

Inquiry into NSW Government's Management of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Hearing - Monday 13 September 2021 Supplementary Questions

Cr Charles Lynch, Deputy Chair, NSW Aboriginal Land Council

1. Have you had any trouble accessing laptops or other electronic devices for students during remote learning?

Access to the technology necessary for learning from home is reduced for Aboriginal families. This 'technological divide' has excluded many Aboriginal children from having access to the resources necessary to receive adequate education throughout the pandemic.¹ Remote areas in particular experience less access to technology and internet, while larger families have also struggled to provide adequate computers, phones and other technology for every child.²

Schools in regional and rural communities like Tamworth, Boggabilla, Walhallow and Walgett have struggled to supply the digital resources needed to every child. This has resulted significant issues facilitating learning between children of different age groups, with many families often having one laptop shared by all children in one house. It is important to note additional costs have also been incurred for prepaid internet or phone services for kids being home schooled which at times has been absorbed by carers, including Grandparents who are surviving on aged pensions.

2. Have you had any trouble accessing internet dongles for students during remote learning?

Access to NBN and internet is particularly reduced for Aboriginal families, with the impacts of poor IT access exacerbated by the pandemic.

Some schools have had internet dongles to loan to students, however often these have been in short supply or inadequate to properly support learning of all children in the house.

Internet dongles loaned from schools in Walhallow have had limited range, only functioning if the students are within the school yard.

3. What supports have been in place to help children whose parents are suffering from COVID?

NSW Tamworth Community Connectors conducted regular check-ups by phone calls, texts and emails with students to support them with counselling and tutoring throughout COVID lockdown. While these supports have attempted to reach all children in these communities, news of infected residents only passes through word-of-mouth, and as such services are unaware of the extent by which children have been impacted by infected family.

The availability of culturally appropriate counselling is also limited, with Aboriginal health services such as Tamworth Aboriginal Medical Service unable to offer appointments for 12 weeks.

¹ SNAICC 2020, 'Brief on COVID-19 response and recovery issues for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in contact with child protection services', <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2020-07/apo-nid309074.pdf>

² SNAICC 2020, 'Brief on COVID-19 response and recovery issues for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in contact with child protection services', <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2020-07/apo-nid309074.pdf>