

Temporary school site closure - guidelines

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This document should be read in conjunction with the Department of Education and Training's (department) Emergency management school preparedness policy and the Emergency management plans for schools procedures.

1. Introduction

Section 100 of the *Education Act 2015* 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.

While section 100 does not apply to preschools or other programs and services that may be delivered at a school, these guidelines describe the process by which a school site may be temporarily closed.

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. This duty of care exists to ensure the safety, health, and wellbeing of children whilst at school. This is also reflected in section 167 of the Education and Care Services National Law which requires an approved provider and nominated supervisor to ensure that it is protecting children from harm and hazards.

When deciding on whether a school site should be temporarily closed, principals should consider the safety, health and wellbeing of all staff, students and services delivered on the school site. It may be that the cause for closure only impacts on classroom learning and does not require closure of other services, such as a Families as First Teachers program, programs operated by outside providers or programs operated by the School Council such as Outside of School Hours Care, which routinely operate in different areas of the school site.

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

- emergency or critical incidents
- risk to health or safety
- asbestos management
- whole of staff illness
- disruption to water supply or power failure
- unavailability of teaching staff.

Strategies considered or attempted to avoid the need for a temporary school site closure should be clearly documented in the school's application for temporary closures for more than one day. This should include planning for learning by students 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. Definitions

Term	Definition
Approved provider	The Department of Education and Training is the approved provider of all NT Government preschools. Responsibility for this role has been delegated to the Deputy Chief Executive, Regional Services and the Senior Directors Education. Refer to the Responsible person and educational leader delegations in preschool procedures .
Controlling Authority	The NT Government agency with delegated responsibility to direct or undertake response to a specified hazard. This includes managing the technical aspects of response operations and suppressing immediate consequences. The Controlling Authority establishes command, control and coordination of resources and appoints an Incident Controller.
Critical incident	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	A range of events which could otherwise be described as incidents, accidents, catastrophes, disasters, or crises. Therefore, an emergency 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.
Nominated supervisor	The department has nominated all principals as the nominated supervisor for their respective preschool. Refer to the Responsible person and educational leader delegations in preschool procedures .
Parent	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 customary law or tradition. The definition of a parent does not include a person standing in place of the parent on a temporary basis. The rights and responsibilities of a parent include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> entitlement to exercise all the powers and rights, and all the responsibilities, in relation to the long-term care and development of the child, or daily care and control of the child and the entitlement and responsibilities.
School site	For the purposes of these guidelines, school site includes preschool, the land area up to the school boundaries and areas recognised as part of the school which may not be within the school's boundaries. School sites also include Families as First Teachers (FaFT), child and family services, trade training centres, homeland learning centres and outside school hours care (OSHC) run by the school.
School operating hours	The time during which schools must provide instruction to students, including appropriate breaks.
School staff	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 Aboriginal cultures that is used to refer to the period of cultural practices and protocols associated with a person's death.
Territory Emergency Management Council	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 coordination and recovery operations and providing advice in relation to emergency planning.

Term	Definition
Territory Emergency Plan	The NT's approach to emergency coordination 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.

3. Roles and responsibilities

3.1. Chief Minister

The Chief Minister will:

- decide to close schools on advice from the Territory Emergency Management Council when the Territory emergency plan is invoked and decide to reopen schools following closure due to an emergency, on advice from the Chief Executive of the Department of Education and Training.

3.2. Territory Emergency Management Council

The Territory Emergency Management Council (TEMC) will:

- provide advice to the Chief Minister regarding the application of the Territory emergency plan arrangements.

3.3. Controlling Authority

A Controlling Authority will:

- take appropriate steps to ensure the safety to the public when the nature of an emergency event demands an immediate response. This may include the temporary closure of a school to begin preparations, pending formal closure of the school by the Chief Minister for the remainder of the emergency event.

3.4. Chief Executive, Department of Education and Training

The Chief Executive will:

- progress newsflashes, as required, about temporary school site closures to the Minister for Education's office.

3.5. Deputy Chief Executive Regional Services

The Deputy Chief Executive Regional Services will:

- approve or decline the request for temporary school site closure where the temporary school site closure is for more than one day
- notify the relevant Senior Director Education and Senior Director School Operations of the outcome
- notify the Australian Education Union NT following the approval for school site closure, where the temporary closure has a potential significant impact on department employees.

3.6. Senior Director School Operations

The Senior Director School Operations will:

- approve or decline temporary school site closure requests of up to and including one day
- endorse and progress the Request for approval: Temporary school site closure form to the Deputy Chief Executive Regional Services for approval for closures for more than one day
- provide feedback to the Senior Director Education and Director School Operations if not endorsed
- ensure closures are recorded in the incident register for or progress a newsflash in accordance with the Newsflash guidelines about temporary school site closures to the Minister for Education's office, to notify the Minister of such closures.

