# Health and safety advice for schools in the context of coronavirus (COVID-19)

An update from the Acting Victorian Deputy Chief Health Officer

As Victoria’s Acting Deputy Chief Health Officer, and as a member of the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee, the health, wellbeing and safety of students and staff remains front of mind.

As you know, most Victorian school students returned to a remote learning model during Term 3 to help reduce movement of people across Victoria and slow the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19). With falling case numbers and reduced community transmission, I am pleased to advise that schools can commence a gradual return to on-site learning from the start of Term 4.

Throughout the pandemic, colleagues and I have closely followed emerging Victorian, Australian and international evidence on transmission of the virus and the efficacy of public health measures in reducing transmission. We have observed in Victoria, informed by research undertaken by the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute (MCRI) examining coronavirus (COVID-19) cases linked to Victorian schools and early childhood settings, that coronavirus (COVID-19) transmission in schools is uncommon when community transmission is low.

Cases in schools have been well contained through rapid site closures, cleaning and contact tracing. With specific measures in place, I am confident in our ability to identify and respond to cases of coronavirus (COVID-19) impacting schools. Reassuringly, evidence continues to show that children are less impacted by the virus, they may be less infectious, they tend to have milder symptoms and are less likely to develop severe illness.

The available evidence, including the MCRI findings, suggests that the risk to staff and students in both mainstream and specialist settings remains low, when recommended health and safety strategies are followed and that schools do not pose a greater risk of infection than other locations.

Once again, I thank teachers, staff, students and families for their incredible efforts during these challenging times. With your ongoing support I am confident schools can make a gradual, successful return to on-site learning in Term 4.



**Professor Allen Cheng**

**Acting Victorian Deputy Chief Health Officer**

COVIDSafe principles for schools

The principles for maintaining a COVIDSafe School apply to all Victorian schools: specialist and mainstream, government, independent and Catholic. They are aligned with Victoria’s COVIDSafe principles for business and acknowledge the unique school setting as both a place of work for staff and a learning environment for children and young people, drawing on local and international literature.

A combination of strategies is required to minimise transmission risk. No single strategy completely reduces risk and not every measure will always be feasible and applicable to all educational settings. Where some controls are not feasible, others should be enhanced. Strategies should also be adjusted over time in line with changing risk of transmission in the community.

The School Operations Guide provides point-in-time and detailed advice on specific activities and operations for all schools, informed by COVIDSafe school principles and Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) advice.

*COVIDSafe principles for schools*

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| Reinforce COVIDSafe behaviours\* | Create COVIDSafe spaces | Promote COVIDSafe activities | Respond to coronavirus (COVID-19) risk\* |
| * Stay home when unwell\* * Practise good hygiene\* * Ensure physical distancing (1.5m) \* * Wear a face mask\* (students 12 years and older in secondary school, and staff. Staff are not required to wear face masks while teaching, but can if they wish to do so) * Avoid interactions in enclosed spaces\* | * Make hand hygiene easy * Keep surfaces clean and implement enhanced environmental cleaning and disinfection * Promote outdoor air ventilation and do not have air conditioners on recirculate | * Limit school access to outside visitors where possible * Reduce mixing between groups * Create workforce bubbles\* * Adapt, modify or defer higher-risk activities * Move activities outdoors where possible, weather permitting | * Keep records and act quickly if someone becomes unwell\* * Use personal protective equipment * Clean and disinfect appropriately if a staff member or student has been unwell at school * Manage individual risk |

**\*The COVIDSafe principles for schools incorporate** [COVIDSafe principles for business](https://www.business.vic.gov.au/coronavirus-covid-19/covid-safe-business/creating-a-covid-safe-workplace#COVIDSafe%20principles%20for%20business)

#### Reinforce COVIDSafe behaviours

**Key behaviours required for reducing coronavirus (COVID-19) transmission risk include staying home when unwell, performing regular hand hygiene, and where possible pursuing strategies to support physical distancing among all students and staff. Masks can be particularly useful when physical distance cannot be maintained.**

Education settings are uniquely placed to integrate these messages into everyday learning and practice, through role-modelling and formal and informal learning opportunities.

