

Parents' perspectives on home-based learning in the covid-19 pandemic

Glenn Fahey and Blaise Joseph



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Analysis Paper 15

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Executive Summary

Schools have been fully or partially closed around the world to support containing covid-19 — prompting schooling to shift from the classroom to the home. This has led to many changes in how teachers work, how students learn, and also how parents are involved in schooling. More than ever, Australian schools and parents combined forces — under difficult circumstances — to support students' learning. While students across most of the country have returned to school, the pandemic is a timely reminder of the need for an effective partnership between home and school in order to better support students, as well as the importance of furthering parents' freedom to choose how their child is educated.

This paper considers parents' perspectives from supervising their child's home-based learning, based on a survey of 803 Australian parents (NSW, Queensland, and Victoria) with children attending government schools. The research on parental involvement and engagement is also briefly discussed, in order to contextualise survey findings and propose recommendations for policymakers.

School closures reduced parents' available time and ability to work, especially those in lower income households.

- Closed schools reduced free time or work for 80 per cent of parents. 35 per cent of parents had *both* their work and free time reduced.
- Working parents in lower income households were much more likely than higher income households to have reduced hours or stopped working due to school closures.
- Parents who maintained regular working hours were able to provide little or no supervision of their child's learning and found supervising their child's learning inconvenient.

There is great variation in how, and how often, parents and students were supported by schools.

- 31 per cent of parents were contacted by schools daily or almost every day. 28 per cent never or rarely (less than once per week) heard from their schools.
- Students in regional and rural areas were less likely to complete work online with a teacher's support.
- Parents who communicated with their child's teacher over the phone are more optimistic their child made progress learning at home.

Many parents didn't feel informed or confident supervising children's learning, but regular communication with schools helps.

- 31 per cent of parents didn't feel informed or confident supervising their child's learning.
 - 53 per cent of these parents found the experience inconvenient or very inconvenient.
 - Higher income parents were more confident and informed than lower income parents.
 - Parents in rural locations were less informed and confident of expectations of them.
- Parents that were contacted more regularly — at least weekly — felt more informed and confident about the expectations of them.

Parents have differing perspectives on the progress their children made learning remotely.

- 45 per cent of parents in non-inner-metro areas say their child learnt less than normal, along with 33 per cent of parents in inner metro areas.
- Parents contacted regularly by schools say children progressed well.
- 51 per cent of parents unable to provide regular supervision say their child learnt less than normal.
- 22 per cent of all parents, including 25 per cent of parents in metropolitan areas, think their child learnt better while at home.

Home-based learning resulted in parents in regional and rural areas having more negative opinions of schooling than city parents.

- Most Australian parents reported gaining a more positive view of teachers, curriculum and standards since the pandemic.
- Regional and rural parents are more negative than city parents. 33 per cent and 30 per cent of rural parents now have a more negative view of the curriculum and educational standards, respectively.

Implications for policymakers

- Objective and timely assessment of student learning is needed in order to identify learning needs and direct efforts to address students' educational needs.
 - There is no substitute for the objective and comparable NAPLAN examinations, but state-based standardised testing instruments are preferable over relying only on more subjective, class-based formative assessment.
 - Schools will need to be proactive setting targeted study plans for students who have fallen behind during home-based learning — particularly in Victoria.
- Policymakers should be cautious about implementing future school closures, especially in areas outside inner-metropolitan centres — given the additional educational penalty and reduced health efficacy of school closure policy in regional and rural areas.
- Policymakers should formally review the source of parental concerns about educational standards and quality of the curriculum, held by regional and rural parents.
- Education authorities should evaluate causes of implementation issues in home-based learning — particularly the limited online interaction with teachers in regional and rural areas. It should be determined whether this is primarily due to home-based (such as poor connectivity) or school-based (such as inability to provide online lessons) limitations.
- School administrators and education departments should encourage additional efforts to improve school engagement strategies with parents, including professional development of teachers in this area.
- Policymakers should evaluate the costs and benefits of expanding flexibility of schools to enable some students to study partly or fully from home in future.
 - This could include expanding distance education options for willing parents, teachers, and students.
 - Careful weighing of evidence should be conducted before pursuing new policy approaches. Special attention should be given to which students might benefit from new approaches, how educators and parents could facilitate this, and when it would be appropriate (different levels of schooling and whether students would benefit from temporary or permanent alternatives).

Introduction

Around the world, concerns over the spread of covid-19 triggered the temporary closure of schools in some 188 countries.¹ In the median OECD country, closures are expected to result in around 46 missed school days for upper secondary students — though in some countries, like the United States, schools may be closed for considerably longer. On the other hand, some countries — such as Sweden and Taiwan — didn't close schools, while many others experienced only minor disruptions².

School closures in Australia have been most severe in Victoria

In Australia, while closures were relatively brief in most jurisdictions (spanning from 1 week to 9 school weeks),³ sustained outbreaks of covid-19 have shown that there remains an ongoing threat of the re-closure of schools until the virus risk has fully abated.

It's also especially problematic that widespread re-closures of schools (up to a total of around 18 weeks) have taken place in Victoria — adding to the already nine weeks of closures experienced during the initial series of lockdowns. Students in Victorian schools will not return to school until their fourth term of the year. Periodic closures have also taken place elsewhere in response to clusters of covid-19 cases, contributing to ongoing disruption to schools' operations, students' study and learning routines, as well as parents' workforce participation.

Disruption from school closures has had a mixed and persistent educational impact

The closure of schools and — at least in most jurisdictions around the world — shift to online instruction has been among the sharpest large-scale shifts ever experienced in formalised schooling — as

well as potential catalyst for transformation in how schools operate and how students learn.⁴ The full scale of this disruption to students, educators, and to families, is not yet known.

The effects on students' learning (as well as residual effects on their motivation and engagement in the education process) may take some time to fully materialise. Recent CIS research has produced initial estimates of around 2 to 3 weeks of learning progress for disadvantaged students likely to have been lost in some jurisdictions (and using the same methodology this could be as much as 6 weeks worth of learning in Victoria, due to the extended re-closure period). That has considerable implications for educators due to a steeper curve needed to catch up on learning — made more challenging because progress between students has been especially uneven.

School closures have challenged the work of teachers, students, and parents

Australian teachers have faced unprecedented additional challenges, adapting teaching methods and resources to meet the needs of remote teaching and support for learners. Over this period, surveys suggest Australian teachers worked additional hours to respond to the demands of facilitating home-based learning — around half working an additional six hours a week.⁵

But much of the burden was also shouldered by parents — many having to juggle insecure and challenging work arrangements with supervision of their children's learning. The temporarily heightened sharing of responsibility for education between school and family has been demanding but also has been a timely opportunity for parents to participate more closely in their child's schooling.

Australian parents can have a more active role in education

While children's education is shared between school and home, parents have ultimate responsibility for providing or overseeing the education of their children. In turn, schools have a responsibility — one heightened during the home-based learning experience — to support parents in fulfilling this role.

