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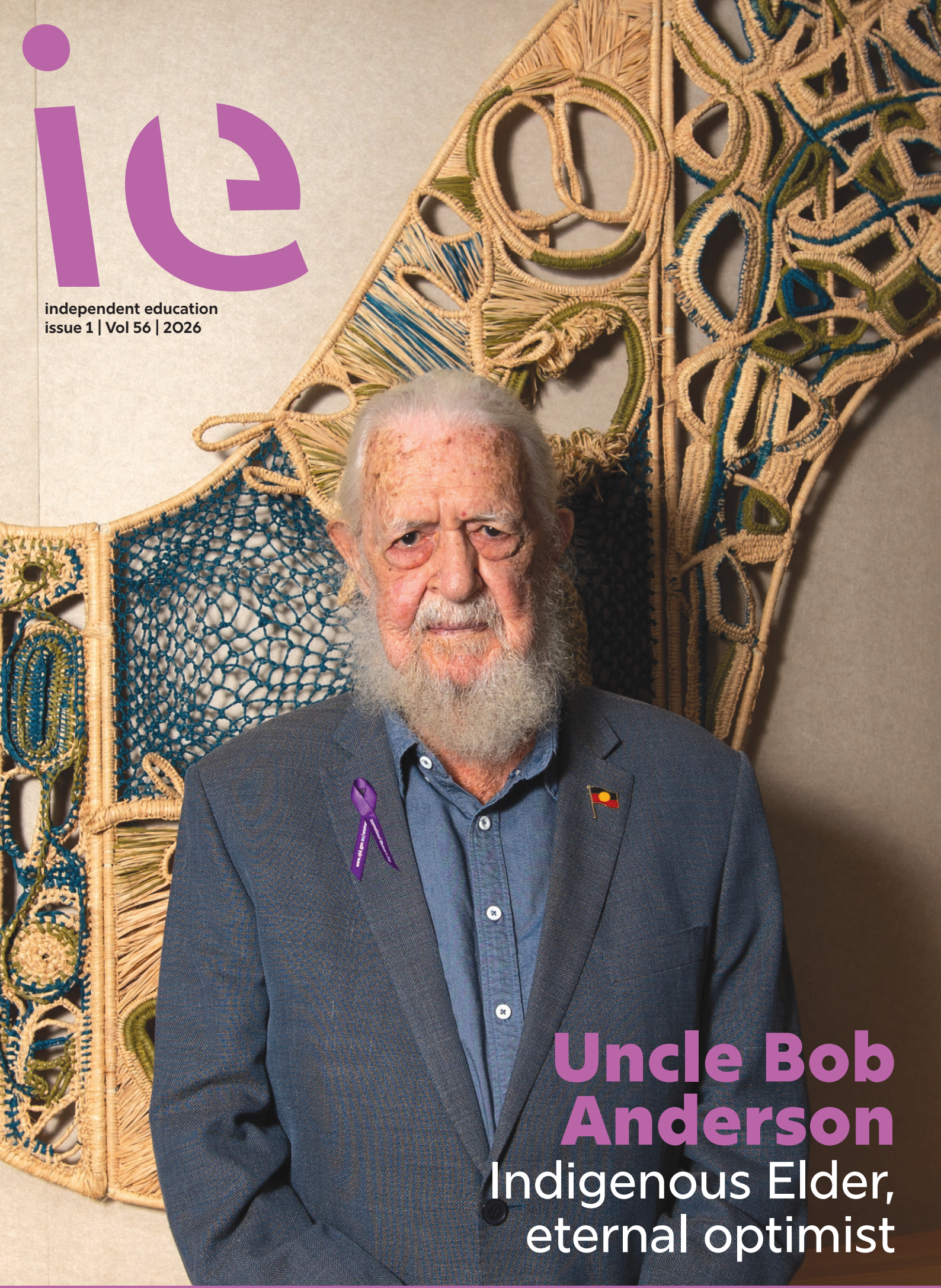

Uncle Bob Anderson

Indigenous Elder, eternal optimist

Uluru Statement from the Heart

Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tribes were the first sovereign Nations of the Australian continent and its adjacent islands, and possessed it under our own laws and customs. This our ancestors did, according to the reckoning of our culture, from the Creation, according to the common law from 'time immemorial', and according to science more than 60,000 years ago.

This sovereignty is a spiritual notion: the ancestral tie between the land, or 'mother nature', and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were born therefrom, remain attached thereto, and must one day return thither to be united with our ancestors. This link is the basis of the ownership of the soil, or better, of sovereignty. It has never been ceded or extinguished, and co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown.

How could it be otherwise? That peoples possessed a land for sixty millennia and this sacred link disappears from world history in merely the last two hundred years?

With substantive constitutional change and structural reform, we believe this ancient sovereignty can shine through as a fuller expression of Australia's nationhood.

Proportionally, we are the most incarcerated people on the planet. We are not an innately criminal people. Our children are aliened from their families at unprecedented rates. This cannot be because we have no love for them. And our youth languish in detention in obscene numbers. They should be our hope for the future.

These dimensions of our crisis tell plainly the structural nature of our problem. *This is the torment of our powerlessness.*

We seek constitutional reforms to empower our people and take a *rightful place* in our own country. When we have power over our destiny our children will flourish. They will walk in two worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country.

We call for the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution.

Makarrata is the culmination of our agenda: *the coming together after a struggle.* It captures our aspirations for a fair and truthful relationship with the people of Australia and a better future for our children based on justice and self-determination.

We seek a Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations and truth-telling about our history.

In 1967 we were counted, in 2017 we seek to be heard. We leave base camp and start our trek across this vast country. We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.

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For more information refer to NESA or TQI websites.

Melody makers
Bringing music to the classroom **18**

Editorial

We hope all IEU members have enjoyed a wonderful start to 2026.

IEU branches across Australia have started the year strongly as major campaigns and collective bargaining efforts get underway.

Themes of professional respect, inclusion, and the importance of safety and wellbeing feature in this edition.

Read about 97-year-old First Nations Elder and union movement icon Uncle Bob Anderson, who shares stories from his lifetime of fighting for social justice and helping achieve meaningful progress on reconciliation (page 6).

Two IEU history teacher members, Mick Klipin and David Van Tol, will embark on extraordinary journeys after receiving NSW Premier's Teacher Scholarships. Learn about their once-in-a-lifetime professional development opportunity and reflections on why IEU membership matters (page 14).

Ruth Sharman, a Queensland-based specialist teacher whose role is to support student inclusion, was recently given an award for her outstanding commitment to helping students feel safe and supported.

Hear from Ruth about why she loves her job and why the current round of Queensland Catholic negotiations is critical for staff in her role (page 9).

Queensland University of Technology education professor Martin Mills examines how diminishing autonomy for teachers to innovate in the classroom is driving staff from the profession, and why professional respect for teachers is non-negotiable (page 10).

In this edition of *IE*, we also explore the pressures school principals face and why school leaders should be regarded as "first responders" (page 32). We also discuss how increasing workplace surveillance is raising safety concerns for all school staff (page 30).

We hope you enjoy this edition of *IE* and find the articles insightful and useful.

Remember, the IEU is here for any members seeking advice or support on any professional or industrial matters, so don't hesitate to reach out.

Terry Burke
Secretary
IEU-QNT Branch

AUS WIDE

Australian Capital Territory

Retired teachers welcomed back under new registration model

Retired teachers will have new opportunities to teach in ACT classrooms in 2026.

The ACT government last year approved a new registration model that lowers fees and requires fewer hours of professional learning for part-time teachers over the age of 60.

IEUA NSW/ACT Branch Secretary Carol Matthews welcomed the new approach to retain experienced teachers.

"The initiative acknowledges the professional wisdom and experience of long-serving teachers while maintaining strong community expectations around teacher quality," she says.

Under the new model, retiree teachers must continue to meet core registration requirements such as holding an approved teaching qualification and maintaining Working with Vulnerable People registration.

They must also demonstrate the abilities and knowledge outlined in the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers.

However, retiree teachers teaching no more than three days a week will only be required to pay half the standard annual fee and complete 25 hours of professional learning over five years.

Northern Territory

ASOCS trial in NT Catholic schools underway

A key win from the most recent agreement was the employer's consent to conduct a school-based trial of the Alternative School Officer Classification Schedule (ASOCS) used in Queensland Catholic schools.

The current classification structure is outdated and does not reflect the realities and complexities of work in a contemporary school setting.

During Term 4 2025, a dozen school officer members participated in the trial, with a further trial currently under consideration by the employer.

Participants included laboratory technicians, administration officers, librarians, information technology support staff, wellbeing and pastoral care officers and inclusion support assistants (ISAs).

IEU officers supported the trial by conducting individual education sessions for each school officer participant.

These sessions assisted school officers in completing their job analysis, a key component of the ASOCS model, to allow understanding of their role.

The job analysis and classification factors were used to develop exemplar position descriptions, which will serve as a reference for consistent classification across roles.

Importantly, the trial is a separate issue from any discussion of contemporary wages for school officers.

New South Wales

Union enforces independent schools' workload transparency clause

Workload transparency was a key outcome of the IEU's Now's The Time campaign and independent school employers must meet the new requirements in clause 16.5 of the Independent Schools (Teachers) Multi-Enterprise Agreement (MEA).

Employers must tell teachers about the usual face-to-face teaching hours, outline general extracurricular expectations and specify release time for Leadership Level 1 and 2 roles. This clarity is essential for fair and sustainable workloads.

In Catholic systemic schools, workload is set through Work Practices Agreements, and in NSW government schools through the industrial award.

Some independent schools previously refused to disclose teaching loads, making it difficult for part-time teachers to confirm correct pay and full-time teachers to know whether they were under- or overloaded.

IEU organisers are actively engaging with members in independent schools to ascertain whether their employer is fulfilling these legal obligations.

The union has produced resources to empower chapters to require employers to comply, including a pro forma letter to request this information from school leaders.

If the union is unable to obtain information that confirms the school is complying with its legal obligations under the MEA, we will not hesitate to act, including seeking the assistance of the Fair Work Commission.

Queensland

Catholic members want ACTION NOW!

IEU members in Queensland Catholic schools are bargaining for a replacement collective agreement, with the current agreement expiring mid-year.

Single bargaining unit (SBU) meetings have commenced, and employer and member logs of claims tabled and exchanged.

It is evident in the employer claims that there is no broad vision to address key issues, particularly workload, in schools.

The employee log of claims was developed through a comprehensive consultation process and subject to final consideration by IEU chapters, ensuring broad member support for the claims.

Four key themes emerged from employee feedback, with members wanting action on:

- addressing the workload crisis
- wages that recognise the value of their work
- implementing contemporary rights at work
- the recognition of specialist and leadership roles.

Six SBU representatives brought their lived experience as teachers, middle leaders and school support staff from Catholic schools across the state, ensuring members have a strong voice at the bargaining table.

Queensland Catholic schools must address these meaningful improvements to working conditions for IEU members.

South Australia

Record-breaking $1.3 million recovered for members

The IEU's SA Branch is having a busy and successful year.

The union recovered over $1.3 million in underpayments to members in 2025 – a record for the branch.

About 70 sub branch reps completed one-day training sessions (held in-house at the IEU), with 10 of those reps returning for more advanced training in March this year.

Since the training, sub branches have become noticeably more active and willing to act collectively to achieve the outcomes they seek, while also recruiting new members.

SA members were highly engaged with our branch, gaining support through 3500 phone calls, 3791 logged assistance emails and 1734 queries and issues resolved.

The branch negotiated 13 enterprise agreements with approval for two more due, and membership is growing.

Bargaining continues for 13 further EAs – including the Catholic EB24 negotiations, which have stalled on pay and workload. Lutheran Schools SA bargaining is about to commence, and many more independent school EAs will enter bargaining throughout the year.

Tasmania

Catholic schools ready to bargain

On 6 March, IEU representatives from across Tasmania met to endorse the union's log of claims for the next round of bargaining with Catholic Education Tasmania.

The 61-point draft log was built from member feedback and union experience under the current agreement.

The IEU is calling for a single-interest agreement that protects and improves existing conditions, guarantees wages at least equivalent to Tasmanian government schools, recognises increasing workload and responsibilities and provides sustainable support for work-life balance.

Key claims include substantial salary increases, improved superannuation, fair compensation for extra duties, limits on out-of-hours meetings, protected planning and preparation time, strengthened health and safety measures, modernised leave entitlements, and fair processes for performance and conduct management.

The IEU supports the campaigns of the Australian Education Union, which represents government school teachers, and other public sector unions and, as our own bargaining commences, looks forward to joining the call for better outcomes for all Tasmanian workers.

Victoria

The fight for fair bargaining rights

More than 30,000 members of the Victorian branch of the Australian Education Union (AEU), which represents teachers in government schools, took strike action on 24 March over unresolved pay and workload issues.

Alongside critical workload and welfare issues, they are seeking a 35% pay increase over three years to address interstate disparities which have left Victorian education salaries among the lowest in Australia.

The AEU's claims are similar to those of IEU members in Victorian Catholic schools, but a key difference is the right to take industrial action. Government school staff can take protected action because they have a single employer, whereas Catholic teachers require a Single Interest Authorisation (SIA) from the Fair Work Commission (FWC) to do so. Uniquely among Catholic employers across the nation, this is a step that the Victorian Catholic Education Authority opposes.

The IEU's 2025 SIA campaign successfully demonstrated majority support across the sector for fair bargaining under an SIA. However, employers continue to oppose and delay our application for an SIA, resulting in an extended, ongoing dispute at the FWC.

