Learning from a crisis

How the lockdown put the spotlight on school funding
NEW TITLES AND ONLINE RESOURCES

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Ross Mars

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In times of crisis, you would hope that as a country we would all pull together – we are, as the Prime Minister keeps telling us, ‘all in this together’. However, the politics that have played out between the federal government and state and territory governments have left the education workforce at the centre of a very unhelpful tug of war.

On one hand, the PM said very clearly that it was the responsibility of the state and territory governments to manage COVID-19 issues for schools and yet, on the other, both the PM and Minister Tehan have relentlessly pursued the re-opening of schools without due consideration of local arrangements, nor the health and safety of the workforce.

With more than 90 per cent of students impacted by school closures internationally, the clear advice from the World Health Organisation has been for governments to take a slow and cautious approach. It states that the best interests of children and overall public health considerations must be central to national and local authority decisions to reopen schools.

This is backed up by leading university researchers in Australia, who independently examined the latest evidence and recommended that ‘any resumption of school operations should be contingent upon physical distancing measures appropriate to each school context. A staged return of school operations should consider the social, emotional, developmental and academic needs of different groups.’

Denmark has taken the advice on board. The return to face-to-face teaching has begun cautiously, with preschool and early years students returning before older students. This staged process is based on cooperation between government and teachers to address different issues as they arise.

As state and territory governments begin to ease community restrictions and schools return to onsite face-to-face teaching and learning, there are five key...
principles developed by Education International that should guide our process.

Firstly, there must be open dialogue with teachers and unions to agree to the health and safety measures for students and staff transitioning back to school. Second, the necessary personal protective equipment and hygiene practices must be in place. Third, equity needs to be front and centre, with an acknowledgment that the impact of the pandemic is not equally felt, and a support structure must be put in place for vulnerable students and staff. Fourth, dedicated mental health systems must be in place to protect physical and emotional wellbeing; and fifth, any return must be built on the trusted advice of educators as professionals. Education authorities must engage with their educators and their unions to assess the impact of returning to school and to gain pedagogical advice. It is vital that the continued professional autonomy of educators is respected.

Our heartfelt thanks and respect goes out to all of you for your dedication and commitment to public education and our students as you have worked tirelessly to prepare for an emergency mode of operations during term 2, while also caring for your own families during a very difficult time.

The AEU will continue to advocate strongly for the safe return to onsite education in schools that we all want to see, but we will not resile from fighting for the health and safety of our members. By any measure, we will be dealing with COVID-19 for some time yet and therefore it is fundamentally important that governments meet their responsibilities to education staff and students. If we are truly “all in this together”, then governments must back us with the resources to stay safe and they must trust and respect the teaching profession to do what we do so well – and that is educate the students of Australia regardless of the circumstances.

Correna Haythorpe

Know your union

With a federal office and branches or associated bodies in every state and territory, the AEU represents more than 188,000 members industrially and professionally.

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Post pandemic poverty demands urgent response

Oxfam is calling for an urgent increase in Australia’s aid budget to help save lives and prevent poverty in developing countries, as the economic fallout from the pandemic continues.

It’s new report, Dignity Not Destitution, predicts the COVID-19 crisis could force an extra 240 million people in East Asia and the Pacific below the poverty line.

More than half the world’s population could be living in poverty in the aftermath of the pandemic, setting the fight against poverty back by decades, the report says.

“Women are likely to be hardest hit financially, due to unpaid care work, and the fact they are more likely to be employed in poorly paid, precarious jobs that are most at risk. More than one million Bangladeshi garment workers – 80 per cent of whom are women – were laid off at the height of the crisis after orders from western clothing brands were cancelled or suspended.”

Boosting respect and support

Wear it Purple Day is a movement that has the potential to save thousands of lives, its organisers say.

Wear it Purple president Ross Wetherbee says schools, community organisations and universities organise events to recognise the annual event and help young LGBTQ+ people feel respected, accepted and included.

“Young LGBTQ+ people … face fear of being rejected or discriminated against for simply being true to who they are. Research shows us that 75 per cent of LGBTQ+ youth experience some form of discrimination,” he says.

“Without visible signs of inclusion explicitly showing rainbow youth that they are accepted, supported and included, young people find themselves adopting a path of hiding themselves to fit in … which can impact their long-term health and wellbeing.”

Wear it Purple will be celebrated on Friday 28 August. Schools planning to participate can register their events at wearitpurple.org

Shhhh … we’re reading

Silent reading for pleasure in school is waning, despite its documented benefits, research has shown.

Margaret Kristin Merga, a senior lecturer in education at Edith Cowan University, says that many silent reading opportunities are being cancelled and those that go ahead often don’t reflect best practice.

In an article in The Conversation, Merga provides tips for making the most of silent reading sessions, including placing more emphasis on reading for enjoyment.

“If we want young people to choose to read more to experience the benefits of reading, then silent reading needs to be about pleasure and not just testing,” she says.

Students should choose their own books, even if they are perceived as too challenging, and be given opportunities to chat about the books before and after the session.

Merga says having access to paper books is also important. “Reading comprehension is typically stronger when reading on paper.”

She says allowing students to read for pleasure at school is a big step towards creating a reading culture.
If we want young people to choose to read more to experience the benefits of reading, then silent reading needs to be about pleasure and not just testing.

Margaret Kristin Merga
Education lecturer

EVENTS 2020

Public Education Day
28 May

World Environment Day
5 June

World Day Against Child Labour
12 June

Refugee Week
14-20 June

NAIDOC Week
5-12 July

Schools Tree Day
31 July

National Tree Day
2 August

International Day of the World’s Indigenous Peoples
9 August

Wear it Purple Day
28 August

Stop trade talks

Education International, the global federation of education unions, has joined almost 300 global organisations calling on the World Trade Organisation to cease all trade negotiations during the COVID-19 crisis. In a letter to the WTO, the organisations said they were “shocked” that negotiations were continuing and called on the WTO to rethink the rules negotiated in trade agreements that encourage monopolies and reduce affordable access to all forms of medical supplies, putting lives at risk.
Turning point

Back-to-back crises in 2020 have laid bare the dangerous inequalities of Australia’s school funding. But could they at last provide the springboard for levelling up?
Funding

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IN SHORT

COVID-19 has laid bare inequality, poor infrastructure and resources in public education.

The current needs-based funding formula is failing public schools.

The government must give every public school its full SRS and increase spending on capital works.

Funding from bushfire repairs to pandemic preparations, Australia’s unbalanced school funding system has been found desperately wanting – even as educators rise to the challenge of multiple crises.

The response to the COVID-19 pandemic proved once again that teachers and educators are frontline staff, essential workers in the Australian economy. In just weeks, schools instigated a completely new method of curriculum delivery – remote learning – while grappling with tough, but vital, health and safety measures.

That pivot came as many schools, particularly in regional and remote communities, were grappling with the aftermath of a devastating bushfire season that affected students and teachers in every state and territory.

But the crises again exposed the underfunding of our public schools and the heavy lifting they do in providing education for most of Australia’s vulnerable and disadvantaged children.

Some schools lacked the IT equipment to switch quickly to remote learning. Some lacked even the necessary hand sanitiser, soap and cleaning equipment to keep their workplaces safe.

Essendon Kelor College principal David Adamson says he raided his camp and excursion budget to fund laptops and internet plans for students at the school in Melbourne’s north west who needed them. But, he says, a bigger concern was student welfare.

“I’ve got some Year 9 students who were already pretty disengaged from education. At the moment, they’re not doing much at all. To get them back on track will be a challenge. That’s a bigger cost – how do we provide welfare support for those kids? The risk is that they won’t complete school.”

