LEARNING FROM REMOTE LEARNING

VicSRC VictorianStudent RepresentativeCouncil

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

VicSRC works on the land of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and we respect and acknowledge them as the traditional custodians of this beautiful country. We understand and respect that culture and connection to land and community is a right for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and that they also have a right to self-determination and cultural safety. We also recognise that Indigenous knowledge and perspectives need to be fully imbedded in our education system and curriculum.

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INTRODUCTION

Victorian Student Representative Council LTD (VicSRC) is the peak body representing school-aged students in Victoria. Our vision is education that's flexible, relevant and includes all students in all decisions. We stand with and for students to elevate their voices to be heard.

VicSRC is led by a team of 15 secondary school aged students (VicSRC Student Executive Advisory Committee) that make decisions collaboratively with a group of six adults (VicSRC Board of Trustees) about how VicSRC operates, what programs it offers and how it hears from students about what changes need to be made in education. A team of staff members put these decisions into action with consistent advice from the Student Executive Advisory Committee.

In April 2020, the Victorian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in term two beginning with many Victorian students transitioning to online learning. This was the biggest upheaval in the education system in recent history.

Students faced countless challenges through this unprecedented period. Like many others, students were confused and reported that it was difficult to find accessible, up to date information about changes to their schooling and education experience. Additionally, access to internet and electronic devices was quickly flagged as a major issue for some, which greatly impacted upon their ability to keep up with their peers, and continue to progress through the year as they otherwise would.

However, the ongoing work of the education sector ensured that students would be able to continue their learning despite adversity.

When students felt they were lacking information, VicSRC filled the gap by providing clear, accessible resources to students regarding new announcements and developments made by the Victorian Government. We also worked with the Department of Education and Training to ensure there were regular opportunities for students to express concerns or feedback through VicSRC to be addressed by the Department or other education organisations including Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority and the Victorian Institute of Teaching.

In response to many students lacking access to internet and electronic devices, the education sector responded by ensuring that small numbers of students could learn from school if necessary and providing devices and internet access to many students across Victoria.

When the decision was made to start gradually returning students to school from the 26th of May 2020, the Victorian Minister for Education, James Merlino, asked VicSRC to capture the learnings from this period to feed into a summit of education leaders across all school sectors in July 2020.

This report has impact and relevance beyond that summit. Students' voices are often not heard in conversations about education and the education system, but in this report you will find the voices of hundreds of students wanting to share their opinions not only about remote and online learning, but about the education system as whole.

Bri Hines
VicSRC Student Executive Advisory Committee

METHODOLOGY

VicSRC staff and students from the Student Executive Advisory Committee (the Executive Committee) designed an online survey to ask Victorian students what worked for them during remote/online learning, what didn't work, and what things they would like to see continue in face-to-face education. A breakdown of the survey questions is included in the appendix.

The survey was sent to VicSRC's Student Community, Partner Schools and wider networks through email newsletters. The link to the survey was shared through official VicSRC social media channels and students from VicSRC's Executive Committee and Ambassadors also shared it through their personal networks. 505 Victorian students completed the survey from all school sectors, all year levels and from diverse locations around Victoria.

After the survey closed, VicSRC conducted three student consultations via video conference. A total of 16 students from primary and secondary students representing all three school sectors as well as metro, rural and regional locations took part in these consultations.

ABOUT THE REPORT

VicSRC wanted to use this opportunity to capture key learnings from the online and remote learning period. The key focus of this report is: what can we learn from the past few months of online and remote learning to make education better for every student in Victoria?

We do not want to edit students' voices, so quotes from students in this report are mostly included verbatim and have not been edited for spelling or clarity. We have noted the students' year level, school type and location for each quote.

Limitations of the report

This report is not intended to represent every student's experience of online and remote learning. Students have had vastly different experiences depending on their preferences, location, age and many other factors that cannot be accurately captured in a survey.

Additionally, the demographics of the students who took part in the survey and consultations do not fully represent the diversity of Victorian students.

Nevertheless, we believe this report captures the over-arching themes and thoughts of students from across Victoria.

DEMOGRAPHICS

REGION OF SCHOOL

Metro	**385**
Regional/rural	**118**
Overseas	**1**
Unknown	**1**
TOTAL	**505**

Overseas
0.2%

Regional/rural
23.4%

Metro
76.2%
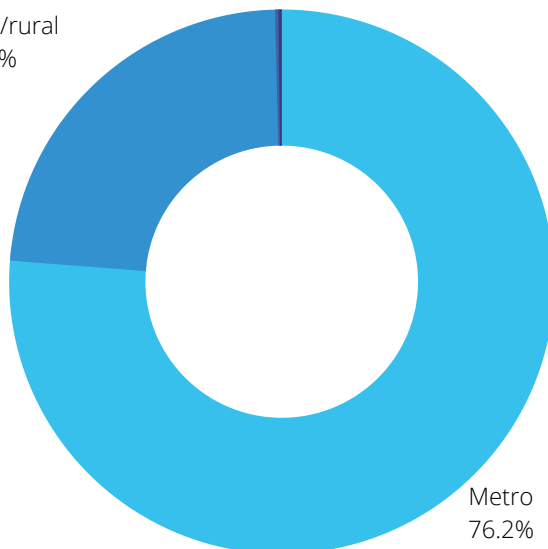
Catholic
5%

Independent
7.7%
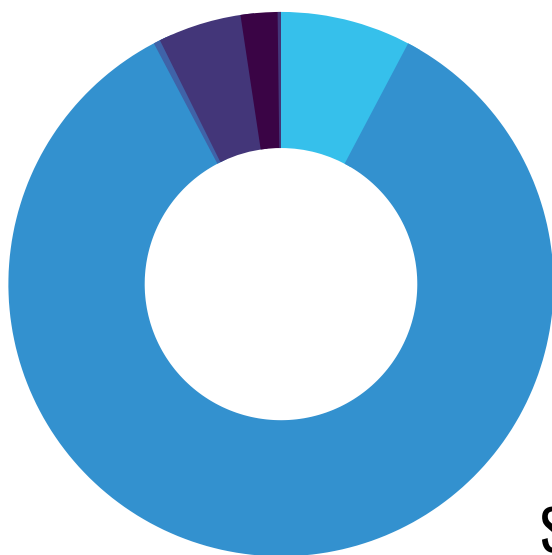
Independent	**39**
Government	**427**
Specialist	**2**
Catholic	**25**
Distance/VSV	**11**
TAFE/VCAL	**1**
TOTAL	**505**

Government
84.6%

SCHOOL TYPE

MODE OF LEARNING DURING COVID-19

From home	**455**
At school	**39**
Always learn at home	**11**
TOTAL	**505**

At school
7.7%

From home
90.1%

YEAR LEVELS
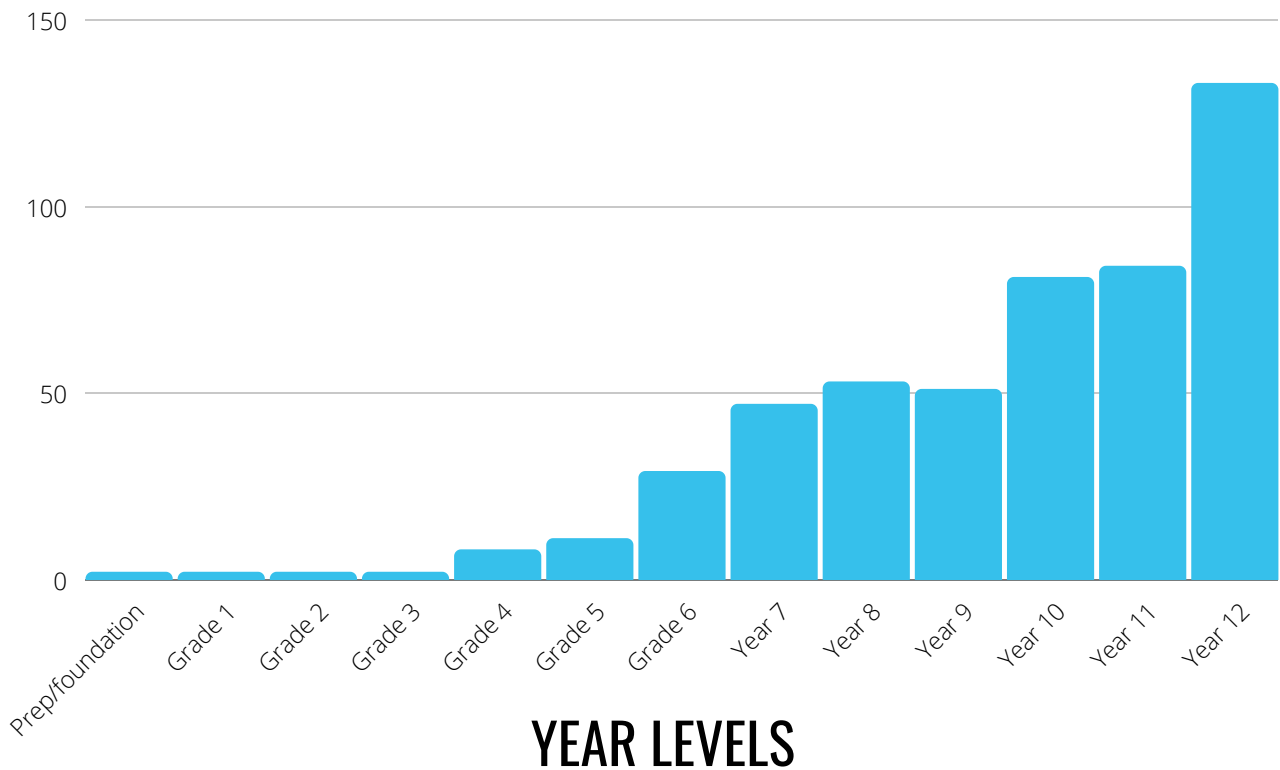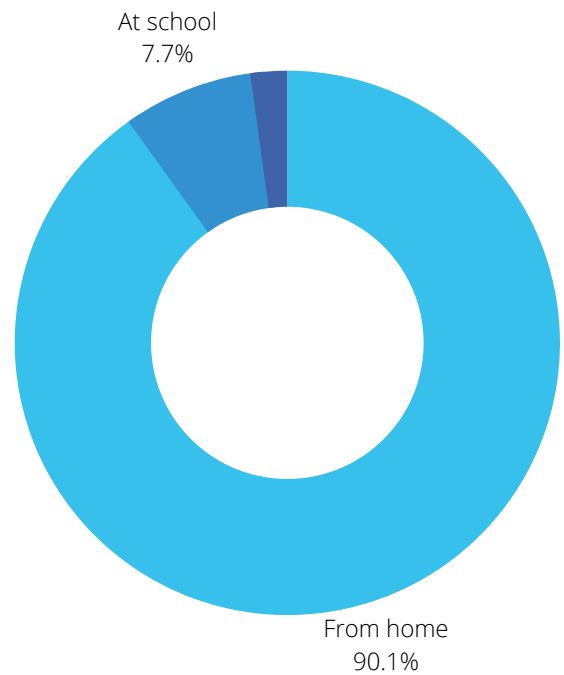
Of the 16 students who attended the video conference consultations:

