

The impact of COVID19 lockdown on the wellbeing of staff and students in our schools

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic and its associated lockdowns have had varying effects on school staff and students. Through a combination of an online survey and student focus groups, feedback was obtained about engagement with work during lockdown, what they valued most from their school leaders and teachers, suggestions for improving wellbeing and feedback about how they were managing their own personal wellbeing. After a whole school term of learning from home, the school company now has clear information regarding staff and students' enthusiasm for their work, stress, work-life balance, online connections, strategies and processes. Strategies can now be put in place to continue to support these key stakeholders through the remainder of the current lockdown and prepare them for the return of teaching our students face-to-face. This research has enabled the school company to focus its support moving forward in this pandemic and provide feedback to schools regarding their staff, and students' wellbeing at this time.

Introduction

As our schools were recovering from the impacts of our first COVID19 lockdown in 2020 we did not foresee another lockdown with wider impacts and harsher restrictions, stretching for over three months. Our school leadership teams led their schools through this new situation and adapted to regularly changing, and often unknown, guidelines and restrictions daily. It was clear early that this would be ongoing for most of the term and would have wider reaching affects than in 2020. Schools sought regular feedback from staff, students, and families regarding the quality and impact of their online learning and adjusted their

service based on this. Staff wellbeing was recognised as a focus area and our schools took a range of approaches to manage this, due to differing impacts in each school context. This article explores the impact of this second lockdown on staff and student wellbeing with an intention to modify programs based on identified needs, as students return to school in Term 4.

Background

The welfare of people during the COVID19 pandemic has been affected in various ways. These include:

- The need to implement restrictions to contain the virus, limited socialisation and subsequent impacts leading to an increase in people's feelings of loneliness and isolation.
- Concern about catching the virus that increased levels of anxiety.
- Increased pressure to supervise children at home whilst also working from home.
- Students not able to concentrate when learning from home and concerns regarding their consequent learning.
- Job losses for those that were not able to perform their job from home.
- Not having the appropriate computer equipment, internet and computer literacy to support learning at home.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) report (2021) states that by mid-April 2020, one-third (33%) of Australian adults had reduced the frequency of their contact with family and friends since the start of the COVID-19 epidemic (AIHW 2021a, p. 60). At this time half of Australian adults expressed they were lonely, though this reduced to a third by May (AIHW 2021b, para. 5). Additionally, 22% of people described loneliness as the most common stressor (AIHW, 2021a, p. 60). By the end of June 2020, this figure had reduced to 9.1% (ABS 2020,

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“around half of parents were concerned about their child's learning due to the disruptions caused by the pandemic ... The vast majority (88%) were satisfied, however.”

para 15; AIHW, 2021a, p. 60).
School closures also had an impact on people's wellbeing during the pandemic and survey data from the November 2020 ANUpoll (Biddle et al., 2020) indicates that around half of parents were concerned about their child's learning due to the disruptions caused by the pandemic, in particular 13% were very concerned and 37% somewhat concerned (p. 2). The vast majority were satisfied, however, with the way their child's education institution handled the COVID-19 situation (48% very satisfied and 40% somewhat satisfied (p. 3).

Research design

Research purpose

The research was initiated to gather data indicating the ways in which the COVID-19 lockdown was impacting the wellbeing of staff and students in system schools so as to inform organisational responses facilitating optimised learning and wellbeing.

Research questions

From the research purpose two research questions were derived.

- 1. What are staff and students' perceptions of their wellbeing, enthusiasm and engagement with their work, stress, work-life balance, online connections, teaching/learning strategies and whole of school and classroom processes pre COVID lockdown and during COVID lockdown.
- 2. Can this data indicate system schools that require support regarding wellbeing?

Method

A voluntary online survey for teaching and non-teaching staff was prepared in Microsoft Forms and

distributed to staff at six Adventist schools in Sydney (referred to as system of schools) from 30 August to 3rd September 2021, after ten weeks of lockdown and eight weeks of learning from home. Staff were questioned regarding their engagement with their work during lockdown, what they valued most from their school leaders at that time, suggestions for improving staff wellbeing, and feedback about how they were managing their personal wellbeing.

The questions in this survey used wording based on the Insight SRC school culture survey (Adventist Schools Australia (ASA), 2021) completed in ASA schools 3-14 May 2021. At this date, this system's students were learning at school and had been since the beginning of Term 4, 2020. The questions were replicated to allow comparison of data to measure the potential impact of the second COVID19 lockdown on our staff.

