



Australian Council of State School Organisations Returning to School in 2022 Survey

RULES, RATs AND
RETURN TO SCHOOL
Preliminary Learnings
January 2022

Initial Results from the
“Return to School in 2022” Survey

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two years the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) has used a variety of mediums to gauge the feelings of families in relation to school through the pandemic. In January this year, ACSSO conducted the fourth of its “COVID” surveys giving parents and carers a voice to articulate the concerns and feelings they are experiencing about the “2022 return to school” for the children in their care.

As millions of students across Australia are set to head back to school for the start of the 2022 school year, we have, although promised, NO nationally consistent approach. Families acknowledge that:

- Over the last two years there has been mixed messages and modes of education delivery that has either been remote, face to face or a hybrid of both. Some using technology, some being paper based – none being totally inclusive.
- Across the country there has been inconsistencies of how to approach close contacts, absenteeism, non-engagement of students, families without technology etc.
- Some states have delayed the return to school, many families have chosen to withhold their children
- The 2022 return to school comes as the hospital admission rate across Australia hits its highest point of the pandemic and record number of deaths.
- Schools and educational jurisdictions in every state and territory are using a variety of approaches and precautions to determine the best way to keep our children and school staff safe, amid the nation's latest, and most significant, COVID-19 surge on record.
- COVID-19 has had an unprecedented impact on education – but there are many lessons to be learnt.
- To date, the long-term effects on children's academic achievement as well as social and emotional well-being are unclear.

ACSSO is aware that some researchers suggest that academic achievement has been impacted, whilst others have found that the impact is not as detrimental as was predicted earlier in the pandemic. What is clear however, and highlighted in our earlier surveys, is that home learning has been challenging, widened the equity gap and notes that children from high socio-economic status are more likely to have better access to technology.

We know that many students have experienced limited and inconsistent access to learning since early 2020. These circumstances and experiences take a toll and create a sense of frustration and failure in young people's lives. The total impact will take many years to be realised. It is key to take the lessons learnt and build on the successes and refrain from only highlighting the deficit.

BACKGROUND

Unlike previous surveys, the development of this survey was undertaken in response to considerable communication from families. As the numbers in COVID cases began to rise, the news of greater transmissibility of the Omicron variant and additional information from school safety audits meant that families were less confident about the return to school.

A call from the ABC radio National also revealed that the Federal Government was calling National Cabinet to develop a “national approach” to the return to school in February 2022.

The survey released on January 11 aimed to solicit from families their key concerns about returning to school and what components needed to be contained in a national plan.

The survey closed on January 18 with a total of 5,767 responses.

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
▼ ACT	6.24%	357
▼ NSW	36.10%	2,064
▼ NT	0.70%	40
▼ QLD	34.09%	1,949
▼ SA	3.25%	186
▼ VIC	7.87%	450
▼ TAS	4.86%	278
▼ WA	6.89%	394
TOTAL		5,718

All jurisdictions responded, some considerably more than others with 49 respondents not indicating their location. As expected, the anti vax lobby also made an effort to influence the results.

We are still undertaking a detailed analysis of the survey however initial findings indicate: -

LEARNINGS

There were a number of key areas of focus gleaned from this survey:

1. Families were extremely concerned about the wellbeing for the young people in their care – given an opportunity to rate their concern on a scale of 0-5 – with 5 being highly concerned – the average rating was 4. Clearly families can see the impact on well being

Analysis of results to date has identified that amidst the COVID-19 outbreak, everyday life has changed and will continue to change for most people, often with little notice. Families felt that the children in their lives are struggling with significant adjustments to their routines.

Wellbeing of a child is always more important than schooling from a parent's point of view. Bluntly put "I am OK if my son is progressing behind a schooling year as long as he is safe and alive. LIFE is 200% more important than learning, progress and growth of my son. (WA)

The segregation of people particularly children will have long lasting detrimental social emotional impacts. We have seen the rise in teen suicide in Victoria with prolonged school closures. The path forward is potentially very precarious to well being of students and the wider community. (Vic)

2. Families rated air quality as **the** major concern for returning to the classroom

There is substantial evidence that indoor environmental exposure is the leading cause of school absenteeism due to chronic illness¹

Families were most concerned with air quality in the classrooms (77% of respondents). Most felt that the opening of windows, particularly with the unpredictability of weather patterns, was an unsatisfactory solution to this. We see this particular concern echoed in previous surveys.

