

Novel coronavirus

Chief Health Officer advice for parents and carers on returning to schools

Dear parents, guardians and care-givers

Queensland's current COVID-19 response measures have helped to flatten the curve of coronavirus spread and have contributed to our State's continued success in limiting the number of cases and transmission in the community. Queensland is now seeing very low rates of COVID-19 infection. I know that in recent weeks many of you have been making some big sacrifices to ensure that your children can keep learning from home, often while juggling many other commitments. Your efforts have not gone unnoticed. Thank you.

On 2 May 2020 we eased some of the restrictions in Queensland. I am proud that our efforts now see us in a position to consider students returning to school over the coming weeks. Queensland Health has worked closely with the Department of Education to plan for this transition and the safety of staff, students and school communities has been at the forefront of all our considerations.

The first stage of resumption, commencing on 11 May 2020 will be for students at the essential early years and critical senior years: community kindergarten, Prep, Year 1, Year 11 and Year 12. Children of essential workers, vulnerable children and children in designated Indigenous communities will also be able to attend school. If COVID-19 transmission rates remain low, a full return to school for all students is then planned for 25 May 2020 and this will be confirmed by 15 May 2020.

Significant consideration has been given to the first stage of resumption. We want to give all our children a great start to life, and this must include access to early years education. I am confident that the hygiene habits young Queenslanders are learning at home with your help will be reinforced in the educational setting. The senior secondary years of grade 11 and 12 are also important, and I believe that as our senior students transition to adulthood, they are old enough to understand and recognise the need for good health and hygiene and that if they are unwell, they should stay home. Schools should encourage students to take responsibility for staying at home in those instances.

I understand that sending your students back to school at this time can be difficult, particularly when you see the impact that COVID-19 has had on many other countries around the world. I want to assure you that we would not be recommending a return to school unless we were confident that it was safe for everyone. The Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC), which comprises the Chief Health Officers of all Australian jurisdictions, continues to note that there is very limited evidence of transmission between children in the school environment. In Australia, only a very small percentage of COVID-19 cases have been in children.

Implementing a return to school in a staged way will provide critical time for schools to develop and implement arrangements to ensure that the transition can be made safely for everyone. The Department of Education, on advice from Queensland Health, will work with schools, staff and parents to ensure that the return to school can be done in a way that is safe. The biggest risk of transmission of COVID-19 in schools is between adults, and many of the arrangements put in place will be to enable appropriate distancing between the adults that are on school grounds.

This approach is informed by advice from the AHPPC at <https://www.health.gov.au/news/australian-health-protection-principal-committee-ahppc-advice-on-reducing-the-potential-risk-of-covid-19-transmission-in-schools>. It will include adapting staff arrangements, communication, physical distancing of adults at key points and times in the school day such as drop-off and pick-up, and routines for hygiene and cleaning.

Activities such as assemblies, camps, interschool activities, sporting and arts events will not be allowed to take place at this time. The situation will continually be reviewed to determine when it will be safe to recommence these additional activities.

The most important ways to help stop the spread of COVID-19 in the school environment are the same as in the broader community. Please encourage and support the children in your care to do the following, and remember you are their role model:

- Clean your hands regularly with soap and water or alcohol-based sanitiser.
- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue or bent elbow when coughing or sneezing.
- Avoid touching your face, nose and mouth, and avoid shaking hands.
- Stay home if you are sick. This is the most important thing you can do. If you have any respiratory symptoms, please get tested for COVID-19.
- Practice social distancing outside your household, including staying 1.5 metres away from others as much as you can.

In the unlikely event that there were to be an outbreak of COVID-19 at a school, be assured that Queensland Health has the ability to respond rapidly and thoroughly to limit any transmission.

I am confident that with these measures in place, neither students, staff or members of the school community will be at any increased risk of COVID-19 by attending school. If you require any additional information in relation to Queensland's response to COVID-19, please visit the Queensland Health website at <https://www.qld.gov.au/health/conditions/health-alerts/coronavirus-covid-19>.

Finally, I want to thank you again for the critical work that you have done to educate, entertain and reassure your kids in this difficult time. Everyone has a role to play in getting through this pandemic, and ensuring the wellbeing of our children is an absolute priority. With your help, we can look forward to a time in the near future where we can see a return to the Queensland lifestyle that we know and love.

Dr Jeannette Young PSM

Chief Health Officer