Student focus groups were also conducted with Stage 2 and 3 students using qualitative semi-structured interviews. Classes were selected by school principals based on teacher wellbeing, to ensure this process did not add any further stress. Groups of 5 students were selected by teachers based on possible engagement in the process and ability to express their views and opinions. The semi-structured interviews allowed students to explain their thoughts and provide any clarification on their views. The focus groups were conducted online using Microsoft Teams and Zoom. The interview questions were a mixture of open and closed responses. The open responses were analysed using deductive coding, to capture themes present in the responses.

The survey was voluntary and the responses from each school provide an acceptable response rate. With 133 staff completing the survey, the overall response rate for this survey was 44% of all staff across the surveyed school

This information was used to identify schools with staff wellbeing levels that were of concern and to initiate interactions with leadership to adapt school strategies to address these issues. The information gathered also validated, contextualised, or eliminated, perceived issues held by system leaders based on independent anecdotal staff feedback.

Findings and discussion

Closed question staff responses - system wide data

To assist analysis staff responses were 'collapsed'. Responses at or above the midpoint of the scale were considered 'favourable' and the percentage of these responses compared to the whole population was calculated (% favourable). Table 1 provides a comparison of % favourable data collected across the sampled schools in May and September 2021 using closed questions.

Figure 1: Number of staff from each school participating in the survey

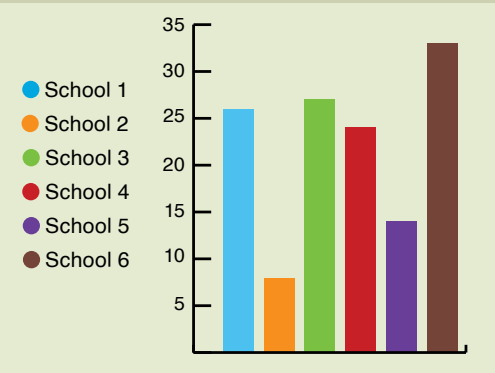


Table 1: Comparison of current and pre-lockdown staff responses

	Pre lockdown % favourable	Current % favourable	Difference %
How positive are you feeling while working during lockdown?	92	84	- 8.0
How enthusiastic are you feeling while working during lockdown?	95	75	- 20.0
How stressed are you feeling while working during lockdown?	56	65	9.0
How depressed are you feeling while working during lockdown?	89	83	- 6.0
How much do you feel there is a good team spirit at our school during lockdown?	90	84	- 6.0
How high do you think school morale is during lockdown?	86	75	- 11.0
How effective do you feel you have been in completing your work during lockdown?	97	92	- 5.0
How supportive do you feel your leaders/managers have been during lockdown?	89	91	2.0
How effectively have you been able to communicate with your colleagues during the lockdown?	98	88	- 10.0
How effectively do you feel students have engaged with their learning during lockdown?	88	77	- 11.0
How well have you been able to access the resources needed to do your job during lockdown?	95	96	1.0
How concerned have you been about catching COVID-19 as a result of your work?	65	63	- 2.0

In the COVID period pre-lockdown staff responses indicated high positive levels (>85% favourable) for mental health, morale, enthusiasm, team spirit, effectiveness, leader support, resourcing, communication, and student learning. Catching COVID as a result of being in the workplace was the least favourably addressed concern.

In the lockdown period of this investigation, there was a significant reduction in enthusiasm for work and school morale which is expected after eight weeks of working from home and the separation of staff from colleagues, students and work contexts. It is interesting to note that while enthusiasm dropped, stress levels have improved since the last survey, possibly showing improvement in managing the changes and implementing learnings from the first lockdown in 2020.

The perceived reduction in student engagement during lockdown is supported by the student focus group data which shows student positivity for learning from home dropped 12% since the last lock down (Table 2).

Another indicator that leadership teams have improved their management of this lock down, compared to the previous one, is the improvement in the data regarding supportive leadership with

91% positive responses (rating a 3, 4 or 5 out of 5), though this is a modest 2% increase. A 1% increase in access to resources may also suggest a facilitating leadership response.

