

# Should Australian schools remain open during the COVID-19 epidemic?

## What they said...

*'As we act to slow the spread of coronavirus, the message to students and parents of government schools is clear: all children who can learn at home must learn from home – with exceptions only in extremely limited circumstances'*

**Victorian premier, Daniel Andrews, and Victorian Education Minister, James Merlino**

*'For all of those parents who wish to send their children to school, for an education at the school, those schools will remain open'*

**Australian prime minister, Scott Morrison**

## The issue at a glance

As of March 29, 2020, (some weeks before the end of Term 1 in most states) the federal government advised that it was safe to send Australian children to school and that all schools needed to be prepared to accept all students except those who were ill. Schools were expected to reopen after the term break with a mix of distance learning and in-school education, so that all 'essential workers', defined by the prime minister as anyone with a job, would be able to remain in employment. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/mar/30/australia-coronavirus-shutdown-rules-stage-3-not-lockdown-what-is-closed-open-restrictions>

However, even at this point, there were differences in the manner in which each state and territory was managing schools, with Victoria and the Australia Capital Territory having brought the commencement of the holidays forward.

On April 3, 2020, the Victorian premier, Daniel Andrews and education minister, James Merlino, announced that other than in 'extremely limited circumstances' all Victorian state school students would be educated remotely from the start of Term 2.

<https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/victorian-students-to-learn-from-home-as-vce-timelines-revised/>

Debate over the form education should take at this difficult time continues.

## Background

(The information contained below has been drawn from the Wikipedia entry titled '2019–20 coronavirus pandemic', the full text of which can be accessed at

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2019%E2%80%9320\\_coronavirus\\_pandemic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2019%E2%80%9320_coronavirus_pandemic)

And from the Wikipedia entry titled 'Impact of the 2019–20 coronavirus pandemic on education', the full text of which can be accessed at

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Impact\\_of\\_the\\_2019%E2%80%9320\\_coronavirus\\_pandemic\\_on\\_education](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Impact_of_the_2019%E2%80%9320_coronavirus_pandemic_on_education))

The 2019–20 coronavirus pandemic is an ongoing pandemic of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). The outbreak was identified in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, declared to be a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on 30 January 2020, and recognized as a pandemic on 11 March 2020.[9][10] As of 9 April 2020, approximately 1.58 million cases of COVID-19 have been reported in 209 countries and territories, resulting in approximately 94,800 deaths.[4] About 353,000 people have recovered.

The virus is mainly spread between people during close contact, often via small droplets produced during cough, sneeze, or talk. While these droplets are produced when breathing out, they usually fall to the ground or surfaces rather than being infectious in the air over large distances. People may also become infected by touching a contaminated surface and then their face. The virus can survive on surfaces for up to 72 hours. Coronavirus is most contagious during the first three days after onset of symptoms, although spread may be possible before symptoms appear and in later stages of the disease.

Common symptoms include fever, cough and shortness of breath. Complications may include pneumonia and acute respiratory distress syndrome.[20] The time from exposure to onset of symptoms is typically around five days but may range from two to 14 days. There is no known vaccine or specific antiviral treatment. Primary treatment is symptomatic and supportive therapy.

Recommended preventive measures include hand washing, covering one's mouth when coughing, maintaining distance from other people, and monitoring and self-isolation for people who suspect they are infected. Authorities worldwide have responded by implementing travel restrictions, quarantines, curfews, workplace hazard controls, and facility closures.

The pandemic has led to severe global socioeconomic disruption, the postponement or cancellation of sporting, religious, political and cultural events, and widespread shortages of supplies exacerbated by panic buying. Schools and universities have closed either on a nationwide or local basis in 193 countries, affecting approximately 99.4 percent of the world's student population. Misinformation about the virus has spread online, and there have been incidents of xenophobia and discrimination against Chinese people, other people of East and Southeast Asian descent and appearance, and others from areas with significant virus cases. Due to reduced travel and closures of heavy industry, there has been a decrease in air pollution and carbon emissions, which has had a beneficial effect on the environment.

#### Impact of the 2019–20 coronavirus pandemic on education

The 2019–20 coronavirus pandemic has affected educational systems worldwide, leading to the widespread closures of schools and universities.

As of 8 April 2020, approximately 1.716 billion learners have been affected due to school closures in response to COVID-19. According to UNESCO monitoring, 188 countries have implemented nationwide closures and 5 have implemented local closures, impacting about 99.4% of the world's student population. On 23 March 2020, Cambridge International Examinations (CIE) released a statement announcing the cancellation of Cambridge IGCSE, Cambridge O Level, Cambridge International AS & A Level, Cambridge AICE Diploma, and Cambridge Pre-U examinations for the May/June 2020 series across all countries.

International Baccalaureate exams have also been cancelled.

School closures impact not only students, teachers, and families, but have far-reaching economic and societal consequences. School closures in response to COVID-19 have shed light on various social and economic issues, including student debt, digital learning, food insecurity, and homelessness, as well as access to childcare, health care, housing, internet, and disability services. The impact was more severe for disadvantaged children and their families, causing interrupted learning, compromised nutrition, childcare problems, and consequent economic cost to families who could not work.

In response to school closures, UNESCO recommended the use of distance learning programs and open educational applications and platforms that schools and teachers can use to reach learners remotely and limit the disruption of education.

#### The situation in Australia

As of March 29, 2020, some weeks before the end of Term 1 in most states, the federal government's advice was that it was safe to send children to school up to the end of the term, but some pupil-free days would be needed to plan distance learning. Schools are expected to reopen after the term break with a mix of distance learning and in-school learning for all 'essential workers', defined by the prime minister as anyone with a job. However, there were differences in how each state and territory was managing schools.

<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/mar/30/australia-coronavirus-shutdown-rules-stage-3-not-lockdown-what-is-closed-open-restrictions>

In New South Wales, schools remained open, but it was up to parents to decide whether to send children to school, and parents were advised to keep children home unless they needed to work.

In Victoria, school holidays were brought forward by three days, with the last Tuesday of Term 1 being a pupil-free day intended to allow teachers to prepare for distance learning. Victorian state schools are expected to open on April 14; however, this is another pupil-free day for teacher preparation for online learning.

In Queensland, schools remained open, but it was up to parents to decide whether to send children to school.

In the Australian Capital Territory, schools were pupil-free until the school holidays, but open to students who absolutely needed to attend, such as those whose parents had to attend work and could not care for their children at home, as well as vulnerable children and those with additional needs. No child was to be turned away.

In Tasmania, schools remained open, but it was up to parents to decide whether to send their children.

In the Northern Territory, schools remained open but optional for parents to send children

In South Australia, schools remained open but the premier, Steven Marshall, acknowledged parents would take children out of school, allowing for increased social distancing.

