

Australian Education Union Victorian Branch and Independent Education Union Vic-Tas Joint Statement

Schools need more support to manage COVID-19

The Australian Education Union and Independent Education Union call on the Premier Daniel Andrews and the Minister for Education James Merlino to urgently provide schools with the flexibility and support needed to deliver high quality educational programs while ensuring the health and safety of teachers, support staff, principals, and students.

The Department of Education's current policy for schools in Melbourne and Mitchell Shire, which requires VCE, VCAL, and special school students to access face to face teaching and learning on-site, is failing too many students and not enabling schools to put in place reasonable and necessary health and safety measures to protect school communities. This policy is binding on public schools, replicated in Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne, and acts as guidance for independent schools.

Our profession understands the importance of face to face teaching to the delivery of high quality education. However, in an escalating pandemic, schooling arrangements must take proper account of key health and safety issues, appropriate steps to limit transmission such as physical distancing, as well as the government's broader advice to Victorian workers that those who can work from home should do so.

Thousands of teachers and support staff across areas covered by Stage 3 restrictions are currently required to attend workplaces to undertake tasks such as running remote classes which could equally effectively and far more safely be performed from home. In addition to the heightened risk of transmission, this is causing significant additional anxiety to school staff and their families. This must change.

The Department of Education policy, on any assessment, does not provide schools with the flexibility they need to manage these issues properly. A black and white approach in a pandemic where circumstances change almost daily does not provide the agility our schools urgently need. Current policy arrangements leave principals with the responsibility to manage student and staff absences, parental concerns and in some instances school closures, yet they are not trusted to make the key decisions that will provide tangible support to their communities.

As a result, some students are not receiving a formal learning program and staff and students are left to work and learn in circumstances that put their mental and physical safety at risk. This is no more evident than in special schools and senior secondary colleges.

We have received multiple reports of principals in public and Catholic schools who have been prevented from taking sensible steps to minimise risk. School leaders understand the flexibility needed to determine the most suitable and safe arrangements for their communities and the local context in which they find themselves. This flexibility could entail reducing the numbers of staff and students on-site and the provision of education to students attending school and those whose parents have kept them at home, all of which are vital to everyone's psychological health.

The state government and employer bodies such as Catholic Education Melbourne must provide school leaders with the necessary authority, in consultation with staff and their local community, to make decisions to respond to local circumstances, ensuring education programs continue while the health and safety of staff and students is prioritised and managed effectively in accordance with occupational health and safety law.

We believe school leaders need to be afforded the trust and flexibility to make the best decisions for their local circumstances. The physical and mental health and safety of our members is being ignored and must be afforded higher priority.

The current policy isn't working for all schools and must be changed.

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