



2021

COVID-19 School Operating Guidelines

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COVID-19 School Operating Guidelines

1 Introduction

These operating guidelines have been developed to support the safe and continued operation of Northern Territory (NT) Government schools and associated early childhood services through the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Department of Education (the department) will continue to follow the advice and directions of the NT Chief Health Officer (CHO), and the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) on the operation of schools. This may require rapid changes to these operating guidelines without notice.

1.1 National Principles for School Education response to COVID-19

The following principles are guiding decision making nationally in relation to the operation of schools:

Schools should continue to maintain good behaviours to prevent the spread of disease. This includes frequent handwashing, respiratory hygiene and physical distancing where possible. Children and staff should not attend school if unwell and should stay home and be tested. In circumstances where children have other medical reasons for recurrent symptoms, a letter from the GP is sufficient to allow return to school without a negative test.

Regular environmental cleaning and disinfection, especially of frequently touched surfaces, and promoting outdoor air ventilation where possible, also reduce the risk of transmission.

Settings that enable frequent and close contact between individuals or groups pose a risk of transmission. Therefore, large events require COVIDSafe plans and there may be limits on the number of people who can attend. If there are no restrictions in place, activities such as school camps or excursions may be considered if COVIDSafe plans are in place.

Any additional measures in schools should be balanced against the local risk, such as whether there are cases in the community. If community restrictions are in place, such as requirements to wear masks, these may apply in schools where appropriate. Schools should refer to their own state or territory requirements and recommendations.

It is important that we continue to protect the health and wellbeing of students and staff. Students and staff may experience loneliness, confusion and see distressing scenes and stories from overseas. [Head to Health](#) provides online resources on mental health and COVID-19, including information for parents, which may also assist teachers. School systems should support staff with existing Employee Assistance Programs.

For more information please visit the AHPPC website [Australian Health Protection Principal Committee \(AHPPC\) updated statement on minimising the potential risk of COVID-19 transmission in schools | Australian Government Department of Health](#)

2 Visitors and Events

2.1 Visitors in schools

Visitors (including parents and carers) are permitted in schools subject to principal discretion and provided the following requirements are met:

- Visitors check in to school grounds using the '[Territory Check in' app](#) and existing school visitor registers.
- Visitors should maintain physical distancing of at least 1.5 metres between themselves and all other people including staff, students and other visitors. Where closer contact is absolutely necessary, it should be limited to less than 15 minutes.



- Schools should display floor markings indicating 1.5 metre distances in any areas where school visitors are likely to queue (eg at reception, at entryways to events, etc).
- Visitors should adhere to the school's hygiene practices, including:
 - o Washing or sanitising their hands on entry, after contact with high touch surfaces, after coughing or sneezing and after using the bathroom.
 - o Coughing/sneezing into a tissue or the inside of their elbow.
 - o Avoiding the use of any water bubblers except to fill up their own personal water bottle or disposable cup (BYO water bottles should be encouraged).
- The school must ensure appropriate signage to advise visitors of the physical distancing and hygiene requirements, and ensure all visitors are advised of the requirements on entry to the school.
- Schools must provide hand washing or sanitising facilities to visitors on entry to the school, however visitors should also be encouraged to bring their own hygiene products (tissues, hand sanitiser, etc) rather than relying on school supplies.
- In remote communities, visitors must hold any relevant permits required for entry into the community.

Principals should carefully consider the number of visitors coming into schools to ensure the maximum possible physical distancing and hygiene principles are applied. Practices to reduce the number of adults in the school and to encourage physical distancing at peak times should continue, such as alternative drop off/pick up arrangements, discouraging parents from entering classrooms, etc.

Visitors (as well as staff and students) should not be permitted to enter the school or a school event if:

- they are unwell;
- they are awaiting the outcome of a test for COVID-19;
- they have been directed by relevant authorities to quarantine or self-isolate; or
- in the last 14 days, they have travelled to a place identified by the [NT Chief Health Officer](#) as a COVID-19 hotspot.