Though parents cannot always replace the professional expertise of trained educators, there are constructive ways they can complement the work of teachers and schools. Parents commonly report that they don't feel confident fulfilling their role, feel intimidated when interacting with schools, and are uncertain of what the appropriate role is for them in schooling.⁶ Of course,

not all parents have equal confidence and ability to provide substantial educative roles for their children. For this reason, helping parents become empowered participants in the education process can be an important role of schools.

During the home-based learning period, well-informed, supported, and engaged parents — working in partnership with schools to manage learning — have been more important than ever. But the benefits of this partnership are not unique to the pandemic — and finding ways to build upon the learnings from this period will benefit the education system in the future.

Box 1: Parental involvement and parental engagement in schooling

It's important to distinguish between the related terms of parental *involvement* and parental *engagement* with schooling — though these tend to reinforce each other in practice.⁷⁸ Parental involvement (sometimes termed 'school-based involvement') generally includes ways that parents participate in decisions made in schools and how schools are governed — such as participation in school activity, interaction with teachers and administrators. Broadly speaking, parental involvement is encouraged because it can be precursor to greater engagement, but also because parental involvement is important for school accountability.⁹

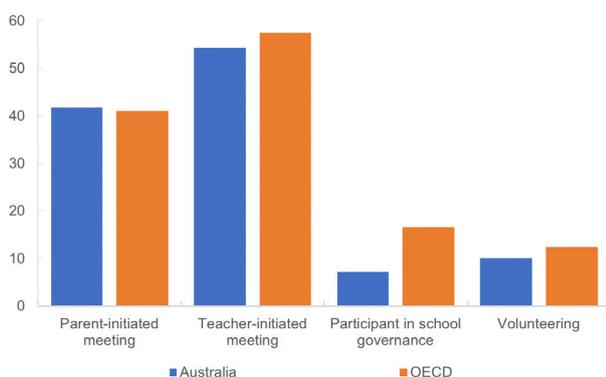
Parental engagement (sometimes called 'home-based involvement') is generally about how parents interface with, and complement, schools' efforts toward students' *academic* learning — such as supervising homework activities, overseeing and setting expectations of their child's progress through school, and exposing children to intellectually stimulating activities.¹⁰ Given the increased burden placed on effective parental engagement with home-based learning, it's appropriate to consider findings from this area of education research.

Greater parental involvement in schooling could benefit students

OECD data shows that Australian parents are similarly involved as parents across comparable countries, on average — except for parents' participation in school decision-making.¹¹ Australian parents are considerably more involved in urban areas, non-government, and more socioeconomically-advantaged schools.

Compared to some high-performing countries, Australian parents' involvement is lower. For instance, 75 per cent of parents attend teacher-initiated discussions about students' progress in Singapore (compared to 54 per cent in Australia), and 33 per cent of parents are involved in school decision-making and governance in Taiwan and Korea (compared to 7 per cent in Australia).

Percentage of students' parents who participated in school-related activities, Australia vs OECD average



Source: OECD (2019). PISA 2018 results Volume III: What school life means for students' lives, OECD Publishing, Paris.

Parents' involvement presents educational benefits for students.¹² The more involved parents are in a child's schooling, the more they demonstrate the value of education — resulting in more positive attitudes and aspirations for learning.¹³ Research generally finds that both teacher-initiated interactions and parents' voluntary involvement in school activities are related to improved student outcomes and conducive school environments.¹⁴ Other studies show that greater parental involvement can help overcome attendance and behavioural issues of students in disadvantaged schools.¹⁵

Guaranteeing parental choice means active involvement in schools

In addition to the need for genuine choice *of* school (between-school choice), parents should have a representative voice *in* school (within-school choice). If parents are unable to have a say in how schools are run and how their child's learning needs are being served, it is a restriction of their school choice.

Within-school choice is fully realised when parents are involved and well informed, and where home-school interactions are cooperative and responsive. Parents' involvement in school gives them first-hand information on the learning environment and how to navigate the education system — which, in turn, helps them to be more effectively engaged in students' learning efforts.

Within- and between-school choice can reinforce each other; because parents who actively choose a school tend to be more invested in this choice, and become more involved.¹⁶ And if parents don't have between-school choice (that is, the opportunity to change schools if dissatisfied), their needs are less likely to be fully met by schools. Previous CIS

research suggests parents are happier with their choice when they use non-government schools,¹⁷ in part because of the greater involvement possible in this sector compared to government schools. Parental involvement is also beneficial to schools because it can directly influence change and improvement of schools in additional ways than when parents simply change schools.

When schools engage parents, students enjoy better educational outcomes

Education research shows that greater parental engagement is correlated with better educational outcomes for students.¹⁸ In families where at least one parent is actively engaged, children are more motivated to learn, see school positively, and have good relationships with their teachers.¹⁹ Active engagement of parents is also shown to reduce the effects of educational disadvantage and underperforming schools.²⁰ However, it has also been noted that Australian schools and policymakers have

paid little attention to encouraging greater parental engagement as a concerted goal.²¹

Parents can generally support children’s learning through ‘academic socialisation’, which includes: having high academic expectations of their children; showing interest in what they’re learning; talking about educational aspirations; and talking to children about things that interest them.

But there are also more specific activities, such as: general supervision of children’s learning activities; helping children develop reading habits;²² and having a good approach to homework. In the earlier schooling years, research shows that parents can help children build vocabulary and practise spelling through reading together,²³ as well as helping to reinforce topics that are read about by applying them in everyday activities.²⁴ In latter schooling years, parents can support children’s learning by: establishing study routines; encouraging independent reading; setting goals; and monitoring children’s time and effort dedicated to study.

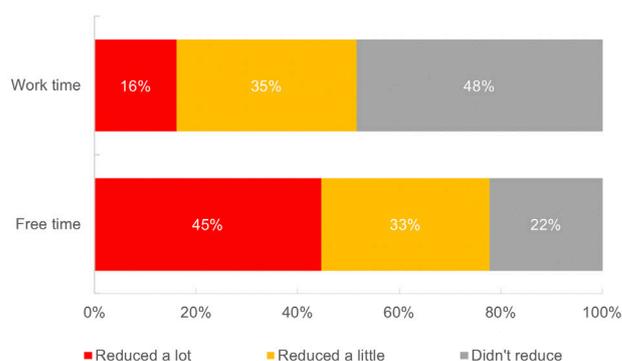
Impact of school closures on parents’ work and time

School closures increased demands on parents to provide school-aged children with supervision at home. Parents having to take time out of work has been a major contributor to the economic effects wrought by covid-19.²⁵ Australian Treasury estimates that around 1 million adults were likely to have withdrawn from work to care for children at home — contributing to the considerable economic impact of school closures.²⁶ Since around 1 in 4 Australian households has at least one child under 15 — many in single parent households — this means the effects were felt across a large cross section of the country.²⁷

School closures greatly reduced parents’ work and free time.

The closure of schools had a considerable impact on parents’ home and work life — with 80 per cent having their free time or work reduced as a result. 35 per cent of parents had *both* their work and free time reduced due to school closures. 52 per cent of all working parents had their available work time reduced.

How surveyed parents available work and free time was impacted by school closures.