John Schuh, executive principal of Ferny Grove State High in Brisbane, says his school is “just managing” to balance remote learning with social distancing measures for the 10 per cent of students on campus. Even so, electives for Years 7 to 9 had been dropped and, with a critical shortage of relief teachers, something would have to give if more students returned.

Secondary schools are often large enough to shuffle budgets around for a few weeks, Schuh says. But his primary school colleagues are struggling to supply laptops or iPads to students in need; some had resorted to photocopies and Australia Post to get teaching materials out. “They don’t have the capacity to do things online,” he says.

“We’re very good at solving these problems for the government, but funding would be a huge advantage for everybody.”

INEQUALITY HIGHLIGHTED

The crisis has underlined that government schools educate most disadvantaged or vulnerable students – children without access to laptops or internet, or with complex needs that require strong systemic support, time and resources that schools struggle to provide.

“COVID-19 has really highlighted the inequality in our schools, the lack of infrastructure and resources,” AEU federal president Correna Haythorpe says. “That’s a story that has to be told.

“We’ve seen some short-term funding from state and territory governments to deal with these issues, it doesn’t deal with the long-term reality of the inequality in resources.”

Haythorpe says clear messaging, extra clearing regimes in schools and immediate support for staff with health concerns were the best government responses to the crisis. “Some states have unfortunately left it to individual schools and said it’s their problem. That has put a lot of pressure on principals and teachers.

“The reality is that many state and territory governments have had to put in extra laptops and computer support – not only to support children from disadvantaged backgrounds that don’t have computers or internet at home, but even schools that don’t have enough equipment,” she says.
Many of the things that parents expect from schools will be a challenge – the value adding experiences like music programs, excursions and camps.

“Some schools were actually dealing with shortages of soap and hand sanitiser, which they were required by their state’s chief medical officers to have. If schools are to operate under a whole new set of requirements that say you have to have sanitiser at the front of every classroom, extra cleaning services for the laptops, iPads, tables, chairs, playgrounds – whose responsibility is that?

“It all requires extra resources from government.”

NO TOGETHERNESS HERE
The crisis has demonstrated that when it comes to education, we’re not all in it together, says Haythorpe. “Private schools were among the first to close in term 1, in defiance of federal government requests for them to remain open. They followed that with a plea for extra funding,” she says.

“But the sector is used to special treatment. The Liberals in Canberra responded to the prolonged drought and bushfires with a $50 million relief fund – for private schools only.”

Haythorpe says the Coalition’s view is that public school infrastructure is a problem solely for the states and refuses to contribute to capital works funding. “The coronavirus crisis has again shown the unsustainability of that position.”

Private schools massively outspend government schools on capital works – Catholic schools spent more than twice as much per student in 2017 and independent schools doubled that again. Despite that, the Morrison Government has promised the sector $1.9 billion in infrastructure funding over the next decade.

But it’s mostly government schools that have been coping with surging roles as

Who gets what?

Special deals for Catholic and independent schools include:

- **$3.4 billion** extra to fund Direct Measure of Income changes.
- **$1.2 billion** “Choice and Affordability” fund to reduce private school fees.
- **$1.9 billion** fund over the next 10 years for capital works.
- **$50 million** for bushfire and drought relief.

Australia experiences a new baby boom. The Grattan Institute estimates an extra 650,000 school places will be needed over the decade to 2026.

Private schools are also the only sector expected to be fully funded by 2023 under the new Schooling Resource Standard (SRS), with inequalities baked into the Liberals and Nationals vision of equity. While every private school will get 100 per cent of its SRS, the target for public schools is to reach just 95 per cent by 2023.

For the hundreds of private schools overfunded under the formula, the transition will stretch to 2029 – although that hasn’t been enough to prevent squeals of pain from the sector, which has asked for even longer.

Meanwhile private schools get access to $3.4 billion to ease the introduction of Direct Measure of Income – the assessment of parents’ ability to pay fees which underpins the SRS for private schools – and a further $1.2 billion “Choice and Affordability” fund, intended to reduce fees, despite the fact that two decades of ever-increasing government subsidies have not stopped fees outstripping inflation.

Together, they make a mockery of then-treasurer Scott Morrison’s claim in 2017, in an interview with journalist Laurie Oakes, that “there shouldn’t be special deals”. “There should be one deal and it should be based on the needs of every single student,” Morrison said.

“This is in the Liberal Party’s DNA,” Haythorpe says. “Their version of needs-based funding is simply not needs-based.”

As always, government schools are rising to the occasion. Adamson says his staff have been “outstanding”. “They’ve
taken it on with a passion because they really do care about their kids.

“We take all comers, and we don’t get the support our (private school) competitors do in the community.”

THE GROWING GAP

Schuh says he expects the gap to widen. His school spends “nearly $800,000 a year just to make our school function” and this is made possible only by voluntary parental contributions.

“We will see a real financial struggle when we come back (from the COVID-19 lockdown) Parents aren’t going to be able to pay voluntary fees, pay for excursions and we won’t have that income stream that we budgeted for.

“Many of the things that parents expect from schools will be a challenge – the value adding experiences like music programs, excursions and camps,” Schuh says.

Haythorpe says that when the crisis is over, the federal government must address the underlying issue of poor resourcing – giving every public school its full SRS and pulling its weight on capital spending.

“If we had been provided with the necessary capital works and infrastructure investment, that would have minimised a lot of the trauma of dealing with social distancing or remote learning requirements,” she says.

“And if schools had been allocated fair funding, they might have had more capacity to organise the necessary resources, run the professional development needed and to work through a pandemic with less stress.

“COVID-19 has highlighted the funding issues – and we can’t afford to lose momentum.”

A tough start gets even tougher

It was the toughest start imaginable to the year for the staff and students at the three schools that make up Kangaroo Island Community Education in South Australia.

The island was devastated by the summer bushfires. Many students and staff lost everything, and almost everyone was touched by catastrophe.

So when AEU Federal president, Correna Haythorpe visited the schools with State president Lara Golding, she was even angrier at the lack of support from the federal government.

The Coalition had announced a $50 million pot for private schools hit by drought and fire – but nothing for the public schools educating most of the bushfire-hit students.

“One campus we visited had about 38 kids who’d lost everything, and about 95 per cent of them had lost something,” she says.

“And many staff were affected as well, but they were all there at the beginning of the year making school a safe and wonderful place for the kids.

“We’ve seen the same right across the country. There are clean-up costs; schools needed mental health support and counselling services. They might have playgrounds and infrastructure that has been damaged.

“We lost only a handful of schools, but the reality is that a significant number of schools lost playgrounds or sheds or infrastructure that has to be rebuilt.

“We have to ask why the government believes that it is only private schools who need relief funding.”

On Kangaroo Island, 45 staff were directly affected by the fires – from being evacuated, to losing their homes, vehicles or infrastructure, or by having a partner fighting the fires. The campuses played a significant role during the emergency, hosting more than 150 firefighters for many weeks.

When term 1 started, five staff required additional leave either due to trauma or to deal with loss.

The strain on the school’s leaders and other staff was immense, says SA vice president Dash Taylor Johnson. Several had barely had a break since December, working seven days a week to help accommodate fire crews, assist with resources and to support children and colleagues.

“The trauma will be ongoing for many months, possibly years ahead,” says Taylor Johnson.
It's not right that in a classroom of 30

5 kids live in poverty

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Australian educators faced the challenges of the global pandemic head on, finding new ways to engage their students against a backdrop of health and safety concerns, tricky technology solutions and, for many, increased workloads. We spoke to educators across the country about their experiences.
Justin Harris, a teacher at Geelong High School in Victoria, says most teachers and students have been working from home during the COVID-19 shutdown, “which brings with it a host of health and safety issues”.

Harris, also an AEU rep and school health and safety rep, says that there are physical and mental challenges in delivering 100 per cent online teaching from home isolation.

