

Putting the AHPPC guidance into practice in NSW Public Schools



Mark Scott

As planning for the education provision across our schools continues, so does our focus on providing for the health, safety and wellbeing of all our students and staff.

The Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) has released advice on reducing the potential risk of COVID-19 transmission in schools. The Department is committed to supporting schools to identify and implement measures, so we can continue our essential work of educating students in a safe environment. The Department's standard procedures and processes align with the AHPPC recommendations and additional measures to enhance these are being rolled out. We appreciate your support in implementing these measures within your school context.

We are grateful for all of the incredible work of our school based staff who are making unprecedented changes to the way they work to ensure the continuity of learning for our students. Our work is essential to all our communities, more so now than ever. We must ensure we can continue to support our students and as a Department, we are putting in the extra protections we can to keep our staff and students safe while we do so.



Kerry Chant

COVID-19 is a respiratory illness caused by a new virus. We know that symptoms can include fever, cough, a sore throat or shortness of breath. We know the symptoms can be mild in many and severe in some,

particularly the elderly and those with pre-existing health conditions. The virus can spread from person to person, but we know that good hygiene and physical distancing as well as exclusion of people with symptoms from any setting helps prevent infection. We are aiming to suppress community transmission of COVID-19 to low levels and continue to implement a range of measures such as rapid testing and isolation of people with symptoms of COVID-19, identification of their contacts and placing contacts in isolation, and social distancing and hygiene practices.

Evidence from our studies in schools shows that transmission in the school environment is mainly from adult to adult and children do not appear to contribute significantly to disease spread. This is different to the role that children play in the spread of other respiratory infections such as flu. Therefore strategies in a school environment need to reduce close contact between adult members of the school community.

I encourage you, if you or your child are sick, and think you have symptoms of COVID-19, to seek testing.

Health officials have advised the National Cabinet that schools are safe to remain open. They have also set out guidance for how schools should operate during the COVID-19 pandemic and we have appreciated how the Department of Education has been supporting and implementing that guidance:

- 1. Help stop the spread and stay healthy**
- 2. Stay informed and supported**

NSW Health is working closely with the Department of Education throughout this time. From everyone at NSW Health, we thank you for your continued support and compliance.

Purpose

This document seeks to provide practical guidance for schools in implementing the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) advice on reducing the potential risk of COVID-19 transmission in schools. It sets out actions that can be taken at the school level and the support that will be provided by the NSW Department of Education to support the ongoing operations of schools.

Preventing the spread

The best way to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 is by continuing effective hygiene practices:

Protect yourself from viruses



Clean your hands with soap and water, or hand sanitiser.



Cover your nose and mouth when you cough or sneeze.



Avoid close contact with anyone with cold or flu-like symptoms.



Stay home if you are sick.

- Clean your hands for 20 seconds with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand sanitiser
- Sneeze or cough into your elbow or a tissue
- Stay home if you are sick.

Help stop the spread and stay healthy

Physical distancing

One way to slow the spread of viruses, such as COVID-19, is to implement physical distancing including keeping two arm lengths apart (1.5metres) from each other. The more space between people, the harder it is for the virus to spread.

There are many actions that can be taken within a school to promote physical distancing and help reduce the risk of COVID-19 infection.

Physical distancing is being supported by a [managed return](#) to school which will limit the number of students on site in line with health advice and broader community measures. Existing advice on ways to minimise transmission should continue to be followed and schools should consider the breadth of the AHPPC advice and how it applies to their context.

Schools will be taking a number of further actions to promote physical distancing and help reduce the risk of COVID-19, including:

- Encouraging staff and students who are unwell to stay home.
- Providing clear markings to guide staff and students on appropriate social distancing where they are required to line up or queue such as canteens, hand washing, bathrooms, and entry at school gates.
- Re-arranging classroom furniture to leave as much space as possible between students.
- Making use of outdoor learning spaces.
- Staggering the school day, including recess and lunch times, to enable staff and students to maintain appropriate distancing.
- Providing additional space for staff to use during breaks from classroom teaching.
- Ensuring parents keep a distance from school wherever possible, using kiss and drop approaches and contacting the school by phone or email as required.
- Limiting non-essential access and use of the school site outside of school hours including the use of play equipment.
- Limiting additional visitors to school to essential providers only. Canteens and uniform shops may recommence as more students return to school. Out of hours school care is considered essential.
- Eliminating non-essential gatherings in the school including assemblies.
- Utilising technology for gatherings and staff meetings.
- Restricting access and where appropriate the use of playgrounds and high touch play equipment.
- Postponing all planned school excursions, sporting activities or other large gatherings.
- Where groups of staff do need to meet on the school site, social distancing of at least 1.5metres should be observed.
- Processes to check that all volunteers at the school (e.g. canteen staff) are well.

