Submission to Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training *Inquiry into the Education in Remote and Complex Environments*

Addition to Submission 30, June 2020

Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) is the national representative organisation for children and young people with disability aged 0-25 years. CYDA has an extensive national membership of over 5,000 young people with disability, families and caregivers of children with disability, with the majority of our members being families. CYDA's purpose is to advocate systemically at the national level for the rights and interests of all children and young people with disability living in Australia.

CYDA is pleased to provide further information about the home learning experiences of students with disability during COVID-19, to complement our submission provided to the Committee on 28th of February 2020 (Submission 30).

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, CYDA identified a lack of coherent national information strategy and response for children and young people with disability. To collect data from this cohort, we conducted an online survey for five weeks from mid-March to late April with nearly 700 responses including metropolitan, regional, remote and rural areas. The survey results show the COVID 19 pandemic has exacerbated the daily inequities faced by children and young people with disability and their families and caregivers, and has had additional unexpected impacts.

Although the survey collected information about the impacts of the pandemic on a range of aspects of children and young people's lives, the impact on their education was particularly observable, including for students in rural and remote environments.

CYDA partnered with researchers from the Public Service Research Group at the University of New South Wales in Canberra to analyse the survey results, leading to the development of a joint report, *More than isolated: the experience of children and young people with disability and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic*. We are pleased to enclose a copy of this report to form our additional submission to the Inquiry. A brief overview of key findings and recommendations from the report is also included below, highlighting responses from rural and remote students.

Key findings:

- Survey responses clearly demonstrated that people felt there was a lack of information about the coronavirus targeted to children and young people with disability and their families, with 82% stating they lacked information. Moreover, lack of information targeted to the particular needs of households was exacerbating distress and uncertainty.

- Uncertainty about education was a prominent theme, including school closures and challenges with learning from home, and concern that progress gained by children and young people with disability would be lost during this period.

- Half of survey respondents experienced a decline in their mental health either for themselves or for the child or young person with disability. This increased over the period of the survey.

- The majority of respondents were unable to buy essential supplies, e.g. groceries, special dietary products, hygiene products, which peaked at the commencement of the pandemic period.

- One in three respondents experienced cancellation of support workers (either by self or service) and NDIS services.

- There was significant concern in survey responses that people might lose work or be required to give up work due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and this would have an impact on household income.

- There were a range of health issues including inability to access COVID-19 testing, telehealth being inaccessible and fear of engaging with health services.

Table 1 depicts results from different cohorts of respondents – regional; rural and remote; and metropolitan. Similar themes come through for all respondents, with subtle differences between the rural and remote cohort, compared with the others. For example, families in remote and rural areas ranked the closure of school or education as the second biggest impact during COVID-19, while this was ranked third for regional and metro respondents.

Table 1. Key survey findings according to location

Question	Regional (88 respondents)	Rural and Remote (30 respondents)	Metro (160 respondents)
How have you or the child or young person with disability been impacted by the COVID-19 emergency?	1.Unable to buy essentials 65.52%	1. Unable to buy essentials 62%	1. Unable to buy essentials 53.13%
	2. Decline in mental health and well-being 51.72%	2. Closure of school or education 51.72%	2. Decline in mental health and well-being 51.25%
	3. Closure of school or education 44.83%	3. Cancellation of support workers 44.83%	3. Closure of school or education 45.63%
	4. Voluntarily self-isolating from school or education 42.53%	4. Decline in mental health and well-being 44.83%	4. Voluntary self-isolating from school or education 45.63%
	5.Cancellation of support workers 41%	5. Unable to work in usual employment 34.48%	5. Cancellation of support workers 44%
	6.Unable to work in usual employment 20.69%	6. Loss of income 34.48%	6. Unable to work in usual employment 25.62%
Do you feel that there is enough information targeted at families or children and young people with disability about COVID-19?	No 81.61%	No 69%	No 88.68%
	Yes 21.84%	Yes 34.48%	Yes 12%

Comments from young people and families illustrate the uncertainty and limited support available for students with disability during the COVID pandemic:

"I go to boarding school outside of my community because they have better learning there. Because of COVID-19 we had to go back home to our community. Trying to do school at the community school was difficult but the community school tried really hard to help us boarding school kids. We had to use computers to learn everything instead of being in the classroom. We used the classrooms at the community school to do our boarding school work on the computer…

Teachers at the community school helped us to connect to the boarding school. But without the teachers at community school (not our teachers) it would have been really hard... I wanted to stay at boarding school but we needed to go back home. That was a bit challenging. I was supported by the community school even though it wasn't their job. Some of my boarding school friends from other communities didn't get any help and missed out."
   — *15 year old Aboriginal young person with disability in a remote community in the Northern Territory*

"The medical advice is it is safe for children to attend school, so why did Victorian schools close early? A note came home on the last afternoon telling us that school will not be resuming after the holidays, and are swapping to remote learning. I do not have the skills or knowledge to teach my son, and am scared of what will happen to his education."
   — *Family of a young person aged 13-18 years old attending a special secondary school in rural Victoria*

"The supports that were in place in school have been removed and they are not implementing the ILP"
   — *Family of a child aged 7-12 years in regional NSW*

"Specialist schools shouldn't make it so hard for essential workers to access on-site schooling. Remote learning is terribly inadequate"
   — *Family of a child aged 7-12 years in regional Victoria*

"Interruption to activities of daily living difficulty in accessing the on-line platform for lessons. The platform regularly cannot load page needed. Unable to get the motivation to do lessons, participate in fitness program Concern for education needs giving likelihood of isolation will continue until > June Behavioural changes are a challenge to manage"
   — *Family of three young people with disability aged 13-18, 18-25, and over 25 years old attending a mainstream secondary school in regional Queensland*

