

Lessons we can learn to help schools support our children

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Anxiety, uncertainty and a constantly expanding workload have been dominant features of Australian schools since the coronavirus pandemic began.

School and system leaders have been put under pressure to open schools as soon as possible and have been inundated with all sorts of advice on how to handle the pandemic.

Parents have tried their hardest, unsure of how to best help and support their children's remote learning. Numerous parents also were working from home during this period; for many of us it has been impossible to juggle everything so, in the end, we struggled through and tried to learn as we went along.

Soon, all schools across the nation will be back to face-to-face teaching. With people having gone through so much, we now need clarity and confidence for the road ahead. There are clear steps we can take to support school leaders and teachers, to provide clarity for students and parents and, most important, to improve student learning with targeted support for those students whose learning has been put most at risk by the coronavirus pandemic.

Let's start with some clarity on what actually happened. In the Northern Territory, schools had some pupil-free days at the beginning of the pandemic but otherwise never actually closed. In Queensland, students were at home for three to five weeks. Other systems varied, with Victoria having remote learning for the longest duration. When the last group of schools go back, Victorian students will have been at home for seven weeks.

For a lot of kids across the country, the time at home was pretty short. Even for some Victorian students, the seven weeks of schooling they miss is less than 2 per cent of their total school education. We shouldn't pretend it doesn't matter but we should understand that for the great majority of kids we can make this up in subsequent months and years if we are clear on the way forward. But some students will be adversely affected, so we need to identify and support them.

You cannot help but feel for upper-secondary students and their families. They are uncertain and anxious about their post-school pathways.

Systems have worked through difficult questions — what exams will look like, their timing, and what it means for pathways — to ensure no one is unfairly affected and the integrity of the exams, their marking and final year of secondary education are maintained.

The greatest concern is inequality; unfortunately, students who were already struggling are likelier to have fallen further behind. Many families where English is not the main language spoken at home have found remote learning difficult. Some students, especially from recent migrant families, rarely hear English spoken at home and research shows their learning may have regressed during the pandemic.

Many disadvantaged students will be in the same boat; many households without viable internet connections could hardly participate in remote learning and many families simply can't create the necessary structures for children to learn at home.

These problems are magnified for students with special needs who could not access the support they regularly receive. Schools and several non-profit groups have worked hard to help these students and rectify these situations, but it has been very difficult to do remotely, and many students will have slipped through the net.

The most pressing issue is making sure these children stay in school. In normal times, teachers work hard to develop relationships with at-risk students; connecting with them each day and stepping in when they start to disengage in class. They talk to them, provide reassurance and support, and draw on their experience to bring the child back to their learning.

This is difficult at the best of times but can be impossible online. Several teachers I have talked to have found it extremely challenging to try to engage at-risk students in an online environment.

Some students lost contact altogether, which means, in effect, that they have already dropped out of school. The key questions now are: Will they come back when schools resume? And how long will they stay?

Unfortunately, the situation is only going to get harder. As the recession hits, more families will experience unemployment and, across time, some will disengage completely from the labour market. When this happens, kids are much likelier to drop out of school.

With high and rising youth unemployment, they will be unlikely to be able to find a job and will fall into the category of being not in education, training or the labour force. Their younger brothers and sisters are likely to have already dropped out of early childhood education — large providers of early childhood education are reporting attendance rates of only 43 per cent. These young children will start behind and will grow up in families that are regularly disengaged from education and employment. Put simply, this is how an underclass develops.

History shows it is cheaper and more effective to invest effort and resources in preventing this from happening than trying to address inequality once it is entrenched. So the most important thing we can do is to ensure at-risk students come to school every day. We can't wait until the end of the month or end of the term to analyse attendance data. Some schools and systems have already flagged this as a priority, contacting families to ensure their children attend and planning for ongoing support.

Once students are in school, we can concentrate on how to improve learning by better supporting teachers and school leaders.

When the pandemic started, teachers suddenly had to re-do all their lesson planning and create new resources and materials to be put online or sent home to students. Some schools were better prepared to do this — they had well-established curriculum and could shift it online. But for most teachers it has been a huge, complex, ongoing task.

What many people do not realise is that Australian school systems provide comparatively little support for teachers and schools to implement high-quality teaching programs. High-performing systems around the world directly provide or quality-assure comprehensive teaching programs and instructional materials for teachers to use, adapt and build on. Australian systems do not. We largely leave it up to teachers.

