Physical Distancing in Schools

This fact sheet is current as at 17 June 2020. Major changes from the previous version appear in a breakout box

We are aware that physical distancing has been a major concern for schools during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Schools are exempt from current and previous directions[1] from the NT Chief Health Officer related to mass gatherings, proximity (1.5m between people) and density (4 sqm per person in a single, undivided inside area). These directions do however provide a useful guide for school operations in Term 3 to further enhance safety.

In April, the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) released advice for school leaders engaging with children, parents, teachers and support staff to reduce even further the relatively low risk of COVID-19 transmission in schools. It also includes guidance on hygiene, cleaning and wellbeing.

As the NT implements the NT Governments Roadmap to the New Normal there are key principles of personal and community responsibility, physical distancing and hygiene principles that all Territorians should follow.

There are a range of measures schools can take to support physical distancing and reduce transmission within the practical limitations of a school environment. Practices around physical distancing apply to both students and staff. Recommended practices include:

- Principals should carefully consider the number of visitors coming in to a school and use their discretion when determining if and when visitors can access the school. Principals may determine that visitors can access the school on a case by case basis as set out in the Guidelines for Term 3, 2020.

- Practices should continue to be in place to reduce the number of adults at peak times and encourage physical distancing, such as alternative drop off/pick up arrangements, discouraging parents entering classrooms, etc.

- Put floor markings to indicate 1.5 metre distances in any areas where school visitors are likely to queue (eg at reception, at entry ways to events, etc).

- Visitors should maintain physical distancing of at least 1.5 metres between themselves and all other people including staff, students and other visitors. Where close contact (less than 1.5 metres) is absolutely necessary, it should be limited to less than 15 minutes.

- Ensure appropriate signage to advise visitors of physical distancing and hygiene requirements and ensure all visitors are advised of the requirements

- Adopt a cautious approach to large events including face to face assemblies, concerts, ceremonies, presentation events, parent/teacher nights and sporting events. Continue to explore alternative approaches to these activities including online and Skype events.

- Where large school events are held, apply the recommended precautions set out in the Guidelines for Term 3, 2020 and complete the large school event checklist.

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[1] https://coronavirus.nt.gov.au/chief-health-officer-directions

NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT

- Spread students out across classrooms and other spaces in the school (e.g. science labs, music rooms, library), and desks spread out within classrooms to the extent practicable. This may include using staff flexibly to increase distancing.

- Configure staff rooms to maximise space between staff and minimise density.

- Utilise spaces that are well ventilated, including outdoors.

- Minimise activities that lead to mixing between classes, years and groups. This may including revising the use of common areas, reducing co-curricular activities, staggering start/finish/break times that result in mixing between classes, and managing student movement when entering and exiting school buses to ensure appropriate physical distancing.

- Minimise activities where people remain static, face to face, for extended periods. Where possible, avoid face to face contact for extended periods, e.g. do not position student desks facing each other, undertake group work online, teachers provide feedback from the side not face to face.

Guidance around physical distancing can be taught in classrooms to students to encourage good practice including greeting methods other than a handshake or hug and demonstrating how to measure 1.5m distance between people.

Following are some key questions schools could consider to support implementation of physical distancing:

Resources

- What physical spaces, including outdoor areas, assembly halls, withdrawal spaces and specialist rooms can you use to support smaller groups?
- Do you require additional desks or chairs?
- Have you marked physical distances in your line up areas (eg front office, event entryways, classroom entrances, canteen line, library, etc)?

Staffing

- Who can you identify on your staff (with and without TRB) to support smaller student to adult ratios?
- Are there relief teachers available who may be engaged to support smaller groups?
- Do you think you will need support from registered corporate teachers or other staff?
- Can staff meetings be held online?
- Can staff make alternative arrangements for having their breaks outside of the general staff room?
- Can you reconfigure office spaces for staff?

Strategies

- Do your outdoor spaces allow for all students to be at recess and lunch at the same time or will you need to plan staggered times?
- What flexible timetabling measures can you introduce that would allow students to be spread across the school?
- Are their adjacent vacant facilities that may be used?
- Can rotational activities be held inside and outside the classroom to reduce student and staff ratios and manage physical distancing?

If you need support to plan for physical distancing, principals should contact their Senior Director, School Improvement and Leadership or QSSS Director.