School teachers need clear guidelines on managing COVID



By Pat Byrne

The outbreak of COVID-19 in schools has caused confusion among parents and the community, and anxiety among education staff.

Despite the government's efforts to explain the rules around isolation and school closures, by announcing two sets of protocols (one set that comes into force when there's an undefined high level of community transmission), it was always going to be a tough ask to keep the advice clear.

The State School Teachers' Union of WA supported the delay in opening the state's borders.

We did so because we could see from our oversight of the sector that schools and TAFEs were not ready for a massive outbreak of Omicron cases.

The union has made the point since the beginning of the pandemic that there was a need for the rules in the community and the protocols in schools to be consistent. This is still not the case.

It is inconsistent that unvaccinated people can't go into a café or bottle shop, yet they can volunteer in a school classroom or canteen for an entire school day as long as it's once a week.

It is inconsistent that large gatherings of 500 people in the community require proof of vaccination, yet in schools, hundreds of people can attend an assembly without being vaccinated. We have already seen how quickly Omicron has affected our schools, and how much disruption this has caused to students and staff who are now in isolation.

The government is under pressure to move from a 14-day isolation period to seven days, and we expect them to follow the health advice on this.

Our main concern is that when this decision is made, health and safety protocols are in place, and clear guidelines have been communicated to schools and parents.

We need a reset that combines clear guidelines with every possible support to make them practical and safe.

This means a number of things need to happen in schools. For a start, rapid antigen tests should be available for teachers and students with clear, step-by-step protocols for testing, reporting results and dealing with positive students and staff.

Anyone volunteering inside school buildings such as canteens and classrooms for any period of time should be fully vaccinated.

Sufficient CO2 monitors and air filters need to be operational in schools prior to the implementation of any new health advice, with clear guidelines for staff on how to operate them.

Our members understand the difficulties the education system faces. They're also aware the reality is that school will not be the same this year, whatever the protocols.

When high numbers of teachers are sick or isolating, there will be disruption to normal curriculum delivery, but schools will do everything they can to minimise this disruption.

Our members understand the desire to keep schools open, and they want to teach children face to face as much as they can.

But they want to do it as safely as they can.

If you don't keep education staff safe, you won't keep schools open.

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