



## TO THE INQUIRY INTO THE VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

### **SPELD VICTORIA**

Established in 1969 SPELD Victoria is a not-for-profit organisation whose mission is to assist all Victorians with learning difficulties to achieve their full learning potential. We achieve this through the provision of direct service delivery, information, advocacy and awareness raising amongst the wider Victorian community.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic SPELD Victoria had to close its office and key services on the 27<sup>th</sup> March 2020. As a result, the face-to-face diagnostic assessment service, parent workshops, and the professional learning program were no longer able to be delivered. SPELD Victoria worked rapidly to adjust to online learning for both parents and professionals and to develop a new online literacy assessment which would give parents guidance in understanding their child's difficulties and strategies for their learning.

While providing this support, our team continued to hear of the struggles individuals with learning difficulties and their families were experiencing during the COVID-19 period of remote learning and home-schooling. In an effort to better understand the experiences of students with learning difficulties and their parents, the team at SPELD Victoria invited our parent subscribers to participate in a survey on the 20<sup>th</sup> May 2020.

The information below is based on the issues raised by these parents.

### **Introduction**

Within each and every classroom across Australia there are students struggling to develop their reading, writing, spelling, and maths skills (AUSPELD, 2018)<sup>1</sup>. More specifically, it is estimated that 15-20% of Australian students experience learning difficulties and 3-5% have a Specific Learning Disorder (AUSPELD, 2018)<sup>1</sup>. Without the appropriate supports these difficulties will disadvantage these students in their school years and beyond. Research has shown that early intervention, including remediation and accommodation, is the key to success for these students (AUSPELD, 2018)<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Federation of SPELD Associations [AUSPELD] 2018, Understanding Learning Difficulties, <<http://auspeld.org.au/>>.

Students with learning difficulties benefit from exposure to high-quality, evidence-based programs and teaching strategies (AUSPELD, 2018)<sup>1</sup>. They often require more time and more repetition to master their academic skills. They also require a range of adjustments or accommodations to support them to access the curriculum and demonstrate their knowledge in assessments.

Section 32 of the Disability Discrimination Act 1992, states that education providers must comply with the Disability Standards for Education 2005 (the Standards). To comply with the Standards education and training providers must make 'reasonable adjustments' to accommodate a student with a disability. Such adjustments may range from school wide (adjustments to the learning environment to support students across the whole school), to student specific (to address the specific needs of a student to access and participate in the school environment).

For many students with a diagnosed Specific Learning Disorder the transition to remote learning resulted in a disruption and at times a denial of the adjustments and interventions these students with a disability were ordinarily provided with in the school environment.

### **Education issues faced by student with learning difficulties and their families**

Our survey was completed by 132 parents with children in primary school (60%), secondary school (44%), and kindergarten (1%). Parents reported that 70% of their children had been diagnosed with dyslexia, 20% had been diagnosed with dyscalculia and 28% had a diagnosis of dysgraphia.

For the majority of the parents surveyed their child's remote learning consisted of being sent links or emails (75%), live online learning (59%), or pre-recorded videos (54%). Some parents reported that they needed to pick up information packs from the school (22%).

Encouragingly 65% of our parents felt supported by their child's school during the remote learning. Many of our parents also recognised benefits of remote learning such as:

- gaining greater insight into their child's learning difficulties;
- being able to provide one-to-one support and adjust the learning;
- increased knowledge and use of assistive technology;
- the ability to foster an environment that enabled better concentration;
- increased engagement and improvements to mental health and confidence.

Sadly 25% of our parents did not feel supported by their child's school.

Furthermore, parents reported that 41% of their children with a diagnosed Specific Learning Disorder did not receive adjustments to their learning from the school as they were entitled to under the Disability Discrimination Act.

Parents also described struggling with:

- managing the pressures of remote learning alongside their own workload;
- difficulty accessing support from the teacher;
- children feeling overwhelmed by the workload and having difficulty with organisation;
- understanding instructions from the school;
- children focusing and remaining engaged;
- increased challenges to mental health;
- increased screen-time and reduced exercise;
- issues with technology;
- social isolation.

Our parents provided a clear message about the elements that resulted in greater success in their experiences of remote learning:

1. Open and frequent communication between the teachers, parents and the student.
2. Clear communication of instructions and expectations.
3. Teacher feedback regarding student performance and responding to questions in a timely manner.
4. Individualised adjustments and flexibility to support the child's learning.
5. One-to-one support from teachers or teachers' aides.
6. Inclusion of assistive technology (i.e., speech to text, audio books) to support the student's ability to access the curriculum and complete work.
7. Consistent approach between teachers across subjects to reduce confusion (i.e., use of the same platform, where information is stored, where tasks are submitted).
8. Mental health and coping supported with open dialogue at a class level and with individualised communication.
9. Groups to support social interaction (however, for some large groups and with expectations of cameras turned on can increase anxiety).
10. Engagement in varied learning modalities (i.e., physical activities, experiments, hands-on tasks)
11. Reduction in screen time.
12. Accessible and effective technology.

### **Recommendations from SPELD VICTORIA:**

1. Remind schools that students must continue to receive 'reasonable adjustments' as stipulated in the Standards when learning modalities are altered (i.e., changed from face-to-face to online or remote learning).
2. Establish a standard of support for students with learning difficulties during times of crisis. This may be required for COVID-19 cluster outbreaks or school closures due to bushfires or other disasters.
3. Provide professional development for school leaders and teachers that reasonable adjustments and differentiated learning are not optional but an essential mandated requirement.
4. Provide professional development for school leaders and teachers regarding the types of adjustments and how they may be adapted to support students in remote learning circumstances.
5. Strengthen mental health support for students with learning difficulties.

We hope this account of the situation for students with learning difficulties and diagnosed Specific Learning Disorders and their families during COVID-19 will ensure better support for students with learning difficulties in the future.

Further data and analysis of the experiences of students with learning difficulties and Specific Learning Disorders will be available soon on the SPELD Victoria Website.

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