



Wednesday 9 February 2022

Dear Families and Friends of Geelong Grammar School (GGS),

COVID-19 (Novel Coronavirus) – Update #4 as at 5.30pm on Wednesday 9 February

Given the nature and tone of correspondence received today from boarding parents, it is timely to reiterate the School's position in relation to COVID responsiveness and the active and wide-ranging advocacy and engagement which the School has undertaken both prior to and subsequent to the commencement of Term 1.

Care and Compliance

The School's response is shaped by a significant number of published Guides and Advices, issued and regularly updated by the Department of Education and Training (DET), following collaboration and oversight by the Department of Health (DoH). In addition, the School has a published COVIDSafe Plan and is directed at a federal level by the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPCC).

Despite our classification as an independent school we are answerable to these bodies. Our license to operate depends upon our compliance with the guidelines set. The School is also under the direction and auspice of the relevant Public Health Unit, which, in the context of the current lockdown requirements at our Corio Campus, is Barwon Health. The School has worked tirelessly to engage with the relevant Public Health Units for each of our campuses and it was only through the direct advocacy of our Senior Medical Officer, Professor Fergus Cameron, and our Executive Team, that an initially proposed 7-day full lockdown of a senior boys' House was averted (please see Case Example below).

Category of Household Contact and how this relates to boarding

Due to high density and close living arrangements within a residential context, as well as the State's current Code Brown alert, the numbers of students and staff who may be considered as being exposed is large, including all those living in a shared space such as a dormitory. As a result, the DoH currently advises that exposed residential staff and students be managed similarly to a household contact. A household or household-like contact is someone who has spent more than four hours with a confirmed COVID-19 case inside a house, accommodation, or care facility.

As of today's date, household or household-like contacts are required to:

- quarantine for 7 days;
- be tested on Day 1 of quarantine (or as soon as possible) and test again on Day 6 of quarantine with a rapid antigen test (RAT), or a PCR test if a RAT is unavailable; and
- if a student or a staff member tests positive on a RAT, they must report their result.

In the event of a confirmed case, school boarding premises must follow all advice from the DoH. This includes working closely with DoH and/or the local Public Health Unit.

We too have seen protocols published by other schools with boarding facilities. Whilst this is of interest and a discussion point with the relevant authorities, Geelong Grammar's context is highly idiosyncratic, and our scale of boarding operations amplifies the likelihood of environment initiating a major spreading event; the potential train of transmission across Corio and Timbertop with over 800 boarders is very different to a school context totalling 150 or fewer boarders. Accordingly, our approach is to engage in open dialogue

with the DoH and to benefit from shared expertise – specifically, the science and how it applies to our sites.

Such conversations cannot be ignored simply because the answers are challenging or difficult to manage; rather, we are continuing to work towards a bespoke approach for our unique residential environments with the support of the DoH. To that end, Barwon Health will attend the Corio campus tomorrow as a part of their assessment to inform understandings of how we can function to avoid sequential cases and rolling lockdowns in Houses.

Daily Notification of positive cases

Each day, as may be required, we publish a COVID-19 Daily Notification at 4.00pm on [Hive](#). This notification includes relevant details of year level, class group, House and cocurricular activities. Please refer to this notification as it may impact your child/children.

As ever, any consequent responses specific to the impacted group will be communicated by the staff working directly with your sons and daughters; for example, Heads of Unit and Heads of House.

Case Example

When a positive case was identified in Manifold House on Friday 4 February, the School immediately sent home those students in the same dormitory to isolate for 7 days. The School notified the local Public Health Unit, Barwon Health, as required. The initial response from Barwon Health was to order a full 7-day lockdown of the House. This would have required students to remain within the House for the full 7 day period with lessons confined to remote learning.

Our Vice Principal, Chris McNamara, and Professor Fergus Cameron worked with the Head of Infectious Diseases at Barwon Health throughout Friday to develop and inform an understanding of the nature, layout and operations of the House and the detailed risk mitigations implemented within the House. Over the course of the day, we were able to successfully negotiate a modified position that has allowed our Manifold House students to continue to attend class, access outdoor spaces and have scheduled sole use of the Handbury Centre for Wellbeing for recreation and exercise.