Principals should continue to ensure frequent and transparent communication with their school representative body, school community and relevant community stakeholders regarding the arrangements and requirements for visitors in the school and/or community.

Some communities have requested specific additional precautions be taken, which must be accommodated on a case-by-case basis. Principals should be informed of any family or friends that are traveling to community and visiting the school and/or school events and ensure the community is supportive of these visitors being present.

2.2 Register of visitors

Schools must apply for and display the Territory Check in QR code throughout the school grounds. All visitors should use the '[Territory Check in' app](#) to check in electronically. Alternatively, the school must maintain a register of visitors, which should include the following minimum details:

- First and last name of each visitor
- At least one form of contact information (eg telephone number, email address or home address)
- Date and time of entry to the school

Records must be kept for a minimum of 28 days to allow access to contact tracers if required.

Note, however, that use of the QR code must not replace existing visitor registers.



2.3 Large school events

Schools are encouraged to adopt a cautious approach for any events, and to consider alternatives including online delivery using videoconferencing, smaller events involving fewer attendees, and dissemination of video recordings, photographs and reports of events through school websites or electronic newsletters.

Schools are permitted to hold large events with principal approval, ensuring hygiene and physical distancing principles are implemented where practical, and ensure QR code and/or register processes are in place for visitors.

For any large event, schools are encouraged to use the [School Event Checklist](#) to guide the safety requirements for your event.

For a large school event that involves **more than 500 participants** or spectators who are not students or staff at the same school, a [COVID-19 Event Safety Plan](#) must be completed, approved by the principal and submitted to the Environmental Health unit online. The COVID-19 Event Safety Plan will be assessed by the NT Chief Health Officer. You should submit your COVID-19 Event Safety Plan at least two weeks prior to your event to ensure sufficient time for the plan to be reviewed and approved.

Environmental Health Officers may conduct random visits to the event to ensure you are meeting your responsibilities as outlined in your COVID-19 Event Safety Plan.

For events held at a venue other than the school, the venue may also require additional plans, checklists or risk assessments to be carried out. Where they are required, these documents must also be completed.

2.4 Community use of school facilities

In accordance with current [policy](#), school representative bodies (supported by the principal) retain the authority to approve the use of school facilities by other organisations when they are not being used for education purposes (i.e. after hours, weekends and school holidays).

In authorising the use of school facilities by other organisations, schools should:

- ensure all activities are conducted after hours following staff and students' departure (or, alternatively, that all activities are conducted in a discrete area separate from any areas used by staff/students);
- view and be satisfied with the organisation's COVID-19 Safety Plan;
- ensure that the organisation has a process to record attendees at their activities, either through use of the Territory Check in app or other means; and
- ensure that the organisation cleans all equipment and areas accessed by participants (including access points, high touch surfaces, common areas etc.) after each use and prior to the following school day to the standard set out in the [Cleaning and Disinfection Advice for Schools and other Workplaces fact sheet](#).

In-school health services such as dental clinics should continue in consultation between the principal and the provider, with appropriate physical distancing and hygiene practices in place.

Directors Quality School Systems and Support (QSSS) can support principals with any queries or concerns about community use of facilities.

3 Professional development

Wherever possible professional development and staff meetings should be conducted via skype, phone and online. Face-to-face delivery should only occur where physical distancing and hygiene practices are implemented, it has been identified as an urgent priority, and the quality or efficiency of the program is significantly enhanced by in person delivery.



4 Staff travel

4.1 Personal travel

In order to ensure employees are informed of any changes to COVID-19 Australian hotspots and travel restrictions, the department requires all employees who intend to undertake private travel intrastate, interstate or overseas, for any reason, to register their travel plans using the department's Safe Travel Register:

<http://pandemicportal.education.nt.gov.au/travel>.

The Safe Travel Register is only available on NT School devices. Should an employee's private travel plans change whilst they are away, the traveler must contact their line manager to ensure the safe travel register can be updated as necessary.

As an additional safety measure, regional and office-based staff who are not based in a remote community will not be approved to travel into remote communities for a period of 14 days following any interstate or overseas travel.