Western Australia

Major agreements deliver long-awaited pay rises

The IEU's WA Branch is shaping up for a big year, with bargaining continuing across the state's two largest non-government education employers, Catholic Education and AngliSchools.

After more than two years of negotiations, the Catholic Support Staff Bargaining Agreement will proceed to a vote in Term 2. The AngliSchools Support Staff Agreement is currently before the Fair Work Commission awaiting final approval.

Both support staff agreements mark an important milestone as the first federal agreements for these cohorts, delivering improved conditions and long-awaited pay increases.

In contrast, bargaining for teachers in AngliSchools remains protracted. After two strong 'no' votes, negotiations are approaching a third year. Further meetings are expected despite the employer's ongoing reluctance to address unsustainable workloads and increasing class sizes.

IEU WA is also campaigning for members in several workplaces to start bargaining for their first ever enterprise agreements.

We have completed Term 1 delegate training and our organisers are visiting members in the Great Southern region, with the Goldfields, Carnarvon/Geraldton area, the Southwest and Kimberley scheduled for Terms 2 and 3.

InFocus
Uncle Bob Anderson

A lifelong advocate for social justice, Uncle Bob Anderson is a highly respected Ngugi Elder and icon of the Australian union movement, writes Emily Campbell.

Robert Vincent Anderson, also known as Uncle Bob, has an astonishing list of achievements for a man whose early life was plagued by hardship.

The 97-year-old was the first Indigenous person to graduate from the fledgling Queensland University of Technology (QUT) over 75 years ago.

He received a Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) in 2001 for his service to Queensland's Indigenous community.

In 2019, he led the Quandamooka People to success after a lengthy Federal Court battle for native title recognition of their land and waterways.

Despite adversity during his childhood and expulsion from school, Uncle Bob has achieved remarkable feats and impressive credentials. But he is modest about his role in advancing reconciliation and improving others' lives.

'Saltwater person'

Born in 1929 in East Brisbane, Uncle Bob is the youngest of five siblings, with two brothers and two sisters.

He is a father, grandfather, great-grandfather and uncle to many nieces and nephews, and has shared countless adventures with his beloved long-term partner Cathy Boyle.

As a Ngugi person, Uncle Bob's traditional Country includes Mulgumpin (Moreton Island) and Minjerribah (Stradbroke Island) in the Quandamooka lands of South East Queensland.

Uncle Bob spent his early childhood with his family on Minjerribah and attended Dunwich State School.

"It was wonderful, there's a special feeling about it – you're there by the bay waters, the Quandamooka land," he says.

"You grow up knowing you're a saltwater person and it adds something to your identity.

"During that time there was segregated education and a lot of Aboriginal children were going to the school on the Mission, which is where my mother's siblings attended school."

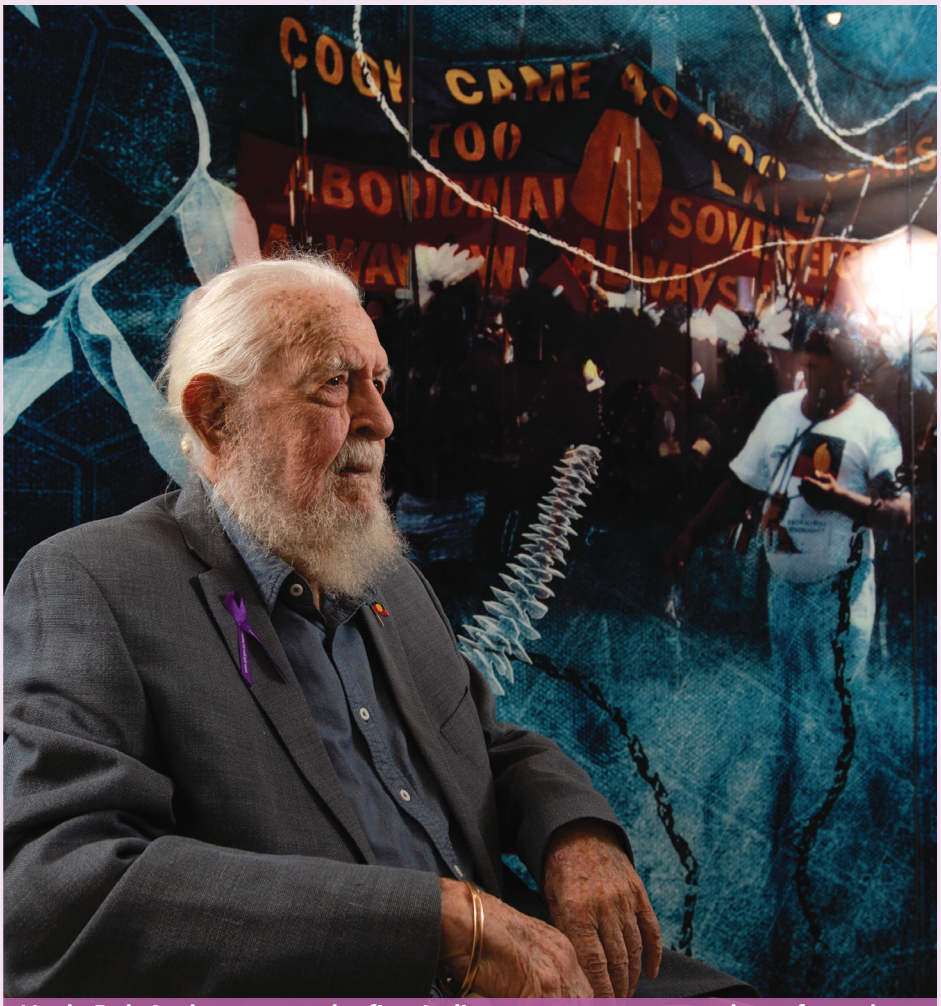
The family encountered devastating hardship after Uncle Bob's father was severely injured while working as a ship painter and docker.

"His leg was badly fractured, and in those days, there was no support for injured workers, so he was consigned to the back room of the house," Uncle Bob says.

"My mum then had to go out washing clothes to earn some money to keep things ticking over. I was only eight at the time."

The isolation following his workplace accident affected Uncle Bob's father's mental health and he was later committed to a psychiatric hospital in Goodna.

"You grow up knowing you're a saltwater person and it adds something to your identity."



Uncle Bob Anderson was the first Indigenous person to graduate from the fledgling Queensland University of Technology more than 75 years ago.

Growing up amid adversity

Uncle Bob says his mother was a strong woman who did an incredible job working and raising children by herself amid adversity.

"Her name was Lydia Myee Tripcony, Myee meaning 'special one'," he says.

Uncle Bob also remembers his family being under the supervision of the State Children's Department for a time.

"I grew up without a father, my mother was a single parent and a woman from the State Department would come and visit our house generally in school holiday time," he says.

"That's all a part of the journey too, you think it's the norm."

The family eventually relocated to Brisbane where Uncle Bob attended St James Christian Brothers School and St Benedict's Convent School in East Brisbane for his later school years.

With kerosene lamps at home and no electricity, completing homework in the dark proved challenging.

At age 11, Uncle Bob was expelled from St James after he was wrongly accused of vandalising East Brisbane State School.

Some other boys who were friends were the culprits, but since Uncle Bob was in their company, he was assumed to be the perpetrator and blamed without a chance to explain himself.

"Oddly enough, St James was in Boundary Street towards the city," he says.

"In my youthful mind, I thought the boundary must've been the boundary between the city and Fortitude Valley, but I later found out that wasn't the case."

In fact, the 'boundary' referred to curfew laws that once existed in Brisbane – a tool of systemic racism designed to maintain colonial control.

"Growing up, there was a consciousness, which was exhibited by mum saying, 'always be home by dark'," Uncle Bob says.

Years later, Uncle Bob attended a gathering of First Nations Peoples to celebrate then Brisbane Lord Mayor Jim Soorley ending the curfew.

"A great cheer went up and perfect strangers embraced each other. The only other time I saw that was during the War, 1939-1945 when the Japanese surrendered and the war in the Pacific was over – perfect strangers embracing each other."

Union leader

When he was 15, Uncle Bob secured a carpentry and joinery apprenticeship with the Barnes Brothers Builders in Annerley.

"Their attitude towards Aboriginal people was pretty good and I think they were Catholics too, which might have helped," he says.

Uncle Bob balanced long days of work on the tools with evening classes at the Central Technical College, which became QUT. He was the only apprentice taken on by the employer who had completed his full five-year apprenticeship.

"The employer remarked that I'd achieved more than the average – it was hard work, but I enjoyed it," he says.

Uncle Bob worked as a leading hand for the construction of housing commission homes in Camp Hill, Carina, Murarrie and Inala, before he was elected in 1963 as a state organiser for the Building Workers Industrial Union (BWIU). The union was later amalgamated with other unions into the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union.

He remained in the role for 14 years, after being actively involved as a member and delegate during his carpentry career.

"I first joined my trade union in 1951 and at the time it was customary for my family – and all working class families – to be members of their respective union," he says.

"As an organiser, I would visit all the workplaces throughout the state. For example, I would travel and spend six weeks in Townsville and Cairns, then I might return home for a time and next go to Rockhampton or Toowoomba."

Advancing reconciliation

During his time as a BWIU state organiser, Uncle Bob played an active role in finding positive outcomes for many disputes, industrial and otherwise.

These included social and industrial relations challenges at the Mount Isa Copper Mine lockout in 1964-65, the Bougainville Copper Mine in Papua New Guinea in the late 1960s and the controversy surrounding the South African Springboks rugby team visit in 1971.

The last leg of the Springboks rugby tour was met with anti-apartheid protests and boycott campaigns, with blue collar unions heavily involved.

The then Queensland Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen called a state of emergency, and the protests influenced the cancellation of the subsequent South African cricket team's tour in 1971-72.

"It was an expression [by] workers, where there's an injustice like that, they'll do something positive about it," Uncle Bob says.

Often at the coalface of reconciliation advocacy, Uncle Bob campaigned on street corners in the lead up to the 1967 referendum – and the 2023 Voice to Parliament referendum.

"The '67 referendum was a critical point of time in the history of this nation and what flowed from there was important," he says.

Uncle Bob led the long fight for Native Title of Mulgumpin, which was granted in 2019 – a moment he describes as fulfilling.

Next, he would like to see treaty and reparations for First Nations Peoples.

"The matters of what the future holds are the next steps," Uncle Bob says.

Unfortunately, Uncle Bob was denied the opportunity to give evidence and share his experience during the short-lived Queensland Truth-Telling and Healing Inquiry in 2024.

He was the next Elder due to give evidence, before the Crisafulli government cancelled the process.

Serving the community

Uncle Bob once refused to pay a fine after being arrested for protesting for the immediate closure of the joint Australian-United States defence facility at Pine Gap.

He served five days' imprisonment. At one stage, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) reportedly had a lengthy file on Uncle Bob because of his social justice activism and civil disobedience, which he finds a source of amusement.

"I think ASIO spies were all about the place," he says. "Sometimes there'd be a car moving slowly up and down outside my residence at Tarragindi."

After he departed the BWIU, Uncle Bob worked repairing ships at the Port of Brisbane, where he was a member of the Federated Ship Painters and Dockers Union until his retirement from manual work in 1983 due to injury.

Since retirement, Uncle Bob has been involved in community organisations including the Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board, Queensland Museum Board of Trustees and the Brisbane Indigenous Media Association (Murri Radio 4AAA).

Uncle Bob has also been recognised with honours including life membership of the CFMEU, Queenslander of the Year in 2000, Brisbane Citizen of the Year in 2001, an honorary doctorate from QUT, a Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) and NAIDOC South East Queensland Indigenous Person of the Year in 1998.

Uncle Bob Anderson, with his partner Cathy Boyle, stresses the importance of all Australians learning about First Nations culture and history.

Education and reconciliation

When asked about his time studying, Uncle Bob says he felt like an "object of curiosity" as the only black man at the college and even more so when he was the only one of his intake to graduate.

"Whenever I go back to QUT, see the Oodgeroo Unit and the teams of people and dedicated spaces there for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, I am amazed at how much has changed for our young people," he says.

"My advice to younger generations is to seize the opportunity to gain education.

"Consolidate your formal education with your cultural knowledge and you will feel whole."

Last year, Uncle Bob moved to a new home back on Minjerribah, which his partner Cathy describes as a "full circle moment".

Uncle Bob says he was glad to return to live on beautiful saltwater Quandamooka Country – land and sea that he and his family have held deep spiritual connections with for thousands of years.

He is optimistic about the country's future and stresses the importance of all Australians learning about First Nations culture and history.

"As a society and a nation, we are walking together, talking together and sharing a common destiny," he says.

"Education should be something we share together.

"There should be an awareness of our nation's history through colonisation and asking of what it was like before colonisation.

"I've got confidence in the upcoming generation. If they are studious and become involved, they'll be able to see the richness in themselves."

Acknowledgements

Additional sources consulted while researching this piece include:

- collections.slq.qld.gov.au/viewer/IE4484966
- queenslandspeaks.com.au/bob-anderson

Specialist teacher

Honoured for commitment to inclusion

IEU member Ruth Sharman has been recognised with a Brisbane Catholic Education (BCE) Excellence Award, in the wellbeing and safety category, for her work promoting inclusion at her school, writes Ella Doyle.

When a student returned to St Eugene College in Burpengary after an 18-month absence, Ruth Sharman worked tirelessly to ensure he felt safe and supported.

The student had been diagnosed with a brain tumour that left him nonverbal and with limited movement.

A specialist teacher: inclusive education (known broadly as teachers of inclusive student support), Ruth worked with a team of professionals to ensure all barriers were removed and support was in place for the student.

