

# Temporary school closure guidelines

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This document should be read with the Emergency management school preparedness policy and the Emergency management plans for schools procedures.

## 1. Introduction

These guidelines relate to closures captured by Section 100 of the *Education Act 2015* which allows the Chief Executive to temporarily close a Government school or part of a government school if it is considered appropriate to do so:

- because of short term risk to the safety or welfare of staff or students
- for cultural reasons, or
- for any other reason.

All Northern Territory (NT) Government schools have a responsibility to provide consistent and high quality education to all students and to provide appropriate programs for students during the published school term dates, or approved variations to school hours or term dates, unless a temporary closure is required in line with these guidelines.

Examples illustrating instances which may result in the need to temporarily close a school include:

- emergency or critical incidents
- risk to health or safety
- asbestos management
- access to drinking and ablution water for a timeframe that deems the environment unsafe for students and staff to remain on site
- power failure for a timeframe that deems the environment unsafe for students and staff to remain on site.

Contingency planning for all temporary school closures should be clearly documented in your school's Emergency Management Plan, in line with the Emergency management plans for schools procedures. This includes closures where the event is considered an emergency or disaster, natural or otherwise, and the Territory Emergency Plan is activated.

## 2. Guidelines

### 2.1. Disruption to schooling

- An incident that results in regular scheduled schooling not being available for less than one school day, for example students have commenced school and have been sent home with learning from home materials.
  - Water main bursts at 11am.
- An incident where schooling will be disrupted for the full school day but students are able to attend and engage in alternative activities that do not involve the classroom.
  - Power outage for the full day and students are taken to another location to learn.
- Where possible staff are available onsite for children of essential workers and vulnerable children.

- Senior Director School Operations approval required – can be sought verbally with above considerations.
- Entered on the incident register.
- Attendance codes:
  - If all students are sent to learn from home – T.
  - If some students remain – B for those learning from home and / for those remaining at school.

## 2.2. Open – Learning from home

- An incident where schooling will be disrupted for the full school day and the majority of students are not able to attend but the school will remain open for children of essential workers and vulnerable children.
- Learning from home materials provided to students not attending.
- Senior Director School Operations approval required – can be sought verbally or via email with above considerations.
- Newsflash required under the category Open – Learning from home.
- Attendance codes: B for those learning from home and / for those remaining at school.

## 2.3. Temporary school closure – Learning from home

- An incident that will impact the ability for the school to be open for a full school day or more and school will not be available for any students including children of essential workers and vulnerable children.
- An incident that is continuing from the previous day that is impacting the ability for the school to be open for a full school day or more and school will not be available for any students including children of essential workers and vulnerable children.
- Where possible learning from home materials provided for students.
- Where possible approval for a temporary school closure must be sought the day prior to the requested closure dates.
- Senior Director School Operations approval required for first day.
- Senior Director School Operations and Deputy Chief Executive Regional Services endorsement required for following days.
- Chief Executive approval required.
- Newsflash required under the category Temporary school closure – Learning from home.
- Attendance code: T.

### 3. Considerations

Depending on the context of the temporary school closure, the following matters should also be considered.

#### 3.1. Emergency temporary school closures initiated under the Territory Emergency Plan

In the event that the Territory Emergency Plan is invoked, the Chief Minister, on advice from the Territory Emergency Management Council, will make the decision to close and reopen schools unless the nature of the emergency demands an immediate response, in which case local authorities will take the appropriate steps to ensure the safety of the public. This may include the temporary closure of the school to enable communities to begin preparations, pending formal closure of the school by the Chief Minister for the remainder of the emergency.

#### 3.2. Emergency temporary school closure initiated by the Department of Education

Principals and teachers do not have the authority to send students away from school or deny them access to the school during the published school term dates, or approved variations to school hours or term dates, unless one or more of the following apply:

- approval has been obtained from the Senior Director School Operations where the closure is less than one day, or the Chief Executive where the closure period exceeds one day
- they are clearly acting in an extreme emergency situation to fulfil their overriding responsibility to ensure the immediate health and safety of students and staff.