There was a call for air purifiers and air quality audits.

Parents need more than an assurance of adequate ventilation - we need evidence. CO2 monitors in every room so schools can report on CO2 levels, and air purifiers. ... (NSW)

3. A little over one third of the respondent's had their 5–11-year-old child having had their first vaccination, however, if you consider that almost 20% of respondents didn't have children in that age group, then the response is closer to half – significantly greater than the national response at this time.

It is clear from the national vaccination rate of around 93% that the overwhelming majority of families support vaccination. It is then understandable, with the surge of COVID cases, that the majority of respondents have young people in the 5-11 year age group. The concern from this group is that school is returning before the majority in that age group have had the opportunity to receive their first dose.

Would prefer remote/online learning for first term to enable double vaccination of eligible primary students prior to school return. (SA)

To ensure all students can be vaccinated in time and minimise disruptions later in the year. (ACT)

4. Respondents were divided as to whether the school year should be delayed with 40% of respondents even considering withholding their children

Drilling down on the narrative it is clear that the concerns centred around vaccinations, particularly for the young people under the age of 11. Also highlighted is the constant interruption of the school year with case numbers still high and the anticipation of absenteeism.

Current indications suggest that families would have been more confident with a return to school when case numbers appeared more manageable, a majority of the 5-11 year age group receiving their first vaccination at least two weeks prior and where there was a guarantee that staff disruption is minimised.

Common sense is to delay by a few weeks to allow all eligible primary aged children to have at least their first vaccine and for immunity to kick in... Puts less stress on the health system, keeps teachers and staff safer etc. (QLD)

¹ <https://www.epa.gov/iaq-schools/why-indoor-air-quality-important-schools>

It is going to be very difficult for schools to manage staff absences and getting relief teachers in. Classes will most likely be collapsed (putting more pressure on teachers at school and disruptive to students). We have a teacher shortage atm. I don't know how this is going to be managed..... Challenging for teachers to manage this and this is where children will get covid and then come home with it (NSW)

5. Over 70% felt that school staff should be boosted before returning to school

This is also a preferred position of many jurisdictions, however the delayed availability of Pfizer in particular, has meant that there is a delay in the timeframe for this to have occurred by the start of the school year.

6. The majority felt masks should be compulsory for school staff but were not as supportive for students – many felt that primary school students would find this difficult and possibly stressful

INITIAL CONCLUSION

It was abundantly clear not just from the number of respondents but from the narrative surrounding the responses that there was heightened anxiety surrounding the return to school. Particular concerns focussed on the rise in cases and hospitalisations, the inability for young people aged 5-11 who still had difficulty in getting a vaccination and the confusion surrounding air quality in the classroom. Mixed messaging and inconsistency across the jurisdictions, particularly around what constitutes a “close contact” was also causing great distress.

My main concern is that I would like to see a concrete, detailed plan on school re-opening - what are the safety measures (will they differ from last year), what are the triggers for closure, what happens if there is an outbreak, what constitutes an outbreak (with close contact definitions changing) what happens if there are teacher shortages due to illness/quarantine. (NSW)

The narrative in the survey and conversations with families indicate that there is a preference for face-to-face teaching in light of their concerns for student wellbeing, engagement with education and relationships with friends and school staff. However, as highlighted by this survey families are still not confident that there are still too many unanswered questions relating to the pandemic

I feel like our kids are being thrown into a dangerous situation with no care for their well being . It is more than about hospitalizations and deaths. I am concerned about long-COVID, MIS-C and other unknown long term complications from COVID. I don't understand why, when we are so close to having our younger children vaccinated, we are rushing back. What's a few more weeks when we have been through so much more anyway? Not to mention the disruptions this will cause and putting our teachers in danger also (Vic)