"It required a united and committed school community to ensure his return was not only safe, but successful," she says.

"I feel very proud to be part of such an amazing school community."

Walking alongside students

Ruth describes her role as assisting teachers to support students within classroom settings by promoting inclusive principles, ensuring barriers are removed and appropriate adjustments are in place.

Creating and updating individual learning plans for students, student/family advocacy, case management and conferring with allied health professionals are among the tasks she performs.

"I see the role as walking alongside teachers and families to support the student," she says.

"Classroom teachers are amazingly hard-working people who are at the coalface of the implementation of curriculum delivery and inclusion.

"My role is to support them in supporting the students."

Ruth promotes safety and inclusion among her colleagues as the wellbeing representative in her school's IEU chapter.

"One thing I learned within my studies is that you cannot have wellbeing without inclusion," she says.

"Teacher wellbeing is an ongoing consideration and issue for our profession.

"It's important that actions within school wellbeing efforts reflect the current climate and are not tokenistic."

ACTION NOW! campaign

Data from the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) shows 25.7 per cent of school students received an educational adjustment due to disability in 2024, compared to 24.2 per cent in 2023 and 18 per cent in 2015.

This highlights the vital role that teachers of inclusive student support play in schools today.

Yet the breadth of their work is not always adequately recognised by employers.

> "I see the role as walking alongside teachers and families to support the student."

Ruth and her colleagues are working to change this through our union's teachers of inclusive student support working group, which met regularly last year to form the union's claim ahead of Queensland Catholic bargaining this year.

"Many teachers of inclusive student support have postgraduate qualifications and a specific skill set unique to each school setting, yet are recognised only as teachers," she says.

They are also fundamental to schools' Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on school students with disability (NCCD) processes and student learning.

"Recognition and clarification of this role is imperative as this also highlights within the profession that teachers of inclusive student support are leaders of inclusion within their school communities," Ruth says.

This year, IEU members in Queensland Catholic schools are bargaining for better recognition of teachers of inclusive student support as part of the union's ACTION NOW! campaign.

The claim, tabled by IEU employee representatives at a Single Bargaining Unit meeting, includes adjusted and proportional caseload limits, provision of professional development and training by employers and an allowance for teachers of inclusive student support.

More information

ACARA data: bit.ly/41ndxqu

TEACHER SHORTAGES
Why respect matters

Tackling the school staffing crisis begins with listening to teachers and respecting the profession, writes Andrew Taylor.

Martin Mills was teaching history to Brisbane high school students in the 1990s when he decided to depart from the strict letter of the syllabus and explore a topic of interest – radical groups in Ancient Rome.

"I was excited, the kids were excited," he says. "But in today's curriculum, there isn't room for teachers to choose what they enjoy teaching and what they think might engage their students."

A professor at Queensland University of Technology's School of Education, Mills says the loss of autonomy for teachers to innovate in the classroom is one of the factors driving staff out of the profession.

"The time for teachers to actually think about what they're doing in their curriculum has gotten smaller as other kinds of administrative work creep into their lives," he says.

Mills says teachers are "drowning in paperwork and meaningless reforms that create change fatigue and are constantly chasing their tails in time-wasting exercises".

Rebuilding respect

Appropriate salaries are essential to attracting and retaining teachers. But Mills says restoring respect for the profession is also a vital part of addressing teacher shortages.

This begins with trusting teachers to do their job rather than micromanaging them.

"To attract more teachers, we have to respect the profession," he says.

"Teachers should have the same status as other professions and be looked up to as much as an engineer, a lawyer or a doctor."

However, rebuilding respect for the teaching profession is no easy task.

A 2022 Monash University study found 70 per cent of Australian teachers do not feel teaching is respected or appreciated by the public.

The 2022 *Australian Teachers' Perceptions of their Work* report also revealed less than one in 10 feel respected by politicians.

Excessive monitoring of their work, including decisions about curriculum, teaching approaches and classroom management, was highlighted as a reason many teachers feel disrespected.

Teachers also report they are frequently questioned, challenged, and verbally and physically abused.

A lack of respect shown by parents towards school staff prompted the IEU to demand employers stamp out bad behaviour.

IEUA NSW/ACT Secretary Carol Matthews in 2025 wrote to Catholic dioceses in NSW and the ACT outlining the union's request for actions to ensure respect for teachers.

"Declining respect for the teaching profession has long been a factor in teachers' dissatisfaction with their jobs," she said. "It has a major impact on their health and wellbeing."

Freedom to teach

Mills is critical of proposals to ease teacher workloads by providing lesson plans instead of reducing pointless administrative tasks.

"That's not why people become teachers," he says. "They want to think about their students and how to match the curriculum to them and deliver it in a way which engages them."

Mills says teachers want freedom and time to teach, and to have their voices heard.

"You know what makes teachers want to stay?" he says. "Teachers want to feel they're making a difference, but they have to feel supported and have good mentors who help them stay in the school system."

Mills examined the outcomes of implementing a "socially just curriculum" in a school in a low socio-economic area in the co-authored paper *Constructing a rich curriculum for all: One school's enactment of curricular justice*.

"Teaching workloads, along with social trends that 'de-professionalise' teachers, have encouraged subject heads to become more prescriptive of content and pedagogy," the report said.

Meaningful impact

Mills says teachers enter the profession because they care about students and are driven by a desire to make a meaningful impact.

But research by Fiona Longmuir and Amanda McKay shows these relationships are strained, with teachers leaving the profession because of issues around workload, wellbeing, safety and respect.

"In the current climate, these motivations, which reflect the important relational imperatives that are foundational to effective teaching and schooling, are undermined and in peril,"

Queensland University of Technology professor Martin Mills says teachers enter the profession because they care about students and are driven by a desire to make a meaningful impact.

they write in *Teachers workload strain: considering the density as well as the quantity of teachers' work*.

"This devaluing of the relational work erodes teachers' capacity to continue in their professions and makes the profession less attractive to potential future teachers."

Unhealthy competition

Mills says excessive demands for teachers to collect and report data, and an unrelenting focus on standardised testing have led to competition between schools and a loss of autonomy for teachers.

"I think the exam testing culture, the competitiveness, mean teachers are being held accountable to very narrow criteria," he says.

"The imposition of teaching methods in pursuit of higher test scores is an indication of a lack of trust in teachers."

Mills's concerns are shared by the IEU, which joined dozens of education leaders urging an end to crude and harmful school league tables based on NAPLAN data in an open letter published in Nine newspapers last December.

IEUA Federal Secretary Brad Hayes says simplistic league tables are a disservice to school communities.

"Publicly ranking schools misuses NAPLAN data," he says. "It risks stigmatising communities and undermines collaboration to support all students. Data should improve learning outcomes, not fuel baseless competition."

Union view
Easing the workforce crisis

Improved pay, better working conditions and enhanced career paths are vital to recruiting and retaining teachers.

However, IEU members also say unsustainable workloads lead to teacher burnout and explain why so many leave the profession. Employer demands and government policy drive teachers away from the job they love.

Teachers must have a voice on professional bodies and government authorities.

"For too long, teachers have been excluded from critical debates and decisions dominated by actors external to the reality of schools, often to the detriment of our schools and students," IEUA Federal Secretary Brad Hayes says.

The following measures are key to tackling the staffing crisis:

- early career teachers need more support to stay in the profession with improved release time, professional development and mentor programs
- respect the professional autonomy and judgement of teachers – paperwork, more red tape and an obsession with data is sucking the life out of our profession
- avoid quick fixes such as sending unqualified teachers into classrooms without adequate preparation – rushing student teachers into classrooms before they are ready will only exacerbate early career burnout

The community as a whole must strive to fully value and respect the teaching profession.

ALL INCLUSIVE

Valuing the vital roles of support staff

As schools face growing and increasingly complex demands, support staff are vital, yet their roles are not always valued and well resourced, writes Will Brodie.

Essential to easing workload pressures for teachers, many support staff have historically helped with classroom and administrative duties.

But the focus is moving to more direct support of students and learning, including instructional and personal support to students with disability. As support staff roles evolve, there is a need for greater consistency and recognition.

A 2022 Grattan Institute study took the example of teaching assistants to illustrate a point. The job has different titles across Australia, including teacher aide, education support staff, learning support assistant and inclusion support assistant.

Solution to inclusion

A 2023 report by the South Australian State School Leaders Association (SASSLA) found teaching assistants had evolved from "classroom helpers" to "para-educators".

"Most teaching assistants now provide direct learning support to students rather than supporting teachers," the report said.

SASSLA also found new disability standards that promote inclusive education had enabled students with disabilities to attend mainstream schools.

This has increased classroom complexity and added more responsibilities such as task differentiation, targeted support and individual learning plans to teacher loads.

As a result, teaching assistants became known as the solution to inclusion, "functioning as a 'band-aid' or 'quick fix' to support inclusive education", the report said.

The Grattan Institute study found Australia spends more than $5 billion a year on teaching assistants – about 8 per cent of total school funding.

Since 1990, the number of teaching assistants has almost quadrupled, far outpacing growth in student enrolments and teacher numbers over the same period.

While their work has changed considerably, their pay and conditions have not always kept up.

Low pay, heavy workloads

In Victoria, a pre-bargaining survey in the Catholic sector found some support staff earn less than casual retail workers, despite managing complex, high-risk and emotionally demanding tasks, including supporting students with disabilities, behavioural challenges, or Type-1 diabetes.

IEU Victoria Tasmania Branch General Secretary David Brear says support staff are "critical to the effective functioning of schools" and must be properly valued through "fair pay, clear classification structures and adequate training".

"Without these, support staff face undervaluation and heavy workloads, which undermines both their wellbeing and the quality of support they provide to students," Brear says.

"Improving pay, classification and professional development for support staff is crucial for a sustainable workforce and high-quality education."

Classroom complexity

IEUA Federal Secretary Brad Hayes says even small classes are becoming difficult to manage because of "a complex combination of behavioural, cultural, language, medical and learning needs".

"When staff are not provided with adequate support, classroom complexity significantly increases workload pressures and contributes to burnout and ongoing workforce retention challenges," he says.

The union has called for the following to be implemented in all agreements:

- accurate classification structures and wage levels that properly recognise the work value of support staff assisting students with additional learning needs
- additional paid hours to be offered to part-time and term-time teaching assistants to attend classes and activities involving students with identified support needs
- payment of health care allowances where support staff are required to care for or support students with documented health care plans
- access to high-quality, ongoing professional development focused on student learning, wellbeing and inclusion needs.

Union wins

Winning better conditions in collective agreements is crucial to improving the working lives of support staff.

An example is the Alternative School Officer Classification System (ASOCS) phased into Queensland Catholic schools in 2024 and currently being trialled in Northern Territory Catholic schools.

IEU-QNT Branch Secretary Terry Burke says the previous classification structure was "archaic, simplistic and failed to capture the realities of work in a modern school".

ASOCS assesses positions accurately, regardless of job title. The nine factors used to evaluate a position are:

1. knowledge application
2. accountability
3. scope and complexity
4. guidance
5. decision-making
6. problem-solving
7. contact and relationships
8. negotiation and co-operation
9. management of responsibility/resource accountability.

While this was a significant win for Queensland Catholic school members, they are now fighting for wages that match the ASOCS structure.

Burke says all school support staff are taking on more responsibility, greater complexity and higher expectations than ever before. "Yet their wage structures are outdated and have not been properly reviewed for over 30 years," he says.

The NSW/ACT Branch of the IEU achieved substantial pay rises for school support staff in Catholic systemic schools in 2023. This included teacher aides.

Illustration: Sam Wallman

"Improving pay, classification and professional development for support staff is crucial for a sustainable workforce and high-quality education."

The branch has also been campaigning for similar pay rises for support staff in independent schools, including teacher aides in Aspect (Autism Spectrum Australia) schools.

New guidelines

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) provides seven Guidelines for the Optimal Deployment of Teaching Assistants in Australian Classrooms:

- a school-wide approach to deployment
- clear role expectations
- opportunities for collaboration
- professional learning opportunities
- implementation of evidence-based interventions
- a clear teaching and learning approach
- administrative, operational and supervisory support.

The SASSLA report says it is time "to reconceptualise the role of a teaching assistant to that of a paraprofessional with an important role to play in education".

It also calls for clearer role definitions and consistent qualifications across Australia, noting that most entry-level positions only require the completion of Year 10 as a prerequisite. Job descriptions are often unclear, creating ambiguous expectations for both teaching assistants and teachers.

The Grattan Institute wants governments to collect better information on how support staff are working with teachers and students, and what tasks they're assigned.

It also wants funding for pilot programs to evaluate the best ways for support staff to work with teachers and students: "We need to identify what works best and spread that knowledge across all schools."

These proposed reforms are necessary and overdue. Equally important is the IEU's work to secure improvements through enterprise agreements and advocacy.

Schools and teachers are being asked to manage increasing complexity, particularly in inclusive classrooms. To do that, they need expert assistance.

This means all support staff need structured training, clear career pathways, fair pay and professional recognition.

Class acts: **Unlocking history's secrets**

Two IEU members will embark on extraordinary journeys after winning NSW Premier's Teacher Scholarships, writes Andrew Taylor.

Mick Klipin Bishop Druitt College, Coffs Harbour

Mick Klipin has been a regular visitor to Cambodia for two decades, leading Year 11 school trips and visiting a sister school in the south-east Asian country's Ratanakiri Province.

It was on one of these visits that Klipin began learning about people's lives during the Vietnam War, which spread into neighbouring Cambodia, and the genocidal reign of the Khmer Rouge.

