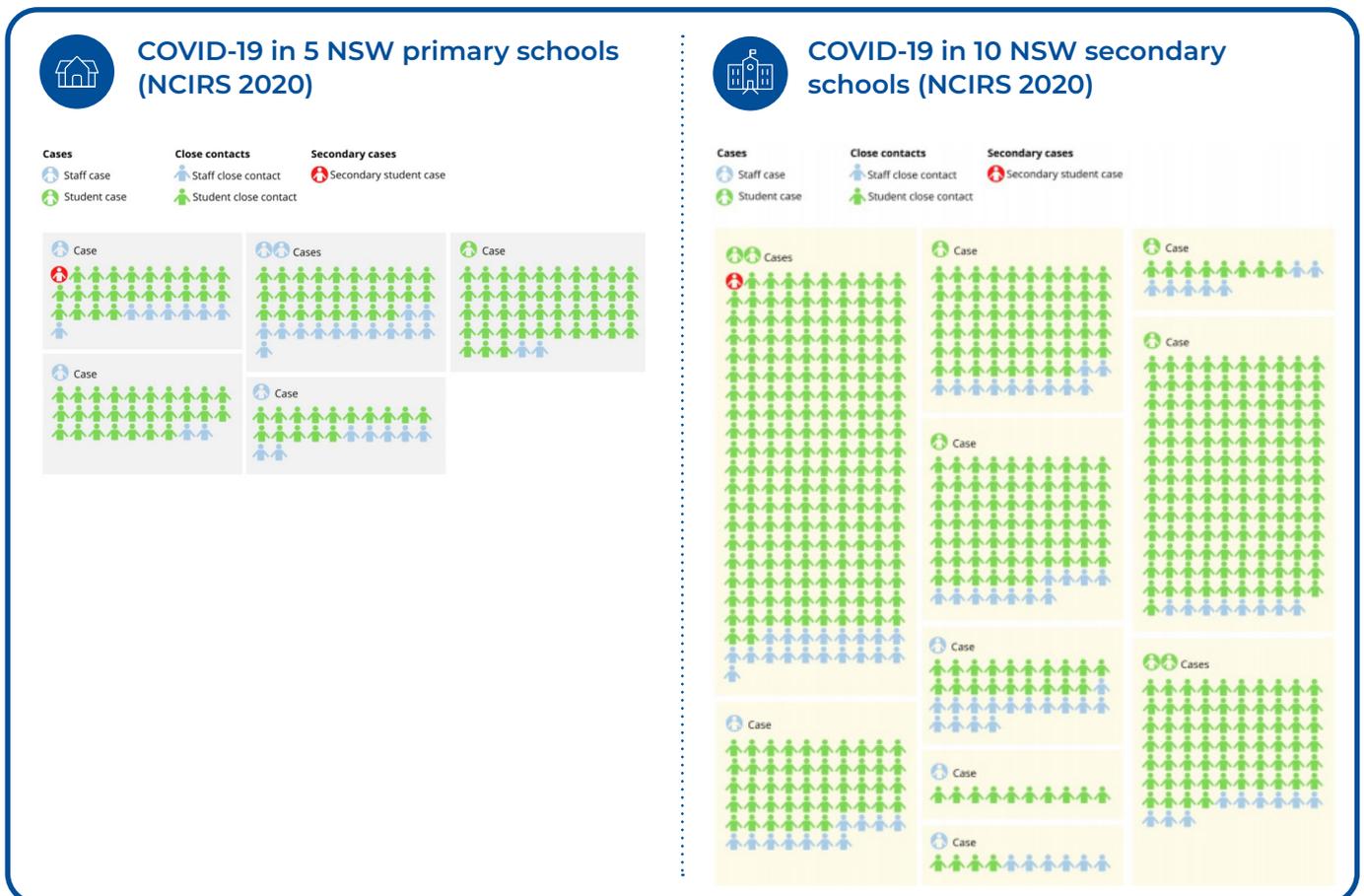
The design of the managed return to school policy included the phased return of students to full time face-to-face learning, recognising that staff and community confidence would determine the success of the return. The high attendance rates following the return to full time face-to-face learning demonstrates the high level confidence the community had in their schools as safe learning and working environments. As at 2 July student average attendance was 86%, 63% of vulnerable staff were onsite, and 7033 casual teachers were working across the state.

