

MEDIA RELEASE

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Working, learning from home impacts detailed

A WIMMERA-BASED study has unveiled the impacts and stressors of working and learning from home for many local families.

The Wimmera Development Association-commissioned report aimed to understand and record people's experiences of learning and working from home during the first COVID-19 lockdown in March and April 2020. This included how households shared the load – of supervising learning, work commitments and general household duties; how caregivers connected with schools; and their internet connectivity, digital literacy and access to devices.

Dr Cathy Tischler, a social and economic researcher from the region, led the study for Wimmera Development Association

An interview team spoke with more than 50 participants involved in learning from home or supervising learning from home during April and May. More than 80 per cent of participants were women and about half lived in the Horsham Rural City municipality.

“Our work found that while some families were able to share the load, it was predominantly women taking the brunt of the work of caring for children, managing learning from home and juggling work or study,” Dr Tischler said.

“There are range of factors at play here, including the nature and expectations of work in the region – but the stress of this additional responsibility on one member of the household was identifiable in the research.”

Dr Tischler said parents reported “significant” variation in the ways in which schools communicated with caregivers and provided educational support. Some parents returned their children to school as learning from home became too difficult or unworkable.

“The focus of schools appeared to shift – at least from a parent's perspective – and be strongly about the provision of curriculum. For some schools, the social welfare and support elements of education dropped off and the role of teaching became strictly about information transfer,” Dr Tischler said.

“Learning from home was labor-intensive for parents of younger children and more than half of all families reported spending six or more hours supporting their children with learning from home.

“Women with the highest levels of education, and the lowest levels, both identified the most significant struggles.”

Dr Tischler said many caregivers took leave or reduced their working hours to support learning from home. In some instances, grandparents and friends became involved in providing support to parents.

Dr Tischler said one positive from the experience was that it also gave parents more insights into their child’s education.

“This period of time changed the level of engagement many parents had with education. A number of parents said they realised their children needed more help to learn; and even just understanding the extensive workload that their children would complete each day, in a school setting, was an eye-opener for many parents” she said.

Dr Tischler said the study prompted further questions and actions in understanding digital literacy and internet connectivity – particularly in low socioeconomic households, small businesses and migrant families.

“Internet access and connectivity impacted children’s ability to access school and engage. This is particularly a concern for low-socioeconomic families and people living outside of larger towns in the region,” she said.

“There was a lot of perseverance by families coping with poor or intermittent internet connection; some incurring significant additional costs to ensure they had the technology and access they needed – costs which ranged from hundreds of dollars to around \$3000. But paying more for internet didn’t necessarily drive better results.”

The study recommended further consideration for how to ensure educational and linked social welfare support the quality of support has consistency across the region, should learning from home occur again.

It also provided insight into the impacts on individual families and particularly women in their efforts to manage expectations and responsibilities for childcare and learning from home.

Wimmera Development Association is the peak advocacy body behind many major and emerging projects in the region. It supports businesses, promotes economic development opportunities to investors and is a key link between industry and governments, lobbying for improved infrastructure and for regional priority issues.

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Editors please note: An electronic copy of the report is available for your information. *It is not for publication.*