- 13 were metro students
- 3 were regional or rural students
- 14 were secondary students
- 2 were primary students

PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

It is important to acknowledge the unique experiences of primary school students throughout this period. This section looks specifically at the data from the 56 primary school students who responded to the survey.

Students who learned from home

When asked to identify the best things about learning from home, students overwhelmingly told us that they liked that they could work at their own pace (73%), and that they were more comfortable at home (56%). 49% of students also identified that spending more time with family was one of the best things about learning from home.

> " You could do your subjects in whatever order you wanted" - Primary, Government, regional (feedback via email)

> "If you needed more time on a piece of work you could go back to it afterward and finish it" - Primary, Government, regional (feedback via email) "

The two worst parts of learning from home were a lack of interaction with their peers (76%) and a lack of communication with teachers (49%).

"I have more time to get help from Mum and Dad in the things that I have trouble on." - Grade 4, Government, metro

"I can do things when I want and I think I have learnt to be more organised. I have flexibility to spend more time on things I like and less on things that seem easy/ boring." - Grade 6, Government, regional/rural

"I've found it very difficult not having the direct support from my teachers although they are only an e-mail away. My mum and dad have been a great help but just not the same as my teacher." - Grade 6, Catholic, metro (feeback via email)

"At the start of home learning was very tough, what with not going anywhere… can't see friends and teachers…I missed seeing all of the leadership team." - Grade 6, Catholic, metro (feedback via email)

"Too many barriers to be able to get help from a teacher (eg. getting Dojo, calling school made it hard)" - Grade 6, Government, regional (feedback via email)

Encouragingly, 64% of students felt that they were keeping up with their work or felt more on top of their work than usual.

17% of students thought they might have fallen behind a little bit, and the remaining 17% were concerned they have fallen behind a lot or missed important content.

Some of the work is too hard for me and I can't figure the questions out." - Grade 5, Government, metro

"Because we do more work at home than we did at school. I'm a good student but I'm finding it overwhelming to keep up." - Grade 6, Government, metro

"The work is the same but its a bit harder due to not having any one to explain thoroughly." - Grade 6, Government, metro
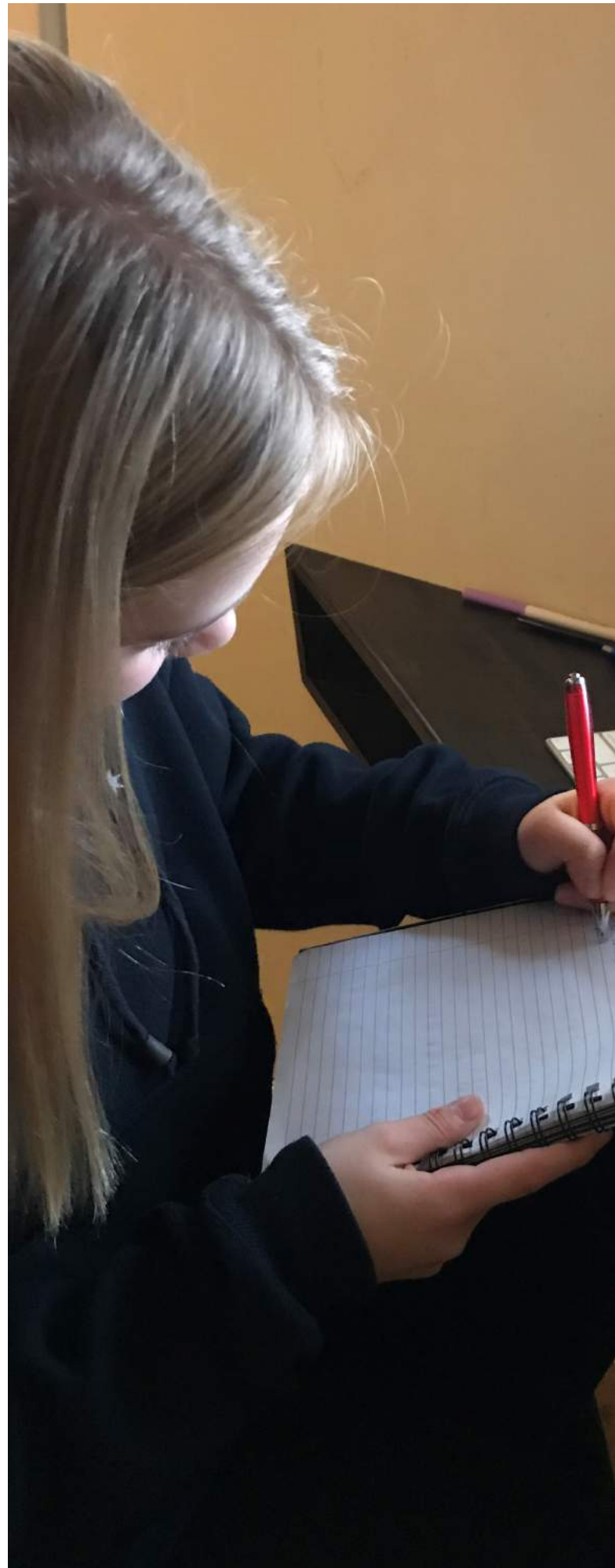
What do primary school students want to continue in face-to-face learning?

Independent learning was a big theme when we asked primary school students what they would like to keep doing when they go back to face-to-face learning. 15% of students actively indicated that they want to keep aspects on independent learning:

"I would still like to be a bit more independent and get my work done alone and fully in my control but still could help each other. Just want more independence." - Grade 5, Government, metro

"To be able to learn at my own pace a little bit more. - Grade 5, Government, metro

Communication with and support from teachers was also key, with 13% of students actively making comments about communication:

"I like that the teacher has time to just talk to me [during learning from home]" - Grade 4, regional/rural

"[I would like to continue] Using Microsoft Teams. We could still use it for homework reminders and sharing information about work." - Grade 6, Government, regional/rural

"Were I can message my teacher for help without the class knowing I need help" - Grade 6, Government, regional/rural

"I like the way i can message my teacher and they can message back, that would be cool if i can do that at school as well." - Grade 6, Government, metro

Students who learned at school

Eight primary students who responded to the survey were learning online but at school. This small number makes it difficult to draw concrete conclusions, but their responses were similar to those students who learned from home during the same period.

- Multiple students said that they enjoyed learning at their own pace

> *Because I like remote learning because we can go at our own speeds and have breaks during remote school - Grade 6, Government, regional/rural*

- Most students identified lack of communication with teachers as a challenge
- Two students specifically commented that they found it very hard to have the on-site teachers changing every day and were looking forward to having their regular teachers back.

> *I feel safer to have my MY class and OUR teaches instead of it all changing everyday so I am happy to go back to face to face learning - Grade 6, Government, metro*

Overall, the survey results show that primary school students had a mostly positive experience of online learning and can identify some areas they would like to keep, but are excited about returning to their friends and teachers in their regular schooling environment.