"I had opportunities to have conversations that I hadn't had before," he says. "Some of them revolved around life under the Khmer Rouge, and the aftermath of the US bombing of that part of the country."

A teacher at Bishop Druitt College in Coffs Harbour, Mick's interest in Cambodia prompted him to apply – successfully – for a NSW Premier's Teacher Scholarship, which provided $15,000 for a five-week study tour.

Mick says the study trip will deepen his knowledge of the country's turbulent past, which he teaches as part of Modern History and Society and Culture courses.

Mick Klipin has been a regular visitor to Cambodia for two decades and leads Year 11 school trips that engage students in community service projects.

Profound effect

Mick has led annual school trips to Cambodia for 20 years, fostering not only cultural exchanges, but also engaging senior students with community service and philanthropic projects such as teaching English and donating educational materials.

The relationship between Krou Yeung School and Bishop Druitt College has also provided professional development opportunities for staff at both schools. Krou Yeung is a non-government school offering kindergarten, English and Khmer classes to Cambodian children.

"We've got a really beautiful relationship that's evolved," he says. "We spend five days at their school and then we host a teacher or two and students every year for five-to-six weeks."

Mick says the trips have a profound effect on students. "I'll get emails from a parent who will go 'I don't know what you did over there, but I've got a different kid'."

Mick says many students return to Cambodia as part of their gap year or while they're at university. "They can go and volunteer at the school, knowing they'll be welcomed with open arms."

Union makes sense

Mick says his approach to teaching history has not changed significantly during his career – fostering a relationship with students remains the key to effective learning.

"I don't think kids have changed that much," he says.

"Their psychology is still pretty much the same. There are different pressures, but they are still kids."

An IEU member since 2017, Mick says it always made sense to join the union and collectively bargain for better pay and conditions.

"Negotiating with employers is not something that teachers can do individually given the imbalance in power," he says.

He adds that workloads have intensified, with increasing paperwork taking time away from lesson planning.

"There's no doubt that email means there is a lot more communication coming through that needs to be dealt with in a limited time frame," he says.

"Not all of it is particularly useful but it still needs sifting through, which takes time."

From left, NSW Premier Chris Minns, IEU members Mick Klipin and David Van Tol, and acting NSW Education Minister Courtney Houssos at the NSW Premier's Teacher Scholarships presentation in 2025.

David Van Tol Kambala School, Rose Bay

It is more than 60 years since the Cuban Revolution swept Fidel Castro into power and installed a communist government on the doorstep of the United States.

However, it remains a source of fascination for history teacher David Van Tol and his students at Kambala School in Sydney.

"The topic has big personalities, unbelievable stories and, in the current global climate, it has that David-versus-Goliath angle that students seem to connect with," he says. "And then, by coincidence, Cuba moved from the Year 11 course into the new HSC syllabus starting in 2028."

David's interest in Cuban history was sparked by teaching Year 11 Modern History and Global Politics for the International Baccalaureate.

"Those subjects pushed me to think more about how history plays out in international relations, and how the legacies of big events like the Cuban revolution still shape people's lives," he says.

David will have the opportunity to visit Cuba to learn more about the country's history after winning a NSW Premier's Teacher Scholarship.

Understanding the revolution

David says he is "really curious" to discover what Cubans think about the revolution.

"I also want to understand how the story of the revolution has changed over time through Castro's rule, the economic shifts and the passing of generations," he says.

"And, of course, how figures like Che Guevara became such global symbols that keep being adapted and reinterpreted."

David's goal is to come back with practical, ready-to-use teacher resources for the new HSC topic.

"I want to combine site visits, primary sources and the kind of on-the-ground observations you just can't get from a textbook," he says.

Besides teaching, David is also a textbook author, exam marker and the Head of History at Kambala.

"Some students don't immediately see the point of history," he says. "But many love the thinking behind it – analysing sources, questioning stories, uncovering the turning points and imagining other worlds."

David says the Cold War offers students a sense of what the world was like when their parents were students, "while the civil rights movement speaks to the social activism they see around them today".

Love of teaching

David became a teacher when he was 21, but turned to sales and marketing, "which I absolutely hated", he says.

"When I was living in the UK, I went back into casual teaching and loved it, even with the challenges of teaching in socially deprived areas of east London."

He credits a former standout teacher at Sefton High School, Mr Brennan, with igniting his interest in history.

"I remember our very first lesson where he had a class of 26 spellbound with his growing mind-map of the causes of World War One," David says. "All told as an unfolding story that moved around from person to person and place to place."

Dramatic change

An IEU member since 2016, David joined the union when he needed advice about transferring long service leave between schools.

"The IEU sorted it out quickly, and I've stayed a member since," he says. "They've always been active in negotiations and supportive of teachers."

David says the profession has changed dramatically since he began teaching, pointing to the ever-growing administrative load.

Registers, forms, documentation – none of this was part of my first years," he says. "Pastoral documentation has also increased. All of it is well-intentioned, but it adds up.

"And email – I still find myself avoiding it when I can to go speak to the person directly."

Time pressures also impact student learning, David says. "Students need time to practise skills and build knowledge, but school life is fast and full. Expectations on young people are higher than ever."

Building bridges

How to create deaf-friendly classrooms

Deaf and hard-of-hearing children face significant barriers to experiencing school life, writes Emily Campbell.

New research by Deaf Children Australia (DCA) shows deaf and hard-of-hearing (DHH) students in regional and remote areas face even greater challenges.

To address these gaps, DCA has launched a free online course designed to equip schools with the skills and resources to better support DHH students.

Regional and remote disadvantages

DCA is a not-for-profit organisation that champions the growth and social inclusion of DHH children and young people across Australia.

It recently surveyed hundreds of parents, carers and school staff in rural and regional areas, with many respondents saying their schools lack the skills, resources and support to give DHH students an even break.

More than 60 per cent of respondents believe their mainstream school needs greater deaf awareness. In contrast, more than 40 per cent reported their schools had limited skills in effectively communicating with DHH children.

The findings are concerning given 83 per cent of DHH students in Australia attend mainstream schools.

DHH students in remote areas experience even more difficulties – particularly in First Nations communities where 90 per cent of young children experience different forms of ear disease, a Menzies School of Health Research study shows.

One in six First Nations children in remote communities suffer from burst eardrums.

With medical treatment less accessible in remote communities, these ailments can lead to long-term hearing loss and have been linked to educational disadvantage and behavioural problems.

The DCA survey found 80 per cent of respondents agreed their school community would benefit from skills and resources to support and include DHH students.

These findings are the motivation behind DCA's Building Bridges program – an initiative based on evidence and years of research. It is designed to be practical and flexible to suit any school setting.

Working with DHH students

IEU members Kellie Walker and Louise De Beauzeville are teachers at NextSense, a school in Macquarie Park, Sydney, catering for students with sensory disabilities.

NextSense comprises three specialist schools with specific and distinct programs for children with hearing or vision loss.

IEU members at NextSense last year secured strong pay rises and better working conditions in a new collective agreement, doubling their union membership density along the way.

Kellie and Louise both say that programs such as Building Bridges in mainstream or deaf schools would make a positive difference for students who are DHH.

Kellie is highly familiar with the barriers faced by DHH students, especially those attending mainstream schools, given she is deaf.

"I grew up in a country town as the only deaf person in the classroom at my mainstream school," she says.

"Most of the curriculum was inaccessible to me, and I would often have teachers with big moustaches or teachers who turned to face the board when speaking, so I usually had no idea what was being said in class.

"I read textbooks late into the night at home to try and catch up on what others learned during class."

It was not until she got an interpreter that Kellie was amazed to realise that students who sat behind her asked questions in class.

"It made me realise just how much I had missed," she says.

The struggles Kellie faced were not just academic but also social.

"There was nobody I could identify with growing up — I wasn't part of the deaf community yet as I knew no other deaf people, and I wasn't hearing, no matter how many speech classes I attended," she says.

"I'd watch others in social groups chattering away and I felt isolated and anxious constantly, with no peers and no adults like me.

"I often missed information so had to develop strategies to work out and predict what might be said – and if in doubt I would resort to the 'deaf nod'.

"That was, smile and nod and hope no one asked me a question.

"I got very good at imitating people's facial expressions and reading a situation."

Kellie says it was exhausting.

Access to language

"It would be tempting to think things are different now and while hearing technology has advanced, my experience is still one many DHH students in mainstream education can identify with," she says.

The level of support offered by specialist schools such as NextSense allows DHH students to experience true inclusion by giving them fair and equal access to the curriculum, smaller class sizes, individual education plans and access to expert staff, many with lived experience of deafness.

Kellie says seeing examples of successful deaf adult role models is vital.

"At NextSense, children are surrounded by people like them and are given access to language, fostering a strong sense of identity," she says.

Highly regarded

Kellie's colleague Louise, who is hearing but teaches DHH students, is not surprised by DCA's survey findings.

"All of the problems for students in the mainstream are amplified if they live in rural areas, as they are even more isolated and have even less access to deaf adults and peers, in addition to therapies when young to improve their language," she says.

"Some of these barriers include communication access, social inclusion, cognitive load and fatigue, visual access demands, language mismatch, self-advocacy demands and low expectations or misunderstandings."

Louise says schools would be far more inclusive if all staff and students interacting with DHH students used Building Bridges.

> "I'd watch others in social groups chattering away and I felt isolated and anxious constantly, with no peers and no adults like me."

"Of course, some problems would remain, like the ability to fluently communicate with peers and staff and seeing people like themselves, but DHH students would feel welcomed into a school community," she says.

Kellie and Louise agree the Building Bridges program would make a positive difference and recommended IEU members — particularly those in mainstream schools — make use of it.

Empowerment and inclusion

Building Bridges was created to educate entire school communities, including teachers, school leadership, support staff, and the parents and carers of DHH students.

DCA project lead and spokesperson Sarah Brennan says all students, regardless of their abilities, have the right to communicate with, and be understood by, their teachers, school staff and peers.

"We know DHH students thrive when their school community understands how to support them, but many within that community feel they do not have the skills or resources to properly communicate with them to ensure they feel fully included," she says.

"When it comes to special education and additional assistance in regional and rural areas, the challenge is even greater, with limited options for families who choose to live in these communities."

What's included in Building Bridges?

The free Building Bridges program includes:

- an online, self-paced short course for all school staff, covering deaf awareness, communication tips and guidance
- access to a video library of 200+ school-friendly Auslan signs
- downloadable resources with practical information about inclusion, Auslan and activities
- Auslan resource pack with posters, activity sheets and two large-format *Platypus Playhouse* storytime books (in Auslan/English).

The course outcomes mean participants will:

- understand more about inclusivity
- know more about types of deafness
- understand technology
- comprehend bimodal bilingual strategies
- recognise signs of deafness and listening fatigue
- develop a basic library of everyday Auslan signs.

More information

- deafchildrenaustralia.org.au/building-bridges/
- Read about the NextSense IEU chapter's bargaining wins: bit.ly/46QYR68

MELODY MAKERS

Bringing music to the classroom

An innovative mentoring program aims to build teachers' skills and confidence in teaching music, writes Andrew Taylor.

Standing in front of a class of primary school students, let alone dancing, singing and playing the guitar, is not for the faint-hearted.

Boosting the confidence and skills of colleagues to incorporate music into their teaching practice is a vital part of Ethan Parlato's role as a mentor under the Australian Youth Orchestra's Music in Me program.

A specialist music teacher at Our Lady of Fatima Catholic Primary School in Caringbah, NSW, Ethan's commitment to quality music education motivated him to become a mentor.

"If I can share my skills and knowledge with teachers, it's only going to help them get better," he says.

Strengthening teachers

Music in Me (formerly the National Music Teacher Mentoring Program) was set up in 2015 by renowned conductor and music educator the late Richard Gill to provide access to high-quality music education for primary school students.

Music in Me's director Bernie Heard says Gill was deeply concerned by the decline in specialist music teaching in primary schools and the growing inequity of access to music education.

"His vision was not to simply deliver music to schools, but to strengthen teachers themselves – so that music education would be embedded, sustained and owned by schools over the long term," she says.

Mentoring teachers to improve their confidence and competence in teaching music is a key element of the program's mission.

"One-off workshops or resources rarely shift long-term practice," Heard says. "In contrast, mentoring provides personalised, context-specific support, modelling of effective classroom practice and opportunities for reflection, feedback and gradual skill-building."

The program also aims to improve student engagement and promote the value of music education in primary school education.

Monash University research confirms the value of mentoring programs in helping young children flourish and transform the classroom practice of teachers.

More than 1100 primary school teachers in the government and non-government sectors in NSW, Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia have been mentored under Music in Me, which will begin in Queensland and the ACT this year.

"Many participating schools serve communities experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, high staff turnover or limited access to specialist arts education," Heard says.

Music often marginalised

The Australian Curriculum expects primary school students to make and respond to music, understand basic concepts of rhythm, pitch and dynamics, and sing and play instruments.

But these goals may be challenging for generalist teachers who lack music education during their initial teacher education (ITE).

"Many generalist teachers are expected to teach music without having received sufficient pre-service training or ongoing professional learning," Heard says.

A 2023 study, *Fading Notes: Music Education for the Next Generation of Primary Teachers*, found teachers

> "It's about giving teachers the tools and confidence to use music effectively and joyfully with their students."

IEU member Ethan Parlato, top left, is a mentor under the Australian Youth Orchestra's Music in Me program.

received an average of only eight hours of music education across their ITE degree.

"This is in no way sufficient to ensure teachers are confident and competent to deliver a quality music education," Heard says.

