

4. Increase the Commonwealth funding for evidence-based school support for students with disability and/or learning difficulties

Similar to the funding and operation of public and private hospitals, the funding of schools is a joint responsibility of the Commonwealth and States/Territories, with the majority of the responsibility for managing the operation of schools sitting with the States/Territories. A base amount of funding per student is provided by the Commonwealth to either States/Territories for public schools, or directly to private schools. Where students or schools have additional needs because of factors such as socio-educational disadvantage, regional or remote location, low English language proficiency or disability needs, additional funding per student is provided.

In the case of students with disabilities, the Commonwealth Government collects information on students with disability from schools by the level of additional support they are provided to access and participate in learning. This information is used to calculate the additional funding amount per student which is allocated. Considering the COVID-19 pandemic and the significant impacts on children with disabilities in particular, an increase to this level of funding must be strongly considered. Funding needs to also be considered to support students with learning difficulties in order to support their access and participation in learning.

A [2021 study](#) exploring the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on families with children with neurodevelopmental disorders found that nearly 60% of caregivers surveyed reported their child's overall health and wellbeing had been impacted by the restrictions, home isolation, and disruption to routines. The study found that:

- Nearly half of caregivers felt their support networks had decreased and 44% felt that carer supports and services had decreased.
- 27% had experienced disruption in provision of respite services.
- 74% of those with children accessing allied health services felt this had been significantly disrupted.

- For families accessing behavioural therapy for their children, 71% felt access had been disrupted.

In addition to the impacts of the stress of the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated disruptions to routine, COVID-19 restrictions have resulted in reductions in service provision for many children. A [survey conducted in the early stages of the pandemic](#) in 2020 in Australia looking at the experience of children and young people with disabilities found that cancellation of support workers by self or provider occurred up to 60% of the time, and other NDIS services were cancelled up to 45% of the time. Participants reported that these cancellations occurred often at very short notice, leaving children and young people unable to access services. While telehealth had the potential to bridge some of these gaps, 41% of families reported that telehealth was not a viable option for therapy.

The survey also found that:

- 61% of parents said students had not received adequate educational support during the pandemic.
- Access to an individual support worker dropped from 56% of students to 12%.
- 70% reported concerns that their child will struggle with changed routines and protocols when school returns.

Many children and their families across Australia experience difficulty when accessing assistance within the education system for their child. In many states, children can only gain optimal assistance if they reach the criteria for certain disability diagnoses, such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). This has the following impacts:

- Many children do not gain the assistance that is required, creating stress on the child and family, and ultimately leading to presentations to health services.
- There is great pressure on health systems to make diagnoses for the child to obtain assistance.
- Families who can afford private health services will obtain the required diagnoses much earlier than disadvantaged families.
- Diagnoses may be inappropriately made, contributing to an increase in ASD diagnoses in our society, and putting extra funding pressures on schools.

If assistance is not provided to help these children and young people catch up, they will face real and significant consequences. Funding should be directed to evidence-based initiatives which can be quickly rolled out to help them catch up.

One such initiative is small-group tutoring. As outlined in the [Evidence for Learning summary](#) this can improve students learning outcomes. Further, the Grattan institute in [their report](#) on measures to help disadvantaged students close the equity gap following COVID-19 recommend this as the highest priority intervention to help address this measure.

Further reading

Grattan Institute report: [COVID catch-up- helping disadvantaged students close the equity gap](#) which recommends a range of initiatives that should be introduced by schools to help students, and disadvantaged students in particular, catch up after the extended periods of home learning. A \$1.25 billion recovery package is proposed, with key initiatives including:

- The national assessment body, the Australian Curriculum Assessment Reporting Authority, be responsible for creating a \$20 million package of suitable in-class assessment tools, so that teachers can readily identify and monitor student progress.
- Investments of \$1.13 billion in small-group tuition programs. Disadvantaged students would receive regular short sessions in reading and maths, three or four times a week over a 12-week period.
- Expanding successful literacy and numeracy programs, especially for students in the early years

Education Endowment Foundation Evidence for Learning: [Small group tuition, Australasian Research Summary](#) presents the research evidence on small group tuition in the Australasian context. Intensive tuition in small groups is often provided to support lower attaining learners or those who are falling behind, but it can also be used as a more general strategy to ensure effective progress, or to teach challenging topics or skills. The studies reviewed in the summary collectively indicate that students' learning outcomes improve as a result of small group tuition. Furthermore, working in small groups enables students to develop interpersonal and communication skills.