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Child safety – Union welcomes national reforms, but more needs to be done

The union representing teachers in early childhood education and care in NSW and the ACT welcomes national reforms to improve child safety but calls for further action to reduce the excessive amount of paperwork.

Federal and state education ministers met today to announce a national register of all childcare staff to verify qualifications and track their work history, a ban on personal mobile phones and mandatory training on detecting and reporting suspected child grooming and abuse.

“The union has been calling for measures such as educator registration and mandatory training for some time,” said Independent Education Union of Australia NSW/ACT Branch Secretary Carol Matthews. “We are pleased that federal and state education ministers have adopted these proposals.”

However, mandatory training should extend to centre owners and operators who often have the final say in making child safety reports to authorities.

Matthews said the trial of CCTV cameras in 300 centres was “no magic bullet – for example, it cannot be installed in baby-change rooms and bathrooms. It is no substitute for a strong child safety culture. There are also serious privacy and cyber security concerns that must be addressed.”

Matthews said the initiatives announced today reflect the importance of staff in providing a safe and nurturing environment for young children.

“However, improved pay and conditions, and measures to address workload are fundamental to safeguard the quality of education and care services,” she said.

Matthews said solving the attraction and retention crisis requires employers to treat early childhood teachers the same as their primary school counterparts, including through pay parity.

Matthews said the regulatory framework in NSW is complex, cumbersome and takes teachers and educators away from their core duty of educating and caring for children.

“Teachers and educators are leaving the sector at unprecedented rates due to burnout and dissatisfaction – particularly from excessive workloads caused by the volume of paperwork,” she said.

“Our members may be expected to write thousands of words to fulfil Assessment and Rating requirements under the National Quality Standard – even a thesis does not have to be that long.”

Matthews also welcomed stronger scrutiny of centres that consistently breach state and territory regulations to determine if they should be fined or lose funding.

“It is high time that for-profit providers were held to account for failing to ensure the safety of children in their care,” she said. “The focus on profits rather than high-quality education and care is a big reason behind safety breaches.”

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

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