FEELINGS ABOUT GOING BACK TO SCHOOL

Primary School Students
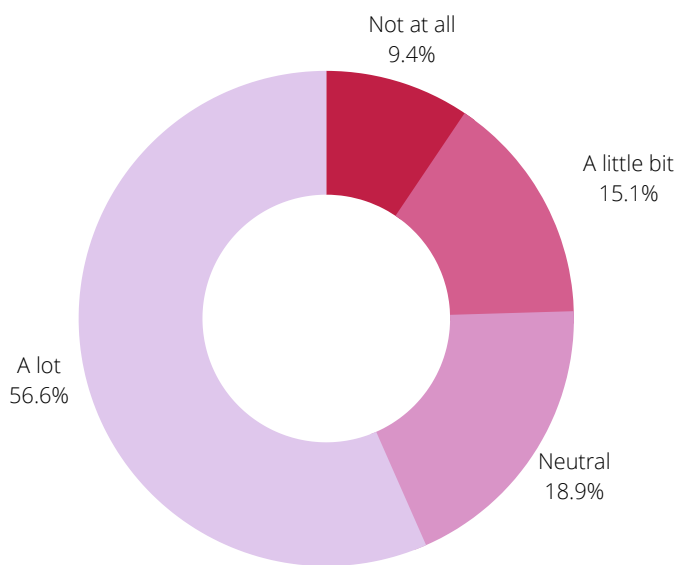
Not at all
9.4%

A little bit
15.1%

A lot
56.6%

Neutral
18.9%

Do you feel excited about returning to face-to-face learning?

A lot
3.8%

Neutral
13.2%

Not at all
43.4%

A little bit
39.6%
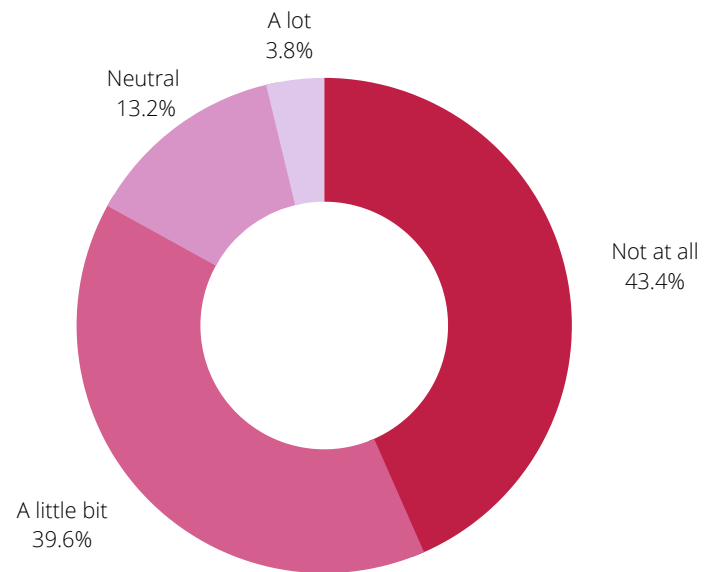
Do you feel anxious about returning to face-to-face learning?

Secondary School Students
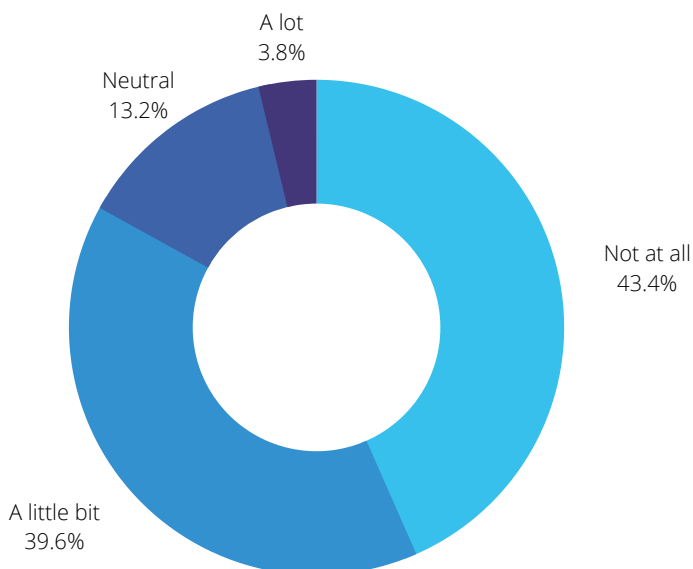
A lot
3.8%

Neutral
13.2%

Not at all
43.4%

A little bit
39.6%

Do you feel excited about returning to face-to-face learning?

A lot
16.6%

Not at all
33.6%

Neutral
20.2%

A little bit
29.7%
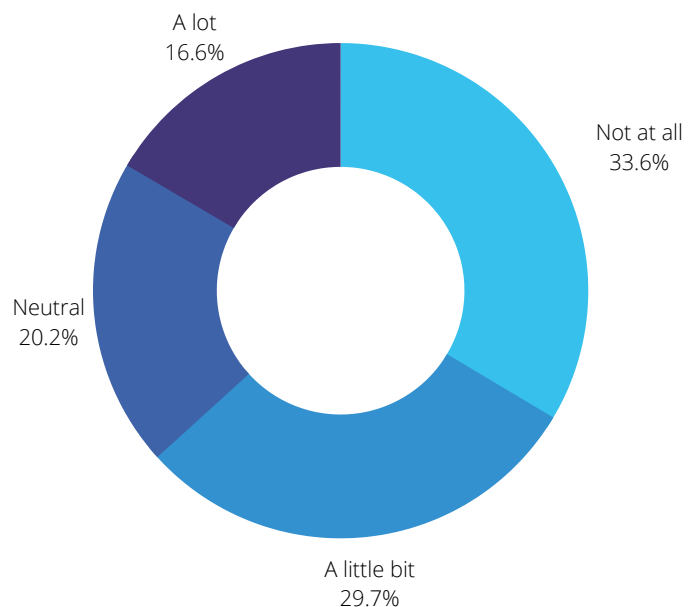
Do you feel anxious about returning to face-to-face learning?

While most students that had been working remotely from home were looking forward to returning to face-to-face learning, 57% of primary students were very excited to return compared with 35% of secondary students. Secondary school students also had a higher number of students not excited about returning to school at 17% (71 students).

Some of the reasons given for not wanting to return to schools included:

- Feeling more comfortable at home

"I feel more relaxed and less stressed when learning from home. At face to face school, I have to worry about unimportant things like uniform and what classroom I'm meant to be in, unlike at home" - Year 10, Government, metro

- Ability to work more independently

"Learning at home is much better than school - I can do everything at my own pace, and there are less distractions" - Year 12, Government, metro

- Finding learning easier at home

"finally got into a routine that worked with my school/study/work/ life balance which i normally don't have at school and i feel more in control of my learning when it is more independent" - Year 11, Government, regional/rural

- Dissatisfaction with their school

"Not excited to go back to an environment that's run like a prison" - Year 12, Government, regional/rural

- Noise levels and disruption at school

"School is loud and disruptive, and teachers can be unreliable or unsuitable. Online allowed me to work in a relatively quiet space where i could seek assistance from a tutor instead of sitting though a class with an incompetent teacher" - Year 12, Government, regional/rural

- Commute time

"I am not looking forward to losing sleep because i have to get up early to get to school. i am not looking forward to travel time" - Year 8, Government, metro

- Fears about COVID-19 infections

"I don't want to go back to school during the covid, because there's a chance an outbreak will happen, kids at school won't care about hygiene and I won't be able to see my grandma as often because I will be putting her at risk" - Year 9, Government, metro

- Social anxiety

"I hate talking, and get socially anxious so bad. I feel safer at home" - Year 11, Government, metro

The main reason for students feeling anxious about returning to face-to-face school relate to social anxiety or school dissatisfaction (24%), concerns over COVID-19 (16%) and anticipating more work due to missed work during remote learning (15%).

HOW DID STUDENTS FIND LEARNING REMOTELY?

Students working remotely from home and from school consistently reported that having more freedom and independence in their learning was a positive experience. This feeling was mirrored by the survey respondents who always learn at home. The comfort of the learning environment and the opportunity to have a better school/life balance was also positive and many students appreciated the extra time they could spend with their families.

- 68% of students said that one of the best things about learning from home was that they could learn at their own pace,
- 60% of students told us that they feel more comfortable at home,
- Around one-third (33%) of students said that they enjoyed spending more time with their family,
- and the same number said that being at home was better because it was quieter.

Of the students that answered "Other", the top responses were:

- Learning from home allowed them to sleep more (30%),
- They didn't have to commute to school (12%),
- They found learning from home less stressful (11%),
- Students enjoyed a flexible working structure (10%),
- They didn't have to wear a uniform (7%).

Research* has demonstrated that students who have gone through puberty have a different sleep pattern to younger students, so it is not surprising that many found sleeping in and saving time travelling to school was helpful to their learning.

