

Responding to COVID-19 in our schools and colleges

By Matt Jarman
Senior Vice President

The SSTUWA is pleased that members will now be able to access COVID-19 leave immediately if needed, with the requirement to first exhaust other forms of leave now being lifted.

This is the direct result of extensive lobbying by UnionsWA and affiliated public sector unions, including the SSTUWA, through meetings and public statements.

The union's consistent position has been that to keep schools open you need to keep teachers safe.

The SSTUWA will continue to pursue improvements in a range of areas including provision of personal protective equipment (PPE), a focus on improving air quality and managing access to schools and TAFEs.

We reiterate our previous requests for parents and the broader community to recognise the challenges schools and TAFEs face, to understand the inevitability of disruption in coming weeks and to be patient and supportive as staff work to keep students and themselves as safe as possible.

School principals across the state have been grappling with how to implement new COVID-19 protocols in schools after receiving very little notice changes were coming into effect.

The SSTUWA warns that schools still face extensive disruption and has been grateful for the parental and community support for leaders and staff in keeping teachers safe so schools can stay open.

The union welcomes a number of the changes introduced so far, such as access to school grounds only for pick up and drop off in outdoor locations, as we had raised concerns about unvaccinated volunteers being allowed in school buildings.

However, some of these new measures have a major impact on schools. While some of these changes are supported by schools, they are logistically difficult.

For example, staggering breaks and moving assemblies and timetables around adds to an already ridiculous workload for school staff.

Principals and teachers need the support of parents in following the drop-off and pick-up rules, by wearing masks at all times on the school site and being patient and understanding when school is inevitably disrupted at some point.

We'd like people to remember that school staff are doing their best in a constantly changing environment. Everyone now accepts learning will be disrupted.

The union had called for a number of health measures to be implemented in schools before the state government made the decision to reduce COVID-19 isolation requirements from 14 days to seven days.

While some of these concerns have been addressed, such as limiting the number of students gathering together, clarification from the Department of Education is still needed on several matters.

In particular, the union will seek assurance that all ventilators and CO2 monitors are now operational in schools and will be following occupational safety and health processes to ensure that is the case.

The union is further seeking details on the issue of priority access to PCR testing for teachers and access to rapid antigen tests (RATs).

The SSTUWA is also aware that TAFE members have serious concerns around the potential impact of Omicron in their workplaces.

The union therefore has been actively seeking clarification over the health advice on a range of issues in TAFEs including:

- Vaccination requirements for students.
- Ventilation auditing.
- Social distancing.
- Use of RATs in TAFE colleges.
- Supply of PPE, including masks.

Deep cleaning, including areas where multi-use equipment is in place. In addition, the union is discussing with colleges issues such as:

- Provision of ICT equipment and support.
- Staff shortages and movements.
- Course delivery especially where multiple modes may be required.
- Lack of consultation.

Please note that there is clear agreement between the Department of Training and Workforce Development, colleges and the union that lecturers will not have to teach mixed modes simultaneously.

Colleges have indicated they will be flexible in supporting staff who need to work off-site for health reasons to reduce their risk of exposure to COVID-19.

If you have additional concerns, please raise them with your TAFE Committee or branch representatives.

Authorised by Mary Franklyn, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.

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