Protecting vulnerable populations in schools

Protecting vulnerable people within our school, both within our workforce and student cohorts is a priority and is critical to making schools a safe environment. Existing advice should continue to be followed.

We recommend that parents and carers of children and young people with complex medical needs seek medical advice from their health practitioner to support their decision about whether their child can physically attend school.

There are a range of measures which will be implemented to provide a safe learning environment:

- Ensuring that any student or staff member who is at an increased risk if they contract COVID-19 is supported to learn or work from home.
- Following existing infection control procedures as required.
- Using Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) as recommended in the NSW Department of Education Infection Control Procedures. These procedures can be found [here](#). If schools are unable to access supplies of appropriate PPE locally, they can contact covid-19@det.nsw.edu.au and delivery of supplies will be arranged.
- Adjusting students Personal Learning Plans (PLPs) to account for the changing situation.
- Itinerant staff, such as Home School Liaison Officers, Aboriginal School Liaison Officers, Assistant Principals Learning Assistance, Itinerant Hearing and Vision teachers, and Out of Home Care teachers will continue to support students in and out of school. Additional risk mitigation should be put in place including calling ahead before visiting a student at home to check that no one is unwell, washing hands regularly and using hand sanitiser before and after any interaction.
- Family members of students who may be at increased risk if they contract COVID-19 because of a medical condition are being advised to seek advice from their health care team about any specific risks, and to discuss these with the school and review current health care plans.

Hygiene

Schools will continue to promote and encourage good hygiene practices in order to protect against infection and to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

- Schools should continue to implement effective hygiene practices for both students and staff, including:
 - Washing hands for 20 seconds with soap and water at regular intervals throughout the day, particularly before and after eating and after going to the toilet
 - Immediate exclusion from the classroom of any students who are displaying symptoms
 - Placing used tissues straight into a bin
 - Avoiding touching one's eyes, nose and mouth
 - Not sharing food or drink
 - Not sharing personal items such as mobile phones, pens and pencils etc.
- Young students will be supervised and supported with hand washing to ensure they are practicing good hygiene while at schools.
- Bathrooms and high touch services will be wiped down during the day in addition to the enhanced schools cleaning program.
- Every school will have hand sanitiser distributed throughout the school for use by staff and students.
- Disinfectant wipes should be provided to clean high touch areas such as desks, chairs, photocopiers and computers.
- Schools can request additional hygiene supplies from the Department by emailing their requirements to covid-19@det.nsw.edu.au.
- Used tissues and disinfectant wipes should be disposed of into a lined bin and gloves should be worn when required to appropriately dispose of the waste.
- If canteens are operational, the strictest hygiene practices in food preparation, should be promoted and adhered to.

Routine care

Standard precautions should be followed when it is necessary to come into physical contact with someone for the purpose of providing routine care or assistance.

- Staff must wash their hands with soap and water or use a hand sanitiser before and after performing routine care.
- Hand sanitiser will be made available throughout the school.
- PPE will be provided to all SSPs and Support Units to support ongoing implementation of infection control procedures.

- Department infection control procedures should continue to be implemented. These materials, including a range of fact sheets should be regularly referred to and can be found [here](#).

First Aid

Standard precautions should be adopted when providing first aid and the Department's First Aid procedures followed.

- Any student or staff member who is unwell be isolated in an appropriate space and collected by a parent or carer as soon as possible.
- Each school will be supplied with additional resources for the safe operation of their sick bay including PPE and forehead thermometers.
- The Department's First Aid procedures and the school First Aid Plan must be adhered to as they provide specific guidance for all departmental workplaces to guide first aid practices. The Department's First Aid procedures can be located [here](#).

Management of suspected and confirmed cases

The Department has comprehensive procedures, developed in partnership with NSW Health, to manage reports of suspected or a confirmed case of COVID-19 in a school environment. There is a dedicated team of staff who will rapidly assess the situation and take appropriate action in accordance with advice from NSW Health.

Where there is a suspected or confirmed case of COVID-19 in a school environment, schools should contact the Department's Incident Report and Support Hotline which operates 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

- Any staff member or student who becomes unwell while at school will be isolated in an appropriate space and collected by a parent or carer as soon as possible.
- NSW Health will notify the NSW Department of Education of any confirmed cases of COVID-19 impacting on a school.
- The Department will follow NSW Health's advice and take any action required to manage a confirmed case of COVID-19.
- Where required, a school may cease operations based on advice from NSW Health to allow time to complete contact tracing and have the school cleaned prior to staff and students returning.