3.7. Senior Director Education

Senior Director Education of the relevant region will:

- endorse requests for temporary school site closures up to and including one day
- approve a Request for approval: Temporary school site closure form for single teacher school site closures for required meetings and professional development
- endorse a Request for approval: Temporary school site closure form for schools with more than one teacher
- notify the Director School Operations if a Request for approval: Temporary school site closure form from schools with more than one teacher is not endorsed
- notify the Director School Operations of updates of any temporary school site closures, including those approved for single teacher schools for principals and staff to attend required meetings or professional development
- notify the principal of the outcome of a request for temporary school site closure for the principal to attend required meetings or professional development.

3.8. Director School Operations

Director School Operations will:

- ensure the principal has considered or attempted strategies to avoid the temporary site closure and has measures in place for learning from home and to cater for NAPLAN students if required prior to progressing a Request for approval: Temporary school site closure form
- ensure the Senior Director Education endorses a closure up to and including one day
- receive and progress requests for school site closure up to and including one day to the Senior Director School Operations
- ensure that any requests for school site closures of up to and including one day that have not been received in writing are followed up in writing for record keeping purposes
- receive and review the Request for approval: Temporary school site closure form for closures for more than one day and seek endorsement as appropriate from the Senior Director Education

- progress an endorsed Request for approval: Temporary school site closure form for more than one day to the Senior Director School Operations for approval
- notify the principal of the outcome of a request to close the school up to and including one day
- ensure that the principal has notified:
 - Quality Education and Care NT if the site closed may impact a preschool site, long day care or outside of school hours care program
 - Director FaFT if the site closed may impact a Families as First Teachers (FaFT) program
 - Teaching and Learning Services if the site is closed during NAPLAN testing period
 - All providers of any services or programs such as OSHC, Child and Family Centre, Clontarf located on their school sites
- advise the principal to communicate the closure to families
- advise the principal to record student attendance with a 'T' code (School not available), for the students and period impacted on SAMS, as per the lesson attendance codes and descriptions policy. the students from the school site closed as a 'T' code – School Unavailable – as per the Lesson attendance codes and descriptions policy
- communicate any unforeseen or extended student or staff absence as a result of the school site closure, which is outside of the approved closure times, to the Deputy Chief Executive Regional Services through the Senior Director School Operations
- record closures in the incident register or the Newsflash register as appropriate.

3.9. Principals

Principals will:

- develop an effective school emergency management plan in line with the Emergency management plans for schools' procedures and manage or stabilise emergency situations in line with the plan
- immediately notify the Senior Director Education if directed by a Controlling Authority to close a school or open a school as a shelter
- seek appropriate approvals for temporary school site closures as detailed in section 4.2.3 by directly contacting the relevant Director School Operations for school site closures up to and including one day, or by submitting a Request for approval - Temporary school site closure form for closures for more than one day
- provide regular reports to the Director School Operations regarding the implementation of the school site closure
- communicate decisions regarding school site closure to all school staff, families, wider community, and other stakeholders, as appropriate
- where possible, ensure learning from home materials are provided to students
- liaise with Teaching and Learning Services within the department to arrange alternatives, if required, if the school site closure occurs during the NAPLAN testing period
- document all actions taken by the school, maintain records and ensure human resource and student attendance system processes are followed
- communicate to the Director School Operations any unforeseen or extended student or staff absence as a result of the school site closure, which are outside of the approved closure times

- notify Quality Education and Care NT if a preschool, long day care or outside of school hours care program is provided on site
- notify Director Families as First Teachers (FaFT) if the site closed includes a FaFT program
- notify the provider of any services or programs provided on the site closed (e.g., OSHC, Child and Family Centre, Clontarf)
- record student attendance with a 'T' code (School not available), for the students and period impacted on SAMS, as per the lesson attendance codes and descriptions policy. the students from the school site closed as a 'T' code – School Unavailable – as per the Lesson attendance codes and descriptions policy.

4. Guidelines

4.1. Context

There are situations that require the temporary closure of a school site. The action required from responsible officers is dependent on who initiates the closure and the reasons for closure.

4.1.1. Emergency temporary school site closure under the Territory Emergency Plan

The decision to close schools due to an emergency will be made by the Chief Minister on advice from the Territory Emergency Management Council. This advice will come from the Education Controller to the Senior Director Education, who will notify the principal.

To maintain public safety, a Controlling Authority may also temporarily close a school to begin preparations, pending formal closure of the school by the Chief Minister for the remainder of the emergency event. This advice may come directly from the controlling authority to the principal. In this event the principal should immediately notify the Senior Director Education who will notify the Education Controller and the Director of School Operations.

The decision to re-open schools will be made by the Chief Minister on advice from the Chief Executive Officer of the Department of Education and Training based on advice from the Controlling Authority's Incident Controller, refer to 4.6 Closure of Schools in the Territory Emergency Plan.

4.1.2. Temporary closure of schools established as emergency shelters

Under certain circumstances a school may be opened as an emergency shelter.

