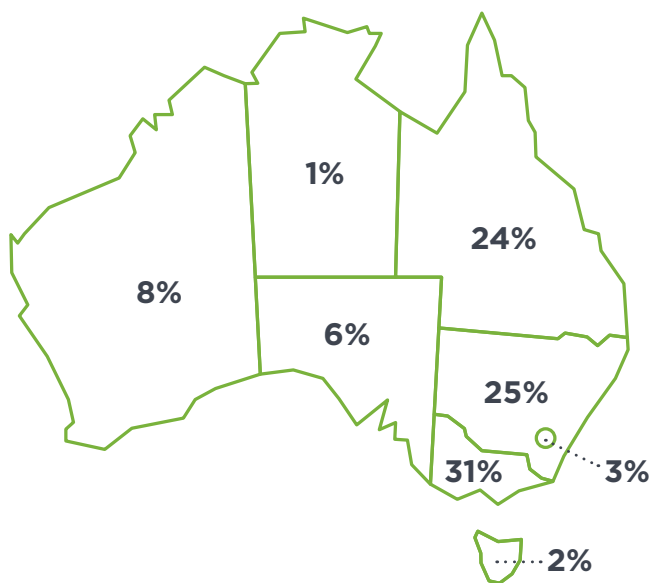


Not even remotely fair

Experiences of students with disability during COVID-19

Survey of Australian students with disability and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Percentage of respondents by state/territory



85% of students with disability were in school, the balance in other forms of education



Location of students



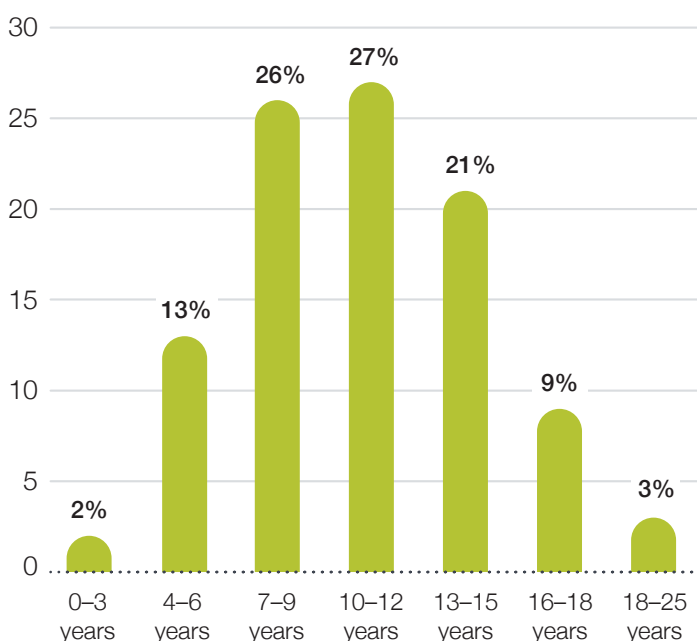
Type of school



- Metro (66%)
- Regional (25%)
- Rural (9%)
- Remote (0%)

- Mainstream school (76%)
- Special school (17%)
- Dual enrolment (3%)
- Other (4%)

Age of students with disability



719 survey responses



(5% young people with disability, 95% family members of students with disability)

1,145 free text comments



73% of students NDIS Participants

What didn't work?

Key finding

Schools were unable to provide or reduced dramatically support for students in their education during the first COVID-19 lockdown

There were significant reductions in the provision of usual supports for students with disability from education facilities, most notably supervision, social supports and individual support workers.

Level of support during COVID-19 versus level of support prior



Overall, it is concerning (although perhaps not surprising) that many parents reported receiving supports only after significant advocacy work, raising questions regarding issues of equity.

Key finding

Despite the well-known inequities they face in their education, there was a lack of assertive and proactive support for students with disability during the first lockdown

- During the COVID-19 pandemic there were many students with disability who were left behind
- More than half did not have:
 - Regular contact with the education provider to ensure the learning is accessible
 - Curriculum and learning materials in accessible formats
- 61% (or about three in five) said students with disability had not received adequate educational support during the pandemic
- Some children were unable to engage online and so missed out on being part of a learning community and others felt schools had not done enough to facilitate access to this
- As a result, nearly three quarters of respondents reported that students with disability felt socially isolated from their peers
- Many reported that this and other consequences of the pandemic were having a significant impact on their mental health: just over half of respondents indicated a negative impact on the mental health and wellbeing of either themselves or the child or young person disability under their care

Key finding

The onus and thus 'heavy lifting' for providing inclusive education shifted from school staff to students and their families

