

Introduction

The ACT Government is taking precautions during this time to limit the spread of COVID-19 and keep the ACT community safe. The ACT Government has approached the pathway out of lockdown for ACT schools with careful planning, drawing on national and local health advice, in response to the current and emerging needs of staff, students and families. These guidelines seek to prioritise the health and safety of staff and young people, while balancing their mental and emotional wellbeing and ensuring continuity of learning.

With COVID-Safe plans and procedures in place and health systems ready to quickly identify and respond to cases, schools and ELCs remain safe places. The return to school and ELC services is consistent with the wider plans to relax restrictions in the ACT and the National Plan. High population vaccination coverage is a critical component of these plans, to protect both staff and students from infection with COVID-19 and minimise and school-based outbreaks. The epidemiology of the outbreak in the ACT and community restrictions will provide ongoing context for decision making.

The Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) encourages schools to remain vigilant and continue to prevent opportunities for transmission in school settings. AHPPC has advised that physical distancing, hand and respiratory hygiene, regular cleaning and disinfection of the environment, and staying home if unwell continue to be critical effective measures for responding to COVID-19. Systems to rapidly respond to cases (which may include temporary school closure), along with the agility to adjust measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in response to community transmission are important. Schools should be ready to return to a full or partial snap lockdown or temporarily close (in response to an exposure) if directed by the ACT Chief Health Officer (CHO). These principles also apply to ELCs.

Health, Safety and Wellbeing

The phased return of children and young people to school and ELCs

The return of children and young people to on campus learning at school and ELC sites will commence in Term 4 if health conditions allow.

To ensure public health measures can be implemented with maximum physical distancing while the ACT progresses to reaching vaccination milestones, the return of children and young people will be staggered by year group, across three phases, considering transition years (Years 12, 10, 6), developmental needs (ELC, Kindergarten-Year 2), year groups that share classes (where possible) (Years 11/12 and 9/10), and population vaccination coverage.

- Phase A:** Commencing Week 1 of Term 4 (5 October)
Year 12
- Phase B(i):** Commencing Week 3 of Term 4 (18 October)
Year 11
- Phase B(ii):** Commencing Week 4 of Term 4 (25 October)
ELCs, OSHC, Kindergarten, Years 1 and 2; Year 6; Years 9 and 10
- Phase C:** Commencing Week 5 of Term 4 (1 November)
Years 3, 4 and 5; Years 7 and 8

Onsite supervision and care can continue for vulnerable children and young people whose parents or carers cannot work from home, and for children whose parents are required to undertake work from home and cannot reasonably provide care whilst working. However, until the end of Week 2 of Term 4, remote learning should continue, wherever possible, except for Years 11 and 12.

Parents/carers of children and young people with complex medical needs should be encouraged to consult their medical practitioner to determine if reasonable adjustments are required to ensure they can safely return to onsite learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Where reasonable adjustments can be made based on the medical practitioner's advice, schools should put those adjustments in place. Where reasonable adjustments can't be made, students should be supported to learn from home. If required, based on medical advice, staff with complex medical conditions may also be supported to work from home where possible.

Vaccination

Vaccination coverage is a key component of the return to school and ELC plan. High levels of vaccination combined with public health social measures are the best protections against COVID-19. Students and staff are strongly encouraged to have two doses of vaccine where eligible.

School and ELC staff and some students have been prioritised for vaccination; not all will have had the opportunity to receive two doses, and children in ELCs and primary schools will still be ineligible for COVID-19 vaccination at the time of their return. Vaccination of adults around children is the most effective way to protect unvaccinated children from disease. Very high to complete vaccination levels for staff undertaking face to face learning is a critical component of the suite of measures in this plan. This will require employers to conduct site level monitoring of staff vaccination rates.

At this stage, with ACT vaccination rates high and increasing, there appears to be no need for employers to implement a mandatory vaccination policy for School and ELC staff. However, this may need to be reconsidered.

How should the safety of staff, children and young people be managed in CECG ACT schools and ELCs?

Schools and ELCs should continue to maintain COVID-safe practices to prevent the spread of disease through a multi-pronged approach. Schools and ELCs should have protocols in place early in Term 4.

All CECG ACT schools and ELCs, including OSHC programs, will be required to adhere to the AHPPC's updated advice on minimising the potential risk of COVID-19 transmission in schools. In the ACT context this includes:

Use of the CBR Check in app

At a minimum, all visitors must check into the site each time they arrive using the CBR check-in app. Schools and ELCs will implement processes which require all adults and staff who attend school sites to also check in using the app.