As a result, she says music is often marginalised particularly in schools under pressure to prioritise literacy and numeracy.

Building confidence

Ethan works alongside teachers over an extended period, modelling music lessons, co-planning and co-teaching with the mentored teacher as well as observing and providing constructive feedback.

"We're always building confidence," he says. "It's all around what we're doing well and how we can get better at those things."

In addition, Ethan sets goals to develop a teacher's musical and pedagogical skills and confidence and align their practice with curriculum requirements and school priorities.

"It is not about turning teachers into music specialists but giving them the tools and confidence to use music effectively and joyfully with their students," he says.

A lack of confidence, limited training or competence, time pressures and a lack of access to resources make it challenging for primary school teachers to incorporate music into their classroom practice.

Music in Me addresses these barriers by demystifying music teaching. It focuses on practical strategies and showing teachers how music can integrate with literacy, numeracy and wellbeing outcomes rather than compete with them.

It also rewards mentors by offering an opportunity for professional growth through coaching leadership practice.

"It's been really good to be a part of the program where I have to justify why I do the things I do," Ethan says. "Articulating the choices I make in the classroom has been really eye-opening."

Ethan is a passionate advocate for music education in primary schools. He says music is vital for students' social and emotional development as well as numeracy and literacy.

"Teaching music helps kids count," he says. "Teaching music and nursery rhymes helps kids understand literacy. Kids can have fun and learn and build their confidence."

A source of joy

A singer-songwriter, Ethan released his debut album *History of Me* in 2023, which can be found on music streaming platform Spotify.

"I love playing live, but it's very difficult to maintain a full teaching load and then go and play a gig on Friday night," he says.

"I still write songs. I still try and record every now and again, but I've had to put it away for a little while to really focus on being a good teacher."

Music has always been a crucial part of Ethan's life – a source of joy, comfort and crucial in helping him cope at school.

"I was always in the classroom but not really understanding," he says. "So I put everything into music. That's how I remember things."

Ethan is a self-taught singer and guitarist who trained as a generalist teacher before specialising in creative arts during his Master's degree.

"I became a creative arts teacher to share my love of music," he says. "I hope that it might help a little student sitting in my classroom."

Collective voice

An IEU member since 2023, Ethan joined the union for safety, support and advocacy, "knowing that if something goes wrong, I have someone I can contact who will be there to help me".

Ethan also says the union plays a vital role in ensuring teachers' voices are included in debates about education policy.

"It's really important that we have someone in our corner, someone fighting for us to make sure that we get what we need to do our job successfully," he says.

More information

Music in me program: **musicinme.au**

Attendance cliff

Smoothing the transition to secondary school

Education experts are calling for the transition period from primary to secondary school to become a specific priority in Closing the Gap for First Nations students, writes Emily Campbell.

Researchers have identified an alarming gap in education policy leaving First Nations school students in remote and regional areas at risk of poorer educational outcomes than their non-First Nations and metropolitan peers.

Drop in school attendance

The research found an "attendance cliff", described as a significant drop in school attendance and participation between primary and secondary school for First Nations students, especially in remote areas.

Research lead Dr Azhar Potia from the University of Sunshine Coast and colleague Professor Karen Thorpe from the University of Queensland say the attendance cliff reveals a major gap in First Nations education policy that needs urgent attention.

Thorpe says a positive transition from primary to secondary schooling is essential for all students, particularly those who identify as First Nations.

"Australia's Closing the Gap reform aims to address disparities experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, yet the transition to secondary education is not a targeted priority," she says.

"Addressing this oversight is imperative in creating equitable educational opportunities that improve engagement, attendance and outcomes for First Nations students across Australia."

The study examined publicly available Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) attendance data from all states and territories.

Potia says the data showed average attendance rates across all students was relatively stable during primary school but dropped upon entry to secondary school for First Nations students.

"It's a pattern that's consistent across all geographical locations, but more pronounced in schools in those remote and very remote jurisdictions," he says.

"The attendance cliff is a notable symbol of inequity, and the data identifies a clear gap in national policy focus that must be addressed through policy and practice, led by First Nations Peoples."

Fostering cultural inclusivity

Dr Tracy Woodroffe from Charles Darwin University is a proud Warumungu Luritja person and co-author of the research.

She argues education policies need to be student focused and culturally inclusive, with greater attention on the middle years.

"Recognising the critical transition into secondary school, which has not been specifically addressed by the Closing the Gap targets, presents a significant opportunity for culturally responsive policy reform," Woodroffe says.

The researchers explore potential factors contributing to the attendance cliff, drawing on a diverse range of studies, including lived experiences and perspectives from students, parents and communities.

First Nations students often face challenges during their transition to secondary school, including higher rates of students moving from their communities to boarding schools in urban centres, away from their kin and community connections.

The impact of moving away from home communities and adapting to the expectations of Western schooling systems can be profound and isolating for these students.

Combating educational disengagement

The research team identified multiple compounding factors contributing to the attendance cliff, and noted that dislocation – geographical, cultural or historical – underscores the need to prioritise cultural safety, connection and celebration.

They say implementing policies that conceptualise the issue as a relationship between school and student can mitigate risks of disengagement.

Strategies to support middle school transition should include cultivating educational environments that respect First Nations cultures, understanding historical contexts, enhancing connections with community and culture, and promoting community-led research to inform meaningful solutions.

Separate research from Flinders University explores ways in which remote schools can adapt to better engage First Nations students.

Community-based researchers collected data from students, teachers, school leaders and community members to understand key factors contributing to a positive school experience.

Respectful leadership, local decision-making, strong governance and incorporation of First Nations languages and culture in the curriculum were raised.

The study's co-author, Associate Professor John Guenther, says the inclusion of First Nations perspectives in school environments is critical to fostering greater connections with First Nations students.

"Children thrive when their schools reflect who they are," he says.

"Programs that connect students to their identity, language and culture have

a profound impact on their sense of belonging and engagement."

Attendance only one metric of success

The study challenges conventional education policies that measure success through attendance rates alone.

Instead, it highlights the importance of culturally responsive schooling and strong community involvement in ensuring positive student outcomes.

Guenther says schools should prioritise creating welcoming spaces for students, rather than blaming families for absences.

The research also highlights the serious impact of racism, bullying and misalignment between school priorities and cultural values.

Many First Nations students reported feeling alienated by schools that fail to integrate their perspectives and histories, reinforcing systemic barriers to education.

"Too often, school environments feel unsafe for First Nations students," Guenther says.

"When schools actively address racism and create culturally secure spaces, students and their families are more likely to engage."

Unsurprisingly, the study found schools employing First Nations teachers and support staff fosters greater trust and stronger connections with students.

"Students see themselves in their educators when schools employ First Nations teachers – it creates a deep sense of trust and makes learning more meaningful," Guenther says.

He called for urgent changes to funding models, which currently reward schools based on attendance rather than the quality of education provided.

"Funding should prioritise building safe, inclusive and engaging environments, rather than penalising families for school absences," he says.

"If we truly want to improve First Nations education, we must stop measuring success by how many students show up and start focusing on how well schools support them."

First Nations staff are role models

Increasing the number of First Nations teachers in schools is widely accepted as a way of engaging First Nations students, particularly in remote and rural communities.

"Having more First Nations teachers could really help increase First Nations student engagement numbers, help to apply more First Nations educational approaches and help create more role models in the community," Woodroffe told *IE* in 2024.

Likewise, Professor Rhonda Oliver from Curtin University has called for more First Nations teachers.

"In schools with a high population of First Nations students, gaps appear because non-First Nations teachers may not have the background or be sufficiently aware to provide the culturally and linguistically appropriate support their students need," Oliver says.

"In regional and remote schools, this situation is exacerbated by the constant turnover of non-local staff.

"As a result, students do not have the time or opportunity to develop the relationships that enhance their school engagement."

Oliver echoes Woodroffe's view that there is a dire need for more First Nations teachers – particularly those who will stay and work long-term in their own communities.

"These teachers are important as they provide role models First Nations students can aspire to, increase education outcomes among students and develop a better cultural understanding for all students," she says.

More information

- *Transition From Primary to Secondary School: Igniting Attendance and Engagement Among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students Through National Policy Reform*: bit.ly/4aMfkKd
- *First Nations students need to feel safe: educational support structures leading to improved engagement*: bit.ly/4kO7PXN

ETHICAL BYSTANDERS

How to combat workplace harassment

It can be hard for employees to speak up about harassment in the workplace, so unions have a central role to play, writes Andrew Taylor.

Fear, uncertainty and a lack of trust of employers can stop workers from trying to intervene in incidents of sexual and gender-based harassment.

This is one of the key findings of a new report by Unions NSW into workplace sexual harassment, launched by federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner Dr Anna Cody as part of the International 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence.

The report, *Ready, willing, unable – The hidden barriers to ethical bystander action in the workplace*, found sexual and gender-based harassment was common in Australian workplaces, including schools.

Cody said the normalisation and cultural acceptance of harassment, the gendered nature of power and the undermining of women's authority were obstacles to bystander action.

"Some of the barriers to bystanders speaking out include fear of retaliation, belief that the employers would not take the issue seriously, and uncertainty about what to say," she said.

Unions NSW gender equity officer Karen Willis said people generally want to be ethical bystanders and speak up when something seems wrong.

The idea of an ethical bystander goes further by offering alternatives such as:

- speaking up in the moment
- checking in later with those affected
- quietly speaking with the individual responsible
- introducing resources to address inappropriate behaviour in the workplace.

"But this approach can fall short if someone chooses not to speak out due to fear of retaliation, concern about group rejection, uncertainty about what happened or other reasons," Willis said.

Women are the primary target

More than half of workers surveyed by Unions NSW said they had observed sexual harassment on multiple occasions in the past year. Most perpetrators were identified as men (85 per cent), while women were the primary target (84 per cent).

Younger workers are particularly affected, with almost half of workers aged 15-17 (47 per cent) and workers aged 18-29 (46 per cent) reporting workplace sexual harassment.

The most reported types of sexual harassment observed in the workplace were:

- verbal comments or jokes (sexually suggestive or gendered remarks)
- staring and leering (invasive or prolonged looks)
- unwanted physical contact (touching, hugging, brushing against)
- e-harassment (inappropriate messages, emails, or images)
- gendered exclusion (excluding or undermining staff based on gender).

Worryingly, the report found: "Participants described workplaces where sexist comments, subtle undermining and gender bias are embedded in everyday interactions."

Barriers to action

Many workers want to intervene when witnessing harassment but identify factors that stop them from doing so.

"Fear of retaliation, employment insecurity, power hierarchies and uncertainty about what constitutes harassment are the most common deterrents," the report said.

Women and gender-diverse workers face additional risks, such as being disbelieved, ridiculed or labelled as troublemakers. Migrant status, disability or minority identity may further amplify a worker's vulnerability.

The report concludes that inaction is not an ethical failure "but rather a rational response to very unsafe and inequitable workplace conditions".

"This culture makes it unsafe to speak up, as workers learn that raising concerns often results in punishment rather than protection," the report said.

The report also argues that sexual harassment and gendered violence are not women's issues: "They are men's issues because they are overwhelmingly perpetrated by men and perpetuated through men's silence and complicity."

Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner Dr Anna Cody

Unions central to solutions

Unions play a strong role in empowering working people to report and resist sexual harassment. Union reps are particularly important as strong allies and effective advocates when they visibly support victims.

"The presence of a [rep] as a support person can help individuals feel safer when reporting harassment," the report said.

The report recommends measures to address workplace sexual harassment, including mandatory, practical training for all staff and leaders, meaningful worker consultation and union engagement.

It also calls for the protection of ethical bystanders through clear anti-victimisation provisions and confidential reporting options as well as gender equity and bystander training across career stages.

Willis said the union movement has always played a vital role in advocating fair wages and better working conditions.

"Ethical practices are central to our values, so acting as an ethical bystander when sexual harassment or sex-based discrimination occurs truly reflects the principles of unionism," she said.

The IEU backs action to support ethical bystanders to speak up and change workplace culture for the better, including:

- stronger legislative protections for ethical bystanders who speak out
- funding for programs that reduce gender-based harassment and support those who intervene
- training to empower ethical bystanders to take safe and effective action.

More information

Download the full report:
unionsnsw.org.au/publication/ready-willing-unable

How to be an ethical bystander

Alex Reed-Joyce is a delegate for the Rail, Tram, and Bus Union based in western Sydney. Here he describes his experiences as an ethical bystander.

I grew up in a working-class family that modelled the importance of speaking up if you thought something was wrong. We didn't call it activism – we just called it decency.

I was raised by a single mother, who was herself raised by a single mother. Every home I knew was run by strong women. That was my normal – a privilege I hadn't recognised until I saw it being undermined.

Like many people, I started with an all-in approach. I couldn't resist an argument, no matter how big or small, at work or home, with friends or strangers, maybe a couple on Facebook. It always felt like a matter of life and death.

One day at work, in the middle of a heated discussion, I had a realisation. I was 22 and my sparring partner was in his mid-40s – I was never going to convince him I was right.

We had five or six of our workmates listening to us, and I knew then my focus was wrong. Instead of convincing him, I had to show others there was a different way of thinking.

I'd love to say this was part of a thought-out plan to be an ethical bystander, but in reality, it was self-preservation. How could I live according to my principles and still have friends?

When every intervention is a blow-up, it can make speaking up with friends and family difficult.

Now I interject with a simple "You can't say that" or "That's sexist" in a purely matter-of-fact way.

Instead of looking at me as an opponent, people treat me like a referee. The arms go up in defeat and they say, "Why can't I say that?" or "How is that sexist?"

