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Vaccinate to educate: Add school and early childhood staff to priority group

The Independent Education Union of Australia NSW/ACT Branch is calling on the Federal Government to include teachers and support staff in schools and early childhood services as frontline essential workers in a priority group for vaccination.

“It is not only in the interests of teachers and support staff to receive the vaccination but also the entire community,” said IEUA NSW/ACT Branch Secretary Mark Northam. “It takes just one case of COVID-19 to shut down an entire school, impacting hundreds, sometimes thousands, of families – disrupting learning and impeding parents and guardians’ ability to work.”

Since the COVID-19 crisis began, more than 50 schools in NSW have had to close owing to confirmed cases, and nearly 20 early childhood centres have been disrupted. Then there’s the matter of extensive contact tracing and deep cleaning before the school can reopen, which can take anything from 24 hours to several days and cost in the tens of thousands.

“The IEU supports NSW Education Minister Sarah Mitchell’s COVID-safety guidelines for students starting Kindergarten, Year 1, Year 2 and Year 7, released on Monday 18 January,” Northam said. “But these guidelines should be extended to include priority vaccination of all school staff to ensure smooth delivery of education in 2021.”

The IEU’s call is echoed internationally. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and Education International (EI), a global federation of teachers’ unions, has already called on governments to consider education staff as a priority group for vaccination.

In the United States, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention has classified school staff as “frontline essential workers” for vaccine priority based on concerns about the social and academic effects of school closures. Schools and early childhood centres not only teach children, they also provide mental health and social support.

In the UK, the four Children’s Commissioners have requested prioritising teachers for vaccination. “It would be a vital first step in limiting the devastating impact of the pandemic on children’s rights this year, which may well have consequences for years to come,” the Commissioners said.

While the full details of Australia’s vaccination policy are still being finalised, the first group will rightly include frontline health workers; aged care and disability care workers; residents in aged and disability care; and quarantine and border officials. The second group is reported to be elderly people and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people over the age of 55.

“Let’s add teachers and support staff to the priority list,” Northam said. “The union will lobby the relevant ministers on behalf of its members for school and early childhood staff to be prioritised for vaccination. It’s in the national interest to minimise disruption to families in 2021.”

Contacts

Mark Northam, Secretary, IEUA NSW/ACT, 0427 667 061

Liam Griffiths, Assistant Secretary, IEUA NSW/ACT, 0409 877 102

Media: Monica Crouch, 0411 645 751 monica@ieua.asn.au

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