“Many teachers are home with young children and other family members, trying to work on a kitchen table or a bed,” he says.

“We don’t normally have a stand for our department laptops, which we need and most people don’t have a separate keyboard or mouse.”

While the government has provided some funding for equipment, Harris says it’s not enough.

“The worry is that teachers aren’t set up ergonomically, and we’re going to get a number of musculoskeletal issues – in backs, necks and shoulders – from bad workstations. Using new technologies and changed workplaces are big stressors for many people.”

He urges teachers to take regular computer breaks, set boundaries around availability, and value the upskilling. “We’ve probably learned skills that otherwise would have taken years of PD at school.”
“Social distancing was probably our number one health and wellbeing concern before the school closed,” says Andy Mison, principal at Hawker College, a Year 11 and 12 school in outer Canberra.

“It was a challenge getting people to change habits that are fundamental to our practice and necessary for teaching and learning in a face-to-face environment. It also runs counter to the way teenagers operate.”

There are 500 students at Hawker College and Mison wanted to ensure teachers remained healthy. “A couple of our senior teachers have chronic health conditions, so I didn’t hesitate to send them home.

“They understood, but it was challenging for them. And I think it was a relief when everybody else was working from home, too.”

Practical hygiene and cleaning measures were easier to implement, says Mison. “They’re operational issues and we were pretty well supplied, so we didn’t really experience too much difficulty with that.

“We had to change some priorities, such as asking cleaners to spend less time vacuuming floors and more time cleaning desks and sterilising areas that people would regularly touch.”

Workloads changed, in as much as people are potentially more accessible now. But teachers no longer had playground duties or commuting to and from work, so that balanced out some of the difficulties and productivity improved.

“A wonderful thing was that once we determined that our entire team would be working in isolation, my business manager got in a truck and delivered school furniture and IT equipment all over Canberra and adjacent parts of NSW to set them up at home.”

It was a challenge getting people to change habits that are fundamental to our practice and necessary for teaching and learning in a face-to-face environment.

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“Teachers have been put in a difficult position. I’m angry and I’m scared.”

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Resources

- **Beyond Blue** information to help educators support children and young people’s mental health during the coronavirus outbreak, covering: educator self-care; how to talk about what’s happening in the news; and finding positive ways to direct energy and express emotions. tinyurl.com/ybl5xvyr

- **Cool Australia** has free activities to support students who are learning at home. coolaustralia.org/learning-at-home

- **Earth School** is a series of lessons designed to help students discover and celebrate nature. It has been developed by 70 environmental and education experts and a global team of 50 prominent organisations. ed.ted.com/earthschool
“Sometimes hand washing, especially in junior primary, can take 10 to 15 minutes, which takes away from learning time,” says Marika Marlow, a classroom teacher at Mount Barker Primary School in South Australia.

Usually a teacher for children who need additional learning support, Marlow has been assisting teachers who have been busier than usual servicing the needs of students at home and at school during the pandemic.

The school has implemented hygiene procedures for those who are attending.

“We’ve always been vigilant about the children washing their hands before eating and now, using hand sanitiser has become a regular practice,” says Marlow. “Many parents have also assisted by sending a tissue box for their child to use.”

Things can get tricky in junior primary, where there’s a wet area with one tap and four outdoor toilets with a tap in each, used daily by four to five classes.

“When we ran short on sanitizer, wipes and disinfectant many of us had to go out and buy them because back orders took a while to fill,” says Marlow.

Cleaners now work day and night. Before that, children couldn’t use playground or PE equipment because there wasn’t enough time for teachers to disinfect everything between recess and lunch.

Social distancing has been a challenging concept for the children, says Marlow. “The older ones understand, but it’s been difficult.

“When we were down to around 50 per cent attendance last term, it was easier to socially distance in the classroom.

“This term, there’s only a few children away and we’ve been told there’s such low risk there’s no need for social distancing.”

And we are active on Facebook.”

Teachers who went away for the school holidays self-isolated on their return, and during the student-free final week of last term they prepared take-home packs of materials, and made new videos for the school’s Facebook page.

The school has operated as it normally would, but on a smaller scale, condensing some face-to-face units and combining some classes.

Cook says that Facebook is the main communication channel between the school and the community as students without a computer or ADSL can still access it on their parents’ phones.

It’s hugely popular; in one recent week, the school’s learning-related posts reached more than 2500 people, and had more than 500 interactions.

Cook says creating new video resources, such as a guide to local plants, was one bonus to come out of the crisis. “We wouldn’t normally have this opportunity,” he says. “It was a little unexpected and quite a positive.”

Attendance is always a challenge in a remote community says Andrew Lansdell, who teaches Year 10, 11 and 12 at Shepherdson College on Elcho Island in north-east Arnhem Land.

He says some of the school’s 600 students and their parents have been reluctant about attending because of rumours around COVID-19, so teachers needed to work out how to explain the virus and why it was still OK to come to school in the Northern Territory.

“Communicating with parents across remote communities is very tricky. We’ve got a PA system, which would only get to around half the town.

And for staff, meetings are now limited to less than 10 people, often scattered around the school and on Skype.

Student attendance is improving after a few weeks’ break. “At the moment, I’ve got a Year 10, 11, 12 engagement class of boys. They come to school a bit, but they are still really developing,” says Lansdell.

“We’re trying to encourage them to get up and get to school, and work out how to rejig their body clocks so they can function a bit more during the day. It’s a challenge we are actively working on, because a lot of what goes on in the community happens at night.”
Learning from a crisis
Technology

Technology has created opportunities to help students to learn at home but also many challenges.

“We’re using Zoom, it works across every platform and it doesn’t use a lot of data, so most of our kids can get into it. We’re also using Microsoft Teams, Seesaw, and a range of apps.

“Some of my teachers are still working until 11pm – they teach classes during the day and do their marking, then they’re trying to engage with (their own) kids at night.”

I’m not sure how long we can sustain that work rate but I really admire the commitment.”

Maywald predicts a renewed focus on wellbeing post-crisis.

“I think we’ll see a healthier society, because instead of people sharing their bugs, everybody will be more supportive of people staying home and getting better.”

Country kids experience black spots so it doesn’t matter what dongle you send out, internet access is simply patchy or non-existent.

“My students have access to technology, however it’s just a babysitter for them,” says Year 3 to 5 Special Education teacher Melissa Rabar.

“If they saw my face on Zoom, some of them would go into a meltdown because they’re highly autistic and they’d think what’s my teacher doing at home on my iPad. They wouldn’t be able to understand why I’m trying to teach them.”

For that reason, technology wasn’t a solution for students who didn’t attend Darwin’s Nemarluk School during the worst of the COVID-19 crisis.

Rabar says that despite schools in the NT staying open when other states were in lockdown, only 12 students out of 175 came to school in week 11 of term 1.

She joined the AEU’s Branch Executive this year and says the union, teachers and staff wanted the schools to close.

“We were encouraging parents by sending home learning packs, which were for the kids who were able. I sent home hands-on activities that my families could do with their students.”

Rabar says her workload, and that of her colleagues, increased by at least 50 per cent at the peak of the crisis.
“We’ve never had to provide all learning opportunities remotely before,” says Seir Holley, assistant principal, curriculum at Keilor Heights Primary School. “It’s been the biggest learning curve for everyone.”

The COVID-19 shutdown in Victoria led to a complete overhaul of the school’s approach to teaching and learning, Holley says.

The school did have a small head start: it had an existing software platform that shared material with students’ homes, which was used to deliver remote learning.

Nonetheless, it required a lot of learning for teachers, as well as parents and students who’d never used the software in this way, she says.

“That’s had a massive impact on teachers’ workloads, whether preparing tutorial videos to share with families so they know what to click on, or maintaining all privacy and safety requirements,” says Holley.

