National education and union news



TAFE workforce stretched to breaking point

The TAFE teaching workforce and its facilities are under extreme pressure, with complexity of students, increased enrolments and ageing facilities impacting on teaching and learning.

The AEU has released its *2026 State of Our TAFE* report, which shows that despite a recent injection in funding, the sector is still crying out for help.

Responses from 1,696 TAFE teachers across the country, the report shows widespread workload intensification, staff shortages and declining retention, even as enrolments surge under a reinvigorated TAFE system. Nearly two-thirds of respondents said they had considered leaving their job in the past year and almost half do not expect to still be working in TAFE within five years.

AEU Federal President Correna Haythorpe said the findings were a warning that despite recent investment in TAFE under the Albanese Government, urgent action to support TAFE teachers and campuses were needed.

“Decades of underfunding have stretched TAFE teachers to breaking point and these survey results are a wakeup call for governments,” she said.

“Free TAFE has been transformative for students and communities, but its implementation has presented some additional challenges for TAFE teachers.”

Teachers also reported significant increases in students presenting with mental health, literacy, numeracy and digital skills needs, without additional learning or support services to meet that demand.

“Students enrolling in Free TAFE have significantly higher levels of additional needs than the TAFE student cohort overall and TAFE teachers have reported on the fact that TAFE institutes are generally not resourced well enough to cater for their needs,” Ms Haythorpe said.

“Free TAFE has opened the door to education for people who were previously locked out, but governments have failed to fund the wraparound supports students need to succeed.

“Teachers are increasingly expected to fill the gaps by providing pastoral care, wellbeing support and foundation skills without the time, training or resources to do so.”

The report shows 88 per cent of teachers knew a colleague who had left TAFE in the past 12 months, while more than half reported reduced student contact hours despite rising administrative and compliance demands.

“TAFE teachers are committed to their students, but excessive workloads, insecure and casualised employment and uncompetitive pay are pushing skilled teachers out of the sector at the very moment Australia needs them most,” Ms Haythorpe said.

“Almost two-thirds of TAFE staff surveyed have considered leaving their jobs in the past year, and nearly half do not expect to be working in TAFE in five years’ time. Without a teaching workforce, TAFE cannot succeed.”

The report also highlights chronic underinvestment in TAFE infrastructure, with outdated equipment and overcrowded campuses impacting on the system’s ability to meet local skills needs.

“Rebuilding TAFE means more than funding courses,” Ms Haythorpe said.

“It requires serious, long-term investment in secure jobs for teachers, manageable workloads, modern campuses and properly funded student support services.”

The AEU is calling on Commonwealth, state and territory governments to urgently commit to a national TAFE workforce renewal and retention strategy, a significant capital works and equipment program, and guaranteed funding for ongoing student support.

“TAFE is a public institution and a public good,” Ms Haythorpe said.

“If governments are serious about skills, productivity and equity, they must invest in the people and places that make TAFE work.”

To read the *2026 State of Our TAFE* report click here.



Unions call for national rules on extreme heat to save lives

Australian Unions are calling for new national safety rules that require employers to stop work or modify duties when temperatures reach dangerous levels, warning that increasingly frequent heatwaves driven by climate change now pose a

major workplace health and safety threat.

Countries like Japan already enforce mandatory occupational health and safety heat requirements, but there are currently no national heat standards in Australia. State and territory workplace health and safety laws do not clearly set out employer obligations to safely manage the risks of working in heat.

Unions are urging Safe Work Australia to introduce a heat regulation that requires employers to provide controls such as rest breaks, work scheduling and work stoppages at defined temperature thresholds, and to ensure workers' compensation coverage for heat-related illnesses.

The push came on Extreme Heat Awareness Day last month (4 February), with the ACTU joining the Australian Medical Association (AMA), Australian Red Cross, the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA), the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF)
and Sweltering Cities to call for coordinated national action to protect workers and communities from escalating heat hazards driven by climate change.

Australia's housing standards are also forcing millions of workers, particularly renters, to endure unsafe temperatures at home. Unions are urging the Federal Government to update the National Construction Code to include climate-resilience measures so new homes maintain safe indoor temperatures, and to work with states and territories to introduce minimum energy-efficiency standards for rental properties.

The Commonwealth's 2025 National Climate Risk Assessment projects heat-related deaths in major cities will more than quadruple without change – rising 444 per cent in Sydney, 423 per cent in Darwin, 312 per cent in Perth and 259 per cent in Melbourne.

