# Getting the COVID-19 response right

**By Matt Jarman**
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The SSTUWA is committed to working with the state government to ensure educators and students are safe when the WA borders open on 5 February.

As Australian Education Union Federal President Correna Haythorpe said recently, educators want to work constructively with their relevant departments of education to ensure schools can run safely, even in the face of the Omicron variant.

The AEU is concerned that the Prime Minister's office is preparing its own national plan for schools without consulting teachers or state governments. This demonstrates that the federal government has learned nothing from the experience in 2020, when teachers were ignored in the national response; that their health did not seem to matter to a Prime Minister whose sole mantra was to keep schools open, with no mention of the protection of teachers. It was only after intense lobbying that discussions between the AEU, Independent Education Union and the Australian Health Protection Committee were held and some acknowledgement of staff concerns was made.

The AEU has again called for a national plan; this one to include:

- Guidelines for the reopening of schools, accommodating the various needs of each state and territory where required.
- Priority access to RATs and PCR tests, with clear and consistent testing, tracking and isolating protocols and procedures to manage staff shortages.
- Identification of and funding for infrastructure required to allow schools to accommodate social distancing, hygiene, ventilation and any other public health measures to prevent the spread of the virus.

The SSTUWA is meeting with the department and undertaking the same constructive conversations with the state government. One of the key errors of 2020 was the failure to consult properly with educators and that mistake should not be repeated.

The vast majority of teachers want to be in classrooms, to be safe and to be able to deliver the face-to-face learning that they know benefits students.

A survey carried out by the SSTUWA in August, to which over 3,000 members responded, provided strong evidence that our members were already ahead of the rest of the community in getting vaccinated against COVID-19.

It was also possible to project from the responses to already vaccinated, having had the first vaccination, or having the first jab booked, that around 90 per cent of our members were going to be fully vaccinated by Christmas.

We did however expect some push back from members who objected to our support for the health advice that required mandatory vaccinations for education staff. Approximately 80 people chose to relinquish their union membership due to our support for mandatory vaccination. While losing members is always regrettable, the SSTUWA position will remain. This also extends to the getting of booster shots, which are now mandatory for all occupational groups covered by the original government mandate.

The overwhelming majority of members have supported our position and have followed the advice of the chief health officer.

Experiences across the world and the rest of Australia leave little doubt that within a week or two of the border opening we are likely to have many more COVID-19 cases in WA. Inevitably this will affect schools.

The SSTUWA is meeting with the department to outline our specific concerns and ensure processes are in place to deal with the inevitable disruption which will occur due to staff and/or student absences from schools.

The guidelines which were announced in December were predicated on the Delta variant being the main concern; this is no longer the case. There will need to be major changes. For example, it seemed highly contradictory that "regular" visitors to

school were defined in such a way that unvaccinated parents could spend a full day in a workplace – for example as a canteen volunteer. At time of writing, we are hopeful that these guidelines will change in response to our concerns.

There needs to be further clarification on mask wearing by visitors and indeed on access to school grounds for unvaccinated people. If people can't go the pub without a vaccine they should not be in schools.

There is also a need for clear guidance on ventilation. Suggestions that the windows stay open will cut little ice when temperatures hit the 40s in February and March.

We have had plenty of examples to learn from in other areas of Australia as to what is required and which mistakes to avoid.

The government, department, school leaders and teachers have done incredibly well to see WA so far through the COVID-19 pandemic without the impacts we have seen elsewhere. To see that change now for the want of stronger rules around vaccinations and masks for all visitors, as well as a proper effort around ventilation would be disappointing, to say the least.



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