

Introduction

The ACT Government has taken a highly precautionary approach to keeping our community safe during the COVID-19 pandemic, in line with national expert health advice. Equally, the ACT Government has approached the return of face to face learning and work in ACT public schools with careful planning, drawing on national and local health advice, in response to the current and emerging needs of staff, students and families.

What are we trying to achieve?

The ACT Government acknowledges that returning to face to face learning and work in ACT public schools requires a range of preconditions to be in place to support staff and family confidence that schools are safe places to be. These include:

- School specific health and prevention advice, including WHS arrangements for adults in place.
- Plans to enable responsiveness if circumstances change and community transmissions increase.
- A high standard of cleaning services and hygiene supplies in every school.
- Time for teachers and school leaders to readjust their learning plans to ensure a smooth transition for students.
- Time for workforce planning to ensure the needs of vulnerable cohorts, children of teachers as essential workers, and family needs are taken into consideration.

What will returning to face to face learning and work look like in the ACT?

When schools are fully operational it is not practical or necessary for students to socially distance. The reality of full school operations is:

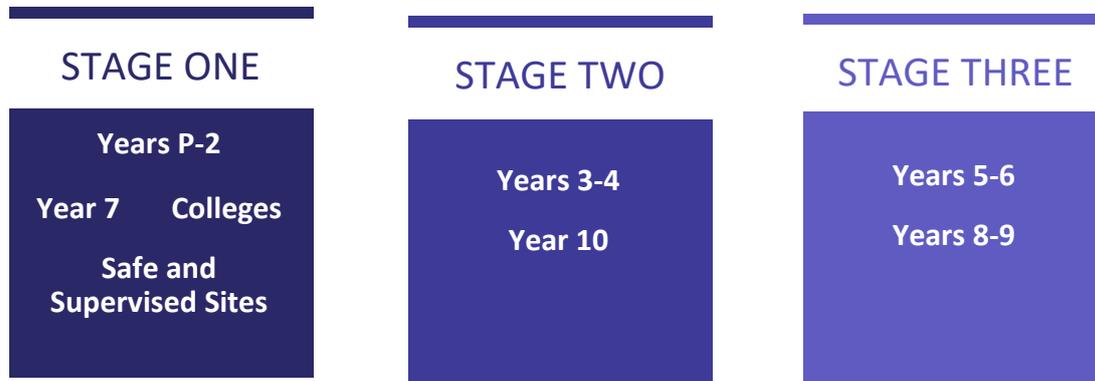
- Students and staff should not come to school if they are sick.
- The Australian Health Protection Principal Committee does not recommend that regular temperature checking of students as there is limited evidence to suggest this is of value.
- Classes will have the usual number of students as well as staff members required to support the students. As an indication, this can be between 21 and 32 students across the primary and high school settings
- Students will be moving from class to class, using all areas of the school to transition between learning spaces
- During inclement weather, students will need to utilise all internal spaces. This means students may need to congregate in larger numbers in these internal spaces including classrooms and corridors

With low case numbers and no evidence of community transmission in the ACT, the government has been able to relax some physical distancing measures. There have also been no cases of COVID-19 resulting from transmission from a school student in the ACT and current Australian research shows there is very limited transmission from child to child, or from child to adult.

The ACT Chief Health Officer has therefore advised that students aged 3-19 years are not at increased risk in returning to face to face learning, and that good hygiene and environmental cleaning are more important for reducing the risk of COVID-19 transmissions for staff and students in ACT public schools.



The ACT Government also understands that there is the potential for an increase in cases of COVID-19 as community restrictions are eased, especially for adults. To protect staff, students and families from this potential risk, a graduated return to face to face learning and work will be required and physical distancing measures will need to continue for the adults within the school community. This will also require the ability to respond if there is community transmission. The gradual return will occur over three stages:



During stage one, all students who had registered for a safe and supervised site and all children of teachers will be able to attend their regular school. This is to ensure essential workers, including teachers, can work. Local schools will be empowered to implement the staged return in a flexible way to meet the needs of each school community. This may include a mix of remote and onsite learning options. Schools may also make alternative arrangements to support composite classes across year levels.

College students will attend a combination of on-campus and remote learning, with colleges making arrangements to support learning on-campus for students and subject matter that requires it.

Importantly, the approach to returning to face to face learning and work will also account for both staff and students who are in those population groups that are more vulnerable to severe COVID-19 who may need to stay at home even after community restrictions ease for the majority of the population. Access to remote learning resources will continue to be available to students unable to attend their school physically.

Health and Hygiene Requirements

How will the safety of staff and students be managed in ACT public schools?