In Western Australia, schools remained open, but laws were relaxed so attendance was not compulsory. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/mar/30/australia-coronavirus-shutdown-rules-stage-3-not-lockdown-what-is-closed-open-restrictions>

## **Internet information**

On April 11, 2020, The Age published a report titled 'Parents to be trusted to do right thing if they send kids to school' indicating that the Victorian government is confident that those parents able to supervise their children's education at home will do so.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/parents-to-be-trusted-to-do-right-thing-if-they-send-kids-to-school-20200410-p54iwe.html>

On April 7, 2020, the Victorian premier, Daniel Andrews, and the state's education minister, James Merlino, issued a media release explaining that most Victorian students were expected to learn from home during Term 2, 2020.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/victorian-students-to-learn-from-home-as-vce-timelines-revised/>

On April 1, 2020, 7 News published a report titled 'Coronavirus can and does kill young people - and many have one thing in common' which presented a number of COVID-19 deaths among children.

The full text can be accessed at <https://7news.com.au/lifestyle/health-wellbeing/coronavirus-can-and-does-kill-young-people-and-many-have-one-thing-in-common--c-946226>

On March 28, 2020, Bloomberg published an article titled ‘Should Schools Close to Fight Virus? These Places Say No’ which looks at the justifications Singapore and Sweden offer for keeping schools open and the concerns of some of those who oppose the decision. The full text can be accessed at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-03-27/should-schools-close-to-fight-virus-these-countries-say-no>

On March 27, 2020, The Guardian presented an article titled “‘More harm than good’: the case for and against closing schools during the coronavirus pandemic’ It presents the views of Professor Peter Collignon, an infectious diseases physician and microbiologist at Canberra Hospital, who is opposed to closing schools and those of Marylouise McLaws, epidemiologist and member of the World Health Organisation (WHO) Health Emergencies Program Experts Advisory Panel for Infection Prevention and Control Preparedness, Readiness and Response to Covid-19, who believes schools should be closed. The full text can be accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/27/more-harm-than-good-the-cases-for-and-against-closing-schools-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic>

On March 24, 2020, the ABC published an article titled ‘How does coronavirus affect kids, babies and pregnancies?’ which largely presents the views of Peter Collignon, professor of infectious diseases at the Australian National University medical school on the question. The full text can be accessed at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/health/2020-03-24/coronavirus-covid-babies-pregnancy-children-kids/12080892>

On March 23, 2020, The Guardian published a report titled ‘Can kids catch coronavirus? What we know about Covid-19 and children’ which examined some of the evidence for claims that children suffer less severely from COVID-19, but which also looked at the inconclusive nature of current knowledge. The full text can be accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/23/can-kids-catch-coronavirus-what-we-know-about-covid-19-and-children>

On March 23, 2020, 7 News published a report titled ‘Coronavirus Australia: Teachers ‘afraid and angry’ over decision to leave schools open’ which outlines the concerns of teachers over the federal government’s decision to leave Australian schools open. The full text can be accessed at <https://7news.com.au/sunrise/on-the-show/coronavirus-australia-teachers-afraid-and-angry-over-decision-to-leave-schools-open-c-757448>

On March 22, 2020, news.com.au published a report titled ‘Coronavirus: Prime Minister Scott Morrison announces schools to remain open, “should go to school tomorrow”’ which gives the views of the prime minister and the federal medical officer as to why Australian schools should remain open. The full text can be accessed at <https://www.news.com.au/lifestyle/health/health-problems/coronavirus-prime-minister-scott-morrison-to-meet-with-state-officials-to-decide-on-school-closures-sunday-night/news-story/e1e4c63e4fa7809c5522121f306e4a9e>

On March 21, 2020, The Guardian published a report titled “‘I feel expendable’: Australian teachers sound alarm about schools and coronavirus’ which detailed the opposition of many Australian teachers to the federal government’s decision to keep schools open. The full text can be accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/21/i-feel-expendable-australian-teachers-sound-alarm-about-schools-and-coronavirus>

On March 20, 2020, ABC News published a range of views on whether schools should close to help control the spread of the coronavirus. The piece, titled 'Schools are open during the coronavirus outbreak, but should I keep my kids at home?' was originally published in The Conversation.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-20/coronavirus-covid-should-kids-go-to-school/12071336>

On March 19, 2020, The Canary published a report titled 'Coronavirus: Scientists warn young people not to be complacent as deaths rise' which details the growing number of young people who have been seriously affected by the COVID-19 outbreak.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.thecanary.co/discovery/news-discovery/2020/03/19/coronavirus-scientists-warn-young-people-not-to-be-complacent-as-deaths-rise/>

On March 19, 2020, The Sydney Morning Herald published a report titled 'Readers debate decision to keep schools open amid coronavirus outbreak' which presents a range of opinions on whether Australian schools should remain open during the COVID-19 outbreak.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.smh.com.au/national/readers-debate-decision-to-keep-schools-open-amid-coronavirus-outbreak-20200319-p54bx6.html>

On March 18, 2020, Vox published a report titled 'The risk Covid-19 poses for children, explained' which examines some of the dangers the coronavirus poses for children.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.vox.com/2020/3/18/21181009/coronavirus-in-kids-symptoms-covid-19-risk>

On March 18, 2020, The Australian published a background report titled 'A level playing field for schoolchildren?' which presents a range of views on the issue of whether schools should be closed to help control the coronavirus.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/inquirer/coronavirus-a-level-playing-field-for-schoolchildren/news-story/141d1c5ee4cc1ecbd45be55b71ce0b39>

On March 17, 2020, The New York Times published a report titled 'Children and Coronavirus: Research Finds Some Become Seriously Ill' which presents some of the evidence indicating children can become severely ill with COVID-19.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/17/health/coronavirus-children.html>

On March 16, 2020, The Chronicle published a report titled 'Schools to implement new strict virus measures' which outlines some of the provisions put in place to prevent contagion while still keeping students at school.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.thechronicle.com.au/news/new-plans-for-schools-from-today/3972471/>

On March 16, 2020, The Guardian published an article titled 'Why Australia is not shutting schools to help control the spread of coronavirus' which explains the reasons originally given for keeping Australian schools open during the COVID-19 outbreak.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/16/why-australia-is-not-shutting-schools-to-help-control-the-spread-of-coronavirus>

On March 14, 2020, ABC news published a report titled ‘Coronavirus may not spread as fast if schools kept open, NSW Education Department says’ which gives the view of the New South Wales Education Department as to why schools should remain open.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-14/coronavirus-nsw-schools-should-stay-open-department-says/12053962>

On March 12, 2020, New Scientist published an analysis titled ‘Why don't children seem to get very ill from the coronavirus?’ which considered the evidence suggesting children are more mildly affected and considered some of the possible reasons for this.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.newscientist.com/article/2237259-why-dont-children-seem-to-get-very-ill-from-the-coronavirus/#ixzz6JPH6nSFC>

## **Arguments in favour of schools staying opening**

1. Children are less likely to contract the virus and suffer milder symptoms when they do. There are those who claim that there is no pressing need to close schools during the coronavirus epidemic as children do not easily contract the disease and are generally not seriously ill when they do.

Firstly, it has been noted that children seem less likely than adults to contract the virus. Chris Blyth, a paediatric infection specialist from the University of Western Australia and the Telethon Kids Institute, has stated, ‘We are seeing lower numbers of children infected compared to what we'd normally see with other respiratory viruses.’

