

Health and Safety Advice for Returning to Onsite Learning in the Context of COVID-19

Message from Victoria's Chief Health Officer



As Victoria's Chief Health Officer, and as a member of the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee, and with the health, wellbeing and safety of students and staff front of mind, I fully endorse a return to onsite learning for all Victorian schools.

I trust that you have seen and understood my precautionary approach to onsite schooling to date in Victoria. This precautionary approach continues, so I hope that you have confidence in my view that the risk to you, your students and the broader community has changed to a point that I am confident in the full return to onsite schooling.

There continues to be little evidence within Australia and globally of transmission between children in the school environment. I understand that little evidence is not the same as evidence of limited transmission. Nonetheless, the available evidence largely indicates that transmission between children is likely to be low compared to adult populations. This growing evidence, coupled with very low levels of community transmission in Victoria, means that the risk posed to staff and students returning to onsite learning at this current time is very low.

While the risk is very low, we continue to advise caution, particularly in relation to adults and more vulnerable members of our school communities. The following guidance provides some sensible steps schools can take to reduce the risk of coronavirus transmission and provide a safe working and learning environment for staff and students.

Everyone in the Victorian community has a role to play in protecting themselves and keeping the spread of coronavirus suppressed.

Thank you for your incredible contribution to Victoria's response to COVID-19.



Adj Clin Prof Brett Sutton

Victorian Chief Health Officer

The purpose of this guidance is to support schools to continue to provide safe teaching and learning environments for staff and students as schools transition back to onsite learning.

Actions for schools

Schools should consider a variety of strategies to support physical distancing and good hygiene practices to reduce the risk of coronavirus (COVID-19) transmission within the practical limitations of a school environment. The following actions are to be considered, adapted and implemented as necessary according to the education setting and the individual needs of the staff, students and wider school community.

Attendance onsite

Perhaps the most important action school communities can take to reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19 is to ensure that any unwell staff, children and young people remain at home.

While the risk of transmission of the virus is very low, staff or students most at risk of severe illness should individually assess appropriateness for onsite attendance at this time with support from their medical practitioner.

As the main risk of transmission of COVID-19 in the school environment is between adults, it is important that visitors to school grounds are limited to those delivering or supporting essential school services and operations.

- All unwell staff and students must stay home.
- Parents/carers of a student with complex medical needs (including those with compromised immune systems) should seek advice from the student's medical practitioner to support decision-making about whether onsite education is suitable, noting that this advice may change depending on the status of the COVID-19 pandemic in Victoria.
- In line with other members of the community, teachers and staff may be at greater risk of more serious illness if they are infected with COVID-19 if they are:
 - aged 70 years and over
 - aged 65 years and over, with chronic medical conditions
 - of any age, with compromised immune systems
 - Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and aged over 50, with chronic medical conditions.

Such teachers and staff may be considered vulnerable and should take additional care to protect themselves and consider working from home. Refer to the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) [Fact sheet for 'at-risk' groups in the community](#).

- Visitors to school grounds should be limited to those delivering or supporting essential school services and operations (e.g. student health and wellbeing services, specialist curriculum programs, maintenance workers).

- Additional staff, including parent volunteers, should be discouraged from attending school at this time. Activities dependent on and involving parents (e.g. specialist programs, 1:1 reading) should be cancelled.
- Parent–teacher information sessions and interviews should meet physical distancing requirements of 1.5 metres between adults, or else be replaced with virtual alternatives.
- Activities that involve onsite attendance by students from different educational institutions (e.g. interschool sport or interschool debating) should not take place or else be replaced, where possible, with virtual alternatives.
- School assemblies, excursions, camps and other non-essential large gatherings must be postponed or adapted considering use of technology.

Hygiene

Everyone can protect themselves and prevent the spread of COVID-19 by continuing effective hand hygiene. Enhanced hygiene measures should continue during the return to onsite teaching and learning.

- All staff and students should undertake regular hand hygiene, particularly on arrival to school, before and after eating, after blowing their nose, coughing, sneezing or using the toilet. This should be directed or supervised by staff where required.
- Where soap and water are not readily available, hand sanitiser should be provided in every occupied room.
- It is recommended that students do not drink directly from drinking fountains at this time. Instead they should bring their own water bottle for use (and refilling) at school.
- Staff and students should be reminded to clean their phone regularly.
- Where relevant, the highest hygiene practices among food handlers should be ensured where these services are operating. Sharing of food should not occur.

School arrival and departure

As the main risk of introducing COVID-19 to the school environment is from adults, close proximity between adult members of the school community should be avoided, particularly during school drop-off and pick-up.

- Schools should encourage staff and parents to observe physical distancing measures by not congregating in areas inside or around the school.
- Local school arrangements to practise physical distancing and minimise interaction of students and adults within the school and at school entry points may include:
 - staggering drop-off and pick-up times to reduce the number of adults congregating at the school gate or outside classrooms
 - placing dots at the school gate to encourage spacing between adults

- encouraging parents to enter the school grounds only when essential to do so and contacting the school by phone or email as required.
- Non-contact greetings should be encouraged.
- Schools should not conduct wide-scale temperature checking of students as there is limited evidence to demonstrate the value of such checks.

Considerations for teaching and learning environments

Maintaining a physical distance of 1.5 metres will not always be practical in education settings. Physical distancing is most important between adults.

Reducing mixing between different cohorts (either classes or year levels) is recommended as a precautionary measure to minimise risk of the spread of transmission and aid containment in the rare event of a confirmed case of COVID-19 onsite.