Despite this, there has been a high level of public scrutiny for each individual case of COVID-19 that has impacted school communities. This highlights how critical each individual school is to instilling confidence in the Education System as a whole.

A report into COVID-19 in NSW schools prepared by the National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance (NCIRS) highlights the limited spread of COVID-19 within NSW schools.

What should be kept or changed as a result?

The response to COVID-19 has highlighted that the pre-existing health and safety systems were capable of adapting and responding to this particular emergency. It has also highlighted the importance of individual school compliance with centrally provided frameworks, such as infection control procedures in the response. Supporting schools to maintain best practice with appropriate central accountability measures will further improve responsiveness to future emergencies, as well as supporting business as usual operations.



Source: http://ncirs.org.au/sites/default/files/2020-04/NCIRS%20NSW%20Schools%20COVID_Summary_FINAL%20public_26%20April%202020.pdf



Learning 11

Incidents such as COVID-19, have an immense impact on business operations that are providing front-line support. It is recommended that the Department explore options of creating a pool of staff from across the Department that can be readily deployed during critical times to support essential areas of the business. This should include systems to support a clear line of sight of staffing capacity across the entire Department.

Learning 12

With the intense focus on hygiene and infection control measures to keep schools healthy and to prevent the spread of COVID-19, there is a greater level of understanding and application of infection control measures in our school environments. There is a new level of understanding of the importance of hygiene and infection control practices as a means of creating safe working and learning environments which will remain ongoing beyond the response to COVID-19. However, to ensure an ongoing and sustained application, targeted support, training and clear information will be required to support staff and students to maintain best practice.

Learning 13

Following established procedures was critical not only to health and safety, but for confidence in the Education System as a whole. Appropriate oversight and support measures should reinforce compliance with critical procedures, as well as promote system confidence.

Cleaning and hygiene supplies

What was done?

Cleaning

Cleaning was one element in a suite of measures the Department put in place to ensure NSW schools are safe, clean and secure places for students and staff. Schools are professionally cleaned each day under a whole of government cleaning contract. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department implemented additional cleaning processes.

Hygiene supplies

The implementation of additional infection control and hygiene measures in early 2020 led to a significant increase in global demand for hygiene products, including toilet paper, soap, hand sanitiser, disinfectant and PPE. In March 2020, the Department received significant advice from schools and the ECE sector that they were unable to purchase hygiene supplies due to limited stock or maximum buying limits.

The Department stepped in early to reinforce the supply chain by establishing a whole of system end-to-end response to procure and distribute hygiene supplies to schools. As the Department has purchasing power in the market, a portfolio-wide supply chain approach was implemented to address the supply chain risks. The Department exceeded its responsibilities under the Pandemic Plan, identifying and managing risks across the Education System and beyond areas of operational and legislative accountability.

In line with commitments under the Pandemic Plan, the Department supported communication links with CSNSW and the AISNSW. Beyond this, the Department ensured non-government schools and the ECE sector had access to hygiene supplies. Through the SEOC, the Department also supported other NSW Public Sector agencies to access hygiene supplies where needed.

The Department developed a prioritisation process which places a needs-based focus on the distribution of limited resources. Sites with special care needs and vulnerable children take priority.

Every NSW public school is cleaned at least once a day in line with an agreed department-wide regime

Extra measures at every NSW public school in response to COVID-19



Enhanced cleaning

25% increase in cleaning hours targeting high traffic areas

Day 1 Term 2



Additional day clean

In line with AHPPC guidelines and targeting bathrooms, supplies, bubblers, and high touch surfaces

