Learning through COVID-19

Maximising educational outcomes for Australia’s children and young people experiencing disadvantage

Pillar 3 Report Summary:
What can be done to maximise educational outcomes for children and young people experiencing disadvantage?
Learning through COVID-19: What can be done to maximise educational outcomes for children and young people experiencing disadvantage?

Who are the students at risk of poorer educational outcomes?

Learning through COVID-19 focused on three cohorts of students likely to be most affected by the educational disruption of COVID-19:

- **Cohort 1:** Young children who started school already behind.
- **Cohort 2:** Older children who were already at risk of disengagement, who may not return to school but whose employment prospects have worsened.
- **Cohort 3:** Children and young people who have had contact with the child protection system.

**Approach**

The Pilar 3 study design incorporated an integrative synthesis across complementary evidence-based options for action to inform solutions to address worsening educational disadvantage. Pillar 1 provided a rapid evidence review of work (Pillars 1 to 3) designed to inform solutions to address worsening educational disadvantage.

The influence of COVID-19 on educational disadvantage was mapped onto a Driver Tree that show a set of pressures on existing factors influencing disadvantage, which in turn expose children and young people to experiences that have an impact on their educational outcomes. The Driver Tree was essentially a map that allows effort to be targeted to modifiable risk factors that may mitigate the effects of COVID on educational disadvantage. The Driver Tree also allows the effort of the to be focused on an issue without oversimplifying in the complex causes. While the Driver Tree was a comprehensive time-of-writing, it will require ongoing monitoring and updating as the situation evolves.

A ‘What Works’ review, that was supported by stakeholder consultation, was conducted to understand promising interventions and programs that address priority Action Areas. This was used to identify evidence-based interventions and programs (termed Promising Programs) across core actions within four priority Action Areas. These Promising Programs were assessed for their evidence-base and implementation readiness for the Australian context.

**Core actions**

Three to five core actions were identified across four priority Action Areas.

**Evidence-based Options for Action**

- **Pillar 1:** Stalled mental health, wellbeing and hope
- **Pillar 2:** Protecting vulnerable learners
- **Pillar 3:** Learning transition and resilience
- **Pillar 4:** Promoting educational futures

Of these, the most robust evidence comes from programs that have only been implemented without oversimplifying in the complex causes. While the Driver Tree was comprehensive time-of-writing, it will require ongoing monitoring and updating as the situation evolves.

There are clear trade-offs between effectiveness and implementation readiness: and the Australia-based programs with high implementation readiness all only have mixed effectiveness. While overseas programs are effective, they are less ready to implement in the local context and may therefore take longer to apply. Most of the Australia-based programs attempted to build teacher capacity on mental health or integrate flexible learning to support mental health and well-being, with only one program engaging parents/carers.
Future role of teachers, schools and communities

There are clear trade-offs between effectiveness and implementation readiness and only one Australian-based program that provided free school meals is ready to implement and effective. Several other Australia-based programs are also effective, but they will take longer to implement, and may require further development and piloting to transfer to new contexts. Three overseas programs that are effective and ready to implement are not currently available in Australia.

Digital equity

There is not currently an evidence base of tested programs either in Australia or overseas, and any programs in this Action Area will require strong piloting and evaluation to assess program effectiveness.

Protections for the most vulnerable students

There are no Australian-based programs supporting vulnerable students with any evidence of effectiveness. Overseas programs have shown positive effects and are implementation ready, but they would need to be adapted to an Australian context by working collaboratively with targeted populations.

Impact of COVID-19 on educational disadvantage

It is still too early to have a complete understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on educational disadvantage in Australia and there is no robust evidence base indicating the effectiveness of programs currently operating in Australia. Ongoing monitoring efforts will be needed to obtain this understanding and those efforts will be improved by better data systems.

Addressing the ongoing impact of COVID-19 on educational disadvantage will require building the capacity and skills of Australian schools and social service providers to adopt and implement evidence-informed approaches and to monitor and evaluate their effectiveness.

That said, the greatest need is likely to be experienced by those children and young people with existing vulnerabilities and cumulative multiple risk factors living in places experiencing disadvantage. Efforts to address the effects of COVID-19 on educational disadvantage should prioritise these groups.

It is important to highlight that the effects of COVID-19 are playing out against an existing system of educational disadvantage in Australia, and efforts to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on disadvantage may not address all the underlying drivers of educational disadvantage.

Ways forward

A comprehensive response to COVID-19 impacts on educational disadvantage will need to contain a number of elements:

- A multi-pronged set of solutions including solutions from more than one priority Action Area, accompanied by thoughtful and rigorous implementation and evaluation.
- Ongoing research into the immediate and longer-term impacts of COVID-19 on the educational outcomes of children and young people and on the system of educational disadvantage.
- Ongoing development and monitoring of the Learning through COVID-19 Driver Tree.
- Building data assets, systems/platforms and sectoral capabilities to further support research and evaluation.
- Promotion of a public understanding of the systemic nature of educational disadvantage, and the reasons for promoting excellence and equity as goals of the system.