On Monday, after 4 days of negative tests for all Manifold House students, Mr McNamara and Professor Cameron again approached both the DoH and Barwon Health to advocate for a full release of those students who reside within the House but outside the determined boarding zone of the infected case. Unfortunately, this was rejected. Professor Cameron is, however, continuing to liaise directly with the DoH and Barwon Health to inform their general approach to boarding schools and to advocate for a move to a similar response as we see in New South Wales, where only those students within a dormitory are regarded as household-like contacts.

Advocacy

We continue to work directly with the various external stakeholders such as Barwon Health, DET and DoH so they may better understand the unique GGS context and the active and detailed risk mitigations which we have in place in response to the pandemic. Our approach is informed, compliant and seeks to mitigate impact balanced against the ultimate prioritisation of the safety of our students and staff.

Our School is an active member of the Australian Boarding Schools Association (ABSA). ABSA advocates on our behalf. Most recently, ABSA has sought to advocate to the AHPPC with regard to the definition to be applied to household contacts (as known in Victoria, or elsewhere as close contacts). ABSA seeks this be defined as being those boarding students who share a bedroom. Should the AHPPC apply a broader definition, this may extend to include all students within a boarding house.

Parents may wish to contact their local Federal Member of Parliament to provide insight as to the potentially harmful and disproportionate impact of a broad definition being applied for students living and learning on our Timbertop and Corio campuses. An article regarding this matter may be found on the [Farm](#)

[Online website](#). Please be assured that separately and more specifically to GGS, the School's Executive and Professor Cameron advocate directly and frequently with relevant authorities.

Fitness and Wellbeing

We acknowledge the impact of these lockdowns across our student program as it imposes limits on living and learning on campus. This will include co-curricular activities; however, I confirm arrangements are in place facilitated by our staff to ensure access by any student within a lockdown context at Corio to the Handbury Centre for Wellbeing, and at Timbertop an established exercise routine. We understand that some students will, from time to time, be unable to train with their teams/crews for a limited period; however, those students within this lockdown context are able to use fitness equipment to support exercise and training.

What can families do to support our School at this time?

As supportive members of our School community, constructive engagement which acknowledges the complexity and ever-changing nature of the circumstances under consideration assists our School greatly. Please kindly provide a reassurance to your child/children that the significant shifts in the management of the uncertainty of the pandemic will continue to call for them to demonstrate a patient and respectful resilience, for which we are deeply grateful.

Please also raise questions through C19questions@ggs.vic.edu.au. To enable our staff to focus on the care and education of our students, your queries will be addressed via correspondence such as these Updates and the associated [Frequently Asked Questions \(FAQs\)](#).

Booster vaccinations for eligible students

From 3 February 2022, eligible students aged 16 and 17 years old are able to receive a COVID-19 booster vaccine, following a recommendation from Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI). The booster dose for 16 to 17 year olds will be one dose of the adult Pfizer vaccine three months after their primary course. Students who were 15 years old when they had their second COVID-19 vaccination and are now 16 years old will also be eligible for a booster dose. The School is engaging with Medical Hub RMIT to provide booster vaccinations for eligible boarding students on site at the Timbertop and Corio Campus. Further information regarding the booster vaccination date/s and the applicable consent arrangements will be provided to families from Heads of Campus.

Timbertop Exeat

Given the significant effort to PCR and RAT test all students upon arrival, operating a modified program while we waited for results, and still having cases emerge, leading to a Unit being sent home to isolate for 7 days, it is now increasingly unlikely that the mid-Term exeat will proceed as scheduled. As committed previously by the Head of Campus, Ross Hopkins, this decision will be finalised by Friday 18 February. It is regrettable that the invitation to the Timbertop Parents' Connect was released prior to the decision being made and we apologise for any confusion caused. This function will only proceed in conjunction with the mid-Term exeat; if so, it will be held outside within a limited time period, and arranged in Unit groups to mitigate COVID-19 associated risks.

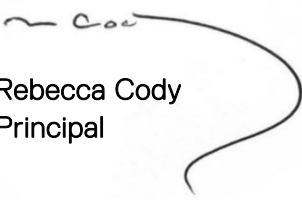
Next Steps

Families will be updated with relevant information post the DoH's site visit tomorrow.

We will continue to advocate for our students and staff and consistently review our planning, response and mitigations to achieve the very best outcomes for our students and staff in the complex circumstances of this global pandemic.

We share the many frustrations expressed to us by families, yet our ultimate goal is to care and educate safely all our learners; in doing so, we will continue to work calmly, professionally and respectfully with the DoH, safeguarding a positive and proactive relationship.

Yours sincerely,


Rebecca Cody
Principal