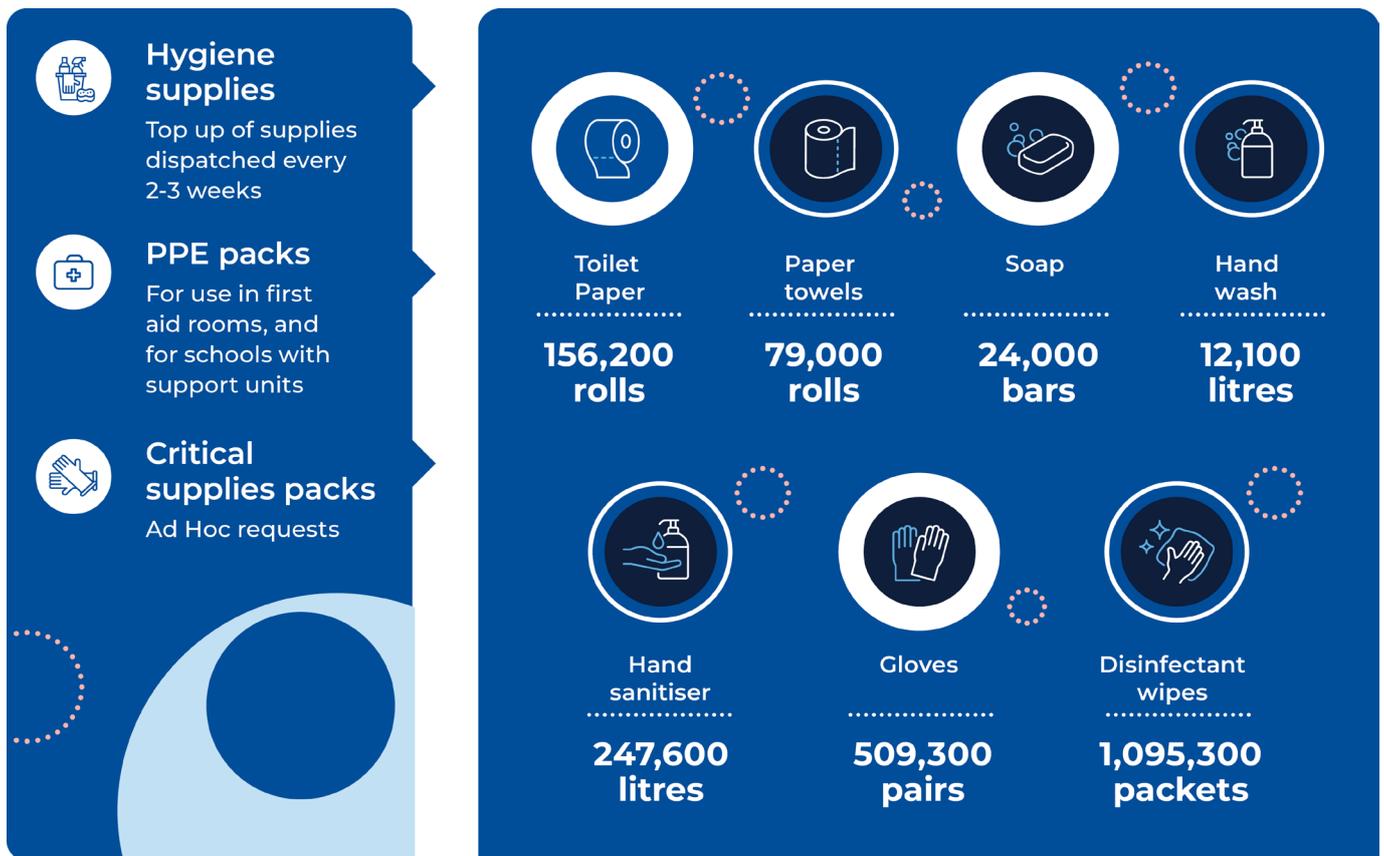
11 May 2020



Specialist cleaning

Deep environmental clean of entire school following a confirmed COVID-19 case in the school

Ad hoc



Data as at 01 July 2020.

A distribution hub was stood up at the vacant site of TAFE Chullora to manage the supply chain. Additional staff were recruited to pack supplies for delivery to schools, and this was supplemented by corporate staff who were temporarily redeployed. Supplies were distributed by Regional Asset Management teams and via Australia Post.

