



APTA response to the Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry

The Australian Professional Teachers Association (APTA) welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to the Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry. We have responded to '*Support for industry and businesses*' in terms of education and schools. The Australian Professional Teachers Association is a federation of state and territory joint councils representing teacher associations. These professional teaching associations represent a network of up to 200,000 teachers from government and non-government schools, early childhood services, universities, technical and further education centres. The vision of APTA is to provide national leadership that supports and advances the teaching profession. Our strengths as an organisation lie in our ability to directly represent the experiences of practicing classroom teachers across Australia, and in our long and continuous history of supporting teachers to improve the quality of education in Australia. We are a voice for teachers and an effective conduit between decision-making bodies and the classroom.

Contact:

Cheryl Brennan

President, Australian Professional Teachers Association

Website: www.apta.edu.au

Email: [REDACTED]

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APTA's Response to 'Support for industry and businesses'

COVID-19 certainly had an unprecedented impact on education. Our students, teachers and parents had to embrace the brave new world of online learning. What these confronting times demonstrated was the dedication and agility of teachers who had to learn new technologies and shift pedagogic practices to ensure that their students did not miss out.

Lessons learned in the classroom

What became evident following the return to 'normal' schooling was that teachers grew from their experiences and applied the great lessons learned to the classroom. The adoption of new technologies by most of the teaching profession has presented great opportunities for innovation and transformation. The Australian Independent Schools NSW asserted that 'COVID-19 presents the perfect opportunity for schools to think, act, reflect, evaluate and celebrate successes; to identify next steps and to sustain effective new ways of being and doing'.

According to the 2018 OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey, most teachers are open to innovation and report that they thrive on developing new ways of practising. The Education Endowment Foundation (2020) concluded that many students became more independent and self-regulated learners, especially when they were required to reflect on what they had learned. Melbourne University researcher Dulfer (2020) asserted that online learning empowered students to have greater agency with more control and input into their education. The NSW English Teachers Association conducted a survey of members in May 2020. Participants stated that they would be using the new technologies in their classrooms for collaboration and student feedback. Many noted that a positive byproduct of students being at home and learning was that many students found the time to pause, revise, rewind literally and reflect. Teachers were using a range of digital tools to test for understanding, such as Quizzes, Kahoot, Exit tickets and videos to flip the learning. Many teachers used Screencast and ClickView to caption videos so they could support their students to understand and apply concepts.

Association members reported that greater collaboration was evident in the online environment, regardless of the digital platform. Students enjoyed using breakout rooms in Zoom and co-authoring essays, study notes and presentations in Teams or Google Docs. Teachers reported that they worked more collaboratively together, creating resources and stepping in to take an online class when their colleague was unwell. Furthermore, many schools stepped up and rolled out outstanding professional learning in a very short period. Instructional videos and handbooks were rapidly created to enable teachers to upskill.

Thus, post COVID-19, schools are now more willing to adopt innovative technologies in the classroom and to provide online resources to students. If there were to be another pandemic, Australian teachers are more than ready to respond.

The role of Professional Teaching Associations

Professional teaching associations played a very valuable role in providing support during online learning. They provided in States and Territories, rich and varied professional learning online. The association's members quickly adapted their professional learning resources into accessible online courses. Many associations provided these to their members free of charge. The skill, agility and generosity of teaching associations was evident. Furthermore, many associations are run solely by volunteers so teachers who were already stretched by having to create new resources for an online environment were committed to supporting their colleagues.

Three key lessons were learned by associations: the importance of collaboration, the generosity of teachers and how technology could be used to deliver quality professional learning. The English Teachers Association NSW ran a three day online international

conference in July 2020 to members across the world. The presentations were a mixture of real time Zoom presentations and recorded sessions. This innovative approach was mirrored across the country by other associations. Teachers in remote regional areas were provided with online professional learning and access to teaching resources. Student Days run by associations prior to 2020, were offered successfully online to hundreds of students.

These lessons have shaped the way that teaching associations operate today. They are offering a blend of online and face-to-face professional learning in states and territories. They now have a raft of valuable professional learning resources that can be readily accessed. Associations in a range of subjects are working together to support each other.

The challenging lessons

On the flip side, online learning exposed more than ever the inequity and rural remote gap where many students did not have access to technology or good internet coverage. Many families only had one computer in their homes, and this was needed by one or both parents for work. The internet coverage was a major issue for remote rural families across the country. The English Teachers Association 2020 survey revealed that many participants believed that the huge inequity between rural communities and metropolitan counterparts was even more apparent. Many students chose not to engage with online learning. This was reported by several member associations. Members reported that many students now have gaps in their learning; especially in states where the lockdown periods were lengthy.

The lesson learned is that all Australian students should have equal access to technology and have better internet coverage.

Concluding remarks

Face-to-face teaching will always be preferred as people are relational. We need human connections. The value of a classroom teacher and physical presence in a classroom is irreplaceable. What is evident is that our teachers who have proven during these difficult times that they are resilient, agile and innovative will take what they have learned and add it to their pedagogic arsenal.

Professional teaching associations have learned that they can be adaptive and agile. They have realised the important supportive role they play, not just in professional learning but in mentoring and supporting teachers in remoted rural areas. Although teaching associations were outstanding during COVID-19, providing support for teachers did stretch the volunteers. Providing greater funding support to APTA would have enabled APTA to provide greater services in support of the teaching profession, in alignment with the goals of the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan. APTA recommends that greater funding be provided to APTA to support teachers and advance specialist expertise in the profession, which could be “scaled up” in the event of a future pandemic to improve the resiliency of the profession.

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