

NEWS

Boarders facing new batch of challenges

A LACK of interstate border restrictions across the majority of the country has been a weight off the shoulders of many boarding school families this year, but some have faced a different suite of problems heading into the school term.

Australian Boarding Schools Association SA delegate and Prince Alfred College director of boarding Phil Noble said while the physical return of students to boarding campuses had been relatively smooth, isolation requirements for boarders deemed as COVID-19 close contacts would likely make things "hectic".

"A classroom close contact which all SA students fall under, is where someone in a class is positive, others from that class can go to school but have to monitor for symptoms, but when not at school, they shouldn't be going out mingling with the population," Mr Noble said.

While he said that made things "a bit challenging" for boarding schools, the particularly tricky one for

boarders was isolation requirements for household close contacts.

"Depending on the shape and structure of the boarding house, anyone in the building or wing or who shares the same bathroom as a positive case is deemed a close contact and can't go to school, regardless of how much interaction they've had (with the case)," he said.

"In some of the eastern states, it's just the roommate or the person either side of a positive case who is considered a close contact.

"If COVID-19 keeps rolling through, we could have students going in and out of school every few weeks."

Mr Noble said he "wouldn't be surprised" if the rules continued to change as the school terms progressed.

"I don't think the isolation requirements are going to be manageable long term, but I understand why they want to be cautious at the start of a school term," he said.

"If they change the rules after a couple of weeks, it'll likely be in a way that's easier

for us to manage.

"No matter what the classification of a close contact is, there is still the chance to catch the virus because the virus obviously doesn't follow the rules. In boarding, they just want to slow the spread and not have that massive infection all at once."

A move to classifying boarding staff as essential workers - allowing those identified as close contacts to return to work following a negative test result - would also be a good change, according to Mr Noble.

"Some of the smaller boarding schools only have three staff and if you lose one of them, it makes it hard to provide that duty of care," he said.

"If you lose two, what do you do?"

With selected grades still online learning until Monday, Mr Noble said some boarding schools had welcomed back face-to-face students at the start of term and gave online learners the option to return then as well,



UNDER WAY: Australian Boarding Schools Association SA delegate Phil Noble says the year has started with some challenges, but the situation is manageable so far.

while others only welcomed face-to-face students for the initial two weeks.

"At PAC, parents (with students in online learning levels) have had the option to do either. A lot of parents who decided not to send their student initially, decided to do that for the sole reason of not wanting to put any added pressure on us," he said.

"It was great to get that correspondence from parents that they're willing to help us manage the situation."

SA Isolated Children's Parents' Association boarding/hostel/second home portfolio leader Hollie Williams said the group had sent a letter to Education Minister

John Gardner earlier this week, urging for a change in the close contact definition and the need for boarding staff to be classed as essential workers.

Ms Williams said many ICPA members had expressed their disappointment about strict time restrictions to help their children settle into boarding school, especially those who are first time boarders this year.

Some members have reported having to do a "drop and go" of their children to boarding school, with an enforced time limit and no access to the child's room to help unpack and settle in.

She said other families -

dependent on the college - have reported they were allowed into the boarding house, but have other concerns restrictions on children leaving the campus, or the potential need to collect children if COVID outbreaks occur.

"The majority of our members send their children to boarding school out of necessity, as being geographically isolated they cannot live at home and attend secondary school," Ms Williams said. "This needs to be kept in mind when parents aren't allowed to settle their children in to their room and the students are not allowed to go off campus."

- CLAIRE HARRIS

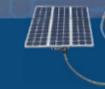


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