"Lack of support workers suddenly and totally unclear about what support school will offer and how they expect them to engage with my child who has intellectual disability and ADHD. Are they classified as vulnerable people? My child needs 1:1 attention to control behaviour, engage and keep on task... can definitely not engage in remote learning without my contact supervision. I feel forced into a position of being unable to complete my last year of my masters (studying part-time). I am a single parent and my main prior support was my child's father who passed away 11 months ago."
   — *Family of a child aged 7-12 years in regional Victoria*

> "Uni went online - cannot cope and raise anxiety - refusal to complete - concerned adjusted assessments won't be adhered to was supposed to start first-ever real job training this week - no one he can contact and now angry and frustrated"
> — *Family of a young person aged 18-25 years old in regional NSW*

During the COVID-19 crisis, existing interface issues between the education system and the NDIS were exacerbated, with students with disability learning from home and missing many of the supports they usually receive at school and through the NDIS. There is also evidence that students in rural areas were unable to learn from home during the pandemic, due to a lack of equipment and reliable internet access at home.[1]

Home learning brought challenges for students with disability and their families as noted on our COVID-19 survey results report. Online learning did not work for all students particularly for those with complex needs where supervision was required at all times. Parents reported a loss of income or a reduction in working hours as they were required to monitor online learning without extra assistance.

> "Being asked to have the child do schooling online, which is basically impossible for a child with ADHD and ASD. This will require full-time oversight by me, which means I can't work!"
> — *Family of a child aged 7-12 years old, NSW*

> "Online education doesn't work for all kids. What is the alternative? This whole process has been non-inclusive of his needs."
> — *Family of a child aged 7-12 years old, WA*

The negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on educational experiences of students living in remote areas and complex environments would only be compounded for students with disability and their families/caregivers, and increase the inequities faced pre-COVID. While there is limited data available at this point in time for this specific cohort, *More than isolated* highlights challenges for students across the country, and our survey results from students in rural and remote areas are in line with the report's findings.

A quote from a teacher in a remote community in the Northern Territory highlights the barriers faced by teaching staff in delivering inclusive education to students with disability:

> "I didn't realise when I accepted this job that my training wouldn't be sufficient to support students in my classroom with disability.
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> I was prepared to work in a cultural context very different from what I was taught at university, but was shocked to understand that more than half of the students in my classroom have disability (physical and/or intellectual), and that there would be no support available for these students.
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> We have teacher's aides and community members who work as classroom officers, but no one with any specific disability training. I try to ensure that every member of my classroom is supported in their learning, and to feel like they belong and are excited to

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[1] Greenbank, A.; Marciniak, C. 'Principal says her school was 'forgotten' during the coronavirus lockdown.' *ABC News.* https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-27/cabbage-tree-island-school-overlooked-with-homeschooling-tech/12288446

CYDA is also co-convenor and Chair of the Australian Coalition for Inclusive Education (ACIE). The ACIE brings together organisations that share a commitment to advance inclusive education in Australia and across state and territory education systems, including government and non-government schools. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the ACIE wrote to every state and territory disability and education minister about our concerns about the experience of students with disability, including:

- The provision of reasonable adjustments and supports for students with disability, to enable them to access the general curriculum and their class lesson content on an equal basis while learning at home, with many families reporting that the support that they are offered is inadequate or unsuitable
- The loss of vital social connection for students with disability with their class peers, regular teachers and support staff, which is critical in ensuring ongoing engagement and well-being during this time of crisis, with many families reporting difficulty in maintain these relationships in the current environment
- The longer term impact of social and academic disconnection and the necessary measures to mitigate such adverse impacts, and to support re-engagement in class learning and the re-establishment of relationships with class teachers, support staff and peers once students return to their schools.

In response to these issues the ACIE developed principles and recommendations for *Providing inclusive education for children and young people with disability in a 'time of crisis'* (attached).

In the absence of a national forum to discuss the particular needs of students with disability during the COVID-19 situation, the ACIE also convened a COVID-19 National Inclusive Education Roundtable on 20 May 2020. The overarching aims of the COVID-19 National Inclusive Education Roundtable were:

- To use the experience of the COVID-19 situation as an opportunity to establish an ongoing roundtable for progressing inclusive education in Australia for children and young people with disability
- To foster connection and collaboration between educational leaders, people with disability, families, disability advocates, academics and broader stakeholders to realise inclusive education in planning the 'road out' and beyond the COVID-19 crisis.

The objectives of the roundtable were to:

- Increase understanding about the impact of COVID-19 on students with disability, their families and caregivers
- For state and territory education jurisdictions, outline how they are supporting students with disability during the COVID-19 crisis and the 'road out'

- Showcase the benefits of inclusive education in a time of crisis
- Review the principles and recommendations of the 'Providing inclusive education for children and young people with disability in a 'time of crisis'' document
- Discuss next steps and an ongoing format for a national dialogue on realising inclusive education (as defined by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities CPRD) in Australia.

Future roundtables convened by the ACIE are proposed to examine the educational disadvantage faced by students with disability, including rural and remote students, along with progressing inclusive education in line with Australia's responsibilities as a signatory to the CPRD. Additionally, CYDA is currently conducting a national survey exploring the educational experiences of children and young people during this time of crisis. We expect to have the results available in July 2020 and would welcome the opportunity to provide specific data for students with disability in rural and remote areas to the Committee as a late submission.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide additional information to our submission to the Committee. Should you wish to discuss any of this information further please do not hesitate to contact CYDA on 03 9417 1025 or info@cyda.org.au

Authorised by:

Mary Sayers, Chief Executive Officer

Contact details:

Children and Young People with Disability Australia
P. 03 9417 1025
E. info@cyda.org.au
W. www.cyda.org.au