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## Workplace flexibility must keep pace with an ageing population and growing caring responsibilities

Teachers and school staff caring for ageing parents need stronger workplace flexibility, and employers and governments must take decisive action to deliver it.

Caring is a widespread reality across the community. Around 3 million Australians provide unpaid care, with women making up the majority of primary carers. This has particular significance in education, where around 73% of IEU members are women.

### Workforce Change Driving New Demands

Like the broader population, the [teaching workforce is ageing](#). In 1981, more than half of teachers were under 35, but by 2021 this had fallen to just 29%, while the proportion aged over 55 has doubled. More IEU members are balancing demanding roles with caring for elderly family members - a pressure set to grow with the number of Australians over 70 set to [increase by 2.3 million](#) in the next two decades.

Many members now find themselves part of the '[sandwich generation](#)', juggling work alongside caring for both children and their parents. These responsibilities are incredibly demanding, yet workplace arrangements in many schools have not kept pace.

### The Growing Pressure on the Education Workforce

IEU members have won important gains through [collective bargaining](#) and [political advocacy](#), including better access to flexible work and paid leave. However, these rights remain inconsistent and can be hard to access at the workplace. They must be strengthened to meet the needs of a changing workforce.

Faster progress on flexibility is critical to addressing staff shortages. Workload pressures in schools are immense and without adequate flexibility, teachers are being [forced from the profession](#) or into early retirement as they struggle to manage caring responsibilities.

### Delivering the Next Wave of Flexibility Reforms

Workplaces have rightly improved supports for new parents through paid parental leave and return to work arrangements. The same recognition must now extend to those caring for ageing parents.

Concerted action from employers and governments is needed:

- Enforceable rights to flexible work should be [strengthened further](#) following the positive 2022 reforms to improve equity of access
- Ensure access to carers' leave and flexible work without career penalty, including options such as employer-funded [superannuation care credits](#) for workers on extended carers' leave
- Better support the [practical implementation](#) of flexibility at the school level
- Foster [workplace cultures](#) that recognise caring as a normal part of working life

Without real support for carers, well-meaning retention efforts will likely fall short, and the profession will continue to lose the experience that our schools and students depend on.