Forget the government rhetoric on its mild in kids. Stop using data from the middle of last year. Look at the evidence presenting around the world and use it to create policy for kids. And why on earth are we not prepared for testing when yet again we can see what the rest of the world is experiencing. Are we all meant to rest on the ignorance and religious ideals of

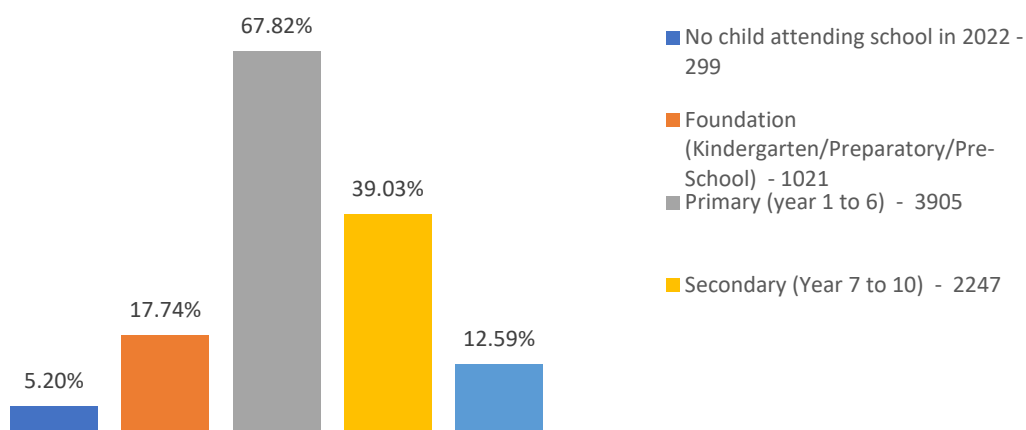
those in charge. Let's start working with the highly esteemed and experienced public health specialists. Not the mouthpieces for political parties. Evidence, evidence, evidence. It's the basis of science. Our kids deserve protection. And now we're creating huge mental pressure by letting them know their well being is not valued in society, nor their need to protect those possibly more at risk in the community around them. (Tas)

I think return should wait until we pass the peak of omicron and hospital system relieved. I would prefer my kids to be double vaxxed. Going to be hard to stay open as teachers get ill. Won't send my kids if teachers can work with covid 19 and schools don't disclose. (Qld)

Appendix "A" Raw Data

Q1. In 2022 which stages of schooling will your child/ren be enrolled in (please tick all relevant)

