



29 July 2022

**Submission to the Public Accounts Committee Inquiry into the Tasmanian Government's continuing response to the COVID-19 pandemic**

The Tasmanian Disability Education Reform Lobby (**TDERL**) would like to thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Public Accounts committee in relation to the following terms of reference:

- *the financial and public health measures taken by Government to prepare for return to school for students and staff for the 2022 educational year;*
- *the financial, social and educational impacts associated with measures implemented to support the return to school plan including (but not limited to) impact on:*
  - *students and educational outcomes*
  - *parents and carers*

TDERL was very concerned by the lack or preparedness of the Tasmanian Government in relation to preparations for return to school plans for all students in Tasmanian schools particularly those for students with disability across all school systems.

When the Tasmanian Government announced that the Tasmanian border was to be opened in December 2021, TDERL was calling on the Government to ensure that it had return to school plans in place for students with disability before the 2021 school year was completed. In October 2021 TDERL called on the government to issue a ministerial direction to push schools to create individual COVID-safe plans for families of students with a disability before school resumed in 2022. This call was ignored. It is well recognised that COVID 19 has significant impacts on medically complex and vulnerable students with disability and TDERL was very concerned that there were no plans in place at the end of the 2021 school year to give parents and carers certainty about how their children would be kept safe when school commenced in 2022.

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of January no plans in relation to return to school had been announced by the Tasmanian Government and in fact the Government's public messaging was not even acknowledging the significant danger that COVID 19 causes to vulnerable students with disability in Tasmanian schools. TDERL at that time felt compelled to call on the Government to make its plans clear, given we were less than a month from returning to school. Ultimately the Government announced its

return to school plan that included all students with disability and their families being contacted to determine what mitigation requirements were required to keep them safe at school. The Government advised parents of students with disability that their child's school would phone them to discuss their child's needs. The reality was the Government had left the Education department with less than four weeks to contact more than 4000 families and this was never achievable.

Some families were contacted by school nurses and others were sent emails asking them to contact the Department of Education to advise of any needs their child had. Some families received excellent support some families did not receive any communication. This made it incredibly hard for parents to make informed decisions in relation to whether their child should return to school at the beginning of term one.

Many families made the decision that they would not be returning their child to school (particularly those families with medically vulnerable children under 12 who had not received two doses of COVID19 vaccines) until their children were fully vaccinated – in many cases this saw students not returning to school before the middle of March 2022.

The impact on students with disability of the lack of planning in terms of school attendance was significant with families telling TDERL that:

"My child can not physically attend school due to the very high risk for herself and a family member"

"She got COVID on the first day of Yr 12 exams, so failed to do any assessments in the exam week"

"Has made attendance more difficult"

"My child has had COVID19 twice and missed school. Going to school risks getting sick"

"My child could not attend school in the lead up to any family events to reduce risk of onwards transmission if infected"

"The removal of basic safety measures has made school attendance terrifying"

TDERL is also aware of instances of families/carers of students with disability keeping their child home when there was a case of COVID19 in that child's classroom being told that the absence was not a permitted one under the Education Act. Parents/Carers saw this as a punitive approach to school attendance given, they were keeping their children home due to the risk to their child's health and safety.

Parents/Carers of students with disability have told TDERL that COVID19 and the Governments lack of preparedness has had the following impacts on their child's learning:

"Reduced attendance at school"

"Reduced opportunity for socialisation"

"My child is not engaging with school as the school are not catering for learning at home – they deem school to be safe place to be"

"The added stress and frequent disruptions because of sickness (including lots of substitute teachers and unfamiliar TA's) has been very disruptive for their engagement and progress"

"They have become very disengaged"

TDERL is concerned that whilst Tasmanian goes into the “living with Covid” phase the Tasmanian Government is not properly engaging with parents and carers of students with disability and that there is no overarching strategy to ensure students with disability can remain safe in their local school.

The best example of this is the Governments current consultation of stakeholders on whether the Education Department will allow unvaccinated teachers to teach students with disability. When the Minister for Education was questioned on this last week, he had no answers and this is simply not good enough.

The Tasmanian Government needs to be able to articulate its strategy for keep students with disability in our schools safe, simply saying there are individual learning plans in place is not enough. Is the Education Department ensuring that these plans are appropriate and up to date? Are they consulting with people with disability in schools as they withdraw more and more mitigation measures from our schools?

Sadly, TDERL believes that the answer to those questions is that there are no checks are happening to ensure that Covid plans are appropriate and in place for vulnerable students and no the Government is not consulting with students with disability and their families as they remove mitigation strategies. Disappointing of all is that this Government that wants to be one with heart does not seem to have a strategy that they can articulate that ensures all measures possible are being undertaken on a system wide basis that ensure that students with disability are able to attend school on the same basis as their nondisabled peers.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide you with this submission.

Regards

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'Kristen', written over a horizontal line.

Kristen Desmond

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