In the consultations, several students described their families being more actively involved in their learning during the remote learning period. Secondary students also said that they had more time to engage with their family rather than doing homework as they normally would be. These students reported that their families were normally involved in their learning but having more flexibility to complete work when they chose to, allowed them to interact with their families in a different way.

*Why teen brains need a later school start time", Kylah Wahlstrom, https://theconversation.com/why-teen-brains-need-a-later-school-start-time-65308.

Breakdown by year levels in secondary school

Year 7:
- 32% of students said that one of the best things about learning from home was that they could learn at their own pace.
- 45% of students told us that they feel more comfortable at home.
- 40% of students said that they enjoyed spending more time with their family,
- 26% said that being at home was better because it was quieter.

Year 8:
- 28% of students said that one of the best things about learning from home was that they could learn at their own pace.
- 34% of students told us that they feel more comfortable at home.
- 21% of students said that they enjoyed spending more time with their family,
- 20% said that being at home was better because it was quieter.

Year 9:
- 35% of students said that one of the best things about learning from home was that they could learn at their own pace.
- 33% of students told us that they feel more comfortable at home.
- 20% of students said that they enjoyed spending more time with their family,
- 22% said that being at home was better because it was quieter.

Year 10:
- 27% of students said that one of the best things about learning from home was that they could learn at their own pace.
- 32% of students told us that they feel more comfortable at home.
- 15% of students said that they enjoyed spending more time with their family,
- 17% said that being at home was better because it was quieter.

Year 11:
- 37% of students said that one of the best things about learning from home was that they could learn at their own pace.
- 26% of students told us that they feel more comfortable at home.
- 15% of students said that they enjoyed spending more time with their family,
- 19% said that being at home was better because it was quieter.

Year 12:
- 28% of students said that one of the best things about learning from home was that they could learn at their own pace.
- 23% of students told us that they feel more comfortable at home.
- 12% of students said that they enjoyed spending more time with their family,
- 14% said that being at home was better because it was quieter.

While a majority of students enjoyed the independence and flexibility they had working remotely, it was a fairly even split between students feeling more in control of their learning or at the same level and those who felt they had fallen behind.

I feel like I've fallen behind a lot
16.4%

I feel more in control of my learning than before
34.2%

I feel like I've fallen behind a little
29.8%

Not much has changed
19.6%
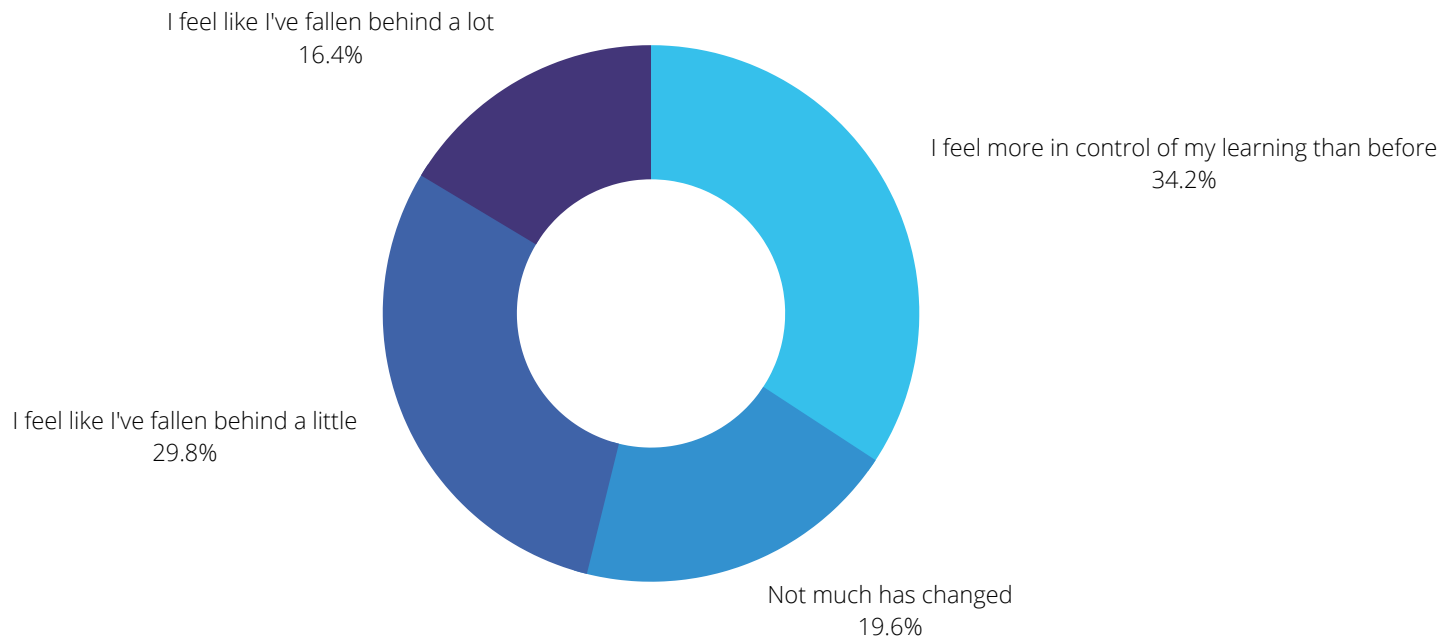
Students that felt in control of their learning reported that the independence they experienced in choosing their own schedule, to be able to work in comfort and at their own pace was productive for their learning. They also described feeling less stressed because they could prioritise the work they needed to focus on which helped them get on top of areas they were feeling behind in.

I feel as though online learning has given great benefit to me. I have attended a lot more classes than I normally would and my grades have gone up a lot more. I find it so much easier to concentrate and focus on my work. The teachers have been so supportive and understanding with any needs or challenges that I've faced. I feel much more comfortable talking to my teachers about the struggles I was having and found communication have been stronger" - Year 12, Government, metro

It has provided more flexibility for me to control my learning day and how I'd like to manage my subjects e.g. Each day I may choose tp focus on a particular subject or diversify my learning as required" - Year 12, Catholic, metro

Because I'm at home and I feel very safe at home so I don't be as shy as I was at school" - Year 7, Government, regional/rural

It's easier for me to work independently and at my own pase. I find it easier to understand when I'm not pressuring myself to finish it quickly" - Year 7, Government, metro

The students who felt they had fallen behind reported feelings of stress, isolation, depression and being overwhelmed by the workload provided by their schools. They also identified feeling demotivated without classmates and teachers physically around and the technology proved to be a barrier at times also.

"At school, I was up to date with almost everything. Now learning from home, I'm behind. I've received my worst ever interim report during secondary school. The reasoning why I've fallen behind is because of the environment, the feeling is much different here at home. At school, I'm ordered to do things, but at home, I'm not ordered. I'm too comfortable at home to the point I don't really want to do my classwork, I'm too relaxed. There's also so many distractions here at home compared to school. Myself and I believe a majority of students are mentally not stable because we've been inside our houses for 2 months and that's really bad. I've never been so stressed out in my entire life until now. I honestly feel like I should drop out, I don't want to drop out, but I asked myself many times in this circumstance, "Is dropping out the best option for me?" I'm at risk of failure, however I'm not gonna fail. I'm going to complete everything before school starts. I just know for a fact, if this pandemic was never around, I personally wouldn't be so stressed. I'd be happy for the work I've completed and I'd be up to date with almost everything" - Year 11, Government, metro

its just been a lot more work load, and of course it has been more difficult to communicate with teachers about the work load, so i am falling behind. But this is not because i am slacking, it is because i am trying my absolute best, but are still being crushed by workload - Year 9, Government, metro

"I feel like this due to: 1. Not knowing certain details of the work assigned because my teacher has too many emails to handle at once. 2. There is so much work to be done! The cause of this led to having a list of catch-up work that i have to do otherwise i will not have an improvement on my learning. 3. Staying at home has had a big effect on my mental health. The longer I stay at home, the bigger my worries and anxieties have grown. In the past i have had a few worries, but i am just overwhelmed at this stage. 4. The more work is given, the more hours i have to spend on screens! Throughout the day, if i want to relax and watch my favourite tv show, i can't because by the end of the day i cannot handle the light shining in my face! 5. I miss my friends SO much! Online learning makes it extremely hard to connect with friends, and teachers have only recently been allowing a google catch up once a week. I'm sure you now understand why I, as a student, am so eager to get back to face to face learning. I hope you approve" - Year 5, Government, metro

" my mental health gets so bad at home and so it takes a huge toll on me on my education. my depression comes from feeling isolated all the time and to be physically isolated by force was a huge trigger - Year 12, Government, metro "

"Due to the lack of motivation, working at home has caused me to fall behind. Being at home is not always the best place to be" - Year 12, Government, metro

Students reported that some of the biggest challenges working remotely were:

- Not being able to see or interact with friends/classmates (61%)
- Not having enough communication with teachers (50%)
- Too much work given by teachers (50%)

A number of students who were learning remotely from home and school during this period reported feeling demotivated and more easily distracted. There were also concerns about too much screen time and not enough physical activity.