Working women were more likely than working men to stop work as a result of school closures. Australian Bureau of Statistics data also shows that around 84 per cent of female parents spent more time caring for, and supervising, their children²⁸ — with women three times more likely as men to have stayed at home to take sole care of their children.

66 per cent of parents in low income households reduced hours or stopped working due to school closures.

Working parents in lower income households were much more likely to have reduced hours or stopped working as a result of school closures, compared to higher income households. This appears to be explained, at least partly, by the observation in this survey that lower income households disproportionately reported being those with a single working parent — meaning that school closures left little option for working parents to reduce hours or withdraw from work.

Parents who kept regular working hours provided less supervision of their child’s learning.

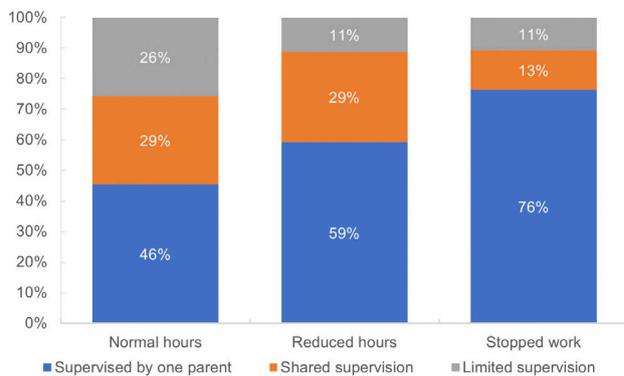
In households where a parent stopped working, one parent was most likely to take the duty of supervising their child’s learning. However, in households where parents maintained their regular working hours, it was more likely that children had either little or no supervision of their learning or parents shared supervision. Children unsupervised by parents face obvious educational difficulties during a period of home learning, exacerbating the challenge for teachers.

Relatedly, parents who remained in work while supervising their child’s learning were more likely to find the experience inconvenient.

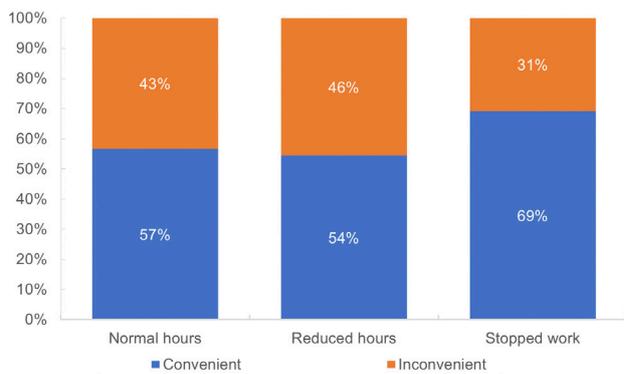
Parents’ changes to work arrangements, by household income level.



Parents’ changed work arrangements and supervision arrangements.



Parents’ changed work arrangements and convenience supervising children’s learning.



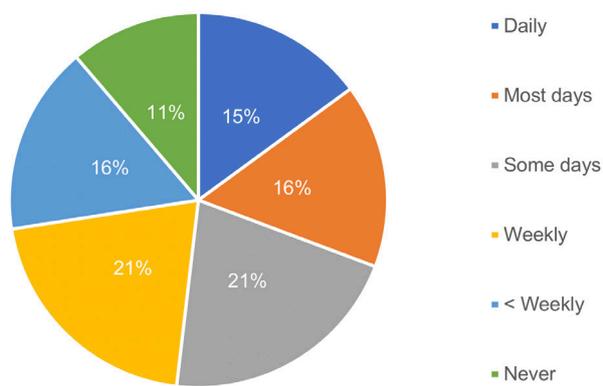
How and how often parents and students were supported by schools

The quality and quantity of support available to students and parents has obvious implications for the functioning of home-based learning. For most students, schooling activities were transitioned online, though this was of varying quality — partly reflecting differences in state government policies, school-level approaches and integration of digital learning activities, and teachers’ proficiency adapting online.

Early research on parental experiences during home-based learning noted that families were confused about how much students should spend on learning content and time online, as well as the level and type of facilitation and supervision required of parents.²⁹

31 per cent of parents were contacted by schools daily or almost every day. 28 per cent never or rarely (less than once per week) heard from their schools. Parents were contacted more frequently in Victoria and less so in NSW.

Frequency that parents were contacted by schools.



Of course, communication with parents doesn’t necessarily equate with better engagement with parents. While schools appreciate that having more proactive and positive interactions with parents can help them to be more engaged, delivering initiatives to improve these relationships can be very challenging,³⁰ partly due to demands made on parents’ time. In addition, schools’ engagement strategies are

context-dependent — varying by student age, parent preferences and efficacy, community relationships, and school resources.^{31 32} Nonetheless, effectively engaging with parents is among the competencies required of Australian teachers under national professional standards.

While both parents and schools are well-intentioned, there isn’t always effective two-way communication with a positive dialogue toward students’ learning.³³ Research shows that more flexible and personalised communication approaches are most effective in engaging parents, more so than traditional methods. For instance, text messaging — at least weekly — from schools to parents is shown to result in more informed parents.³⁴ It’s also found that for substantive matters, and hard-to-reach parents, faceto-face conversations, phone calls, or text messages are likely to be more effective than traditional approaches such as generic emails or letters.³⁵

During home-based learning, schools supported parents in varying ways. The most commonly reported supports include: a customised web portal designed for learning at home (57 per cent of parents); emails from teachers (45 per cent of parents); and school-wide emails (44 per cent of parents).

There also appears to be variation across the polled states. Victorian parents were more likely than those in NSW and Queensland to respond that a web portal or newsletter was made available. And Queensland parents were more likely to report that teachers regularly emailed than parents in NSW and Victoria.

There is also some variation in how students were supported by teachers. In particular, students in regional and rural areas (39 per cent regularly and 35 per cent occasionally) were less likely than their metropolitan (55 per cent regularly and 33 per cent occasionally) counterparts to complete work online with a teacher’s support. 25 per cent of students in rural and regional schools never had online instruction with a teacher. This is likely to translate into poorer quality instruction and learning for these students, since they lacked access to direct online interaction with their teachers.

How parents felt about support provided by schools

Some of the most important tasks for schools during home-based learning include maintaining dialogue with parents about their expectations, as well as helping them to overcome digital divides and managing the logistics of home-based learning.

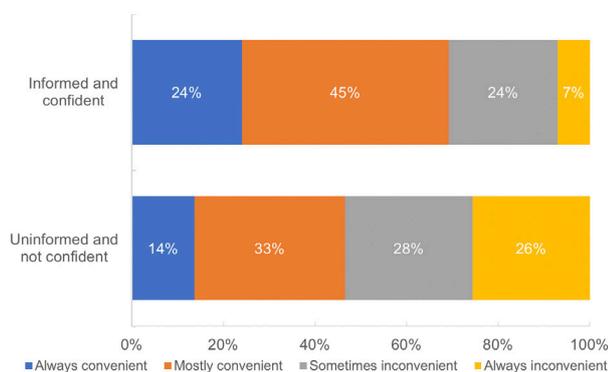
In the context of home-based learning, it's been suggested that parents prioritise specific activities to support children, including: clarifying tasks and addressing questions; providing feedback on learning; making adjustments based on students' progress; providing positive reinforcement; facilitating peer to peer learning; and enabling social connections.³⁶

On the whole, 69 per cent of parents say they felt informed and confident about what was expected from them to supervise their child while learning remotely. While that appears relatively high, it's also concerning that 31 per cent of parents weren't informed or confident — with obvious implications for their ability to provide effective supervision of learning.

