

28 April 2020

Dear Chief Minister

We are writing in response to your recent announcement that ACT schools will remain closed (pupil-free) for the entirety of Term 2.

The Narrabundah College parent community requests the reopening of Year 11 and 12 Colleges as soon as possible in Term 2. There are compelling reasons for this.

College years have the most serious consequence for our students' tertiary study and career plans. Keeping them at home for the whole term is likely to be detrimental to their social health and psychological wellbeing. Many of our children are expressing deep concern over their futures and university entrance processes that this disruption in tuition is causing.

Studies have confirmed that 'education is one of the strongest predictors of the health and the wealth of a country's future workers, and the impact of long-term school closure on educational outcomes, future earnings, the health of young people, and future national productivity has not been quantified.' (*Viner et al 2020*).

We know that remote/ continuous learning has a particularly negative impact on vulnerable students who may have cognitive challenges. Additionally, vulnerable students who do not have a supportive environment at home are not thriving studying from their bedrooms, particularly when they may be living in situations of domestic violence, poverty or rising financial and family tensions associated with Covid-19.

The ACT has a very low rate of infection and there is growing evidence regarding the relatively low effectiveness of school closures on transmission of Covid-19 compared with the high disruption costs to students from prolonged periods away from their school environments (*Viner et al 2020 and the National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance 2020*).

Keeping schools and colleges closed is having a disruptive effect on parents working from home and the ACT economy. The Australian Health Protection Principle Committee (AHPCC) has found that school closure is associated with considerable costs. It estimates 15% of the total workforce and 30% of the healthcare workforce need to take time off work to care for children.

This burden will be significant and will fall disproportionately on those in casual or tenuous work circumstances' (AHPPC, 17 March 2020).

While the evidence is clear that colleges and schools should return to normal school routine as soon as possible, we are also conscious and respectful of concerns expressed by teachers about their health.

Parents and students would be more than willing to enter a compact to ensure that we protect the health of teachers and other workers at Colleges. The AHPPC, following its meeting on 16 April, has outlined sensible measures that schools can take to remain open safely.

These measures include:

- encouraging non-contact greetings
- avoiding close-proximity queuing and encouraging increased space between students, for example, by placing markings on the floor
- encouraging students to maintain 1.5m distance when entering or leaving a classroom
- teachers maintaining 1.5m physical distance from other adults in staff rooms
- cancelling school excursions, assemblies and sporting activities
- arranging classroom furniture to leave as much space as possible between students
- maintaining smaller classes
- suspending group work if the activity cannot be modified to avoid close proximity
- student work being submitted electronically

As young adults aged 16-18, College students are able to practice social distancing in a disciplined manner that would sufficiently protect themselves, teachers and other school employees. Teachers and other support staff also have a responsibility to do the same.

School closures are demonstrably not proportionate or effective as a public health intervention to prevent community transmission of COVID-19 at this time. We therefore seek your agreement to re-open ACT Colleges in Term 2 as a first step in a phased re-opening of schools.

Yours Sincerely,

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References:

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