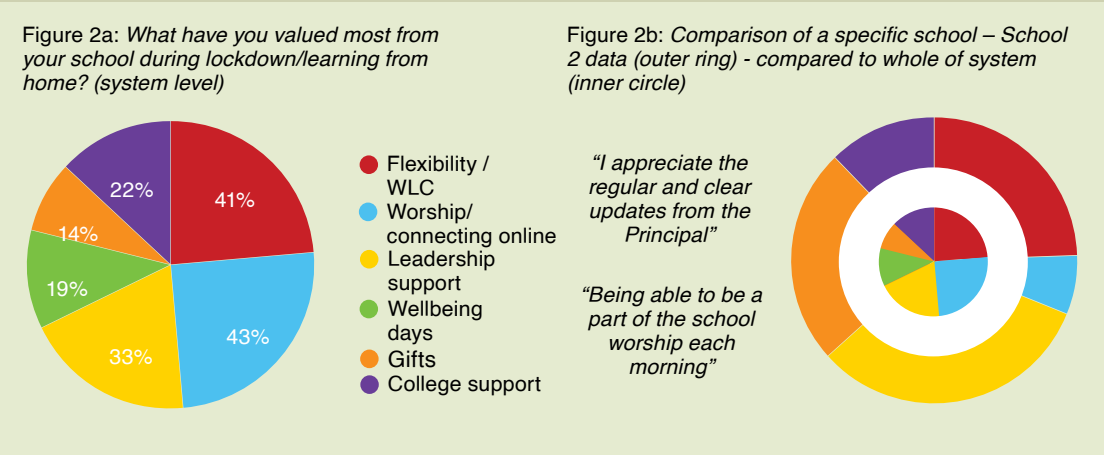
Open response findings – staff wellbeing survey

The following Figures 2-4 summarise the results of the coding analysis, identifying common themes in the responses to each question. One of these themes was work life balance (WLB). Each pair of graphs indicates the percentage offering responses to a specific question included in the title of the graph on the left. The graph on the left represents the responses from across the whole system while the graph on the right is a combination of the system responses in the centre circle and a specific set of school responses in the outer 'ring'. This enables easy identification of differences between whole of system and specific school responses.

The ability for staff to work from home and use time saved was highly valued along with staying connected through staff worship, online meetings, and classes with students (Figure 2a). This data varied among the schools. Comparative information (Figure 2b, 3b, 4b) unique for each school was provided as feedback to that school's leadership team to

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Figure 2: Most valued school response during lockdown



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If you want to know how to do something better, ask the people doing it!
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enable them to adapt their staff wellbeing strategies, leadership support and teamwork as needed.

Figure 3a shows that most of the staff would like to maintain the current wellbeing strategies implemented at their schools and to continue to focus on their wellbeing moving forward as they adapt to future changes and transition back to face to face learning. There were many suggestions for improvements to processes including meetings, assessments, and professional development. By comparing each school's data to the system level data, schools with higher staff wellbeing needs and suggestions regarding current processes could be identified, as is shown in Figure 3b for School # 6. Staff at School 6 express a strong need for prioritising wellbeing, process improvement and less focus on maintenance. This data informs system administration, suggesting targets for change in facilitating school leaders' management for enhanced staff wellbeing.

Figure 4a shows the variety of ways our staff were managing their own wellbeing during the lock down. All leadership teams in our schools, and at system level, were encouraging staff to go outdoors as much as possible and were enabling meaningful spiritual connection times through staff worship and chaplain support. There was not a lot of variance in results across our schools in how staff have taken care of their wellbeing. The main variance noted was the participation in 'Religion' as a wellbeing activity, with smaller schools (P-6) recording higher results (as shown in Figure 4b for School 5).

This survey process provided an opportunity to give a voice to our staff regarding their experiences and recommendations during this second lockdown.

This is a key component of effective schools which itself leads to increased staff wellbeing. Nita Clarke (2010) commented that in organisations where engagement worked well, there are employees who are “informed, involved and energised” (p. 2). To meet challenges and provide a better service, leaders need to seek the views and feedback of staff on the frontline. ‘If you want to know how to do something better, ask the people doing it!’ (p. 2). Chauhan & Sharma (2019) agree that providing opportunity for a staff voice can reduce fear and stress, consequently increasing engagement in an organisation.

Closed response findings – students

The table below indicates that whilst the students' positive feelings about learning from home have decreased across all schools by 12%, they are looking forward to school, feel their teachers are supportive and enjoy being a student at their school, with an average positive response of 91% in these areas. Student concern about contracting COVID19 during this lock down was varied across the schools, which could be attributed to the varied restrictions in place within LGAs of Sydney, however it is noted that this has increased significantly since the last lockdown. Two of the three schools who participated in this research were in Level 4 plus LGAs where restrictions were increased and recorded COVID19 cases were higher.