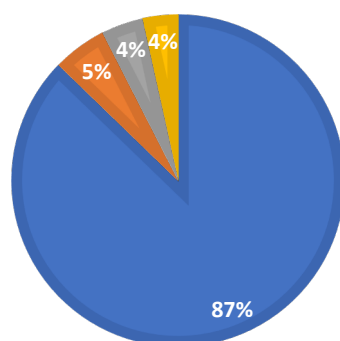
Answered: 5,758 Skipped: 9



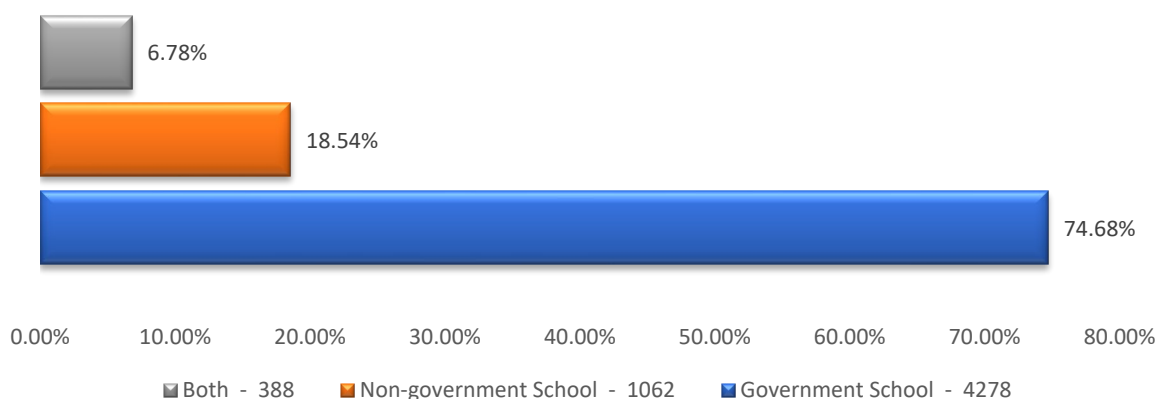
Q2. WHO SHOULD BE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE COST OF RAPID ANTIGEN TESTS FOR STAFF AND STUDENTS WHEN THEY COME INTO CONTACT WITH "COVID POSITIVE" PERSON IN A SCHOOL SETTING?

ANSWERED: 5750 SKIPPED: 17

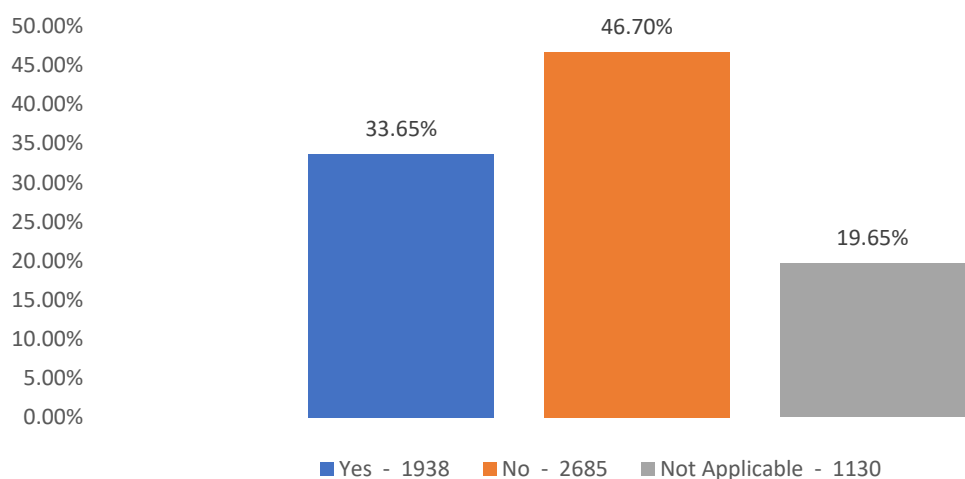
■ Government - 5017 ■ School Sector - 302 ■ Individual families - 238 ■ Other (please specify)- 193



Q3. Do your children or children you look after attend a
Answered: 5,728 Skipped 39

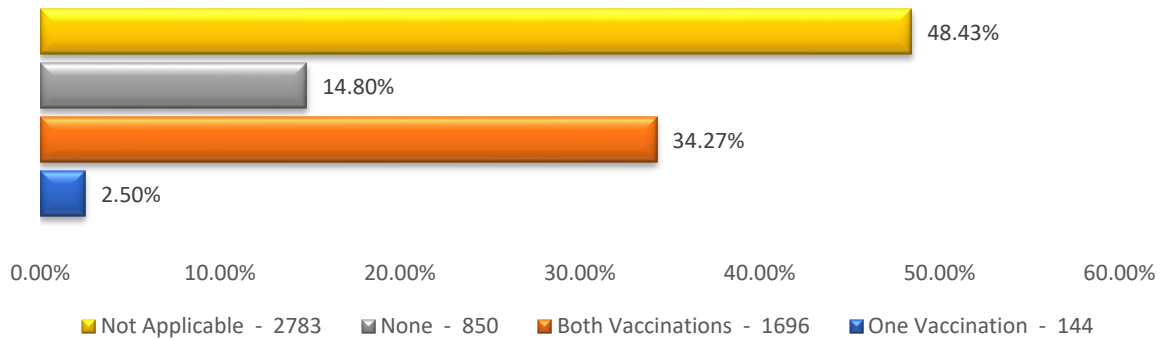


Q4. With Covid vaccinations now available for children in the 5 to 11-year age group, if relevant to you, has the child/ren in your care had their first vaccinations
Answered: 5,749 Skipped: 18