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/health/2020-03-24/coronavirus-covid-babies-pregnancy-children-kids/12080892> Peter Collignon, an infectious diseases physician and microbiologist at Canberra Hospital and professor of medical school at Australian National University, has similarly stated, ‘[COVID-19] appears to cause less infections in children than occurs with influenza. While we don't know the exact infection rates in children, symptomatic infections appear to be much lower than what would be expected to occur with influenza in children.’ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/27/more-harm-than-good-the-cases-for-and-against-closing-schools-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic>

Additionally, it has been noted that when children do contract the virus, they generally exhibit less severe symptoms than adults. Professor Collignon stated, ‘Children will undoubtedly get infected but the probability that they will come to serious grief from this seems very low.’ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/health/2020-03-24/coronavirus-covid-babies-pregnancy-children-kids/12080892> Dale Fisher, a professor and chair of the World Health Organization's Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network has further stated, ‘A lot of the swabs that we have taken from family clusters have shown that while the parents might have had the disease and had symptoms, the children are completely well, even though they tested positive.’ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-03-27/should-schools-close-to-fight-virus-these-countries-say-no> Some have concluded from this that the disease is less injurious to children who contract it.

A number of studies have contributed to the conclusion that children contract the virus less often and that when they do become ill with COVID -19 their symptoms are usually quite mild. On February 24, 2020, JAMA Network published a report on a recent study conducted by the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention presenting findings for 44,672 people with confirmed covid-19 infection. The study found that children under 10 years old made up less than 1 percent of those cases and none of the 1023 deaths.

<https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2762130> According to a report published in The New Scientist on March 21, 2020, another recent study found children just as likely as adults to be infected with the virus but much less likely to get sick with covid-19 and die – a similar trend to that seen with SARS or MERS, two other severe diseases caused by

coronaviruses. <https://www.newscientist.com/article/2237259-why-dont-children-seem-to-get-very-ill-from-the-coronavirus/#ixzz6JDHyA9Xp> A report published in The Guardian on March 23, 2020, stated, '[In China], 2.4 percent of all identified cases were in children under 19 years old. An even smaller number within this group of children had severe symptoms, 2.5 percent, or what the World Health Organization (WHO) described as "a very small proportion".' <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/23/can-kids-catch-coronavirus-what-we-know-about-covid-19-and-children>

Australian federal medical authorities have used international studies and early Australian data to support their belief that COVID – 19 does not present a major threat to most children and thus does not justify the closure of Australian schools. Australia's deputy chief medical officer, Paul Kelly, has stressed that despite the difficulty young children may have in following contagion-prevention recommendations, they remain safe at school as the disease causes very mild symptoms among most children who contract it. Professor Kelly has stated, 'I recognise these [hygiene restrictions] are very difficult particularly in the younger years of school but reassuringly there have been very few cases of COVID-19 in children in Australia, similar to what we have seen in the rest of the world and of those cases, almost all of them have been extremely mild.' <https://www.news.com.au/lifestyle/health/health-problems/coronavirus-prime-minister-scott-morrison-to-meet-with-state-officials-to-decide-on-school-closures-sunday-night/news-story/e1e4c63e4fa7809c5522121f306e4a9e>

## 2. Having children at home may spread the virus more widely in the community

Several overseas authorities have advised that the risk of COVID –19 may be reduced if children continue to attend school. The claim has been made that children could be more likely to spread infection within the broader community if they were not contained and supervised within schools.

The United States Center for Disease Control (CDC) has advised that unsupervised children might engage in social mixing without adults monitoring whom they were meeting. The CDC has warned, 'Longer closures may result in more students congregating outside of school [e.g. other students' homes, shopping malls], which will increase risk to older adults or those with comorbidities.' The CDC cautioned that without school children would still need to be cared for and that might mean grandparents were called on for extra babysitting duties. Older carers, the Center noted, are among the most susceptible to suffering serious symptoms and are also among those most likely to die. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-16/should-i-keep-my-children-home-from-school-due-to-coronavirus/12058200> Robert Booy, from the Centre for Research Excellence in Population Health, has similarly stated, 'If you take kids out of school, they then mix with adults and other kids in the park and that may do as much harm as good.' <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-16/should-i-keep-my-children-home-from-school-due-to-coronavirus/12058200>

Some Australian political leaders and health spokespeople appear to have taken their lead from overseas opinions in seeing school closures as potentially hazardous.

The Australian prime minister, Scott Morrison, has stated, 'As the British chief medical officer observed over the last couple of days, the issue of widescale closure of schools, it may be anti-intuitive, but the advice is this could be a very negative thing in terms of impacting on how these [disease] curves operate. (Editor's note: Britain has since closed its schools. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-britain-schools/british-schools-to-close-as-coronavirus-crisis-worsens-idUSKBN215178>) When you take children out of schools and put them back in the broader community, the ability for them to potentially engage with others increases the risk.'

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/15/australian-schools-stay-open-amid-coronavirus-but-nsw-brings-in-social-distancing> This point was elaborated upon by the

federal health minister, Greg Hunt, who has stated, 'The view of the medical advice is that in many ways, schools are a safer place than mixing kids in shopping centres. As we know, some of those children who have not been in school have been mixing in shopping centres or being with grandparents.' <https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/lifestyle/health/coronavirus-prime-minister-scott-morrison-set-to-escalate-australias-shutdown/news-story/c4b82a9473d11a2563d85141903df962> The same point has also been made by the secretary of the New South Wales Department of Education, Mark Scott, who has stated, 'If you just shut the schools, the kids are all down at the shopping centre or at the playground or at the movies, or perhaps being minded by grandparents or others — that may not actually be helping to limit the speed of the spread of the virus in the community.' <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-14/coronavirus-nsw-schools-should-stay-open-department-says/12053962>

The concern that unsupervised groups of young people might spread the virus was voiced by a Queensland intensive care nurse who posted a comment on a Facebook community page warning of the danger. She stated, 'Drove past the Albany Creek skate park approx. 5pm this evening to see it full of kids riding scooters and skateboards. What do parents NOT understand about social distancing? Why are you putting my health/life and that of my colleagues at risk just so that your kids can go and blow off some steam in the skate park.' <https://www.couriermail.com.au/questnews/north/school-principals-and-icu-nurse-warn-children-their-actions-could-put-others-lives-at-risk-from-coronavirus/news-story/5bcdffd447fc2e267fab47e5575f40c8>

Concern has also been expressed that if children are kept out of school, they may infect elderly members of the community who are more likely to suffer serious illness and die if they contract the virus. Allen Cheng, Professor in Infectious Diseases Epidemiology at Monash University, has stated, 'If children are withdrawn from school, it is important that they should avoid contact with vulnerable older adults as adherence with personal hygiene is often more difficult in young children.' <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-20/coronavirus-covid-should-kids-go-to-school/12071336>

### 3. Infection control provisions can be put in place in schools

Those who maintain that schools should remain open note that procedures can be put in place to reduce the risk of contagion.