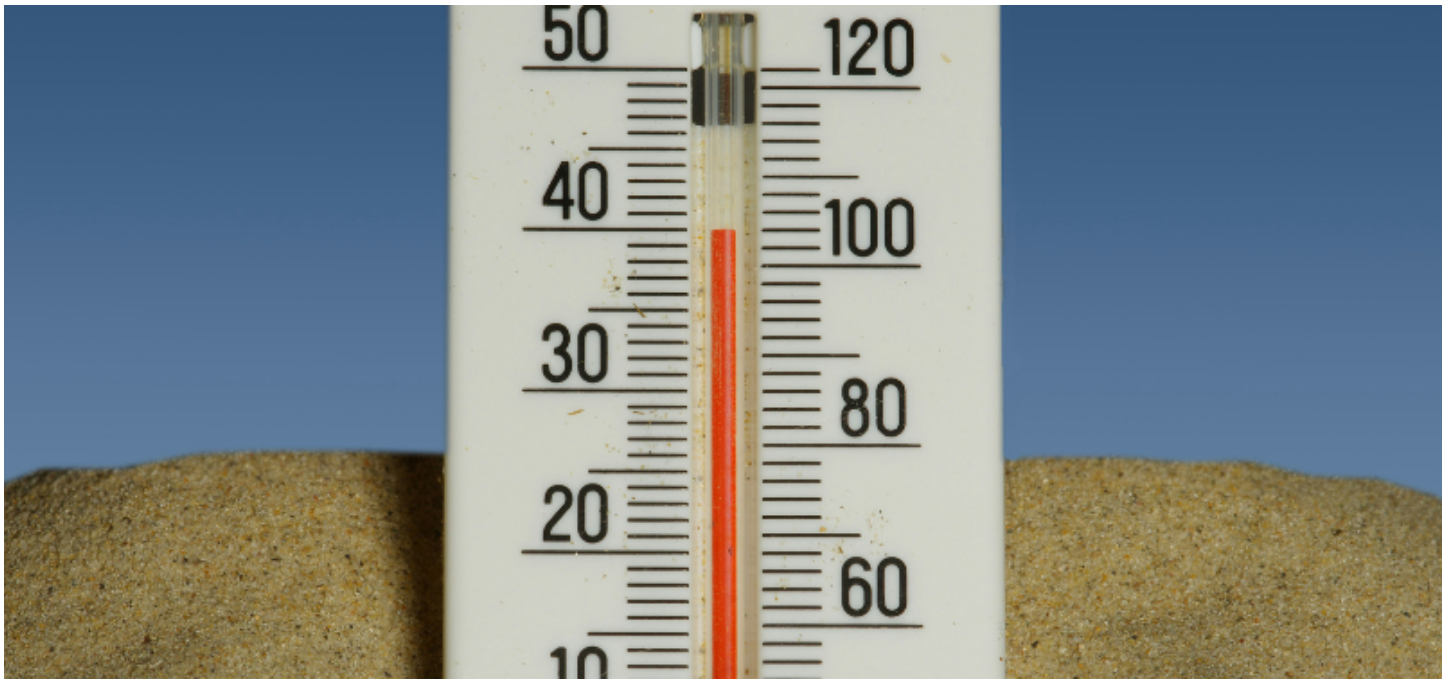
Safe Work Australia data shows workers currently carry 74 per cent of the financial burden of heat-related injuries and illnesses, while employers bear just five per cent.

ACTU President, Michele O'Neil said no worker should be told to push through the brutal heat and risk their own life.

"When it's dangerously hot, your boss should either change your work or stop your work," she said.

"A rest break or work stoppage in extreme heat can be the difference between a worker going home safe or not going home at all.

"We regulate asbestos and silica because they kill people and devastate families. It's time we treat climate hazards like extreme heat in the same way. There is no excuse for Australia to leave workers exposed without clear, enforceable rules, especially when the government's own reports project heat-related deaths to more than quadruple in our major cities."



Sweeping changes to cleaning in NSW schools

Cleaners in NSW public schools are transitioning to permanent employment with the Department of Education, marking a significant step away from more than three decades of outsourced cleaning contracts.

Restoring cleaners to permanent public employment will strengthen school operations and support safe teaching and learning environments and highlights the benefits of a stable, supported workforce for schools and the communities they serve.

The New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) has been a strong advocate for the United Workers Union campaign to bring school and TAFE cleaners into direct employment — our policy recognises that a stable, publicly employed cleaning workforce is essential to supporting safe, well-maintained learning environments, particularly in growing and high-traffic schools.

Under outsourcing arrangements, many school communities raised questions about the sustainability of cleaning services and the pressures places on staff.

A Federation-supported P&C survey from 2022 captured feedback from parents, students and staff about the realities of maintaining school environment,
including cleaning of high traffic areas and supporting staff to manage busy school sites.

This system level change follows earlier de-privatisation of school cleaning roles in the Hunter and Central Coast and signals a broader shift away from contracting service delivery in public education.



Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
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