



Zali Steggall MP

FEDERAL MEMBER FOR WARRINGAH

The Hon. Dan Tehan MP
Minister for Education
PO Box 6022
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

The Hon. Greg Hunt MP
Minister for Health
Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Public Service and Cabinet
PO Box 6022
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

19 March 2020

Dear Minister for Education and Minister for Health,

I write to you regarding the decision to keep schools open during the COVID-19 pandemic. On behalf of many in Warringah, I would like to request greater clarity on the decision to keep schools open.

I understand from the Deputy Chief Medical Officer's briefing at 1PM today, that schools will be kept open in Australia, for now. The main reasons that were provided included:

1. Almost all cases of COVID-19 among children are mild;
2. Children are not known to be carriers or to be responsible for transmitting the disease, either to other children or to adults;
3. Children are more likely to contract the virus from adults/parents in their home than from other children at school.

I believe greater clarity of communications and information is required. The reasons given by the Chief Medical Officer differ from the comments made by the Prime Minister yesterday, when he made the argument that schools need to stay open in part to avoid disruption to health services and the greater economy.

There is a substantial contradiction between the current Government recommendations to physically distance oneself by at least 1.5 m from other people and legal ban on gatherings of more than 100 persons indoors with what is occurring in our schools, where significantly more than 100 students attend at any one time. I understand there has been no universal measures implemented in schools to stagger recess and lunch hours to reduce student numbers in common areas or 'thinning' of classes to enable 1.5m spacing between students.

Following the Prime Minister's comments, many in the community are concerned that schools are being kept open to facilitate care and supervision of children of health and essential services workers and minimise impact to the economy. Many are concerned that doing so is putting both students and teachers at risk.

In order to communicate more effectively with the community and respond to the many concerned parents of my electorate, please provide confirmation that it is the Government's position that:

1. Children are not an at-risk group of contracting the virus from one another and in the event they do, that they are only likely to experience mild illness;
2. Children do not contribute to or increase the risk of spread of the virus in the community to other children and adults.

In the circumstances, could you please clarify what age groups of children are not considered an at-risk group. Are all age groups at the same risk level, ie primary, secondary and tertiary students, noting that tertiary students are generally adults? How are high schools and universities of more than 100 people different to workplaces?

The UK recently shut-down all schools due to their individual situation, some in Australia, including the Victorian Premier, have said that it is inevitable that schools will be shut-down in Australia. The ongoing uncertainty is causing much anxiety and concern for students, parents and professionals.

Many parents are taking action by keeping children at home, but schools are not able to officially provide online education to accommodate those children. Also, a period of isolation of 14 days will be ineffective if everyone is not participating. As a result of not taking decisive action early, longer periods of physical isolation are likely to be required. Finally, teachers are not feeling adequately protected and supported under the current arrangements and policies.

Urgent decisive action is needed. This could include bringing forward the upcoming holiday period and ensuring holiday care priority is given to health and essential services professionals. Alternatively, encouraging schools to offer online classes as well as face to face would reduce the number of students attending and permit the 1.5m distancing recommended.

The community is deeply concerned about the current situation. I look forward to receiving confirmation and/or clarification from your office(s) in respect to the Government's position on the health risk to children and the reasons for the continued operation of schools.

Sincerely



Zali Steggall, OAM MP
Federal Member for Warringah