Across the states and territories, school administrators have been advised to minimise the risk of COVID-19 transmission by implementing strategies to restrict physical contact between staff and students. All non-essential activities, including assemblies, excursions, camps, school sports and parent-teacher interviews have been cancelled. Playgrounds are to be re-arranged, and recess and lunch times to be staggered to reduce large groups congregating. <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/inquirer/coronavirus-a-level-playing-field-for-schoolchildren/news-story/141d1c5ee4cc1ecbd45be55b71ce0b39> As New South Wales Teachers Federation president, Angelo Gavrielatos, has noted, 'Schools have been told to implement a range of social distancing measures, which include keeping a distance of 1.5m between persons and minimising physical contact where possible.'

<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/inquirer/coronavirus-a-level-playing-field-for-schoolchildren/news-story/141d1c5ee4cc1ecbd45be55b71ce0b39> Prior to being superseded by the enforced hotel quarantine provisions, students or staff returning from overseas were expected to abide by the 14-day self-isolation rules.

<https://www.thechronicle.com.au/news/new-plans-for-schools-from-today/3972471/>

The New South Wales Department of Education secretary, Mark Scott, stated that these steps were precautionary and designed to reduce exposure via non-essential gatherings. Scott explained, 'Schools have been a focus of the community and government as the impacts of



coronavirus have developed globally...I expect school assemblies and substantial gatherings to be cancelled, along with all excursions The community expects schools to be as safe as possible. We are implementing these measures to provide peace of mind for students, parents and staff.' <https://www.thechronicle.com.au/news/new-plans-for-schools-from-today/3972471/>

By way of example, in an email to parents, Freshwater's Harbor Public School listed the changes it would make to curb the virus spread. Whole school, grade or stage assemblies - including an Anzac Day assembly - have been suspended. All school excursions - including school camps - have been cancelled until further notice and will be rescheduled later in the year. All major arts and sports activities and events have been ceased temporarily until further notice. This includes whole school sporting events and inter-school events involving three or more school. Parents have been reminded once again to keep their children at home if they're sick. The email stated, 'If your children are unwell with respiratory illness, they should remain at home until symptoms resolves and, where appropriate, seek advice from a medical practitioner.

Children with chronic medical conditions or immunosuppression may be at increased risk of disease. Please consider special arrangements for these children, such as home-based study where their learning can be done uncompromised.'

<https://www.thechronicle.com.au/news/new-plans-for-schools-from-today/3972471/>

On April 9, 2020, the West Australian government put out hygiene related infection control advice typical of that disseminated in other states and territories. The advice states, 'Staff and students are to take all of the necessary precautions: washing hands with soap and running water regularly, especially when hands are visibly dirty, before and after eating or prior to food preparation, after going to the toilet, when caring for the sick, and after handling animals or animal waste; avoiding using handkerchiefs; coughing and sneezing with a tissue or bent elbow, and disposing of used tissues immediately; avoiding touching eyes, mouth and nose and avoiding contact with others if unwell.

As per advice received by the Public Health Emergency Operations Centre (PHEOC), schools have also been advised that it is preferable that students bring their own individual water bottles that can be filled from water fountains as necessary. This will reduce the need for students to drink directly from fountains. All students should be instructed on safe usage of water fountains e.g. not putting their mouth onto equipment. The water fountains will be regularly cleaned and checked that they are working correctly with good pressure.' The WA Department of Health has provided advice to the Department of Education on cleaning protocols. This advice included a recommended increase in the frequency of cleaning high-contact areas and the types of cleaning chemicals and equipment to be used. Schools have been advised of the enhanced cleaning requirements, and these new requirements are being put in place.

<https://www.wa.gov.au/organisation/department-of-the-premier-and-cabinet/covid-19-coronavirus-advice-schools-and-education-sector>

4. Closing schools would seriously damage young people's academic progress and impact negatively on them socially and psychologically

Opponents of closing schools as a response to COVID-19 point to the harm that would be done students psychologically, socially and academically.

Some critics have stressed the emotional harm that could be done to children by further dislocating their lives during a period of general community disquiet. Chris Blyth, Paediatrician, Infectious Diseases Physician and Clinical Microbiologist at the University of Western Australia, has stated, 'Voluntarily pulling children out of school will pose a major disruption to their lives at a time when community anxiety continues to climb. My three

children are at school today.’ Natalie Jewitt, a clinical psychologist from the Jenby’s school wellbeing project, has observed, ‘I am acutely aware of the importance of preparing and having time to process endings and transitions in our lives. We have to remember that many children have important and supportive relationships with teachers so this will be a huge change for them.’ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/mar/19/year-11-went-into-meltdown-pupils-hit-with-implications-of-school-closures> Referring to the risks faced by children in under-resourced and potentially dysfunctional families, Bernadka Dubicka, chair of the child and adolescent faculty at the British Royal College of Psychiatrists, has observed, ‘There are vulnerable children and young people where increased isolation in a difficult home environment could be very detrimental, therefore it is vital that essential services are protected and supported as much as possible.’

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/mar/19/year-11-went-into-meltdown-pupils-hit-with-implications-of-school-closures>

Others have referred to children’s need for social contact with their peers. Paul Kidson, Lecturer in Educational Leadership at the University of Wollongong, has noted, ‘It will be challenging for kids socially. We naturally like being around our friends, and to limit this voluntarily is a brave call.’ One student in Britain, where schools are already closed, has commented on the impact news of the shutdowns had on her and her friends. ‘While I thought it would be fun at first, the idea of school shutting for the rest of the year made everyone unhappy because of how much we would miss each other.’

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/mar/19/year-11-went-into-meltdown-pupils-hit-with-implications-of-school-closures>

The educational impact of withdrawal from face-to-face instruction upon children has been a major focus of many of those opposed to school closures. Allen Cheng, Professor in Infectious Diseases Epidemiology at Monash University, has noted, ‘While I can’t comment with authority on the psychological and educational impacts of home schooling, it should be noted that we may be in this situation for many months. From a personal perspective as a parent, I don’t think I could do anywhere near as well in teaching my children as their current teachers.’

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-20/coronavirus-covid-should-kids-go-to-school/12071336>

The same concern about the impact school closures would have on students’ education has been expressed by Professor Peter Collignon, an infectious diseases physician and microbiologist at Canberra Hospital, who has argued, ‘There are many potential detrimental effects if we close schools now. Firstly, on the children themselves. Many will likely miss out on over six months of teaching. While online learning might be available it is unlikely to be as effective as face-to-face teaching and those with less resources will disproportionately be disadvantaged.’

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/27/more-harm-than-good-the-cases-for-and-against-closing-schools-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic>

Looking at the educational impact from a United States’ perspective, Andreas Kluth has written of the capacity for home education to exacerbate socio-economic differences between children, noting, ‘In some families, mom and dad have white-collar jobs that let them work from home, keeping an eye on the kids. They probably also have good WiFi, at least one laptop or iPad per kid and shelves of books in the background. They may also have a sense of discipline and balance, setting strict timetables but making room for playtime and exercise. And they’ll probably have a bowl of fruit waiting before the next lesson.

