

Coronavirus

Health experts slam Premier's primary school mask rule as 'silly'

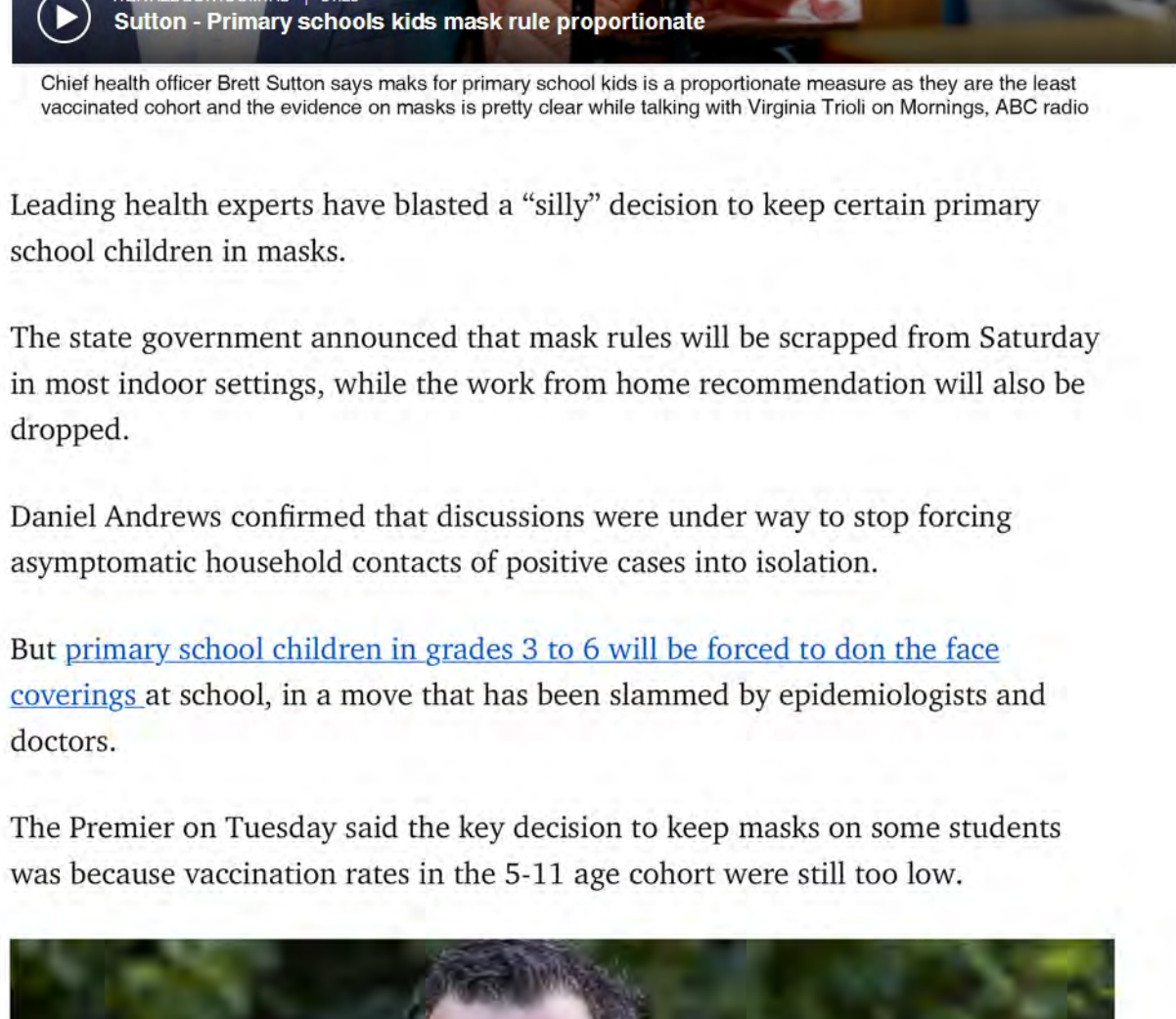
Chief health officer Brett Sutton has defended his schools mask rule, as an expert slapped down a grim prediction that schools would spark a new wave.

