



Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Dear principals, teachers, educators and support staff

Chief Health Officer advice for teachers on returning to schools

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented many challenges to our community and has been a time of much uncertainty for our schools, preschools and early childhood settings. Many of you will have experienced heightened levels of stress and anxiety, particularly seeing the devastation this virus has caused in many countries around the world. Fortunately, Western Australia (WA) has been spared from widespread disease through effective border controls, contact tracing, quarantine and social distancing measures, and currently has very few cases and no evidence of community spread.

I want to thank you all for stepping up to these challenges in these unprecedented times and playing a pivotal role in the lives of children and young people in your school communities. Schools are a central part of a child's life, providing stability, a sense of achievement and a rich learning environment. A functioning education system supports the wellbeing of the wider community, the workforce, and the economy. The practicalities of changing teaching practices, including new online learning strategies, also cannot be underestimated.

The advice from the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC), WA Department of Health and myself, as WA's Chief Health Officer, remains unchanged. We have considered the benefits of schools remaining open over the last 2 months and, in the context of our wider public health strategies, determined schools should stay open and that they are safe for staff and students.

With increased testing and low rates of infection in Western Australia, I am confident that school staff and children are not at an increased risk of COVID-19 by physically attending school. Even when we had higher rates of disease in WA, only 1.5% of cases were in school students (8 cases) and one case was in a teacher, which were mostly related to travel, all of whom had mild illness and have fully recovered. Furthermore, there have been no cases of student-to-student transmission in WA and no cases of student-to-teacher transmission.

Other Australian jurisdictions have had similar experiences. In reviews of cases in South Australia and New South Wales, there has been only one case of student to student spread and no student to teacher spread. Adult staff (teachers) appear to play a role in both the introduction and, to a greater extent than children, transmission of the virus in educational settings, which is why social distancing among adults remains important. There remains no good international evidence of significant transmission between children, or between children and teachers, in schools. The down side of keeping schools closed is the potential to significantly adversely impact the cognitive, psychological and physical development of children.

I have been working nationally with AHPPC and closely with the Department for Education, Catholic Education and the Independent Schools board to make schools as safe as possible for everyone. AHPPC has also provided advice, available at: <https://www.health.gov.au/news/australian-health-protection-principal-committee-ahppc-advice-on-reducing-the-potential-risk-of-covid-19-transmission-in-schools>, which it continues to refine. This includes increasing cleaning throughout

the day, making sure there is soap and tissues for students and staff, having protocols in place to practice social distancing, not having large gatherings of the school community and teaching children, however young, to avoid passing on germs.

Working closely with the Department for Education, WA Health has developed clear protocols for a minimum 24-hour closure in the event of a case, to enable contact tracing and thorough cleaning. These rigorous protocols have been effectively adopted previously in WA.

There are things you can do as an individual in your work setting. Please make sure you stay home if you are unwell and, if you have fever or respiratory symptoms, get tested for COVID-19 before returning to work. Follow all of the social distancing guidelines when interacting with other school staff and parents – forgo the handshake or hug and keep 1.5 m from each other in the staff-room. I acknowledge that Western Australia is doing well, but there is a long way to go before we can say it is over and I encourage you to maintain all these recommendations.

I appreciate the fantastic work that Western Australian principals, teachers, educators and support staff are doing during this unprecedented time. You have been true community leaders and pivotal in helping many children and their families manage during this difficult time.

Thank you for your leadership and dedication to your profession.

Yours sincerely,



DR ANDY ROBERTSON
Chief Health Officer

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