In other families, the parents — or the single mom or dad — may have none of this. If the school doesn’t structure the children’s learning, the parents don’t know where to find teaching tools, and wouldn’t be confident in this role anyway. Maybe they need to hold down a job in the gig economy and will therefore be absent much of the time. Their kids will end

up spending “school hours” with junk food and Fortnite.’

<https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2020-03-21/coronavirus-school-closures-will-hurt-kids-and-worsen-inequality><https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2020-03-21/coronavirus-school-closures-will-hurt-kids-and-worsen-inequality> Concern regarding loss of academic opportunities have been a particular focus of Australian prime minister Scott Morrison who has expressed the fear that schools could be closed for twelve months. ‘I do not want to see our children lose an entire year of their education. This is very serious... we want to ensure...we can keep up to the mark with our children’s education as best as we can.’ <https://www.news.com.au/lifestyle/health/health-problems/coronavirus-australia-pm-scott-morrison-announces-schools-will-remain-open/news-story/d00220cddb56b143bbe5b4fda971223> Particular concern has been expressed about impacts on senior students completing their final years of education.

5. Closing schools would make it difficult for many workers to continue in their jobs

Those who argue that children should remain at school during the COVID-19 epidemic note that parents in work will not be able to remain at their jobs if they have to supervise their children at home. It is claimed this would put an intolerable financial strain on families and would dramatically reduce the community’s access to essential services, especially those provided by health care workers.

The prime minister, Scott Morrison, has repeatedly stated that schools must stay open to allow Australian parents to remain in work, especially those supplying vital health care services. On March 16, 2020, the prime minister stated, ‘The...issue is the disruption impact that [closing schools] can have and put at great risk the availability of critical workers such as nurses and doctors and others who are essential in the community because they would have to remain home and look after their children.’

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/16/why-australia-is-not-shutting-schools-to-help-control-the-spread-of-coronavirus>

On March 18, 2020, Morrison stated, ‘The disruption that would occur from the closure of schools around this country, make no mistake, would be severe. What do I mean by severe? Tens of thousands of jobs could be lost, if not more. [There would be] a 30 percent impact on the availability of health workers is our advice – that will put peoples’ lives at risk... There is a national public interest here in keeping schools open...’

<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/mar/18/pm-tells-australians-to-stop-hoarding-as-he-announces-sweeping-measures-to-slow-spread-of-coronavirus>

Reinforcing the prime minister’s point, the federal chief medical officer, Brendan Murphy, stated, ‘It will be hard for schools, but it would be much, much, much harder for society if the schools were closed.’ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/mar/18/pm-tells-australians-to-stop-hoarding-as-he-announces-sweeping-measures-to-slow-spread-of-coronavirus>

On March 23, 2020, the prime minister clarified those jobs beyond those in health care services that he considers ‘essential’ and stressed again that schools had to remain open so that parents could continue to work. Morrison stated, ‘For all those workers who need to send their children to school, that’s why the school needs to remain open. Now if you ask me who is an essential worker? Someone who has a job. Everyone who has a job in this economy is an essential worker. Every single job that is being done in our economy with these severe restrictions that are taking place is essential. It can be essential in a service whether it’s a nurse or a doctor or a schoolteacher, or a public servant who is working tonight to ensure that we can get even greater capacity in our Centrelink offices, working until eight o’clock under the new arrangement in the call centres, these are all essential jobs. People are stacking shelves, that is essential. People earning money in their family when another member of their

family may have lost their job and can no longer earn, that's an essential job. Jobs are essential. And everyone who has one needs to be able to keep doing their job and that means they will need to continue to be able to send their children to school for an education, for an education at that school.' <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-25/scott-morrison-all-restrictions/12087112>

On April 2, 2020, in a statement primarily concerned with keeping childcare centres open, the prime minister, Scott Morrison, emphasised that parents needed to be able to work in order to support their families and they should not be forced to choose between feeding their children and supervising them through the week. Morrison stated, 'We have had great cooperation from the teachers' unions, from the schools, ensuring that no child is being turned away... we are...ensuring that... people who have those jobs won't have their livelihoods put at risk. I don't want a parent to have to choose between feeding their kids and having their kids looked after. Or having their education being provided.

This virus is going to take enough from Australians without putting Australian parents in that position of having to choose between the economic wellbeing of their family and the care and support and education of their children. I won't cop a situation where a parent is put in that place with their kids.' <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/live/2020/apr/02/coronavirus-update-live-news-australia-nsw-victoria-queensland-qld-tas-act-sa-wa-nt-covid19-latest-updates?page=with:block-5e8553098f08532a0e6665a3>

The prime minister reiterated this position on April 7, 2020, stating, 'From the Commonwealth's point of view, and particularly from a national economy point of view, then we obviously want to ensure that parents who are unable to provide a proper learning environment at home that they don't have to choose between their children's education and having a job that can feed their children.'

<https://www.theage.com.au/politics/federal/national-cabinet-prepares-for-post-easter-jump-in-school-students-20200408-p54id3.html>

## **Arguments against schools staying open**

### **1. Young people are not immune to the virus**

Those who argue that schools should be closed during the current coronavirus epidemic note that contrary to claims made by some of their opponents, children are not only capable of contracting the virus, they may become seriously ill.

On March 16, 2020, Maria Van Kerkhove, the COVID-19 technical lead at the World Health Organisation, said in a press conference, 'We can't say universally that it's mild in children, so it's important that we protect children as a vulnerable population.'

<https://www.vox.com/2020/3/18/21181009/coronavirus-in-kids-symptoms-covid-19-risk>

Also, on March 16, 2020, the medical journal *Pediatrics* published a report by Chinese epidemiologists on the effect of COVID-19 on children who caught the virus. The researchers analysed 2,143 cases of children under 18 that were reported to the Chinese Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as of February 8, 2020. About half of the children had mild symptoms, such as fever, fatigue, cough, congestion and possibly nausea or diarrhea. More than a third — about 39 percent — became moderately sick, with additional symptoms including pneumonia or lung problems revealed by CT scan, but with no obvious shortness of breath. About 4 percent had no symptoms at all. However, there were 125 children — nearly 6 percent — who developed very serious illness, and one 14-year-old boy with confirmed coronavirus infection died. Thirteen of those were considered 'critical,' on the brink of respiratory or organ failure. The others were classified as 'severe' because they had dire respiratory problems. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/17/health/coronavirus-children.html> It has further been suggested that the incidence of infection among children in some Western countries may be higher than that reported in China. Dr. Andrea Cruz, an associate professor

of pediatrics at Baylor College of Medicine, 'The age pyramid in China is really different than the U.S. — they have a lot fewer kids than we do. You've had a lot of under-testing in children because the focus has been on adults. It's likely we've been underestimating the disease burden in kids.' <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/17/health/coronavirus-children.html>

More recent data about COVID-19 in youth supports early findings that children and teenagers tend to have a less severe course of illness than adults and do not always have the same cough and fever symptoms that adults do. However, it has also been revealed that the illness can lead to hospitalisation and, in rare cases, death, according to new research from the United States Center for Disease Control's Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/tarahaelle/2020/04/07/coronavirus-less-severe-in-children-in-new-study-corroborating-past-findings/#1143709936f7>

Among the 291 children in the United States study where data was available to the researchers on symptoms, 73 percent of children experienced severe, cough or shortness of breath, compared to 93 percent of cases in adults between ages 18-64. Fever occurred in 56 percent of children, compared to 71 percent of adults, and just over half the children (54 percent) had a cough, compared to 80 percent of adults.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/tarahaelle/2020/04/07/coronavirus-less-severe-in-children-in-new-study-corroborating-past-findings/#1143709936f7>

It has further been noted that children who are immunocompromised or have other cardiac, metabolic, or respiratory problems are also at higher risk of complications from Covid-19, just as they would be from other infections.