Mitch Clarke 3 min read February 23, 2022 - 12:06PM

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Chief health officer Brett Sutton says masks for primary school kids is a proportionate measure as they are the least vaccinated cohort and the evidence on masks is pretty clear while talking with Virginia Trioli on Mornings, ABC radio

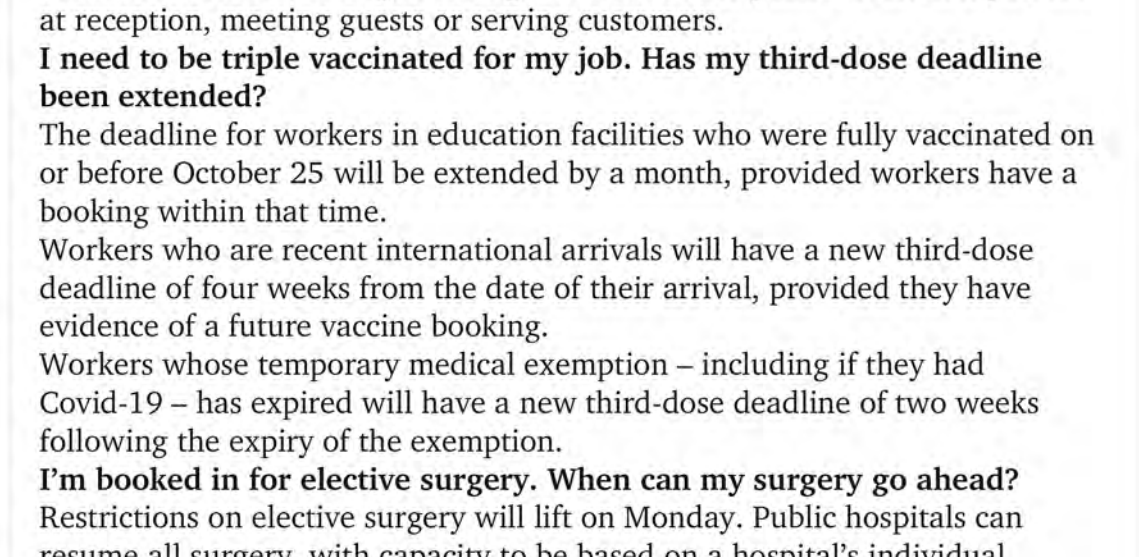
Leading health experts have blasted a "silly" decision to keep certain primary school children in masks.

The state government announced that mask rules will be scrapped from Saturday in most indoor settings, while the work from home recommendation will also be dropped.

Daniel Andrews confirmed that discussions were under way to stop forcing asymptomatic household contacts of positive cases into isolation.

But primary school children in grades 3 to 6 will be forced to don the face coverings at school, in a move that has been slammed by epidemiologists and doctors.

The Premier on Tuesday said the key decision to keep masks on some students was because vaccination rates in the 5-11 age cohort were still too low.



Premier Daniel Andrews says the decision to keep masks on some students is because job rates in the 5-11 age cohort were still too low. Picture: Aaron Francis

NEW MASK RULES UNCOVERED

What are the new rule changes? Masks will no longer be needed in most indoor settings and the public health recommendation for Victorians to work or study from home will also be removed.

When do they come into effect? From 11.59pm on Friday.

In which settings do I STILL need to wear a mask?

- Public transport, in taxis and ride-share, on planes, and indoors at an airport.
When working at or visiting hospitals and indoor areas at care facilities
If working in hospitality, retail, at courts, justice or correctional facilities
When working indoors at an event with more than 30,000 people
At primary schools for staff, or children in year 3 or above

Are masks still recommended? For other workers serving or facing members of the public, such as if you are at reception, meeting guests or serving customers.

I need to be triple vaccinated for my job. Has my third-dose deadline been extended? The deadline for workers in education facilities who were fully vaccinated on or before October 25 will be extended by a month, provided workers have a booking within that time.

Workers who are recent international arrivals will have a new third-dose deadline of four weeks from the date of their arrival, provided they have evidence of a future vaccine booking.

Workers whose temporary medical exemption - including if they had Covid-19 - has expired will have a new third-dose deadline of two weeks following the expiry of the exemption.

I'm booked in for elective surgery. When can my surgery go ahead? Restrictions on elective surgery will lift on Monday. Public hospitals can resume all surgery, with capacity to be based on a hospital's individual assessment, while private hospitals can resume to 100 per cent.

