

Putting children and young people first

It's easy to think that because many children and young people escape the most severe symptoms of COVID-19, that pandemic-related decisions should be focussed on adults because they are bearing the brunt of the COVID-19 related burden. But this is not true.

Public health measures taken to protect families, teachers and community members, and more recently, the economy, have resulted in children and young people making significant sacrifices.

Already in 2022, decisions are being made that have the potential to dramatically impact the lives of young Tasmanians.

I strongly encourage decision makers to carefully consider the potential effects of their decisions on children.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Australia is a signatory, requires that in all decisions affecting children, their interests should be given primary consideration.

Three current issues serve as good examples of where the needs and rights of children should be front and centre.

The first is the debate about when to commence the 2022 school year.

It goes without saying that in the lead up to the start of this school year, the benefits and risks to young Tasmanians of returning to school must be carefully weighed, including the potential impacts on their learning, health and safety, and physical, social and emotional development.

This is especially the case for students who are vulnerable or disadvantaged.

Children's needs are unique and differ from those of adults, including their caregivers. Schools are essential services, and the pandemic has served to demonstrate just how important they are – not just for student learning but also for meeting a range of other wellbeing needs.

Every effort should be made to enable safe access to schools from the beginning of Term 1.

In particular, specific measures should be put in place to enable the learning of any young people who may be particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 - such as some children with disability and children who are immunocompromised.

We must also make sure the rules around close contacts both in and out of school are very, very clear.

We must carefully communicate these rules and any decisions, including any mitigation measures - early, clearly and transparently - to allow families time to make decisions and to prepare for the commencement of the school year.

To mitigate disruption to students' access to all that schools have to offer, approaches to the delivery of education must be flexible and adaptable.

This should include access to learning-at-home. Likewise, consideration should be given to increasing pre-emptive availability of testing for families with children to minimise positive cases entering schools.

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Secondly, children accessing early childhood education and care services are already living with COVID-19 in their learning environments, and all reports are that it is not easy for children, families or the workforce.

However, staff, who are ensuring children's right to access education and care is at the centre of their decision making are leading the way. The job of decision makers now is to listen to their calls for clearer rules and consistent communication and to help them provide care, education and support to children and families safely.

A third issue that has significant implications for children is the provision of child health and parenting services for children and their families.

A decision was recently made to reduce child health and parenting services until February 4 to allow child health nurses to focus on broader health system requirements.

This decision will see the cancellation of most appointments for children aged six months and above.

While I acknowledge the commitment to maintaining services to younger infants and their families, there is clear evidence of the critical importance of access to appropriate child health and assessment services from conception to two years for children's future health and wellbeing. I have frequently heard how important and highly valued child health nurses are for children, especially for those with specific needs or who are otherwise vulnerable or disadvantaged.

For the wellbeing of children, it is critical that child health services return to normal levels as soon as possible, and that parents and carers are provided with clear, early and accessible information regarding the temporary reduction of services and available supports during this time.

The profound and cumulative effect of the decisions we make now on the lives of young Tasmanians should not be underestimated.

Placing children and young people at the centre of decision-making processes not only upholds their rights but also reduces the possible long-term impacts upon their lives and wellbeing.

This is the very least that we owe our youngest citizens, who will carry the burden of the pandemic across their lifespan.

Leanne McLean, Commissioner for Children and Young People