Independent Education Union of Australia

Speaks on...

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School employers must act now to protect staff and students from a Super El Niño summer

Forecasts for the upcoming summer have warned of the dangers of a 'super' El Niño weather system. With extreme heat expected in the coming months, school and education employers must act now to protect the health and safety of their staff and students.

While El Niño is a naturally occurring weather pattern, the strength of this year's event and warnings are unprecedented. Meteorologists predict that Australia will most likely experience its hottest summer on record, with temperatures significantly above average across the nation.

It is critical that education employers implement comprehensive heat management plans and practical safeguards. Preparation cannot wait until another heatwave arrives.

Around 3000 Australian workers suffer serious illness or injury due to extreme heat each year. International research has found that the education sector is particularly vulnerable to high temperatures, which also affects student learning, concentration and cognitive functions.

Two-thirds of Australian schools are classified as high-climate risk, with many already experiencing the impacts of extreme heat, flooding and natural disasters.

The recent approval of new heat protections by federal and state workplace safety ministers is an important step towards strengthening national standards. Employers must also play their part by ensuring practical measures in every school and education workplace.

The IEU's Climate Risk Mitigation Policy sets out the immediate and long-term responses needed:

- Update school policies and procedures to respond effectively to extreme weather.
- Introduce mandatory five-minute sunscreen breaks for students and teachers.
- Review thermal efficiency standards and ensure school cooling systems are properly maintained and serviced to meet minimum five-star environmental performance targets.
- Increase green space, tree canopy coverage and shade infrastructure on school grounds to help reduce the effects of urban heat islands.
- Build on successful IEU bargaining campaigns that have delivered natural disaster leave for extreme weather events and work disruptions.
- Support implementation of the ACTU Climate Action Plan, including regulatory reforms to work health and safety laws, workforce planning and future skills development.

This summer will test the preparedness of schools across Australia. The question is not whether extreme weather will occur, but whether employers are ready to protect their staff and students.