

Sunday 15 March 2020

COVID-19: new directions and advice

Dear colleagues,

Firstly, thank you again for the queries that have come through last night and today. It's very helpful to get feedback about areas where greater clarity is sought, so again, please do continue to get in touch with further feedback, comments and questions.

This update is long and detailed. To make it more digestible, it's divided into two sections: New Directions and Q&As.

The New Directions section provides information that is a result of decisions taken over the weekend by national and state governments and authorities.

The Q&As are responses to questions raised by those who have written to me over the past 24 hours.

There is a lot of information, but it is all focussed on the very important role schools need to play in both protecting the health of our students and staff and in supporting broader efforts to slow the spread of COVID-19.

Thank you for the hours of hard work and for your leadership. I know many of you held school leadership team meetings over this weekend. Please pass on my sincere thanks to each and every member of your teams. These are really challenging times, but in the end we are all working to ensure the safety and well being of not only our students and staff, but our wider community.

NEW DIRECTIONS

CAMPS AND EXCURSIONS

All camps scheduled to commence from and including Tuesday 17 March must be postponed and rescheduled, or, if there is no other option, cancelled. If you have a camp scheduled to commence tomorrow and are able to cancel it, it is recommended that you do so. Otherwise, no camps can commence from Tuesday 17 March.

For the purposes of excursions, a school excursion is defined to include local parks and sporting facilities regularly used by the school, including local swimming pools.

All excursions outside the school for purposes such as visits to cultural institutions, art galleries, theatres and sporting events or facilities (other than those local facilities regularly used by the school)

planned from and including Tuesday 17 March must also be postponed or cancelled. Like camps, if excursions planned for Monday 16 March can be cancelled, it is recommended that you do so.

An exception to this is Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) students attending a prescribed theatre performance for VCE Theatre Studies where the audience will be less than 500 people.

This does not include student and staff travel between campuses of the same school. It also does not include travel by individual staff or small groups of staff to professional development events.

INTERNATIONAL ARRIVALS

Everyone arriving into Australia from overseas from midnight tonight (15 March) will be required to self-isolate for 14 days. This obviously includes students and staff who may be returning from overseas excursions or other travel.

Importantly, it also includes parents and carers and any other relatives or friends of your students who are returning from overseas travel. As they are required to self-isolate, they must not visit the school to pick up children or for any other reason. Please remind your parents and community members of this.

In addition, in response to the New Zealand Government's travel restrictions announced over the weekend, staff and students can no longer travel to New Zealand. This is effective from today, Sunday 15 March 2020.

SWIMMING LESSONS

Swimming lessons that are held at a local swimming pool can continue.

RESIDENTIAL AGED CARE VISITS

Based on advice from the Commonwealth Government to protect vulnerable Australians, schools should not visit residential aged care facilities.

BASTOW PROGRAMS

To enable all principals to give their full time and attention to their students, staff and communities at this challenging time, all Bastow professional learning programs specifically for school principals have been postponed, effective from Monday 16 March.

Registered participants have been informed today. I know there will be a number of participants disappointed by this decision, but it is important that we enable you to focus on the current highest priority, which is ensuring that you are able to continue to ensure your schools are calm environments in which students, staff and community members are receiving clear and regular information.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

SCHOOL CLOSURES

No government school is currently closed or in the process of being closed. You will be informed directly if there is any prospect that your school will be closed, either as a stand-alone school closure or as part of a local or area-based closure. You will then be provided with detailed advice, a step-by-step guide and communication resources to support you through that process.

ORGANISED GATHERINGS

The Commonwealth Government has announced that mass gatherings of more than 500 people are now prohibited. This explicitly does not include schools running normal teaching and learning program. It does, however, apply to any school event that involves attendance by community members who are not students or staff (where staff includes support staff) and where total attendance will exceed 500. This includes school assemblies and sporting events.

It does not include parent-teacher events unless you expect there to be more than 500 people including community members to be present at any one time.

In schools with more than 500 students, you should review internal school gatherings and change arrangements for full school assemblies. Staggered lunch breaks should be introduced if possible where these don't currently occur, and any other large in-school student gatherings and events should be postponed, or re-arranged so multiple smaller events are held.

EMPLOYMENT OF EDUCATION SUPPORT STAFF

In the event of any school closure that is directed by the Department of Education and Training (DET) as part of the efforts to slow the spread of COVID-19, all school staff (including Education Support Staff) will be paid. I imagine you are well progressed in planning with teaching staff in relation to teaching duties in the event of a school closure. Please check with all your support staff members to ensure they also are clear about their duties in the event of a school closure.

GOOD HYGIENE PRACTICES

Again, all the above steps are part of our efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19. Can I again ask you to pay extra attention to the health and hygiene measures employed across your school, in particular the provision of soap in school toilets, changing rooms and bathrooms.

We are obviously aware of the current challenges facing supply of personal hygiene products (toilet paper, soap and hand sanitiser). In the first instance, please continue to purchase personal hygiene products through your usual suppliers. If you face an imminent shortage of personal hygiene products for staff or students and your usual supplier is unable to provide products, please first contact your cleaning provider to source products. If that is not effective, please contact the Department's cleaning unit via email on cleaning@edumail.vic.gov.au for additional support.

A [poster communicating good hygiene practices](#) is available on the [Department of Health and Human Services' coronavirus website](#). I encourage you to download it, print multiple copies and display them around the school.

SCHOOL CLEANING

While there are no reported cases of COVID-19 among the staff or students, the current school cleaning contracts and operations are appropriate and adequate.

CAPITAL WORKS

In the event of a school closure involving a school that is in the middle of a capital works or school maintenance program, the capital works and/or maintenance will continue as scheduled unless and until the builder/workers receive other directions from the Department.

Thanks

Dr David Howes

Deputy Secretary

Schools and Regional Services

The Department acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional custodians of the land and acknowledges and pays respect to their elders, past and present.