The changes affected all areas of schooling, each requiring copious professional learning. It ranged from processes to monitor daily student attendance, new individualised remote learning programs, monitoring students’ progress and supporting their wellbeing, as well as dealing with increased parent contact and feedback.

All done remotely, from home, where teachers may have their own families to support as well.

“The reality is teachers are working longer hours because they are supporting students all day and then having to plan at night and on weekends, says Holley.

“The workload for teachers has been immense. I can’t stress this enough.”

SEIR HOLLEY
LEARNING CURVES AHEAD

“Technology is a learning experience, and in this current environment there’s a great opportunity to use innovation,” says Year 7 and 8 teacher David Genford.

“Pre-COVID-19, if you tried something, it was almost as if you were expected to be a master of it before you used it.

“One of the best things is that the kids are very aware of this. They know we’re human and some things are going to work, and some aren’t. They’ve been really appreciative of our efforts.”

As the school data coach at Taroona High School in Tasmania, which has 1100 students, Genford has seen teachers sharing workloads, and embracing innovation and trial and error in technology.

In his year levels, four or five teachers work together to produce online content, which is then delivered to the cohort by one teacher, freeing up other staff to respond to students, manage discussion boards and other work.

Overall, it’s been a time of rethinking content and structure.

“We’ve honed in on what is essential for the students,” he says. “We’ve shortened our lesson time to increase the breaks kids have at home. We don’t want them sitting in front of a screen the whole day.”

Genford’s takeaway from this period is the value of innovation, and not being put off by failure, pointing to his own attempt at hosting an online quiz on Facebook Live that was plagued by a deal-breaking 30-second delay.

“It didn’t work, but the feedback from the kids was ‘thanks for trying’. They loved seeing each other’s faces and interacting. Even a failure can be positive.”

DAVID GENFORD
HUMAN NATURE

We shouldn’t underestimate what kids have access to at home.

RYAN GOVAN
A DREAM RUN
“I knew if I didn’t participate in the learning that was going on in the school environment at the moment, I’d be disadvantaged when it was over,” says Julie Streeter, a Year 2 teacher at Yarrilee State School.

After nearly 40 years teaching young children in primary school classrooms, with minimal technology use, Streeter made a conscious decision to embrace online learning when the COVID-19 shutdown hit her school in Queensland’s Hervey Bay.

Now, two months down the track, Streeter feels more comfortable with the online platforms; though she says she’s still on ‘L plates’.

“I’m able to do the work, but it might take me longer than the younger generation who’ve grown up with this technology,” she says.

It reminds her of her first year teaching. “You know the content well, and you know how to teach, but this is a very different way to teach.”

Streeter recognises that many families are on the same learning trajectory. During the first week of online learning, the Microsoft platform struggled under the increased need for students to access remote learning. This created more stress and anxiety for parents, with many requesting paper-based materials.

Her Year 2 students are accessing their lessons through OneNote and displaying a growing confidence and ease with competence-based learning. “Some of the little children learn so quickly,” she says.

Moorman says teachers at Lockridge Primary School in Western Australia have been designing home-learning programs where they can connect to families in a range of ways rather than only through an online package.

“I’m using Facebook because parents can access that easily on their phone. We’re going to them, rather than expecting them to come to us.”

Connecting with the community has been vital, and the school employed a relief teacher to support this work.

“I’ve been able to upload videos, and parents are sending photos of their children, and we’re connecting with each individual family at home at least twice a week.”

“I’m FaceTiming with the children – and the parents are there – and using filters: I’m a pizza, or a dragon, and they’re a bunny. You haven’t lived until you’ve talked to a four-year-old as a piece of pizza on Facebook!”
Learning from a crisis

Workload

Educators have spent many extra hours creating online content while often continuing to teach those left in classrooms.

“While I’ve been working remotely, the administrative part of the role that consumes daily life in schools was dissolved and the need to support the professional development of teachers and the design and creation of an online learning environment became my priority,” says Cherie Connors deputy principal at Fadden Primary School in the ACT.

“I’ve had more opportunity to focus on leading learning and teaching, which is heaven for any leader.”

Teachers at the school are also thinking deeply and differently about how to design websites and create activities that can be integrated into students’ homes and daily lives.

“From this perspective, I believe the pandemic has provoked us to think differently about what learning is and how it occurs.” Connors calls it a “win for our teachers and learners”.

Video conferencing during lockdown, for example, taught students about technology.

“It was so cute to be a part of a Year 1 and 2 Google Meet and listen to them chatting to each other during the check in, observing them muting and unmuting their mics to ask a question or talk to their peers and teachers, sharing their pets and showing items, including family members, in their homes,” says Connors.

She was also inspired by the selfless attitude of school staff.

“After the AEU’s decisive action to support colleagues in working from home, I had conversations with staff who were conflicted by their deep commitment and passion to learners on site and the need to support their families and their own personal health and safety.

“We took advantage of the two weeks pupil-free to upskill and prepare ourselves for term 2, and support staff health and wellbeing.”

The need to support the professional development of teachers and the design and creation of an online learning environment became my priority.

“In our first full week back in term 2, a lot of us noticed we were more mentally exhausted at the end of a day than we normally would be if we were just teaching in the classroom,” says Peta-Maree Revell-Cook.

As a teacher in the Next Step program for students with high additional needs at Claremont College in suburban Hobart, Revell-Cook usually has around 26 children in class. By early term 2, attendance had dropped to just three.

The preparation of a curriculum for online and face-to-face learning, combined with support and staff meetings “doubled, if not quadrupled” her workload, at times during the crisis.

That included photocopying online content for students with no internet access and keeping in touch with parents and students regularly.

One benefit Revell-Cook can see emerging from the crisis is proof of the futility of many administration tasks.

“For 10 weeks, some of the admin duties we usually have to complete fell by the wayside,” she says.

“I’m hoping that opens up conversations around workload, because if we didn’t need to do that then, do we really need to pick it up again?”
“I feel very grateful because we’ve got such a supportive team at our school,” says Bianca Eatts, a Year 5 teacher at Aveley North Primary School in Perth.

This is Eatts’ second year teaching and the COVID-19 pandemic has been “very strange”. But she says she’s taking comfort in the fact that everyone is in the same situation, and even teachers with 20 years’ experience “have never seen anything like it”.

As student numbers began to drop off, teachers got to work preparing take-home packages.

“Each year level worked as a team to put them together,” says Eatts.

The packs were designed to ensure each of the school’s 500 students would follow the same plan.

Because they were assembled when few students were attending, Eatts says it didn’t add too much to the teachers’ workload.

“It was a big team effort but no extra work from what we’d have normally done, because we’d be planning for the term anyway.

“And it was kind of nice to come in and know that it was already done for this term,” she says.

In fact, Eatts describes the end of term 1 as “sort of a teacher’s dream”.

“All you want is for more time to be able to do things, and we had more time. But there was also the uncertainty of it all, because we didn’t know what we would need to do to prepare.

“It was a really strange feeling at the end of last term, in all aspects of life,” she says. “But now everything has gone straight back to normal.”
EVERYONE KNOWS BEST

Involving the community in early learning is creating an innovative program to support families from playgroup to further education.

BY CYNDI TEBBEL
People liked that things changed because of their input. If they feel like they’re connected and they belong, they’ll be there and so will their children.

Mandy Dempsey describes the Port Augusta Children’s Centre in South Australia as a ‘one-stop shop’ for early childhood programs.

Dempsey, the centre’s director for early childhood development and parenting, and her team worked in partnership with about 200 parents and the local Aboriginal community to promote and improve attendance and engagement in early years education.

The resulting support programs and services for families were so successful that the centre was recognised with the AEU’s Arthur Hamilton Award 2019 for Outstanding Contribution to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education.

The groundswell began about five years ago when staff wondered how they could get more children and their families to attend playgroups.

