

GUIDELINES

TEMPORARY SCHOOL CLOSURES

Responsibility of: School Support Services

Effective Date: July 2016

Next Review Date: November 2018

Target Audience: Principals, staff, parents and school community

File: 2015/313

EDOC: 2015/38790

Version Number: 2.0

This document should be read in consultation with the [Emergency Management - School Preparedness policy](#) and the [Emergency Management - Plans for schools guidelines](#).

1. INTRODUCTION

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 and/or safety
- asbestos management
- burst water pipe or power failure.

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 guidelines](#). This includes closures where the event is considered an emergency or disaster (natural or otherwise) and the [Territory Emergency Plan](#) is activated.

These guidelines relate to closures captured by section 100 of the *Education Act* 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:

- (a) because of short term risk to the safety or welfare of staff or students
- (b) for cultural reasons
- (c) or for any other reason.

2. DEFINITIONS

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 and/or under stress.

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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 are succinct briefings that provide critical information to the department's Chief Executive and the Minister's office. The department's Corporate Communications unit and Deputy Chief Executives are also notified of information through this process.

Quality Education and Care NT (QECNT) refers to the NT regulatory authority responsible for administering the [Education and Care Services \(National Uniform Legislation\) Act and Education and Care Services National Regulations](#).

Parent signifies a child's father, mother or any other person who has parental responsibility for the child, including a person who is regarded as a parent of the child under Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander customary law or tradition.

Parental responsibility (in regards to the definition of parent) refers to a person who has:

- a) daily care and control of the child, or
- b) 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
- c) 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.

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 is 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 has been established under the Emergency Management Act 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.

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.

3. ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The Chief Minister will:

- 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

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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.

The Territory Emergency Management Council will:

- 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.

The Chief Executive will:

- approve all department initiated temporary school closures that exceed a period of one day
- approve the newsflash.

The Deputy Chief Executive School Education will:

- in instances where the department initiated temporary school closure exceeds one day, recommend/not recommend school closure and progress for Chief Executive consideration
- notify the Australian Education Union (AEU) where the closure has a potential significant impact on department staff
- progress the newsflash.

Executive Directors will:

- where the closure will be less than one day, approve the temporary closure of a school. In instances where the department initiated temporary school closure is anticipated to be for longer than one day, recommend/not recommend closure and progress for Deputy Chief Executive School Education consideration
- progress the newsflash.

Regional Directors will:

- ensure that the principal has attempted to develop a contingency plan and exhausted all options available to them to keep the school open
- 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/not recommend the department initiated temporary school closure and progress this to the relevant Executive Director for consideration
- progress the newsflash.

Principals will:

- develop a sound Emergency Management Plan in line with [Emergency Management - Plans for schools guidelines](#) and manage/stabilise emergency situations in line with this plan
- seek appropriate approvals (as detailed in [section 4.3 of these guidelines](#)) for emergency temporary school closures and continue to provide regular reports to the relevant Regional Director regarding the implementation of the school closure

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- communicate any decisions regarding school closure to all school staff, wider community and other stakeholders
- commence the newsflash process
- 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 School Education through Regional and relevant Executive Directors
- notify QECNT regarding the closure of a preschool.

4. GUIDELINES

4.1 Context

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

4.2 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 open and close schools in the NT.

In these circumstances, school closure and reopening will be undertaken in accordance with the [Territory Emergency Plan](#) and, if required, may be coordinated by the Territory Emergency Management Council.

4.3 Emergency temporary school closure initiated by the Department

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 relevant Executive Director 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 relevant Executive Directors (or another senior departmental officer if the relevant Executive Director is unavailable) must be contacted as soon as possible and be fully briefed on all circumstances.

4.4 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 section [4.4.2 of these guidelines](#).

4.4.1 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.

4.4.2 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 section [4.3 of these guidelines](#).

4.5 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 relevant Executive Director 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.

5. RELEVANT LINKS

Legislation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Emergency Management Act and the Territory Emergency Plan• Education Act (NT)• Education and Care Services (National Uniform Legislation) Act• Fire and Emergency Act and Regulations• Workplace Health and Safety Act (National Uniform Legislation) Act
Departmental policy, guidelines and other documents	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Emergency Management Framework (staff access only)• Emergency Management Plans for schools guidelines• Emergency Management - school preparedness policy• Excursions policy• Newsflash guidelines and procedures (staff access only)