" The teachers give us way more work and don't spend much/any time explaining the content to us. it is harder to know what work needs to be done and where to find the work because there is so many platforms. it is also way harder to concentrate at home because there is no motivation to do the work and so many distractions and i really need that school classroom environment to concentrate - Year 10, Government, metro "

"The teachers don't know how fast pace to move the class so they set more work and then combined with distractions and lack of motivation I feel like it was easy for me to fall behind" - Year 10, Government, metro

" Negative: way too much screen time and sitting down in a chair that isn't good for your body - Year 10, Independent, regional/rural "

ACCESS TO DEVICES AND INTERNET

Given that this was an online survey, this data is not a complete story and we acknowledge that there will be a different data set captured elsewhere that should provide more comprehensive insight into the challenges faced by students that had no access to internet or devices.

VicSRC commends the Department of Education and Training for the tremendous effort to provide students with devices and internet access while learning from home.

Of the 455 students that responded to this survey who were temporarily learning from home:

- 413 (91%) had access to both internet and an appropriate device for learning
- 31 (7%) had access to a device but not reliable internet
- 11 (2%) only had access to the internet, not their own device

Students shared some of the challenges of unreliable internet access:

"My internet was slow and unreliable making it hard to do fast paced activities or live stream" - Year 12, Government, regional/rural

"Fluctuating internet connection: Some work was handed in late, which may have affected marks. Also made schoolwork more stressful, and remote learning as well." - Year 11, Independent, metro

"I have missed quite a few days of school" - Year 8, Catholic, regional

Two students reported that they had borrowed a device from their school for the period of learning from home. Those who didn't have access to their own device reported challenges as well:

"Because i didn't have a laptop to work on so had to use my phone which was rly hard" - Year 11, Government, metro

"My laptop broke and i fell too far behind" - Year 10, Government, metro

Access to reliable internet and devices was a key element in whether remote learning from home was successful and effective. Students also commented that without internet or devices their ability to socialise and stay connected to friends, classmates and teachers was heavily impacted. As one student reported who had access to internet and a device:

> *I'm an extravert, in quarantine, i've felt isolated and became a bit agrophobic as such causing me to feel incredibly uncomfortable outside of home. But I always find that i'm always comfortable around teachers and friends, face-to-face learning is giving me a sense of normality. - Year 12, Government, regional/rural*

This demonstrates the impact the lack of internet or device would have had on students in a similar position.
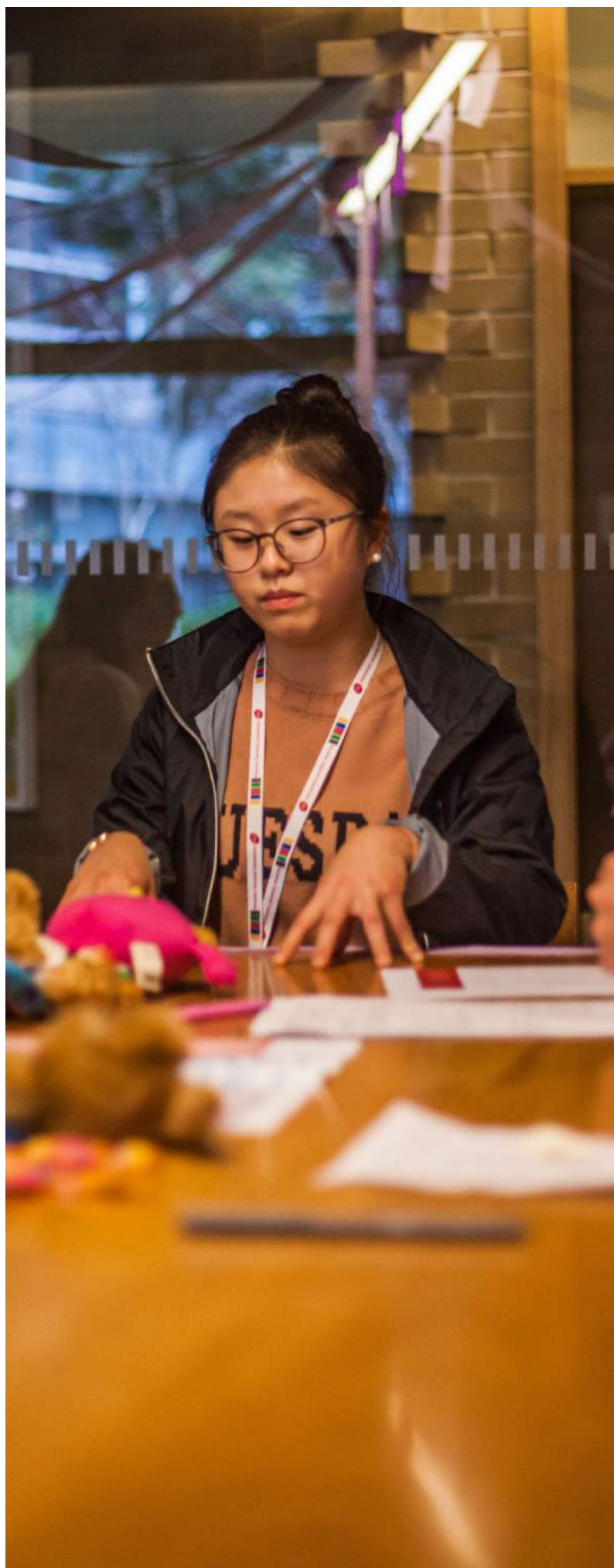
WHAT PARTS OF REMOTE LEARNING DO STUDENTS WANT TO CONTINUE IN FACE-TO-FACE LEARNING AT SCHOOL?

As this question allowed students to answer freely, there is a multitude of responses ranging from:

"No, it just doesn't work at all" - Year 10, Government, metro

to

"I liked almost everything about learning from home and I think I would be good to incorporate one day a week to do school from home. I would give kids a break from having to go to school but still get work done" - Year 10, Government, metro

Remote learning clearly worked for some students and not for others – much the same as face-to-face learning does and doesn't work to differing degrees. It is clear from the responses to this survey that most students do not want to learn remotely long term but that there are some aspects that students would like to be implemented into on-site schooling.

The main areas that students identified can be captured in the following themes:

1. The ability for students to work at their own pace and decide when and how they would like to learn.

This includes aspects of student agency, flexibility within the class, and flexibility within the timetable.

This was identified by 184 students who learnt remotely from home and from school as well as those who always learn from home.

"I would like to continue being able to work at my own pace and being able to independently learn and decide for myself what is most beneficial for my learning and how I learn best" - Year 12, Catholic, regional/rural

"Yes because I would still like to be a bit more independent and get my work done alone and fully in my control but still could help each other. Just want more independence." - Grade 5, Government, metro

"Allowing students to do their work either by hand or online (making it student choice), letting students work at their pace and offering help when they need it most." - Year 10, Government, regional/rural

"Yes maybe more breaks during the day so it's not stressful" - Year 8, Government, metro

The teachers are really flexible and I get to work at my own pace but still get all my work done. I get to go ahead in work or fall behind in work without my work suffering or getting stressed. I also don't have to put up with classmates mucking around so I can concentrate too. Because of the flexible learning environment, it is easier to make appointments or do other stuff. I also get more time to myself to explore other interests.- Year 9, Virtual School Victoria, regional/rural

Students were able to work at their own pace, in a class setting its intimidating to ask for help or even admit that you're behind in work. - Year 12, Government, metro

2. Online options integrated into face-to-face learning.

Students enjoyed being able to access resources, detailed lesson plans, video tutorials and more through online platforms (like Google classroom, Microsoft Teams, Seesaw, Compass, etc) used in schools across Victoria. They also mentioned consistent communication/feedback from teachers as a major positive. 70 students specifically mentioned these areas as helpful tools to bring more consistency into the return to face-to-face learning.

"I would like to continue having a really detailed weekly outline and plan." – Year 12, Government, metro student

"Having detailed lesson plans have been really helpful and I would like it i the teachers kept doing this." – Year 7, Government, metro

"The level of communication between teachers and students, as (at least with my school) they catched up with us everyday with how we're going and if we need help." – Year 10, Government, regional/rural

"I think it would be great idea to let kids still be involved in the classroom activities when they are sick. Meaning that teachers would post the daily activities so we wouldn't fall behind." – Year 7, Government, metro

Google Classroom- It has all your work on it that you need to do, if you're falling behind you can see what you need to do. – Year 8, Catholic, regional/rural

"I would like to continue to use MS teams to submit work. It's really handy to have more than one place to submit work. It's also a better tool to message the teachers rather than email them. Less work to communicate with teachers on MS teams." – Year 12, Government, metro

"Where I can message my teacher for help without the class knowing I need help" – Year 6, Government, regional/rural

"Yes, I would like classwork to still be submitted online as the due dates and class work reminders are very helpful in staying on top of classwork" – Year 11, Government, metro

"I like that for each class we had a video of the class we were able to go back and look over if we missed something or if we had zoned out. I also love that teachers were putting the lists of tasks on good classroom so I was able to use it as a checklist. I divided these tasks up so that I felt like I was achieving more" – Year 12, Government, regional/rural

However, several students indicated that their teachers and school staff needed more training in how to use digital platforms and make online learning engaging.