Now the children’s centre underpins an innovative platform that supports the whole community.

“We didn’t want to force them into something they were not comfortable with, so we thought if we gave them a bit of an introduction they might feel more confident about coming.”

An Aboriginal transition playgroup gave parents and children a relaxed introduction to preschool routines and expectations and helped them gain a sense of belonging in a new environment.

It worked so well that preschool attendance almost doubled.

Other initiatives included a community-run radio program for people of all ages to share stories, songs and jokes including in traditional languages and an outreach program Men Behaving Dadly, which encourages men to spend more time playing with their children, getting involved in sports, or just sharing quality time.

FLEXIBLE SCHEDULES

Dempsey says involving families in conversations about how the centre operated was a key factor in increasing participation at all levels.

It turned out that while the families liked sending their children to preschool, they wanted shorter hours over more days.

Now, preschool starts later, at 10am, and runs over four days. “Giving parents more flexibility means they have more time to get up and get children ready,” says Dempsey. “And because we’ve spread it over four days, if they’re absent for one day it’s easier for them to make up any sessions they missed.”

A recent survey of parents provided much positive feedback and showed that the community has taken ownership of the centre’s operations.

“People liked that things changed because of their input, and that’s what it’s about,” says Dempsey. “If they feel like they’re connected and they belong, they’ll be there and so will their children.”

There’s also been a huge flow-on effect because as parents feel more comfortable in the centre environment, attendance becomes routine and the benefits extend to the family and wider community.

The Learning Together playgroup is led by a teacher who can also give extra support to parents who might have a child with a disability or need help with other skills.

“It’s a friendly, happy place where parents can get a bit of help at the same time,” says Dempsey. “Because it’s in a play environment, they don’t feel pressured about getting the support. And by not focusing on one person, you can give messages to the whole group so the mums or the carers can use that information without feeling targeted.”

CULTURAL CONNECTIONS

Support for parents extends to on-site programs that offer social work, parenting, domestic and family violence support and allied health services. It’s all part of the one-stop-shop experience.

“People told us they felt disconnected with culture and didn’t want that knowledge to get lost,” says Dempsey. “So we worked with our women’s group which ran cultural workshops at our Bush Kindy.”

Creche support is provided for parents whose children aren’t at playgroup or preschool, which frees them up to speak with community partner organisations at the centre about services they might need.

Reflecting the local population, half of the centre’s staff are Aboriginal. One woman who started as an early childhood worker recently stepped into a leadership role as a community development coordinator.

“I think when people see that progression they go, you know what? She’s one of us, and we can do this too,” says Dempsey. “Some of the mothers here left school, raised their families and then got to a point where they were thinking what’s next for me?”

Centre staff encouraged interested women take up further study. They instigated a Certificate III course in early years education through the local learning centre at the Aboriginal Health Service in partnership with TafeSA.

“One mum who got into the routine of taking her baby to playgroup three times a week is now studying. They’ve seen other people do it and realised they can do it, too. And now they’re getting qualifications and work experience, so there’s something next for them. That’s really exciting.”

Mandy Dempsey
Port Augusta Children’s Centre, SA

Mandy Dempsey is a freelance writer.
Reward for effort

Meeting challenges head on and learning not to sweat the small stuff are keys to success for these new educators.

BY MARGARET PATON

MICRO-SKILLS IN THE SPOTLIGHT

New educator Phoebe Morris, who teaches Year 6 at Camira State School in Ipswich, Queensland, has been focusing on literacy and numeracy micro-skills.

Morris and the other Year 6 teachers use a cycle-of-inquiry approach to continually assess students’ reading data. “We noticed some kids were nearly at year level and wanted to know what was holding them back. That’s how we figured out which micro-skills to work on,” says Morris.

She doesn’t ask her students to check a “random word” in the dictionary or use it in a sentence. Instead, she teaches vocabulary, grammar and spelling. “We make sure the word is in context. When we come upon an unknown word in a novel I’m reading to them, we do a bit of inferencing. Then we discuss their understanding of what the word is and isn’t. Like ‘aquarium’ - that’s a glass tank for fish, but you won’t find it in nature.”

She’s also been finessing her teaching method for spelling, which she finds difficult as kids get older because of the intricacies of the Latin and Greek roots of words.

THE CUBE APPROACH

School-wide, there’s a focus on explicitly teaching problem solving in maths. At Camira State School, educators explain the “cubes” approach in which students circle keywords, underline the question, box the action word, then evaluate and solve the problem.

Morris encourages her class to apply that knowledge in groups. “It’s particularly good for my students who are below Year 6 level. Maybe they can’t answer the question themselves, but contributing as a group means they all have success.”

Morris is happy with the way her students have learned to work together, having taught about two-thirds of them last year in Year 5. “Some of the students from last year have really stepped up. If they see a peer needs help, they support them.”

Her class includes high-performing students who are working at Year 7 and 8 levels. Morris has been differentiating her lessons for all students and exploring their learning progressions, which she says helps build connections.

“Having a good relationship with my class means they know I have their back. The classroom is a safe space. It means that, with behaviour management, they can be honest with me and own their behaviour. But if you don’t have the relationship, they’ll get into trouble and they won’t feel they can talk to you about it.”

OUT OF THE CLASSROOM

Morris represented her local union branch at last term’s state council. “I was probably the youngest person there because beginning teachers aren’t usually involved,” she says.

A key topic was how to engage Generation Z to want to become teachers and keep working in the profession. “I have some ideas about ways to engage young teachers at our school. We love our tech and social media.”

Morris remains a keen AFL player and took part in a regional derby match last term. In June, she’s going for her first Dan - or stripe - in taekwondo.
Having a good relationship with my class means they know I have their back. The classroom is a safe space. It means that, with behaviour management, they can be honest with me and own their behaviour.

Phoebe Morris
Camira State School, Ipswich, QLD

BOOSTING ATTENDANCE
The remote Alekarenge School – four hours’ drive north of Alice Springs – has made significant progress in increasing attendance by building relationships and partnerships with the school community, says new principal Colin Kiel.

Kiel, who has been teaching for six years, was appointed to the position at the beginning of 2019.

He says attendance had been as low as 40 and is now just over 130.

“Three staff members work three hours a day either on the bus with me or helping get brekkie for the kids and getting them into the class,” says Kiel.

“I did a million different things to follow up kids as they were coming back into the community.” Kiel says he has even encouraged visitors to the region to bring their children to the school, sometimes for just a couple of days.

He also updated the school’s attendance data to avoid parents “getting in trouble when their kids aren’t at school for funerals or cultural reasons”.

“It was a lot of hard work but having accurate attendance figures will pay off in a big way,” says Kiel, who estimates Alekarenge will receive an extra $100,000 a year as a result.

Another reward for “a lot of hard work” is the students’ engagement with the Read Writing phonics program.

Kiel says it was quite an effort set it up, particularly the data files needed for the program, but the results have been well worth it.

THE VALUE OF MENTORING
He puts a lot of store in the value of mentoring and has begun a prestigious Leadership for School Improvement Emerging Principals’ Program run by the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership.

Meanwhile, he is mentoring graduate teachers in his team. “I have a meeting with those teachers every week. I don’t want to teach them to be like me, but to be the best teacher they can be,” he says.

Emotional health and wellbeing is on the agenda in every staff meeting.

“This is especially needed in a remote school. When teachers in towns or cities have a hard day, they can go to a movie or a restaurant, but my staff can’t do that – the pub is an hour’s drive up the road. And when we come home, when there’s an issue in the community, it can keep my staff up all night.

“We have to look out for each other, ask each other how we’re going. It’s not a sprint, it’s a marathon and, as a principal, I need to be able to offer support.”

That means Kiel has an open-door policy with his staff. He has been able to shoehorn that time into his day by keeping a tight rein on administration tasks, which he says have become “almost automatic”.