It is recognised that in the most extreme and unusual circumstances, principals or other staff might have to take action without prior approval in order to ensure the health and safety of students.

In this situation the Senior Director School Operations, or another senior departmental officer if the Senior Director School Operations is unavailable, must be contacted as soon as possible and be fully briefed on all circumstances.

#### 3.3. Temporary closure during periods of Sorry Business

Following the death of a community member, many Aboriginal communities conduct Sorry Business activities and engage in cultural activities to mark the passing and mourn the loss to the community. Sorry Business is an important event for Indigenous Australians and there are a number of obligations and responsibilities during this time, such as attendance at funerals and events.

Schools must remain open during periods of Sorry Business, unless there are exceptional circumstances where a principal can demonstrate that school closure is necessary. This need must be based on the matters outlined in the [Assessment of impact on school operations during Sorry Business](#) section of these guidelines.

### 3.4. Community engagement

Engaging with remote school communities is critical in shaping education delivery throughout the NT. As there is such diversity in the culture and practices between each community, it is essential that schools establish strong community ties with their local communities and adhere to local practices as appropriate.

Community engagement must be tailored to the needs and context of each individual community and principals should adopt the following five strategies when working within their communities:

- make engagement a priority and invest in achieving this
- be proactive in communication with the community
- actively seek, listen and respond to community feedback
- commit to offering meaningful ways that communities can participate in the school including effective participation in school governance bodies
- assist community to become advocates for schooling.

This is an ongoing process which is dependent on the principal and community members establishing a shared understanding and agreement about how best to engage to meet the needs of students.

### 3.5. Assessment of impact on school operations during Sorry Business

Professional judgment, coupled with strong community liaison, is required to ascertain whether this is the closure of a school is absolutely necessary. Some factors which may contribute to the decision may include:

- staff attendance and alternative staffing arrangements
- requests from the community and whether, to mark respect, it would be culturally appropriate to close facilities.

In most instances, periods of Sorry Business will not necessitate the closure of a school, including where a majority of students are absent due to Sorry Business. Closure shall only be considered where significant staffing or other concerns inhibit the school's ability to operate.

If it is determined that a closure is necessary, principals must adhere to [Emergency temporary school closure initiated by the Department of Education](#) section of these guidelines.

### 3.6. During all emergency school closure events

Where possible schools should provide sufficient notice of the school's closure to parents and, if the school closure is to continue, the Senior Director School Operations and Regional Directors School Operations will provide alternative workplace arrangements.

Some circumstances result in the conditions of a school being a potentially dangerous or unsafe environment and impact the health or safety of the school community. In these instances, alternative instructional procedures that align with the school's Emergency Management Plan should be implemented to enable a modified school program in a more suitable environment.

## 4. Roles and responsibilities

### 4.1. Chief Minister

The Chief Minister has a responsibility to:

- decide to close and reopen schools when the Territory Emergency Plan is invoked unless the nature of the emergency demands an immediate response, in which case local authorities will take the appropriate steps to ensure the safety of the public. This may include the temporary closure of the school to enable communities to begin preparations, pending formal closure of the school by the Chief Minister for the remainder of the emergency.

### 4.2. Territory Emergency Management Council

The Territory Emergency Management Council has a responsibility to:

- provide advice to the Chief Minister regarding the application of the Territory Emergency Plan arrangements
- if required, coordinate the closure and reopening of schools in the NT when the Territory Emergency Plan is invoked.

### 4.3. Chief Executive

The Chief Executive has a responsibility to:

- approve all temporary school closures for a full school day or more and where school will not be available for any students including children of essential workers and vulnerable children.

