

# COVID-19 Insights

## Snapshot:

The challenges of surviving COVID-19 in Australia's hardest hit communities

**The Smith Family**

May 2020



everyone's family

The Smith Family works with almost 700 schools around the country supporting over 50,000 students through our *Learning for Life* program. Over the last two months, we have been working to understand how disadvantaged families in these communities are coping in the current COVID-19 environment.

Even before this crisis our families were experiencing poverty and the multiple and compounding challenges associated with that including:

- All of them live in low-income families
- More than half live in a single-parent family
- Around 40% of our students and 50% of their parents/carers have a health or disability issue
- More than half have a parent or carer who didn't finish Year 12
- One in 5 students has attended 4 or more schools

We have drawn on the full extent of our network to determine how our families are coping now, including receiving updates from our staff working with families and students, monitoring calls to our Family Hotline, and seeking advice from our Principals' Advisory Group. We will also continue to survey families over coming months to understand how their experiences change over time, so we can rapidly adapt our service response, as required.

We have collated insights drawn from our teams on the ground in vulnerable communities, and produced the following summary of issues and challenges our families have faced as this crisis unfolds:

### 1. Digital divide

- Some families do not have a computer or laptop for students' schoolwork. Same for tertiary students.
  - Some families have decided to put their Federal Government payment of \$750 towards a laptop for their children's at-home education and learning.
- Some families do not have internet. Same for tertiary students.
- Families do not have access to affordable broadband and data plans. Same for tertiary students.
  - Families who have internet are seeing a sharp increase in monthly bills.

- Multiple children in families are sharing one/limited number of devices to do school work.
- Some children do not have access to online learning platforms. Same for tertiary students.
  - Families often using mobile phones but mobiles often do not adequately support online learning platforms.
- Parents and carers do not have digital skills and literacy sufficient to help children with schoolwork.
- Some parents and carers lacking guidance and support from school and other services in dealing with digital and tech problems. Others finding schools are providing additional support for families to adjust to home schooling.

## 2. Challenges with schooling/studying from home

- Huge concern among families that children will fall behind with schooling because of disrupted routine, lack of resources at home including lack of digital access.
- Lack of digital resources means families often relying on hard copy resources.
  - Financial pressure in affording paper, printing, ink and other stationery – extra burden on already strained family budget for many families. Some schools providing packs to take home which is helping enormously.
  - Using hard copies means limited feedback from teachers on homework and learning.
  - Some students finding it difficult to go to school to pick up more resources, especially if via public transport or if they do not live near their school.
  - Not all schools are providing hard copy learning packages to compensate for lack of access to digital/online resources.
- Parents/carers do not feel proficient or well supported in assisting with schoolwork.
  - Additional concern for families where English is an additional language, or where parents have low level of literacy and/or numeracy, even at primary school level.
  - Additional level of stress for grandparent carers, especially those who are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander who may be looking after a number of grandchildren. They are worried about their health, the children's schooling and the disrupted home life
- Concern that all this disruption will have a major impact on high school students nearing Year 12 exams and assessments and possible post-school pathways.
- Stressful trying to create a routine at home amongst all other challenges families are facing.
- Parents/carers find it stressful having children at home all day with no additional assistance or more limited access to childcare. This in particular is acute for parents/carers with children with high needs, or children with disabilities being at home with no additional support all day.
  - Similar pressure faced by tertiary students with children and dependents.
- Tertiary students dealing with changed living arrangements, especially those who were living on or near campus in student accommodation. Some are returning interstate where they can, others have no obvious or easily accessible home base.
  - Some students need assistance with living expenses at this time.

## 3. Overarching risk of students disengaging altogether from their education or changing pathways

- With the set of challenges outlined above, there is a significant risk that students will disengage from their schooling altogether, and not return to school next term. Students in Years 7 who have recently transitioned to high school, or those in Year 10 are particularly susceptible to this risk.
- Some tertiary students considering changing their course given disruption to particular industries, e.g. those in hospitality courses.

#### 4. Employment/unemployment

- Lots of tertiary students have lost their casual jobs but some are also finding more work depending on demand for products/services during crisis (e.g. those who work in pharmacies).

