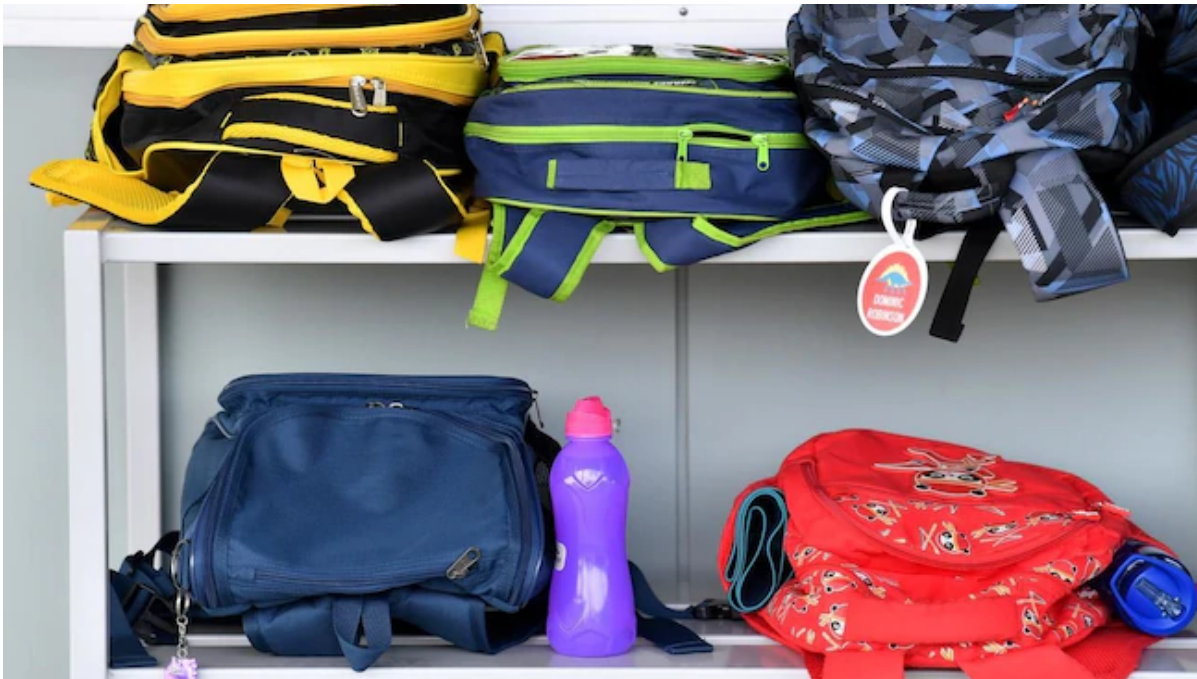


Mums furious over school attendance push

Tracey Ferrier



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Parents in Queensland are being told to ensure their kids continue to attend schools. Credit: AAP

Parents have accused Queensland's education department of making heavy-handed threats to force kids to go to school during the coronavirus emergency.

In one case, a regional primary school student whose health problems put him at increased risk from respiratory illnesses, was told he must provide medical evidence supporting his absence during the crisis.

In another case, a Brisbane school informed a mother there was no justification for keeping her kids out of school for fear they would catch COVID-19 on the bus.

"Please be aware that as the school has not been closed the students will require a medical certificate if absent for more than 3 days. Or absences will be classed as unjustified as per Dept of Education directions," the school said in a text seen by AAP.

It comes as the state government announced it would increase the amount of cleaning in state schools in response to the COVID-19 outbreak.

Education Minister Grace Grace said the education department had ordered for extended and additional cleaning, and schools would be given more resources to allow progressive cleaning across the day.

There has been much debate about the federal government's decision to keep schools open, as cases of the virus continue to climb.

Some within the education sector, including the Queensland Teachers' Union, have said it is impossible to implement government advice on social distancing in crowded school settings.

A mother who does not want to be named told AAP the principal of her children's school seemed "embarrassed" when handing her education department advice demanding parents provide medical evidence to explain her son's absence.

"He was actually quite sheepish, embarrassed, saying: 'I'm really sorry but I have to get something in writing'," she said.

"Every family that's making decisions about what is right for their children is now going to be asked for medical evidence, or they'll be marked as an unauthorised absence.

"It's just heavy handed, that's what it is. Bring it on Education Queensland, if you want to query me about why my kid's not at school."

Education department advice to schools seen by AAP says students being kept home on the basis of medical advice are to be listed as absent for an "acceptable reason" and won't have their time away listed on their report cards.

But schools have been directed to "request documentary evidence of the medical practitioner's advice".

It also says that students who are being kept at home as a precaution should be marked as "unauthorised" absentees.

"These absences are not considered a reasonable excuse based on current health advice," the directive to schools says.

Bridget Burton, director of human rights and civil law at Brisbane's Caxton Legal Centre, says parents are obliged by Queensland law to ensure their kids attend school, unless there is a "reasonable" excuse.

If they don't, parents can be hit with hefty fines. But even outside a pandemic emergency like this one, she said that rarely happens.

Ms Burton believes the risk of parents being fined for non-attendance due to coronavirus fears is extremely low.

In a statement on Thursday, the education department confirmed it was applying an "unauthorised absence" policy if children are kept at home solely due to coronavirus fears.

But a departmental spokesperson said that if parents chose to keep well children home, they would be able to access home-based learning material via the department's website.

The statement made no mention of fines for parents who opt to take their kids out of school due to infection fears.
