

Concerns about children returning to school in Victoria in 2022

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Background: To contain the spread of the Omicron variant of COVID-19 in Victorian schools during term one of 2022, the Victorian Government announced measures including mask-wearing and recommending twice-weekly testing with rapid antigen tests of staff and students. The Government also invested in schools to improve ventilation and supported the implementation of COVIDSafe measures.

Methods: Between March 4 and 14, survey participants from the Optimise study, an ongoing cohort study designed to monitor social and behavioural responses to COVID-19, completed a short survey assessing their concerns about children returning to school, COVID-19 testing in schools, perceptions about COVID-19 prevention measures taken in schools, and the acceptability of closing schools under certain circumstances.

Results: Among 692 Optimise participants invited to complete the survey, 526 (76%) participants responded. Seventeen percent were parents of children attending primary (n=59) and secondary school (n=53). Participants were primarily concerned about children contracting COVID-19 (51%), inadequate vaccination levels in the school (29%), and disruptions to onsite learning (26%). Seventy-four percent of parents of primary school students and 79% of parents of secondary school students agreed the testing requirements in place at the time were manageable. Forty-four percent of parents of children attending primary school reported that children over eight years were wearing masks of any type properly in the classroom 'always' (8%, n=5) or 'most of the time' (36%, n=21). About half (52%) of participants agreed it was acceptable to close schools for one week when community cases exceed 20,000 daily cases in Victoria, while about a quarter (23%) agreed it was acceptable to close schools when community cases exceed 10,000 daily cases.

Conclusion: The study highlights the high acceptability of surveillance testing among parents of school-aged children, with levels of acceptability of school closures dependent upon the amount of virus circulating in the community.

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