WEEKENDS FOR FAMILY TIME
Despite all this, Kiel is managing to keep his workload to weekdays.

He lives near the school during the week and returns to his wife and newborn daughter in Alice Springs each weekend.

“I couldn’t bring myself not to be at school for the start of the year (just after his daughter was born). It’s when you set the tone, so I took four weeks’ leave at the start of second term.”
CELEBRATE PUBLIC EDUCATION DAY

#PUBLICEDUCATIONDAY

MAY 28

Authorised by Susan Hopgood, Federal Secretary, Australian Education Union, 120 Clarendon St, Southbank 3006.
PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER
It’s mid-year, and new Home Economics teacher Ashleigh Leaver has her student behaviour management down pat. “I thought it was going to be more of a problem because I worked at the school late last year. But it’s only low-level behaviour. I just give a little tap on the desk and they’ll stop what they’re doing,” says the Perth high school teacher.

Her state’s mobile phone ban at schools has been a “massive help”, too. She has only had to tell two students to “put them away” and found they obeyed.

HIGH EXPECTATIONS
From the “get-go”, Leaver has set her expectations high. She teaches Years 7 and 9 food technology and textiles. “I still remember my first year as a high school student in home economics. We made a fruit kebab and some awful rockmelon smoothie. As a teacher, I’ll never do that to my class.”

She hit on a winner with her Year 7 classes when she asked them to design their toppings and make a pizza. Every student passed.

“All these kids, just 12 years old, were really rocking in the kitchen. I was proud of training them up well,” she says.

FINE-TUNING LESSON PLANS
The signature pedagogy at Aveley Secondary College is Explicit Direct Instruction (EDI). “The way I write my lessons has changed so my practice is more suited to EDI. We aren’t expected to be EDI experts straight away. I have good support – my mentor helps me add engagement strategies and elements including checking for understanding to make my lessons stronger.”

And she appreciates how tenuous knowledge retention can be among her students. “I thought the Year 9 students would remember little things from Year 7 food technology such as which coloured chopping boards to use for what, how to use measuring cups and spoons, etc. “I had assumed it was common knowledge, so I learned I had to do some revision for the older year groups.”

UPSKILLING WITH TECH
What about her own learning? She’ll strengthen her textiles knowledge and explore using OneNote. Other teachers have recommended it for “storing everything” relevant for teaching.

Leaver also wants to nominate to run an academy in which students would opt to learn macramé or to sew teddy bears to donate to the children’s hospital, in sessions before or after school. She put off volunteering for that in semester one because of her workload. “I definitely have more work on my plate than social activities. Maybe it was unrealistic for me to think I was going to be able to do all my work at school, so I’m still taking work home with me.”

CREATING NEW RESOURCES
Because the school is new, there weren’t resources or programs, so Leaver made some from scratch. Down the track, she can re-use them, so she won’t always need to work 50 hours a week.

Her biggest takeaway from a fellow teacher was not to stress about the small stuff. He advised her not to deck out her new, bare classroom immediately. Instead, he said she should focus on assessments that were due earlier than expected. “Week by week, I feel like I’m getting on top of work more,” says Leaver.
COVID-19 Update

We spoke to our new educators before the COVID-19 crisis emerged so their stories reflect a different time. More recently, we checked in with them for a quick update.

**PHOEBE MORRIS**  
Camira State School, QLD

“We’ve had lots of questions and confusion from parents. Initially only 40 parents requested hardcopies, then it went up to 150, which took time to organise. Overall, however, the school community has been very supportive of the move to remote learning. Parents were concerned about whether the work that kids do now will be revised when they return to school. I said ‘yes’, because they’ll be at different stages. How can we assess our students when we haven’t seen some of them for eight weeks? Since the last week of term 1, our school is open only to children of essential workers or from vulnerable homes until at least week 5. I’m the only one of three year 6 teachers supervising students. The strangest thing is there are no real behaviour issues at all. Students are emailed work or have the hard copy. It’s quite onerous emailing feedback for each student every day. It feels like an office job doing admin rather than being in front of the kids teaching. All my hobbies have ground to a halt. It’s had the biggest impact on my life and taken a toll on my mental wellbeing.”

**COLIN KIEL**  
Alekarenge School, NT

“We were told at 4pm we’d be locked in our remote community from midnight. That was two weeks before the end of term 1. Then, we didn’t really know what school would be like. I’d already been in isolation for two weeks with another illness and had to work out how to get a work/emergency exemption to travel. It meant that, for a month, I couldn’t see my wife and baby daughter who live in Alice Springs. We didn’t close the school but, in case we had to, we’d made home packs with worksheets, playdough and games. Two teachers had to leave the community and another teaches from home via Skype. Student attendance has been low. I’ve had to drive past family homes where they had no phone to tell them the school was still open. We’ve got the only loudspeaker in the community, so we broadcast a COVID-19 update every Monday. Our school Wi-Fi is better than in Alice Springs, so now it’s business as usual with social distancing. We got funding for more cleaning during the day. And they’ve slammed the brakes on my principal leadership program, but I sort of feel on top of things.”

**ASHLEIGH LEAVER**  
Aveley Secondary College, WA

“The final week of term 1, our state government said schools should only open in term 2 for children of essential workers. So, we all created websites for our classes from scratch with online learning resources. I spent hours on that, including videos. Then the government said that this term we should prioritise face-to-face teaching. Now, we’ve got 60 per cent of the kids at school and we aren’t expected to be teaching both online as well as face to face, but students at home have access to the resources online or paper. We haven’t been able to cook in my home economics classes. The principal didn’t want the kids sharing the same equipment. Plus, the assistant was getting grief at the supermarket buying supplies. People assumed she was stockpiling. One girl emailed me to say she had a lot going on in her life. Family members were losing their jobs, but my student was looking forward to returning to school. I think that email is proof teachers have a massive impact.”

*Margaret Paton is a freelance writer and casual K-12 teacher.*
This term, we are all doing a great job in trying circumstances to create engaging lessons for our students. In moving from remote learning to blended learning, advancing our skills using video technology helps us make the transition back to school.

Beyond just live-streaming, applications like Zoom, Google Hangouts and Webex have recording options. Students can watch pre-recorded video lessons at home and in the classroom, as recordings easily convert to an mp4 video to share with your students.

Inserting short video-clips directly within your video conference is a dynamic way to introduce, revise or consolidate learning.

**Teaching ideas for presenting short video-clips in your live-stream or recorded lessons:**

- Introduce the context for the clip, then share your screen to play the video (in full-screen mode). When it ends, stop sharing your screen to return to your webcam to highlight the key points you’d like students to address from the video.
- Pause, rewind, re-play to focus on key points and ideas in the clip. Short video clips can be used to activate prior knowledge or build an understanding of a topic or concept.
- Teach language in context with video-clips and accompanying subtitles.

**The benefits of incorporating video-clips into blended learning:**

Getting students to watch an entire video or program can lead to cognitive overload.

This is where shorter clips keep students attention while reducing overall screen time and come with the added benefit of building upon students multimodal literacy skills.

As multimodal learners, we process and respond to images and sounds when they are combined, much faster than we do the written word. Students are generally more motivated to engage with videos, as they are digestible and accessible to a range of learning styles and speeds.

From streaming to recording, to creating, integrating video technology into the classroom actively supports students’ transition from lower to higher-order thinking. Short-clips can be used to build knowledge and foster critical thinking while the higher-order processes are activated when students themselves create videos for knowledge building and assessment tasks.

EnhanceTV has a rich array of short educational clips for all subject areas that you can easily integrate into your live-streamed or recorded lessons. We have a clipping feature (available on a free school trial), that allows you to create your own short-clips from any full-length program which you can share with students anytime.

