

THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION IN LIGHT OF COVID-19

HOW THE PANDEMIC WILL TRANSFORM
EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA



Introduction

As COVID-19 sweeps across the globe, life as we know it is changing drastically and in some cases, perhaps permanently or indefinitely. Although Australia has done well to limit the transmission of the 2019 coronavirus - and subsequent hospitalisations and deaths - exercising caution as they explore return-to-school will be imperative to maintain success long-term.

The classroom is integral to learning for many students, particularly those whose parents are essential workers and not present during the day to guide them through their learning. For this reason and others, returning students to school is accompanied by a myriad of benefits and on the agenda for Australian leaders. This article explores the current state of education across the country, plans for transition back into the classroom, and potential safety measures that schools may consider in order to prevent the transmission of disease among students after their return.

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The state of the education system today

On 9 April, the federal government recognised that while each state is approaching the return to school a little differently, the national government remains consistent with the expectation that states ensure vulnerable students have access to onsite learning opportunities. Scott Morrison has reiterated on more than one occasion that schools are safe for children who need a place to learn. All states are compliant, offering onsite options for vulnerable students, but indeed the return-to-school plans are varying from state to state:

NSW

Schools are open with only 5% of students in attendance; educators are strategising for better attendance by the third week of term 2

Victoria

Schools are open only for vulnerable students and education will be delivered through distance learning methods throughout term 2

Queensland

Schools are open only for vulnerable students/those whose parents are essential workers and onsite learning won't be re-evaluated until around 15 May

South Australia

Schools are open for all students but parents may choose whether to send students or keep them at home and engage in distance learning

Western Australia

Parents are encouraged to keep their children home and no further information has been provided regarding potential return to onsite learning

Tasmania

Students are distance learning whenever possible with onsite learning provided for those who need it

Northern Territory

As of 20 April all students should report to school unless their parents have made other arrangements with the school

ACT

Students will move to distance learning for term 2 with the exception of those who are vulnerable/do not have a parent at home during the day, who may still report to school

All schools, whether educating the few students who qualify as vulnerable (or whose parents qualify as essential workers) or all students, are taking safety seriously and exploring interventions to protect students and staff from infection.



Education in the next six months

While students may continue distance learning through July in some territories, we expect students to return to their classrooms for term 3 as long as the statistics continue to show that COVID-19 is well controlled nationally. Exceptions may exist in states or territories that experience widespread infection. As students return, now or in the future, schools can take a number of measures to promote safety and prevent the spread of infection:

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Screen all faculty, staff, students & visitors

Screen all faculty, staff, students and visitors at the door through • temperature screening (with appropriate protection/barriers in place). This was used to great effect in Singapore when the pandemic first hit the nation. Their efforts with temperature testing were lauded globally. Schools can also ask screening questions at this point, adapted for age-appropriateness: Have you had a fever, dry cough, or shortness of breath in the last 14 days? Have you been in direct contact with anybody who has tested positive for COVID or who is awaiting results? Have you travelled to a high-risk area? Those who have a fever upon temperature checks or who answer yes to these questions are not permitted to enter the building until they are deemed low risk again.



Rearrange classrooms

Rearrange classrooms and other learning environments to be more conducive to social distancing, spreading desks out, marking the floor to help students line up with adequate distance between them, labelling seats at lunch to maintain space, etc.

Reconsider high-risk activities

Reconsider high-risk activities like gym class, circle time, and recess; apply creativity to promote social distancing while still providing opportunities to learn in the group setting.





Place barriers

Place barriers like • countertop protection screens at reception desks, teachers' desks, and possibly in between students' desks to prevent the transmission of disease. Consider installing cubicles in shared office spaces to create a barrier effective in slowing the spread.

Limit the number of students in the building

Stagger the times that students arrive in the morning and leave at the end of the day to limit the number of students in the building at any given time, which gives educators the opportunity to spread students out and maintain social distancing. Stagger the times that students go to lunch to reduce the number of students in common spaces and allow for six feet in between each student while lining up and while dining.

Cleaning and disinfection

Ramped up cleaning and disinfection routines to prevent germs from living on surfaces and spreading from student to student.

Hygiene as common practice

Education policies for students and teachers alike around hygiene must be rolled out and become common practice. Continuity of messaging will create habits and this will play a big role in minimising spread at schools.

These temporary changes make it possible to return children to school while managing risk in the careful way the country has done since the pandemic first became evident.

Long-term changes and advancements

When danger of COVID-19 is no longer imminent, many of the measures in place now will no longer be necessary. However, lessons learned through this experience will drive both government agencies and schools to better prepare for the future.

Drafting policies and procedures that address pandemic preparedness and response while in the heart of the pandemic can add long-term value to schools should they face a similar situation in the future, including a second surge of COVID-19 infections that some have predicted for late 2020. Those involved in planning and implementation of emergency response should document actions taken and outcomes, including what went well and what failed to achieve the desired outcome as a form of “lessons learned.” This information can be used to either draft policies and procedures if not already in place or refine policies and procedures based on real-life experience.

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Schools should also consider having personal protective equipment on hand for future emergencies, to include acrylic barriers for reception desks, teachers' desks, lunch line, and other common spaces; cubicles to provide better opportunity for social distancing if ever needed; and an adequate supply of face masks for initial protection.

Although many educators had to quickly develop solutions for distance learning, schools may elect to continue using these platforms to 1) enhance current learning, providing a new way for students to learn or guidance that can be accessed from home when needed, and 2) maintain improved preparedness for the need to transition to distance learning on short notice in the future due to pandemic or other natural disaster.

To summarise Dr. Tedros with the World Health Organization, this may not be the first pandemic but it's the first pandemic that our society is prepared to control. The same caution that has driven safety in Australia since the beginning of this pandemic should continue, lifting restrictions when and where it makes sense without ever losing sight of the ultimate goal: to use this experience to become even better prepared for the future.

As Australia's leading manufacturer of mobile room dividers and partitions, Portable Partitions Australia (PPA) have a proud relationship with 100s of schools around Australia. When the current health crisis arrived PPA was able to devote our expertise in partitions to creating products that are aimed to keep frontline staff healthy, as well as trying to reduce community transmission of COVID-19. Our range of medical screens, partitions and temperature checkpoints are designed to do just that.

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