

## Duty of Care Policy

The purpose of this policy is to explain to our school community the non-delegable duty of care obligations that all staff at Melton Primary School owe to our students and members of the school community who visit and use the school premises.

## Summary

- All staff working with students owe a duty of care to those students.
- All staff must take reasonable steps to reduce the risk of reasonably foreseeable harm to students.
- All staff must take reasonable precautions to minimise the risk of child abuse by an individual associated with the school.
- The requirement to take reasonable steps to reduce the risk of reasonably foreseeable harm, continues even when another party is involved (for example, a third party providing services for an excursion or school camp).
- In some circumstances, a school's duty of care will extend beyond school hours and outside of school grounds.
- Principals of Victorian government schools and DET staff can seek legal advice about their particular circumstances from the Department's Legal Division on [03 9637 3146](tel:0396373146) or [legal.services@education.vic.gov.au](mailto:legal.services@education.vic.gov.au)

## Details

All Melton Primary School staff have a duty of care in relation to students. Principals, teachers and other staff working with students must take reasonable steps to minimise the risk of reasonably foreseeable harm, including by:

- providing suitable and safe premises
- providing an adequate system of student supervision
- undertaking risk assessments for school activities and events
- implementing strategies to prevent reasonably foreseeable injuries, whether physical or psychological, to students (including injuries suffered as a result of bullying)
- ensuring that appropriate medical assistance is provided to a sick or injured student
- ensuring the school complies with the Child Safe Standards
- taking other reasonable precautions to minimise the risk of child abuse by an individual associated with the school
- implementing relevant Department and local school policies
- managing employee recruitment, conduct and performance
- taking into account that different and sometimes greater measures may need to be taken for younger students or students with disabilities to discharge this duty of care

This duty of care is non-delegable, meaning that it cannot be assigned to another party. However, this does not mean that only one person holds a duty of care to a particular student at any one time. Multiple staff may have a duty of care to the same student, with differing responsibilities and roles to play in relation to the school discharging its overall duty of care. The precise scope of the each staff member's duty of care may be different.

For example, a principal is not required to personally supervise every student at lunchtime to discharge their duty but instead is responsible for establishing and monitoring a system for supervision that is shared amongst staff. Another staff member may be responsible for preparing the yard duty roster and each staff member rostered onto yard duty will have a duty of care to take reasonable steps in relation to any foreseeable risks to students arising at lunchtime which may include:

- monitoring specific students where there are known risks
- generally monitoring all students and intervening where there is inappropriate student behaviour
- responding to accidents and taking appropriate measures to follow up any incidents that have occurred, which may involve ensuring that the incident is reported to another staff member with responsibility for further action

### **Duty of care to students outside of the school**

In some circumstances, the duty of care owed by school staff will extend beyond school hours and outside of school grounds. Whether the duty extends outside of school hours or outside school grounds will depend on all the circumstances of each individual case, and the school staff members' knowledge of any reasonably foreseeable risks of injury.

For example, in some circumstances the Department may be liable for injuries to students in the playground before school begins for the day if they occur during the period of time for which the school yard is supervised.

In one case, a non-government school was found liable for injury to a primary student at an unsupervised bus stop, approximately 350 metres from the school and located outside a secondary school. School staff knew that a large group of students regularly caught the bus from outside the neighbouring secondary school, and that there was a risk of harm to students at this bus stop while they were gathered there. In addition, a teacher from the primary school witnessed the incident but did not intervene. The court found that the teacher-student relationship was still in existence at the time of the injury, and therefore the non-government school authority had a duty of care.

### **Legal Background**

'Duty of care' is an element of the tort of negligence. In broad terms, the legal position is that if a person is injured as a result of a negligent act or omission of another, the injured person should be compensated for loss and damage flowing from that negligence.

To successfully bring a compensation claim in negligence, a person must establish on the balance of probabilities, that:

- a duty of care was owed to them at the time of the injury
- the risk of injury was reasonably foreseeable
- the likelihood of the injury occurring was more than insignificant
- there was a breach of the duty of care or a failure to observe a reasonable standard of care; and
- this breach or failure caused or contributed to the injury, loss or damage suffered

The fact that a duty of care exists does not mean that a school staff member will be liable for every injury sustained by a student. In order for the student to succeed in a negligence claim, all of the above elements must be established.

In Victoria since 1 July 2017, and only specifically in relation to child abuse claims, there is a 'presumption of liability' for any organisation that exercises care, supervision or authority over children, including schools. This means that school staff need to prove that they took 'reasonable precautions' to prevent child abuse by an individual associated with the school, if the Department is to successfully defend a legal claim. This does not change existing duties that school staff already have, but instead reinforces the importance of ensuring that schools take reasonable precautions to minimise the risk of child abuse.

## Aims

To ensure that staff have an understanding of their duty of care to students, and behave in a manner that does not compromise these legal obligations.