"I think it's much harder to get a little kid in prep, or (grade) 1 and 2 to wear their mask than it is for kids who are a bit older," he said, adding it wasn't his job to "interpret the advice" of chief health officer Brett Sutton.

"You've got to draw the line somewhere. It's not an epidemiological issue, it's a common sense issue."

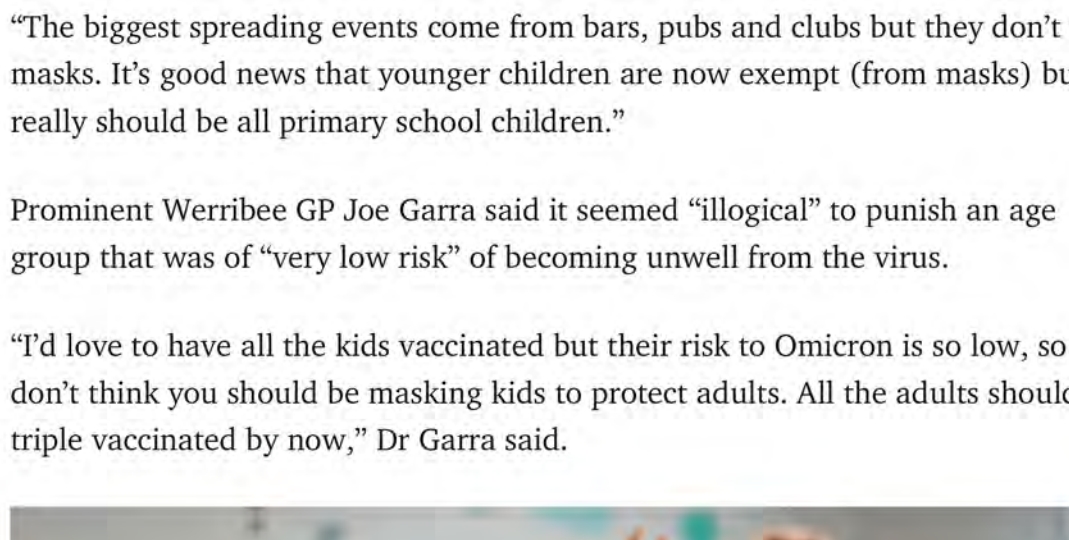
Chief health officer Brett Sutton has defended the move, saying it would lead to "downward pressure on transmission".

He said it was his direct advice for kids in grades 3 to 6 to keep their masks on in school.

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"They are the least vaccinated cohort ... the evidence on masks is pretty clear," he told ABC Radio.

But he said the controversial rule would be reviewed at the end of the school term.



Infectious diseases physician Peter Collignon said "catastrophic predictions" about schools being the subject of a new large wave were "very wrong".

"The people who are pushing these restrictions are the ones who have been wrong with the predictions so I think we have to be quite reticent on taking their advice," Professor Collignon said.

"The biggest spreading events come from bars, pubs and clubs but they don't wear masks. It's good news that younger children are now exempt (from masks) but it really should be all primary school children."

James Cook University professor of infectious diseases modelling Emma McBryde said she "can see no genuine reason" for keeping the mandate in place for that age group.

"I would recommend they draw the line at no schoolchildren needing to wear masks anymore," she said.

"We should be focusing on the people who are vulnerable at the moment, not the transmitters, because Covid is everywhere."

"It's a silly measure to keep a small cohort of young children wearing masks. It almost feels as though they can't let go of control. To me, there's no genuine rationale of it."

