Summary of SSTUWA issues in relation to Term 2 school operations

The SSTUWA is seeking urgent discussions around the following issues for Term 2, 2020. These positions are provided on a “without prejudice” basis, given the rapidly changing information and circumstances.

1. Student attendance

Subject to the decisions of the National Cabinet and WA government concerning school closures, the SSTUWA agrees with the physical attendance at schools of the children of essential workers and vulnerable children (as currently defined).

Children physically attending school will be provided with the same program of schooling offered to students learning at home.

2. Employee attendance

The SSTUWA is very strongly of the view that the physical attendance of employees at school must meet the requirements for:

- Providing a suitable program of work for students physically attending
- Those staff necessary to prepare and supply materials for students learning at home that cannot be completed remotely
- Those necessary for the conduct of essential business and facilities functions.

Requirements or expectations for maximum attendance by staff pose an unnecessary increase in risk, particularly in areas where staff congregate and which were not designed with social distancing in mind.

In an environment of minimised staff attendance, the SSTUWA believes there is merit in a roster of employees (excluding those defined as vulnerable or with medical certificates) to be in attendance, including specialist teachers and teachers whose subjects are outside the five subject curriculum being delivered.

3. Delivery expectations

The SSTUWA acknowledges the need for principal discretion (in consultation with staff) in delivery of the modified program in approximately 850 schools across the state.

The system must provide clear, general expectations about delivery, within which principal discretion is exercised. Without this clarity, unnecessary local conflicts about expectations (two weeks work or 10 weeks work) will arise. The full responsibility for decision-making should not be foisted upon principals by the system.

Matters such as the continued application of awards and industrial agreements, and the continued application of code of conduct and standard of practice provision around student protection and communication with students should be clearly enunciated from the centre.

Also from the centre, a reiteration and explanation of the “this is NOT business as usual” message is essential if we are to minimise stress for principals and avoid principals making decisions which give rise to staff anxiety and increased workloads. Clarity around of what new rules apply in relation to a range of matters including assessment, reporting, attendance and roll marking, length and frequency of contact with students and parents, etc, is imperative.

All this must occur within the context of what is reasonable –workload and otherwise – on teachers and principals, as provided for in the General Agreement 2019.

The SSTUWA accepts that these expectations will evolve and change with circumstances but need to be defined and communicated – some as binding directions, others as guidelines.

4. Vulnerable workers

The SSTUWA is urgently seeking details of DoE's interpretation of the most recent iteration of the list of vulnerable workers. The exclusion of employees with chronic health conditions (unless complicated by age or being an Aborigine or Torres Strait Islander) from that list is, on the surface, impossible to understand. How employees of any age with chronic lung diseases, for example, are not vulnerable to a virus that attacks the respiratory system defies the normal rules of common sense.

Employees can obtain a medical certificate beyond these circumstances. However, as the union currently understands it, this means that employees take sick leave rather than working from home. Many employees in this category are perfectly able to manage a range of respiratory illnesses in normal circumstances. It is unjust that they are expected to access leave arrangements due to circumstances over which they have no control.

5. Year 11 and 12 students

The SSTUWA acknowledges a priority for Year 12 and 11 students to enable those students to successfully complete schooling in 2020 and 2021 respectively. The requirements for this to occur are subject currently to broader discussions at authority and ministerial level.

6. Assessment and reporting

The emphasis should be on learning rather than summative assessment in Term 2. If report cards are to be issued on the modified program in Term 2, they should be issued with a clear understanding and communication to parents that the report is based on limited assessment in very different circumstances. Ideally, term 2 formal reporting should be dispensed with.

7. Teachers required to self-isolate

Some local communities (with good reason) are requiring workers returning to the community to self-isolate for 14 days and presumably to work from home. This may have implications for shared teacher accommodation in centres that have it. An alternative is to have those teachers report to alternate locations for work.

There may be issues that emerge about the mixing of staff who are returning as opposed to those who have remained quarantined in communities.

8. Social distancing in schools

Medical advice must be sought about how to apply social distancing in the school setting both for students attending and for staff working in common areas. It is not sufficient to say that schools as essential workplaces are exempt. Teachers are expected – as members of the broader community – to abide by social distancing requirements after work and on weekends, but then revert to what we are told is not safe practice while they are at school.

This is an example of the extent of principal discretion. The medical advice must be binding. How it is implemented is a matter of principal discretion (in consultation with the staff).

9. Continuation of casual and temporary employees

The Department must ensure the continued employment in Term 2 of temporary and relief staff employed who would otherwise have been employed but for the intervention of COVID-19.

10. Reimbursement of additional costs

The question of reimbursement of additional costs associated with working from home has been raised. These include, for example, additional data costs for additional use of internet. This needs to be the subject of a policy response across all schools.

The SSTUWA is opposed to any additional expectations that teachers and principals would further subsidise the operation of the education system from their own pockets.

11. Communications

The SSTUWA acknowledges the efforts being made by DoE through its regular communication to schools – the COVID-19 Updates. We recognise the difficulty of operating in an environment where new instructions are issued almost daily, via the Health and Police departments.

While the pace of changes means that updates can generally only be expressed in 'cross agency language' it is important that an 'education' interpretation follows as quickly as possible from the centre. This avoids the risk of different

interpretations by individual principals and the resulting inconsistencies between schools which in turn creates confusion and anxiety for everyone. Consistency of language between documents is important here. If the medical advice says ‘must’ or ‘should’ then the DoE advice in its documents should be the same.

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