- 80% of respondents reported that responsibility for education shifted away from teachers and schools and on to parents
- Many parents reported having to do significant work to translate learning materials into a useful format for their children. Some reported receiving exactly the same materials and support as those provided to students without disability, with the onus entirely on parents to make the necessary adjustments. This caused some family members to feel they were letting students with disability down because they did not have the skills required to adjust the materials appropriately
- Others felt the support was no worse during the pandemic, but this was mostly because they had not been well supported even prior to the pandemic. Where support had been received, it was often in response to advocacy work done by parents who had contacted schools (sometimes repeatedly) and requested the materials and adjustments their children required

Key finding

Individual Education Plans (IEPs) are not working in the way they should

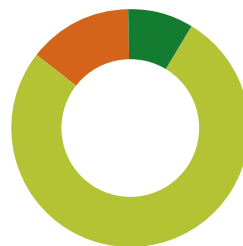
While a well-designed IEP might not need to be changed to accommodate a pandemic, many families did not feel that IEPs were operating well to begin with before the pandemic, and modifications and accommodations were not being made to support the shift to remote learning.

Does the child or young person have an Individual Education Plan (IEP) in place?



- Yes (70%)
- No (21%)
- Don't know (9%)

Has the child or young person's IEP been updated or modified since the COVID-19 outbreak?

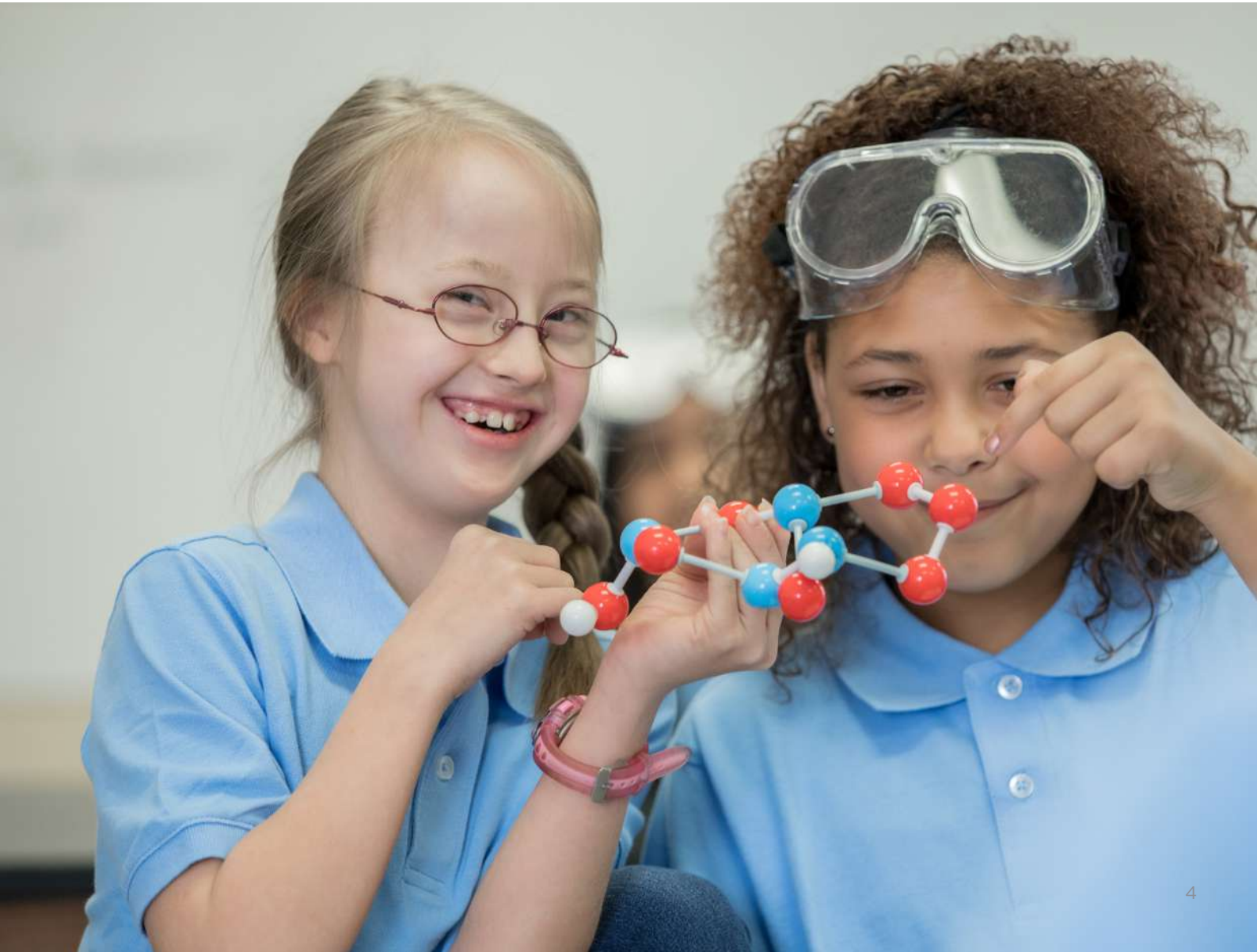


- Yes (9%)
- No (77%)
- Don't know (14%)