Informed and confident parents found supervising learning more convenient

Parents who felt informed and confident in the expectations of them were much more likely to report that supervising their child's learning was always or mostly convenient. Conversely, 53 per cent of parents who felt uninformed and not confident in the expectations of them, found the experience inconvenient or very inconvenient.

Parents' convenience providing supervision, by their confidence providing supervision.

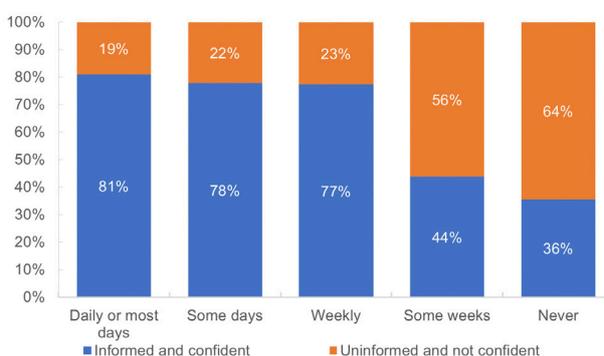


Parents in different households vary in how they felt about support provided by schools. Parents with more children in their households, unsurprisingly, found home-based learning to be inconvenient — 50 per cent of parents with 3 or more children in a household

found it inconvenient, compared to 33 per cent of parents in households with 1 child.

More regular communication with parents — at least weekly — appears to go a long way to explaining whether parents felt informed and confident about the expectations on them while their child was learning remotely.

Frequency parents were contacted by schools and their experience with home-based learning.



Parents in lower income and rural locations were less informed and confident of expectations

Parents in higher income households report being more confident and informed than parents in lower income households. Around 78 per cent of parents in households earning over \$150,000 a year found they were informed and confident of their expectations, but this was just 61 per cent for parents in households earning \$50,000 or less. This could partly reflect differing levels of education of parents, educational resources available to schools to provide support, and time of at least one parent available to supervise children. 27 per cent of households in inner metropolitan areas felt uninformed and not confident about their expectations of home-based learning — compared to 42 per cent of rural parents.

School can help parents be more confident and informed about students' work

Parents sometimes lack confidence supporting their child's learning because they can be unsure of what they can do to help. An ongoing source of this is confusion about schools' approaches taken toward homework — which is, for many parents, the closest connection they have with children's academic work.

Box 2: How parents can best support children with homework

The role of homework has been a divisive issue in recent years. Some parents are concerned that workloads placed on children may affect their wellbeing. Teachers, however, note that homework provides valuable feedback on where students may need more support, and it helps students by reviewing and practising what's learnt in class.

In any case, research is clear that students who regularly complete homework do better than those who don't — especially in high school³⁷ — and that it helps build students' responsibility and organisational skills. Though there's less direct evidence of the benefits linking homework to achievement for younger students, there are still many potential benefits; since homework provides the development needed to acquire good study habits and become a mature learner as they progress in their schooling.³⁸

It's clear that quality rather than quantity of homework is what matters.³⁹ Generally, homework is most effective when it's tied directly to class content and when there's high quality feedback provided on the work.⁴⁰ To the extent that time matters, it differs by age group. For primary students, shorter — but more frequent and targeted — homework is most effective.⁴¹ For secondary students, 90 minutes is considered optimal, and up to two and a half hours per day is suitable for senior secondary students.⁴²

Homework is also important for keeping parents connected to the school and their child's learning; though researchers caution against parents working too directly on tasks (such as providing answers to problems or working on assignments).⁴³ Instead, parents can best help students by: being knowledgeable about what's been set for homework; maintaining a positive outlook on homework; providing support where necessary (particularly providing hints and targeted informational feedback); establishing homework routines; eliminating distractions; and helping to manage students' time.

Australian parents tend to offer relatively limited support with their children's homework — around 4.4 hours per week on average (compared to global average of 6.7 hours)⁴⁴. 47 per cent of Australian parents spend under 2 hours per week helping academically with homework — with 33 per cent indicating they feel they spend too little time helping their child academically.

There's a role for schools in helping to engage parents in ways that are appropriate for their child's age and stage of learning.

Schools can encourage parents of children in younger years to do educational activities together, including giving parents useful facts or tips they can use.⁴⁵ Schools can also reinforce how important it is for parents and children to read together — and

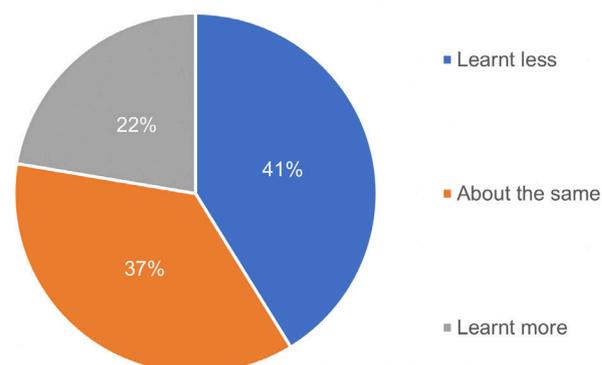
research suggests that schools which provide more structured support, ideas, and activities with carefully chosen books are more likely to be supported by parents.⁴⁶ For older students, schools can encourage engagement from parents by providing regular updates on children's progress (such as homework completion and grades) and upcoming tasks (such as tests).⁴⁷

How parents think their children progressed learning from home

Parents hold mixed views on how their children's learning progressed while at home. 78 per cent of parents expect that their child learnt less or about the same from home. Consistent with recent CIS research,⁴⁸ parents in lower income households were more likely to report their child made less progress than those in higher income households.

Parental perspectives on how much their child learnt during school closures differs slightly by parents' sex — with female respondents more likely to report negatively on their child's progress (45% of women said their child learnt less, compared to 36% of men). This could reflect that female respondents' disproportionately larger supervision roles may have made them more likely to observe learning gaps.

Parents' assessment of their child's learning progress during home-based learning.



Some parents think their children learn better from home

An interesting finding is the substantial proportion of parents who believe their child learnt more during remote learning. 22 per cent of all parents — including 25 per cent of parents in metropolitan areas — think their child progressed better while they were learning at home. This is likely to reflect that some students are potentially suited to learning in a non-traditional setting — particularly those with learning dispositions that mean they are self-motivated and capable of working independently.

The progress parents think their children made varies across groups of parents and students. 27 per cent of Victorian parents say their child learnt more while at home, compared to under 20 per cent in New South Wales and Queensland. Parents with a child in junior secondary school were also slightly more likely to report this.

