

# South-west special developmental schools support stay-at-home learning as social distancing 'impossible'



HOME LEARNING WORKING: Warrnambool Special Developmental School principal Robert Dowell has backed calls for a strategy to return to school as social distancing 'impossible'. Picture: Anthony Brady.

SPECIAL developmental schools say if classroom-based learning was to return too soon it would be "impossible" for teachers and students to adhere with social distancing.

As the state and federal government remain at loggerheads about students returning to school amid the coronavirus, Warrnambool Special Developmental School principal Robert Dowell said eased restrictions requiring distancing would pose challenges.

"For us because we have students we have to toilet and feed, we know that can't happen," Mr Dowell said.

"It is totally impossible."

Federal Education Minister Dan Tehan has pushed for a return to classrooms saying at-risk students could fall behind. But some schools say they've recorded increased attendance and benefits from remote learning.

Mr Dowell said the school's relationships with parents had strengthened.



Warrnambool Special Developmental School principal Robert Dowell at the school on Tuesday.

"A lot of parents are aware of what we do, but they will have a deeper knowledge of our curriculum and that will be a positive byproduct as we move forward," he said.

"We've been incredibly creative and using a lot of innovative devices and ideas that will have benefits even when we come back."

Principal Association of Specialist Schools president Cameron Peverett, a principal at Colac and a Bushfield resident, said there couldn't be a "one-size fits all" approach to students returning.

"Whatever decision is made, there has to be a return to school strategy, it shouldn't be a 'right, this is when school is going back. That's going to be really troublesome'," Mr Peverett said.

"We need that lead up to fit individual families. There needs to be a level of authority and autonomy given to principals to acknowledge that it's not necessarily going to be appropriate for all students to return to schools straight away."

He has spoken with Mr Tehan about concerns that special development school teachers could not avoid contact with students amid social distancing rules.

"He is certainly aware of my view of the risks," Mr Peverett said.

"What my conversation with Minister Tehan was more about though was the confusing messages coming from the federal level rather than the state Premier. We need the message to be clear."

Mr Tehan has said some schools [risked students disengaging](#) if stay-at-home learning continued beyond May.

Victorian Education Minister James Merlino said the government was working so every student received the support they needed while learning remotely.

"We hope to see Mr Tehan's passionate defence of disadvantaged students continue after the pandemic with additional Commonwealth funding for those who need it most," Mr Melino said.

The state government also said absence rates for all state schools so far this term were "lower than usual".