

PORTFOLIO REPORTS - STATE COUNCIL

STUDENT ACCOMMODATION REPORT

Chandra Ridley – Portfolio Holder, March 2021

It was a difficult year for Student Accommodation with the COVID-19 outbreak.

From mid-March 2020 boarding facilities began introducing measures such as social distancing, staggered mealtimes, reduced recreation activities and increased cleaning regimes to help combat COVID-19. By 27th March 2020 boarding facilities were closed.

Students in Years 11 and 12 were required to start attending school again from 29th April. There were no boarding facilities open at this time, with some schools recommending students stay with Perth based family or guardians.

A media statement issued by the Minister of Education and Training on 1st May 2020 announced that all residential boarding facilities would reopen from 5th May 2020. All Year 12 students would be able to return back to public boarding facilities.

Years 10, 11 and 12 could return to Albany, Broome, Esperance, Moora and Narrogin Residential Colleges. All years could return to City Beach, Geraldton, Merredin and Northam Residential Colleges.

Year 12 students were permitted to return to Cunderdin College of Agriculture. Only Years 11 and 12 were able to return to Denmark, Harvey and Narrogin Agricultural Colleges, with all years permitted to return to boarding at Morawa Agricultural College.

Catholic and Independent schools made their own decisions in line with Government guidelines.

An additional \$343,000 was to be spent on cleaners, cleaning staff and cleaning supplies.

Parents had the choice as to whether they sent their children back to boarding. Those students needing to cross residential boundaries could do so via Educational Exemption.

Quite a few restrictions were imposed including:

- No visits home during term time.
- No visitors to boarding, including parents.
- Modified recreational outings.
- Staggered mealtimes.
- Possible temperature monitoring.
- Contact tracing upon returning from leave.
- Flu vaccination recommended before returning to boarding.
- Public transport discouraged.
- Social distancing in boarding houses, boarders spread throughout facility.

Also announced on 1st May 2020 by the Minister was that eighty (80) Public Schools, Education Support Centres and Residential Colleges were taking part in the DETECT Program to test for COVID-19 in schools and the psychosocial impacts of the virus. The tests targeted groups that do not have any symptoms. The testing took place for three to six months and included Albany Residential

College, Geraldton Residential College, Western Australian College of Agriculture Harvey and Narrogin. There were three aspects: surveillance study where staff and students are tested over three months, contact tracing of positive test results and psychosocial impacts of COVID-19 among students, parents, and teachers.

From 18th May 2020 all students in residential facilities were allowed to return home on weekends at the discretion of the Principal or Residential Manager. Restrictions on parents, care givers and non-essential visitors from entering school grounds remained in place.

On 8th June 2020, a media release stated restrictions had been lifted for public schools allowing the resumption of several activities including school camps, sports training, assemblies and excursions with a limit of 100 people for indoor events and 300 for outdoor events. School camps were limited to 100 attendees. It was stated that the AHPPC (Australian Health Protection Principal Committee) were reviewing advice regarding risk management for boarding schools.

On 17th June 2020, the AHPPC released an updated statement on reducing the potential risk of COVID-19 transmission in boarding facilities.

Risk assessments should include but not be limited to a consideration of:

- Accommodation and sleeping arrangements.
- Mealtimes and processes.
- Control of entry and exit to sites.
- Process for and records relating to visitors.
- Off campus visits.
- Cleaning regimes.
- Vulnerable students.
- Vulnerable teachers and other staff.
- Laundry areas and other ancillary areas.
- Mental health of students.

Minister Ellery released a media statement on 18th June 2020 stating that dormitory capacity restrictions had been lifted for public school boarding facilities. Home visits could resume and parents were able to visit the facilities.

School camps were able to fill their dormitories but the 100-person limit for camps remained.

From 27th June 2020 the limit of 100 students at school camps no longer applied, in line with the introduction of Phase 4 of the WA COVID-19 Roadmap.

Some boarding facilities continued to limit access to boarding houses and students needed to complete contact tracing upon returning to boarding after outings.

On 18th August 2020, the McGowan Government announced a \$4 million allocation to establish a Martu Residential Facility in Newman. The project includes converting three BHP owned houses into separate accommodation for male and female students. Construction is expected to begin in early October 2020 and be ready to house up to twelve students in 2021. This will enable Martu children wishing to further their education to do so close to family and country.

The Australian Boarding Schools Association (ABSA) Chief Executive Officer, Richard Stokes, released a media statement on 18th August 2020 regarding students who board interstate. Students who

attended school outside of their home state were unable to travel home for the holidays, or to see their parents if they wish to return to school without quarantining for two weeks. He was asking for consideration of these students needs as a matter of urgency so they could travel home for the holidays. This affects 19 students in Western Australia.

On 31st August 2020, the Minister for Decentralization and Regional Education, Andrew Gee, asked State and Territory Governments to map out a COVID safe pathway to allow interstate boarding students to travel home for the school holidays then return to school. Many students were forced to self-isolate in a hotel or commercial accommodation at their own expense before returning to school.

Many students were returning to homes in remote locations that were COVID-19 free. They should be able to isolate in their own homes before returning to school without posing a risk to the community. Minister Gee was trying to develop a compassionate pathway forward that looked after the health and wellbeing of the community, boarding students and their families.

On 18th September 2020, the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) released a statement stating it supported the safe return of boarding students to their homes during the school holidays and recognized the challenges COVID-19 was presenting. Several States implemented appropriate risk-based approaches and class exemptions to support the safe return of students and staff. As the issues were more complex for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding students, these needed to be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

On 31st January 2021, a weeklong COVID-19 lockdown was announced by WA Premier Mark McGowan. This coincided with the return to school. Boarding facilities were closed. When they reopened a week later Phase 4 restrictions were put in place. Although masks had to be worn to school, boarding facilities were classed as homes and students were not required to wear masks.

Phase 4 COVID-19 restrictions are still in place in boarding schools.

Some Catholic boarding schools require all visitors to boarding to have the Safe WA app. This includes parents, family members and Perth based guardians.