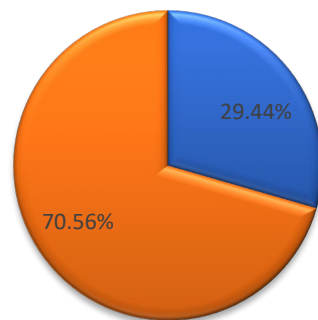
Q5. For young people in the 12 to 18-year age group if relevant to you have the child/ren in your care had their vaccinations

Answered: 5,746 Skipped: 21



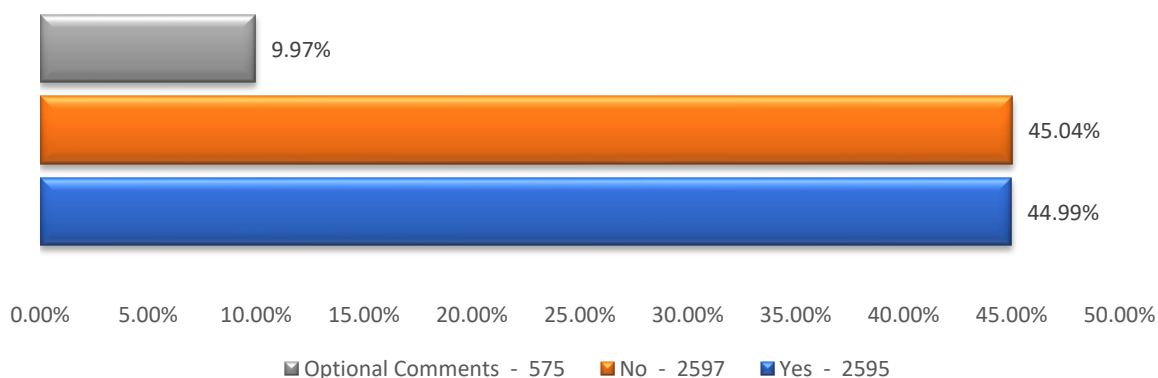
Q6. Do you believe that all school staff should be fully vaccinated, and receive a booster when eligible?

Answered: 5,757 Skipped: 10



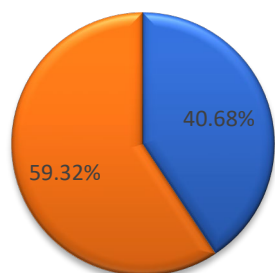
Q7. Do you believe that the start of the school year should be delayed?

Answered: 5767 Skipped: 0



Q8. Are you considering withholding the children in your care from attending school on the basis of the current COVID situation?

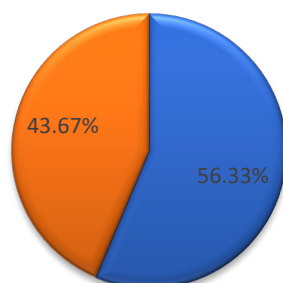
Answered: 5,589 Skipped: 178



Yes - 2274 No - 3315

Q9. If a child in your care attends school and presents with COVID like symptoms would you be comfortable with school staff conducting a Rapid Antigen Test

