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## **Federal government must resource school vaccination hubs to protect staff and students as Omicron surges**

The union representing over 17,000 teachers and staff in Queensland non-government schools is calling for immediate state and federal government leadership to support schools in resourcing plans to protect staff and students amidst the Omicron variant surge.

Independent Education Union – Queensland and Northern Territory (IEU-QNT) Branch Secretary Terry Burke said given the Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s announcement yesterday (5 January 2022) that all schools will “go back and stay back” from the start of Term 1 this year, associated federal resources and support would be critical.

“At a very practical and immediate level the federal government should put in place arrangements to have mass vaccination of students on individual school sites from the beginning of the school year,” Mr Burke said.

“This is a tried and effective way of delivering a large-scale vaccination program into the school age community.

“All our schools need is the plan, the vaccinations and the practitioners to deliver the vaccination; they will do the rest.

“Today is a vastly different situation to the one we were in at the end of the 2021 school year.

“School students and parents need certainty and support ahead of the scheduled return to classrooms later this month.

“Protecting the health and safety of everyone in a school community is more critical than ever in the face of this highly transmissible variant – one we still have much to learn about.

“At the end of last year, the focus was on vaccinations, as it should have been, given their importance in helping to reduce the severity of the illness from the virus.

“However, thanks in large part to the ongoing failure of the federal government to show leadership and protect the Australian community – we still have a large cohort of the population that remain unvaccinated.

“That cohort being children aged under 16 – the very group our members spend many hours a day with in the one classroom – especially in a primary school setting.

“Our schools are one of the rare workplaces where a person is likely to be exposed to so many unvaccinated people and for such long periods of time.

“This has the potential to create super spreader hubs.

"If the federal government is determined to see schools resume classes as scheduled – this leaves many questions to be answered including:

- how will exposures and outbreaks at school sites be dealt with – especially in the case of multiple student and staff cases given current widespread community transmission.
- what adequate and enhanced pandemic leave provisions will be put in place for all school staff given current active case levels, associated isolation requirements and testing delays.
- what school-level policies will be in place to deal with staff shortages due to exposures and isolation requirements.
- will remote learning return as needed in the event of school exposures and/or outbreaks and how will this be managed given running two curriculums is unsustainable for teachers and school staff.
- what ongoing work from home policies will be enacted for school staff with medical vulnerabilities.
- what school policies will be in place to deal with testing requirements and clearing staff to return to work.
- will Rapid Antigen Tests (RATs) be provided for free to teachers and school staff given their role as frontline and vulnerable workers.
- what school policies will be initiated regarding students who need to stay home if unwell and procedures for their safe return to school.
- what updated on-site safety measures will be established for all schools including enhanced cleaning and masks wearing.
- what steps are being taken to improve air ventilation and air quality safety at all school sites.

"All these issues and questions need to be urgently addressed and answered by non-government school employers who will need the support of the federal government to do so at this unprecedented time.

"Our union hopes that Mr Morrison's statements yesterday are backed by real action this time – hollow words will mean little to our members as they face the prospect of returning to work with an unvaccinated community," Mr Burke said.

Mr Burke said the union would work closely with school employers to do all that was needed to protect IEU-QNT members, their students and school communities.

**ENDS**

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*The Independent Education Union – Queensland and Northern Territory (IEU-QNT) represents more than 17,000 teachers, school support staff, principals and early childhood education employees across Queensland and the Northern Territory.*

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