### 4.4. Deputy Chief Executive, Regional Services

The Deputy Chief Executive, Regional Services has a responsibility to:

- approve temporary school closures for up to and including one day because of a short-term risk to the safety or welfare of staff or students, for cultural reasons or for any other reason. School will not be available for any students including children of essential workers and vulnerable children
- notify the Australian Education Union (AEU) where the closure has a potential significant impact on department staff.

### 4.5. Senior Director School Operations

The Senior Director School Operations has a responsibility to:

- approve alternative arrangements for learning where there is an incident that results in regular scheduled schooling not being available for less than one school day
- approve alternative arrangements for learning where there is an incident where schooling will be disrupted for the full school day and the majority of students are not able to attend but the school will remain open for children of essential workers and vulnerable children

- endorse to the Deputy Chief Executive Regional Services all temporary school closures for a full school day or more and where school will not be available for any students including children of essential workers and vulnerable children.

## 4.6. Regional Directors School Operations

Regional Directors School Operations have a responsibility to:

- ensure that the principal has attempted to develop a contingency plan and exhausted all options available to them to keep the school open
- ensure schools have put in place appropriate measures for providing students with learning from home materials
- where the above has not been possible, review the application for temporary school closure
- ensure a communication strategy has been developed and facilitate any additional support for the school, including Human Resources (HR) or counselling support
- recommend or not recommend the department initiated temporary school closure and progress this to the Senior Director School Operations for consideration
- progress the newsflash.

## 4.7. Principals

Principals have a responsibility to:

- develop a sound Emergency Management Plan in line with Emergency management plans for schools procedures and manage or stabilise emergency situations in line with this plan
- seek appropriate approvals, as detailed in [Emergency temporary school closure initiated by the Department of Education](#) section of these guidelines for emergency temporary school closures and continue to provide regular reports to the relevant Regional Director School Operations regarding the implementation of the school closure
- ensure student have access to learning from home materials
- communicate any decisions regarding school closure to all school staff, wider community and other stakeholders
- document all actions taken by the school, maintain records and ensure that human resource and student attendance system processes are followed
- ensure that any unforeseen or extended student or staff absence, which is outside of the approved closure times, is communicated by way of a supplementary newsflash and advice to the Deputy Chief Executive, Regional Services through relevant Regional Director School Operations and Senior Director School Operations.
- notify QECNT regarding the closure of a preschool.



## 5. Definitions

| Term                                   | Definition   |
|--|--|
| Attendance codes                       | To be recorded in SAMS to indicate which students are learning from home, learning at school or are absent.  |
| Critical incident                      | Includes any event which causes disruption to the school, creates significant danger, risk or likelihood of traumatic effects and creates a situation where staff, students and parents experience trauma, feel unsafe, vulnerable or under stress.  |
| Emergency                              | Encompasses a range of events which could otherwise be described as incidents, accidents, catastrophes, disasters or crises. An emergency therefore embraces the range of terms frequently used to describe an event, actual or imminent, which endangers or threatens to endanger life, property or the environment, and which requires a significant and coordinated response.   |
| Newsflashes                            | Succinct briefings that provide critical information to the department's Chief Executive and the Minister's office. The department's Communications and Media unit and Deputy Chief Executive are also notified of information through this process  |
| Parent                                 | Means a child's father, mother or any other person who has parental responsibility for that child, including a person who is regarded as a parent of the child under Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander customary law or tradition. The definition of a parent does not include a person standing in place of the parent on a temporary basis.   |
| Parental responsibility                | In regard to the definition of parent, refers to a person who has: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• daily care and control of the child, or</li> <li>• is entitled to exercise all the powers and rights, and has all the responsibilities, in relation to the long-term care and development of the child, or</li> <li>• has daily care and control of the child and the entitlement and responsibilities at (b) and includes a person who has been given the above responsibilities under another state or territory law.</li> </ul> |
| Quality Education and Care NT (QECNT)  | Refers to the NT regulatory authority responsible for administering the <i>Education and Care Services (National Uniform Legislation) Act 2011</i> and the Education and Care Services National Regulations 2011.  |
| School                                 | Includes preschool and the land area up to the school boundaries.  |
| School operating hours                 | Refers to the time during which schools must provide instruction to students, including appropriate breaks.  |
| School staff                           | Includes any person responsible for the operations or education services at a school. This can include contractors, visitors or volunteers.  |
| Sorry Business                         | An expression adopted from Indigenous cultures that is used to refer to the period of cultural practices and protocols associated with death.  |
| Territory Emergency Management Council | Is established under the <i>Emergency Management Act 2013</i> and is comprised of chief executives from a number of key departments. The primary functions of the Council include directing resources during emergency and recovery operations and providing advice in relation to emergency planning.   |