Educational video clips are a great way to make the most of blended learning and flipped classrooms.
SOLIDARITY RAFFLE 2020

For more than thirty-five years, Union Aid Abroad - APHEDA has worked with unions and social movements abroad to support their efforts to defend their rights. In a globalised world, your contribution gives power to workers everywhere. Help continue the fight for global justice by buying and selling raffle tickets today!

Raffle closes 2 October 2020 - Winner drawn 29 October 2020
Most refugees and asylum seekers held on Nauru and in Papua New Guinea have been detained for more than seven years and are experiencing catastrophic levels of trauma and illness.

Speaking to delegates at AEU’s federal conference in February, broadcaster and human rights advocate Craig Foster urged teachers to support a campaign for their resettlement.

The #GameOver campaign calls on the federal government to take up offers from countries such as New Zealand, Canada and the US to urgently resettle the Nauru and PNG-detained refugees and people seeking asylum.

The campaign is about bringing innocent people to safety, rather than engaging in “intractable” policy arguments about border control or immigration, Foster says.

On the GameOver website, he says: “We have to find a better way to control immigration without hurting innocent people, and I know we can. But it has to start with saving these people who are in deep pain.”

Foster says it is essential to change the way asylum seekers and refugees are detained, and demonised. “Whilst Australia says we’re the most successful multicultural country in the world, some sections of society – for example, refugees and asylum seekers – would challenge that.”

We need to have a discussion with all Australians about diversity, about how people are demonised and about basic human rights, freedom and equality, and dignity and rights for all human beings,” he says.

By mobilising people power Foster believes that, as a nation, we can help the final 433 refugees and asylum seekers out of offshore detention and see them safely resettled.

“Ultimately, this is about the type of Australia we think we are, or want to be. Please help.”

PHOTOGRAPHY AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL AUSTRALIA/ANDREW HUNTER

(L-R) Amnesty International’s Tim O’Connor with refugees Adam, Behrouz Boochani and Mohammad and human rights campaigner Craig Foster.
Global moves to promote equity

More than 90 per cent of students in 190 countries have been affected by school closures to help stop the spread of COVID-19. Now, as restrictions are slowly easing, attention is turning to what's needed to support a safe and healthy return to classrooms.

Health systems were first to feel the pressure of COVID-19 in late February as they dealt with extreme demand. Next, it was education.

With schools closed, educators were called on to switch their focus to help students learn at home. That has had varying degrees of success in wealthy nations such as Australia, let alone in poorer developing nations.

Governments were not prepared to deal with an emergency on the scale of COVID-19, says Susan Hopgood, AEU federal secretary and president of Education International (EI), the global federation of education unions.

“The political commitment to public services has been very low in very many countries. As a result, we’ve had neglect, underfunding and the privatisation of public services. So education systems were just not ready for a global crisis,” she says.

The countries struggling most to find the health resources to fight the pandemic were likely to be those also falling behind in their efforts to educate children, says Hopgood. These countries were vulnerable to predatory commercial players who signed privatisation deals with cash-strapped governments to take over education systems. But, in a major win for education activists fighting against privatisation, the World Bank recently agreed to freeze investments in for-profit schools.

The immediate effects of the crisis felt by educators around the globe included health and safety concerns, particularly in poor and overcrowded schools and the added workload of preparing materials or online learning for students at home.

Some part-time and temporary teachers also lost their jobs.

An EI global survey found that students from rural and disadvantaged communities were being left behind as a result of the pandemic.

“Our members are telling us that girls, refugees, migrants, students with disabilities, students from low-income families are most at risk,” says Hopgood.

“The inequalities that already exist are being worsened by the crisis and the lack of resources to deal with it.”

Teachers themselves are also struggling.

“There is a huge shortage of professionally trained teachers across the globe. So we have teachers who are under-trained, under-qualified and don’t have those skills to provide remote education at all,” says Hopgood.

But COVID-19 has also demonstrated the dedication and commitment of teachers to their students, she says.

“It’s been a story about resilience and determination by the education workforce and community to respond as best we can to this and to ensure that we come out the other end with as few impacts as possible.”

GETTING BACK TO SCHOOL

Helping schools, educators and students to get back on track as schools begin to reopen is now a priority and EI has put together a five-point guide for governments to assist with a smooth return. Guidelines cover health and safety, consultation with educators and equity for students and educators.

EI general secretary David Edwards says governments must ensure education unions are at the table in every part of
Whatever it takes, we mustn’t leave a single child behind, so we have to work to overcome that as a global community.

Susan Hopgood
Education International president

the process to help assess student needs and staff workloads, and health and safety concerns.

Equity must be a top priority, he says. “We know that the impact is not equal, and that vulnerable students and education workers have been the most affected.”

And governments must trust the professionalism of educators. “We have seen a deep support for our profession and appreciation for what we do. We want to make sure that the authorities engage with educators to determine and assess the impact of the school closings and that any framework for transitioning back to onsite education is built on trust in the professionalism and pedagogical practice of the education workforce,” Edwards says.

Meanwhile, EI has joined a UNESCO-initiated global education coalition that has been helping countries mobilise resources to support learning at home and now, to help with the return to school.

“Never before have we witnessed educational disruption on such a scale,” says UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay. “This coalition is a call for coordinated and innovative action to unlock solutions that will not only support learners and educators now, but through the recovery process, with a principle focus on inclusion and equity.”

Hopgood says EI’s commitment and the commitment of educators across the globe is to continue working towards the right to free quality education for every child. “Whatever it takes, we mustn’t leave a single child behind, so we have to work to overcome that as a global community.”
FACT OR FAKE?

With more news and information at their fingertips than ever, students are struggling to understand what’s true.

BY CYNTHIA KARENA

Until recently, the 2016 US Presidential campaign was the event most associated with fake news. That was until the world was gripped by a deadly pandemic.

This year social media has been flooded with conspiracy theories about the source of the coronavirus, half-baked medical advice, and false assertions about the virus-fighting capabilities of various pharmaceuticals.

It seems as though there is no area left untouched by disinformation in relation to the COVID-19 crisis, says Guy Berger, UNESCO’s policies and strategies director in communication and information.

“In a time of high fears, uncertainties and unknowns, there is fertile ground for fabrications to flourish and grow. When disinformation is repeated and amplified, including by influential people, the grave danger is that information which is based on truth ends up having only marginal impact,” he says.

Fake news is “made-up stuff, masterfully manipulated to look like credible journalistic reports that are easily spread online to large...

A 2017 survey found only one-third of young people were confident they could distinguish between real and fake news.

IN SHORT

// Fake news, hyperbole and misinformation has been rife during the COVID-19 pandemic.

// Teachers, parents, media outlets and the community all have a role to play in educating students about media literacy.

// Websites that have been discredited as containing fake news can be used as a teaching tool to encourage critical thinking.
audiences willing to believe the fictions and spread the word,” says Politifact, the fact checking website run by the respected Poynter Institute in the US.

“When we can’t agree on basic facts - or even that there are such things as facts - how do we talk to each other?” Politifact says.

SORTING OUT THE TRUTH
A 2017 survey by academics at Western Sydney University and Queensland University of Technology, found that only one-third of young people were confident they could distinguish real from fake news.

The survey found 73 per cent of children aged eight to 16 regularly consumed the same news as their parents and 49 per cent got their news from social media sites, a figure that increases with age.

In an article in The Conversation in February, two of the survey’s authors, senior lecturer Tanya Notley and associate professor Michael Dezuanni, reported that more than two-thirds of children surveyed said news often or sometimes upset them; just over half said it scared them.

Dr Jocelyn Nettlefold, director of the ABC-University of Tasmania Media Literacy Project, says the responsibility of equipping students with media literacy extends beyond teachers and schools.

“There needs to be greater community dialogue about the challenges, she says.