I simply answer them and move on. This creates a safe space for follow-up questions and sometimes leads to deeper conversations about sexism, racism and other bigotry.

These moments are common and lay the groundwork for tougher conversations. Not only do they create an expectation that you will step up but also makes it more likely that you will intervene without hesitating.

Society offers me more space than others to be outspoken, and it can be easy to think you're a knight in shining armour. My aim is to use this privilege to create space for voices that are not heard or ignored. My goal is to be an amplifier, not a microphone.

This is an edited extract of Alex's speech at the launch of the *Ready, willing, unable* report.

Bridging the reading gap

Differences in student ability are one of the greatest challenges in teaching reading and literacy, writes Andrew Taylor.

Learning to read is a crucial part of the Australian Curriculum. Yet a growing gap in students' reading ability is a challenge in the classroom, according to a survey of more than 500 Australian primary school teachers.

The *National Teaching of Reading Survey* found teachers had high confidence in teaching literacy and reading. But the report by the Primary English Teaching Association Australia also revealed a wide gap in student reading skills.

Deakin University education senior lecturer Maria Nicholas says teaching reading in ways that cater to the diverse needs of students is challenging even for experienced and confident teachers.

"In the wake of teacher shortages, it remains imperative that we ensure structures are in place, and sufficient resources are made available to support our teachers to meet the needs of all their students," Nicholas says.

A growing divide

The reading gap refers to the difference in skills between groups of students. Last year's NAPLAN data shows more than half of "very remote" Year 3 students needed additional reading support compared to 8.5 per cent of students in major cities.

"Not only is that a significant gap, the gap's been increasing," Nicholas says

However, NAPLAN results show that every subgroup has students with vastly different reading skills.

"What this means for primary school teachers is that they have a range of abilities in their classrooms that they must cater for," Nicholas says. "That's one of the challenges teachers face."

Narrow assessment measures – due to limited resources or time constraints – also limit what students can demonstrate or achieve in the classroom.

"Socioeconomic disadvantage, illness, disengagement from learning and cultural disconnection from schooling can all lead to higher rates of absenteeism, which lead to gaps and delays in a child's learning," Nicholas says.

"Family circumstances and times of challenge can affect a child's engagement, attendance, wellbeing and health – all of which impact their learning."

Staffing crisis

Staffing shortages that lead to increased class sizes also impact reading instruction.

"Teachers have less time to get around to every child and need to conduct more assessments with more students, adding to their workload, which further compounds one of the issues that has contributed to a teacher shortage," Nicholas says.

"We're also seeing pre-service teachers, who have not completed their degree, given permission to teach in the final years of their training."

> "When teachers feel listened to and respected, it gives them greater work satisfaction and positively impacts retention."

But teachers who are not fully qualified need guidance and support from colleagues to address gaps in their training, which adds to the workload of existing staff.

"Should pre-service teachers not receive the mentorship and support they need, this too may lead to graduate teachers leaving the profession early," Nicholas says.

Strong professional knowledge

The teaching of reading has often been a front in the culture wars, with some politicians and media outlets questioning whether teachers have adequate pedagogical skills.

But the report found teachers showed strong professional knowledge in reading instruction aligned with evidence-based practices.

The report found teachers used strategies such as flexible and ability-based grouping to cater for different levels of reading: "However, time constraints, wide ability ranges and resource limitations represent the primary challenges in differentiating reading instruction."

Learning support staff were relied on to cater to students of varying reading ability, which the report said, "potentially [created] inequities between well-resourced and under-resourced schools".

Teachers mainly rely on "self-directed learning" such as online resources, blogs and social media rather than formal professional development opportunities.

Strengthening teaching

The report recommends several initiatives to boost the teaching of reading, such as reducing administrative burdens on teachers and allocating "protected time" for collaborative planning and discussion.

It calls for greater support for early career teachers including mentoring and reduced teaching loads, more professional development and collaboration opportunities, and funding schools to diversify reading materials.

"When teachers feel listened to and respected, it gives them greater work satisfaction and positively impacts retention," Nicholas says.

By building their professional knowledge through collaboration, teachers feel less isolated and deepen their understanding of how children learn to read and how to meet diverse classroom needs.

But measures to ease workloads may be counterproductive "especially when the solution seems to be to deskill teachers by having others design their reading programs", Nicholas says.

Support staff also play a vital role in bridging the reading gap provided there are systems in place to ensure their work is valued.

"We've seen learning support staff effectively engaging children in small group or one-on-one interventions or mini-lessons for those who would benefit from more intensive instruction and support," Nicholas says.

"Through this work they're also able to report on student progress, strengths and needs of individual or groups of students that the classroom teacher can then factor into their future planning."

In the classroom

A member of the IEUA NSW/ACT Branch Executive, Amanda Wood has taught every year level from kindergarten to year six in Catholic systemic primary schools for more than two decades.

"Across that time, I have taught the full range of reading development, from early decoding and foundational skills through to deep comprehension and critical literacy," Amanda says.

A teacher at St Patrick's Catholic Primary School in Wallsend, NSW, Amanda says some students arrive at school with a strong foundation and genuine love of books.

"For some, English is an additional language and much of their literacy learning happens at school," she says.

"For others, their first real interaction with print, reading and writing begins in the classroom."

Amanda says reading habits beyond the school gate are important.

"When reading at home becomes less frequent or harder for families to prioritise, the difference between students who read regularly and those who do not becomes more noticeable," she says.

Amanda says experiencing reading as an enjoyable activity makes a positive difference to a child's ability.

In contrast, inconsistent instructional approaches can increase students' cognitive load and slow progress, she says. "Another factor is limited teacher training in how reading skills develop, along with minimal ongoing professional learning in this area."

A lack of staff to supplement core classroom programs with small-group learning support is an obstacle to bridging the reading gap.

Amanda says many students with reading gaps do not qualify for funded support, which makes targeted intervention difficult.

"Time is another challenge," she says. "While teachers support each other well, graduate teachers often have limited opportunity to observe experienced colleagues or learn how to effectively differentiate reading instruction."

Professional learning and ongoing training in the teaching of reading is also vital to keeping up with developments in reading and literacy research.

"Teachers are highly skilled and knowledgeable but finding time to collaborate is difficult," Amanda says. "Our work is face-to-face all day, and release time is often taken up with planning, assessment, communication and system requirements."

Amanda says shared programs may support consistent practice and reduce student cognitive load and teacher planning time. But, she says: "Teachers understand their students best, and their input is essential when designing or selecting programs."

Remote learning

Teaching in far-flung places

Working in remote locations offers opportunities for professional growth and personal fulfilment as well as challenges, writes Will Brodie.

For IEU member Eliza Bongioletti, working in Longreach means a 10-hour drive to her former home of Bundaberg and 12 hours from Brisbane, the nearest major city.

At 40,600 km², Longreach Regional Council is similar in size to Switzerland but is home to only a few thousand people.

But Eliza, who teaches Year One students at Our Lady's Catholic Primary School, is not complaining.

"Working in Longreach is both deeply rewarding and genuinely enjoyable, though it does present unique challenges," Eliza says.

"On a personal level, the significant distance from family, friends and certain amenities can be difficult to navigate.

"Professionally, the structure of having a single teacher allocated to each year level means there are limited opportunities to share planning responsibilities."

Eliza, who moved to Longreach in 2022, says she is well supported by her school and colleagues, and "the incredible sense of community" makes working in the town in central-western Queensland a rewarding challenge.

Eliza serves on the committee that runs the two-day Longreach Show in May. It is a major professional operation, and helping deliver it has embedded her in the community.

"Relationships form quickly and deeply because people in the town just love having you here," Eliza says.

"Despite the distance and the challenges of remote living, the support, connection and resilience of the people here create an environment that is far richer and more tightly knit than many would expect.

"Our school is fun, the community is fun and there is always something new and exciting to do. I love Longreach and moving here is one of the best things I have ever done."

Unique rewards

IEU-QNT organiser Richard Pascoe says it can be challenging to arrive in an isolated region without knowing anyone, which can undermine both professional confidence and personal wellbeing.

Then there are higher grocery and fuel prices and limited rentals. Smaller schools mean teachers frequently take on extra roles and are more involved in the broader community, strengthening connection but adding to workload demands.

Health appointments can mean three-to-four days of travel, affecting student wellbeing, attendance and increasing staff demands.

Access to professional development and timely employer support can also vary across remote schools.

However, IEU members say working in a remote community offers rewards not found in urban schools.

Whole new world

Henri King, originally from Sydney, teaches at Xavier Catholic College Wurrumiyanga on Bathurst Island, one of the Tiwi Islands, 80 kilometres north of Darwin. The First Nations school offers co-educational schooling from Year 7 to 13.

The school pays for accommodation, electricity and some relocation expenses for travelling staff.

Henri teaches Essential English and VET Certificate I in Workplace Skills for Years 10–12. He is also the VET Coordinator, managing work experience, graduate pathways and community engagement.

While living in Darwin, Henri became eager to experience the "amazing intercultural stimulation" of living and teaching in a completely different culture.

"It's a whole new world: a new language, a new way of relating socially to people, a different outlook on homeland and family, and a different spiritual perspective," he says.

Henri King, right, says Tiwi Islanders are "welcoming, outgoing and inclusive".

> "The union is committed to ensuring geographical isolation never means being unsupported."

Eliza Bongioletti says working in Longreach, in outback Queensland, is "both deeply rewarding and genuinely enjoyable".

Henri says his confident personality made it easier to adapt, but the real secret is the "welcoming, outgoing and inclusive" nature of Tiwi Islanders.

"They want you to participate in the culture," he says. "They want you to be involved in the community."

Henri undertook two weeks of orientation but says the key to adjusting was simple: "You just take part."

"There are social norms you don't understand at first, but that's the challenge that attracts people," he says. "You build relationships and get a really special experience of community life.

"Teaching in a small community provides an experience you don't get in other school settings."

To learn Tiwi language, Henri "went hard early" with the resources provided. After that, "interpersonal exchanges" did the rest. His students correct his mistakes.

"It's part of the fun," he says. "Trying to really learn shows you care."

Henri says teaching in remote Northern Territory communities is a great opportunity for mainlanders, but more should be done to upskill local Indigenous educators.

"There are a lot of very knowledgeable, highly skilled teachers who should be supported to get the qualifications they need to teach in their communities," he says.

Vital support

Eliza says union support is "very valuable" while living in a remote location.

"Having a point of contact for guidance and advocacy is so important for teachers like me," she says.

"Our union ensures that members in regional and remote areas receive timely assistance.

"This consistent support helps me feel connected, informed and reassured, despite the geographical isolation."

Henri agrees.

"Union staff understand the remote context," he says. "They understand that some educators are not only far from city centres but often far from home.

"Having them available to answer questions and offer support makes a difference. Knowing that our union has our back is really powerful for us."

IEU VicTas organiser Jeremy Oliver says in Tasmania's rugged north-west, where roads are icy in winter and phone reception is limited, "members are pleased to see the effort made to get to their schools".

Such visits build rural sub branch confidence, so members "know their rights and can advocate for themselves, while trusting the union to support them when needed", he says.

The IEU throughout Australia is committed to ensuring geographical isolation never means being unsupported.

HEAD START

Stay vigilant about psychosocial hazards

School employers are legally obliged to prevent harm to employees' mental health, writes Will Brodie.

Awareness of psychological health has grown dramatically in recent years.

Yet in many schools, abuse, threats, and violence are too often dismissed as just part of the job.

Such attitudes are outdated, and the rules governing workplace safety now reflect that.

In Australia, there are workplace health and safety (WHS) laws designed to prevent harm to employees' mental health by addressing factors that contribute to anxiety, bullying and other psychological hazards.

Model WHS laws, adopted by most states and territories, require employers to identify, assess and control psychosocial hazards such as excessive workload, workplace harassment, poor management practices and unsafe work culture.

These regulations ensure workplaces actively manage mental health risks, promoting safe, supportive and respectful environments.

Safe Work Australia (SWA) defines a "psychosocial hazard" as anything at work that could cause psychological harm.

Hazards can arise from work design, the environment, workplace interactions or behaviours.

Many aspects of a teacher's work may qualify as psychosocial hazards, including exposure to aggressive student behaviour, unsustainable workloads and inadequate support.

IEU-QNT Branch Secretary Terry Burke says psychological injuries are just as harmful and debilitating as any physical injury.

"Workers have the right to a safe and healthy work environment," he says. "We see many education workers experience burnout and ultimately leave the profession due to a lack of measures in place to prevent psychological injuries."

Under the model *Work Health and Safety Act* and associated regulations, persons conducting a business or undertaking (PCBUs) have a "positive duty" to eliminate, or if not reasonably practicable, minimise risks to workers' physical and psychological health.

SWA's *Model Code of Practice: Managing psychosocial hazards at work* provides practical guidance on how workplaces should identify, assess, control and review psychosocial hazards.

The national model sets the framework that each state or territory must apply locally. Victoria was one of the last jurisdictions to comply, introducing new regulations specifically addressing psychosocial hazards in December 2025.