The department is not able to support employees with alternative working arrangements while in quarantine or while interstate. Individuals remain responsible for the decision to travel, and are required to enter appropriate leave for the relevant period and pay associated quarantine costs, if applicable.

4.2 Work-related travel

There are current [restrictions on work-related interstate travel for all NTPS employees](#). If you are considering interstate travel for work purposes, please ensure you review the instruction and ensure that you meet one of the exception criteria.

Alternatives should be sought to travelling in person (i.e attending meetings or professional development via video conference/telepresence/conference etc).

5 Excursions

Category A (local area) and Category B (beyond the local area and/or overnight) school excursions are permitted subject to any travel restrictions, border controls, quarantine requirements and biosecurity measures that may be in place and are subject to change without notice.

Category C (interstate) excursions are not currently supported in line with [current restrictions on interstate travel for Northern Territory Public Service \(NTPS\) employee work purposes](#).

Planning for interstate excursions may continue at the discretion of schools; however, paperwork should not be submitted or progressed until the Chief Executive communicates a change in the [NTPS position on work-related travel](#).

Approval for Category C excursions requires Chief Executive approval, and any planning should take into account the different levels of COVID-19 risk in other states and territories, ongoing uncertainty about the ability to freely undertake interstate travel, and the need to ensure reasonable lead times and communications with parents ahead of any such travel.

Planning for interstate excursions should also include establishing protocols for circumstances where some or all staff/students become unwell or are suspected or confirmed to have contracted COVID-19 during the excursion, or if travel restrictions/quarantine requirements are re-introduced during the excursion. Schools should defer making any financial commitments relating to interstate excursions until the Chief Executive has approved the excursion. Approval for Category C excursions will not be given (and previous approvals will be revoked) if border restrictions or quarantine requirements for interstate travel are reinstated in the NT or the destination state.



An enhanced risk assessment (download [Category A, B and C forms here](#)) must be completed for all proposed excursions, focused on ensuring the safety and wellbeing of staff and students. Directors QSSS are available to support principals with these risk assessments as required.

Local restrictions must be taken into account when planning travel.

If required by any of the venues visited during an excursion, additional venue plans, checklists and risk assessments may be necessary in addition to departmental and school documents. Where they are required, these documents should be attached to the excursion risk assessment.

Category D (overseas) excursions continue to be prohibited, and schools are discouraged from undertaking planning for future overseas excursions given the long-term uncertainty about the ability to undertake, and risks associated with, international travel into the future.

6 Health and safety

Schools may use water bubblers for drinking provided [hygiene measures](#) are followed. However, where feasible, the use of personal water bottles continues to be encouraged.

In accordance with AHPPC advice on reducing COVID-19 risks in schools, schools are encouraged to continue with [enhanced cleaning practices](#), including regular disinfection of high touch surfaces and playgrounds. Temporary grants to support enhanced cleaning will be provided to all schools at the beginning of the school year. If schools are having any difficulty obtaining hygiene or cleaning products, please contact the department at pandemic.doe@ntschoools.net.

6.1 How to manage illness, and contact with people who are ill

This section provides advice to schools on how to manage staff and students who are ill, who are awaiting COVID-19 test results, who are confirmed cases of COVID-19, have been to an exposure site or those who have been in contact with people in any of those categories.

Refer to Table 2 of the Government Schools Pandemic Sub Plan.

