

## National Code on Boarding School Students

### Supporting the movement of boarding school students during periods of COVID lockdown

#### Context

Boarding students are an important cohort of young Australians experiencing significant impacts on their schooling, mental health and wellbeing, and connection with family and their culture as a result of lockdowns arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.

There are approximately 23,000 boarding students in Australia. These students need to be able to travel across both State and Local Government Area (LGA) borders, with around 1,600 students needing to cross a state/territory border to attend a boarding school or return home (source: *Australian Boarding Schools Australia data*). Some of these students are as young as 9 years old.

It is important that these children are able to move between Local Government Areas and state/territory borders as needed in a way that demonstrates compassion and understanding of their vulnerability, while maintaining their safety and wellbeing and that of their communities.

Inconsistent and often-changing state, territory and Local Government Area travel restrictions are causing great anxiety and confusion for students and their families as they move from their schools to their homes and back again not only at school holiday periods, but on an individual basis as required during school terms.

This is significantly impacting not only the mental health and wellbeing of students, but that of their families, carers, and the broader school community, including teachers and support staff. Greater national consistency in supporting students, families and their school communities is necessary to address these impacts.

#### Background

In 2020, the impact of border closures, travel restrictions and quarantine arrangements was considered by Education Council and National Cabinet and referred to the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC).

In September 2020, the AHPPC released a [statement](#) to address some of the issues impacting boarding school students living in border zones. The statement supported a nationally consistent approach recognising differences for exemptions will be encountered as a result of differing community transmission levels. It re-iterated that responsibility for decisions regarding border exemptions ultimately lie with the Chief Health Officer for the relevant state or territory.

The statement acknowledges that some jurisdictions have implemented appropriate risk-based approaches and class exemptions to support the return of affected students and staff.

For example, Queensland has issued effective class exemptions for students enrolled in interstate boarding schools, permitting travel under particular circumstances - e.g. earlier in the pandemic, Queensland residents enrolled at an interstate boarding school in a New South Wales, South Australian or Victorian LGA were provided with an exemption where that LGA was declared a COVID-19 hotspot but with no active cases in the preceding 28 days.

In other cases, existing travel exemptions could be applied to parents transiting from one state to another to retrieve a child at the end of the school term. As an example, South Australia allows for transit through NSW, Victoria and the ACT by road, provided travel is via the most direct route, no stops are made except for essential purposes (such as in an emergency or for respite or fuel) and a mask is worn at any time travellers come into contact with the public. Retrieving and delivering students for boarding schools could be explicitly considered essential travel and managed under these concessions.

Nationally consistent and effective exemptions have been developed to support workers in other sectors and in the development of principles to support students. Consideration should be given to those existing arrangements that have proven effective.

The *National Code on Boarding School Students* (the Code) supports a principles-based approach to national consistency in cross-border movement of boarding students, their families and carers, and boarding school staff, while at the same time taking a risk-based approach to health and safety of the school staff, students and the broader community.

The enforcement of the measures in this Code will be reflected through relevant Public Health Orders or Emergency Management Directions or other mechanisms of each State and Territory.

## **Principles**

Adherence to the public health restrictions, as outlined by state and territory Chief Health Officers for the protection of the community, is paramount. However, the continued education of students at boarding school, as well as the maintenance of their wellbeing and mental health, needs to be actively supported within those constraints.

Students must be able to transfer effectively and efficiently between home and school while jurisdictions have border restrictions in place to minimise the spread of COVID-19.

To support students and their families the processes and procedures to effect this movement should be as nationally consistent as possible.

*Principle 1: Boarding school students are a vulnerable cohort and need support.*

- 1.1 As young and vulnerable Australians, all boarding school students should be supported to return to their homes and schools where required as a matter of priority, including at times where individual circumstances may require movement across Local Government Areas and state/territory borders.
- 1.2 Noting that quarantine periods often exceed the duration of school holiday periods, special arrangements should be implemented by state and territory education and health officials to support these students' welfare, and that of their families.

*Principle 2: Boarding school students need to move efficiently and effectively between their schools and homes*

- 2.1 The movement of boarding school students should not be impeded by border arrangements.
- 2.2 A class of travel permit or agreed guidance should be created for boarding school students and their caregivers (up to two accompanying adults), with these boarding students and staff provided a class exemption to restrictions on movement both intra- and inter-state.
- 2.3 Children and families making use of this Code, should comply with vaccination advice in accordance with the COVID-19 Vaccination Plan.

- 2.4 This permit/guidance should be accompanied with clear advice about the limitation of travels and the expectations of COVID safe arrangements.
  - 2.4.1 Journeys should be via the most direct route and not be unnecessarily diverted to metropolitan airports.
- 2.5 If stay at home or quarantine arrangements are required, home quarantine, where appropriate isolation can be provided, should be the priority and should be for the minimum duration to demonstrate that a student or adult is free of COVID-19.
- 2.6 As issues are more complex for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding students who seek to return to their homes in remote communities, additional support should be given to these students to ensure their safety as well as their continued connection to their education, families and communities. Exemptions should continue to be managed on a case-by-case basis in the spirit of these principles.

