

Bushfire At-Risk School Policy

Rationale:

Due to the potentially devastating effects of bushfire, certain schools have been placed on the Bushfire At-Risk Register, with added implications for planning and provisions surrounding the event of a bushfire. Concongella Primary School is on the Bushfire At-Risk Register.

New school procedures for the bushfire season:

New fire danger ratings and warnings have been introduced in Victoria to provide clear direction on the safest options for preserving life.

Concongella Primary School has been identified as being at highest bushfire risk and as such, will be closed on days declared by fire authorities to be Code Red.



Concongella Primary School will be:

- Automatically pre-emptively closed on days declared CODE RED
- Possibly making application to pre-emptively close or relocate on days declared EXTREME

CODE RED DAYS:

Concongella will be automatically closed. There will be no staff on the premises.

Where possible, we will provide parents with up to three days' notice of a planned closure. We will contact you directly by letter with advice on planned closures and will confirm the decision to close by 12 noon the day before the planned closure.

Once confirmed, the decision to close will not change, regardless of improvements in the weather forecast. This is to avoid confusion and help your family plan alternative care arrangements for your child.

No staff will remain on site when the school is closed by the risk of fire.

We will also cancel any offsite activities (such as school camps and excursions) and out-of-school care if the activities are at risk. There may also be changes to school bus routes. Depending on routes, this may also occur on days when the school is not closed.

Procedure:

- CODE RED day declared by the Fire Authority, up to 3 days in advance
- Automatic Closure called

- All parents contacted through letter home and phone call/ text message
- NO STAFF OR STUDENTS WILL BE ON THE PREMISES

EXTREME DAYS

The decision will be made, with consultation, by the principal no later than 12pm midday of the day prior to a declared EXTREME day, to make an application to the Regional Director.

The regional Director will make a decision and communicate it to the school by no later than 2pm on the day prior.

Families will be notified by close of school on the day prior to a closure or relocation.

It is the intention of Concongella Primary School, that in the unlikely event of taking this step to apply for closure or relocation, that we will pursue relocation whenever possible. Closure will be a last resort option only.

If an application is made and successful, we will relocate students and teachers to Grampians Community Health Building in Patrick Street Stawell.

An application will not be made on every EXTREME day, only those that are deemed a greater risk of staying at Concongella PS.

Procedure:

- EXTREME day declared by Fire Authority
- Principal consultation with Staff, CFA, Regional staff, relevant bodies
- Decision made to apply or not to apply for pre-emptive closure or relocation. NB. Preference will always be to relocate.
 - If decision is not to apply, school continues as usual
 - If decision is to make application:
 - Principal makes application to Regional Director no later than 12pm of day prior
 - Await decision by Regional Director to be no later than 2pm
 - Ensure that written notification goes home at end of school day, 3.10pm
 - Ensure that all parents are contacted by phone/ text message detailing either closure or relocation
 - If closure- no students can come to school and NO STAFF will attend the premises.
 - If relocation- ensure room is booked, buses are notified and location is communicated to parents.
 - Conduct school from location outlined.
- Preferred location for relocation purposes is:
 - Stawell Health and Community Centre
 - 8-22 Patrick Street, Stawell.
- School will return to normal as soon as the danger to child safety is deemed to be past.

On high fire risk days families are encouraged to enact their Bushfire Survival Plan – on such days, children should never be left at home unattended or in the care of older children.

For those of us living in a bushfire prone area, the safest option when a Code Red day is declared is to leave the night before, or early in the morning of the Code Red day.

As part of preparing our school for the threat of fire, we have completed the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's self-assessment of our emergency preparedness.

Procedure:

If a bushfire occurs during school hours:

- Identify location of fire;
- Consult with CFA;
- Make a decision;
 - If safe to do so, contact parents to come to pick up children;
 - If the fire is too close for evacuation procedures- proceed to lock down fire procedures in the office building:
 - All students and staff in the office, shutters down.
 - Await response/ advice from CFA,
 - Contact parents when safe to do so and when all children are accounted for
 - Contact region when safe to do so.
- FIRST PRIORITY IS TO PRESERVE LIFE

If a bush fire occurs out of school hours:

- Act upon advice given by CFA;
- Contact Parents with advice;
- Contact region.

Resources:

Concongella Primary School's Emergency Management Plan

Department of Education- Bushfire At Risk Registered School, Pre-emptive Closure/ relocation Policy:

**Pre-emptive school relocation or closure on forecast Extreme Fire Danger Rating days
(Only applies to government schools on the BARR)**

All Victorian schools and early childhood services listed on the Bushfire-At-Risk Register (BARR) are required to pre-emptively close if they are located in a Bureau of Meteorology district where a Code Red Fire Danger Rating day has been determined.

Emergency Management Victoria considers that staff and students can best be protected if schools and early childhood providers continue normal operations for all days other than those determined to have a Code Red Fire Danger Rating.

In exceptional circumstances, some government schools may pre-emptively close or relocate when an Extreme Fire Danger Rating day is forecast. The decision to pre-emptively close a school will only be taken with explicit authorisation from the relevant Regional Director, supported by advice from Emergency Management Victoria.

The decision to pre-emptively close or relocate must form part of a school's emergency management plan that must be well understood by the school's staff, students and parents.

Pre-emptive closure or relocation is different to evacuation. When a recommendation to evacuate the school is made by an authorised emergency services official to the school principal, the evacuation will be managed by emergency services in response to an immediate threat.

This policy provides guidance to Victorian government schools about the circumstances in which they may pre-emptively close or relocate when an Extreme Fire Danger Rating day is forecast.