Student or staff member is unwell	
Individual Action <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - do not attend school, or depart if already in attendance - advise principal and keep informed - call the NT COVID-19 hotline with any concerns – 1800 008 002 - seek medical attention as required - self-isolate if advised by public health authorities - For staff - enter leave as appropriate 	School Action <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - follow normal practices, including recording staff/student absences - if an individual presents at school with fever, coughing, shortness of breath, sore throat or tiredness (fatigue), isolate them until they depart the school - thoroughly clean affected areas after their departure
Student or staff member is advised by public health authorities to self-isolate and/or be tested for COVID-19	
Individual Action <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - do not attend school or depart if already in attendance - immediately self-isolate and take other precautions as advised by public health authorities - advise principal and keep informed - seek medical attention as required - enter leave as appropriate - call the NT COVID-19 hotline with any concerns – 1800 008 002 	School Action <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - follow normal practices, including recording staff/student absences - if the individual is at school isolate them until they depart the school - thoroughly clean affected areas after their departure



Student or staff member is not unwell, but has been in contact with a sick person or a person who is awaiting results of a COVID-19 test	
Individual Action <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - no action required unless advised otherwise by public health authorities - the NT COVID-19 hotline with any concerns – 1800 008 002 	School Action <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - follow normal practices, including recording staff/student absences if necessary
Student or staff member has been in contact with a confirmed case of COVID-19, has been at an NT or interstate exposure site or has been in a hotspot location declared by the NT Chief Health Officer (within the declared date range)	
Individual Action <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - call the NT COVID-19 hotline 1800 008 002 - do not attend school, or depart if already in attendance - immediately self-isolate - advise principal and keep informed - enter leave as appropriate 	School Action <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - follow normal practices, including recording staff/student absences - if the individual is at school isolate them until they depart the school - thoroughly clean affected areas after their departure
Student or staff member has a confirmed case of COVID-19	
The Department of Education Chief Executive provides approval for the school to close and school closure procedures are activated.	
Individual Action <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - continue to self-isolate and follow all other advice and directions of public health authorities - seek medical attention as required - advise principal and keep informed - enter leave as appropriate - call the NT COVID-19 hotline with any concerns – 1800 008 002 	School Action <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - advise Director QSSS to coordinate departmental support - if approved, implement immediate school closure - provide communications to school community - implement School Outbreak Management Plan as required - Ensure staff readiness should a community outbreak occur (e.g. take laptops home)

7 Students

All students are expected to physically attend school unless they are unwell. Students who are unwell must remain at home, and parents/carers of children at school that are unwell should be required to collect them as soon as possible. Any children at home continue to have access to resources on the [Learning Together](#) website.

7.1 Student absence

NT Government schools will record attendance in line with the [Attendance Recording and Reporting Guidelines](#) and [Attendance Codes](#) list, with the below clarifications and variations in place:

1. Students physically at school will be recorded as “present” or other appropriate code;
2. Students not physically attending school sites due to vulnerabilities to COVID-19 or direction by a health professional to quarantine or self-isolate – use the “O-Out of Class” code (repurposed for this period).

This code counts as “present” for all reporting. It is expected these children are learning at home, supported by families. These students should be supported by schools in line with their pandemic plans.

Schools that have identified a work package or blended mode of education delivery, they may elect to use the Keep Kids Learning book and/or resources provided on the Learning Together website. For schools that have focused on digital education provision, consideration should be given to loaning students devices where they do not have access to digital technologies at home. Parents are responsible for supporting their child’s learning at home.



Schools should develop assessment and reporting schedule that identifies evidence of learning to make an assessment of progress and achievement. Students learning at home should receive an A to E grade for each subject studied, and the school will determine how teachers will collect evidence of learning.

3. Students not physically attending school sites for other reasons will be marked with the appropriate existing code, including: “S–Sick” if the student is unwell including diagnosed psychological conditions; “X–Absent with unacceptable reason” if parents voluntarily withdraw their child from physical attendance; “T–School unavailable” if the school site temporarily closed; or “U–Unnotified”.

Principals will support learning for these students in accordance with normal processes, exercising their professional judgement in determining the support to provide including consideration of any prior knowledge of medical conditions, current medical certificates, and information from health authorities/parents/carers. Schools will continue to work with the student(s) and their parents to encourage and support the student to return to school. Parents are responsible for ensuring their child attends school.

For any students who are absent or learning at home, two-way communication between teachers and families will be essential to ensure no student is left behind. Schools should continue to engage with students and families using existing communication platforms, to provide timely updates specific to their school. It is imperative that schools maintain contact with students and families, and staff continue to maintain their obligations in relation to mandatory reporting.

