



Advice to Principals: Potential School Closures relating to COVID-19

1. Background

As EREA continues to monitor COVID-19 in our community, decisions relating to the health and wellbeing of our students and staff remain our highest priority. We continue to take the advice of the [Australian Government Department of Health](#) with regards to the prevention and spread of Novel coronavirus.

A record number of children and youth are not attending school or university because of temporary or indefinite closures mandated by governments in an attempt to slow the spread of COVID-19. As of 10 March, UNESCO reports, 32 countries in three continents have announced or implemented school and university closures. Having acknowledged this reality, the risk of transmission in Australia currently remains low.

Recent comments from Australian political leaders regarding COVID-19 in relation to schools is noted. The Victorian Premier, for example, has foreshadowed the closure of schools across that state. The purpose of this memorandum is to offer advice to schools as we face the potential for increased risks and rapidly evolving realities which may result in school closures.

2. General advice

Maintain a *zero-symptom-tolerance threshold*. If a student or staff member presents with flu-like symptoms (fever, coughing, sore throat and fatigue and or shortness of breath), the community member should be sent home, with medical follow-up requested and acted upon.

For cases of COVID-19, exclusion should remain in place until they are medically cleared to return to school.

For cases of “close contact” with a confirmed case of COVID-19, exclusion should remain in place for 14 days since the last contact with the confirmed case. “Close contact” is defined below.

“Close Contact”

Close contact is defined as:

- **living in the same household**
- **15 minutes face-to-face contact with a person with confirmed coronavirus in any setting or;**
- **sharing a closed space with a person with confirmed coronavirus for more than 2 hours.**

3. School closure - case by case

If there is a confirmed case of COVID-19 in your school community (student, parent, staff member), a judgement needs to be made as to whether “close contact” has occurred with other members of your school community.

If you are *able to define* the limits of “close contact”, it may be possible to have only identified individuals isolated from your school. In other words, can you be confident that you’ve identified all the people in your school community who came into “close contact” with the infected individual during their period of contagion?

If you *cannot define* the limits of “close contact”, please contact your Regional Director and discuss your plan around this case, which may include consideration of the closure of your school.

You may have the view that sending students home creates a greater risk, for example, sending boarding students back to their families in remote communities may be a greater risk than having those students remain at school. Please contact your Regional Director to discuss.

The length of closure of your school will need to be determined. This will be influenced by a number of factors.

- Advice from your regional Catholic Employing Authority, ensuring that your response aligns with advice given at that level.
- Advice given by State Education counterparts.
- Advice or direction from Public Health officials
- Local factors which mean that risk can be adequately mitigated, as identified through your school-based emergency response plan (see below).

You may be considering postponing or cancelling domestic events which involve travel across regions, districts or states. Discuss this with your Regional Director. At present, these remain school-based decisions.

Document and ensure notifications and detection reports or school closures are recorded through Complispace.

4. School closure - whole region, district or state

There are currently no known plans to close all schools at regional, district or state level. Nonetheless, EREA would expect schools to follow whole-of-region, district or state directives to close schools should they come, even if those directives are non-binding from a governance perspective.

Principals should contact their Regional Director for clarification, if they have not *already* received advice from EREA with respect to region, district or state-wide closures that have been directed by Diocesan authorities, Education Departments, or other State or Federal government authorities.

Even when closures are broadly followed, you will still need to document and ensure notifications and reports are recorded through Complispace.

5. Postponement or cancellation of planned travel

You may be considering postponing or cancelling domestic events which involve travel across regions, districts or states. Discuss this with your Regional Director. At present, these remain school-based decisions.

Either way, it is important that you keep your stakeholders informed of your decision-making process.

6. Use of Learning Management Systems (LMSs) to continue learning

Many EREA Colleges have highly sophisticated LMSs which would allow a significant degree of learning to continue through a period of school closure. Developing a plan for the continuation of and communication about learning through your school LMS should be considered/developed as a part of your school-based emergency response plan.

If your school-based emergency response plan includes the intention to continue with modified learning plans with staff and students working from home through LMSs, then you will need to make these arrangements and expectations clear with staff, students and your parent community. If staff are expected to work from home, they will not need to access any leave, as they are expected to continue to work, albeit in changed and extraordinary circumstances.

Risks associated with an online learning environment, with which schools will be very familiar, should be revisited in your school-based emergency response plan as you consider any move to use of LMSs for learning-from-home in response to disruption to normal school arrangements.

7. Leave Arrangements

Leave Entitlements

EREA recommends the following approach to leave entitlements in the extraordinary circumstances with which we are now faced, should isolations, partial closures, or whole school closures be required:

- For an employee who is sick and required to stay home from work, based on medical, government or school advice or direction, they are entitled to sick leave, but may first access a period of two weeks (ten working days) ex gratia leave.
- For an employee who is not sick themselves, but is required to care for a family member (for example a child) who is sick or who has been directed to self-isolate, they would be entitled to personal/carer's leave.
- For employees who are directed by the employer to self-isolate because of cases at your school or in your school community, where either the whole school is closed or just some employees are directed not to attend, EREA recommends a period of two weeks (ten working days) ex gratia leave.
- For casual employees who have been promised work for a time that subsequently falls within a school closure period, you have at the very least a moral obligation to design a work plan for them which utilises their services for the period of employment previously scheduled.

8. Other Measures

Consider providing free flu injections to staff, to minimise combined infections. This practice is already common in many EREA schools.

9. Advice to Staff

There may be members of staff who are particularly susceptible to infection for a variety of reasons. It is recommended that Principals discuss this possibility with staff and encourage individuals to disclose this so that a pastoral, protective and proactive approach to the management of their situation can be implemented.

10. Advice to parents

A transparent line of communication to your parent community is an essential component of your school-based emergency response plan. Developing holding statements now will reduce the stress on you and your team in the event of the need to act in the future around school closure.

11. Your school-based emergency response plan (ERP)

Ensure that your school ERP is kept up to date and that you continue to consider the range of risks posed by these events and your state of readiness to respond as a school. Consider your preparation and your response:

Prepare

- All overseas excursions suspended until further advised by EREA.
- Adhere to government health & education departments and CEO/CEC advisory notices. If advice appears to conflict, discuss with your Regional Director.
- Review your ERP in relation to managing events such as infectious diseases – include communication to your school community & media ‘holding statements’ (if necessary).
- Communication to staff & students around basic personal hygiene reminders.
- Develop a ‘Business Impact Assessment’ in relation to the potential closure of the school and develop a Business Continuity Plan (BCP) accordingly. For example, curriculum delivery, IT systems and school site (grounds) security etc. EREA has worked with Business Managers on this for the last 18 months.
- Borders – develop appropriate systems for monitoring health indicators.

Respond (when a ‘positive’ is detected)

- Advise public health authorities (as would be the normal compliance practice) – they may order the closure of the school depending on the “close contact” risk assessment
- Advise EREA through your Regional Director.
- Advise school community through pre-prepared statements.
- Implement your EMP & BCP until such time as the school can return to normal operations.

EREA Executive
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