*Principle 3: Consistent and high quality communication between states and territories and families is essential to support the movement of students, their health and their wellbeing*

- 3.1 States and territories should communicate with relevant sector authorities, boarding schools, students and families, through a dedicated resource in each state and territory to develop, issue and monitor guidance for this cohort.
- 3.2 Each state and territory should work to ensure the safety, well-being and safe-passage of boarding students, explore appropriate tracing and support arrangements.
- 3.3 When an applicant is refused entry due to leaving or returning to school, that states and territories provide a transparent and timely dedicated review process that is communicated to all boarding students and families. That this process is supported by the dedicated resource in each state and territory to minimise distress and confusion regarding processes.

## Application of the Code

This Code applies to boarding students, their families/caregivers, and boarding school staff.

Ongoing regular communication between education, health and policing agencies in each state and territory, as well as communication and consultation with schools, their families/caregivers and students, is critical to ensure the Code is implemented through approaches which are consistent with the principles of this Code.

### *Enforceable measures in relation to border crossings*

Measures will be enforceable in each state and territory that implements border controls.

At the border, persons covered by the Code will need to produce to border officials:

- a valid border permit or equivalent approval,
- evidence of identity and confirmed place of primary residence and the address of the boarding school,
- evidence of application of this Code, for example, a letter from the school,
- evidence of property ownership or lease, or a letter from the property owner or manager.

When travelling, persons covered by this Code are required to carry:

- COVID-19 related Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) (when social/physical distancing is not possible, where directed by a state or territory government, a Department of Health or Safe Work Australia, and/or when indicated by COVIDSafe workplans), including:
  - an appropriate face mask
  - hand sanitiser.

They are also required to keep and retain records of movements and contacts:

- records should include where they are travelling, with whom they have been in contact, details of accommodation, and onward and return travel. Persons covered by this Code are required to adhere to appropriate health and safety at all times, including:
- effective self-isolation as required, during breaks including for accommodation purposes, and when not travelling
- while travelling or in transit, persons arriving from an area of concern should remain isolated to the extent reasonably practicable from the general public
- not travelling while symptomatic until a negative COVID-19 test result has been received
- immediate notification to jurisdictional authorities if a positive COVID-19 test has been received, and immediate self-isolation until symptoms and a subsequent negative COVID-19 test has been returned.
  - Students and staff must not return to school until cleared by the relevant public health authority.
  - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students must comply with state and territory health requirements before returning to remote communities or designated bio security regions.

Upon request from an authorised officer, persons covered by this Code where relevant, will be expected to show evidence of complying with the enforceable measures.

## **Enforcement regime**

Enforcement of the measures in this Code will be through relevant Public Health Orders or Emergency Management Directions or other mechanisms of each State and Territory. The enforceable measures will be implemented in each state and territory where border controls are implemented, and compliance will be monitored in accordance with the relevant state or territory compliance regime to ensure ongoing industry and community confidence in arrangements for persons under the Code.

Penalties for breaching the enforceable measures in this Code may be covered as breaches of the relevant state and territories' Public Health Order and/or Emergency Management Directions or other mechanisms of each State and Territory, for border crossings.

## **Right of explanation and review**

Where a person covered by this Code seeks to cross a border and is refused entry into a state or territory, either at the border by a border official or through applying for a permit/pass, the refusal decision will be subject to further explanatory information being provided in that jurisdiction.

State and territories will facilitate an appropriate process, where a state or territory education agency will provide reasons why a refusal has been made. If on receipt of the information, the person considers a permit or exemption should have been granted, the relevant state or territory will provide an avenue for further review, either by or with input from, a state or territory education agency. This process should be timely and transparent.

## **Implementation approach**

### *For testing (voluntary or mandatory)*

The inclusion of mandatory or voluntary testing will be a decision of each state or territory implementing border controls.

If testing is mandatory in the jurisdiction where entry is being sought, it is the responsibility of that jurisdiction to facilitate it. The person covered under this Code should be allowed to access a test in another jurisdiction, if coming from a jurisdiction where asymptomatic testing is not routinely performed. The person is required to locate a suitable testing facility and have the test performed within that jurisdiction's mandated timeframe.

Information about the location of testing facilities can be found on the relevant jurisdiction's government COVID-19 website.

### *Testing evidence*

For all tests, the testing facility will provide evidence of the test being taken for the person travelling to be able to demonstrate compliance. This may be a form for the person to carry or a photograph of the form taken by the traveller. This will be recognised by authorised officers at border crossings in all states and territories.

If a person under this Code receives a positive test, their health care and treatment will be managed in accordance with clinical guidelines, and the workplace response will be managed in accordance with current state and territory practices as outlined in their COVIDSafe workplan (or equivalent) and the relevant Public Health Orders or Emergency Management Directions, which may include the option for the person to return to their home state to self-isolate where agreed by both health authorities.

Persons under this Code who receive a positive test are required to notify their employer or workplace and follow the relevant jurisdiction's health orders. Persons under this Code are also required to notify the public health authority of the state or territory they are currently in if it is not the state or territory where the test was performed.

#### *Compliance checks*

Random and/or targeted checks by authorised officers may occur to ensure compliance with the enforceable measures in this Code. Penalties for non-compliance with the enforceable measures will be in accordance with the relevant Public Health Orders or Emergency Management Directions. States and territories will coordinate their efforts and share information and data where permitted under law and take appropriate action as required.

#### **Variations**

Variations to this Code, that are consistent with the Principles of this Code, can be made by written agreement of the Commonwealth and implementing states and territories.

#### **Commencement date**

Implementation of enforceable measures will commence within ten business days of National Cabinet agreeing the Code or, if states and territories agree to the Code in principle (who is covered, enforceable measures and the review mechanism) but need time to give effect to changes.