Staying home when sick

Staff members, children and young people who are unwell must not attend a school or ELC site and should stay home and get tested. If they attend a site while unwell, they must be sent home. In circumstances where staff, children or young people have other medical reasons for recurrent symptoms, a letter from the GP is sufficient to allow return to ELC or school without a negative test.

Hygiene

Good hand and respiratory hygiene practices are vital to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Schools and ELCs should display signage and proactively implement good hygiene routines and practices. All staff, visitors, children and young people must:

- 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 and do hand hygiene afterwards
- avoid touching eyes, noses, or mouths
- not sharing food or drink

Masks

The use of masks is one part in a suite of measures to reduce COVID-19 transmission. Staff, visitors, and students in Years 7-12 should wear masks in the classroom and outside when in close contact with others, except when eating.

The wearing of masks for primary students is at the discretion of the student and their parents/carer but is not recommended for children in ELCs or for Kindergarten to Year 2 children. This is because masks are unlikely to be correctly worn by very young children and may represent a choking hazard. Masks may not be appropriate for children with a disability.

Masks need to be worn correctly to cover the nose and mouth. The use of masks, including exceptions to their use and when they can be removed, should align with current Public Health Directions.

Masks should be changed during lunch breaks or every four hours.

Physical distancing

While it is acknowledged that physical distancing between children and young people is not always possible, particularly in single classrooms in the School and ELC environments, it is important for limiting transmission of COVID-19. Unnecessary physical interaction in school classrooms and ELCs and on school grounds should be minimised.

All adults on school and ELC sites must maintain physical distancing between themselves and other adults. Density quotients of one person per four square metres (4m²) apply in non-student areas.

Children and young people should physically distance from each other and from staff where possible. Where possible, separate cohorts should be maintained, and cohorts who do not normally learn together should not mix; adults should stay within their cohort as far as possible. This does not include siblings. It is acknowledged some staff are required to provide essential services or course specific teaching to students across year groups, but this should be minimised where possible. Signage must be displayed to ensure physical distancing requirements are clear.

Optimising physical distancing will require:

- limiting gathering in, and staggering of the use of, common social spaces and indoor communal areas such as corridors, entry and exit points, canteens, school library and staff and common rooms.
- entry to and exit from class at the start and end of the day, and breaks, should be staggered
- increasing in-class distancing to the extent this is possible
- adapting activities that minimise the mixing of classes and years; or where these occur, they should be held outdoors
- only allowing high risk activities which generate aerosols, such as singing and playing wind instruments, to occur outdoors
- assigning bathrooms and common rooms to staff and student cohorts where feasible
- cancelling close contact activities such as indoor and contact sports, camps, and excursions
- restricting OSHC to students attending the school where it is conducted
- cancelling extracurricular activities that would bring together children and young people from multiple year groups or classes, or other ELCs/schools, including sport, assemblies, performances and after school and inter-school activities. This does not apply to OSHC for children who attend school at the site where the OSHC program is delivered.
- encouraging children and young people to remain seated during classes
- scheduling the use of outdoor spaces and utilising outdoor learning spaces, where possible
- limiting on site visitors
- parents or carers must not enter school sites or come onto school grounds to drop off or collect children except in the case of an emergency or to provide necessary supports for a child or young person with additional needs which should be negotiated with the principal in advance. This does not apply to parents dropping off or collecting children from OSHC which requires a sign in/out procedure.
- parents or carers dropping off or collecting children from ELCs should limit the amount of time spent onsite as much as possible.
- access of tradespeople to the school grounds should be restricted during school hours, where possible. This does not include approved construction work that is required to continue throughout the day.
- in all circumstances visitors must comply with the public health measures in place at the site, including wearing of masks and use of the CBR Check in app.
- stopping access to school facilities by community organisations during school hours.

Environmental cleaning

Site specific cleaning plans must be in place to ensure regular cleaning of high touch surfaces (such as handrails and desks), frequently used objects (such as staff desk top computers), common areas, toilets and play equipment.

Ventilation

Indoor air quality can be associated with transmission of COVID-19. Ventilation should be optimised in the learning environment to minimise transmission. Outdoor learning should be encouraged and assisted where possible (balanced against sun safety and temperature considerations).