These findings indicate a higher proportion of students who may have progressed well from home than might be anticipated. A plausible explanation is that negative peer effects are minimised when learning at home. Students who usually underperform due to disruptive peers in the classroom are able to learn without distraction at home. There are likely also fewer opportunities for bullying when schools are closed. It may also be that some students — especially high-

achieving ones — have the necessary motivation and background content knowledge to self-direct their own learning such that they can move at a faster pace than in a standard classroom.

Of course, while this is an interesting finding — and is supported by anecdotal evidence of some students thriving in the home-based setting — further consideration would be necessary before concluding that alternative school arrangements should be provided long-term. It's also worth reiterating that these assessments of student progress are made by students' parents, not their teachers, and so should be corroborated by professional educational judgements. In any case, there's certainly impetus to not only evaluate how students have progressed over the home-based learning experience — especially those in Victoria — but also to keep an open mind about the potential for new flexibility in schooling delivery.

Nevertheless, the upsides of remote learning must be weighed against the negatives. While there is much speculation about the advantages and disadvantages of remote schooling, there is no clear evidence to support these claims to date. Consequently, any attempt by policymakers to restructure the school system to make remote learning a permanent part of Australia's educational fabric is premature at this stage, especially for students outside of inner metropolitan areas.

Box 3: Home-schooling and distance education as alternative approaches

Home-schooling is one approach taken by parents to provide education tailored to their child's needs. Across Australia, it's estimated there are between 20,000 and 30,000 students who are home-schooled.⁴⁹ Parents cite a range of reasons for this choice, including: providing special needs that aren't being met in schools available to them; overcoming bullying or social adjustment issues in mainstream schools; cultural, religious and ideological reasons; and living in difficult-to-service locations. Generally speaking, these students outperform similar students, but the evidence base needs further development.⁵⁰

Distance education (and virtual schools) is a school arrangement similar to home-based learning; where students attend classes partially, mostly, or fully online. It is a school option available in all states and territories, but there are different rules surrounding whether students need to meet certain criteria to have this option available (such as living in remote areas or facing exceptional difficulty attending school). Many students in senior secondary participate in distance education in order to take subjects not offered in their regular school. Distance education — full time and part time — is relatively popular for students living in regional and remote areas of Australia, where travelling to school can be costly and time-consuming.

Education research has produced mixed results when it comes to effectiveness of students attending virtual schools — essentially finding that some students might benefit, but most likely would not. Research suggests that online schooling can assist in accelerating students who are academically prepared,⁵¹ however students who are not high achievers do worse online than in face-to-face courses.⁵² Within mixed-ability groups, research generally indicates students tend to underperform compared to similar schools in face-to-face schools^{53 54}.

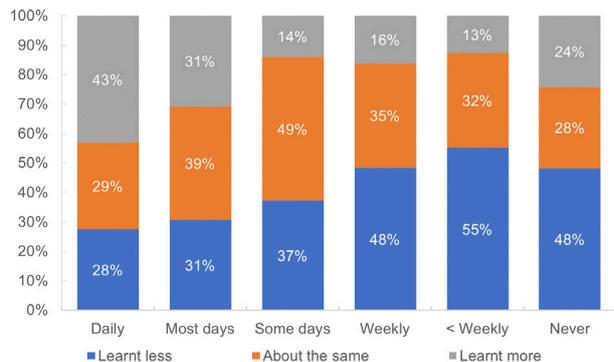
Both home-schooling and distance education require additional supervision by parents, though to varying degrees. Home-schooling usually requires parents to act as full-time educators, or to delegate this to another registered adult to serve as teacher. This means these students often have a one-on-one learning experience. Distance education requires attendance in online classes and requires enrolment in a registered school which offers this option.

Parents with regular and personalised contact with schools say children made better progress

51 per cent of parents who were contacted by schools only weekly or less reported their child learnt less than normal while at home. Conversely, parents who were contacted daily or most days were much less likely (less than half that proportion) to say their child learnt less.

A large proportion of parents (43 per cent) who were contacted daily say their child learnt more while at home — indicating that, with regular contact, parents and teachers can work together to support students’ learning. There is good reason to believe that — outside the specific home-based learning context — more frequent contact between parents and schools could have educational benefits.

Parents’ assessment of their child’s learning progress, by frequency of contact with school.



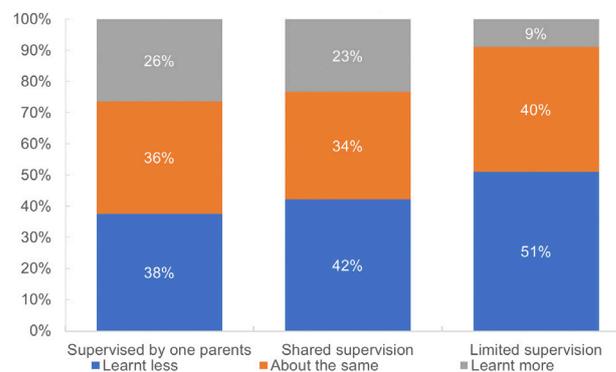
The remote teaching tools that teachers employ do not appear to be strong indicators of whether parents feel their children learn more, less, or the same as usual. An exception is the use of phone calls: parents who communicate with their child’s teacher via the phone are less likely to think their child has lost learning at home.

An implication for schools and teachers is that phone calls are often an effective form of communication and regular calls could be made to parents. This is supported by education evidence that shows parents are more engaged when schools use personalised communications approaches to reach parents, rather than generic school-wide contact (as discussed later in this paper).

How parents feel about supervising their child is related to how they think their child progressed

The amount of supervision provided by parents is related to how they feel their child’s learning progressed while at home. 51 per cent of parents who provided little or no supervision reported that their child learnt less than normal while learning remotely. It appears that having a dedicated parent supervising children’s learning makes it more likely that children achieved greater progress — which might reflect that having a specific parent responsible meant there were more consistent routines established.

Parents’ assessment of their child’s learning progress, by supervision type.



Parents who were provided support from schools have more positive perceptions of how their children’s learning has progressed. Parents who felt uninformed and weren’t confident regarding expectations of them were twice as likely to report that their child learnt less while learning remotely.

There is reason to believe that, in general, closer alignment of parents’ and schools’ expectations of students would benefit their collective efforts to support children’s learning. This could mean there is greater opportunity for teachers to ensure parents are informed and confident in supervising students’ homework and other learning that takes place outside the classroom.

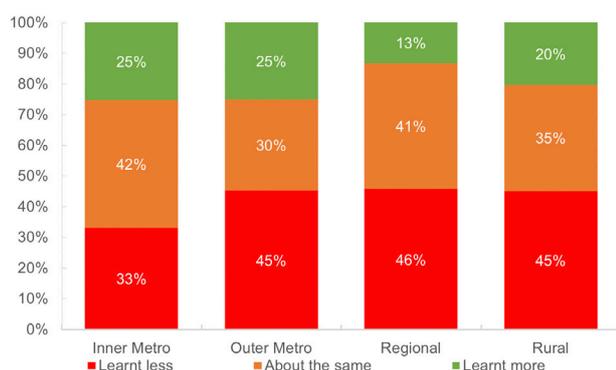
Parents’ assessment of their child’s learning progress, by parents’ confidence of expectations.