7.2 Senior years students

The department will continue to work with the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) Board and provide schools with the advice regarding senior years students and NT Certificate of Education and Training (NTCET). Additional information is also available online: <https://www.sace.sa.edu.au/covid-19-coronavirus>.

7.3 Vocational Education and Training (VET)

Any changes to VET courses will be communicated directly from the Registered Training Organisation (RTO) to the school and to the enrolled student.

RTOs are expected to have completed COVID-19 safety plans. Schools should view and be satisfied with the COVID-19 safety plans before engaging with RTOs. Structured Work Placement (SWP) for students undertaking a VET course will continue if agreed to by the employer and parent.

Please contact the relevant Industry Engagement Officer with any concerns or queries.

7.4 Boarding students

Boarding schools are operating and students are expected to attend. Any children of compulsory school age remaining in community are expected to enrol in their local school.

7.5 Music and language school programs

In-school programs, with educators who usually visit schools to provide small group and whole class lessons, will continue to operate where approved by the principal and in accordance with the health advice. The music and language programs that operate outside of school hours are operating as normal.

7.6 International Students and partnership activities

Current international travel restrictions mean that schools are unable to participate in face-to-face international partnership activities including study tours and overseas excursions. Schools are encouraged to maintain communication with their overseas partner schools through online sister-school activities and to explore innovative approaches for incorporating Australian Curriculum Asia and Australia’s Engagement with Asia cross-curriculum priorities and Intercultural Understanding general capabilities in teaching and learning programs.



Schools are reminded of their obligations to fee-paying international students under the Education Services for Overseas Students Act and National Code. International travel restrictions may affect the health and wellbeing of overseas fee-paying students, especially those who are unable to return home to see families. Some families may be finding it difficult to pay international student tuition fees and are encouraged to contact [International Services](#) to discuss any financial hardship matters.

8 Principals and staff

The leadership provided by principals in all our schools, and the commitment demonstrated by educators and other staff in our schools to deliver quality learning to students and young children, continues to be acknowledged and highly valued. Principals will continue to exercise their professional judgement and make local decisions, within the parameters and guidance provided by the department, to ensure operations suit their school context.

Principals will:

- ensure that staff and students who are unwell stay at home;
- enable physical distancing, hygiene and cleaning practices in their school;
- continue to focus on student attendance and engagement. Any new activities or programs should contribute to, and not distract from, this focus. Principals will continue to consult with school staff regarding school operations, and staff should be invited to give regular feedback for improvement.

8.1 Communications

Principals will continue to ensure frequent and transparent communications with school representative bodies regarding school operations, including changes arising from the COVID-19 pandemic response.

8.2 Resources, workforce and programs

Principals should plan for the utilisation of all school staff including NT Government employees and school representative body employees, for the continuation of internally and externally funded school programs and services (including Families as First Teachers, Child and Family Centres), if the need arises.

Recruitment from interstate continues to be supported, including recruitment of people located in hotspots. All new teachers arriving from interstate hotspots, as well as their families, must quarantine for 14 days on arrival into the NT. The Department of Education will continue to coordinate and fund the costs of quarantine so long as this remains a requirement. Further information is available in the [Quick Guide for Principals](#) and [FAQs for Principals and Teachers](#).

Principals should ensure they capture all direct expenditure related to COVID-19 using 210 COVID (please create an operational path in MYOB). There is no commitment to reimburse for costs and schools should continue to manage within their resource allocation. Where a school is experiencing financial hardship that impacts the school's ability to deliver quality educational programs please contact your School Financial Improvement Manager or sfis.doe@nt.gov.au.

8.3 Vulnerable staff and Working from Home

Staff should be encouraged to confidentially disclose to their principal if they consider that they are vulnerable in the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. Principals that identify as vulnerable should contact their Senior Director, School Improvement and Leadership.