Open response findings – student focus groups

Student focus groups were conducted online with students from schools #1, 4 & 5, based on the availability of students to gather feedback on their learning from home experiences (these will be

Figure 3: Suggestions for managing wellbeing at school

Figure 3a: Do you have any suggestions for managing wellbeing at your school? (system level)

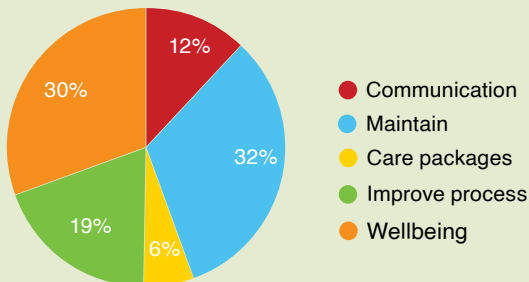


Figure 3b: Comparison of specific school data compared to system (School # 6 outer ring, system inside circle)

"More individual wellbeing check ins for staff."

"The school counsellor to check in with staff and to provide assistance"

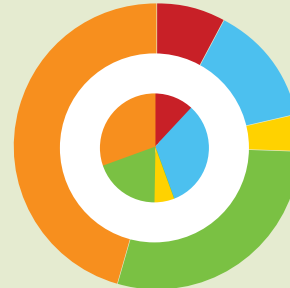


Figure 4: Wellbeing strategies used during lockdown

Figure 4a: How you have taken care of your wellbeing during the current lockdown? (system)

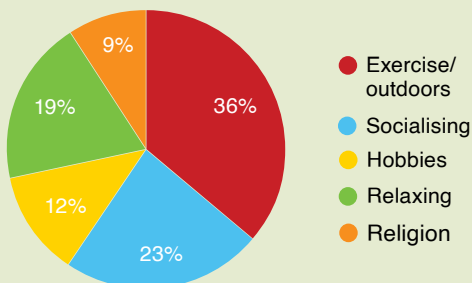


Figure 4b: Comparison of specific school data compared to system (School # 5 outer ring, system inside circle)

"Exercise & eating healthier because of more time available in the evenings"

"Reading the Bible, praying and exercise"



“The overwhelming feedback from these students was that they needed schools to facilitate connections with their peers and to provide more engaging lessons”

referred to as combined schools).

The following Figures 5-7 summarise the results of the coding analysis, identifying common themes in the response to this question.

The overwhelming feedback from these students was that they needed schools to facilitate connections with their peers and to provide more engaging lessons so as to be motivated and encouraged to remain engaged in their learning. Associate Professor Femke Buisman-Pijlman from Melbourne Graduate School of Education (MGSE) comments that social engagement is an essential component to positive learning and the online learning space needs to be adapted to create a connected learning

environment (cited in MGSE, 2021). This student feedback aligns with staff feedback that they valued staff workshops and connecting online (43%) during this time.

Other observations noted were the differences in student's perceptions of engaging lessons, with school #1 having no feedback that this needed improvement and also that schools # 4 & 5 had no technology issues and appear to have higher motivation to learn, requesting increased meeting times online and engagement strategies.

The system technology support during the lockdowns was valued by staff, with 96% favourable responses regarding staff ability to access resources

Table 2: Comparison of current and pre-lockdown student responses

Questions	Pre lockdown % favourable	Current % Favourable	Difference %
How positive are you feeling about learning from home?	85	73	(12)
How cheerful are you while learning from home?	81	73	(8)
How frustrated/angry are you feeling while learning from home?	79	73	(6)
How happy are you to be a student at your school during learning from home?	87	100	13
How much do you look forward to school while learning from home?	78	80	2
How supportive/helpful do you feel your teacher has been while learning from home?	91	93	2
How worried are you about catching COVID-19?	60	40	(20)

“data ... indicates how well staff have coped in these stressful situations and it is recommended that feedback be conveyed ... to ... affirm their professional capacity”

needed to do their jobs. This is also supported by student data which shows that there were limited technology issues during the lockdown period and the technology that was used was working so well that the students were requesting more opportunities to connect.

Staff data shows stress levels had reduced since the first lockdown and this could be linked with the student data which shows high percentages of students who feel their teachers were supportive during working from home (93%). This reduced stress level of staff could also contribute to students looking forward to school during this time (80%) and their positivity about being students at our schools (100%).

Recommendations

Four recommendations emerge from this research include:

1. This research has provided an opportunity for a staff voice, providing system administrators with useful data to inform system interventions. It is recommended that these surveys be adapted and repeated in the future, becoming a continuing practice to monitor staff and student wellbeing post COVID and inform both staff and administration.
2. A focus on effective communication with staff during periods of change and affirmation for adaptability during these times is recommended. The data collected indicates how well staff have coped in these stressful situations and it is recommended that feedback be conveyed to staff regarding these positive aspects to support and affirm their professional capacity. Specific feedback to our Information Technology team

regarding the positive responses regarding staff access to resources and students desire for more online learning should also be communicated, as this was a steep learning curve during the first lockdown and this feedback shows the result of the dedication of these staff.