#### 5. Concerns over physical and mental health of families and students

- Families feeling enormous health, financial and educational burden, causing heightened stress and anxiety.
- Families unsure where to seek counselling and other support in community.
- Family violence is an issue. Heightened concern over physical safety and wellbeing of students being at home all the time and the tensions existing between family members during crisis.
  - Instances emerging of parent and children needing to escape unsafe home.
  - Other support services accessed by families with case workers can't do face-to-face check-ups and have concerns for children.
  - Families who are part of government support programs are contacting case workers more frequently because they are missing face-to-face check-ups.
  - Long delays in getting through to support lines at the moment.
  - Some families engaging counselling support via video conferencing.
  - Previous safe places for children like community centres are currently closed. Difficult to find places that are safe or offer respite from home life.

#### 6. Interactions with extended family

- Concern about pregnant women in families and restrictions on who can attend labour and birth in some states. Causing heightened stress and anxiety for expectant parents/carers.
- Navigating funeral restrictions is difficult. Lack of cultural, religious and spiritual funeral practices unable to take place – may drastically exacerbate grief and disrupt the healing process.
- Usual family supports are not available for parents/carers due to social distancing. Limitations on family life and help causing additional stress on top of everything else.

#### 7. Food insecurity

- Families find it hard to deal with increasing cost of groceries and cost of living currently.
  - One example of a family's weekly food budget increasing sharply from \$200 to \$350 per week.
- Families stressed about being able to secure sufficient groceries given disrupted supplies at shops, lack of specials anymore at major supermarket chains, and/or shop-based restrictions on purchasing.
- One of first things that closed down at schools were breakfast clubs, which many students relied on daily.

- The Smith Family is linking to local foodbank suppliers where possible, but even some community programs are cutting back on the number of meals and deliveries they are able to do right now.

## 8. Referrals to and support from other services

- Can be long delays in arranging appointments or referring families to other relevant services.
- Shift to video conferencing empowering some families to seek appointments as less daunting.

## How do we respond to these challenges?

We believe that our best recovery requires a collective endeavour, similar to Australia's response to the immediate challenge posed by the virus. As the threat of COVID-19 intensified, we witnessed unprecedented collaboration and coordination between different levels of government, and across the community and business sectors. Maintaining this collaboration should be the foundation of our national response to alleviate the impact of COVID-19 on the education of disadvantaged students.

As students around the country return to school, a focus on the needs of vulnerable students, including students living in poverty, must be paramount. These students may require additional support to make up for time lost, and to minimise further disruption to learning as much as possible.

Ultimately, disadvantaged students require long-term support to ensure they don't fall further behind because of COVID-19. This requires:

- Respectfully supporting parents to create a rich home learning environment and to be actively engaged in their child's education in ways that are meaningful for them.
- Using data and evaluation to track students' progress and identify in a timely way the support individual students need.
- Using innovation to test new approaches that more effectively support students.

Where possible, we encourage government, business, philanthropic and the community sectors to find ways to continue to collaborate to support financially disadvantaged students so they can succeed at school.

We also believe that tackling digital disadvantage should be a top priority in our recovery from COVID-19. We can no longer allow disadvantaged students to fall behind in their learning because of the digital divide. It must no longer be considered as adequate, that students only have access to devices and the internet at school, and not at home. Our initial solutions include:

- Ensuring all disadvantaged students have access to their own reliable device connected to the internet at home and that this is provided in a systemic and coordinated way. An internet connected device is an essential tool for an older primary and secondary students' educational journey.
- Ensuring disadvantaged families have access to affordable, reliable broadband. We welcome NBN Co's \$150 million COVID-19 relief and assistance package to assist low-income families with home schooling needs. We encourage telecommunications retailers to work with NBN Co so that further relief and assistance is offered to these families. This could involve discounting retail prices, or the direct provision of data and home internet packages to target groups. Having support and technical support lines available in each jurisdiction for parents and carers who need help with their digital proficiency, including understanding the online learning platforms being used by their children.

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