



COVID-19

YOUR FOUR MOST COMMON QUESTIONS

We've been inundated with questions about COVID-19 - here we answer four of your most common queries.

1. What steps should my employer be taking to minimise risk?

Employers have a legal duty to ensure that workplace risks are identified and minimised. This should be done in collaboration with the IEU sub-branch and with elected staff Health and Safety Representatives.

Schools should implement a range of strategies to reduce transmission, including the promotion of personal hygiene, physical distancing, staggered break times, reductions in mass gatherings (such as assemblies), thorough cleaning, provisions of basic essentials such as hand sanitiser, and clear advice to parents about hygiene in the home and how they should notify the school of any contact with suspected cases.

We understand that in many schools some of these measures will be difficult or even impossible. It is unrealistic, for example, to expect all students to consistently practise physical distancing. We have also had reports of schools having real difficulties sourcing adequate supplies of soap or hand sanitiser. What is absolutely essential is that urgent and genuine consultation occurs around management of these issues between leadership, staff, the IEU sub-branch and Health and Safety Reps.

If you do not believe that your employer is taking all reasonable steps to minimise risk, if consultation is inadequate, or if you do not have an elected Health and Safety Rep in your school, contact the IEU.

2. I am in a high-risk category – what should i do?

Employers must give consideration to the needs of high-risk staff, including older staff and those with existing medical conditions, as well as those who are in unavoidable close contact with high-risk individuals. If you fall into one of these categories, you should request modification of your duties (which may include working from home) or access to leave.

For advice or assistance around any negotiations, contact the IEU.

3. What is the IEU doing?

We are assisting and advising hundreds of individual members every day. In addition to this, we have been in intensive negotiation with employers across our sector to ensure that proper protocols are put in place for any foreseeable eventuality and to ensure that staff will not lose salary or entitlements as a result of this pandemic. This is still a work in progress, but we can report that employers covering the majority of our members are making commitments to us that go significantly above and beyond their minimum legal requirements.

We will provide sector-by-sector information to members as it becomes available.

4. Why isn't the IEU publicly advocating for the immediate closure of schools?

This is a complex issue. Amongst our membership there is a huge range of opinions on the efficacy and timing of school closures: given that expert opinion is divided and international examples are not yet clear, this is understandable, as is the deep anxiety that many school staff are currently experiencing.

The rate of community transmission in Australia is still extremely low, and current evidence suggests (though not yet conclusively) that children present a relatively low transmission risk. This may change – and if we believe that the health and safety of our broader membership is being put at unnecessary risk then we will revise our position accordingly. Right now, however, we are focussing on our ongoing negotiations with the many hundreds of employers in non-government education, on addressing workplace- or sector-specific issues as they arise, and on supporting and advocating for individual members or groups of members in need.

It is likely that school closures will occur at some point. Schools should be planning for this now, as there will be many factors to consider, including remote working arrangements and alternative modes of curriculum delivery. We've seen in several schools already that these arrangements can present complex issues and that genuine consultation with staff and IEU reps is essential.

Finally, we also know that schools and school staff provide far more than an academic education. For many students, teachers and other staff are their best defence against panic, their best educators about crucial hygiene matters, and the best providers of clear and calm advice in this extremely stressful time. We have a vital role to play right now – not as 'child-minders', but as educators, carers, community leaders and role models for our students.

Please – if you need advice or support, contact the IEU office. Our lines are running hot and our inboxes are flooded, but we are doing everything we can to offer advice and support to every member who needs us.