A process to maintain system-wide stock status is in place. Commencing Week 1, Term 2, procurement, requests, warehouse deliveries and dispatch have been managed through a single source of truth reporting system. The system records stock levels and movements for reporting purposes. A dashboard tracking system also monitors current and projected supplies. This central supply and distribution function was a completely new function stood up by the Department in response to the particular supply chain challenges presented by COVID-19.

During the two-week period of remote learning at the commencement of Term 2, the School Security Unit scheduled additional security patrols to ensure that the staff and students who remained onsite were safe. Additional security patrols were also implemented at some schools following thefts of hygiene supplies.

As hygiene supplies were critical to the ongoing operations of schools, the Department also implemented 24 hour security at the Glenfield and Chullora storage facilities.

What was the impact?

Enhanced cleaning was in place across schools in March 2020. Additional cleaning during the day, in line with AHPPC advice, was in place at all government schools to enable the managed return to school, commencing Week 3, Term 2. The success of the managed return to school was supported by the enhanced cleaning regime and the high level of workforce and community confidence it generated.

To date, there has been no recurrence of COVID-19 in the staff or student population at schools subject to specialist cleaning following a confirmed diagnosis.

There are significant costs associated with enhanced cleaning measures, as well as the specialist clean required after a confirmed case. AISNSW also noted the unexpected budget impact of cleaning costs, especially the particularly high impact of cleaning after a confirmed case.

At every stage of the response, the Department took steps to proactively identify critical supply shortages and to rapidly undertake procurement and distribution, for both government and non-government schools and the ECE sector. Prior to the COVID-19 response, the Department did not hold a central stockpile or system-wide record of supplies. Supplies were managed at a local school or service level. The Department now has a centralised distribution centre to procure and dispatch hygiene supplies to schools.

The system response ensured that schools were equipped with the necessary hygiene supplies required to continue operations throughout Term 1 and that all schools received critical deliveries to enable the start of the managed return to school in Week 3, Term 2. The success of the managed return to school was contingent upon the robustness of the supply system, and the high level of workforce and community confidence it generated.

What should be kept or changed as a result?

The Department is currently considering medium to long term options for an enhanced cleaning regime to support the ongoing response to the COVID-19 pandemic, noting that broader conditions and AHPPC advice are subject to change. In all investigations, the potential for rapidly changing health advice is being considered to ensure efficiency and value for money.

To enable the continuation of the additional day cleaning in schools, options currently under consideration include:

- the re-introduction of a janitor role;
- amendment to current roles and responsibilities for General Assistants; and
- the extension of variations to the whole of government cleaning contract.
- All options require further analysis of financial, administrative and operational implications.

There are opportunities to enhance and streamline supply management and logistics in the short and long term.

With sufficient stocks of hygiene supplies now on hand and supported by a robust distribution process, the centralisation of hygiene supplies will continue throughout 2020 with minimal change to systems. The financial implications of maintaining the centralised function will require further consideration to support continued viability.

In the longer term, the Department should consider the establishment of a permanent logistics and response team from the Chullora site, with the critical function of emergency preparedness and resilience. The team would also provide support functions to the Department's broader logistical requirements.

A permanent logistics and response team would support work currently being led by School Infrastructure NSW to streamline facilities management across the Department. Long term success outputs would be based on:

- reduced administrative burden for school principals
- operational readiness in crisis situations
- cost savings through intelligent budgetary systems between schools and the Department
- maximised use of the Chullora site for multiple purposes



Learning 14

The whole of government cleaning contract allows sufficient flexibility and capacity to adjust cleaning regimes rapidly in response to changing circumstances.

Learning 15

To enable effective cleaning of high-touch areas such as toilet facilities, and ensure ongoing compliance with infection control and hygiene requirements, it is recommended that an assessment of assets across the portfolio be undertaken and a program of works scoped to upgrade the assets to meet statutory requirements.

Learning 16

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that school level procurement is vulnerable to supply chain disruption. The Department demonstrated an operational capacity to rapidly stand up critical processes in response to rapidly changing circumstances and government advice. Leveraging whole of system scale was critical to the success of the response.