## Processes

Although the general duty is to take reasonable steps to protect students from reasonably foreseeable risks of injury, specific (but not exhaustive) requirements of the duty involve providing adequate supervision in the school or on school activities as well as providing safe and suitable buildings, grounds and equipment.

A teacher's duty of care is not confined to the geographic area of the school, or to school activities, or to activities occurring outside the school where a student is acting on a teacher's instructions. The duty also applies to situations both before and after school where a teacher can be deemed to have 'assumed' the teacher pupil relationship.

Quite apart from mandatory reporting requirements, a teacher has a concurrent duty of care to protect a student from harm that is reasonably foreseeable. A breach of this duty of care may lead to legal action being taken against the individual teacher or teachers concerned. A breach of this duty of care will be established if a teacher or principal failed to take immediate and positive steps after having acquired actual knowledge or formed a belief that there is a risk that a child is being abused or neglected, including sexual abuse.

The teacher's duty of care is greater than that of the ordinary citizen in that a teacher is obliged to protect a student from reasonably foreseeable harm or to assist an injured student, while the ordinary citizen does not have a legal obligation to respond.

Whilst each case regarding a teacher's legal duty of care will be judged on the circumstances that occurred at the time, the following common examples may be times when a teacher has failed to meet their legal duty of care responsibilities to their students:

- arriving late to class or leaving a class early
- arriving late to scheduled timetabled yard duty responsibilities
- failing to act appropriately to protect a student who claims to be bullied
- believing that a child is being abused but failing to report the matter appropriately
- being late to supervise the line-up of students after the bell has sounded
- leaving students unattended in the classroom
- failing to instruct a student who is not wearing a hat to play in the shade
- ignoring dangerous play
- leaving the school during time release without approval
- inadequate supervision on a school excursion

Staff members are also cautioned against giving advice on matters that they are not professionally competent to give (negligent advice). Advice is to be limited to areas within a teacher's own professional competence and given in situations arising from a role (such as careers teacher, year level coordinator or subject teacher) specified for them by the principal.

Teachers must ensure that the advice they give is correct and, where appropriate, in line with the most recent available statements from institutions or employers. Teachers should not give advice in areas outside those related to their role where they may lack expertise.

## Risks

Legal cases establish that a teacher's duty of care does not start nor end at precise times during the day. The approach generally taken is that a teacher's duty applies irrespective whether the risk occurs in or outside the school environment. However, the important issue in all cases will be [whether the school took reasonable steps to protect the student from the risk](#).

Risks outside the school environment may sometimes call for immediate and positive steps by a school depending on the age of students, urgency and threat of injury. Consider for example, if a live power line came down outside the school, no emergency workers had arrived, and primary children are about to be dismissed to walk home. No school would allow the children to walk out to that danger unsupervised.

There will be a number of other situations where the school will be under a duty to take reasonable steps. In some instances, the school's control over the activity may require it to take more active measures to satisfy the requirement that it take reasonable steps. For example, a known bully on a school bus may require the school to suspend or refuse to transport the bully. In other instances, the school may not control the activity, and the reasonable measures available to it will be limited. For example, fights at a local train or bus stop between students from rival schools may involve informing the police, contacting the other school to implement preventative measures, and notices to parents and students.

While students are generally free to move around the buildings and work independently in break out spaces and designated study areas they must be under (indirect) adult supervision at all times.

Staff are responsible for their students at all times.

The following instructions and notices [apply to all staff](#).

## Classroom supervision

Staff must **not** leave the classroom unattended at any time during a lesson.

It is **not** appropriate to leave students in the care of ancillary staff, parents or trainee teachers (At law, the Duty of care cannot be delegated)

It is **not** appropriate to leave students in the care of external education providers for example incursions (At law, the duty of care cannot be delegated)

In **an emergency situation** use the phone for the Principal or Assistant Principal or contact the teacher in the next room. (if appropriate – send another student for assistance)

**No student should be left unsupervised [outside the classroom](#)** as a withdrawal consequence for misbehaviour. Withdrawal is to be conducted by sending a student to a colleague's classroom, or to the Assistant Principal or Principal. This should be accompanied by documentation and appropriate follow up. The teacher, Principal or Assistant Principal **is to be contacted first** to alert them that the student is on their way.

## Movement of Students

### Purpose:

- To ensure that students are safe at all times.

## Expectations

- Staff will walk beside/behind their grade to monitor the behavior of their students.
- Staff will develop stopping areas so as the grade remains together. Line leaders can be used to assist with this
- Meeting areas should be developed with students allowing for the rotation of classes/activities prior to the commencement.
- Students will sit in their grades during this meeting time.
- Staff will monitor the behaviour of their grade, while also observing other students.
- Staff will observe and monitor the students while addressing the students to ensure the correct behaviours are being displayed.

