



COVID-19 UPDATE

CORRESPONDENCE TO ALL IEU MEMBERS – 19 MARCH 2020

Over the last few weeks the IEU, on behalf of all members, has been working to secure the entitlements and safety of employees across our whole sector – Catholic schools, independent schools, ELICOS colleges and private providers. Since my email to you on Tuesday, I have met with or been briefed by a range of relevant authorities, including Directors of Catholic education, the ISV, senior members of the Department of Education and the Premier's office. I can assure you that your union is continuing to advocate strongly for your rights and for your safety at work.

Here are some key issues we'd like members to be aware of at this stage.

Employers must identify and minimise any workplace risk – and if a school cannot meet its legislated obligation to effectively manage risk then it should not be operating. While this legal responsibility for workplace safety falls on the employer, it is essential that risk identification and minimisation is undertaken in genuine consultation with staff, the IEU sub-branch Rep and with elected staff Health and Safety Representatives.

There are a range of well-publicised steps that can and should be taken by schools – these include the promotion of personal hygiene and physical distancing, staggered break times, reductions in mass gatherings (such as assemblies), thorough cleaning, provision of basic hygiene essentials such as soap, and clear advice to parents.

We know however that some of these measures will be difficult or impossible to consistently implement in a school setting. Regardless, it is essential that urgent and genuine consultation occurs around management of these hazards between leadership, staff, the IEU sub-branch and Health and Safety Reps. Contact the IEU if this is not occurring in your workplace.

Some staff are in higher risk categories than others. This includes the elderly and those with existing medical conditions. It also potentially includes those who live with or care for anyone in these categories. We have secured in-principle agreement from most employers that they will endeavour to meet any reasonable request for alternative working arrangements for such staff. These arrangements could include working from home, alternative low-contact duties, or changed working hours for those who commute on public transport. In the first instance, have this conversation with your Principal or other relevant member of the leadership team – and contact the IEU if your request is refused.

This crisis should not create an unreasonable increase in your workload. Teachers, for example, cannot be expected to simultaneously deliver lessons in person and online. If students are being voluntarily withdrawn from schools, parents cannot expect that their education will continue uninterrupted – and it is the responsibility of school leaders to make this clear.

Schools should be planning for a potential close-down now. As part of the planning for closure, it is essential that schools carefully consider how alternative working arrangements and curriculum delivery will operate. Important factors include the full provision of all necessary resources (including technology), privacy issues for teachers delivering classes by video-link, consideration of the space and facilities that staff have access to at home, and the fact that many staff will have heightened caring responsibilities, particularly those with children also affected by school closures. As we have already seen in a number of different schools, potential issues are best identified and addressed if staff and their representatives are genuinely consulted in the planning process.

Your salary and entitlements

The IEU has been in negotiation with the many hundreds of employers across our sector to ensure that proper protocols are put in place and to ensure that no staff will lose salary or entitlements as a result of this crisis. In the Victorian Catholic sector, we have secured special additional leave arrangements for many categories of affected staff – members in this sector will hear more about this very soon. Tasmanian Catholic employers have been slower to respond, but we are seeking similar commitments. We have also contacted every independent school and education provider employing IEU members seeking their guarantee that staff will not be disadvantaged as a result of this crisis – many have responded with satisfactory commitments, and we will continue to pursue those who have not. We are also encouraging all employers to be flexible in dealing with requests for alterations of existing leave arrangements.

The health and wellbeing of our members is of utmost importance. Our office remains open, and we are fielding hundreds of queries daily and assisting many members and groups of members with specific issues arising from the current crisis.

For assistance, advice or support, contact us on (03) 9254 1860 / 1800 622 889 / info@ieuvictas.org.au

Debra James
General Secretary