Perspectives on how children went vary between city and country parents

There is a geographical divide in parents' perspective on children's learning progress. Outside inner-metropolitan areas, parents are more likely to report that their child learnt less than normal while learning remotely. 33 per cent of parents think their child learnt less in inner metro areas, while significantly more (45%-46%) parents have a negative opinion in outer metro, regional, and rural locations.

Parents' assessment of their child's learning progress, by geographical region.



This suggests that home-based learning may have exacerbated existing educational inequities by geographical region. The implication of this is school closures outside of metropolitan areas should be a last resort for policymakers. It also suggests that state governments have additional cause for caution when imposing school closures outside of inner metropolitan areas (particularly given that significant covid-19 transmission in Australia seems to be limited mainly to areas of high population density).

There are several possible explanations for disparity in educational impact by geographical location. A logistical issue is that internet access and speeds tend to be worse in more regional areas, and this impacts the efficacy of online learning. More fundamentally, students in rural areas suffer from poorer average achievement than other students in general, and so effective teacher instruction is especially important for them at all times. While lack of access to face-to-face teaching may negatively impact most students, children who are already behind will fall further behind as they lack the necessary background knowledge to direct their own learning effectively.

Parents' perspectives on the school system after home-based learning

Australian parents have generally been patient with school closures and have developed a greater understanding and appreciation of teachers' roles after supervising their child's education at home. 55 per cent of surveyed parents say they have a more positive opinion of teachers following home-based learning.

A considerable proportion of parents also say they have a more positive view of the quality of the school curriculum (41 per cent) and the standard of education that is provided by schools (44 per cent). Taken together, this indicates that most parents have either more positive, or unchanged, perspectives of the education system.

Parents value the work of teachers, but rural and regional parents are more sceptical of education standards and curriculum

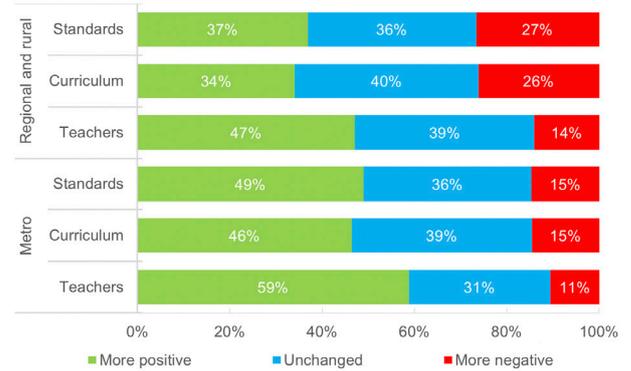
Parents in regional and rural locations are more likely to have developed more negative opinions of the school system since school closures, compared to their metropolitan counterparts. A regional breakdown shows that 33 per cent and 30 per cent of parents in rural locations now have a more negative view of the curriculum and educational standards, respectively, since having had greater exposure to them during home-based learning.

It's important to note that even though rural parents were more sceptical about the curriculum and educational standards, their opinions on the role of teachers aren't sharply different to metropolitan parents. This suggests that parents can often be appreciative of their child's teachers while also being critical of the educational standards of their school and what their child is being taught. Dissatisfaction with the school system does not necessarily equate to dissatisfaction with teachers.

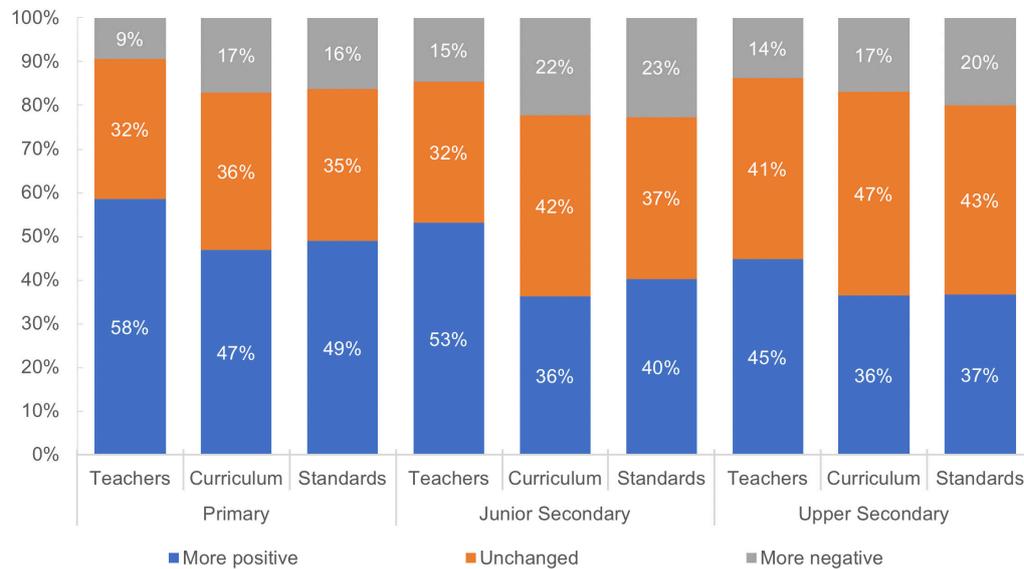
Parents of primary school children have developed more positive perspectives on education

Parental perspectives on the school system also differ by school level. Parents with a child in upper secondary are less likely to report more positive opinions on the role of teachers, quality of curriculum, and education standards, than parents with a child in primary school. Parents with a primary school child were especially likely to say they now have more positive views on the role played by teachers. This could be related to differing levels of involvement that parents and schools made during home-based learning for students in different age cohorts.

Parents' changed perspectives on education since home-based learning.



Parents' changed perspectives on the education system, by student school level.



Implications for policymakers

The parents surveyed for this analysis of their experiences during home-based learning have provided useful reflection on this key event facing education policy and practice. Their responses, along with review of wider research, point to numerous policy implications. While the surveyed parents were restricted to those with a child in government schools in New South Wales, Victoria, and Queensland, most findings are able to be generalised across the country and to non-government school sectors.

Objective and timely assessment is needed to identify learning gaps and interventions made to address academic needs

Schools and teachers have clearly gone to great lengths to minimise the educational impact of school closures. However, 41 per cent of parents believe their child learnt less while at home. Based on this estimate, there are close to 1.25 million students across NSW, Queensland, and Victoria potentially requiring additional remedial support (including some 490,000 NSW, 402,000 in Victoria, and 354,000 in Queensland). Given that the duration of closures has been longest in Victoria, by far, the scale of this necessary support may be considerable.

The first step in rectifying the situation is a timely and objective assessment of students' core literacy and numeracy skills. This is especially important because Education Council — the meeting of Australia's education ministers — decided not to hold NAPLAN tests in 2020. These students will not have their progress tracked along a common and objective achievement scale in 2020, and also their progress won't be recorded for nearly two full years from now (since tests are held in mid-May for Years 3, 5, 7, and 9). While schools and parents have been encouraged to voluntarily access and review past NAPLAN exams, this is no substitute for a population test done under proper exam conditions, and will not provide the meaningful information needed on student achievement and progress.