<https://www.vox.com/2020/3/18/21181009/coronavirus-in-kids-symptoms-covid-19-risk>

On April 1, 2020, 7 News published a report on fatalities among young people with coronavirus in England, France and the United States. None was reported as having other underlying conditions. In the case of a 16-year-old French fatality, treatment response to the patient's condition was delayed by misdiagnosis. In the case of one 19-year-old English sufferer, though he was known to have the disease he was not taken to hospital until he was an emergency and died half an hour later. The mother of the French victim stated, 'From the start, we were told that the virus doesn't affect young people. We believed it, like everyone else.' <https://7news.com.au/lifestyle/health-wellbeing/coronavirus-can-and-does-kill-young-people-and-many-have-one-thing-in-common--c-946226>

England's chief medical officer, Professor Chris Whitty, has stated, 'It is clear that children get this disease much less strongly than adults, I think the data on that is pretty strong now, and it certainly is the case that the majority of those that end up dying sadly are people who tend to be either in the later part of their lives, usually quite elderly, or those with pre-existing health conditions.

But there are also some young people who have ended up in intensive care or who have ended up with severe disease around the world. I think it's important that we don't give the impression that every single person who is young and healthy is just going to breeze through this.' <https://www.thecanary.co/discovery/news-discovery/2020/03/19/coronavirus-scientists-warn-young-people-not-to-be-complacent-as-deaths-rise/>

## 2. Young people can spread the virus to others in a school setting and then to the wider community

Those who argue that children should generally not remain at school contend that even though their symptoms are usually less severe, they can contract the virus from each other and then spread it to family members and increase its spread within the broader community. Proponents of school closures have warned that even if not very sick themselves, infected children could still be contagious. A study of 36 pediatric cases in China published in the

Lancet at the end of March 2020 found that half of the infected children showed no obvious signs of the disease, making them ‘covert’ spreaders of the pathogen.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-03-27/should-schools-close-to-fight-virus-these-countries-say-no> Critics have argued that this makes children particularly dangerous as transmitters of the disease as there may be no obvious indication that they are unwell. The Lancet report concluded infected children showing no clinical signs of disease are both difficult, and important, to find and isolate to stop the pandemic spreading. The report states, ‘The proportion of asymptomatic cases indicates the difficulty in identifying pediatric patients without clear epidemiological information. This finding suggests a dangerous situation if community acquired infections occur.’

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-03-26/coronavirus-largely-spare-kids-making-them-covert-spreaders>

Ralph Baric, professor of microbiology and immunology at the Gillings School of Global Public Health at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, has studied coronaviruses for decades, and concludes, ‘You may have mild disease spreaders that would be feeding sort of a community outbreak and they don’t go to hospital because they don’t feel that bad.’

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-01-29/10-year-old-boy-raises-fears-wuhan-virus-could-spread-undetected>

Recent findings released by the United States Center for Disease Control, based on analysis of more than 2500 American children and teenagers with COVID-19, emphasise the importance of ‘social distancing and everyday preventive behaviors among children [because] patients with less serious illness and those without symptoms likely play an important role in disease transmission.’ The findings also suggest that closing schools preemptively may play a substantial role in reducing overall community transmission.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/tarahaelle/2020/04/07/coronavirus-less-severe-in-children-in-new-study-corroborating-past-findings/#1143709936f7>

On March 17, 2020, almost 2,500 doctors sent an open letter to the federal health minister, Greg Hunt, urging him to recommend that Australian schools close. The letter stated, ‘We should immediately recommend a three to four-week closure of schools, cultural and religious places including places of worship, gyms and leisure centres, pubs, bars, theatres, cinemas and concert halls.’ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/17/thousands-of-australian-doctors-call-on-government-to-ramp-up-coronavirus-response>

On March 19, 2020, a series of readers, posting comments on the Sydney Morning Herald site, agreed with the doctors’ recommendation. One stated, ‘Children may not get sick, or as sick, as older people but they can still carry the virus to their parents and grandparents with innocent hugs and kisses. A school is a “gathering” and permits transmission of disease. Schools should be closed for a period of time to “flatten out the curve” and quite possibly prevent the deaths of older people. And don't forget the health of the teachers, working in close proximity to their little charges.’ <https://www.smh.com.au/national/readers-debate-decision-to-keep-schools-open-amid-coronavirus-outbreak-20200319-p54bx6.html>

Another reader made a similar point, referring to the health risk posed to teachers. The post stated, ‘Why is that we are asking many public servants to work from home, but teachers are asked to continue working in a seemingly higher risk environment - particularly primary schools where there are young children who have no sense of social distancing and less understanding of personal hygiene?’ <https://www.smh.com.au/national/readers-debate-decision-to-keep-schools-open-amid-coronavirus-outbreak-20200319-p54bx6.html>

There have also been reports that some schools are concerned about a shortage of cleaning supplies and toilet paper, and that teachers are anxious that students, parents or their coworkers may be carriers or that they themselves could unknowingly expose others.

Lea Lockwood, a parent and English teacher in Bendigo, Victoria, stated, 'We were all quite anxious about it. Teachers were wearing gloves and we were washing our hands constantly.'  
<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-03-27/should-schools-close-to-fight-virus-these-countries-say-no>

Queensland Teachers Union President, Kevin Bates, has stated, 'There have been very real issues with schools accessing those basic sanitisation processes, which is adding to the anger and frustration teachers and parents are feeling.' Bates concluded, 'Some of our schools are as large as 3,500 students and it's counter-intuitive to be leaving them open at a time when we're limiting gatherings across other parts of the community.'  
<https://7news.com.au/sunrise/on-the-show/coronavirus-australia-teachers-afraid-and-angry-over-decision-to-leave-schools-open-c-757448>

### 3. It is extremely difficult to maintain infection control provisions in schools

Critics of schools remaining open argue that the numbers involved, the relative immaturity of students and the nature of the physical setting make it impossible to guard against the spread of infection.

