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Reinforcing the right to disconnect for school staff

The Independent Education Union rejects a push by employer groups to limit the right to disconnect for teachers and support staff in independent schools, submitted to the Fair Work Commission this week as it reviews modern awards.

The Association of Independent Schools (AIS), which represents employers in over 300 schools, is pushing for teachers and support staff to remain available after hours. The independent schools sector includes not just the big, well-known institutions, but also smaller schools including faith-based, ethnic and alternative schools.

“Teachers and school staff are already carrying heavy workloads and they need the same right to disconnect as other working people,” said Independent Union of Australia NSW/ACT Branch Secretary Carol Matthews. The IEU represents more than 32,000 teachers and support, professional and operational staff in independent schools.

“Of course we recognise that overnight excursions and camps, Saturday sport and boarding house supervision are an essential part of life in many independent schools, and staff need to be available for these times and activities,” Matthews said.

“But teachers and school staff also have the right to downtime and are still entitled to the legislated right to disconnect when they are not performing an allocated or rostered duty.”

The right to disconnect is a key part of the federal Labor government’s “Closing Loopholes” changes to industrial relations laws passed in February this year. The new right comes into effect on 26 August (and a year later for businesses with fewer than 15 employees).

“Along with overnight excursions and weekend sport, student contact, employer requests and parental queries are all part of school life, and we are not trying to stop this,” Matthews said.

“But the AIS calling for school staff not to have this right is unreasonable. School staff should not be required to be on call at 8pm on a weeknight if a parent or student wishes to contact them.

“We are happy to discuss clearly identified exceptions, but the new right to disconnect was designed to allow all working people family and leisure time free from work demands and interruptions, and teachers and school staff are no exception.”

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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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