

COVID-19 in schools – the experience in NSW ^[1]

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Background

Globally, the control of COVID-19 (caused by the virus, SARS-CoV-2) has been focused on public health measures, including improving hygiene and ensuring social distancing. Some countries have closed schools as part of their response. The strategy of closing schools has previously been recommended to assist in the control of influenza pandemics¹ because we know children with influenza are likely to spread the infection and become ill from influenza. However, COVID-19 appears to be a less common infection in children than is influenza and in studies done overseas, many of the infected children had only mild symptoms. It has been suggested that children are also less likely to spread the virus. Thus, it has not been clear how common it is for SARS-CoV-2 to transmit among school children or school staff, and if school closures are an effective measure to control COVID-19. Prolonged school closures can have negative consequences for the community and for children.

The emergence of COVID-19 and early spread globally coincided with the start of school term 1 in Australia. The first NSW school with a COVID-19 case was identified on 5 March 2020. The National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance (NCIRS), with the support of the NSW Ministry of Health and NSW Department of Education, started this schools investigation in early March. Through this investigation, we aimed to understand the transmission of SARS-CoV-2 in schools and childcare centres in NSW. This report summarises the preliminary findings (to 21 April 2020) of this work in NSW primary and high schools.

Related link:

Region: Australia and New Zealand ^[3]

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