ACT public schools will be required to adhere to the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) advice on reducing the potential risk of COVID-19 transmission in schools¹. This includes:

- **Physical distancing for adults** - The greatest risk of transmission in the school environment is between adults over 25 years of age. Staff and parents will avoid long periods of time in close contact with other adults. Adults, including parents, staff and volunteers will maintain physical distancing between themselves and other adults. This includes at school drop-off and pick up, in the classroom and in the staff room.

Adults at the school will stick to the guidelines of maintaining 1.5 metres between themselves and no more than one adult per four square metres in an indoor environment (e.g. in staff tearooms). Where

¹ <https://www.health.gov.au/news/australian-health-protection-principal-committee-ahppc-advice-on-reducing-the-potential-risk-of-covid-19-transmission-in-schools-24-april-2020>



possible, parents are encouraged to drop their children off without entering the school grounds, noting that younger children and children with special needs may require some support.

Staff are encouraged to minimise the number of people in staff rooms and smaller office spaces at any one time. Staggering meal breaks may be one option schools can consider to reduce the number of staff congregating at one time.

- **Risks to vulnerable populations in schools** - Parents/carers of students with complex medical needs are encouraged to consult their medical practitioner to determine the suitability for onsite learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Staff who are aged 70 years and over, aged 65 years and over with chronic medical conditions, are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and over the age of 50 with chronic medical conditions, have compromised immune systems, or who are a full time carer of a person in one of the above categories, will be supported to work from home where possible.
- **Hygiene** - Good hygiene practices are important to preventing the spread of COVID-19. In ACT public schools all students and staff will be reminded to wash their hands with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand-sanitiser on arrival and regularly throughout the day, cough into their elbows or a tissue, place used tissues straight into the bin, avoid touching eyes, noses or mouths, not share food or drink, not use water fountains or bubblers directly, and ensure strict hygiene in the preparation of food.
- **Environmental cleaning** - In each ACT public school, a school cleaning plan will be developed that will ensure regular cleaning of high touch surfaces (such as handrails and desks), frequently used objects (such as staff desk top computers), play equipment, and bathrooms, consistent with the AHPPC Statement². School play equipment that is used by the broader community will also be considered as part of the school cleaning plan.
- **Prevention of COVID-19 in schools**- If a staff member or student is unwell for any reason, they must not attend an ACT public school. If they attend while unwell, they will be sent home. This is an important community response that all parents, students and staff need to take seriously in order to prevent COVID-19. AHPPC do not recommend regular temperature checking of students as there is limited evidence to suggest this is of value.
- **Management of suspected and confirmed cases** - Staff, children or young people at school experiencing symptoms compatible with COVID-19 (e.g. fever, cough, sore throat, shortness of breath) will be isolated in an appropriate space with suitable supervision and collected by a parent/carer as soon as possible. If the child can't remain isolated the staff member looking after the student will wear a mask (available in school first aid kits) and carry out frequent hand hygiene.

In the event that a staff member, student or family member is diagnosed with COVID-19, ACT Health will provide assistance to the school on further management. Where this will result in full or partial school closure while site cleaning and contact tracing is undertaken. A procedure has been developed and implemented to manage this situation.

- **Providing routine and emergency first-aid care** - Standard precautions need to be taken, as per normal procedures, for staff or volunteers who are providing routine care or first-aid assistance to students where they need to come into physical contact with a student (for example: nappy changing, assisting with toileting or feeding, attending to a cut or disposing of student's tissues).

² <https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-information-about-routine-environmental-cleaning-and-disinfection-in-the-community>



Standard precautions include the following hand hygiene practices, washing your hands or using hand-sanitiser in the following instances: before physical contact, before a procedure or provision of care, after physical contact, after a body fluid exposure risk (for example after touching a student's tissue or providing first aid) and after contact with the student's surroundings (e.g. if a staff member has touched a student's chair/desk or other personal items or aids). For some personal care, additional PPE may be required, based on standard practice. For example, if staff or volunteers might come in contact with body fluids it is recommended that they wear an apron and gloves.

Will schools be required to move furniture around or reduce the number of students in each class to ensure social distancing between students?

No. There is no strict requirement to maintain physical distancing between students in ACT public schools.

The AHPPC has advised that physical distancing does not need to be strictly adhered to in classrooms or corridors. However, where practical, schools may still help minimise the already low risk of transmission by implementing some physical distancing measures between students and teachers outlined in the AHPPC Statement², in addition to maintaining high levels of hygiene and conducting frequent cleaning.

With low case numbers and no evidence of community transmission in the ACT, the government has been able to relax some physical distancing measures. There have also been no cases of COVID-19 resulting from transmission from a school student in the ACT and current Australian research shows there is very limited transmission from child to child, or from child to adult.

What practical physical distancing measures may be implemented?