There's little reason to believe that additional funding commitments should be required by schools. Provisions have already been made to provide schools with the resources to maintain social distancing and additional hygiene precautions. Furthermore, school systems across Australia have received significant real per-student funding increases this year anyway as part of the 'Gonski 2.0' plan.

If school closures are required in future, they should be localised and better targeted

There is evident educational penalty from school closures for most students, and especially for educationally disadvantaged students. Yet, many decisions pertaining to school closures have been taken with state-wide mandates.

Results of this survey reiterate that school closures have additional educational disadvantage to students outside of inner metropolitan areas. In turn, policymakers should take extra care when imposing school closures that apply outside of inner metropolitan areas, where health advice has indicated there is considerably lower risk of transmitting covid-19.

Parents value the work of teachers but don't feel teachers should be paid more

Parents hold their child's teachers in high regard. This survey shows that 55 per cent of parents now hold a more positive opinion on the role played by teachers in the education system. This is a testament to the exceptional work of teachers on an everyday basis, as well as specifically during the home-based learning period.

Education unions continue to advocate for increasing across-the-board salaries of teachers — in part, to reflect the additional workload taken on during covid-19. However, a 2019 survey of parents by the CIS shows that just 15 per cent of parents place increasing teachers' pay among school spending priorities.⁵⁵

The social standing of, and respect for, the teaching profession has clearly lifted due to home-based learning. However, there's little reason to indicate that this should necessarily translate to increased salaries to be paid to teachers across the board. A more flexible pay structure, along with improved performance management arrangements, would provide opportunities for high-performing teachers — including those who have excelled during home-based learning — to earn salaries that reflect their performance and work effort. The research literature is increasingly clear that policy interventions with carefully designed and implemented pay arrangements that better incentivise teachers' performance demonstrate educational benefits.⁵⁶

Additional attention is needed to address concerns of regional and rural parents and the educational needs of their children

Across this survey's results, students and parents in regional and rural areas have indicated that home-based learning was less satisfactory than in metropolitan areas. An independent 2018 review into the state of regional, rural, and remote education pointed to lower educational opportunity for these students compared to those in metropolitan areas.

This survey and previous CIS research suggest that school closures have exacerbated students' learning gaps. In part, this appears to be related to the approach taken by schools — such as the observed lack of interaction with teachers during home-based learning. It should be established whether this is because of lower access to technology in homes or schools, and capacity constraints.

Rural and regional parents appear to be concerned about the quality of curriculum and educational standards, rather than with the role of teachers. This should encourage education departments to investigate the source of these concerns — both those resulting out of home-based learning, and also any pre-existing issues.

Strengthening the partnership between parents and schools will benefit students

Relationships between schools and parents are not as constructive and cooperative as they could be, and this harms students. Both teachers and parents are well-intentioned, but clearer strategies and open dialogue will better establish each other's responsibilities and roles. Parents need to be informed and confident in the role they can play in supporting schools' work — yet a considerable number did not feel this way with home-based learning.

Given that Australian parents are not highly involved and engaged in their child's education by international standards, there is an opportunity to capitalise on the goodwill gained during home-based learning to build a stronger partnership between schools and parents. This could involve reviewing the training provided to teachers and school leaders in facilitating parental engagement strategies. Previous research has shown that this competency is not regularly pursued in teachers' professional development.

Findings from this survey and broader research show that more regular communication could better inform parents and increase engagement. Schools should review their current communications strategies with parents to ensure they are effectively engaging them. This survey shows that personal phone calls from teachers resulted in parents being more engaged

and informed. Research suggests that regular, personalised text messages can also be effective. While it's true that increased communications with parents could be time-consuming for schools, there are clear educational benefits. Ultimately, a more effective partnership between school and home should reduce time burdens, since parents can better reinforce school priorities at home. Establishing clearer expectations around homework based on school policies is an important part of improving parental engagement around education.

More flexible study arrangements for students could be considered in future

Expanding parental choice means ensuring that there are options available to parents which best suit their child's needs. This survey indicates that 22 per cent of parents feel their children learnt more while at home — highest for students in junior secondary, in metropolitan areas, and in Victoria. This provides early evidence to suggest that more flexible approaches to schooling — with more time spent studying from home — could be considered for some students in future.

There are already options available to parents seeking non-traditional approaches to face-to-face mainstream schools, but there are obstacles that restrict parents' access to these options. A more flexible and pluralistic school system gives parents more educational choice, which should be a principle guiding education policymakers.

While it would be premature for policymakers to consider broad changes to school arrangements at present, they should evaluate the costs and benefits of whether alternative approaches might suit parents and children whose needs aren't being served by existing schooling arrangements. At a minimum, it may be appropriate for policymakers to consider removing regulations and barriers faced by parents who already seek non-traditional approaches to schooling.

Any evaluation should be thoroughly evidence-based, with special attention given to:

- *which* students might benefit from new approaches (such as whether it can be demonstrated whether specific student attributes make them good candidates);
- *how* educators and parents could facilitate this effectively; and
- *when* it might be appropriate (different levels of schooling and whether students would benefit from temporary or permanent alternatives).

Conclusion

The covid-19 pandemic has brought with it unprecedented shocks to the education system. In the short term, this has resulted in undeniable (and unequal) damage to many students' learning, upended the work of teachers, and placed increased demands upon parents. The longer term effects from the disruption to education remain uncertain. As with all major shocks, there is much that can be learned from the response to the pandemic — with the promise of developing future education improvements.

Just as workplaces around the world have discovered during the pandemic, there are potential ways of introducing flexibility to the otherwise rigid system of school education. There are also countless examples of schools and teachers finding novel ways of adapting to meet the needs of students, teachers, and parents. Many local approaches could be scaled up and integrated into regular practice. Of course, policymakers and practitioners will need to tread cautiously to ensure that innovation is matched by evidence of educational efficacy. As ever, careful evaluation and monitoring is needed to ensure that what's new isn't spuriously conflated with what's better.

Of the potential lasting changes from the pandemic, fostering better home and school partnerships is an obvious imperative — particularly if more flexible school offerings are to be considered in future. That does not simply mean heaping additional burdens on time-poor teachers and parents. Instead, it's about identifying constructive ways to enable parents to be informed and engaged participants in the education of their children. Ultimately, this can relieve some of the excess burdens placed on schools. Research presented in this paper shows that the education system has enjoyed broad support from parents through the pandemic. Capitalising on the goodwill that's been won will be crucial in continuously improving the education system.

As we approach the end of the school year, it's timely for teachers and school leaders to reflect on the challenges, successes, and opportunities of 2020. Policymakers will need to show leadership in taking stock of the year and ensuring that resources are well-deployed so that school systems are ultimately made stronger from the crisis. All stakeholders in the education system will benefit from the sharpened focus on efficiently and effectively schooling Australia's young learners — an apt silver lining to this turbulent school year.

Appendix: Methodology and survey details

The Centre for Independent Studies (CIS) commissioned YouGov to survey Australian parents with school-aged children enrolled in a government school over the period 2–6 July 2020. Respondents were restricted to the states of New South Wales, Queensland, and Victoria because they had similar period of school closures at the time. A total of 803 adults were included in the online survey. 24 parents whose children remained in regular face-to-face school attendance were excluded from the analysis.