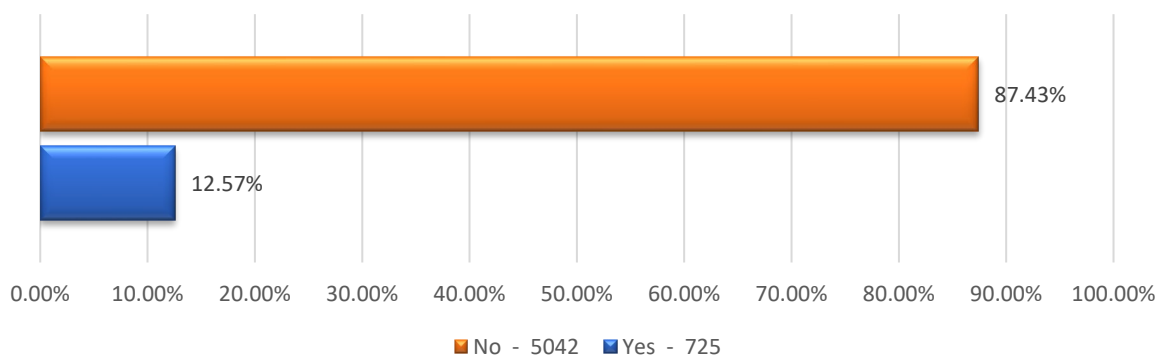
Answered: 5762 Skipped: 5



■ Yes - 3246 ■ No - 2516

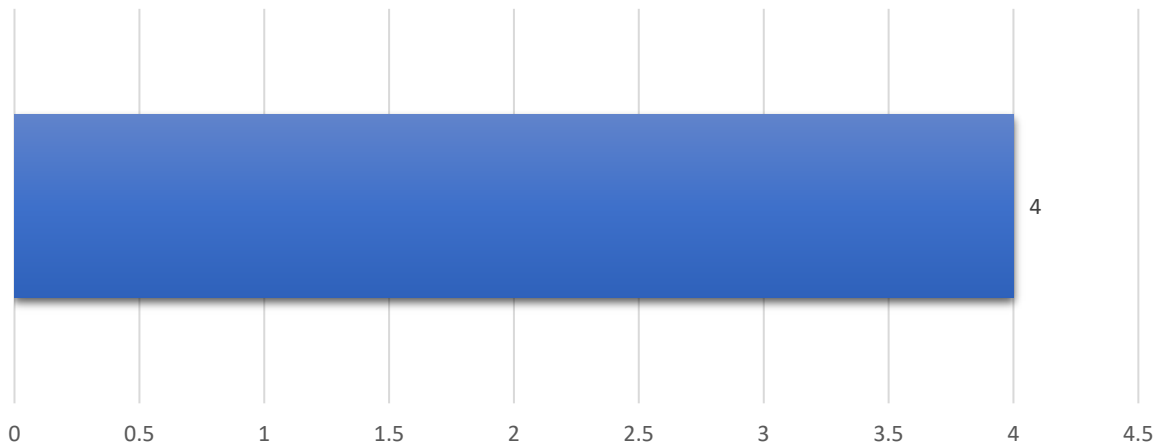
Q10. Has your school been in contact with you to discuss school commencement / child safety details?

Answered: 5767 Skipped: 0



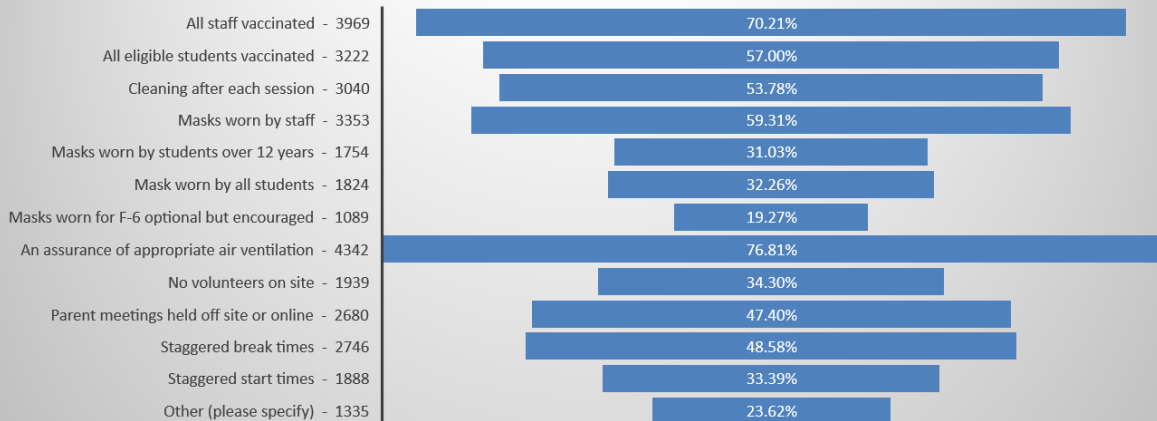
Q11. On a scale of 1 to 5 with five being 'very' - How concerned are you about your child's social-emotional well-being?