The AHPPC has suggested some practical ways that social distancing can be implemented in the school environment. Examples include spacing out queues of children coming into classrooms or at other times, holding some lessons outdoors, staggering some play times and encouraging non-contact greetings.

Can school assemblies, events, excursions and physical education programs resume?

To reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission between adults, ACT public schools will limit assemblies, events, excursions and physical education programs that would bring large groups of staff and parents together for long periods of time. This may involve separating these activities into single grades or classes depending on the size of the school.

Consistent with AHPPC advice, pool excursions will not be possible at this time and school pools will remain closed to support physical distancing. This advice will be reviewed and updated when safe to do so.

How will schools support younger children to maintain good hygiene practices?

Age appropriate hygiene practices will be encouraged for all ACT public school students. For younger children this will include intentionally teaching handwashing techniques and personal hygiene strategies, supervision of handwashing where possible to support children to do this effectively, and ensuring students wash hands when entering the school, at regular intervals throughout the day and prior to and after eating.



How will schools support students with disabilities who may have personal care needs in school?

Staff must always wash hands with soap and water or use a hand sanitiser before and after performing routine care and other close interactions with students in the classroom environment and ensure environmental cleaning where relevant. Schools will make hand sanitiser available at school entrances and in classrooms where personal care needs are provided.

Non-medical face coverings will not be used as a mitigation strategy against transmission of COVID-19 or other similar communicable diseases, as the use of these masks has the potential to create more harm than good.

Additional Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), for example medical face masks, is not required to provide regular care for children or young people who are well, unless such precautions are usually adopted in the routine care of an individual child or young person. Good hygiene practices and environmental cleaning are more important for reducing risk.

Will schools have adequate supplies to support hygiene requirements?

The Education Directorate has sourced a supply of hand sanitiser and soap for every school. This will include hand sanitiser at visible entries and access points in every school. Additional supplies will continue to be sourced through normal supply chains and schools can contact EDUStrategicProcurement@act.gov.au if they are experiencing any difficulties accessing sufficient supplies.

How will adequate school cleaning practices be ensured?

The ACT Government employs a dedicated school cleaning workforce to clean every school. All ACT public schools will have an updated school cleaning plan prior to the resumption of face to face learning with dedicated cleaners employed to maintain regular cleaning services throughout each school day.

An additional 70 school cleaners will be employed under the Jobs for Canberrans program to deliver this important service for our schools and community. New school cleaners will be thoroughly inducted into their relevant school and will commence in line with the planned return of students to face to face learning.

Will all ACT public school staff be tested for COVID-19 prior to the return to face to face teaching?

No. All Canberrans, including school-based staff and students are required to self-isolate and be tested for COVID-19 if they experience any symptoms compatible with COVID-19 and must not attend school. The ACT Government has also been undertaking broad community testing and is well placed to identify cases as early as possible.



What will happen if community infections increase in the ACT?

The ACT Government continues to monitor COVID-19 infections, including through broad community testing. Canberrans are also encouraged to download the COVIDSafe App to enable early identification of contacts if an infection occurs in the ACT community.

The Education Directorate has established procedures in place to respond to a confirmed or suspected case in an ACT public school. This includes working with the Chief Health Officer to determine risks and may include full or partial closure of an individual school in the case of localised infection, through to system wide return to remote learning if community restrictions are reinstated. The ACT's significant investment and planning for remote learning will enable flexibility to respond to any return to community restrictions if required.

The Education Directorate will also work closely with schools to review these arrangements in the months ahead to ensure effective implementation and management of COVID-19 related risks.

How will children with medical vulnerabilities be supported during this time?

Schools may need to work one-on-one with the caregivers/parents of vulnerable students to manage their risk, if and when they return to school. Additional measures may need to be put in place to support vulnerable students. For example, by providing additional hand sanitiser to these students or providing hand hygiene prompting or assistance, if appropriate.

How will IT and internet access be supported for families during the transition?

Students can continue to use the Chromebooks that have been provided to them for remote learning during the transition period. Families who have been provided with internet access to support remote learning will also continue to receive this support during the transition. Further advice on arrangements once face to face learning resumes in full will be provided at a later stage.

Will regular transport options be available and safe for students travelling to and from school?

Transport Canberra will continue to operate buses and light rail services as usual. Transport Canberra have implemented an increased cleaning regime on buses and light rail vehicles as well as at high-traffic areas such as stops and interchanges.

Transport Canberra have also implemented a range of other measures such as the use of rear doors on buses, automatic opening of doors on light rail vehicles at all stops and closing the front seat on buses to create distance between the driver and passengers.

Schools will also identify a dedicated drop off and pick up zone for families who choose not to send their children on public transport options at this time.

