Union welcomes decision to delay WA's reopening



The SSTUWA has welcomed the decision by the state government to delay the opening of WA's borders.

"While we understand that this will be difficult for many people in the community, it does give more time to make WA schools and TAFEs as safe as possible for those who work and learn there. It is crucial that this time is not wasted," SSTUWA President Pat Byrne said.

"Principals, teachers and lecturers have been increasingly anxious in the lead up to the new term, understanding the reality that schools and TAFEs will be high risk environments in any Omicron outbreak.

"Educators want clear advice on what is being done to make workplaces safer. Omicron is already here in WA and open borders or not, many educators are concerned about what will be done to keep them, all staff and students safe."

The SSTUWA is now working with the government to resolve the following issues of concern to school and TAFE staff:

- **Vaccination**
- **Ventilation**
- **Testing**
- **Casual/close contacts**

The union welcomes the requirement for all staff to have a booster shot and expects that principals/managing directors will be instructed to facilitate staff access to these appointments.

The issue of unvaccinated persons, parents in particular, accessing school sites is of concern.

In the TAFE situation, concerns remain around unvaccinated students. These are generally adults; college staff have raised concerns about working with unvaccinated adults due to the greater transmissibility of the Omicron variant.

The issue of pandemic or COVID-19 leave for those vulnerable staff who, despite being vaccinated, feel unsafe working with unvaccinated students needs to be addressed. The SSTUWA seeks provision of sufficient leave for these teachers and lecturers.

The clearest benefit to a delay in opening the borders is it gives people more time to get vaccinated.

Medical advice stresses the need for proper ventilation measures to ensure that levels of CO2 do not promote the transmission of the Omicron variant of the COVID virus. This means that schools and colleges need the capacity to determine the CO2 levels and, if necessary, take the appropriate measures to address problems.

We are aware that the school sector has conducted an audit of all workspaces; the next step is to provide appropriate strategies, including equipment, to rectify any problems.

The SSTUWA is pressing the government to acquire sufficient CO2 monitors and HEPA filters for schools and colleges.

There are significant concerns among our members around the testing of students.

Access to rapid antigen tests (RATs) is critical. If schools and colleges are to remain open then it is imperative that school and college staff have priority access to free RATs. This must be on an ongoing basis, as students may test positive at any time.

The SSTUWA is seeking an assurance that RATs for students will be administered at home.

The National Cabinet decision to change the definitions of close and casual contacts is of considerable concern to school and college staff. We believe that the new definitions hold particular problems for teachers given the close interactions which occur in many school settings.

The union has been working cooperatively with government on these issues and will continue to do so. However, proper and full information needs to be provided by the employer to reassure educators that their workplaces will be safe.

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