Coronavirus (COVID-19) is spread from close contact with an infected person, mostly through face-to-face interactions. People may also pick up coronavirus (COVID-19) from surfaces contaminated by an infected person. Hand hygiene remains one of the critical measures to reduce coronavirus (COVID-19) transmission.

Density restrictions of one person per 4 square meters in classrooms and corridors will not always be practical in education settings.

When there is limited space, one approach to minimise risk is to organise students within a class into smaller groups (bubbles), maximising distance between these groups in the classroom and keeping these groups together throughout the day.

Density restrictions do apply for staff areas such as lunchrooms, and areas generally accessed by the public, such as reception.

Congestion within the school and at entry points can be avoided by adjustments to drop-off and pick-up processes and signage in more confined spaces such as locker bays and canteens.

Adding structure to recess, lunch and free study periods can also promote adherence to physical distancing during times of less supervision.

Indoor congestion can be managed by promoting one-way flow of individuals through areas such as hallways and locker bays.

#### Create COVIDSafe spaces

**The spaces where staff and students teach, learn and play have an important role in protecting against coronavirus (COVID-19) transmission, particularly surface and airborne transmission.**

Reducing the need to interact with high-touch surfaces, enhanced environmental cleaning and cleaning of high-touch surfaces and good hand hygiene can protect against surface transmission. Other measures include reconsidering the need for shared equipment, disinfecting equipment between use (where possible, if it must be shared) or, where this is not practical, washing hands after use.

Promote use of hand hygiene facilities by keeping them well stocked and in readily accessible locations, for example at the entrance to buildings. Hand sanitiser should be accessible in every occupied room, particularly where access to running water and soap is not readily available.

Outdoor air ventilation should be increased whenever possible, including in bathrooms, to dilute the concentration of an airborne virus and to filter air recirculating in a space. Air conditioners should not be used on recirculate.

#### Promote COVIDSafe activities

**Some school-based activities or activities that use school facilities may need to be altered, deferred or delivered remotely to reduce coronavirus (COVID-19) transmission risk. Decisions regarding the types of activities that take place should consider the potential risk associated with the activity, the level of community transmission, and available modifications to minimise risk.**

Activities that involve close contact between individuals, those that can spread aerosols and droplets (such as singing and playing wind instruments) and group activities conducted indoors in enclosed spaces can be associated with increased transmission risk between individuals.

Activities that involve the congregation of large numbers of staff and students, or mixing of individuals from outside the immediate school community, can hinder containment in the event of a confirmed case.

Wherever possible and weather permitting, opportunities for outdoor learning and working should be considered as alternatives to interactions indoors.

Creating student and staff bubbles, and keeping these separate as much as possible, can minimise the risk of transmission between groups and aid containment in the event of a confirmed case. This approach could also be considered to reduce risks associated with staff that work across multiple schools, limiting where possible the number of schools accessed by a staff bubble.

#### Respond to COVID-19 risk

**Any staff member or student who becomes unwell while at school with symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19) must return home immediately and get tested, with a designated space(s) made available on school premises to support isolation where required.**

Personal protective equipment (PPE) should be used in line with guidance for schools, with staff trained to understand when and how to use PPE appropriately in an education setting.

Staff or students most at risk of severe illness should continue to individually assess appropriateness for on-site attendance with support from their medical practitioner. Note that the outcome of such an assessment may vary during the course of the pandemic and the level of community transmission.

Schools must notify the Department of a suspected or confirmed case of coronavirus (COVID-19) in a school, providing requested information and taking required actions. Good record-keeping in schools, including for any visitors, enables the prompt identification of individuals who may have been in contact with a confirmed case. Appropriate cleaning must take place following a confirmed case on school premises.