## Behaviour

- Children who do not act appropriately will be disciplined by their class teacher.
- Students will display respectful behaviours. These should include:
  - Walking in a single or paired line.
  - Walking closely together to ensure a safe viewing distance by the teacher.
  - Minimal talking.
  - Students keeping their hands and feet to themselves.
  - Students stopping at pre-arranged stopping areas and patiently waiting for further instructions.
  - Students should be seated or standing, depending upon the teacher's instruction, with observant and respectful behaviour.

## Strategies

- Teachers will actively support each other and will take collective ownership for all students.
- They shall promote and advocate positive behaviours and should the students breach the expectations within this protocol a teacher should:

Obtain the attention of the offending student/s and make eye contact.



Provide a verbal warning.



Withdraw the offending student/s and have them sit away from the group



Explain to the students why they have time out.

## Yard Supervision

Yard supervision is an essential element in a teacher's duty of care. It is now clearly established that in supervising students, teacher's duty of care is one of positive action.

Be aware that students are usually less constrained and more prone to accident and injury than in a more closely supervised classroom.

Be aware that yard duty supervision within the school requires the teacher to fully comply with DET guidelines and brings with it an increased duty of care. It is a teacher's responsibility to be aware of these guidelines and duty of care responsibilities. Teachers are also expected to follow school policy whilst on yard duty.

Staff rostered for duty are to attend the designated area at the time indicated on the roster.

Staff on duty are to remain in the designated area until the end of the break period or until replaced by the relieving teacher, whichever is applicable. If not replaced contact the office and another staff member will be called to relieve you from yard duty.

The handing over of duty from one teacher to another must be quite definite and **must occur in the area of designated duty**. Where a relieving teacher does not arrive for duty, the teacher currently on duty should send a message to the office, **but not leave the area until replaced**.

No changes to the yard duty roster are to be made without the approval of the Daily organiser, or Assistant Principal.

Be alert and vigilant -intervene **immediately** if potentially dangerous behaviour is observed in the yard - enforce behaviour standards and logical consequences for breaches of safety rules.

You should always be on the move and highly visible (staff must wear their high vis vests, have a yard duty folder and a portable phone/walkie talkie)

## Excursions, incursions and camps

Be aware that students are usually less constrained and more prone to accident and injury than in a more closely supervised classroom.

Be aware that an incursion with an external provider does not absolve supervision duties of the teacher, including first aid duties. A teacher must be present at all times and remain the person designated with duty of care responsibilities.

Be aware that camps and excursions outside the school require the teacher to fully comply with DET guidelines and bring with it an increased duty of care. It is a teacher's responsibility to be aware of these guidelines and remain the person designated with duty of care.

Be aware that excursion and camp activities require the teacher to ensure that the venue and transport adhere to DET guidelines.

Be aware that school policy is for students to be counted on and off transport and at other times on a regular basis whilst on excursion or camp activities.

The teacher in charge will have copies of all confidential medical forms and permission notes with contact details. A copy of this material will also be kept at school.

Arrangements will be made for students not attending to continue their normal program at school under supervision of another classroom teacher.

The teacher in charge or designated teacher of an excursion or camp will carry a mobile phone and a first aid kit.

If the return time from an excursion or camp is delayed, the teacher in charge will contact the school to inform the Principal of the new arrival time so that parents can be contacted and a senior staff member will remain at school until they arrive.

If crossing roads students are to use designated crossing points. Staff are to walk to the middle of the crossing to ensure visibility and orderly crossing. Other staff control the flow of students across the road.

All staff [must follow the DET guidelines when organising an excursion, incursion or camp](#). All procedural steps contained in the [School camping, excursions and incursions Policy and Procedure outlines](#) must also be followed.

## Informing Staff of their legislative liability of Duty of Care

All staff will be informed of their legal requirement via:-

- A copy of this document will be provided to each member of staff at the first staff meeting at the commencement of the school year, and will be placed on the website.
- New staff will be informed of their Duty of Care as part of the school's Induction Program
- Duty of Care will be an agenda item at staff meetings and staff will be directed to familiarise themselves with section Student Safety of the Victorian Government Schools Policy Advisory Guide.
- Staff will complete a risk assessment including duty of care when completing planning for camps, excursions and incursions.
- Staff will be directed to the student wellbeing policy annually.
- It is important that schools clearly inform parents when playground supervision will be provided and that no formal supervision of the playground occurs outside those hours

## Related Policies

All Department policies relating to the care, health, safety and wellbeing of students including:

- [Bullying Prevention and Response](#)
- [Child Safe Standards](#)
- [Child Protection and Child Safe Standards \(PROTECT\)](#)

- Excursions
- International Student Program (ISP)
- Legal Claims, Subpoenas, Summonses and Other Legal Documents
- Risk Management — Schools
- Supervision of Students
- Volunteers in Schools

Other policies relevant to duty of care include:

- Insurance for Schools
- Personal Liability of School Employees
- School Council — Liability and Legal Proceedings

## Policy review and approval

Policy last reviewed	15th February 2024
Approved by	Principal and School Council
Next scheduled review date	Feb 2027