

16th April 2020

TITLE

PASS Committee Coronavirus (COVID-19) Implications and Considerations: Communications of Eligibility for At-School Supervision in Victorian Government Specialist Schools

KEY ISSUE

The messaging around the eligibility for at-school learning supervision has remained consistent for cohorts of students, except for with children with disabilities or additional needs. Advice has been provided that at-school supervision should only be available where it is **impossible** for this to occur at home, not whether it is going to be difficult. This would apply for students with additional needs. Isolating this group as an exception to other children, where some children may be difficult to be supervised in their learning at home, but not impossible, is providing additional confusion and anxiety for families and schools. Clearer messaging is required to explain that a child's disability is another factor for consideration, not a *fait accompli*, that they should be supervised by their specialist school's staff at school.

BACKGROUND

This support paper should be read in conjunction with the *PASS Committee Coronavirus (COVID-19) Implications and Considerations: Victorian Government Specialist Schools* found at: https://www.passvic.org.au/uploaded_files/media/pass_committee_coronavirus_covid19_implications_and_considerations_victorian_government_specialist_schools__23032020.pdf

Specialist schools provide specialist and intensive support in a specific setting for students with mild to profound learning and support needs.

Specialist schools support students within a school setting who present with intellectual disabilities, hearing impairments, autism spectrum disorder, physical disabilities, severe behaviour and social and emotional disorders, significant health (including mental health) disorders and any combinations of the above. These schools may also have satellite campuses or base-rooms and can be classified as providing for a combination of the conditions listed above. These schools are found throughout Victoria within metro, regional and rural areas.

Victorian Department of Education and Training's (DET's) *Operating Model: Transition to Flexible and Remote Learning; Victorian Government Schools, From Start of Term 2, 2020*

<https://aus01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Flist.comms.educationupdates.vic.gov.au%2Ftrack%2Fclick%3Fu%3D770f4d1425f14b0d9936ca688e358872%26id%3D9cde9a84%26e%3D1f27220d&data=02%7C01%7Cpeverett.cameron.g%40edumail.vic.gov.au%7C6da398a02afa4b2ecd3508d7da7ce407%7Cd96cb3371a8744cfb69b3cec334a4c1f%7C0%7C0%7C637218102255150857&sdata=wFMoWnb6m5zqveRk3%2FBuxAsCFrrqYGIHxtyJOE4nFIY%3D&reserved=0>

This plan was designed:

Principals' Association of Specialist Schools

Ph: 0407 553 140

Executive Officer: Jayne Muldoon – muldoon.jayne.m@edumail.vic.gov.au



To increase physical distancing across the population and slow the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19), children in Victorian government schools should move to remote and flexible learning and care at the commencement of Term 2.

This means that from the start of term two all students who can learn from home must learn at home.

DET's Learning from Home: Communications Support Pack for Principals

<https://auso1.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Flist.comms.educationupdates.vic.gov.au%2Ftrack%2Fclick%3Fu%3D770f4d1425f14bod9936ca688e358872%26id%3D7e4fo3cc%26e%3D1f27220d&data=02%7Co1%7Cpeverett.cameron.g%4oedumail.vic.gov.au%7C4aeaccab85114be5455fo8d7dc772986%7Cd96cb3371a8744cfb69b3cec334a4c1f%7Co%7Co%7C637220276675722455&sdata=LUU1yhmoSOT9cl1SeN6spxXh4ntZ3lttwb7V%2Fzxsidg%3D&reserved=0>

This pack of information has been created to support communications with teachers, parents and carers, and students during the transition to remote learning.

This pack was delivered to principals and is general in nature and supports the general communications for all schools to deliver to their communities. However, specific advice was not given to principals of specialist schools and further communications within the public have created confusing or contradictory advice to those given to principals.

KEY QUOTES

*"If you **can** learn from home, you **must** learn from home."*

– Premier Dan Andrews, The Age: 7th April 2020

"...teachers will run all their classes remotely.

If students don't have access to a device at home, we'll loan them one.

And we will provide internet access for thousands of students who need it most.

*Kids whose parents still have to go to work can continue to attend school – and **we'll provide supervision.***

But I want to be clear on this: they'll be learning remotely, just like everyone else.

We absolutely don't want any more students or staff than absolutely necessary at school."

– Premier Dan Andrews, Facebook: 7th April 2020

"...all children who can learn from home must learn from home – with exceptions only in extremely limited circumstance."

*"On-site learning **will only** be available for children whose parents can't work from home and vulnerable students without access to a suitable learning environment at home."*

– Victorian Students to Learn from Home as VCE Timelines Revised,
press release on 7th April 2020 by Deputy Premier and Minister for Education, James Merlino.
Accessed at <https://www.jamesmerlino.com.au/media-releases/victorian-students-to-learn-from-home-as-vce-timelines-revised/>

In order to protect the health and safety of your children, your family, your teachers and the whole community, it is important that you follow the Victorian Government's direction and keep your child learning at home this term.