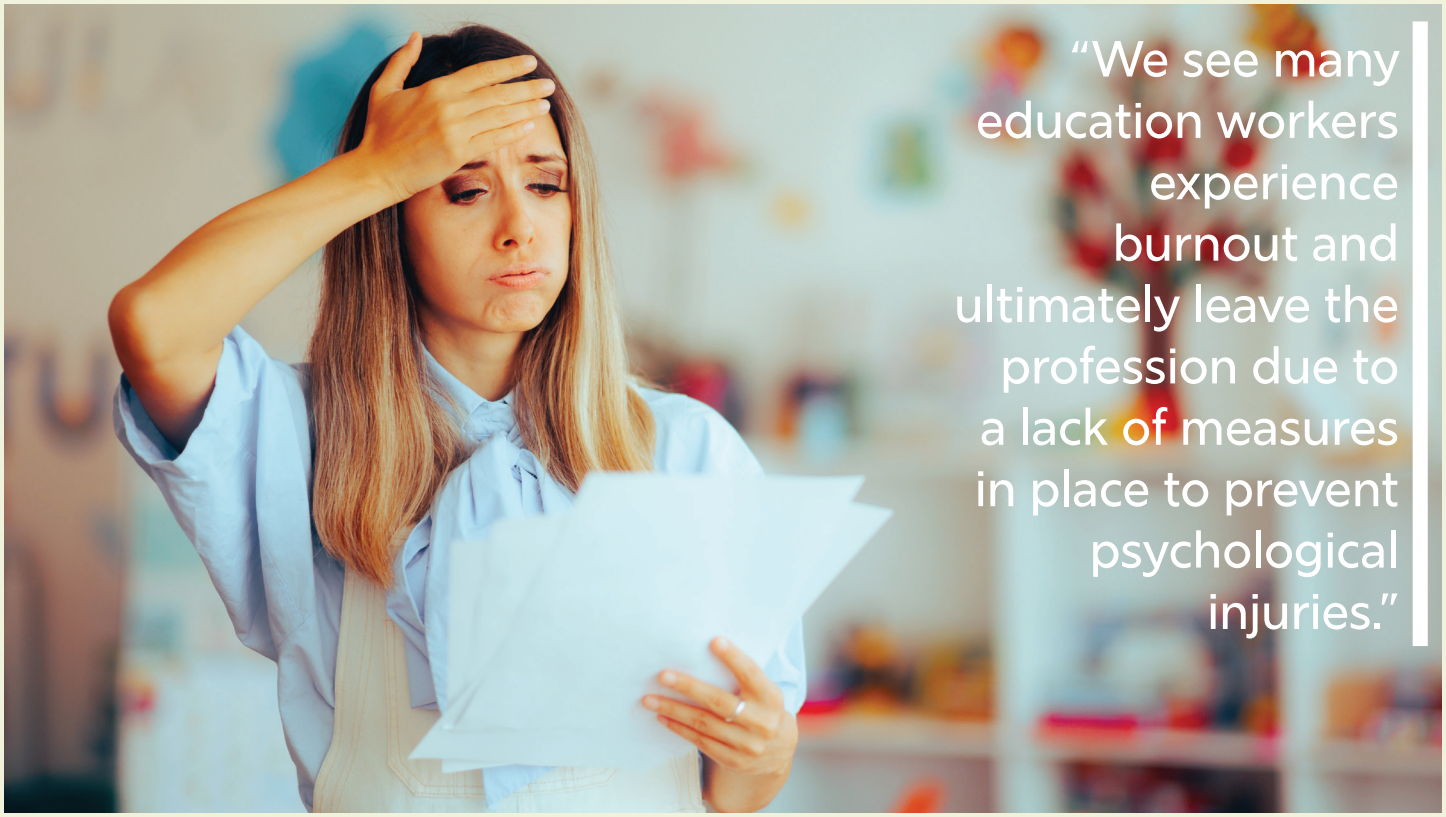
Psychosocial hazards are now explicitly treated like physical hazards under law.

Unions can use this legal foundation to hold employers accountable for risks such as bullying, harassment, high workloads, poor organisational change management or exposure to trauma. Previously, unions had to rely on broader, less explicit WHS obligations.

Common psychosocial hazards

According to the code, psychosocial hazards arising from work may include:

- high and/or low job demands
- low job control



- poor support
- low role clarity
- poor organisational change management
- low reward and recognition
- poor organisational justice
- poor workplace relationships, including interpersonal conflict
- remote or isolated work
- poor environmental conditions
- traumatic events
- violence and aggression
- bullying
- harassment, including sexual harassment.

Psychosocial hazards are not always obvious: some cause harm immediately, while others accumulate over time.

Hazards are often interrelated, and the greater the number operating simultaneously, the higher the risk of employees experiencing negative psychological responses that threaten health and safety.

Under the code, school employers must also consider factors that may increase the risk of hazards. These factors include limited work experience, barriers such as literacy or language, injury or illness, and personal attributes including sex, race, religious beliefs, gender identity, sexuality, age or pregnancy – or a combination of these.

Violence not just physical

SWA's *Preventing workplace violence and aggression* guidance states that violence and aggression can be:

- physical or psychological
- verbal, written, or online
- one-off or repeated
- lower-level behaviours such as name-calling, through to serious acts like physical assault, including criminal offences
- in person, or via correspondence, electronic means, or social media platforms.

Employer responsibilities

To meet the code's minimum standards for managing psychosocial risks, school employers must:

- **Consult with workers** – Regularly engage workers, including elected health and safety representatives (HSRs), to identify hazards.
- **Identify hazards** – Use leave records, work hours, compensation claims, grievances, incident reports, surveys, turnover, and local crime or violence data.
- **Assess risks** – Evaluate likelihood, frequency, severity, and interactions of hazards in consultation with workers.
- **Control risks** – Take steps to eliminate or minimise hazards and their impacts.
- **Maintain and review controls** – Ensure measures remain effective through routine checks and updates.
- **Respond to reports** – Encourage reporting and maintain clear procedures for complaints, incidents, or hazard reports.

What members can do

1. Elect a Health and Safety Representative (HSR)

- Elect an HSR and establish a Health and Safety Committee – a powerful way to protect yourself and colleagues.
- HSRs can identify, report, and resolve hazards, inspect the workplace, participate in safety consultations, and hold management accountable.
- Supported by union-approved training, HSRs act independently, are not personally liable for good-faith actions, and can investigate risks, monitor compliance, stop unsafe work, and issue Provisional Improvement Notices when necessary.

2. Bargain for better conditions

- Collective bargaining is key to improving working conditions, including psychosocial support.
- Highlight workload, stress, safety, and harassment in logs of claims, sub-branch motions, and workplace discussions.
- Strong member participation and activism build bargaining power, ensuring employers recognise staff needs.

3. Contact your union

- The union provides dedicated support for psychosocial hazards, workplace injuries and workers compensation claims. Contact the union immediately if you face psychological risks. For immediate danger, call 000.
- You have the right to a safe workplace – your union is here to protect it.

More information

Safe Work Australia. *Model code of practice: Managing psychosocial hazards at work*

DANGER SIGNS

School staff face technological risks

Emerging workplace surveillance and tech-enabled harassment raise safety concerns for staff in schools, writes Will Brodie.

The IEU is calling for stronger protections to address two technological threats: online harassment from students and parents, and the growing risks to staff privacy posed by workplace surveillance and artificial intelligence (AI).

Online harassment of staff

Members' privacy, safety and wellbeing are increasingly threatened by social media abuse, targeted attacks and AI-generated deepfakes.

Another form of online harassment is "rage baiting", where students deliberately provoke a teacher to elicit an emotional reaction then share footage of the incident online.

In 2025, the IEU supported new NSW laws making it illegal to create or share sexually explicit deepfake material without consent.

A deepfake is an AI-generated image depicting someone saying or doing something they did not, often appearing real. Such images of school staff shared online have caused serious distress.

IEUA Federal Secretary Brad Hayes has urged all state and territory governments to "urgently review" their laws so they have protections like those introduced in NSW.

"Every woman teacher and student in the nation, regardless of school, sector or location, deserves to be safe at school and free from online abuse," he says.

In consultation with staff and their union, employers must develop best-practice harassment policies and support mechanisms, Hayes says.

"Schools have a duty to respond to cases of abuse swiftly and decisively – the wellbeing and safety of staff experiencing harassment must remain paramount."

Workplace surveillance

IEU members report intrusive school surveillance including forced use of personal devices, undisclosed recordings for AI tools, student-filmed classes posted online and hidden screenshots capturing teachers' work without their knowledge.

However, input from unions, including the IEU, is changing laws for the better.

In September 2025, the IEU made a detailed submission to the Productivity Commission's interim report *Building a Skilled and Adaptable Workforce*, arguing for a National AI Authority and overarching AI Act "to ensure laws keep pace with rapidly accelerating technology".

The union's submission said teacher protections and workload reduction must underpin any AI or EdTech initiatives. It also said education technology and AI must be safe, ethical, and informed by teacher workload impact assessments.

In NSW, legislative amendments in February require employers to manage health and safety risks arising from digital work systems and provide union health and safety representatives powers to inspect those systems.

The IEU-QNT has supported members concerned by attempts to install surveillance cameras in workplace spaces such as staffrooms.

Legal and ethical guidelines

IEU-QNT Assistant Secretary Nick Sahlqvist says our union advocates for express consent from all employees before surveillance cameras are installed or expanded.

"While it might be understandable for employers to protect school property and grounds using security cameras, more thoughtful consideration is needed when it comes to monitoring workspaces," he says.

"Employers must comply with legal requirements and consult with employees about any installations, particularly in spaces where employees have a reasonable expectation of privacy – such as staffrooms.

"Any use of surveillance footage for performance management or disciplinary purposes is wholly inappropriate in our union's view."

In Victoria, workplace surveillance laws requiring notice, written policies and strict limits on covert monitoring are being finalised.

The IEU made a detailed submission to the inquiry informing the proposed legislation, stating that employers must take all reasonable steps to prevent unauthorised surveillance of workers on their premises.

The union is not just driving legislative change. The new Tasmanian Catholic schools' log of claims seeks to limit workplace surveillance, requiring consultation, lawful purposes and banning monitoring in private spaces.

Regardless of emerging laws, staff surveillance remains subject to strict legal and ethical guidelines.

It may only be used for security purposes, not for performance management or disciplinary action, and employers must clearly inform staff and respect their privacy.

Artificial intelligence

Putting people ahead of technology

IEUA Assistant Federal Secretary Veronica Yewdall recaps key insights from a conference on artificial intelligence (AI) hosted by the international peak body for education unions.

Education International (EI) held the *Shaping Our Future: Education Unions Leading for a Human-Centred AI* conference in Brussels in December 2025.

The conference was the first global gathering of union leaders, teachers and experts to explore the opportunities and challenges posed by AI in education and research.

It served as a collaborative platform for EI members to influence the role of AI in promoting educational quality, equity and inclusion, while safeguarding the rights of teachers and support staff, and upholding democratic values.

AI does not save teacher time

Professor Wayne Holmes, a leading AI scholar from University College London, delivered the keynote address and presented research challenging many of the assumptions driving rapid AI adoption.

Holmes says scientific and commercial sectors are reporting limited or problematic returns from AI investment, raising the possibility that the technology is being oversold.

Yet he says education systems appear to be "running full tilt" towards AI integration.

Holmes's research suggests AI does not save teachers time, with workloads instead shifting toward writing prompts, managing data, navigating ethical concerns, verifying outputs and responding to heightened expectations for personalised feedback.

He also questioned claims that AI enhances personalised learning or collaboration, noting most systems still drive students toward uniform outcomes such as exams.

Holmes presented findings showing students with temporary access to advanced AI tools such as GPT-4 initially perform better, but their performance drops below that of students who never use AI once access is removed.

He also warned of a "flipped" digital divide, where wealthier students continue to benefit from human teachers while others rely more heavily on automated systems.

Shared challenges for unions

Across plenary discussions and breakout sessions, delegates grappled with the implications of these findings and the broader challenges of AI in education.

Participants raised concerns about ensuring teachers have access to AI tools and the training required to use them effectively, while also insisting unions must play a central role in shaping national and global AI policy.

Questions emerged about addressing bias embedded in AI systems, ensuring teachers retain control over curriculum design and pedagogy and preventing AI-driven programs from eroding cultural diversity or privileging western knowledge systems.

Delegates also stressed the need for governments and employers to work with unions on issues such as infrastructure, commercialisation, data protection and the widening digital divide.

A recurring theme was the need to move beyond policy statements toward active engagement and negotiation with governments, ensuring unions develop strategic approaches to AI governance.

Regional collaboration

Delegates from the IEU, Australian Education Union and the National Tertiary Education Union, as well as representatives from Taiwan, Fiji, South Korea and the Philippines, attended an Asia-Pacific regional meeting.