Australian teachers have to develop their teaching programs — the lesson plans, the projects and tasks students complete, the essays they write, the texts they read, the assessments they sit. They do this within a broad curriculum framework that some states

supplement with more detail and resources than others, but it is still less than what a teacher in a high-performing system is provided.

Some of Australia's education leaders have been starting to address this problem in recent years, but the pandemic shone a light on this issue. Suddenly, all the work a teacher must do had to be put online — and quickly.

Social media networks of teachers went into overdrive — teachers were asking for advice on the proper sequence for teaching spelling. What's the best resource for teaching algebra?

These are complex questions that require considerable expertise and time to work through. High-performing systems around the world recognise this and provide the answers to teachers. We do not. Spare a thought now for the first-year teacher. Never before has a group of teachers been so violently thrown in the deep end and left to sink or swim.

In future, we need to do five things.

First, we can't lower our expectations for student learning.

Given the time lost to remote learning, we can't teach everything in the curriculum and expect students to reach the required standards in each subject and grade level. So we have a choice between maintaining every bit of the curriculum or letting standards slip. The research is clear that if we let standards slip, inequality will increase; students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, will fall further behind. So we need to reduce the curriculum by prioritising the key learnings in each subject and each grade level that students must get right to succeed in future years.

In early literacy, for example, this includes being able to decode words and read fluently. In maths, pivotal learning happens when teaching number and fractions. Prioritising within subjects means we don't drop whole subjects from the curriculum. Students need science, history, geography, arts and other learning areas in the Australian Curriculum. Research shows that this is particularly important for disadvantaged students who rely more heavily on the knowledge developed in these subjects to succeed in later schooling.

Prioritisation of the curriculum is already happening in some schools as they try to work out the best way to deal with the losses from remote learning. Some education ministers have said the focus should be on literacy and numeracy but this is easier said than done; problems could easily be exacerbated if the wrong things are cut.

Second, prioritisation of the curriculum will be successful if we provide teachers with quality-assured comprehensive instructional resources on the key areas in each subject in each grade level. We shouldn't force teachers to use the resources provided by the system — they can adopt and adapt as they see fit. Research clearly shows this is a cost-effective way to improve student learning and it clearly reduces teacher workload.

Since the pandemic began, I know many teachers who were regularly developing instructional materials at 1am for students to use that day. We can't expect teachers to stay in the profession when they have to work these hours, and we can't expect them to consistently make expert decisions with this workload.

Third, we need to understand what remote teaching and learning looked like during the pandemic to better support teachers and improve instruction.

What instructional materials were put online and why? What were students asked to do and what did they complete? If schools are prioritising certain aspects of the curriculum then we

need to track this, understand the decisions made and provide appropriate support next year.

Fourth, streamline how schools operate in our systems. Early feedback from school leaders and teachers is that they are enjoying being able to focus more on their core work of teaching and learning. Extra-curricular activities have largely stopped so students are in class more regularly and, when the pandemic hit, systems turned virtually everything off — many of the initiatives, programs and requirements that school leaders and teachers normally have to attend to suddenly were cancelled.

Now, system leaders are under pressure to turn everything back on again. They shouldn't.

For years, system leaders have tried to streamline how their systems interacts with schools; to respond to school leaders' complaints about overly complex requirements and growing compliance. But it is incredibly difficult to simplify and shrink large, complex systems; there is always so much happening that is difficult to stop programs, to stop how people are working and simplify decision-making.

The pandemic forced so much in our systems to stop that now is a fantastic opportunity to improve system effectiveness and properly evaluate initiatives before they are turned back on.

Finally, we need to recognise the incredible human effort of the past months.

I have been blown away by the efforts of Australian teachers, school and system leaders. Parents and families who don't know each other have reached out and provided support to one another.

One school principal I know wants to find a way to recognise the goodwill offered by the parents at her school. And parents across the country want to recognise what teachers and school leaders have done and thank them for their efforts and dedication to children.

All of this needs to be recognised and, at some point — when the health risks are lower — we should celebrate what has been achieved. The pandemic has brought many problems but there is enormous effort and goodwill to harness for a clear way forward if we want it.

Link to article in *The Australian*

<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/inquirer/lessons-we-can-learn-to-help-schools-support-our-children/news-story/ed982e8163d9a04b87ee83634fd6639e>