

22nd March 2020

TITLE

PASS Committee Coronavirus (COVID-19) Implications and Considerations: Victorian Government Specialist Schools

BACKGROUND

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 DET Emergency Response Plan for Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19):

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/department/covid-19/DET%20Pandemic%20COVID%20Incident%20Response%20Plan%20-%20V1.docx>

This Plan guides the Department of Education and Training's (DET's) activities to be prepared for, respond and recover from a coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, in order to:

- *ensure timely and accurate pandemic information is delivered to DET's workforce and to education settings and their communities*
- *minimise the risk of exposure to the virus in education workplaces and settings through infection prevention and control measures*
- *plan for adequate workforce availability and processes to support education sectors' and DET's essential functions and services.*

DET's Security and Emergency Management Division, in consultation with DET's Principal Health Advisor, is responsible for updating and implementing this Plan.

IMPLICATIONS

Schools have been advised that hygiene, social distancing and personal care can mitigate the risk of contracting COVID-19, however there is a significant proportion of students for whom personal care is performed by others, and their ability to self-regulate is still developing. Students with identified communication impairments may be compromised through inability to inform others of any symptoms and social distancing is a skill that may not be understood, thus compromising wellbeing. These students will find following the advice provided by Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the Department of Education (DET) challenging.

Ensure timely and accurate pandemic information is delivered to DET's workforce and to education settings and their communities

Within DET's Emergency Response Plan for Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19), this has been described as:

Clear communication across stakeholder groups and to Victorian communities will help organisations plan for and respond to a coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Effective communication during the various stages of a pandemic is vital to help minimise transmission, provide continuity of government and essential services, and support recovery. This will also help communities understand the risks associated with a coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and how they should respond.

To date, specific advice is yet to be provided on how to manage key aspects of the Response Plan for our schools. Where hygiene, social distancing and personal care of students are the responsibility of school staff and unable to be conducted without close proximity and physical support by others, specific advice is needed for our settings. Guidelines on how staff within our schools should respond to this advice are necessary for us to care for our students, staff and families with the least amount of risk.

Minimise the risk of exposure to the virus in education workplaces and settings through infection prevention and control measures

Advice has been provided across the school sector in order to mitigate exposure and infection within the DET's Coronavirus Advice webpage:

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/department/Pages/coronavirus.aspx>

To date, there is advice pertaining to (but not limited to):

- Travel restrictions
- Organised gatherings
- Cases of confirmed contact
- NAPLAN
- Additional Pupil-Free Days
- School Cleaning and Access to Hygiene Products
- School Attendance
- Social Distancing in Schools
- Learning from Home
- Maintaining Good Health Hygiene at School
- Continuity of Learning
- International Student Program
- Camps and Excursions
- School Sport
- Vocational Education and Training (VET)

Once again, we advocate for timely advice as how to apply a number of these expectations within our settings, which can be a challenge due to our high volumes of medically vulnerable students, those with disabilities making hygiene practices less consistent, and the close proximity required by our staff to assist these students.

Plan for adequate workforce availability and processes to support education sectors' and DET's essential functions and services.

Our local workforces are essential in maintaining the health and hygiene of a large number of our students. With this comes complexities with the health and safety of our staff and their families. School staff may have their own medical concerns or may have frequent exposure to their own family members who may be elderly or have significant medical conditions. We encourage DET to consider how to support these staff in order to prevent infection and cross-infection due to the nature of their

work. The availability of casual relief staff is an ongoing issue within our specialist schools, especially as the distance increases in school location from Melbourne. Maintaining an available, appropriate, and effective casual workforce increases in the complexity of providing school continuity as the available school-based workforce decreases.

As schools, our primary concerns are around the provision of an appropriate educational experience for all of our students. This will be a significant challenge in an environment of remote learning, or where the shift from education sways towards health care of students.

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.

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.

It is recommended that DET seek advice from the DHHS to develop an appropriate individual action plan for specialist schools and if recommended, that specialist schools be declared non-operational or other solutions are applied.

Whilst our students have complex medical needs, we are schools with teachers and education support staff; only having health paraprofessionals if available. Where students are unable to be appropriately medically supported by school staff to access their education, considerations should be made as to the appropriateness of school programs. Schools are generally well equipped to educate and should not be used as medical support centres, where these experts do not reside.

We urge all policymakers and people who make decisions about schools to keep our students ongoing learning and health in mind and ensure that all plans support schools to cater for the full range of students that participate in education in Australia. We request that any decisions made enable us to make the *reasonable adjustments* our students require to access their education.

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

Regards

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Cameron Peverett". The signature is fluid and cursive, written over a white background.

Cameron Peverett

PASS President – Principals' Association of Specialist Schools

Principal – Colac Specialist School



*Leading specialist
education in Victoria*