Learning 17

The centralisation of an enabling function, such as the procurement, dispatch and monitoring of hygiene supplies, allowed schools to focus attention on the provision of continuity of education, the delivery of the managed return to school and ensuring every student is known valued and cared for.

Learning 18

Infection control and hygiene requirements should be clearly defined for each school community in order to inform robust supply chain planning.

Communication and engagement

Effective communication and engagement is integral to the success of responses to health emergencies.⁵ The rapidly changing environment of the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for prompt and accurate communication of key messages to key stakeholders to ensure they clearly understood their roles and responsibilities to help manage the crisis, to counter misinformation and enhance the reputation of the Department.

What was done?

The response to COVID-19 commenced while the Department was still responding to ongoing bushfires and floods across the state. Unlike crisis communications in the case of fires and floods which were localised to specific school communities, COVID-19 required a system wide response as it affected the entire state.

Through the response to COVID-19 the Department leveraged a number of measures to communicate with staff, students, key stakeholders and the community. This included through:

- Maintaining up to date and timestamped information on a set of dedicated COVID-19 pages on the education website, in a rapidly changing environment – the COVID-19 Hub
- Producing significant collateral for schools, including posters to display around the school supporting appropriate infection control and hygiene measures
- Providing advice on supplies dispatched and how to use products
- Providing a channel for all critical supply requests and enquiries

⁵ [https://www.who.int/publications/item/risk-communication-and-community-engagement-readiness-and-initial-response-for-novel-coronaviruses-\(ncov\)](https://www.who.int/publications/item/risk-communication-and-community-engagement-readiness-and-initial-response-for-novel-coronaviruses-(-ncov))

- Providing avenues for Principals to provide feedback and ask questions to the Secretary and Deputy Secretary
- Supporting responses to a high volume of staff and public enquiries about the Department's response to COVID-19
- Developing a 'plan on a page' for the managed return to school, providing schools and the community with confidence about the continued approach to managing COVID-19. This was the first such plan in the country.
- Developing comprehensive Guidelines for how schools would operate in Term 2 with supporting collateral, which were updated and reissued as health advice changed.

Key channels included:

- Department-wide and school-leadership emails to communicate critical changes and announcements
- Development of a COVID-19 webpage hub, internal and public facing, serving as a one-stop shop for departmental staff and community members for all information in relation to COVID-19, including links to key resources, guidelines, fact sheets, FAQ and contact details





Stakeholder meetings



Livestreams



Internet/intranet



Social media



Emails

- Introduction of a daily situational report sent through a dedicated email account to school executive and corporate managers summarising the key changes from the day, with links to key resources and further information
- Social media platforms such as the Department's and individual school Facebook pages
- Creation of a general enquiries phone line and email account for departmental staff and community members
- Greater utilisation of live streams and online meeting platforms to host question and answer sessions for Department staff and stakeholders
- Sharing of information with the Education sector
- Leveraging school and teacher advocates to share key updates and advice

What was the impact?

The attendance patterns following major announcements of policy movements during the COVID-19 response indicate that messaging was communicated effectively to the public. Both in the transition to the remote learning period and in the return to face-to-face learning, it was clear that schools and the community understood who should be attending school, and what could and could not happen at school in each stage.

Schools are the primary source of information for parents about education and students. They hold this relationship and it is effective during normal operations. However, this is not an effective method during a system and state-wide crisis unless we can be confident all schools clearly and quickly relay advice to

their communities. As a result of some delays in relaying advice to local school communities, all schools are now required to use the Department's social media platforms for consistency and timeliness of messaging.

The response to COVID-19 demonstrated that there is an almost total reliance on Principals to disseminate information to teachers and school staff, however, Principals were often not confident to make decisions in relation to COVID-19. As a result they directed their staff to the health and safety or EdConnect hotlines for advice resulting in significant increases in calls to those hotlines.

More regular face-to-face briefings are needed from the Department to provide updates to Principals. It is critical that clear advice is provided and where possible supported by a clear action plan for schools to follow. There was a reliance on Deputy Secretary emails and Situation Report daily update emails to disseminate advice internally, however open rates and effectiveness of these communication methods were not able to be measured.

