

Coronavirus: Rules on Victorian school classes are 'back to front'

By NATASHA ROBINSON, HEALTH EDITOR and ANGELICA SNOWDEN, JOURNALIST
9:01PM JULY 8, 2020



Infectious diseases physician and microbiologist Peter Collignon.

Infectious diseases experts have criticised Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews's decision to allow senior secondary students to return to school while younger students stay home, saying older teenagers carry the highest infection risk while primary school children are far less likely to transmit the virus.

Prominent infectious diseases physician and microbiologist Peter Collignon said the policy did not make sense and younger students were being needlessly disadvantaged, with remote learning looking a likely possibility for them for much of term 3.

"My view is they've got it exactly the wrong way around," said Professor Collignon, who works at the ANU Medical School

"If you're going to stop people going to school, it should be the ones more at risk of spreading this virus, which are older students.

"We don't have a lot of data on children and transmission, but there's something about being over 15 that seems to suddenly start rapidly increasing the risk.

"I can't see the point of closing schools to children under 15."

The risk of COVID-19 transmission among senior students is highlighted by the Al-Taqwa College cluster, in which 102 students and staff members are now infected with COVID-19. The cluster is likely to become Victoria's biggest, overtaking Cedar Meats.

Authorities are alarmed by the number of cases of COVID-19 that have been detected in young people since the second surge of infections in the state began. Almost 50 per cent of diagnosed cases in the past seven days have been among those aged under 30.

Twice as many cases have been diagnosed in young people aged between 10 and 19 as those under 10. There were 141 cases diagnosed in teenagers aged between 15 and 19, 115 cases among 10 to 14 year-olds and 75 cases in those aged between five and nine years.

Most of the children acquired the infections from outside the school setting, whereas Al-Taqwa College has highlighted the high risk of transmission among older students at secondary schools.

Professor Collignon said older teenagers and adults had higher numbers of receptors in their nose, to which the coronavirus binds. "That's probably the reason children under 15 aren't anywhere near at the same risk as adults," he said

CASES AMONG YOUNG VICTORIANS

0-4	79
5-9	75
10-14	115
15-19	141
20-24	294
25-29	341

Professor Collignon said that despite the importance of year 12 studies, older students were more likely to succeed at remote learning than younger students.

"Perversely, the people who have got more of a chance of being able to do home schooling and e-learning are the older ones, the 17- and 18 year-olds," he said "And the ones who can't do it very well at all are the five- and six year-olds. So I think they have got this exactly around the wrong way."

More than 20 schools have been linked to COVID-19 cases in Melbourne in recent weeks. In early June, Victorian health authorities reported a student from Newbury Primary School in Craigieburn had tested positive and attended class while they were infectious on May 29.

Since then, a number of clusters have been associated with a range of high schools and primary schools across the

After the Al-Taqwa cluster, the second largest outbreak was at Albanvale Primary School in the northwest of Melbourne, which has recorded 15 cases.

Aitken Hill Primary School in Craigieburn has been linked with 10 cases. Other clusters have sprung up at Camberwell Grammar School and Ascot Vale Primary School.

University of NSW epidemiologist Mary-Louise McLaws urged health authorities to consider asking older students to wear masks in the classroom and to step up messages of social-distancing among all teenagers."I here is a need for a wider resetting of the messaging that they are young adults and their bodies may respond in the same way as older adults," she said.

NATASHA ROBINSON, HEALTH EDITOR

Natasha Robinson began her career at The Australian in 2004. A Walkley awards finalist and a Kennedy Awards winner, she was appointed Health Editor in 2019, and has covered rounds including national affairs, in... [Read more](#)



ANGELICA SNOWDEN, JOURNALIST

Angelica Snowden is a reporter at The Australian. She has worked at the Herald Sun, ABC and at Mojo. Angelica is finishing her Masters in Journalism from Monash University and has a BA in Science (Psychology) f... [Read more](#)