- Schools will advise their school community through the school website, Facebook accounts and other local messaging systems of any confirmed cases that impact the school. Staff and students will be supported to work or learn from home if they are required to self-isolate or if they have been identified by NSW Health as a close contact of a confirmed case of COVID-19.
- The Incident Report and Support Hotline is available 24/7 to take incident notifications and provide advice and support to schools at any time.
- All children and young people with a health care plan should ensure this is up to date and if required provide additional advice to their school on any additional monitoring in the context of COVID-19.

Environmental cleaning

NSW Health has provided advice to the Department on the appropriate cleaning standards for schools and these are being implemented.

COVID-19 can be readily inactivated by cleaning and disinfection, therefore to reduce the spread of viruses in the school enhanced cleaning measures are being implemented.

- Schools will continue to be cleaned each day by professional cleaners.
- All schools have an additional 25 per cent of cleaning hours each day to ensure that high touch surfaces are thoroughly cleaned every day and this will continue for as long as required.
- Bathrooms, play equipment and high touch areas will be cleaned during the day including after recess and lunch.
- Additional resources to support cleaning throughout the day will be allocated to every school, the type of resource will be determined in line with local contextual factors.
- If play equipment cannot be cleaned between uses, then it should be closed.
- Schools should continue to increase the amount of fresh air available indoors by opening windows or adjusting air conditioning.
- Water bubblers can only be used to refill water bottles and should be cleaned after recess and lunch.

- Disinfectant wipes should be available throughout the school for use by staff and students as an extra precaution for wiping down hard surfaces if they are to be shared throughout the day, for example objects such as computers, photocopiers and sport equipment. If schools cannot find adequate supply they can contact covid-19@det.nsw.edu.au who will arrange delivery of supplies.
- Schools will be thoroughly cleaned, to NSW Health standards, if there is a confirmed case of COVID-19 which has impacted on the operations of a school.

Stay informed and supported

Psychological and physical well-being for everyone

The Department is working hard to ensure the continued psychological and physical well-being of our students and staff.

- Student's social and emotional wellbeing will be supported by the managed return to school.
- Student counsellors and itinerate staff continue to provide support to students and schools.
- The Department's Employee Assistance Program is available for confidential counselling services on 1800 060 650. This has also been expanded to include support for casual staff.

Support for staff is also available through a dedicated COVID-19 webpage which has staff wellbeing resources available.

Children

We recognise that the COVID-19 pandemic might result in stress and anxiety for some of our students. Supporting the mental health and wellbeing of our students remains a key priority for NSW public schools.

- Strategies are in place so counselling services continue to be available to students.
- The School Services Learning and Support Teams continue to be available and are using alternative modes to deliver their continued support.
- Staff remain legally obliged to report risk of significant harm concerns to the NSW Department of Communities and Justice or the Department's [Child Wellbeing Unit](#).

- Processes will continue to be followed to follow-up students who do not appear to be engaging with their school or teacher while learning from home.

School leaders, teachers and support staff

School leaders play a pivotal role in supporting students and staff to adopt new ways of operating, teaching and learning at this time.

- School leaders will be supported through the continued use of hosting live streams and videos on a range of topics.
- The Department will continue to communicate with all staff to ensure consistent messaging across a range of key topics.
- [The Learning from Home Hub](#) will continue to be updated on the website to support staff with the delivery of education during the pandemic.
- Staff are encouraged to engage with their colleagues through [online staff rooms](#) and to share resources and experience to support one another.
- Schools should follow the guidance provided and display appropriate material in the school reception to ensure the safety of school administration staff.
- The Employee Assistance program is available for all staff, including casual and temporary staff. Details of this program can be found [here](#).
- The Department will continue to support all staff with work related or non-work related health conditions through the Recovery at Work program.

Communication

Clear and consistent communication will help to ensure that everyone has access to current and accurate information. This is particularly important in helping students, teachers and parents understand that we all have a part to play in slowing the spread of COVID-19.

- The Department website will continue to be updated with comprehensive information and advice for families and students about learning from home.
- Schools should continue to regularly communicate with their communities about social distancing, hygiene practices and what they should expect during the change to school operations.
- Schools will be provided with age appropriate posters to display key messages relating to physical distancing, hygiene and mental health.