

13 October 2021

Ventilation and air quality Frequently Asked Questions for staff

Q: Why do we need to ventilate learning spaces?

ACT Health has advised schools to optimise fresh air circulation to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission. The risk of transmission is higher in crowded and poorly ventilated spaces where people spend long periods of time together in close proximity. Good ventilation is one part of a suite of measures to minimise transmission in schools, like vaccination, physical distancing, good hygiene, cleaning and mask use.

Q: What's the evidence that it reduces risk?

The Chief Health Officer, the [Australian Health Protection Principal Committee](#), [World Health Organisation](#) and [Safe Work Australia](#) all recommend good indoor air quality to reduce the chance of COVID-19 transmission.

Q: How can my school optimise fresh air circulation?

We know there are easy and quick changes we can make to improve ventilation and fresh air circulation. The simplest of these is opening windows in classrooms and turning on the exhaust fans in rooms that have them. Other actions include opening windows that had previously been either mechanically fixed or painted shut - where it's safe to do so.

We've been undertaking detailed investigations of colleges including technical assessment of HVAC systems and our ability to control fresh air. As a result the Education Directorate knows that fresh air flow can be adjusted in ALL public schools to improve ventilation.

Q: What's the Indoor Air Quality framework and how is that different from the Air Quality Plan?

The Directorate has developed an Indoor Air Quality (IAQ) framework to assess the IAQ of all 3,500 public school learning spaces. It includes a checklist, which needs to be completed promptly by schools.

By the time students return, every school will have its own Indoor Air Quality Plan. This will include a list of actions already undertaken by the Directorate (examples e.g. HVAC systems change) and actions for schools to undertake each day (including opening windows to promote natural ventilation and turning on exhaust fans).

Q: Who's going to be adjusting ventilation in schools?

Actions in your school's Air Quality Plan will be carried out by non-teaching staff like your Building Service Officers.

Q: Won't rooms be less comfortable for students and staff?

Cooler classroom temperatures during cool weather and warmer classroom temperatures during hotter weather are expected to result from increasing fresh air to learning environments.

Q: Is there an estimation of what will happen to electricity bills?

Higher energy bills are anticipated to result from the increase in fresh air as a greater volume of air needs to be heated or cooled.

Q: What about CO2 sensors?

Many of our schools have Building Management Systems with CO2 sensors which provide a proxy for ventilation in a room. CO2 monitoring will commence in those schools once students and staff have fully returned on-site in Term 4.

Q: My school doesn't have CO2 sensors. Will it be receiving them?

Longer term, the Directorate will look to introduce additional mechanical ventilation in spaces that require it. This may include installation of new building management systems with CO2 sensors that can remotely control HVAC systems and windows.

The focus on ventilation is seeing new technological solutions to neutralise airborne viruses and improve air quality coming into the market. We'll continue to monitor studies on their effectiveness and pilot suitable technologies in our schools.

The Directorate is monitoring air quality in learning spaces to further refine the strategy to provide the best ventilation for ACT public schools.