- Fresh airflow indoors should be promoted and use of outdoor learning areas or environments with enhanced ventilation maximised where possible and as practical depending on weather conditions.
- Mixing of staff and students between rooms should be avoided where possible.
- Local school arrangements to reduce mixing between students and staff from different classes or year levels outside the learning environment may continue to be of use as precautionary measures and include:
 - staggering of break times and separating different classes or year levels when outdoors
 - considering the order and pace in which classrooms are vacated
 - organising student traffic in corridors and locker bays (e.g. dividing the corridor for traffic direction).
- Where multiple staff are required in a classroom, staff should be reminded to maintain physical distancing from each other as much as practical.

Considerations for offices and staff facilities

As the greatest risk of transmission of COVID-19 in the school environment is between adults, close proximity between staff should be avoided where possible and especially in offices and staffrooms.

Workstations should be spaced out as much as possible and the number of staff in offices limited. This might mean relocating staff to other spaces (e.g. the library or unused classrooms).

In line with other workplaces across Victoria, remind staff to maintain physical distancing from each other as much as possible in the reception area, staffroom and offices.

Cleaning and facilities management

Environmental cleaning, coupled with regular hand hygiene, remains important to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission.

Continue the extension of routine environmental cleaning, including progressive cleaning throughout the day, to ensure that risks of transmission are reduced for high-touch services.

Schools should consider the necessity of using shared items or equipment at this time. Such items may include shared computers, class sets of teaching and learning materials, and musical instruments etc. Hand hygiene immediately before and after use of shared equipment is recommended. Risk can be further minimised by regular cleaning of high-touch shared equipment, for example using an antibacterial wipe where appropriate.

Sport and recreation

In line with community advice, reasonable precautions are still recommended to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission in the context of sport and recreation.

- Playground equipment can be used; however, students should be directed to practise hand hygiene before and after use. Similar to other commonly touched surfaces, schools should undertake cleaning where practical.
- Swimming and aquatic facilities should not be used.
- Outdoor facilities are preferred for the purpose of physical education and recreational play. Where indoor facilities are used, please limit the number of students.
- Non-contact sports should be encouraged. Hand hygiene must be practised before and after use of any sporting equipment.

Provision of routine care and first aid

Physical distancing is not practical when providing direct care. In this situation, standard precautions (including hand hygiene) are important for infection control.

- Standard precautions are advised when coming in to contact with someone for the purpose of providing routine care and/or assistance (for example, the use of gloves for nappy-changing, toileting, feeding).
- Standard precautions as per related policies should be adopted when providing first aid. For example, use gloves and an apron when dealing with blood or body fluids/substances.
- Hands should always be washed with soap and water or hand sanitiser used before and after performing routine care or first aid.
- Additional personal protective equipment (PPE), for example face masks, is not required to provide routine care or first aid for students who are well, unless such precautions are usually adopted in the routine care of an individual student.

Management of an unwell student or staff member

It is important that any staff member or student who becomes unwell while at school returns home. While it is unlikely that a staff member or student who is unwell with flu-like symptoms will have COVID-19, there are some sensible steps schools can take while a student awaits collection by a parent or carer as a precaution.

- Staff and students experiencing compatible symptoms with COVID-19, such as fever, cough or sore throat, should be isolated in an appropriate space with suitable supervision and collected by a parent/carer as soon as possible. Urgent medical attention should be sought where indicated. It is not suitable for an unwell student to travel home unsupervised.
- Where staff or students are experiencing symptoms compatible with COVID-19, the important actions to follow include practising hand hygiene, physical distancing and (where possible) putting on a face mask.
- In the context of schools supporting students with complex health needs, if the care of an unwell child or young person is to be prolonged (for example, because it will take some hours for a parent to collect a child) and maintaining distance is not practical when providing direct care, gloves, a gown and eye protection could be considered if available.
- Face masks should not be used in situations where an individual is unable to safely or practically tolerate a mask (for example, a child with complex medical needs including existing respiratory needs, and younger children).
- Health care plans, where relevant, should be updated to provide additional advice on monitoring and identifying the unwell child in the context of COVID-19.
- If a staff member is unsure whether a student is unwell, it is advisable in the first instance to contact the parent/carer to discuss any concerns about the health status of the student and, taking a precautionary approach, request the parent/carer to collect their child if concerns remain. A trained staff member could take the temperature of the student, where appropriate, to support decision-making. Gloves should be worn for the purpose of taking a temperature.
- Staff or students experiencing symptoms compatible with COVID-19 should be encouraged to seek the advice of their healthcare professional who can advise on next steps. A medical certificate is not required to return to an education setting after a period of illness; however, staff and students should not return until symptoms resolve.
- Cleaning guidance should be followed according to the circumstances of the case. If a student spreads droplets (for example, by sneezing, coughing or vomiting), clean surfaces immediately with disinfectant wipes while wearing gloves.

Managing a suspected or confirmed case of COVID-19

The CECV has comprehensive procedures in place with the DHHS to manage suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19 in schools.

- The DHHS should be contacted on **1300 651 160** to discuss what to do next if a student or staff member:
 - is a confirmed case
 - has been in close contact with a confirmed case.
- The DHHS defines 'close contact' as someone who has either:
 - had at least 15 minutes of face-to-face contact with a confirmed case of COVID-19
 - shared a closed space for more than two hours with someone who is a confirmed case.

Unless you have a student or staff member in one of the two above categories, you do not need to take further action, unless directed to do so.