

## **The impact of COVID-19 on student wellbeing: Empirical evidence from NSW primary schools**

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The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in unprecedented disruption to the lives of school students around the globe. Governments shut down entire schooling systems, impacting more than 90% of the global student population and disrupting the lives of more than 1.5 billion students. In NSW, this disruption included the closure of schools for eight weeks during 2020 as part of a national lockdown. While in most cases learning continued from home, with teachers rapidly moving to online and distance delivery of lessons, many students were physically isolated from their teachers and peers and exposed to heightened levels of health and economic unease during a collectively traumatising period. This situation has raised concerns, globally, about a future pandemic ‘wave’ of youth mental health crises and prompted urgent calls for research on the impact of COVID-19 on student well-being.

In this paper, we contribute to this research agenda by via teachers’ insights into how students were affected during Australia’s 2020 COVID-19 school closedown and the subsequent period when schools re-opened. Our analysis is anchored in telephone interviews with 12 teachers and 6 school leaders from 13 NSW government schools after students returned to face-to-face lessons.

The participating educators reported that student well-being was substantially affected by high levels of anxiety in the broader community and within households. They shared stories of families who struggled with periods of lockdown and how the challenges associated with supporting student learning were exacerbated by stress within the family home. The need for students and parents to adapt to new ways of teaching and learning served as an additional source of anxiety, particularly for families with limited digital literacy and/or access to the necessary technology to support learning from home.

Upon returning to school, students displayed serious signs of stress, anxiety, and frustration. Teachers also reported a decline in student behaviour and social interaction. The reduced curriculum in schools, with a relatively narrow focus on literacy and numeracy, was described as intensifying student stress, leading to fatigue, mental anguish and behavioural issues for some students. We argue that the learning from home period created broad and far-reaching negative impacts for many young people. Additional research is urgently needed to understand the ongoing effects of disruptions to schooling on student wellbeing.