

Schools safe to open for all students, experts say

Melissa Cunningham, Benjamin Preiss and Adam Carey

Three of Australia's leading infectious disease experts have called into question the Victorian government's position on school closures, saying medical evidence clearly shows schools can be reopened safely.

As other states including Queensland and NSW prepare to allow more students back into the classroom for term two, the Victorian government is yet to relax its direction that only vulnerable children and those of essential workers should attend.

Victoria's Chief Health Officer, Brett Sutton, yesterday departed from his previous message around school closures, indicating he was considering recommending a relaxation of current restrictions

University of Sydney infectious diseases expert and professor of paediatrics Robert Booy said it appeared Victoria was not acting on evidence suggesting it was safe to reopen schools.

"The situation in Victoria is one where they are following a counsel of perfection that 'children must spread disease' because that is what they have done in the past with other viruses," Professor Booy said.

"But in this virus, it's much less of an issue. They have to get past a mindset where 'it's always been this

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way, it must be this way again'. You have to examine evidence, and the evidence overwhelmingly shows that schools only carry a small risk to children or teachers."

Australian National University Associate Professor Sanjaya Senanayake also supported reopening schools. "Right now all the evidence says it is safe to reopen schools," he said. "The one consistent fact so far is that children do not seem to get easily infected by this virus."

Professor Senanayake said if Australia was facing an influenza pandemic he would be calling for schools to remain closed, because children are more at risk of serious illness from the flu and were also known spreaders of the disease.

Professor Allen Cheng, director of the infection prevention and healthcare epidemiology unit at Alfred Health, said the majority of outbreaks had been adult-to-adult

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Time to return: Scott Minehane with son Caleb and daughter Tara

Photos: Justin McManus

Opposite schools of thought

Victorian parents are divided over whether children should be sent back to school.

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Stay at home: Matt and Kelly Elgin with their daughter Frankie

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transmission. He said there had been notable outbreaks at weddings, business meetings and religious gatherings, but schools were "notable in their absence from this list". Multiple schools in Melbourne, including Toorak Primary School, Yeshivah - Beth Rivkah Colleges and Carey Baptist Grammar, were forced to close in term one after a member of the school tested positive.

Professor Sutton, who has responsibility for deciding when remote learning should end, said yesterday he was "open to opening schools before the end of term two", but was still assessing the risks.

"We know that introduction of the virus has happened with adults

coming to school, so that is a concern," he said. Professor Sutton also said not enough was known about whether children were spreading the virus.

"We also don't know the extent to which kids might have asymptomatic illness and be transmitting it to each other.

"It is comforting that kids don't get, by and large, serious illness, but that's not the same question as how much they might contribute to community transmission or broader population transmission."

Professor Sutton urged parents to get children tested for coronavirus if they had symptoms as the government seeks to dramatically expand the testing regime.

But he has consistently said there would be no return to school before

the state of emergency is reviewed on May 11. Victoria's position on schools is more cautious than some other states.

NSW will begin a phased reopening of classrooms from May 11, and South Australia and Western Australia, both of which have recorded far fewer coronavirus cases, are encouraging all students to go to school this week.

The findings of the National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance, which tracked the spread of 18 coronavirus cases in classrooms - nine teachers and nine students - across 15 schools also indicated the disease has limited transmissibility between students, and from students to teachers.

The study analysed the tests of 863 close contacts of the infected

group between early March and April 21.

"There were only two cases detected - one was thought to be a student-to-student transmission, and the other was teacher-to-student transmission," Professor Cheng said.

But experts agreed strict hygiene standards and social distancing would be crucial to preventing outbreaks if schools were to reopen.

More than 97 per cent of children are learning remotely, according to data from the Department of Education and Training.

The federal government and the state opposition have cited the study, which has not been peer reviewed, to pressure the Andrews government into reopening schools to all students.

Bialik College principal Jeremy Stowe-Lindner said schools wanted to see a unified message coming from the state and federal governments on when they should be open.

"We also want to see an understanding of the need to give equal priority to the health of all our staff and students on-site," he said.

Premier Daniel Andrews said parents were clear about the status of schools during term two.

"There is no debate on schools. The Chief Health Officer is clear. The government is clear. Parents are clear," he said.

Mr Andrews said he was grateful to parents for how they were managing during the pandemic.

He said there would be no easing of restrictions before the state of emergency expires.