Answered: 5,767 Skipped: 0



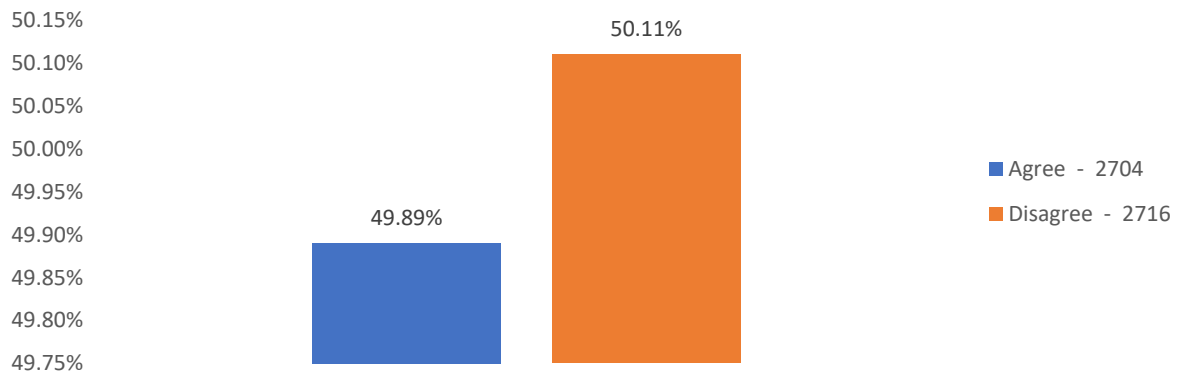
Q12. What conditions would you like in place for return to school in 2022 for your young people

Answered: 5,653 Skipped: 114



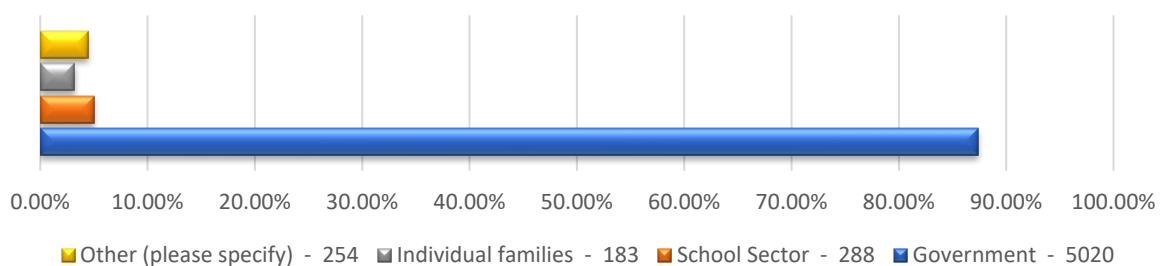
Q13. The Australian Governments definition of a COVID close contact is

