

National Framework for Managing COVID-19 in Schools and Early Childhood Education and Care

January 2022

In 2019, Australian Governments set out our shared vision for Australia's education system in the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration. Our vision is for a world class education system that encourages and supports every student to be the very best they can be, no matter where they live or what kind of learning challenges they may face. Since Term 1 2020, our children have experienced unprecedented challenges, as they live and learn in a world with COVID-19.

Evidence throughout the COVID-19 pandemic continues to demonstrate the vast majority of children who develop COVID-19 experience mild disease of short duration. This National Framework for Managing COVID-19 in Schools and Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) aims to ensure children can return in Term 1 2022 and continue to attend ECEC, primary and secondary school, and outside of school hours care in the context of COVID-19. The Framework also complements ongoing workforce participation at a time of workforce pressure in many sectors.

Framework Objectives



Keeping ECEC and schools open is important to children's learning, social and emotional development, wellbeing, physical and mental health. Children benefit most from face-to-face learning and further interruptions should be avoided, where possible. ECEC and school closures also often come with significant societal and economic costs, including hidden impacts on the mental health of families, the safety of children and the ability of families to participate in the workforce. Australian businesses and industry are affected in instances where families are unable to attend work due to ECEC and school closures, which can create ongoing disruptions to Australia's ability to respond to and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

With high levels of community transmission, COVID-19 transmission will occur in education settings and contribute to overall levels of community transmission. While this will present challenges for both staff and students, the National Cabinet agreed ECEC and schools are essential services and their ability to operate and remain open should be prioritised above other community settings where disease transmission occurs.

The objectives of this Framework are to:

- Protect vulnerable children and staff at higher risk of severe disease within ECEC and schools, including those with disability or severe chronic health conditions.
- Minimise disruption to face-to-face learning from COVID-19 transmission in ECEC and schools, because of the mental and physical health, and social development advantages from ECEC and school participation.
- Minimise broader community transmission and keep it within the capacity of the health system.
- Minimise the broader workforce disruptions for parents and carers.

Framework Approach



While the Framework's objectives and guiding principles are predominantly aimed at ensuring national consistency, specific measures will be implemented through individual State and Territory operational plans and through localised arrangements within ECEC services and schools. These measures will be updated on an ongoing basis as local and international evidence and operational research on Omicron and other variants of concern increases.

Australia's Omicron epidemic is expected to peak in individual jurisdictions at different times in the first weeks and months of 2022. State and Territory operational plans will consider local outbreak trajectories and local health system capacity. While the timing and specific implementation arrangements of jurisdictions may differ, the principles agreed to in this Framework form a consistent basis for State and Territory operational planning and support continuity of education in Term 1 2022 and beyond.

Early childhood learners have experienced similar disruption to school-aged students, noting some childcare and preschool services are co-located with schools. Ongoing access to quality early childhood education and outside of school hours care is necessary for the best start to learning and for many families to participate in the workforce. It is expected the application of these principles will need to be tailored for this sector. The Commonwealth will undertake further work with States and Territories to address the unique circumstances of the ECEC sector, for example guidance on workforce and regulatory requirements that maintain the primacy of child safety.

The principles in this Framework recognise different education settings are impacted differently by COVID-19:

- Children aged 0 to 4 years are not currently eligible for COVID-19 vaccination, reinforcing the need to prioritise prevention strategies in ECEC settings. It is acknowledged that depending on both eligibility for vaccination and vaccination rates, there may be a mix of vaccinated and unvaccinated children in any given education setting.
- For most of Term 1 2022, the difference between primary and secondary school settings will be more marked as it will take time to build strong vaccination coverage of children aged 5 to 11 years.
- In secondary schools, the majority of the student and teacher population is already double vaccinated. This means secondary school environments are currently more comparable to other community settings and workplaces, noting that boosters are progressively becoming available for ages 18 and over but are not yet approved for any groups under 18.
- In every education setting, there will be some subsets of the population, like in the broader community, who are at higher risk of severe disease. A proportionate response in individual State and Territory operational plans and through localised arrangements within ECEC services and schools will see additional supports provided in these settings and population groups.