Vulnerable employees may include:

- staff with compromised immune systems (such as people who have cancer)
- staff with chronic medical conditions
- staff who are pregnant



- staff over the age of 60 particularly when combined with a chronic medical condition
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, particularly over the age of 50
- staff with vulnerable people living in their household.

Current and specific advice regarding relevant medical conditions for the COVID-19 pandemic are listed on the Department of Health [website](#). Staff may identify as vulnerable outside of this list, and consideration will be given on a case by case basis.

Staff that identify as vulnerable should complete a Personal Action Plan and discuss this plan with their principal/leader. The Personal Action Plan may: identify alternative work tasks, environment or ways of working to support the staff member; provide the staff member with opportunities to access their accrued leave; or provide an option to work from home, where possible. Once approved by principal/leader, copies of approved Personal Action Plans will be submitted to WorkforceServices@nt.gov.au.

Where working from home is the preferred option, staff members will need to complete a Working from Home Agreement in accordance with the Working from Home Guidelines.

Copies of approved Working from Home Agreements will be submitted to WorkforceServices@nt.gov.au by the principal/leader. It is important that teaching staff working from home are provided with clear guidance around the work that they are required to undertake, the manner in which they undertake it and how they are supported to effectively conduct this work.

Personal Action Plans and Working from Home Agreements should be regularly reviewed by the employee and their line manager/principal.

8.4 Wellbeing

NT Government employees can access free counselling sessions and, as part of the pandemic response, the department is funding additional counselling support for staff.

During this period, department staff and their immediate family members can access up to six counselling sessions per person, per issue. These counselling sessions can be conducted by a range of service providers.

For more information and contacts:

- [NTG Employee Assistance Program](#)
- [Teach in the Territory - Employee Assistance Program](#)

EASA and CORP Workplace Solutions are committed to supporting all Territorians during these unprecedented times, and have developed some tips for maintaining wellbeing:

- [Calming Coronavirus Concerns](#)
- [Managing Stress](#)
- [Managing Sleep](#)
- [Managing Anxiety](#)

Good resources for maintaining mental health in the pandemic can also be found on the Wellbeing section of the [Pandemic Communications Portal](#).

9 Digital platforms

Schools should continue to use their funding to maintain their school digital environment including learning technologies and apps for use by students and teachers.

Schools should be mindful of the risks associated with using cloud based applications, especially surrounding privacy and child safety, including bullying. It is safest to use software that has been assessed for privacy and security and approved by the department. Refer to “Guidelines for supporting schools using online environments on the Connecting Learners Hub on eLearn under [School Leaders](#).



Parents and school leaders are strongly encouraged to go to [eSafety.gov.au](https://www.esafety.gov.au) for specific advice regarding COVID-19 including:

- [an online safety kit for parents and carers](#)
- [an online safety booklet for parents and carers](#)
- [advice for school leaders keeping schools and learning safe online](#)

Staff should also refer to the [Protective Practices Guidelines: For Teachers in their interactions with children and young people](#) from the Teacher Registration Board.

10 Early Childhood Education and Care Services and Programs

Operating guidelines for Early Childhood Education and Care Services are available on the [Pandemic Communications Portal](#).

11 School transport

School buses contracted by the NT Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics (DIPL) will continue to operate. DIPL has implemented enhanced cleaning protocols for buses, including a thorough daily cleaning, and twice daily cleaning of buses for special schools.

Where schools operate transport services for students, buses should be cleaned in line with the [COVID-19 Cleaning and Disinfection Advice Fact Sheet](#), and physical distancing and hygiene practices should be in place to the extent practicable.

Schools should manage student movement when entering and exiting buses to maintain appropriate physical distancing.

12 Key contacts and further information

- For school operation support, contact your Director QSSS
- For school improvement and leadership support, contact your Senior Director, School Improvement and Leadership
- A list of other contacts will be included in the [Contacts section](#) of the department's [Pandemic Communications Portal](#).
- The Pandemic Communications Portal is updated regularly and will remain the primary source of communications with schools in relation to COVID-19.
- Further information is also available at coronavirus.nt.gov.au.
- Further changes will be communicated as the situation develops.



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