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Let's avoid replicating early childhood crisis in schools

The Independent Education Union, which represents more than 32,000 early childhood teachers, school teachers, principals and school support staff throughout NSW and the ACT, is warning that COVID-related staff shortages leading to early childhood centre closures is foreshadowing what's ahead when schools re-open.

Early childhood teachers have been on the frontline of the COVID crisis since it began, staying open throughout the most recent NSW lockdown, with no option for remote learning. They are already open after a brief Christmas break.

Early childhood teachers cannot socially distance from their young charges, who are not vaccinated. The sector has been experiencing staff shortages for some years, and Omicron has only exacerbated the problem, forcing many centres to close while staff are furloughed.

Early childhood centres and directors are telling the IEU they feel abandoned by the government in the face of this crisis. Centres don't know what's happening from one day to the next, one early childhood centre director says, and this uncertainty is only amping up pandemic anxieties among staff, parents and children. "The rules keep changing, and we're in a state of confusion," the director told the IEU.

"Government via press release will not cut it," said IEUA NSW/ACT Branch Acting Secretary Pam Smith. "It is crucial that the early childhood sector is supported and consulted at every step of the way."

"The State Government must communicate clearly with early childhood teachers and directors about access to rapid-antigen tests and any potential mandate for booster shots.

"Confusing and inconsistent communication from government is adding to the anxiety many early childhood teachers and directors are experiencing."

"We must learn from what is happening in the early childhood sector now and take steps to avoid these issues being repeated when schools re-open," Smith said.

The IEU, which represents degree-qualified teachers in early childhood centres, consistently advocates for improved pay and conditions, and recognition of their professional status.

The IEU is available to support its early childhood members with any questions or problems they may have and calls upon the government to provide support to these crucial teachers with a consistent approach to the Omicron crisis.

"More timely and agile action and communications for the early childhood sector and schools alike would alleviate some of the stress experienced by teachers and parents," Smith said.

Contacts

Pam Smith, Acting Secretary, IEUA NSW/ACT Branch, 0418 297 409
Media: Sue Osborne, 0430 220 254

The IEUA NSW/ACT Branch represents over 32,000 teachers, principals and support staff in Catholic and independent schools, early childhood centres and post-secondary colleges.

Authorised by Pam Smith, Acting Branch Secretary, IEUA NSW/ACT