



COVID-19 UPDATE

CORRESPONDENCE TO ALL IEU MEMBERS – 17 MARCH 2020

As the COVID-19 virus continues to spread, IEU members and whole school communities are under enormous pressure. I share the concerns and anxiety that many members are feeling in these uncertain times.

Current advice is that at this stage schools should remain open, except where required for cleaning, contact tracing or isolation. This is supported by public health experts, and it's important to highlight that (contrary to some suggestions circulating on social media) this is not simply about 'child-minding' or keeping the economy going – it's part of a broader strategy to manage the spread of the virus. It may be the case that at some point there will be a general closure of schools, but it's crucial that this is timed for maximum effectiveness.

Victoria's Chief Health Officer Dr Brett Sutton has stated that 'pre-emptive school closures are not likely to be proportionate or effective as a public health intervention to prevent community transmission of COVID-19 at this time... School closures may still be considered late in the outbreak in anticipation of a peak in infection rates, for a shorter period of time. Short term reactive school closures may also be warranted to allow cleaning and contact tracing to occur.' A similar statement has been made by the Tasmanian Director of Public Health.

On 16 March I, along with many other union leaders, attended a meeting with senior representatives of the Victorian Chief Health Officer. I left this meeting reassured that operational decisions about our sector are being made for the right reasons and are informed by expert advice. I firmly believe that individuals and communities will be safest if employers and employees in our sector follow the advice provided by health experts and relevant government departments.

Most important to us is the well-being of our members. The IEU has been actively seeking assurances from all employers that every effort is being made to ensure that staff are as safe as they can be in these unprecedented circumstances, and that those directly affected by the virus will not be disadvantaged in terms of income or employment entitlements. Employers are obliged to provide safe workplaces, and proactive measures should already be in place to minimise risk. Many schools, for example, have cancelled face-to-face parent teacher sessions, assemblies and other school events, as well as limiting staff meetings. Particular allowances must be made for individuals with heightened risk factors, and anyone required to self-isolate must be able to do so without financial penalty.

We continue to actively lobby employers in our sector around these issues and have received constructive responses and commitments from Catholic employers as well as many independent schools. We will keep members informed about these responses and will actively oppose any actions by employers which are unreasonable or fail to acknowledge the critical role being played by school staff in the fight against the spread of COVID-19.

The IEU will actively work with education authorities and employers in the best interests of our members throughout this crisis, and we will keep you updated as the situation evolves.

We will continue to publish employer responses and other relevant updates on this section of our website. We will also update our Facebook page with relevant news and advice.

In the meantime, any member needing specific advice or support regarding their situation should contact the IEU on (03)9254 1860, 1800 622 889 or info@ieuvictas.org.au

In unity

Debra James
General Secretary