| Term                     | Definition   |
|--------------------------|--|
| Territory Emergency Plan | Describes the Territory's approach to emergency and recovery operations, the governance and coordination arrangement, and roles and responsibilities of agencies. It is supported by regional, local and hazard-specific plans and functional group sub-plans. |

## 6. Related policy, legislation and documents

### 6.1. Policy

- Emergency management plans for schools procedures – [https://education.nt.gov.au/policies/school-operations#emergency\\_management](https://education.nt.gov.au/policies/school-operations#emergency_management)
- Emergency management school preparedness policy – [https://education.nt.gov.au/policies/school-operations#emergency\\_management](https://education.nt.gov.au/policies/school-operations#emergency_management)
- Excursions policy – <https://education.nt.gov.au/policies/school-operations#excursions>
- Newsflash guidelines and procedures – internal only
- Request for approval for temporary school closure – internal only

### 6.2. Legislation

- *Education Act 2015* – <https://legislation.nt.gov.au/Legislation/EDUCATION-ACT-2015>
- *Education and Care Services (National Uniform Legislation) Act 2011* – <https://legislation.nt.gov.au/Legislation/EDUCATION-AND-CARE-SERVICES-NATIONAL-UNIFORM-LEGISLATION-ACT-2011>
- Education and Care Services National Regulations 2011 – <https://legislation.nsw.gov.au/view/html/inforce/current/sl-2011-0653>
- *Emergency Management Act 2013* – <https://legislation.nt.gov.au/Legislation/EMERGENCY-MANAGEMENT-ACT-2013> and the Territory Emergency Plan – <https://pfes.nt.gov.au/emergency-service/emergency-management>
- *Fire and Emergency Act 1996* – <https://legislation.nt.gov.au/Legislation/FIRE-AND-EMERGENCY-ACT-1996> and Fire and Emergency Regulations 1996 – <https://legislation.nt.gov.au/Legislation/FIRE-AND-EMERGENCY-REGULATIONS-1996>
- *Work Health and Safety (National Uniform Legislation) Act 2011* – <https://legislation.nt.gov.au/Legislation/WORK-HEALTH-AND-SAFETY-NATIONAL-UNIFORM-LEGISLATION-ACT-2011>

| Acronyms | Full form                     |
|----------|-------------------------------|
| NT       | Northern Territory            |
| QECNT    | Quality Education and Care NT |

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| <b>Document title</b>  | Temporary school closure guidelines  |
| <b>Contact details</b> | Regional Services, School Operations, <a href="mailto:schoolops@education.nt.gov.au">schoolops@education.nt.gov.au</a> |
| <b>Approved by</b>     | Deputy Chief Executive, Regional Services  |
| <b>Date approved</b>   | 15 June 2022   |
| <b>TRM number</b>      | 50:D22:51962   |

| Version | Date      | Author                             | Changes made   |
|---------|-----------|------------------------------------|--|
| 2.0     | July 2016 | Quality School Systems and Support | Revised policy – EDOC: 2018/107461   |
| 2.1     | June 2022 | Quality School Systems and Support | Interim guidelines to align with request for approval for temporary school closure |