



Government of
**Western
Australia**

Principles governing the closure of schools and other educational facilities in Western Australia during a human influenza pandemic

Planning for a
human influenza
pandemic

Principles relating to closure of schools and other educational facilities in Western Australia during an influenza pandemic

Social distancing measures implemented to control the spread of infection during an influenza pandemic may include the temporary closure of schools and other educational facilities. Depending on the extent and duration of the closures, it is recognised that this measure would have significant social, community and economic impacts.

These principles have been developed to explain the basis on which decisions to close educational facilities in Western Australia during an influenza pandemic would be made.

The principles are intended to assist Western Australian schools, TAFE colleges and tertiary institutions to develop their own plans to prepare for and respond to a pandemic.

Principle 1

Decisions on closures of educational facilities in Western Australia during an influenza pandemic are the responsibility of the Western Australian Government

Under Western Australia's emergency management arrangements, the State Emergency Coordination Group (SECG) would be activated in a pandemic emergency to coordinate emergency management, media and public communications, liaise with Commonwealth agencies and other jurisdictions, and provide advice and direction to the Premier, Ministers and agencies. Powers which enable the closure of educational facilities would be exercised in consultation with the SECG, Ministers, the Director General, Department of Education and Training and relevant bodies.

It should not be assumed that closures of educational facilities in one State or Territory will necessarily mean that facilities in other States and Territories would also close. All governments have agreed that there may need to be regional flexibility in the implementation of social distancing measures depending on the nature and location of an outbreak of influenza.

As far as possible, however, the rationale for implementing measures, including facility closures, will be consistent across jurisdictions. States and Territories will also collaborate closely to ensure that the community and other key stakeholders receive information which is consistent and from authoritative sources at all levels of government and through all phases of the pandemic.

Principle 2

Decisions to close educational facilities during a pandemic will only be made if and when necessary

The Western Australian government recognises the significant social, community and economic impacts that could result from educational facility closures during an influenza pandemic.

In the event of a pandemic, the government's approach would be to continue normal operations for as long as feasible. Educational facilities will only be closed if necessary to protect the health and safety of the Western Australian community.

Decisions to close educational facilities will be based on the attack rate of pandemic influenza in Western Australia and the location of the spread across metropolitan and regional areas. The length of time that educational facilities remain closed will depend on the success in containing the spread of infection.

Principle 3

Decisions on closures of educational facilities will be based on assessment of the risk of spread of infection

The risk of spread of any infectious disease is generally higher in primary schools because children are high 'shedders' of virus and their social behaviour is not fully developed, increasing the risk of spread of infection. Hygiene measures are particularly difficult to supervise or implement among younger children. Accordingly, the closure of primary schools is likely to have a higher impact on containing the spread of the disease than the closure of facilities such as secondary schools and universities. Health authorities will monitor the situation closely and advise whether it is safe to send children to school.

Decisions to close secondary schools, TAFE colleges and tertiary institutions would be made if considered necessary and would be based on the attack rate and location of the spread of cases across metropolitan and regional areas.

Principle 4

Decisions on educational facility closures will be made in response to the actual situation in Western Australia, not in response to a pre-determined trigger

Closures of educational facilities will not be an automatic response to a trigger such as a change in the Australian pandemic phases or the first confirmed human to human transmission of pandemic influenza in Western Australia. Decisions will be made at the time depending on the attack rate and location of spread of the disease. Closures in other parts of Australia would not necessarily lead to closures in Western Australia if there were no cases here.

Principle 5

Not all educational facilities in Western Australia would necessarily be closed at the same time

The extent of educational facility closures will depend on how widespread the disease is and the location of cases. Given movement patterns, areas would normally be closed, rather than single schools. Facilities in areas and regions where there is no evidence of cases would not be closed if there was no direct link to other cases and there was a low risk of people travelling from affected areas. Decisions to close schools will apply in the same way to all government and non-government schools.

Principle 6

Communication with stakeholders and the community will be integrated into the decision-making process

Timely and appropriate communications strategies will be implemented to minimise disruptions arising from decisions to close educational facilities in a pandemic. The way in which decisions are communicated to facilities and the community will take account of duty of care obligations and practical realities, particularly in relation to schools.

On the basis of advice from the health authorities, the government will advise whether it is safe for children and students to attend school, college or universities, however, there is a possibility that staff, parents and students may choose not to attend facilities due to fear of influenza exposure even if no decision has been made to close facilities or they have been reopened after a period of time.

The communication of clear, timely and accurate information about the risk and the reason for decisions will help to address concerns and ensure compliance with official directions.

The diagram on the next page sets out the communication process for the education sector that will apply during a pandemic.

Principle 7

Closure of educational facilities does not necessarily mean a complete cessation of educational programming for students

The impact of a pandemic on students and their families will be reduced if measures are taken to minimise disruption to education delivery. Schools and other educational facilities are encouraged to plan for the delivery of educational programming material and learning support processes even when they are not open.

A pandemic has the potential to disrupt assessment activities such as exams, and to affect students' abilities to prepare and complete assignments. Educational authorities will develop flexible approaches that take account of a pandemic's impact and minimise the disruption.

Principle 8

The impact of educational facility closures will be subject to ongoing assessment during a pandemic with the aim that facilities be reopened as soon as possible to minimise social, community and economic impacts

The Western Australian government recognises the importance of educational facilities continuing to operate to the greatest extent possible during a pandemic to minimise the social, community and economic impacts of the pandemic. A return to normal functioning as soon as possible will also be critical to recovery once an outbreak is over. Once a decision to close facilities has been made, its impact on the spread of the disease will be regularly assessed and the decision reviewed in light of the impact.

Principle 9

During a period of school closure, school facilities will only be used for pandemic response activities where that is the best available option

The Western Australian government recognises the need to respect the educational and psychological needs of school communities. Recovery processes following a pandemic will be greatly enhanced if school buildings can be reopened as quickly as possible for school purposes. School facilities will only be used for purposes such as vaccination clinics during a period of school closures where that is the best available option.

Communications during a pandemic: Schools and other educational facilities

