

After years of COVID, fires and floods, kids' well-being now depends on better support

June 17 2022, by Jess Harris



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[Every student in every school](#) in Australia has experienced unprecedented disruptions to their schooling over the past three years. On top of the disruptions and stress of COVID-19 lockdowns, isolation

from their schools, their friends and (for many) their extended families, tens of thousands of Australian families have also seen their communities ravaged by fires and floods.

Kids have had to spend lunchtimes indoors to avoid the smoky haze and ash falling on their playgrounds. They have been rescued from their rooftops by boat and helicopters. Lives have been lost and [communities devastated](#).

[Our research](#) on post-crisis schooling and the [impacts of COVID-19](#) found the disruptions to schooling had significant impacts on the well-being of teachers and students, whereas academically the kids were OK.

And yet schools and teachers are still under pressure to make sure students don't "fall behind" academically. This concern has often overshadowed trickier questions like "how are they coping?" In Australia, we have just one professionally trained [school counselor](#) for [every 750 students](#).

A Mission Australia survey found school disruptions were one of the biggest pandemic concerns.

The Mission Australia survey found young people in Victoria were the most concerned. [#COVID](#) [#Australia](#) [#Youth](#)
<https://t.co/tU7JMFQGRK> <https://t.co/78kfb18vf2>

— Vince Guo  (@DonadeVince) [July 29, 2021](#)

What did the research find?

[Reading results of year 3 and 4 students](#) in 2020 were not significantly different from students who did the same tests in 2019. The picture was more complex in mathematics—some students achieved more and some slightly less than their 2019 peers. Overall, though, students have

continued to progress at the same rate.

However, [teachers' morale and feelings of self-efficacy](#) dropped substantially in 2020.

And disruptions to schooling and home lives have had a massive impact on the well-being and mental health of students. [Mental health support services](#), such as Kids Helpline, reported increases in calls of up to 28% in Victoria while they endured repeated lockdowns.

Teachers from all levels of schooling reported seeing decreased engagement and increases in poor behavior and student anxiety. One teacher told us: "And even the engagement, their concentration levels really, really dropped off a lot. [...] they can't sit still for more than a minute and, like I said, normally before COVID they were fine. They were able to participate in class discussions. And all of a sudden now, engagement [...] they can't sit still anymore. They've always got to be up. Focus and concentration floats in and out [...] routine is gone, it's not there anymore."

How can we support communities under pressure?

Natural disasters like fires and floods can traumatize children, particularly when their communities have been hit repeatedly. While children often show resilience immediately following [natural disasters](#) like bushfires, [studies](#) show up to one in five students report moderate to severe symptoms of trauma six to 12 months after the event.

Kids across the country have lost their homes and their schools. Many students, particularly those in the flooded Northern Rivers region of New South Wales, are living in temporary accommodation and going to "pop-up classrooms." Sometimes these are in a different town, adding up to two hours of travel time for students and families. That's stressful and

exhausting for kids and families suffering from trauma.

Following repeated national emergencies, children need opportunities to [talk about their experiences](#). It helps them to respond, recover and build resilience.

As a key part of the community, schools are uniquely placed to support children and their families in times of crisis. Calls for mental health literacy programs in schools offer one part of the solution. However, this is a complex issue that requires both immediate and ongoing responses.

Invest more in support services

On average, there's only [one professionally trained school counselor](#) to deal with the needs of students for every two schools in Australia—and there are far fewer counselors in regional areas. Students are waiting [more than four weeks](#) to see their school counselor. Schools and communities are desperate for this urgent and critical support.

Most teachers and school staff have limited training in how to understand impacts of trauma on student learning and behavior, and in effective teaching practices for students who have experienced trauma. Departments need to invest in ensuring all teachers have these skills to support our kids in the years to come. The immediate solution can't rely on our already overworked teachers.

Access to professional support for the mental health and well-being of our children is paramount. The current funding of [\\$62.4 million a year](#) provided for school chaplains, who do not require specialist training in psychology, could be re-allocated to ensure adequate and appropriately trained support for all children, particularly those who have lived through the most recent crises. While school chaplains reported increases in [student mental health issues](#), family conflicts and behavioral

issues in 2021, they made [less than 15% of referrals](#) in schools to other supports.

Schools are pillars of their communities. In the current crisis in the Northern Rivers, principals and teachers have again responded with unparalleled community spirit. But they need more support.

Established crisis communication plans can help principals, teachers, students and their families stay connected and feel some sense of control over their own lives. A strategic approach to setting up public and mental health hubs within schools for the whole community is essential for building resilience and getting kids ready to learn.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: After years of COVID, fires and floods, kids' well-being now depends on better support (2022, June 17) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-06-years-covid-kids-well-being.html>

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