- In the event of a declared emergency the decision to open a school as an emergency shelter is made by the Territory or Regional Controller. In this instance the temporary closure of schools is the decision of the Chief Minister under advice from TEMC. Advice regarding school closures in a declared event should come from the Education Controller to the Senior Director Education to notify the principal.
- In the event of a localised emergency where there is no emergency declaration a controlling authority may direct the opening of a school as an emergency shelter. In this instance the direction is likely to come from a local controller directly to a principal. In this case, procedures for applying to temporarily close a school for more than one day outlined at 4.2.3 and in the procedures should be followed by principals.

4.1.3. Temporary school site closure by the Department of Education and Training

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 approve 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 up to and including one day
- approval has been obtained from the Deputy Chief Executive Regional Services where the closure is for more than one day
- they are clearly acting in an emergency situation to fulfil their overriding responsibility to ensure the immediate health and safety of students and staff or as directed by a Controlling Authority
- in extreme and unusual circumstances, principals and senior staff may have to act, without prior approval, to ensure the health and safety of students.

In this situation, the Senior Director Education or Director School Operations must be contacted as soon as practicable and briefed on the circumstances.

4.1.4. Schools to remain open during periods of Sorry Business

Schools must remain open during periods of Sorry Business unless there are exceptional circumstances where a principal can demonstrate that school closure is necessary.

In most instances, periods of Sorry Business will not necessitate the closure of a school, including where most 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.

Following the death of a community member, many Aboriginal communities conduct Sorry Business and engage in cultural activities to mark the passing and mourn the loss to the community. Sorry Business is an important event in Aboriginal culture and there are cultural protocols and obligations that need to be undertaken during this time.

Professional judgement and strong community liaison is required to ascertain whether the closure of a school is necessary. Factors which may contribute to the decision include:

- staff attendance and alternative staffing arrangements
- whether the closure impacts on the health and safety of staff and students
- requests from community elder and whether, to mark respect, it would be culturally appropriate to close facilities.

If it is determined that a closure is necessary, principals must adhere to section 4.2.3 of these guidelines.

4.1.5. Temporary school site closure to attend required meetings or professional learning

Every year, principals and educators attend professional learning opportunities that:

- are relevant to their school or teaching
- require the principals and educators to travel to attend

- may mean that the school is left with depleted staffing levels which compromise the safety of students and staff.

Principals of single teacher schools will need approval from their Senior Director Education using the Temporary school site closure form. If approved, the Senior Director Education will notify the Director School Operations who will record the closure in the incident register for record keeping purposes. For these closure types, principals must provide learning from home materials to students.

4.2. During all temporary school site closure events

Some circumstances result in the conditions of a school being a potentially dangerous or unsafe environment impacting the health and safety of staff, students, and 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.

Principals are responsible for liaising with all service providers located on their school sites when considering temporary school site closure. The reason for the closure may or may not result in the need for these service providers to also close.

On approval of the request to temporarily close the homeland learning centre, the principal must record the school or homeland learning centre as a 'T' code (School Not Available) as per the Lesson attendance codes and descriptions policy records.

5. Related legislation, policy, and resources

5.1. 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 – <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/nqf/national-law-regulations/national-regulations>

Emergency Management Act 2013 – [https://www.pfes.nt.gov.au/sites/default/files/uploads/files/2022/NTES Territory Emergency Plan 2021-2022.pdf](https://www.pfes.nt.gov.au/sites/default/files/uploads/files/2022/NTES%20Territory%20Emergency%20Plan%202021-2022.pdf)

Fire and Emergency Act 1996 – <https://legislation.nt.gov.au/Legislation/FIRE-AND-EMERGENCY-ACT-1996>

Fire and Emergency Regulations – <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>

5.2. Policy and resources

Duty of care owed by teachers – information sheet – https://education.nt.gov.au/policies/conduct#duty_of_care

Emergency Management: School preparedness policy – <https://education.nt.gov.au/policies/school-operations>

Emergency Management: Plans for schools' procedures – https://education.nt.gov.au/policies/school-operations#emergency_management

Excursions policy – <https://education.nt.gov.au/policies/school-operations>

Newsflash guidelines – <https://elearn.ntschoools.net/policies/4462>

Responsible person and educational leader delegations in preschool procedures – <https://education.nt.gov.au/policies/early-childhood-education-and-care/preschool-specific-policy>

Student enrolment and attendance policy suite – <https://education.nt.gov.au/policies/student-enrolment>

Territory Emergency Plan – <https://pfes.nt.gov.au/emergency-service/emergency-management>

Acronyms	Full form
FaFT	Families as First Teachers
NT	Northern Territory
OSHC	Outside School Hours Care
TEMC	Territory Emergency Management Council

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2	July 2016	Quality School Systems and Support	Amendments made due to the <i>Education Act 2015</i> coming into effect January 2016 and to align with amendments to the Territory Emergency Plan

Version	Date	Author	Changes made
3	October 2022	Quality Standards and Regulation – Operational Policy	Administrative amendments to align roles and responsibilities to the structural alignment in effect from 1 July 2022, including NTG template and minor formatting
4	August 2024	Regional Services, School Operations	Amendments made to align with revised procedure and delegation for temporary school site closures
5	September 2024	Regional Services, School Operations	Administrative amendments to align with revised procedure, form and delegation for temporary school site closures