In an article published in The Guardian on March 21, 2020, one secondary teacher in Sydney's Sutherland shire noted, 'The kids are literally just going about their days as usual, moving between classes, sharing desks, sharing pens, it's physically impossible to enforce the social distancing the government has been talking about but there's been no attempt to even try. It's almost like the stance is, there's nothing we can do, what is the point of even trying. It's really so weird going home and watching ABC news, seeing how serious it is, watching the other measures being taken in other workplaces and yet we're just told to keep going as if nothing is happening.'  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/21/i-feel-expendable-australian-teachers-sound-alarm-about-schools-and-coronavirus>

Another teacher from Melbourne's northern suburbs has stated, 'We're being told to try to keep the kids apart from each other, but a lot of the kids struggle to take it seriously.'  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/21/i-feel-expendable-australian-teachers-sound-alarm-about-schools-and-coronavirus>

One mother who has withdrawn her children aged five and eight out of their Brisbane primary school has claimed, 'My kid's school has 1,100 students plus staff and I've done volunteer work there and I've seen what happens on a normal day. Kids that age are not big on hygiene, there's not much hand-washing going on.'

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/21/i-feel-expendable-australian-teachers-sound-alarm-about-schools-and-coronavirus>

It has been noted that the simple immaturity of young people makes it difficult to regulate their behaviour when they are brought together in large numbers. In an article published in The Australian on March 18, 2020, it was noted, 'There have been reports of kids playing coronavirus-themed tag in the playground, while one -Victorian secondary school had to sternly remind its students this week of acceptable behavioural standards after learning some older children had been deliberately coughing and spitting on others.'

<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/inquirer/coronavirus-a-level-playing-field-for-schoolchildren/news-story/141d1c5ee4cc1ecbd45be55b71ce0b39>

New South Wales Teachers Federation president, Angelo Gavrielatos, has explained that most public schools have more than 100 students, the maximum allowed in an enclosed space under government guidelines. The size of classrooms makes it impossible to ensure children are able to maintain the one person per four square metre measures.

Gavrielatos further stated, 'Having decided to keep schools open the government has failed to provide clarity in order to ensure that health and safety requirements can be met.'

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/teachers-struggle-to-keep-children-and-staff-safe-in-crowded-schools-20200322-p54cok.html>

In March 2020, the Australian Education Union wrote to the federal cabinet stating schools were reporting shortages of soap, alcohol-based sanitisers, toilet paper, tissues and ‘infrastructure such as enough sinks and hygiene areas for staff and students to access frequently and systematically’. It also raised concerns about the government’s edict for schools to practice social distancing, saying it was ‘practically impossible’ for students and staff to adhere to 1.5m distances in classroom settings.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/21/i-feel-expendable-australian-teachers-sound-alarm-about-schools-and-coronavirus>

In News GP on March 21, 2020, Dr Wendy Burton and Dr Kat McLean made a series of suggestions as to what schools should do in order to prevent the transmission of coronavirus among students. These included, ‘We recommend handwashing or cleaning before students come into the classroom. As a teacher of children, you know you will need to keep an eye on this process. We also suggest using alcohol gel as they enter or sit down and before eating, and handwashing (as usual) after going to the toilet. Every time...No sharing of food and drinks. No communal meals, for now, including no shared platters of fruit. Proper handwashing takes 20 seconds. You can get creative with some favourite songs or new words to old tunes, and time the kids for 20 seconds. Surfaces will need to be wiped regularly, at least twice a day: door handles, desks, shared equipment, computers (especially if they have touch screens), keyboards, tablets, your phone, etc.’ <https://www1.racgp.org.au/newsgp/gp-opinion/worried-about-children-and-coronavirus-here-are-so> Critics argue that maintaining these standards for all children, in schools with hundreds of students, is not feasible.

4. Provisions can be put in place to allow young people to continue their education

Those who argue that schools should be closed in order to control COVID-19 claim that students will be able to continue their education remotely.

Several private schools and some state and territory governments have assured parents and students that their education program will be able to continue despite school closures.

On March 26, 2020, The Australian published an article noting, ‘Private schools are successfully moving to online learning systems, ensuring their students continue learning, but without the risks posed by mass gatherings at school.’ Professor of politics and public policy at the University of Western Australia and Griffith University, Peter Van Onselen noted, ‘This week alone I have watched my girls doing physical education online, continue their music classes, including playing their instruments in one-on-one tutorials, and participate in classroom discussions led by their teachers using Zoom. All the while also being assigned “homework”, which I had a bit of a laugh at, and completing assignments during individual learning time...They have also been regularly in contact with their friends, via FaceTime and other means, when doing group work.’

<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/commentary/coronavirus-private-schools-ahead-of-the-shutdown-game/news-story/26bf5cad03c86b0e13c76b2272f7ea7b>

Though generally without the range of provisions and depth of resources available within many private schools, state and territory education departments have prepared to instruct remotely.

The Victorian government has announced the provisions it will make to ensure students have the technological support they need to pursue their studies online during Term 2, 2020. On April 7, 2020, the premier’s department issued a media release stating, ‘To ensure more kids can learn from home, the Government will loan more than 6,000 laptops and tablets to students who don’t have access to digital technologies. Schools will also distribute other



classroom devices as required to ensure all students who do not have access to a laptop or tablet at home will be provided one.

Internet access should not determine a child's access to education – so we will deliver free SIM cards or dongles to thousands of students at government schools who need them the most. This includes an agreement with Telstra to provide 4000 SIM cards for government primary and secondary school students. The Government has also purchased an extra 1000 SIM-enabled dongle devices.

Priority for the SIM cards and dongles will be given to senior secondary students, students in bushfire affected areas, and families who cannot afford an internet connection at home.'

<https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/victorian-students-to-learn-from-home-as-vce-timelines-revised/>

The Victorian government has also indicated that the necessary changes will be made to assessments and programs to allow senior students particularly to complete their course and gain their qualifications. On April 7, the government further announced, 'VCE students will still receive an ATAR score, but there will be a number of changes to the academic timetable for VCE and VCAL students. The GAT test will move from June to October or November. End of year exams will be postponed until at least December. School based assessment tasks will be reduced where possible to relieve some pressure on students as they move to remote and flexible learning arrangements. Universities will be asked to delay the start of the 2021 university year to account for impacts of coronavirus on senior secondary students.'

<https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/victorian-students-to-learn-from-home-as-vce-timelines-revised/>

The Victorian premier, Daniel Andrews, has stated, it was likely to be 'a longer year' than expected with exams set to be held in December. The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority is looking at a smaller end-of-year exam schedule, including shortening the length of exams. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-07/coronavirus-cases-increase-victoria-as-schools-reopen-next-week/12127176>

In the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), state schools used pupil-free days in the lead-up to the Term 1 holiday to prepare for remote learning the following term. Education minister, Yvette Berry, stated, 'What teachers and school staff will be doing is preparing to move to a different kind of learning, using all of the online opportunities that we have in the ACT.' Ms Berry explained that the pupil free days would give schools and teachers time to prepare for a 'range of learning delivery options, including online, similar to how distance education is provided in remote areas. <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6691147/act-schools-to-effectively-close-and-move-to-online-learning/>

##### 5. Provision can be made to care for the children of essential workers and those in vulnerable situations

Those who argue that schools should be closed to help control the spread of coronavirus claim that provision can still be made to care for the children of essential workers.

