

COVID Review Team  
Student Learning and Disability Strategy Branch  
GPO Box 9880  
Canberra City ACT 2601

23 March 2023

Dear COVID Review Team,

**Amaze submission to review of the impact of COVID-19 on school students with disability.**

Amaze works to build community understanding of autism, influence policy change for autistic people and provide independent, credible information and resources to individuals, families, professionals, government and the wider community. We are closely connected with the Autistic community through our national Autism Connect helpline, peer support networks and community capacity building initiatives.

We welcome your review of the impact of COVID-19 on school students with disability. As you are aware, COVID-19 lockdowns had unique and varying impacts on Autistic students. While some Autistic students thrived, many were unable to learn from home, fell further behind in their learning, were socially isolated and experienced poor mental health outcomes. There were also many damaging economic and mental health impacts for families of Autistic students.

These issues have been well documented by [Amaze](#), [Association for Children with Disability](#), the Victorian Parliament ([Final Report to inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)) and the [Disability Royal Commission](#), all of which have acknowledged the need for special measures for students with disability.

**The key impacts of COVID-19 on Autistic students**

To understand the key issues faced by Autistic students during the 2020 lockdowns, we encourage you to review [Amaze's Learning in Lockdown](#) report. This report published the results of a survey of over 300 families of Autistic students in Victorian schools which showed:

- Many children were disengaged from school.
- Students were provided with inadequate individualised support to engage in online learning.
- Most families of Autistic students wanted to access onsite learning options.
- Autistic children needed more comprehensive support to transition back to school, including health and mental health support, personalised modifications and supports, assistance to help reconnect with peers and options to repeat the school year (particularly for Year 12 students).

Over the past 2 years, Amaze has also heard from many parents and carers of Autistic students through its national Autism Connect helpline. A thematic analysis of calls received during the 2021 school closure periods, relating to education, showed that parents of Autistic students continued to be most concerned about:

- Their children's inability to engage in online learning.
- Schools refusing to provide adequate adjustments and supports.
- A lack of flexible learning options, with many parents desperate to access face-to-face learning options.
- A lack of clarity regarding restrictions, with some parents feeling they received misleading information from schools.

A thematic analysis of calls received post school closures, demonstrated that parents were initially most concerned about inadequate return to school/transition support. Many parents also reported and continue to report an increase in school refusal. Several parents have sought information about home-schooling options.

We are also aware through Autism Connect and our broader networks, including our peer support networks, that while most Autistic students suffered the well-known negative impacts of school closures, some Autistic students and their families thrived.

As you know, some Autistic students found it easier to learn from home without the overwhelm of a classroom or social pressures of school. Some found new and easier ways to be socially connected and communicate with their classmates and teachers online. Some students have been desperate to continue with flexible approaches to learning (i.e., remote learning or a hybrid of remote and onsite learning).

## Recommendations

Many learnings can be taken from the past three years to guide future responses by governments to public health emergencies like COVID-19. The evidence clearly shows that a one size fits all approach will not work and that students with disability require special measures that are flexible, proactive and tailored to their individual needs. Governments should learn from Autistic students and their families that suffered the well-known negative impacts of school closures, as well as those that thrived.

In the case of, and to prepare for future public health emergencies, Amaze recommends:

### 1. **Autistic led planning and solutions.**

1.1 Work with Autistic people now to ensure that appropriate policies, programs, supports and plans are in place to ensure:

- a smooth transition to and from any future emergency response.
- Autistic students can learn flexibly and on the same basis as their non-autistic peers during times of emergency.
- the strengths of Autistic students are engaged to support their learning and social communication.
- students and their families can access clear and accessible information resources and referrals.
- disability, mental health and wellbeing support is available to all students and families.

### 2. **Flexible learning options.**

2.1 Should school closures and restrictions be required as part of a future emergency response, enable an immediate option for on-site schooling for:

- students at special schools.
- students receiving individualised funding at school or on the NDIS.
- students with disability whose families are experiencing severe stress.

2.2 Prioritise all students with disability in the return to on-site schooling, while supporting flexible or hybrid approaches for students that need them to maximise their learning, and social and emotional wellbeing.

2.3 If relevant, prioritise and implement a vaccine blitz and access for testing for teachers and school staff who work with students with disability.

### **3. Access to online learning and supports.**

- 3.1 Establish a standard of support for students learning remotely, including minimum requirements around access to Education Support Staff and personalised learning adjustments.
- 3.2 Ensure all students with disability (receiving individualised funding or not) have a functioning Student Support Group which can meet virtually and an updated Individual Education Plan to address the impacts of school disruptions.
- 3.3 Provide targeted outreach to students with disability absent from remote learning and develop tailored plans to support their re-engagement.
- 3.4 Strengthen remote access to mental health and wellbeing support.

### **4. Targeted measures as any restrictions ease.**

- 4.1 Prioritise students with disability for return to on-site learning at both mainstream and specialist schools.
- 4.2 Provide a disability targeted response for specialist schools, including additional staff training, access to effective and acceptable PPE, strengthened processes in infection control in schools and on buses.
- 4.3 Immediately provide catch up support, such as additional intensive sessions, to any students that have fallen behind during schooling disruptions.
- 4.4 Strengthen access to mental health and wellbeing support to assist transitions back to school and address impacts of schooling disruptions.
- 4.5 Provide students with disability opportunities for an additional term or semester, or to repeat a year (particularly for students in their final year of primary or secondary school).

### **Amaze stand's ready to assist.**

Please contact me by email at [jim.mullan@amaze.org.au](mailto:jim.mullan@amaze.org.au) if we can assist by providing further information or answering any questions you may have. We would also be pleased to present to the review team on any of the matters raised above.

Yours sincerely,



Jim Mullan

Chief Executive Officer