Pre-emptive relocation on forecast Extreme Fire Danger Rating days

Principles

Pre-emptive relocation is the temporary placement of staff and students from a school in a high bushfire risk area at a host school in a lower bushfire risk area on a day forecast to have an Extreme Fire Danger Rating.

Pre-emptive relocation should only be considered where:

- a) the risk to life safety of staff and students will be significantly reduced
- b) evacuation at short notice would be difficult
- c) students' education continuity will be maintained, and
- d) a host school has been identified with the capacity to accommodate relocated staff and students and meet their educational needs.

Next steps

Where a principal wishes to pre-emptively relocate their school, they must assess the logistics, risks and potential benefits of relocation and seek authorisation from the relevant Regional Director. This work should occur well in advance of the bushfire season. The Department's regions will assist to facilitate this work, noting that there are likely to be many schools unable to relocate to lower risk schools or facilities. The regions assistance will involve:

- a) identifying which BARR schools should be prioritised for relocation to a lower risk school on forecast Extreme FDR days
- b) identifying what student accommodation capacity (including facilities, furniture and equipment) exists at lower risk schools, within a reasonable distance of the BARR school requiring relocation
- c) facilitating partnership building between these schools to enable relocation where adequate accommodation exists
- d) principals communicating and consulting with their School Council and parent communities about the issue of relocating to the lower risk school on a forecast Extreme FDR day
- e) other arrangements (including student transport).

Any decision to pre-emptively relocate on forecast Extreme Fire Danger Rating days must be fully documented in the school's Emergency Management Plan and be well communicated to students, parents and staff. The principal must also notify the Regional Director of the decision to pre-emptively relocate and record the relocation on the Student Activity Locator online form.

Pre-emptive closure on forecast Extreme Fire Danger Rating days

Principles

Pre-emptive closure is the temporary shutting down of a school on a day forecast to have an Extreme Fire Danger Rating. No alternative accommodation or provision of educational services will be made for staff or students.

Pre-emptive closure should only be considered where the risk to the life safety of staff and students will be significantly reduced, under advice from Emergency Management Victoria, and when all other options are not considered appropriate.

Next steps

Where a principal wishes to pre-emptively close their school, they must seek authorisation from their relevant regional director on a case-by-case basis. Principals must submit an application **by midday of the day prior to the day on which they seek to close** by email, using the following templates:

- a) *Request to pre-emptively close for a forecast Extreme Fire Danger Rating day, and*
- b) *Checklist for pre-emptive closure for a forecast Extreme Fire Danger Rating day.*

Regional Directors **must consult** with their Regional Emergency Management Team as part of their decision making process. Regional Directors must also consult with Emergency Management Division regarding any information that may be available from the State Control Centre to assist decision making.

The Regional Director's primary consideration is to mitigate extreme risk to student and staff safety. The following factors will be considered by the Regional Director before making a decision to approve or reject the request to pre-emptively close:

- a) the school is currently listed on the BARR
- b) the school has considered a range of alternatives to closure, including the pre-emptive relocation of students to a lower risk school site
- c) pre-emptive closure procedures are incorporated into the school's Emergency Management Plan
- d) the School Council is familiar with the school's Emergency Management Plan and supports pre-emptive closure
- e) the School has consulted with staff and parents on the issue of pre-emptive closure
- f) all stakeholders (parents, students, staff and other site users) can be notified of the pre-emptive closure
- g) the school's enrolment, including the age and number of students and the number of students with disabilities
- h) site related factors including the geographic location and the number of access and egress routes.

Notifying stakeholders

In circumstances where closure is approved by the Regional Director, the relevant regional office must immediately notify the Emergency Management Division for communication on the Department of Education and Training's webpage and emergency services.

Principals must notify their school community, by **no later than 3:00pm the day prior to the forecast Extreme FDR day** closure. This includes notifying students, staff, visiting teachers, parents, carers, volunteers and other users of the premises during and outside normal operating hours, for example outside of school hours care and community groups, contractors (e.g. cleaners and builders) and visitors.

Principals should follow the same notification procedures as contained within the Code Red day pre-emptive closures procedure:

- a) ensure closure signs have been completed and displayed prominently in multiple locations at their facility, including all entrances and exits to school premises
- b) ensure all students, parents, staff, carers, volunteers, visitors, contractors and other users of the site are contacted (using notification protocols, such as communication trees, the template letters to parents/carers) no later than 3.00 pm the day prior
- c) ensure that contractors, visitors and any community groups using the facilities during or outside of normal operating hours (sporting groups, after school programs, etc.) will not be entering or attending affected facilities, and
- d) in relation to building programs where a particular section of the site is 'controlled' or 'handed over' to the contractor, the principal should advise the contractor that the school will be closed and that the contractor should enact their site Emergency Management Plan.

Bus transport

Regions intending to use their delegation to close schools should decide and communicate a consistent approach within their region about whether a closed school's buses will be cancelled. This is crucial if bus cancellations affect other schools that remain open on a forecast Extreme FDR day.

This consistent approach should be communicated to all schools that may be affected by cancellation of buses on a forecast Extreme FDR day.

If the decision is made to close a school, then all communication about bus cancellation should occur **no later than 3.00 pm the day prior**, to enable notification of school communities.

Other notifications

The regional office must give consideration to all other groups that may need to be notified of a decision to close a school pre-emptively, including:

- local early childhood services
- Government, Catholic and Independent schools
- specialist schools and their bus routes
- school camps.

You can access more information about school closures on the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development website – see www.education.vic.gov.au/bushfires.

For up-to-date information on this year's fire season, visit the CFA website at www.cfa.vic.gov.au or call the 24-hour Victorian Bushfires Information Line on 1800 240 667.