Additionally, the process to publish content on the website and intranet was at times slow. As advice was changing rapidly, published content could be out of date quickly. The timing of releasing significant updated advice often meant school staff heard it at the same time as the public, often through media which was perceived negatively by school staff.

Improving these processes to equip Principals with the information and confidence to keep staff at their schools informed, as well as establishing direct lines of communication with teachers to keep them informed and engaged

in a timely way would be likely to significantly reduce confusion within the Department. Key stakeholders and representatives of relevant business areas and school staff, including teachers, were consulted during decision making, however teachers themselves often did not feel part of the response.

Overall the Education website and intranet performed well with little to no interruptions and with extremely high visitor rates. While the dedicated COVID-19 hub on the website and intranet did host all official advice, the amount of information published and the speed at which it changed may have made it difficult to use and find relevant information. The COVID-19 hub was updated ahead of Term 2 to make it more user friendly and combined with official Guidelines, it became a more valuable resource for school staff.

The Learning from Home hub was a key communication resource enabling students to seamlessly continue learning remotely and transition back to school. A key element of this, is the way it was directly communicated to, and accessed by, teachers. Targeting communications in formats that teachers will engage with is critical to ensuring they will receive relevant information from the Department.

The number of existing and new policies and processes relevant to COVID-19 made it hard to find relevant resources. Ahead of students returning to face-to-face learning, a checklist was published and shared with schools providing links to correct advice, policies and procedures to help schools prepare for more students on campus. This initiative was welcomed.

The formal guidelines documents, managed return to school plan, and supporting collateral including professionally designed posters and forms gave schools confidence to deliver the Department's advice and policy and also minimised the administrative burden of developing this collateral at school.

As a result of the Department's decentralised communication function, there was some duplication of work and at times lack of oversight. Additionally, the large number of frontline staff across multiple enquiry lines

required timely and accurate information in order to be able to perform their functions effectively. This was critical to providing consistent advice to both internal and external stakeholders relying on these functions.

What should be kept or changed as a result?

A communication strategy specific for the period of COVID-19 and aligning to the Department's overarching communication strategy should have been developed early and progressively updated. A crisis communications strategy should be developed and regularly updated to allow this to happen quickly in any future state-wide emergencies. It should include roles, responsibilities and protocols specific to the crisis to ensure greater clarity and governance over the way in which advice is produced and disseminated and how content is published on the intranet and website.

Capability needs to be developed in-house so that the crisis response teams would ideally second someone from the central communications team so that access to the established channels (internal and external) is seamless and leverages existing processes.

During business as usual times, the Department's corporate communications should regularly connect and guide direction of all other Department communications teams to ensure alignment of messaging. This group could then be leveraged and scaled up in emergency situations to ensure full Department saturation and strategic use of channels.



Learning 19

Clearer, direct communications between the Department and teachers would have more quickly made teachers aware of changing requirements for how schools would operate and the helpful support materials and guidance available. This would also enable them to communicate more effectively with parents.

Learning 20

Regular engagement with cross-sector stakeholders improved the quality and reception of the COVID-19 response. Considering mechanisms to continue and improve cross-sector engagement may assist with future reform, crisis responses and drive innovation to benefit learning.

Learning 21

The speed at which the crisis unfolded, combined with the decentralised model of communications, and ownership of channels and audiences, within the Department, made it difficult to strategically plan and manage communications.

Learning 22

Better measurement of communications, and segmentation of email distribution lists is needed to accurately understand the effectiveness of the Department's communication with internal stakeholders.

Next steps

The response to COVID-19 has highlighted the capacity of the Education System to be agile and responsive. This flexibility should not be lost in the return to business as usual, but instead should be leveraged to enable the Department to continue to respond to persistent challenges across the system in order to improve the educational outcomes for all students.

The innovations and changed ways of working in response to the pandemic provide an opportunity to re-imagine the way learning happens through our Education System.

Importantly, the response and recovery phases of the COVID-19 pandemic are continuing. There are likely many more learnings to come out of this experience.