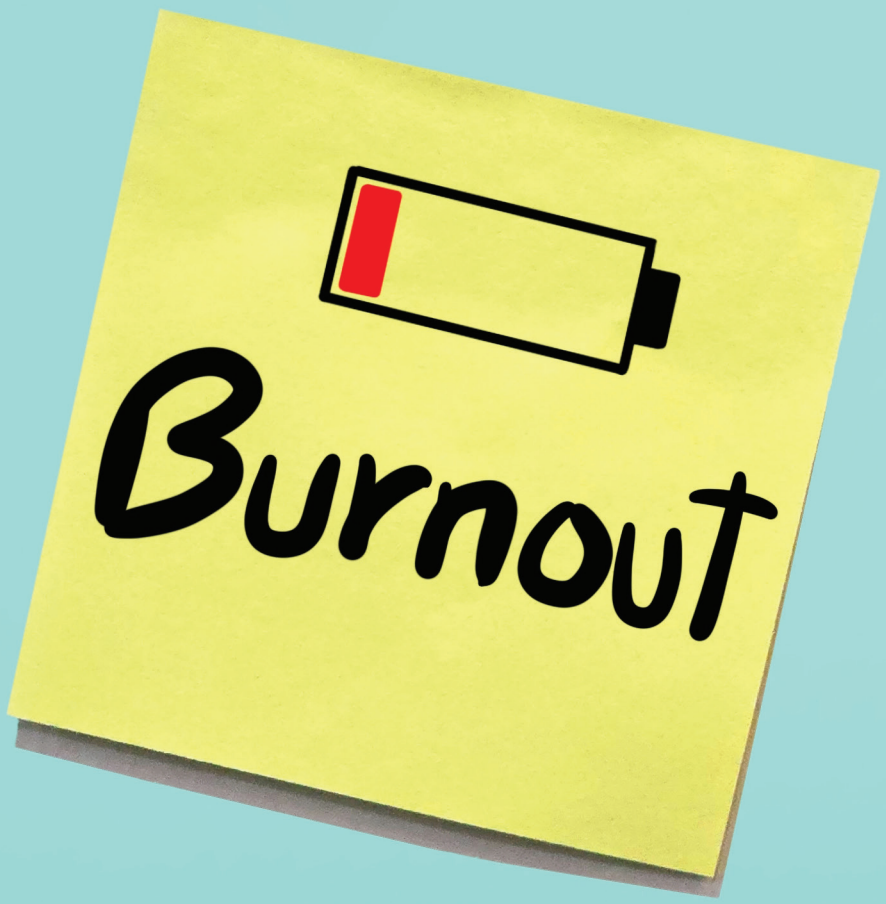
The group examined the academic, social and environmental impacts of AI across the region and agreed to identify actions for EI to follow up in 2026.

The IEU committed to preparing a detailed report for its federal executive, identifying training needs for staff, reviewing internal AI policies and placing AI on the agenda for the next federal industrial committee meeting.

The union also supports the Australian Council of Trade Unions' initiatives on AI legislation and the establishment of a regulatory authority.

The conference was a thought-provoking and timely gathering, underscoring the importance of the global education union movement speaking with a unified voice as governments and corporations accelerate AI adoption.

Unions must remain at the forefront of shaping AI in ways that strengthen the human relationships at the heart of education.



Principals under pressure

How to tackle burnout, violence and workload

New research suggests principals should be regarded as "first responders", writes Will Brodie.

Invisible Labour: Principals' Emotional Labour in Volatile Times, warns that systemic change is essential to support, retain and empower principals.

While the work of principals has always been demanding, the intensified emotional management now required of them is unprecedented, and the violence they face is unacceptable.

"Principals are navigating increasingly diverse and volatile school settings and communities," the report says. "Moreover, there has been no 'snapback' or return to 'normal' since the COVID-19 pandemic."

Emotional labour

Instead, the *Invisible Labour* report, co-authored by Monash University professor Jane Wilkinson, found a new "normal" has emerged.

"It is characterised by the highest-ever recorded levels of burnout and cognitive stress amongst school leaders; record levels of mental health issues for children and youth; rising levels of student absenteeism, school disengagement and violence; and excessive workloads."

Invisible Labour draws on 298 critical incident testimonies from 256 principals in public schools, but the study's findings resonate across all sectors.

It found principals perform extensive emotional labour, "managing their own emotions and those of students, staff, families and communities".

However, this vital work is "largely unrecognised" in policy, job descriptions and support structures.

The report found this emotional labour is taking a heavy toll: "Principals describe themselves acting as first responders, crisis managers, counsellors and community leaders in critical incidents."

They report stress, exhaustion, insomnia, trauma symptoms, burnout and physical illness.

Practical reforms

The report lists 24 practical reform proposals at national, state and school levels, including:

- formal recognition of emotional labour in role descriptions and leadership frameworks
- structured emotional support through peer networks, clinical supervision and specialist roles
- targeted policy and funding to strengthen wellbeing, safety and professional sustainability
- rejecting one-size-fits-all leadership models in favour of tailored ongoing support.

School-level recommendations include timely medical and mental health care after critical incidents, professional respite and flexible work arrangements, greater access to supervision and coaching, and peer support networks for principals at all career stages.

Wilkinson, a former teacher and assistant principal, says some school leaders have formed designated working groups (DWGs) that meet each term.

That means they can elect Health and Safety Representatives and raise work health and safety (WHS) issues for resolution with the protection of legislation behind them, helping ensure employers comply with WHS obligations under new psychosocial regulations.

"Principals are responsible for the safety of teachers and students but, too often, there's no one responsible for their wellbeing and safety," Wilkinson says. "They seem to fall through the cracks."

Wilkinson says DWGs have been a "gamechanger", but they rely on smart, committed and experienced principals taking on yet more work in already overburdened roles. Time and money are needed to support them properly.

Such commonsense investment also benefits employers: mental health WorkCover claims among principals are rising sharply, and modest spending on preventative consultation could avert far greater costs when school leaders are sidelined by stress or avoidable incidents.

Wilkinson says unions play a vital role by advocating for these measures and fighting to have school leader safety "nailed down" in bargaining.

Rising violence

Every year, the Australian Catholic University's national survey of more than 2200 school leaders reveals shocking figures about the level of violence principals are enduring – and little seems to change.

Last year, 49 per cent of school leaders experienced physical violence, 54 per cent faced threats and 87 per cent reported cyberbullying from parents or caregivers.

> "Principals are responsible for the safety of teachers and students, but too often, there's no one responsible for their wellbeing and safety."

More than half of principals (53 per cent) were seriously considering quitting, rising to 82 per cent among those with low job satisfaction.

Researchers point to multiple causes for violence against school leaders.

Complex classroom behaviours and unmet mental health needs increase incident risk, parental hostility and online abuse amplify threats, while excessive workloads and administrative demands reduce leaders' capacity to manage conflict.

Systemic failures compound the problem, including poor resourcing, limited specialist support, weak behaviour policies and inadequate security.

Principals' wellbeing eroded

IEUA Federal Secretary Brad Hayes says excessive workloads remain the "most significant cause of poor principal health and wellbeing".

"Work impact assessments should be extended to all areas of education policy to break the cycle of ever creeping workloads and unsustainable work demands," he says.

While school employers hold ultimate responsibility for reducing workload, the federal government can drive broad reforms by streamlining compliance requirements and imposing stronger obligations on employers.

The IEU last year outlined five elements of educator wellbeing: job satisfaction, sustainable workloads, fair pay, mental and physical health and professional autonomy.

Professor Jane Wilkinson says unions play a crucial role in improving conditions for principals.

In Victoria, the "Value Our Work" campaign focuses on fair pay, manageable workloads, occupational safety and wellbeing protections for principals and deputies in Catholic schools.

"Principal wellbeing is being eroded by an ever-expanding administrative load that pulls school leaders away from the work that matters most: educational leadership, staff support, and student learning," IEU VicTas Principals Officer James Rankin says.

"By resourcing schools with adequate business and administrative staff, principals can spend less time buried in compliance, data entry and operational firefighting, and more time engaging with their communities."

In March, the NSW government proposed new laws enabling principals to ban parents from school grounds if they behave in unreasonable and harmful ways, including excessively emailing, calling or texting school staff. Offenders would be prevented from coming within 25 metres of school grounds, camps, sporting venues and excursions.

The proposed laws will cover government, Catholic and independent schools.

The union's NSW/ACT branch advocates for safer workplaces, mental health supports, workload reduction and administrative relief to attract and retain leaders.

In Queensland, the IEU's advocacy has cut red tape and strengthened behaviour management resources. Recent agreements add wellbeing provisions, reproductive health leave, a right-to-disconnect clause for after-hours demands, and replace indefinite fixed-term contracts with secure ongoing employment.

The safety crisis school leaders face demands urgent action. Employers and governments must cut administrative burdens, streamline compliance and expand work impact assessments.

Schools need to support dedicated safety workgroups, strengthen protections against parent and student aggression, and embed wellbeing provisions in enterprise agreements.

If principals are expected to act as first responders, they must be supported accordingly.

Hard labour

The long battle for a fair day's work

Gaining time away from work is still a vital concern for workers and their unions, writes Andrew Taylor.

The Eight-Hour Day Memorial in Melbourne commemorates Australia's world-leading role in the 19th century to reduce working hours.

Yet Melbourne University history professor Sean Scalmer doubts whether many people are aware of the social revolution sparked by Melbourne stonemasons when they went on strike for a shorter working day in April 1856.

Concerns about the current trajectory of working hours and the growth in unpaid work motivated Scalmer to document the history of the eight-hour day in *A Fair Day's Work: The quest to win back time*.

Scalmer says his father, a truck driver, often worked more than 60 hours a week as a casual employee "and felt unable to refuse requests or demands to work more".

His mother combined full-time work with caring for her mother, which also contributed to a sense "that working people were being asked to work more", he says.

Time theft

Data from the Centre for Future Work shows Australian workers log an average of 3.6 hours of unpaid overtime weekly – or more than four weeks of unpaid labour each year. Time theft costs the average worker an estimated $7930 annually in lost wages.

A Unions NSW survey of more than 5000 workers in 2024 found employees were commonly expected to work nine hours of unpaid overtime each week – an additional 11 weeks of unpaid overtime over a year.

Scalmer estimates he works an average of 45 hours a week: "I'm very conscious of the tension between writing a book about how we should work less and my own working life."

Scalmer says the use of email and the internet means it is easier for students and university bureaucrats to make increasing demands on his time – an experience many teachers know only too well.

> "History shows that workers have regarded winning time away from work as central to their vision of a better society."

"We're all devoted to our profession and wanting to make a difference," he says. "And that makes us open to both institutional exploitation and sometimes self-exploitation."

Fairness in the eye of the beholder

Scalmer's research reveals not only the importance of fairness in debates about working hours, but also how its meaning has changed throughout history.

"In the 19th century, the key understanding of fairness was really the idea of the human rights of the worker," he says. "The idea was that if you worked long hours, you'd be incapable of expressing your full potential as a human being."

From the late-19th century, a notion of fairness linked to productivity and new technologies was also deployed to demand shorter working hours.

"If machines deliver more profits for employers, then it's only fair that employees receive some benefit as well, and that benefit should be in the form of reduced time at work," Scalmer says.

Scalmer also says the formula of eight hours' sleep, eight hours' work and eight hours' leisure, which informed early debates about working hours, ignored the unpaid caring work usually performed by women.

Ideas of fairness thus changed from the 1970s, with a belated recognition of the role of gender and caring work.

"That argument suggests that we need a new way of thinking about the relationship between work for pay and caring work, which will also be a means of winning more genuine gender equality," he says.

Vision of a better society

The quest to reduce working hours was crucial to the emergence of unions, as *A Fair Day's Work* makes clear.

"History shows that workers have regarded winning time away from work as central to their vision of a better society," Scalmer says.

However, Scalmer says campaigns for shorter working hours also embody a wider social vision about how society might be organised differently and more fairly.

"The idea of the eight-hour day was tied to the notion that the human rights of the worker should be given greater attention than the profits of the few," he says.

Scalmer's account of stonemasons and other skilled tradesmen working 10 hours a day, six days a week, prior to their success in cutting the working week to 48 hours, makes for sober reading.

"Workers were really pushed to near exhaustion," he says. "Campaigners talked about a desire to try and educate themselves and read in the evening but simply being unable to do that."

Scalmer highlights the uneven progress of campaigns to reduce working hours in various states and across different industries.

Factors such as the gold rush, the Victorian government's ambitious public works program, political pressure and a well-organised campaign contributed to the stonemasons' success. However, workers in other industries and states struggled to win reduced working hours long into the 20th century.

Scalmer's book also reveals the wider impact of reduced working hours, including mass participation in sports such as Australian rules football, which flourished because workers in Melbourne had time to play on Saturday afternoons.

Annual Eight-Hour Day celebrations, which became a public holiday, often included processions, picnics and sports events, including cricket matches.

Contemporary debates

Today's standard working week of 38 hours is a far cry from the 60-hour weeks that Melbourne's stonemasons sought to reduce.

Yet many workers, including school staff, are exhausted by the combination of paid work and unpaid caring responsibilities.

The right to disconnect – that is, refuse work-related contact outside normal hours – was legislated by the Albanese government in 2024.

Scalmer says progress towards fairer working hours has largely stalled since the 1980s due to political, social and economic forces.

Contemporary debates about what constitutes a fair day's work focus on flexible hours, working from home, a four-day week and unpaid care work, which continues to fall disproportionately on women.

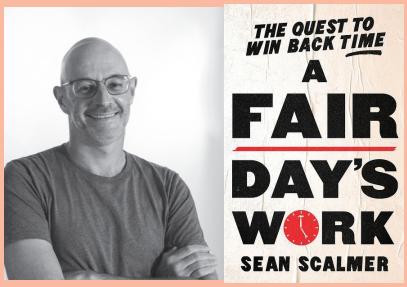
University of Canberra economics professor Leonora Risse last year found the average woman does $40,092 in unpaid labour a year.

Scalmer says the notion of paying for care work or further reducing working hours might sound too good to be true, but so did the eight-hour day in the mid-19th century.

"Every time hours have been reduced from the 19th century through to last week, employers and some economists have said, 'This is crazy. It's going to put these places out of business'," he says. "But in every case, business has found a way to survive."

WIN A COPY

***A Fair Day's Work: The quest to win back time* by Sean Scalmer**



We have three copies of Sean Scalmer's book to give away.

The length of the working day and the challenges of work-life balance are pressing issues for many Australians, as well as lively matters of public controversy.

While the eight-hour day is celebrated as a past industrial achievement, contemporary discussions of working hours often overlook its rich history.

Tracing 150 years of campaigns for rights and the fair distribution of productivity gains, historian Sean Scalmer shows how these movements successfully reduced the length of the standard working week.

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