Key finding

NDIS needs changed but were not secured during the pandemic

- Nearly half of respondents indicated that the child or young person's need for NDIS funding to assist in accessing education had changed since the start of the pandemic, although just 5% had requested a plan review and had it approved
- Funding changes were needed for tutors, support workers, technology, therapies, personal protective equipment (PPE) and other forms of equipment
- Where parents had not requested changes to funding it was often related to not having the time and effort to navigate the plan review process, or thinking that the NDIS would not assist with educational support
- A number of parents reported redeploying support workers from personal care and into helping children engage in learning, with the risk that they would not have enough support worker hours left at the end of their plans. Others had requests for more funding turned down by the NDIA on the basis that education supports should be covered through mainstream services
- There was a lack of clarity about how the NDIS could be used to support remote learning



What worked?

Key finding

Making sure students with disability are socially connected to their peers and the school is critically important

Of all supports, social support during the remote learning phase had the strongest association with students feeling supported, part of a learning community, engaged in learning, and feeling less socially isolated.



This suggests that providing support had an impact on reducing isolation and making children and young people feel more engaged.

Key finding

The importance and role of planned and intentional support for students with disability

These results tell us that planned and supportive actions by schools during the COVID-19 pandemic can have a significant positive impact on the lives of children and young people with disability.

When **1 TYPE** of above educational and social support was provided, it was reported students were:



24% more likely to feel part of a learning community

36% more likely to receive adequate support in their education

When **2 TYPES** of educational and social supports were provided, it was reported students were:



88% more likely to feel part of a learning community

109% more likely to receive adequate support in their education

48% more likely to be engaged in their learning

18% less likely to feel socially isolated

Key finding

Flexible NDIS supports helped students with disability during the first lockdown

Many NDIS participants were able to use the NDIS funding in creative ways to help engage children and young people with disability in their learning, but this was not consistent or well communicated.

Learnings from the first lockdown period

The COVID-19 pandemic has shone a light on just how poorly some children and young people with disability are supported in their education before and during the pandemic. This spans all states and territories and all educational settings.

For example, a number of parents and carers commented that the pandemic period provided them with insight into the level their child was working at. This occasionally came as a surprise, as parents discovered that with adequate support their child could complete work at a much higher level than the school had recorded. For others this period had illustrated how little progress their child had been making and the lack of support they were receiving from their school. Several commented that they were considering changing schools or home schooling their children as a result.

Although the shift to remote learning and the associated impacts of the pandemic have raised some new issues, several respondents indicated that the issues faced are more longstanding. Over the longer term the only way to prevent these issues arising in future waves of the pandemic or during other emergencies is to genuinely implement inclusive education practices.

However, if schools were to do one thing in the shift back to remote learning in Victoria (and other jurisdictions that might follow), it should be to provide social support to ensure children are engaged with their peers in productive ways. Other practical ways that schools might support students with disability are explored in the full report (<https://www.cyda.org.au/resources/details/172/not-even-remotely-fair-experiences-of-students-with-disability-during-covid-19>).

What needs to happen next?

In the short term while the COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact on all Australians this report provides strong guidance for educators on what needs to occur to ensure students with disability are well supported in their education during the pandemic.

The good news from this research is with careful planning and effort by education systems and educators, students with disability can thrive through the pandemic, including in remote learning, by:

- Ensuring they are made to feel part of a learning community through connecting them with their peers
- Ensuring education materials and curricula are accessible and differentiated to the needs of students, and that reasonable adjustments are provided by the educators in partnership with children and families – this should not be left to families or students themselves to navigate

- Providing timely and well-planned support
- Breaking down the barriers between the NDIS and educational support to ensure both systems are complementary and working to ensure children and young people with disability thrive

However, this report also shows that the deep educational inequity experienced by students with disability was exacerbated and further entrenched during the pandemic. This inequity is not going to be overcome without an urgent and holistic approach to change, as outlined by the Australian Coalition for Inclusive Education in their report [Driving change: A roadmap for achieving inclusive education in Australia](#). It is only then that the right to inclusive education as enshrined in the UN Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities can be achieved.