3. A warmer and more comfortable environment at school that provides more mental health support and a better school/life balance.

67 students identified things like being warmer at school, wearing more comfortable clothing, starting later in the day so they could sleep in, shorter class times and longer breaks, wellbeing lessons and flexibility around the space they learnt in.

Having school uniform is more of a hassle, it's not as comfortable to learn in. Being able to come in comfortable with a jumper or track pants allows us to feel comfortable and feel like we look better and can go to school and just think about learning" – Year 11, Government, regional/rural

"To not go to school, and not wearing a uniform, some students don't feel comfortable in uniforms and it would be nicer for them to not wear uniforms, so everyone can express themselves in their own way." – Year 8, Government, metro

"I understand the importance of a uniform, but when you're being told you can't wear certain pants and have to wear a skirt instead in the middle of winter, or you can't wear an actually warm jumper, it's ridiculous." – Year 10, Government, metro

"Teachers caring a whole lot more about students mental health." – Year 12, Catholic, metro

"Mental health periods, because they have helped me feel a lot better." – Year 9, Government, metro

"I'm fine with the way school is. Maybe make the starting time of school at 10:00am instead so we can get a little extra sleep!" – Year 10, Government, metro

"My school has changed their timetable to have breaks in between each class, I feel like that could be a great idea going forward, especially for students like myself who struggle with sitting in an hour long class after another." – Year 8, Government, regional/rural

"yes-because allowed to eat in class and wear whatever we want. also have a napping room at lunch – Year 11, Government, metro

"The shorter days, because they're so much less stressful. I didn't get stressed working from home as much as I do when I'm actually at school but the shorten days relieve so much pressure" – Year 11, Government, metro

"I would like some shorter lessons because it is a huge hustle to get to your next class. The classes can be 5-10 mins shorter just so we have the time to pack up, help the teacher pack up and get to our next class. Even teachers probably feel the pressure of being late and then not getting through the full lesson." – Year 7, Government, metro

"The quiet/choosing when to talk to people and when not to. I work best in the quiet but I also talk to friends too in class so being able to choose when I want quiet and when I want to talk like I have been at home would be good." – Year 9, Government, metro

"I would like to have well being periods and I would like to be able to have fun classes" - Year 7, Government, metro

"Set amount of tasks due by end of the week, considerations for mental health issues (these still are lackluster but have been more forgiving during the isolation period), abolishment of uniforms and strict dress codes that ban self expression." – Year 12, Government, regional/rural

FINAL WORDS FROM STUDENTS

The final question asked students if there was anything they would like to share with the key decision makers in Victorian education. We received a wide variety of responses to this question, including positive feedback to the Government for their response to COVID-19, concerns about returning to school, sharing specific advice around the return to school onsite, criticisms about the Government for their response to COVID-19, and general comments about the Victorian education system.

We have shared some of the key comments here that reflect these areas:

Positive Feedback

"Thank you for trying to helping us through these difficult times as much as possible" – Year 12, Government, metro

"I absolutely applaud you for providing students with an alternative to school. It is working quite well for me and some of my friends from other schools. It was a lot better than anticipated and I am appreciative towards your efforts during these times." – Year 8, Government, metro

"Good work on trying to get everyone's feedback, we appreciate it." – Year 12, Catholic, metro

"My mental health has actually been a lot better during quarantine compared to what it would be like at school. I have been stressing a lot less" – Year 10, Government, regional/rural
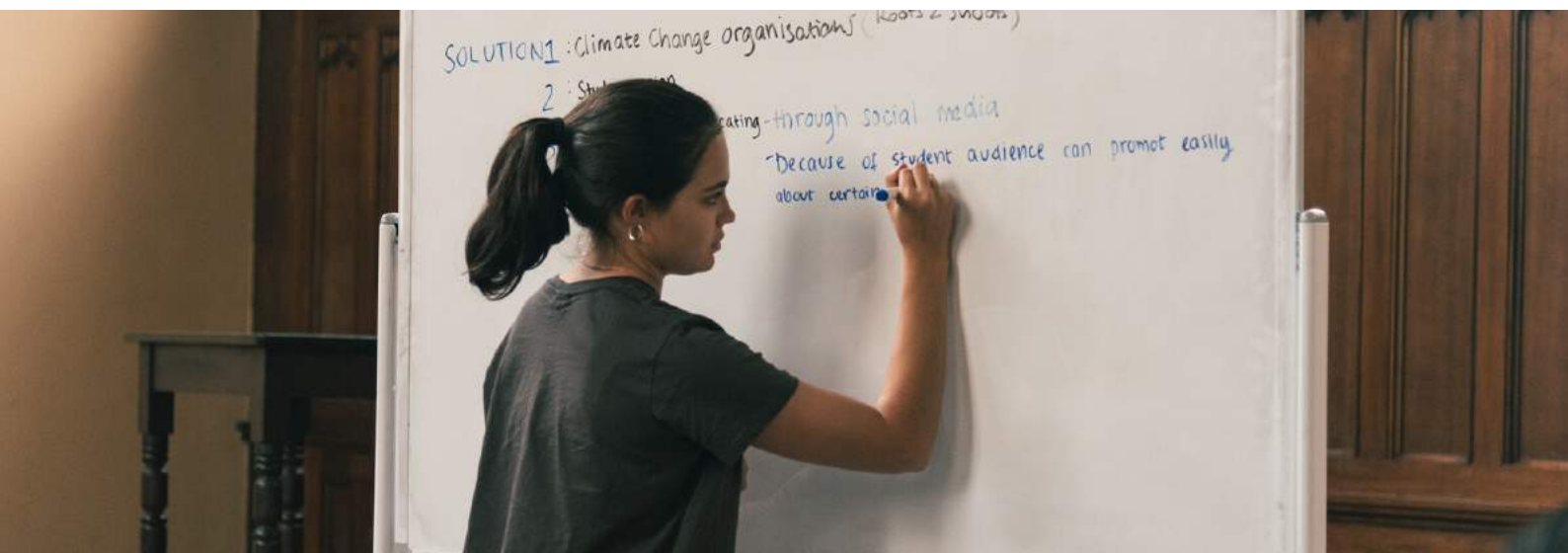
Concerns about **returning to school**

"Please do not rush students back to school if it is not 100% safe. please let teachers know that is students, teenagers and children are all going through a hard time so do not be too harsh on us, causing more problems. we are all in a very vulnerable mental state at the moment." – Year 10, Government, metro

"I just hope all the trouble we have been through is considered. Some people thrived during learning-from-home, but others found themselves lazier and lacking the enthusiasm due to the worries and less pressure. Even those who had enjoyed staying at home may have been impacted emotionally by all that is going on. It's not over. We will continue to fear the virus especially as we start school. One case of it and again we will be shut down. It's tough and I'm worried" – Year 12, Independent, metro

"Please don't expect us to get straight back into things. Also, don't be mad if some of us fell behind a lot. Nobody teaches you how to discipline yourself and learn from home, there is no guide to remote learning and being socially distanced from your friends for so long. But for the most part, my teachers have been open and supportive" – Year 11, Government, metro

"I'm worried about people who don't have access to internet or devices to do school/work. Because the internet is so integrated into our lives, I think there will be many people who will fall through the cracks, especially if they can't afford any of these things. It would be good to consider providing public internet and access to devices especially in rural areas. Left alone, the market will pursue profit and not the wellbeing of actual people" – Year 12, Independent, regional/rural

Advice about returning to school

"I like how I feel a lot more comfortable and I think that maybe we should start doing online classes instead of going to school 5 days a week we could go to school 4 days a week with one day of online class." – Year 7, Government, metro

"I believe schools should aim to create a more comfortable area for learning as well as a more personalised approach to teaching." - Year 10, Government, metro

"I think we should be allowed to have our phones on us (assuming the covidsafe app has been downloaded) so they can track who we've been around as an extra precaution" – Year 12, Government, metro

"Our school has reduced the timetable length from 6 periods to 4 periods a day, with no double periods and I've found this very helpful. The 2 afternoon periods are still in school hours, but are used as catch-up/study/homework time. This helps me keep up with online class work" – Year 8, Government, metro

"Teachers should take at least 3-5 mins out of class time to check up on our well being. they should also provide us students with a free period/class just to catch up on any work we've been falling behind in, no matter what subject it is. that would help us a lot considering many of us aren't able to focus straight during 50-75mins classes" – Year 8, Government, metro

"Give students the choice to continue online learning or face to face. In other words, don't make it mandatory for the student to JUST attend face to face classes to count as part of their attendance. I'd love some days where I don't have the motivation to commute, if I could just have an online lesson. That would do wondrous things" – Year 11, Independent, metro