Learnings – Continuity of education

The learnings identified through this chapter could have applicability across a range of Department initiatives. Most significantly, these ‘ways of learning and working’ should be leveraged in line with the NSW Curriculum Review. That review recommends ways to streamline what is taught in schools. Importantly, these learnings allow further consideration of how that teaching and learning occurs.

There are a number of other projects underway to further identify possible improvements to education, and these should be considered in taking forward the recommended actions. In particular, the Education for a Changing World “Learning from COVID” project identifies further opportunities for learning from the student perspective.

Table 1 – Summary of learnings and proposed next step

Learning	Next Step
<p>1 There are opportunities to re-imagine the way learning is delivered to meet the contextual and individual needs of student and staff.</p>	<p>Consider how to embed new ways of delivering learning and assessment practices across the system.</p>
<p>2 The Department rapidly responded to the shift to remote and hybrid learning. Online resources developed by the Department proved popular.</p>	<p>Consider how to leverage the Learning from Home hub as a more permanent resource, driving innovation in practice and housing new content for use by staff, students and parents.</p>
<p>3 Virtual staffrooms helped teachers adjust to remote teaching and facilitate collaboration. There may be opportunities to continue and improve this platform.</p>	<p>Consider whether the virtual state wide staffrooms for teachers should be continued, and whether the platform can be improved.</p>
<p>4 Schools and teachers continued to have flexibility to adapt central resources to their school communities, but they had varied capacity and capability to respond to the challenge. There are opportunities to improve frameworks to ensure the capacity for local decisions at the school level is balanced with appropriate support measures for schools, leaders and teachers.</p>	<p>Consider appropriate system support mechanisms to assist local school practices.</p>
<p>5 Continuity of learning was supported by readily available online and on-demand professional learning.</p>	<p>Consider online and blended models for the delivery of professional learning going forward.</p>
<p>6 Many parents contributed significantly to the learning of children during this period, continued parent engagement should be leveraged to continue to support student outcomes.</p>	<p>Consider how to embed pro-active relationships with parents to make them partners in learning.</p>

Learnings – Every student is known

It was identified early in the response to COVID-19, that any reduction in face-to-face learning was likely to have more significant impacts on students with higher vulnerability. While this drove the decision to ensure schools remained

open for children who needed to attend physically, it also drove the development of a range of responses that could continue to support every student in their learning.

Table 2 – Summary of learnings and proposed next step

Learning	Next Step
<p>7 The Department quickly identified that the impacts of COVID 19 would heighten the needs of students already identified as being vulnerable, and make other students vulnerable for the first time.</p>	<p>Consider opportunities to continue and expand supports put in place for students with increased vulnerability.</p>
<p>8 The remote learning period created barriers for some students, while removing barriers for others.</p>	<p>Consider opportunities to adapt or enhance flexible learning modes to create a more inclusive Education System, especially for students with a disability.</p>
<p>9 Multidisciplinary teams, cross-departmental collaborations and streamlined ways of working were critical to success in supporting vulnerable students</p>	<p>Consider ways to continue outcomes-driven and customer-focused teams and collaborative projects.</p>
<p>10 Infrastructure and supply chain challenges meant that not all teachers and students had access to an appropriate web enabled device to participate in online learning. Schools were enabled to respond to their particular community needs.</p>	<p>Consider learnings from the remote learning period to refine and expedite the Schools Digital Strategy, particularly through the Rural Access Gap program and to improve central visibility of laptop location and loan status.</p>



Learnings – Schools are safe and clean

These learnings seek to leverage the additional capacity built during the response to COVID-19 and to assist the system policies being applied at the school level. Additionally, they seek to ensure

that schools, staff and students are supported and safe not only in periods of crisis, but as standard practice across the Department.

