eNews - 4 February 2022

SSTUWA
State School Teachers' Union of WA

COVID-19 - a message to members

Dear Member,

Given the somewhat chaotic start to the school year it is important to give you an insight into the SSTUWA's evolving position on a range of issues related to managing COVID-19 and keeping our members and their families as safe as possible.

There is a worryingly black and white approach developing, with all sense of nuance being lost in the debate about balancing an understandable desire to get back to "normal" with the desire to protect the vulnerable in our society as best we can.

In the same way, the whole purpose of schools being open seems to have shifted in some people's minds to being about economics, not education.

The SSTUWA 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 in no way ready for a massive outbreak of Omicron cases.

The SSTUWA raised concerns back in December about the way rules for schools were so different from those being applied to other places where large numbers of people gather in enclosed spaces.

How could it be that nobody would be able to go to a pub or café for a sit-down drink or a meal without being fully vaccinated, yet an unvaccinated volunteer could be in an actual classroom for a full day and the health advice was that was okay?

What was the difference between one venue with 500 plus people and a school hall with over 500 people at an assembly that meant the former required proof of vaccination and the latter did not?

This union and our members have followed the health advice all the way. We were far ahead of the community in takingup vaccinations. When they became mandatory some were disappointed that the union backed the idea, but literally 99% of members complied.

We were told visitors would have to wear masks if social distancing wasn't possible, but there were no new guidelines as to what social distancing now actually meant. Unvaccinated parents could go into classes; teachers were expected to meet face to face for parent interviews with people not having to be vaccinated. The contradictions were obvious.

Then came the announcements of what would come into play at some unspecified level of community spread. This made things even worse. People saw news grabs on TV, heard a snippet on radio or read a headline in a newspaper and naturally assumed these new rules were for now.

Two sets of rules, one in place, one on the way and nobody being very clear about what applied when.

Cue (at time of writing) six in-school cases; many teachers isolating, over 200 students sent home and a school closed.

The government is now under pressure to move from 14 days isolation to seven. We know they will follow the health advice on this.

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

If you don't keep teachers safe then you won't keep schools open. Even if you do keep them open and teachers keep getting sick you certainly won't be providing a proper education.

We need:

- One set of rules in place now, properly explained, with all the consequences for staff and pupils examined and addressed.
- Immediate access to COVID-19 leave for anyone required to isolate or who catches COVID-19 - with no requirement to use other leave first.
- Immediate supplies of Rapid Antigen Tests for teachers and students with clear, step-by-step protocols for testing, reporting results and dealing with positive students and staff.
- Access to school buildings for fully vaccinated people only.
- Full and immediate implementation of all ventilation and air monitoring recommendations.
- Unambiguous advice to parents that schools being open doesn't mean a normal education; that there will be disruption and patience will be required.
- A full and immediate review of the situation in TAFEs, where there seems to be no measures in place whatsoever.

We respect the difficulties our state government faces. There is for us no acceptable level of deaths from COVID-19, no tolerance for writing off the elderly or people with "co-morbidities".

We understand the desperate desire to keep schools open, but to do so the government needs to engage in proper

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