National education and union news



New report recommends modernising schools, backed by full funding and resources

A new research paper from Monash University is recommending Victoria explore options to modernise school provision, supported with full funding for public schools and bold measures to address the public education workforce shortage.

Monash University's Education Workforce for the Future Research Lab, part of the Faculty of Education, suggests investigating a range of modernisation proposals including a four-day work week for school staff, new curriculum provision and assessment practices and updates to senior secondary certifications.

"Victoria's public schools are at a key juncture," said AEU Victoria branch president Meredith Peace.

"There has been significant change in Victoria over the past 30 years. As a community, we have a far greater understanding of the diverse needs of young people, including a much more nuanced understanding of neurodiversity and disability.

"Family structures and parent working patterns have changed, with most families needing two full time or close to full time incomes to make ends meet.

"Teachers, principals and education support staff in our public schools are impacted by new trends in digital technologies, social and political transformations, the commodification of education and more.

"But we have not changed the structure of our school system, making the job of providing quality public education more challenging than ever before, while underfunding and staff shortages are pushing the limits of the system."

The research, based on a review of national and international research and a survey of more than 8,000 Victorian AEU members, finds that:

Fifty-five per cent of participants felt their education programs were under-resourced and 56 per cent felt their wellbeing

programs were under-resourced.

Over 75 per cent of primary and secondary teachers say unequal funding and workloads prevent teachers from providing reasonable adjustments to support students with diverse needs.

Seventy-nine per cent of teachers felt that there was not enough support for teaching students with additional needs, and 71 per cent felt that there was a shortage of education support staff working in classrooms.

Uneven resourcing and the lack of qualified teachers has undermined curriculum provision, particularly in rural and regional areas.

Three-quarters of those who work in secondary schools believe that reform to senior secondary curriculum and assessment is needed.

Over 75 per cent of staff do not have enough time to respond to the learning needs of all students, and over 80 per cent feel that their workloads are increased as a result of inadequate support available.

Lead researcher, Dr Fiona Longmuir, said the paper outlined some of what was needed to be considered to modernise provision of school education in Victoria to better support school staff to respond to current and emerging issues.

To read more visit bit.ly/3YwtfyQ

IR bill lifts low paid casuals out of dark ages

UnionsWA has welcomed the introduction of the Industrial Relations Legislation Amendment Bill 2024 into parliament.

“These are common sense amendments that expand protections for workers and in some instances bring state legislation in line with the federal Fair Work Act,” said then UnionsWA secretary Owen Whittle.

“The changes will enable stronger action to address sexual harassment in the workplace, improve certain basic conditions and increase casual loading for state minimum wage workers to the same percentage it is nationally.”

As a result of the reforms, no casual worker in the state industrial relations system will be able to be paid lower than the state minimum wage plus a 25 per cent loading. For a casual minimum wage worker that equates to an extra $1.21 an hour.

“Cost-of-living pressures mean workers are having to stretch every dollar as far as they can. It is unacceptable for casual workers on the minimum wage in the WA system to be paid less than their national counterparts,” Mr Whittle said.

“A decade after casual loading was set at 25 per cent in theFair Worksystem, this will finally take us out of the dark ages and address this inequity.

“Expanding access to the WA Industrial Relations Commission for public sector workers for certain claims is a significant step forward for their rights.

“We are pleased to see penalties for breaking state industrial laws have also been increased in line with the federal amounts, ensuring worker exploitation is more adequately penalised.

“UnionsWA will continue to push for further reform to the Act to ensure that the rights and conditions for all workers in WA keep up with those won nationally.”

Sexual harassment victim-survivors granted fairer access to justice

The union movement has welcomed the Senate’s passage of the Albanese Government’s Costs Protection Bill, which will make it easier for victim-survivors of workplace sexual harassment to pursue legal action against perpetrators.

The Bill removes one of the main deterrents that victim-survivors face when considering court action – the risk of being burdened with the other side’s legal costs, which can result in significant debt or bankruptcy.

Under the Bill’s new “equal access” costs model, workers can assert their rights in federal courts, without fearing hefty costs. The new model applies to all Commonwealth sexual harassment and anti-discrimination laws, restricting courts from ordering applicants to pay respondents’ costs except in limited cases.

The ACTU is part of a broad coalition of over 85 organisations, the Power to Prevent coalition, including National Legal Aid and the Kingsford Legal Centre, which have been advocating for the new costs model.

According to ACTU research, only one in 230,000 victim-survivors of workplace sexual harassment bring proceedings to an Australian court.

The Australian Human Rights Commission estimates that nearly one in five workers are sexually harassed at work each year, yet only 444 cases have ever been brought to court since 1984, according to the ANU, allowing many perpetrators to evade accountability.

The model already exists in international jurisdictions, including federal civil rights and anti-discrimination laws in the United States.

ACTU President Michele O'Neil said this was a significant strengthening of rights for people who had been harassed and discriminated against at work.

"Victim-survivors of workplace sexual harassment now have a fair chance to seek justice without the fear of financial ruin holding them back," she said.

"No worker should be priced out of justice when they have experienced sexual harassment and discrimination. Every day, in every sector, in every part of the country, unions represent workers experiencing harassment and discrimination at work.

"This Bill sends a clear message: workplace harassment is unacceptable in our workplaces. This is a massive step forward in holding perpetrators accountable and making workplaces safer for everyone."

National Legal Aid executive director Katherine McKernan said Australia still had unacceptably high rates of sexual harassment and it was important that people who are disadvantaged could access justice if they experience discrimination.

"It is heartening to see the government listening to both victim-survivors and those organisations that work with the most disadvantaged to design a system that removes barriers to seeking redress from workplace discrimination and sexual harassment," she said.

"This change is especially important for individuals in low-paid and precarious employment, which often translates to lower awards of compensation that are quickly eroded by legal costs in litigation."

Victoria Legal Aid special advisor Melanie Schleiger said: "Over the past 10 years, Victoria Legal Aid's specialist discrimination law service, the Equality Law Program, has provided over 12,500 legal advice sessions on discrimination matters and run over 1,000 case files, but during that time, only four of our clients proceeded to hearing and final judgment."

"Many of our clients choose not to proceed with seeking legal justice because of their legitimate worries about financial risk to their future wellbeing and that of their families.

"[The] change removes a significant barrier and addresses the power imbalance between victim-survivors and their employers – who often have legal teams and large budgets to defend claims."

To read more visit bit.ly/3YyUeK4

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