It has been noted that in other countries when schools have closed it has been possible to provide care for vulnerable children and the children of key workers, such as those involved in health care. When Britain's schools were closed, on March 20, 2020, the prime minister, Boris Johnson, announced that schools would still need to look after the children of key workers and the most vulnerable pupils. The list of workers whose children would continue to be accepted within British schools includes frontline health workers such as doctors and nurses, some teachers and social workers, workers in key public services including those essential to the justice system, religious staff and public service journalists, local and national government workers deemed crucial to delivering essential public services, workers involved in food production processing, distribution, sale and delivery, public safety workers including

police, armed forces personnel, firefighters and prison staff, essential air, water, road and rail transport workers, and utilities, communication and financial services staff, including postal workers and waste disposal workers. <https://www.express.co.uk/life-style/life/1257031/UK-school-closures-key-workers-who-are-key-workers-coronavirus>

British Education secretary, Gavin Williamson, has said, ‘Vulnerable children include those who have a social worker and those with educational health and care plans.’

<https://www.express.co.uk/life-style/life/1257031/UK-school-closures-key-workers-who-are-key-workers-coronavirus>

Schools across Europe have also been closed to protect children and prevent the spread of coronavirus, but some school facilities remain open for children of health and public service workers. Belgium and Norway announced provisions requiring certain school facilities to continue running to help look after children whose parents are crucial in healthcare, transport and other essential industries.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/coronavirus-school-closed-belgium-norway-europe-pandemic-outbreak-a9399821.html>

In Australia, the Victorian government has indicated that schools will be open for children of essential workers who cannot stay home. It has stated, ‘On-site learning will only be available for children whose parents can’t work from home and vulnerable students without access to a suitable learning environment at home.’ <https://www.sbs.com.au/language/english/victoria-to-move-to-remote-learning-for-school-children>

Toward the end of Term 1, the Queensland Education Department similarly announced, ‘Schools will continue to provide supervision for children of essential services workers and vulnerable children including those in out of home care, students with disabilities who do not have medical complications and children for whom no other appropriate care arrangements are available - for example if both parents are working and their child could be at school and supervised.’ <https://www.thechronicle.com.au/news/queensland-schools-go-student-free/3981803/>

On April 1, 2020, the West Australian Education Department issued a media release stating, ‘Children of parents who need their children to attend school to enable them to maintain employment, and those children in vulnerable families, such as children living with grandparents, are encouraged to continue to attend school.’

<https://www.education.wa.edu.au/coronavirus-school-update>

Similarly, Australian Capital Territory (ACT) public schools are now largely pupil-free; however, they have stayed open for children of essential workers. In Term 2, small number of schools across the ACT will be open to students, but they are not yet known. Children from multiple schools will be consolidated into several ‘hub schools’ across Canberra. Parents would need to register their intent to send their children to school if they were unable to learn from home. ACT Education Minister Yvette Berry has indicated that the majority of learning in Term 2 would be done remotely and there would be no caps on the number of students able to attend classrooms in person. <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6717104/essential-workers-welcome-school-hub-plan/>

Those parents encouraged to send their children to school in Australia and are a larger group than those in England which has imposed a more severe lockdown, restricting the number of types of employment that can continue to operate.

## **Further implications**

There remain significant uncertainties regarding the restricted attendance being encouraged at schools across Australia and the extent to which remote education will be effective for students.

The Victorian Education Department has stated, 'The message to students and parents of government schools is clear: all children who can learn at home must learn from home – with exceptions only in extremely limited circumstances.' The statement further indicates, 'On-site learning will only be available for children whose parents can't work from home and vulnerable students without access to a suitable learning environment at home.'

<https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/victorian-students-to-learn-from-home-as-vce-timelines-revised/> This definition of those students who will be educated 'on-site' is very similar to that offered by the prime minister, Scott Morrison, when he stated that everyone in a job was in essential employment and should be able to send their children to school.

<https://www.sbs.com.au/news/scott-morrison-stands-firm-on-schools-ahead-of-teachers-union-meeting> Only time will tell how many pupils will seek 'on-site' education when Term 2 begins for students in Victoria on April 15.

The success of social distancing within schools will be dependent on a significant number of students remaining at home. Under its social distancing requirements, the Victorian Education Department now requires 'a maximum number of 10 children in a room [and] a minimum teacher-to-student ratio of 1:8 to ensure staff can assist their colleagues with breaks, relief and other support where required. This staffing ratio can include the use of relevant support staff. Where possible, staff and students should endeavour to keep 1.5 metres distance from each other. Based on a room size of 40 square meters, a room should have no more than 10 occupants at any given time. Occupancy rates may be adjusted for larger room sizes, as long as there is no more than one occupant per four square meters of floor space.'

Under normal circumstances classrooms have a maximum of 25 students. In 2016 the average class size in Victorian schools was 21.2 students and the student/teacher ratio was 12.5.

<https://www.study.vic.gov.au/en/study-in-victoria/victoria%27s-school-system/Pages/default.aspx> Approximately half schools' full enrolment will need to learn remotely if the recommended class sizes and ratios are to be achieved.

The Victorian education minister, James Merlino, has indicated that the government has no plan to enforce restrictions regarding children attending school in Term 2, preferring to trust parents to follow the 'crystal clear' advice that students should stay home if they can.

<https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/parents-to-be-trusted-to-do-right-thing-if-they-send-kids-to-school-20200410-p54iwe.html>

Some Victorian principals have expressed concern that the restriction will not be adhered to and that as the term progresses larger numbers of children will attend on-site. Australian Principals' Federation president, Julie Podbury, has stated, 'So, while schools are kept open for the children of essential workers or for vulnerable children and limited staff are available to monitor them in the school, this might soon change, unless monitored carefully and restrictions enforced.'

<https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/parents-to-be-trusted-to-do-right-thing-if-they-send-kids-to-school-20200410-p54iwe.html>

There is also inevitable uncertainty as to how well the new remote learning provisions will work. The Victorian education minister, James Merlino, has stated, 'What we are asking parents to do is trust their schools, trust their teachers, because there will be some things that will work and not work, including technology. The guidance is there, the resources and support are there but there will be things that we will need to tweak along the way, inevitably.'

<https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/parents-to-be-trusted-to-do-right-thing-if-they-send-kids-to-school-20200410-p54iwe.html>

With regard to private schools they are now being compelled to also supply mixed provision, that is, both online and on-site education. Federal Education Minister Dan Tehan has issued a binding legal directive to non-government schools to open their doors for any students who could not learn from home, tying the directive to Commonwealth funding. Thus, any non-government school which does not make on-site tuition available to those students who seek

it will cease to receive federal government funding. Expected levels of attendance are therefore also an issue for non-government schools.

<https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/parents-to-be-trusted-to-do-right-thing-if-they-send-kids-to-school-20200410-p54iwe.html> However, their level of preparedness and access to the technology needed to supply online tuition is likely to be greater.