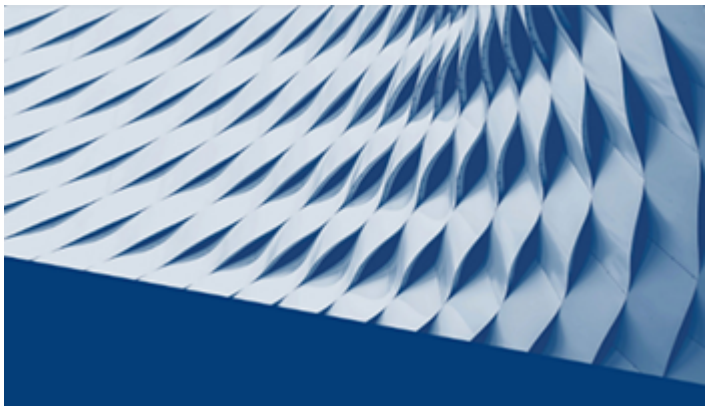
COVID-19: From the Minister for Education and Training



From the Minister

18 March 2020

We are in extraordinary and challenging times and things are changing rapidly.

As teachers and school staff, you play a significant role, with responsibility for more than 317,000 students across 818 public schools in WA.

You are also part of the community and working through this situation with your own families.

I want you to know that I appreciate everything you are doing. Thank you for continuing to ensure the best learning outcomes for all students in a professional and calm manner in the face of what remains an evolving situation.

WA schools are following a national approach.

I would like to reassure you though that each and every education decision is being made with students and school staff front of mind and acting on the advice of the Chief Health Officer.

There are two types of potential school closures, a re-active one in the event of a positive test result and a pre-emptive school closure in the absence of any positive tests.

The Chief Health Officer is a member of the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) and they have adopted a uniform national position on the issue of school operations in relation to the community transmission of COVID-19.

All chief health officers from around Australia agree that there is no need to close schools as a pre-emptive measure at this point.

Previous work suggests that the potential reduction in community transmission from pre-emptive school closures may be offset by the care arrangements that are in place for children who are not at school, for example if front line health and emergency services staff cannot attend work because their children are not at school. Children may require care from vulnerable grandparents or may continue to associate (and transmit infection) outside of school settings.

For pre-emptive school closures to be effective, prolonged closure is required and it would be unclear when they could be re-opened. If there were still a large pool of susceptible students when schools are re-opened, there would be likely to be re-emergence of transmission in the community.

Allowing schools to stay open, but with clear guidelines, will assist in the safety and well-being of our staff and students,

continue the focus on learning and regular routine in this difficult time, and ensure our most vulnerable students are observed, fed, and able to maintain hygiene processes.

School closures may still be considered later in the outbreak, in anticipation of a peak in infection rates. Short term reactive school closures may also be warranted to allow contact tracing and cleaning to occur.

I know you are doing preparatory planning to enact a temporary closure if necessary. The AHPPC is meeting to review advice on the operation of boarding facilities in schools. Further advice will also be provided this week on school sport. The advice in relation to school closures will continue to be reviewed at daily meetings of this Committee.

On Monday, the WA Government announced up to 20 days paid leave for public sector workers in response to COVID-19.

It is available for employees, including casual public sector staff whose paid personal, carers, or sick leave entitlements are exhausted.

This will be peace of mind for those of you who may contract the virus yourselves, who have to self-isolate, who need to care for a dependant who has the virus or because of school closure or disruption to other care arrangements, or you cannot attend work because of transport or other disruptions.

It is important you continue the work you are already doing in implementing a range of strategies to reduce transmission. This includes educating students about the importance of handwashing, reducing face contact and cough etiquette, as well as cleaning high touch surfaces regularly.

Social distancing is important, and I know schools, particularly those with more than 500 students, are sensibly taking extra precautions.

We all have a role to play in slowing the spread. Follow the restrictions around international travel and self-isolation. If you do not have symptoms, there is no reason to be tested. But if you are unwell for any reason, stay home and look after yourself.

The Department of Education will continue to seek the advice of the Chief Health Officer to ensure you have the latest information to keep students and staff safe.

I recognise all employees have the right to feel safe at work and at this point the current health advice is that with sensible precautions in place, schools are safe.

While we will not be immune, WA schools will be well prepared. I know this is tough, and it will be tough for the coming weeks and months, but by working together we'll get through it.

I want you to know I know how hard this is and how hearing all sorts of different "expert views" makes it even harder. The situation is still evolving and I give you my personal commitment to continue to make decisions based on the best advice available to me.

Sue Ellery MLC
Minister for Education and Training

Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
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