Critical feedback

"i advise not doing this again because it is stressful and just does not work. i feel that students should be forgiven if they have not completed work because it was extremely difficult with the extreme work load and low levels of motivation" – Year 10, Government, metro

"nope, but good work? Idk there wasn't any student consultation sooo" – Year 12, Government, metro

"I Really wouldn't recomend doing it again with our school because lots of people don't have internet and parents can only send there kids to school if they have jobs and that isn't fair because for kids like me can't learn i feel like i will have to repeat the year and noone should feel like that teachers think that we are fine but all they have to do is sit at home and video call and watch tv it isn't fair" – Year 6, Government, regional/rural

General comments about education in Victoria

"Please don't return it to what it was before. The system is broken, and we need to seriously fix it ..." - Year 12, Government, regional/rural

"I would like to see some more flexibility in learning, a balance of home & school" – Year 6, Government, metro

"Home learning needs to be a option for all students, the pressure has been lifted and my mental health has never been better. Yes this isn't for everyone but school isn't for everyone either" – Year 12, Government, metro

"I think all us kids are not getting enough breaks we are all getting very stressed and a lot of our mental health aren't good at all. I mean if we are all saying the way the school system works is why we aren't happy and having a good life so far maybe something is wrong with it and if you haven't seen this from kid then you aren't looking very hard because that's all we say. we need more mental health awareness from our teacher if you're not going to change anything also the teachers need to be made more aware of disabilities and how to handle them even little things like dyslexia and ADHD because a lot of my teachers have any idea what to do or how to help. all us kids are in this by ourselves unless you guys help." – Year 9, Government, metro
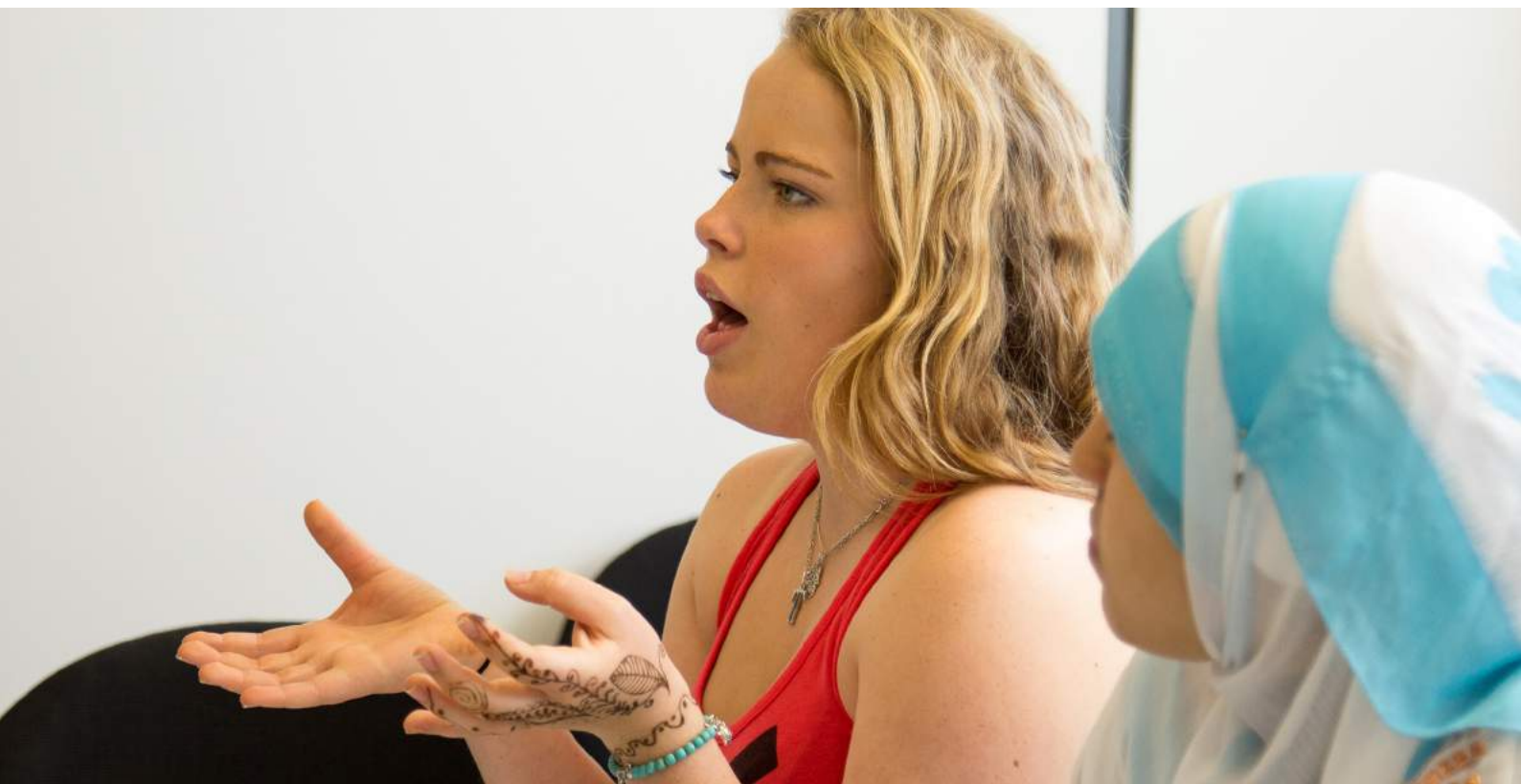
"What would really like to see a push for students to return to face to face learning. What I mean by that is I know a some of my friends are anxious about going back to school. So I think the government needs to action ensuring that students do return to schools. Also I really a system in place for when you can't attend (sick) you can still get your work. Please make sure you have a system in place. I know I'm sounding repetitive but I'm really passionate about not missing out on school. Also we need to be doing more academic subjects we do 20 sessions a week and 9 are not academic which makes me angry. All I want is the best VCE I can get but yet I seem to be doing pointless subjects like, French, P.E, music and so much more!!! it really annoys how much time I waste a week on things that aren't going to help we get a better VCE score. We should just be able to choose those subjects rather than wasting my time. But the worst bit is that we also have French home work. I mean the teacher actually expects to more work outside of class when I could be reading or book or doing extra homework. You also need to have a better school refusal system in as one of my family members has been refusing to attend school and that's not ok.I hope you have read this far because I do have some valid points and I hope they are taken into some deep consideration not just added to data chart. Because every kid needs to be heard. Also this is just a crazy idea but kids minds think differently and I reckon they can help us find a coronavirus vaccine. We are ignored we are misheard, we are the future generations but yet we have no say in our future. Now I'm not a protester nor activist I'm just a thirteen year old girl with big ambitions, big goals to strive for and growth mindset. All I want is the best education and for my voice to be heard. Why can't Australia improve its academic results? What are other countries doing that we are not? Please hear my voice don't just put it in a data table!" – Year 7, Government, metro

"DIRECTLY AIMED TO ALL: Do you really care about our well-being? Do you honestly believe scores justifies how smart we are? Do you think we should have more school activities, especially for those studying VCE/VCAL? It can be a huge stress relief from the work and the pressure. Instead of just "preparing us for our FUTURE job" shouldn't we be prepared for 'Our Life' in general? School shouldn't just "teach" you the things to be "successful" in life, it should also teach us what we should VALUE MOST, which is to be happy and how to live a HAPPY LIFE instead of a "SUCCESSFUL LIFE" because life will be meaningless without happiness" – Year 11, Government, metro

RECORDMENDATIONS

Based on the survey results, consultations and ad hoc conversations with students engaged with VicSRC (Student Executive Advisory Committee, Ambassadors, Editorial Team), we have provided the following recommendations for the education sector:

1. Support and progress student agency

All Victorian schools should support student agency in their learning. The Victorian Government, with advice from Victorian Student Representative Council, should provide free and accessible professional development for teachers and school leadership, in enabling, encouraging and improving student agency in all areas of schooling and education. This training should be a requirement of their VIT registration and be a minimum of five (5) hours per year. The Victorian Government, the Catholic and Independent school sectors should appropriately and sustainably fund community organisations that actively support and progress student agency in education to ensure it remains a strategic priority.

2. Ensure equitable access to devices and internet.

Every Victorian student should have access to reliable internet at home and an appropriate device for schoolwork in school and at home. For students who do not have access to devices or reliable internet at their home, the Victorian government should continue the scheme to provide students with dongles and devices.

Teachers should be required to undertake a minimum of five (5) hours of professional development focusing on IT, including supporting cyber safety and effective online communication for children and young people as part of their VIT registration.

3. Include integrated online platforms to support learning.

All Victorian schools should have a free and accessible online platform integrated into all classes to support learning at school and at home. The Victorian Government should work with the Catholic and Independent sectors to ensure this is consistent and equitable across all schools.

