Media release: Encouraging signs but safety concerns remain in schools

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The State School Teachers' Union of WA said a new survey of members found there are encouraging signs that COVID-19 precautions are being managed in schools, but some areas need attention before student numbers increase.

The survey of over 2,000 members showed 68% reported student attendance above 50% at the start of Term 2, while 22% said under half their students turned up.

SSTUWA president Pat Byrne said many respondents reported that hygiene measures and cleaning were possible while schools were not full, but there were some issues that still needed to be addressed.

"We were pleased to see that the majority of respondents (72%) said there was hand sanitiser in every classroom, however 18% said there was not," she said.

"The survey found 78% of educators said extra professional cleaning took place in their classroom and other areas, while 13% said it did not.

"However, we are aware that some teachers have been asked to do the cleaning of equipment, desks and chairs themselves, or ask students to do so.

"Proper environmental cleaning should be done by professionals.

"Some teachers reported buying anti bacterial wipes themselves to ensure a high standard of cleaning."

Ms Byrne said teachers' workloads were also a concern, with 31% reporting they were being required to deliver more than one mode of teaching at a time.

"This is something teachers were assured they would not be required to do," she said.

"It's actually impossible to do that and being asked to do it creates a stressful situation for teachers, and doesn't deliver the best outcomes for students either, so it's something we need to be sorted out quickly."

The survey, which will be repeated over the next fortnight to monitor workplace safety, also found almost a third of respondents said physical distancing was not possible between colleagues, which Ms Byrne said was worrying because health advice was that contact between adults is the main health risk in schools.

However, despite areas of concern, the survey found 68% of teachers said they felt safe at work, while 32% said they did not.

Ms Byrne said the union would raise the issues highlighted in the survey with the education department.

"We know that the real test for schools will come when we are back to 100% attendance, and we're very keen to see the department address the outstanding issues in all schools before then," she said.

"A combination of addressing these gaps and the introduction of random testing of staff and students will offer reassurance to our members.

"The SSTUWA's priority remains a working environment that will allow teachers to deliver face to face teaching safely."

NB: The state government has subsequently released details of proposed testing in schools. You can read that release athttps://www.mediastatements.wa.gov.au/Pages/McGowan/2020/05/Research- study-to-track-impact-of-COVID-19-in-schools.aspxstudy-to-track-impact-of-COVID-19-in-schools.aspx

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