Survey results

Q: Which of the following best describes who has responsibility for your children, whether they live in the same household or not? This may include parents, step parents etc.	
Please select one option only	
Two or more adults in paid work	43%
One adult in paid work and another not in paid work	28%
Both adults not in paid work	8%
Single adult in paid work	11%
Single adult not in paid work	7%
None of the above	1%
Net: Subtotal Not in paid work	16%
N	803
Q: Which of the following best describes the responsible adults' education levels?	
Please select all that apply	
At least one adult has a university qualification	59%
At least one adult has a TAFE or vocational qualification	42%
None of the above	12%
N	803
Q: Which of the following types of school do your children currently attend?	
Please select all that apply	
Government	100%
Catholic	6%
Independent	8%
None of the above	-
N	803
Q: Which school years are your children currently attending?	
If you have children in different school years, please select all that apply	
Kindergarten/Preparatory	14%
Year 1	12%
Year 2	14%
Year 3	9%
Year 4	13%
Year 5	13%
Year 6	12%
Year 7	11%
Year 8	12%
Year 9	11%
Year 10	12%
Year 11	13%
Year 12	8%
None of the above	-
N	803

Q: In recent months Government schools were partially closed for a period of time due to Covid-19. Did any of your children learn from home – even for a short period – during this time?

Yes 97%
No 3%
N 803

Q: Whilst your child was learning at home, how frequently did they do each of the following?

Work independently and access materials online

Regularly 67%
Occasionally 28%
Never 6%
N 779

Work online with teacher via a learning platform

Regularly 50%
Occasionally 34%
Never 16%
N 779

Receive hard physical copies of worksheets, textbook, or other learning materials

Regularly 30%
Occasionally 33%
Never 37%
N 779

Q: While schooling at home, did you get the impression that your child generally ...

Learnt less than usual 41%
Learnt about the same amount as usual 36%
Learnt more than usual 22%
N 779

Q: While your child was at home, did their school contact you to provide support ...

At least daily 15%
Almost every day 16%
Several times per week 21%
About once per week 21%
Less than once per week 16%
Never 11%
N 779

Q: What resources did your child's school provide as support to supervise your child? Please select all that apply

Teachers' phone contact 29%
Teachers' personalised email 45%
Group email 44%
Generic newsletter 35%
Customised web portal designed for learning at home 57%
Directed to third party online resources 32%
Other 3%
None of these 4%
N 779

Q: Which of the following best describes how you felt about the support to supervise your child?

You felt informed and confident about what was expected from you	64%
You felt uninformed and not confident about what was expected from you	29%
Don't know	7%
N	779

Q: Which best describes how your child was supervised while learning at home?

Supervised mostly by you	48%
Supervision shared between you and another caregiver	23%
Supervised mostly by another caregiver	10%
Mostly unsupervised (Child mostly worked independently)	14%
Totally unsupervised (Child worked totally independently)	5%
Don't know	0%
N	779

Q: Providing your child with supervision during school hours was?

Always convenient	19%
Generally convenient	39%
Occasionally inconvenient	24%
Very inconvenient	13%
You did not provide supervision	5%
N	779

Q: How did your child learning from home impact on your work?

You stopped working during the period your child was home	12%
You reduced your working hours	26%
You worked your normal hours	36%
You do not normally work	24%
Don't know	2%
N	779

Q: How did your child learning from home impact on your children's other caregivers' work?

They stopped working during the period your child was home	7%
They reduced their working hours	22%
They worked their normal hours	51%
They do not normally work	14%
Don't know	6%
N	628

Q: To what extent did the partial school closure affect the number of hours you had as 'free time' i.e. not doing paid or unpaid work or supervising your children's school work?

Reduced your free time a lot	43%
Reduced your free time a little	32%
Did not reduce your free time	22%
Don't know	3%
N	779

Q: To what extent did the school closure affect the number of hours your children's other caregivers had as 'free time' i.e. not doing paid or unpaid work or supervising your children's school work?

Reduced their free time a lot	30%
Reduced their free time a little	30%
Did not reduce their free time	34%
Don't know	6%
N	628

Q: How has the home-based schooling experience affected your opinion of the each of the following?

The role played by teachers

Have a much more positive opinion now than before	27%
Have a somewhat more positive opinion now than before	27%
Have the same opinion now as before	33%
Have a somewhat more negative opinion now than before	7%
Have a much more negative opinion now than before	5%
Don't know	2%
N	779

The quality of the curriculum

Have a much more positive opinion now than before	17%
Have a somewhat more positive opinion now than before	24%
Have the same opinion now as before	38%
Have a somewhat more negative opinion now than before	12%
Have a much more negative opinion now than before	5%
Don't know	3%
N	779

The standard of education provided

Have a much more positive opinion now than before	18%
Have a somewhat more positive opinion now than before	26%
Have the same opinion now as before	36%
Have a somewhat more negative opinion now than before	13%
Have a much more negative opinion now than before	6%
Don't know	2%
N	779

Respondent demographics

Gender

Male	43%
Female	57%
N	803

Age

18 to 34	13%
35 to 49	63%
50+	24%
N	803

State

N	803
NSW	37%
VIC	37%
QLD	25%

Capital City

Yes	66%
No	34%
N	803

Region

Inner Metropolitan	34%
Outer Metropolitan	32%
Provincial	17%
Rural	17%
N	803

If you add up the income from all sources, what is your average GROSS household income per year?

Less than \$20,000 [10000]	5%
\$20,000 - \$29,999 [24999.5]	4%
\$30,000 - \$39,999 [34999.5]	6%
\$40,000 - \$49,999 [44999.5]	5%
\$50,000 - \$59,999 [54999.5]	7%
\$60,000 - \$69,999 [64999.5]	5%
\$70,000 - \$79,999 [74999.5]	9%
\$80,000 - \$89,999 [84999.5]	5%
\$90,000 - \$99,999 [94999.5]	7%
\$100,000 - \$119,999 [109999.5]	14%
\$120,000 - \$149,999 [134999.5]	12%
\$150,000 - \$199,999 [174999.5]	10%
\$200,000 and above [225000]	5%
Prefer not to say	5%
Don't know	1%
N	803
Mean	97373.22

Household Income

< \$50K	21%
\$50K - <\$100K	35%
\$100K - <\$150K	28%
\$150K+	16%
N	752

Language spoken at home

English only	74%
Other languages	26%
N	803

Number of children responsible for

1	44%
2	40%
3 or more	16%
N	803

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About the Authors



Glenn Fahey

Glenn Fahey is a Research Fellow in Education Policy, with a particular focus on education finance and accountability. He is formerly a consultant at the OECD's Centre for Educational Research and Innovation.



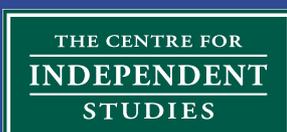
Blaise Joseph

Blaise Joseph is an Adjunct Scholar at the Centre for Independent Studies. He has written research papers on high-achieving disadvantaged schools, national testing, and school funding in Australia.

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