“Bring parents in and let them know what students are learning. Students can also feedback into families and the local community.”

Media outlets, digital platforms, academic institutions and community organisations such as libraries, can help educate students – of all ages – in media literacy, Nettlefold says.

Nettlefold also co-authored the report Insight Five: A snapshot of Media Literacy in Australian Schools, which explores the challenges of teaching young people to separate fact from fiction.

She says one of the main difficulties is that teachers consume and understand news differently to students.

“There needs to be an awareness of the use of computer algorithms to manage and distribute content, the ability for automated data targeting to drive polarisation, the role of bias, and analysis of emotional responses,” she says.

CREATING CONTENT
Dr James Goulding, education lecturer at the University of Sydney, and a former history teacher, says many of the established strategies - such as looking at authorship, language and references – are based on print material and this poses limitations.

He says websites can be manipulated to appear credible, but the information can be false or misleading. “Holocaust denial websites adopt all the language conventions of scholarly sites, even though the content is clearly false. So, using established criteria is not always an effective way of determining the credibility of the site.”

On the other hand, discredited websites should not necessarily be ignored but used as a teaching tool. For example, most students have been told not to use Wikipedia because it’s not considered credible. But Goulding says the binary notion that websites are credible or not could be damaging critical thinking.

“If students think that Wikipedia is not a source but use it anyway, they are not necessarily applying their critical thinking and interrogation skills.

“It’s about teaching students how to use unreliable sources such as Wikipedia and YouTube well, he says.

“People get hung up on the authenticity of Wikipedia and how easy it is to edit, but all those changes are accessible. Students can critically look at references, edits, and discussions.

“It goes the other way as well. Just because a website has org or the language is scholarly, students still need to evaluate and interrogate it,” he says.

INVESTIGATING EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENTS
Meanwhile, it’s difficult to detect fake news or misleading content if we’re already inclined to believe that point of view, says Goulding.

“Our emotional attachment to an opinion makes it seem more credible.”

“Strong critical thinking” is the not just the ability to critique the views of others, but also the capacity to reflect on our own biases and worldview, and consider how our beliefs might affect our judgement, Goulding says.
Creating a zoo-based science program, tracking endangered species in the local park and baking a chocolate cake are some ideas from Monash University’s Science Education Research Group to get students enthusiastic about learning science.

This team of education academics has been mulling over the question of how to increase school students’ science literacy and build a stronger Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) workforce.

While standardised test results and data can be ambiguous, several trends are apparent, says team member and author Professor Deborah Corrigan. Science participation in secondary schools has been steady over the past decade, student engagement is problematic, and science literacy across the overall school leaver cohort is poor, she says.

In Science Education for Australian Students: Teaching Science from Foundation to Year 12, Corrigan and Associate Professor Angela Fitzgerald combine pedagogy and practical examples for teachers in early childhood, primary and secondary school settings.

The book is based on the constructivist theory of education, which recognises learning as a building process, that teachers are learners and that students bring their own experiences to the classroom.

OUT OF THE CLASSROOM
Context and settings are critical, and this means getting out in nature, and moving out of the classroom.

“Science is about explanations of the natural world,” says Corrigan. “If you’re going to create explanations of the natural world, you’ve got to go out into the natural world.”
Informal settings allow testing of science in a real place and generation of genuine explanations. They can be accessed physically, or virtually, but need to be seen as a vital and close link with formal education settings, she says.

“Classrooms make sense for controlled experiments and investigation – but they are probably one of the most sterile places to learn.”

The authors provide case studies of science education through partnerships and outreach programs with Zoos Victoria and other nature centres.

In one example, primary school students participated in a marine entanglement project that became a multi-year program which included community days and mentoring of other schools. For students, teachers and the wider community, seal deaths through fishing line entanglements on the coastal fringe where they lived were real-life problems, and the conservation science and messages they learned were authentic and purposeful, Corrigan says.

The key is to embed science knowledge in practical applications and outcomes. “Concepts are important, but only if they enable us to do something.”

ASSESS WHAT’S TAUGHT
Moving beyond the one-off field trip and creating space for new ways of learning and experiencing science education means reviewing how the curriculum is delivered.

“We need to build a deep understanding and integrate siloed elements of the curriculum – and ask what are the fundamentally important ideas in science. These are things like observing with a purpose, creating explanations, developing models and creating systems thinking, and how those models join together to create systems.

“We want to be developing in our students the understanding that science is one of many ways of thinking and acting. If I want to apply ‘a science lens’, for example, I need to think about the science approach of using direct observation and coming up with an explanation,” Corrigan says.

She believes the science curriculum is overcrowded and overwhelming - for students and teachers - with an over reliance on concepts and facts.

“We’ve got to think seriously about identifying what’s important in the curriculum,” she says, adding that teachers need to be given time to contextualise and personalise the curriculum for their students.

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Mixing methods
A creative approach to teaching is offering solutions to students at all levels of learning.

BY MARGARET PATON

Gimmicks have been part of Steven Kolber’s teaching arsenal since day one. Observe the Year 8, 10 and 11 teacher of English, history and English as an Additional Language/Dialect in three classes at Brunswick Secondary College in Victoria and he’ll be using a different method in each one.

“I’ve always been chasing the next, newest shiny thing in teaching practices. One year, I even taught in a gamified way - students were in teams, earned rewards and I had a grand narrative for the class,” says Kolber.

“All the things I learned from gimmicks I still use. I establish strong relationships with students, with what they know and need to know and find a wide range of approaches and tools.”

Kolber also runs an intensive one-on-one literacy support program for students at the inner-city college, which has 92 teachers and 978 students.

“I have a relatively democratic view of education. Students are empowered to have their own, voice, choice and exploration of the content we’re doing. I’m there to support that,” he says.

LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION
One of the key tools in Kolber’s kitbag is video, especially for flipped learning and instruction. He was among the globe’s top 100 educators leading flipped K-12 learning in 2018. His YouTube channel, Mr Kolber’s Teaching, helped. It has 1070 subscribers, with 350,000 views across 420 videos.

The teacher of a decade has set up an instructional design lab at Brunswick Secondary for his peers to make videos and podcasts. “There’s a piece of glass that serves as a whiteboard you can teach directly onto, film and flip it so you’re writing the right way around and kids can see you draw on the board. It has a green screen to videotape teaching in front of PowerPoint presentations,” he says.

Kolber coached his peers in the maths department to revamp their content, and the psychology faculty followed suit.

“They split up a unit of work that they said usually took six weeks and were able to deliver it in one week. One teacher would do a section for the high achievers, another would do the same activity but at a lower level. They recorded it and watched it to give each other feedback.”

Kolber says the teachers produced about 15 videos, which they showed classes in place of a single teacher delivering 15 activities for 25 different students. This allowed the students to work at their own level, receive greater teacher attention and model excellent teaching practice within the faculty.

“It wasn’t me doing it. It was other people taking on the idea I’d been banging on about,” he says.

AN ACTIVE VOICE
It’s clear there are plenty of people willing to listen to Kolber’s ideas.

He’s a regular contributor on the Teachers’ Education Review podcast, hosts about eight Melbourne TeachMeets a year and volunteers in Cambodia with Teachers Without Borders.

He’s a sub-branch union representative of his school, vice-president of the inner-city region and a Victorian Branch Councillor, representing his region at state level as an elected member of the union.

Kolber also models continuous learning; he started with a double degree in teaching and arts.

“As other students dropped out of that course, it made me realise I was excited about learning for the rest of my life and (the opportunity) to communicate that passion to young people.”

Since then, he’s notched up a Masters of TESOL (Teaching English as a Second or Other Language), a Diploma of Teaching ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) and a Graduate Diploma in Educational Research.

Margaret Paton is a freelance writer and casual K-12 teacher.
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