*On-site school attendance is available as **a last resort** where parents and carers are not able to put in place arrangements to supervise children at home. Your school will have provided you with further information about this.*

– Jenny Atta, Secretary, Department of Education and Training: 14th April 2020

IMPLICATIONS

To date, there has been no specific special school information that would separate the expectations of what should occur in these schools in comparison to mainstream schools. PASS is not advocating for discriminate expectations or advice for specialist schools. PASS is advocating for examples of how to apply these expectations within specialist school contexts and clear communications that support the decision-making of the principal in accordance with the general advice. The expectation is that provision will be made for 'vulnerable' children to access education on a school site, if required and requested by their parents or carers.

Prior to this announcement DET released a *School Operations Guidance Note, Initial Guidance Note Three: Transition to Flexible and Remote Learning*. It contained key points including:

- If schools transition to flexible and remote learning, primary and specialist schools will continue to provide on-site learning and support programs for students who are the children (or under the care) of essential services workers and vulnerable students, where those families choose to send their children to school. The programs for students learning on-site and by remote delivery should be as similar as possible.
- With consultation, principals should identify sufficient willing and able staff to be on site each day to provide learning (that must be provided by registered teachers), support and supervision of attending students and enable common sense social distancing measures to be applied. This may include school leadership, education support and administrative staff along with teachers.

Subsequent to these announcements made on 7th April 2020, a further document was distributed to schools, *Operating Model: Transition to Flexible and Remote Learning; Victorian Government Schools, From Start of Term 2, 2020*. This provides further advice including:

- On-site programs will also be provided for vulnerable students whose health and safety would be at risk without access to a suitable learning environment.
- All students will be learning from home, except for students in the following categories:
 - Children on days when they are not able to be supervised at home and no other arrangements can be made. This will be available for children of parents who cannot work from home, and vulnerable children, including:
 - children in out-of-home care
 - children deemed by Child Protection and/or Family Services to be at risk of harm
 - children identified by the school as vulnerable (including via referral from a family violence agency, homelessness or youth justice service or mental health or other health service and children with a disability).
- The learning program delivered on-site will be the same as the learning program delivered to students undertaking remote learning. Students learning on-site will be supervised by an on-site teacher but follow the teaching and learning program provided by their classroom teacher.

With the labelling of *children with a disability* as being vulnerable, this has caused mass confusion within our school communities. There have been inconsistent or unclear messaging as to the

eligibility of children with a disability to access supervision of learning at school. While PASS agrees that the manifestation or nature of a child's disability may be a contributing factor that may impede the ability to appropriately supervise a student's learning at home, this has been, to date, inadequately expressed within public and school communications. The ramifications of this including, but not limited to:

- an increase in anxiety amongst schools, parents, and communities
- an increase in activity from disability advocacy services projecting a belief that is not embedded with the guidance
- students in attendance of at-school learning supervision, where appropriate supervision is available in the home
- difficulty in staffing learning supervision appropriately within the school setting, whilst maintaining COVID-19 safety and DET schools physical distancing advice
- insufficient access to PPE due to increased required staff numbers in schools

This lack of clarity in stipulating that a child's disability is another factor for consideration (not a determining factor) when deciding the appropriateness of at-school learning supervision has projected an assumption that all children with a disability are vulnerable. In its most simple form this is misleading and confusing, at a deeper level, this is open to being scrutinised as being discriminatory. A child with a disability should not be precluded in the measures to combat COVID-19 and the social isolation conditions that are being implemented. In fact, many of these students have complicating medical conditions or co-morbid immunosuppressant disabilities that make them more susceptible to viruses such as COVID-19.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Due to the complexity of need, vulnerability and level of risk faced by students in specialist schools, the possible impact on student health and wellbeing is extremely high. Now more than ever clear and consistent messaging is needed from DET and our state and national ministers regarding the factors that school principals consider in determining which students should be offered at-school learning supervision.

It is recommended that DET advises schools, their communities and the media that many factors are considered when determining any individual child's access to at-school supervision; one of these being the nature and manifestation of a child's disability. Flexibility and autonomy in decision-making should be granted to the principal to make an informed decision that is supported by DET if made with due diligence being upheld.

It is recommended that this advice be taken into consideration as a matter of urgency to protect the education and health of our most vulnerable students. This would also include greater access to health and hygiene products to reduce exposure, infection and cross-infection within our schools.

PASS is committed to ensuring awareness is raised and that all planning and communications are inclusive of all learners in Victorian schools.

Regards

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jayne Muldoon', is written in a cursive style.

Principals' Association of Specialist Schools

Ph: 0407 553 140

Executive Officer: Jayne Muldoon – muldoon.jayne.m@edumail.vic.gov.au



Cameron Peverett

PASS President – Principals' Association of Specialist Schools

Principal – Colac Specialist School



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