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Exempting education staff from COVID isolation rules is a public policy failure

Today's announcement by National Cabinet that staff in schools, early childhood centres and post-secondary colleges are exempt from COVID isolation rules "is an abject failure of public policy", IEUA NSW/ACT Branch Acting Secretary Pam Smith said. Neither the state nor federal government consulted with the union before making this decision.

The Independent Education Union, which represents more than 32,000 school teachers, principals, school support staff, early childhood teachers and teachers in post-secondary colleges throughout NSW and the ACT, is warning such a decision could have disastrous consequences and result in more school closures and disruptions – the opposite of its purported intention.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison said the only people who should isolate are "close contacts", which he defined strictly as "if you have someone in your accommodation setting that has the virus". But all education staff are now exempt from this provision, meaning those living with someone who has the virus can come to work.

"It means our members will be forced to work knowing either that they are a close contact and could infect others or that they are working with close contacts and could get infected and carry the illness to their own families – this only adds to current anxieties," Smith said.

"Watering down work health and safety provisions in the third year of the pandemic because the government failed to plan is unacceptable."

The exemptions are counterproductive. "How are staff to access rapid-antigen tests? Who pays? How will testing be administered and monitored?" Smith asked. The Prime Minister short on detail about this crucial issue, saying only that "surveillance testing" for education staff was an ongoing discussion.

ACTU Secretary Sally McManus firmly opposes National Cabinet's decision. "The first priority of any government should be to keep their citizens safe," she said. "We need the tools to achieve this, which are free and accessible rapid-antigen tests."

Smith said: "The IEU opposes any weakening of WHS rights – for our members and for every other employee and industry on the isolation-exempt list. A healthy workforce means a healthy economy – not the other way around."

IEU Deputy President Tina Ruello said: "This is unconscionable conduct from a government that has abrogated its responsibility for the health and wellbeing of teachers."

“To exempt teachers from COVID protocols is putting teachers and their families in the front lines as cannon fodder.

“As a teacher I cannot, in all conscience, walk into a classroom as a known close contact and say, ‘Hey kids, the rule doesn’t apply to me – but it does to you. Have a nice day!’”

A Sydney teacher and IEU member said: “There is a reason everyone should read 1984. If you control the language you control the people. How many times will we see the definition of ‘close contact’ change for a political agenda?”

“It is time to say no – you will not play with our lives and the lives of those in our charge,” the teacher said.

IEU Vice President Early Childhood Services Gabrielle Connell said early childhood teachers are fearful they will be in close contact with children and families as well as co-workers who may be positive or close contacts of positive people. “We may not only catch COVID but take it home to our families,” Connell said.

“We have all been thrown under the bus and the government is trying to deal with the situation through Band-Aid solutions, and early childhood teachers are being treated as dispensable objects. We are angry and disillusioned as well as exhausted.”

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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.

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