3. Structured student socialisation time should be planned during any future learning-from-home periods and where possible should be considered as an effective engagement strategy in face-to-face teaching.
4. Schools with lower levels of staff wellbeing should be provided with extra system support and linked to other schools who have strengths in these areas.

Future research directions:

Ongoing research into student and staff wellbeing should be conducted annually, with relevant adaptations, and variances between schools researched and leveraged to grow and strengthen each school context.

Learning from home processes could be reviewed and analysed with results shared to inform future response strategies. Student engagement during online lessons that were recorded could also be reviewed to inform current teacher practice.

An investigation into the factors influencing the positive and negative variances between schools for staff and student results could also occur. These include variances such as why smaller schools have higher identification of religion as a wellbeing activity with staff, which engagement strategies were used in school # 1 and what forms of technology support were offered in schools 4 & 5.

Figure 5: *How could your teacher/school improve your learning from home experience? (combined school results)*

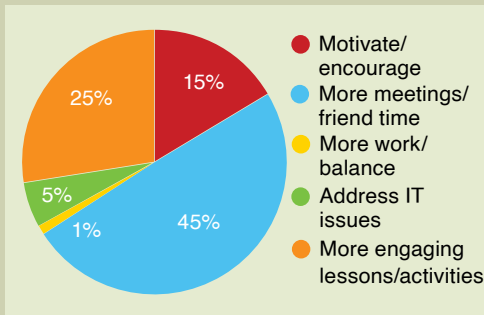


Figure 7: *School # 4 results (outside) compared to combined school results (inside)*

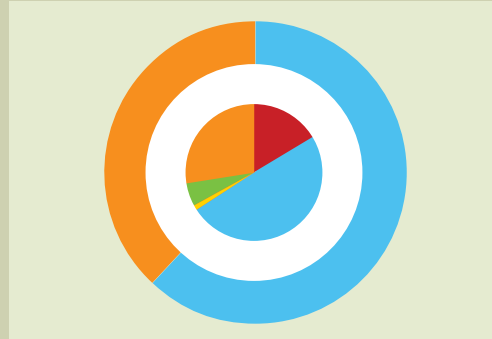


Figure 6: *School # 1 results (outside) compared to combined school results (inside)*

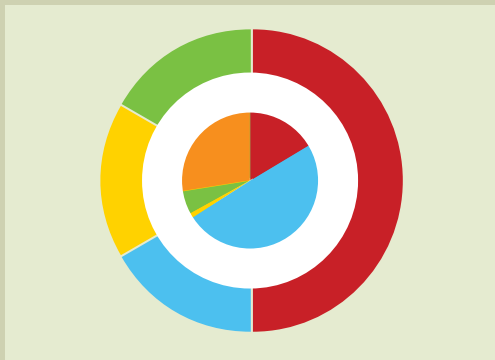
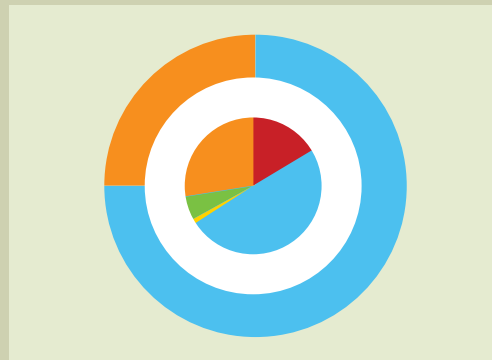


Figure 8: *School # 5 results (outside) compared to combined school results (inside)*



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As our schools strive to use data to inform and modify their teaching and provide our students with best practice pedagogy, research could be conducted on the benefits of student collaboration on student outcomes and pedagogical approaches that incorporate this.

Conclusion

The impact of the second COVID19 lockdown in Sydney has varied across Adventist schools in Sydney. Staff and students' concerns regarding contracting COVID19 range from mild to severe depending on the location of schools, the number of COVID19 cases reported, and the level of restrictions present.

Through regular communication from school leadership teams staff are feeling supported, are able

to do their jobs and are experiencing lower stress levels compared to the 2020 lockdown. Schools have improved their strategies for learning from home that were developed in 2020 and will continue to do so through the remainder of 2021 and gradually return to face to face teaching.

This research enabled the school system to focus its support during the pandemic and provide valuable feedback to schools regarding their staff, and students' wellbeing at this time. **TEACH**

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