Table 3 – Summary of learnings and proposed next step

Learning	Next Step
<p>11 Incidents such as COVID-19, have an immense impact on business operations that are providing front-line support. It is recommended that the Department explore options of creating a pool of staff from across the Department that can be readily deployed during critical times to support essential areas of the business. This should include systems to support a clear line of sight of staffing capacity across the entire Department.</p>	<p>Consider learnings in workforce strategy development.</p>
<p>12 With the intense focus on infection control measures to keep schools healthy and to prevent the spread of COVID-19, there is a greater level of understanding and application of infection control measures in our school environments. There is a new level of understanding of the importance of infection control practices as a means of creating safe working and learning environments which will remain ongoing beyond the response to COVID-19. However, to ensure an ongoing and sustained application, targeted support, training and clear information will be required to support staff and students to maintain best practice.</p>	<p>Consider how schools can be supported to maintain best practice infection control procedures including how this can be effectively monitored.</p>
<p>13 Following established procedures was critical to not only health and safety, but for confidence in the Education System as a whole. Appropriate oversight and support measures should reinforce compliance with critical procedures, as well as promote system confidence.</p>	<p>Consider how to clearly communicate and monitor core school based expectations.</p>
<p>14 The whole of government cleaning contract allows sufficient flexibility and capacity to adjust cleaning regimes rapidly in response to changing circumstances.</p>	<p>Consider options to enable the continuation of additional cleaning in schools.</p>
<p>15 To enable effective cleaning of high-touch areas such as toilet facilities, and ensure ongoing compliance with infection control and hygiene requirements, it is recommended that an assessment of assets across the portfolio be undertaken and a program of works scoped to upgrade the assets to meet statutory requirements.</p>	<p>Assess assets and scope a program of works to upgrade assets to meet statutory requirements.</p>
<p>16 The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that school level procurement is vulnerable to supply chain disruption.</p> <p>The Department demonstrated an operational capacity to rapidly stand up critical processes in response to rapidly changing circumstances and government advice. Leveraging whole of system scale was critical to the success of the response.</p>	<p>Consider establishment of permanent logistics and response team with surge capacity for emergency response.</p>
<p>17-18 The centralisation of an enabling function, such as the procurement, dispatch and monitoring of hygiene supplies, allowed schools to focus attention on the provision of continuity of education, the delivery of the managed return to school and ensuring every student is known valued and cared for.</p>	<p>Consider how infection control and hygiene requirements can be more clearly defined for each school community in order to inform robust supply chain planning.</p>

Learnings – Communication and engagement

Effective communication and engagement is integral to the success of responses to health emergencies. The rapidly changing environment of the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for prompt and accurate communication of key

messages to key stakeholders to ensure they clearly understood their roles and responsibilities in managing the crisis, and to counter misinformation.

Table 4 – Summary of learnings and responsible area

Learning	Next Step
<p>19 Clearer, direct communications between the Department and teachers would have more quickly made teachers aware of changing requirements for how schools would operate and the helpful support materials and guidance available. This would also enable them to communicate more effectively with parents.</p>	<p>Establish and grow a more direct communications channel with teachers to support Department messaging.</p>
<p>20 Regular engagement with cross-sector stakeholders improved the quality and reception of the COVID-19 response. Considering mechanisms to continue and improve cross-sector engagement may assist with future reform, crisis responses and drive innovation to benefit learning.</p>	<p>Consider how to better engage across the education sector, including with student, teacher and parent voices.</p>
<p>21 The speed at which the crisis unfolded, combined with the decentralised model of communications, and ownership of channels and audiences, within the Department, made it difficult to strategically plan and manage communications.</p>	<p>Review communication crisis plan templates to be in place and regularly updated (this should include ownership of channels, stakeholder list and clear responsibility for stakeholders).</p>
<p>22 Better measurement of communications, and segmentation of email distribution lists is needed to accurately understand the effectiveness of the Department's communication with internal stakeholders.</p>	<p>Review communication strategies to ensure clear evaluation measures are in place.</p>

Related projects

There are a range of projects that could be used to progress the learnings identified in this report, or which contributed to the Department's identification of learnings. These include both internal pieces of work, such as the Catalyst Lab Innovation Program's research piece on student, teacher and parent perspectives of the COVID-19 remote learning period, and external pieces such as the Grattan Institute's COVID-19 Catchup report on educational disadvantage.

There will likely be a significant amount of emerging research projects which will further inform the understanding of the impacts and learnings from the remote learning and return to school periods that should continue to inform the Department's ongoing work in this area.



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