

5 August 2020

Hon Luke Donnellan MP
Minister for Child Protection
Minister for Disability, Ageing and Carers

Hon. James Merlino MP
Minister for the Coordination of Education and Training
Minister for COVID 19

Dear Ministers

RE: the need for increased educational and financial support to foster carers and foster children during and after the COVID-19 lockdown.

I am writing to you about the need for improved financial and educational support for foster carers and the children in their care to cope with the consequences of the COVID-19 lockdown measures. Children in out-of-home care often experience disrupted schooling, have lower levels of educational achievement and school completion rates. As a result, the disruption caused by COVID-19 is likely to disproportionately affect children in care with long term social and economic consequences because of poorer skills acquisition and employment outcomes.

The impact of the lockdown on the education of children in care has been significant and has manifested in several ways. The Foster Care Association of Victoria (FCAV) recently conducted a survey of its members which shows that lockdown disruptions are impacting negatively on educational progress. Key findings of the FCAV research include:

- a significant number of children in care attend mainstream schools with the support of an aide to assist with academic learning, social and emotional regulation and personal wellbeing; students who required an aide were refused access to onsite remote learning by their school. This leaves those children further isolated and disadvantaged over the period;
- Many carers reported that attempts to support home learning damaged the relationship between them and the child in their care because of the challenges in delivering an online education program;
- the data shows that over 70% of carers experienced increased stress during the period and that challenges with remote schooling was one of the top reasons for this increase (63%);
- carers of children with disabilities or learning difficulties stated that despite provision for all children in care to access onsite learning, many were actually discouraged or refused at the school or Agency level. When students did attend school, many were not provided with the necessary support to undertake the tasks assigned to them.

Regrettably, the mainstream education system is unlikely to have the resources to assist disadvantaged students to close the gap in educational attainment that has emerged as a consequence of COVID-19. As such, the FCAV believes that the Government needs to develop targeted programs to assist carers and their children following the end of lockdown periods.

In order to close the increased gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children that has emerged, targeted funding should be provided to:

- deliver on-site specialist support services at schools including:
 - occupational therapy to assist with the development of fine motor skills needed for hand writing;
 - tuition to improve and accelerate language and maths literacy;
 - increased funding to support more school aides.

There are a number of examples where targeted funding or support has been provided to assist disadvantaged children with the education. The Department of Education currently provides targeted funding for Aboriginal children through the Koorie Literacy and Numeracy Program.¹

In the community sector the TEACHaR program administered by Anglicare is a good example of a targeted education assistance program for children in care.² TEACHaR funds tutors to provide targeted one on one support to children in care at their schools.

The Grattan Institute recently released a report advocating for the immediate investment of one-off catch-up funding to support students hardest hit by the move to online learning. It did so because it is proven that children tend to learn less when they are not in regular classes and because it is widely acknowledged that many disadvantaged students, who were already behind, are likely to have slipped further behind.

Without targeted supplementary support there is a significant risk that the educational gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children will accelerate.

Yours sincerely



Samantha Hauge

¹ <https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/COVID-Catch-up-Grattan-School-Education-Report.pdf><https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/discipline/english/Pages/koorieelitnum.aspx>

² <https://www.anglicarevic.org.au/news/teachar-the-educational-program-transforming-young-peoples-lives/>