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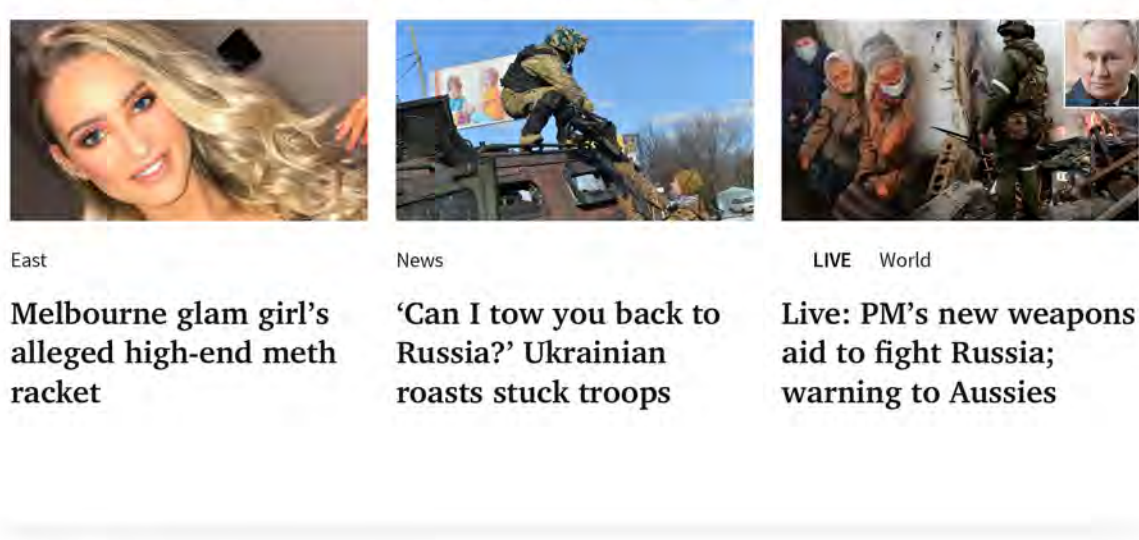
Professor of Infectious Diseases Modelling Emma McBryde 'can see no genuine reason' for keeping the mask mandate in place for that age group. Picture: Alix Sweeney

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Prominent Werribee GP Joe Garra said it seemed "illogical" to punish an age group that was of "very low risk" of becoming unwell from the virus.

"I'd love to have all the kids vaccinated but their risk to Omicron is so low, so I don't think you should be masking kids to protect adults. All the adults should be triple vaccinated by now," Dr Garra said.



Primary school children in grades 3 to 6 will be forced to don the face coverings at school.

Child psychologist Michael Carr-Gregg said some students may find it hard to understand why they had been singled out.

"I think these kids in years 3 to 5 have a great sense of social justice and will struggle with this decision," Dr Carr-Gregg said.

Opposition leader Matthew Guy said the state government was dividing primary schools.

"It is completely and utterly out of touch," he said.

"How is that going to work in a grade 2/3 composite class? Half the class wear a mask and half won't? Let me tell you as a parent of a grade 3 son, it's no different or easier to get a grade 3 to wear a mask than a grade 2."

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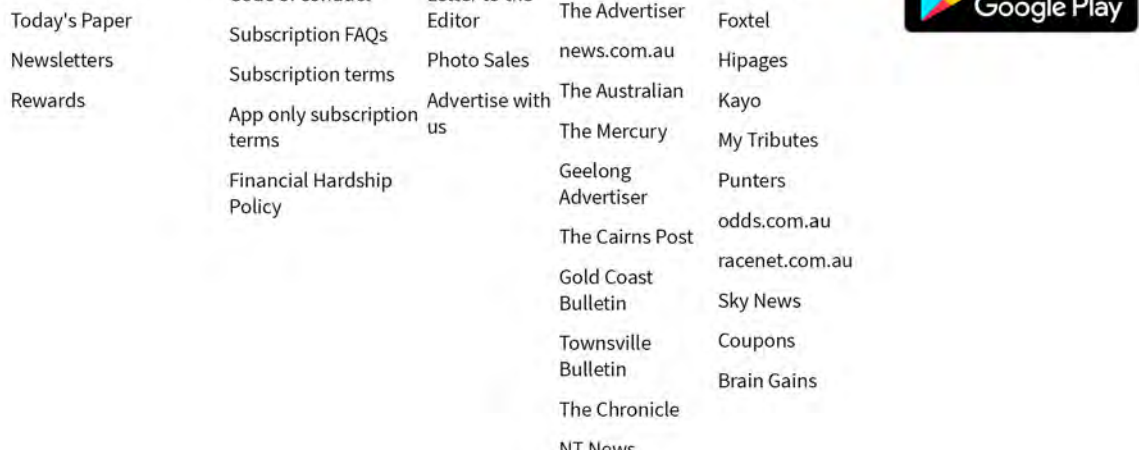
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