Teachers, students and parents/carers should be provided training, preferably co-delivered by students, to ensure everyone understands how to use the platform effectively. This platform will be used to provide the following support:

- Detailed weekly/daily lesson plans
- Online resources
- Collaborative work
- Consistent feedback between students and teachers
- One on one communication between students and teachers
- Consistent deadlines and work tasks
- Parents/carers connection to school learning
- Video tutorials

4. Prioritise mental health support.

Mental health or wellbeing classes should be a mandatory addition to all school timetables for all year levels. Students should be supported to provide peer to peer mental health support (for example, through a Teen Mental Health First Aid course) and all teachers and school leadership should be supported by the Victorian Government to access professional development and appropriate resources to ensure these classes are effective.

Teachers should also be required and supported to spend the first five minutes of each class "checking in" with students and school leadership should actively prioritise mental health as a fundamental goal for all students above academic success.

5. Enhance flexibility within the school structure.

All Victorian schools should be supported, encouraged and enabled to provide a flexible structure to ensure all students' needs are met and to encourage a healthy school/life balance. This could include, but is not limited to:

- Shorter school days for students
- Optional later start times for secondary schools
- Shorter class times
- Longer breaks in between classes to ensure time to get between classes and mentally and physically rest and refocus
- Optional online homework study sessions
- Quiet spaces for students to use for learning and/or rest if requested
- Optional learning from home days for all students, especially senior secondary students
- The ability for students to complete or revise other work in class if requested, to support agency in learning

6. Create a comfortable and welcoming environment.

Students learn best when they are comfortable and feel safe. All Victorian schools should be comfortable and safe for every individual student. The Victorian Government, with support from the VRQA, will ensure schools have appropriate funding to actively pursue the following conditions to maintain registration:

- School uniforms/dress codes are warm, affordable and comfortable and students are part of the decision making/review process
- All schools have appropriate heating and cooling options inside and outside the classroom
- Anti-bullying, Aboriginal Cultural Awareness, Anti-discrimination and Anti-ableism training is a mandatory part of the annual training calendar for students, parents/carers, teachers, school staff and school leadership
- Students can eat and drink, without disturbing others, when they choose to

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Survey questions

Question	**Options**
What year level (or equivalent) are you in at school?	Prep/Foundation to Year 12
What type of school do you go to?	Government Independent (private) Catholic Specialist Other
Which area do you live in?	Regional/rural (outside of Melbourne) Metro (Melbourne)
Has the way you learn at school changed during Term 2?	Yes, I have been or still am learning from home Yes, I have been learning remotely/online but at school No, I always learn from home (eg: through Virtual School Victoria) *Survey branches from this point*

Yes, I have been or still am learning from home

Did/do you have access to internet and an appropriate device (eg a computer, laptop or tablet) while learning from home?	Yes – I had access to both I only had access to internet, not my own device I had access to a device but not reliable internet No, I didn't have access to my own device or reliable internet
If you did not have access to internet and/or your own device, how has your learning been impacted by this?	*Free answer*

Appendix 1: Survey questions

What was the best part about learning from home? Pick up to 3	I could work at my own pace More time with my family I am more comfortable at home It's quieter at home I feel safer at home Easier to communicate with teachers Easier to communicate with friends/peers Other (*free answer*)
What was the worst part about learning from home? Pick up to 3	Lack of communication with teachers Lack of interaction with friends/peers Too much work More time with my family No space at home to do my work Too noisy at home I don't feel safe at home No access to internet or device for learning Other (*free answer*)
How do you feel about your learning since starting remote learning from home?	I feel more in control of my learning than I was before Not much has changed, I'm learning what I'm supposed to I feel like I've fallen behind a little bit I feel like I've fallen behind a lot and/or missed some critical content and I'm worried about how to catch up
Can you tell us more about why you feel like this?	*Free answer*
If you've been learning from home, do you feel excited about returning to face-to-face learning?	A lot A little bit Neutral Not at all
Can you tell us more about your answer?	*Free answer*
If you've been learning from home, do you feel anxious about returning to face-to-face learning?	A lot A little bit Neutral Not at all

Appendix 1: Survey questions

Can you tell us more about your answer?   *Free answer*

Are there parts of learning from home that you would like to continue in face-to-face learning? If yes, what are they and why? If no, why not?   *Free answer*

Yes, I have been learning remotely/online but at school

What was the best part about learning remotely from school? Pick up to 3

Option to work at my own pace
More time with teachers one-on-one
Quieter at school
I feel safer at school
Easier to communicate with teachers
Easier to communicate with friends/peers
Other (*free answer*)

What was the worst part about learning remotely from school? Pick up to 3

Lack of communication with teachers
Too much work
Lack of interaction with friends/peers
Too much time with teachers or school leadership
Too noisy
I don't feel safe at school
Other (*free answer*)

How do you feel about your learning since starting remote learning from school?

I feel more in control of my learning than I was before
Not much has changed, I'm learning what I'm supposed to
I feel like I've fallen behind a little bit
I feel like I've fallen behind a lot and/or missed some critical content and I'm worried about how to catch up

Can you tell us more about why you feel this?   *Free answer*

Appendix 1: Survey questions

If you've been learning remotely from school, do you feel excited about returning to face-to-face learning?	A lot A little bit Neutral Not at all
Can you please tell us a little more about your answer?	*Free answer*
If you've been learning remotely from school, do you feel anxious about returning to face-to-face learning?	A lot A little bit Neutral Not at all
Can you please tell us a little more about your answer?	*Free answer*
Are there parts of learning remotely from school that you would like to continue in face-to-face learning? If yes, what are they and why? If no, why not?	*Free answer*

No, I always learn from home (eg: through Virtual School Victoria)

Why do you usually learn from home?	No appropriate school in my area Learning face-to-face doesn't work for me Family choice Other (*free answer*)
What do you like about learning from home that you wouldn't get into face-to-face learning?	*Free answer*

All students

The results from this survey will be shared with the Victorian Minister for Education, the Victorian Premier and key education stakeholders including the Department of Education and Training, Catholic Education Commission of Victoria, and Independent Schools Victoria. Is there anything else you would like to share with them about learning from home and/or returning to face-to-face learning?	*Free answer*

Appendix 2

Appendix 3: INEQUALITIES IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

by Bri Hines - Victorian Student Representative Council Student Executive Advisory Committee member

This piece first appeared in the printed edition of The Age, 1st June 2020.

There's no one way to define the student experience during COVID-19.

With the news that school will be returning within the next few weeks, I imagine many are beyond excited to return to classes as they were in a distant, pre-COVID world. It's been a long few weeks for all students across the state, and we've faced unique challenges along the way. What is so often a relatively similar experience for all was abruptly transformed as every school across the state took on what online learning should look like. Some of us have had our classes brought, as they were, online, while others were given emails and assignments in the place of human interaction in the classroom. What further differentiates us though, is how we, as individuals, are equipped to manage such a sudden and drastic change.

As many of us are painfully aware, much of this has not been a smooth transition. While online learning is an interesting concept to explore, excelling at home learning comes with the nuance of privilege. Sure, this model of school is going to work for some people. Better, even, for some of us. This is not the reality for everyone, and at this stage we haven't had a single say in directing the future of our learning.

When the biggest commonality among students is suddenly ripped out from under us, it exacerbates the pre-existing inequalities in the education system. Suddenly the students with poor internet connections aren't just struggling to get work done at home, they can barely attend class. Those of us who need a routine beyond walking three steps to our desks every day to keep our mental health in check have been thrown into turmoil. While much of the conversation is focussed on ensuring top performing students are getting what they need to succeed, it seems that those already on the edge of disengagement are being further alienated from the school system.

Appendix 3: INEQUALITIES IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

While I commend efforts by various parties to alleviate these issues, it's not enough. There aren't enough internet dongles or free study guides in this state to get us all where we were headed when we arrived at our first day of school this year. As schools begin to facilitate students moving back to physical classes, much of our focus will be on shifting back to how things were as quickly and seamlessly as possible, and hopefully ensuring that all students are supported. I cannot stress enough the importance of schools engaging with their students on this, as the people most directly impact by the numerous schooling changes.

However, do we really have to go back to how things were before? As we make the move back to physical classes, it brings into question how our education can and should look. In all honestly, some components of this are really working for some of us. If nothing else, this is a really fantastic time to reimagine how the educational experience functionally is, which is something long overdue. Hundreds of years of schooling across the world have left us still learning in a way that is, at its core, almost identical to how it has been. For many, this has been evidence that sitting through one-hundred minute classes from 9am until 3pm everyday isn't the only way to make schooling work, and it may not even be anywhere near the best. If learning from videos in the comfort of our own homes works for some of us, why isn't it more commonplace for us to do that? Is attending school six periods a day, five days a week, really that necessary?

Education is not restricted to one method or pathway, nor should we do ourselves the disservice of pretending it is. There's no singular, static model of schooling that will allow every student to truly flourish. As restrictions loosen, many of us are more than ready to see our friends and teachers, resume many parts of our pre-COVID lives and enjoy what will be our last year of high school as we had planned. Direct collaboration between schools and students will be essential in allowing students to have ownership over their education, much of which has been lost since quarantine began. Let's take what we've learnt, the good and the bad, and move forwards instead of stepping back.