Answered: 5,420 Skipped: 347



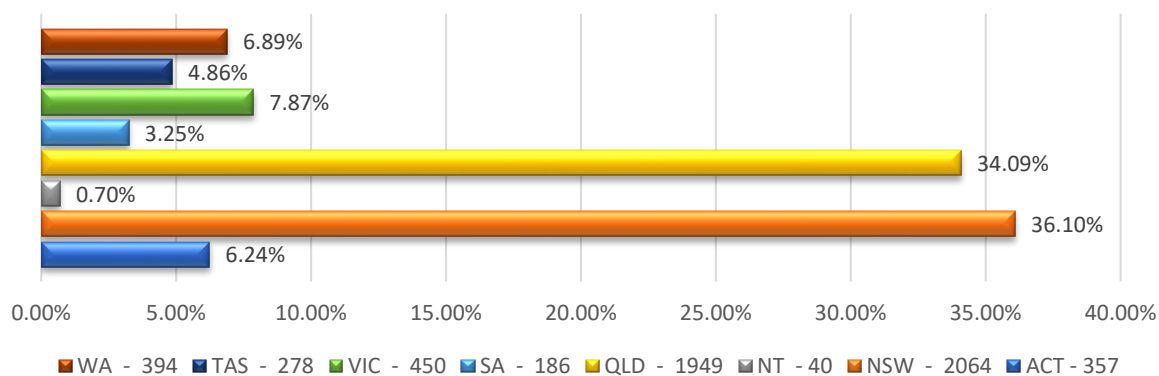
Q14. Who should be responsible for the cost of Rapid Antigen Tests for staff and students when they come into contact with "COVID Positive" person in a school setting?

Answered: 5,745 Skipped: 22



Q16. Which Australian State or Territory do you live in?

Answered: 5,718 Skipped: 49





MEDIA RELEASE

Australian Council of State School Organisations Limited

RULES, RATs AND RETURN TO SCHOOL

"The majority of families are anxious about their children returning to school at beginning of the 2022 school year" stated Sharron Healy, President of the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO). ACSSO recently conducted a national survey of parents with school aged children, and the data from it is in line with data from other surveys released – there is grave hesitation, especially with the high case numbers and the short period of time for kids aged 5-11 years to have had their first vaccination".

Almost half the respondents (44%) felt that the school year should be delayed, with a significant number (38%) indicating they would withhold their children from attending.

ACSSO's survey goes further in identifying three major areas causing the most concern -ventilation, vaccination and verification.

The major cause for concern was the air quality and appropriate ventilation in our classrooms. The simple fact is air purifiers are the only way for many classrooms to maintain reduced viral load. "

"Simply opening windows and doors has proven in the past to be ineffective in dealing with nitrous oxide emissions from gas heaters and current research suggests that it is ineffective in dealing with high Co2 levels, why then would we be expecting it to be effective in reducing viral load. Governments need to invest and ensure suitable air quality in the learning space of our children." Sharron continued

Vaccination protection was the next level of concern. "Families who are supportive of mandatory vaccination (almost 70%) of school staff are equally in support of vaccination for their children – their level of concern going back to school comes with the availability and timing of vaccination for younger students, the timing of boosters for staff and the approval of boosters for 12- to 18-year-old students."

ACSSO specifically asked if parents would be happy if school staff administer the Rapid Antigen Test (RATs). Whilst most parents are happy for RATs to be part of the safety measures, it is interesting to note 58% responded positively to this suggestion. However, it is also significant of the parents happy for the testing to occur, 42% were not comfortable for the testing to be done by school staff. If governments are insistent of RATs tests being part of the school regime, then additional trained workers should be provided to conduct the process for consistency. We believe that a positive RATs test should be verified by Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) testing.

In line with community concerns there was a level of community feedback that reflected their objection to mandatory vaccination and the current health advice relating to the COVID virus.

"We call on National Cabinet to give school communities a level of certainty in this uncertain world, a tangible, detailed plan on school re-opening - what are the safety measures in place, how will they differ from last year, what are the triggers for closure, what happens if there is an outbreak, what constitutes an outbreak, what is a close contact and what happens if there are teacher shortages due to illness/quarantine. We demand that governments invest in the necessary levels of technology* and staff to provide the confidence for school communities that schools are safe places for students and staff" stated Mrs Healy.

The level of concern and confusion can be summed up with this particular response to our survey - "It's hard to know what the right thing to do is."

The national survey, conducted over the past 10 days by the Australian Council of State School Organisations, returned over 5,700 responses and included families from every state and territory and every sector. A more detailed analysis of our survey is currently underway.

*Air purifiers, PPE, RATs

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One voice for every child in government education