

## THE AUSTRALIAN

# Churchill fellows hold 'war room' to plot COVID-19 recovery

By **REBECCA URBAN**, NATIONAL EDUCATION CORRESPONDENT

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Megan Gilmour knows firsthand the toll that missing school takes on children.

In 2010, her son fell critically ill and for two years fought to get well from hospital while also struggling with loneliness.

So she was not at all surprised by the public outpouring of concern over the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns on children's education and mental health.

"The pandemic has provided unparalleled insight into the negative effect that isolation has on humans generally and kids specifically," Ms Gilmour said.

"Many families witnessed how prolonged separation of children and young people from their peers and learning can be devastating. We can't take the connection school offers for granted."

Ms Gilmour, whose charity Missing School has developed telepresence robots to help sick children remain connected to their classmates when they are absent, was among a selected group of Churchill fellows to take part in the inaugural Churchill Policy Room in Canberra on Monday to discuss Australia's recovery from the pandemic.

Winston Churchill Memorial Trust chief executive Adam Davey described the meeting, which was also attended by several government ministers, members of the opposition parties and staff from a range of government departments, as a unique opportunity for experts from a range of fields to put evidence-informed ideas in front of policy makers.

He is hoping it will become an annual event.

“The Churchill Policy Room is modelled on the Churchill War Rooms — it is a hot-house for the sharing of ideas for public policy reform,” said Winston Churchill Memorial Trust chief executive Adam Davey.

“For over 50 years, the Churchill Trust has been sending about 100 Australians each year on international fellowships to gather new ideas and explore different approaches to policy reform, as well as broaden their networks, for the benefit of Australian society.”

Other fellows who took part in the event included Victoria’s deputy chief fire officer Scott Falconer, Victorian Custody Reference Group chairwoman Claire Seppings, Cities for Play founder Natalia Krysiak and Tasmania educator Steve Harrison.

Ms Gilmour completed her Churchill Fellowship in 2016, having travelled to Finland, Sweden, Britain and Canada to study models to enable seriously sick children to maintain their education connections.

A \$600,000 grant from St George Foundation followed, enabling Missing School to pilot the use of two-way robots in schools that allow students to dial in to see and hear their teachers and classmates, be seen and heard, and remotely control their movement from hospital or home.

More than 100 sick children have benefited from the service.

Ms Gilmour said the pandemic had confirmed the role of schools and technology in continuing education for students during a health crisis.

She said she hoped for a change in policy that would elevate students with a health condition to a priority cohort in national school reforms, including systematic policy for the use of telepresence technology during absence.

**REBECCA URBAN, NATIONAL EDUCATION CORRESPONDENT**

Rebecca Urban is national education correspondent based in Melbourne. She has worked for The Australian since 2008, when she joined the Sydney bureau as a business reporter. Previous roles include business edit... [Read more](#)

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