It is recommended CECG ACT schools and ELCs assess their current ventilation capacity and maximise fresh air as much as possible. A checklist to support this assessment can be found [here](#).

Appropriate mitigation activities should include:

- adjusting systems where possible to increase the fresh (external) air being supplied to learning spaces and classrooms and reduce air recirculation (balanced against temperature considerations).
- using mechanical controls, such as opening windows and doors
- the routine use of portable HEPA filters and carbon dioxide (CO²) monitors in ACT schools is not supported at this time, as the evidence for the additional public health benefit of these units over maximising fresh air is currently limited. ACT Health will continue to be guided by AHPPC advice and the evolving evidence on the specific benefit of these devices in addition to other public health measures in a school setting.
- managing suspected or confirmed cases to prevent further transmission.
- schools and ELCs should have specific plans for managing children, young people, staff and visitors who display symptoms of COVID-19 and for managing a COVID-19 diagnosis in a child, young person, staff member or visitor to the school.

Staff, children, young people or visitors with COVID-19 symptoms

Children and young people at schools or ELCs experiencing symptoms compatible with COVID-19 (e.g. fever, cough, sore throat, shortness of breath) must be isolated in an appropriate space with suitable supervision and collected by a parent/carer as soon as possible. Staff and visitors should be advised to travel directly home. The symptomatic person should wear a mask while waiting to be picked up or waiting to return home. If a child cannot tolerate wearing a mask, then staff caring for a child who becomes sick whilst at a school or ELC should wear a mask, carry out frequent hand hygiene and practise physical distancing. There is no need for the staff member to then isolate unless they themselves become unwell or the child is confirmed to have COVID-19.

If a staff member, child, young person, or family member is diagnosed with COVID-19, ACT Health will provide direction on further management, which may result in full or partial school or ELC closure while site cleaning and contact tracing is undertaken. The ACT Government has procedures in place to respond to a confirmed or suspected case in an ACT school or ELC. This includes working with the ACT CHO to determine risks and may include full or partial closure of an individual school or ELC. Quarantine and testing requirements will be communicated directly to school and ELC communities. Schools will be responsible for supporting continuity of learning for children and young people during a period of quarantine.

Routine testing for COVID-19

At the current time, ACT Health is not recommending routine COVID-19 testing of children, young people and/or staff using rapid antigen testing. Home testing might be a future consideration, depending on the level of community transmission, noting that home testing kits are not currently registered for use in Australia at this time. ACT Health will continue to monitor and review the national advice on routine testing for COVID-19.

School canteens

The decision to open school canteens is at the discretion of the school, considering their school community and the need to avoid decreasing access to food for vulnerable children and young people. School canteens can be made safer if treated as take away venues, with pre-ordering and 'click and collect' for high schools/colleges and contactless delivery to classrooms in primary schools. These guidelines apply to all canteen workers, including the wearing of masks.

Wellbeing supports

Children, young people, families and staff will all experience the impacts of COVID-19 in their own way. For some, this may include feelings of distress, anxiety, or confusion. A range of wellbeing supports and resources specifically for children, young people and families are available on the [ACT Health website](#) and on the [CECG website](#).

Schools and ELCs should identify specific wellbeing supports for children, young people and staff.

FAQs

Will schools be able to celebrate end of year events like graduations and formals?

The ACT Government acknowledges the significance of end of year events, including graduations and formals, in celebrating a student's achievements and key life transitions. The health and safety of children, young people, their families, and staff remain the primary consideration in determining what end of year events can go ahead.

The hosting of end of year events will therefore depend on the broader community context, and public health restrictions in place at the time. Advice on end of year events, together with guidance, will be provided as early as possible in Term 4.

What will happen if community infections increase in the ACT?

A cautious approach is being taken to return to school and ELCs to minimise the need for future restriction. If an outbreak is rapidly escalating in the ACT and there is the potential for the health system to be significantly strained, school and ELC closures may be required in line with other community restrictions, to enable control of disease in the community. Schools and ELCs must be ready to respond to a community-wide lockdown or temporarily close (in response to an exposure) if directed by the ACT CHO or by the Children's Education and Care Assurance (CECA) on the advice of the ACT CHO.

The benefits and risks of school and ELC closures will be carefully weighed. This includes the impact on educational, social, health and wellbeing outcomes, especially for vulnerable children and young people.