National Guiding Principles for Managing COVID-19 in Schools and Early Childhood Education and Care

 <p>Principle 1</p> <p>ECEC services and schools are essential and should be the first to open and last to close wherever possible in outbreak situations, with face-to-face learning prioritised*</p>	 <p>Principle 2</p> <p>Baseline public health measures continue to apply</p>	 <p>Principle 3</p> <p>No vulnerable child or child of an essential worker is turned away</p>	 <p>Principle 4</p> <p>Responses to be proportionate and health risk-based</p>	 <p>Principle 5</p> <p>Equip ECEC services and schools to respond on the basis of public health advice and with support from public health authorities where required</p>	 <p>Principle 6</p> <p>Wellbeing of children and education staff to be supported</p>
<p>Children are entitled to an education. ECEC and schools are essential and should remain open wherever possible to maximise their wide-ranging benefits for children, the community and the economy.</p> <p>By the start of Term 1 2022, school and ECEC workers will be designated as essential workers in jurisdictions.</p> <p>Education systems should support schools to ensure individual student learning can continue through periods of isolation-related absenteeism.</p> <p>Arrangements should seek to maintain a reasonable workload for teachers and educators, particularly when balancing face-to-face and remote learning environments.</p> <p>Remote learning should be considered as a time-limited last resort within schools experiencing widespread COVID-19 infections or staff absenteeism that impacts the school's operations.</p>	<p>ECEC services and schools should practice and promote evidence-based COVID-Safe behaviours at all times, irrespective of the level of COVID-19 community transmission.</p> <p>While recognising the exact combination and nature of COVID-Safe behaviours – such as hand washing, face masks, physical distancing and ventilation – in ECEC may look different to school settings, it is important for all education settings to adopt a multi-layered prevention strategy and, in all cases, persons must stay at home if experiencing COVID-19 symptoms or if required to isolate in line with the jurisdiction's health advice.</p> <p>Vaccination of all eligible persons is strongly encouraged.</p>	<p>Localised school planning must ensure a minimum offering of on-campus supervised learning is available at all times in the school term to the children of parents and carers who need to work and cannot support remote learning at the same time (e.g. frontline and essential workers), and for vulnerable children and young people.</p> <p>While ECEC services may sometimes close, during times of reduced service levels ECEC services should similarly prioritise children using these criteria.</p> <p>Provision for this has been standard practice throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.</p>	<p>All responses to COVID-19 outbreaks in ECEC and schools should be proportionate and informed by the latest health advice, practical implementation requirements and the individual risk profile of different education settings.</p> <p>Responses will need to evolve to adapt to the changing nature of the pandemic. Response settings may need to be more stringent in those ECEC services and schools where there are more children at high risk of severe disease, including children with disability or severe chronic health conditions, or unvaccinated, and public health authorities will prioritise these settings in line with a proportionate and health risk-based approach.</p> <p>Clear and timely communication to members of the ECEC service or school community should explain these considerations when responses are implemented, for example, school or class-based notifications to families.</p>	<p>Education systems will continue to support ECEC services and schools as appropriate to implement State and Territory operational plans, which will be informed by public health authorities and updated to reflect the changing nature of COVID-19 as required.</p> <p>Plans will consider any additional training or capacity building needed.</p> <p>Public health authorities may intervene where an outbreak is beyond an ECEC service or schools' capacity to respond. Data collection and sharing will be critical.</p> <p>Communication between ECEC services or schools and public health authorities, and data collection and sharing at the local level, will enable States and Territories to ensure local consistency, and determine the relationship between transmission of COVID-19 in ECEC services or schools and broader community transmission, and adjust jurisdictional plans accordingly.</p>	<p>The health, safety and wellbeing of children, teachers and their families is critical to the successful operation of ECEC and school systems and the delivery of quality education.</p> <p>ECEC and schools should continue to meet regulatory requirements, including through addressing workforce shortages, wherever possible, and noting the Commonwealth will undertake further work with States and Territories on ECEC workforce requirements.</p> <p>Staff and student wellbeing will continue to require close attention and support.</p> <p>Clear, consistent and timely communication should continue to be a priority, particularly about the step-change that likely transmission of Omicron in ECEC services and schools requires, giving certainty and confidence to children, students, staff and their families about the COVID-19 response measures outlined in State and Territory operational plans.</p>

* The Queensland and South Australian Governments have delayed the start of their school years by two weeks due to the forecast peaks of the virus in the states. These schools will still be open for the children of essential workers.