



SUBMISSION

Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee of Public Accounts
Inquiry into the Tasmanian Government's continuing response to the COVID-19 pandemic
"The return to school plan".

Submission prepared by the Tasmanian Branch of the Australian Education Union (AEU)
Friday, 29th July 2022.

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "D. Genford", written in a cursive style.

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INTRODUCTION

The Australian Education Union (AEU), Tasmanian Branch, represents members employed in public primary, secondary, colleges, early childhood and TasTAFE. AEU educators include teachers, principals, educational leaders, and support staff.

We welcome the opportunity to submit to the Public Accounts Committee Inquiry into the Tasmanian Government's COVID-19 response.

This submission addresses the issues as identified by the AEU in relation to the opening of public schools in Tasmania at the start of 2022, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and an appraisal of the State Government's actions and inactions.

SUMMARY OF SUBMISSION

The AEU worked tirelessly, consistently, and collaboratively to convince the State Government and its relevant agencies to provide the highest level of safety and support for school staff and students in readiness for the opening of the 2022 school year.

We welcomed the opportunity to attend Government, agency, and public health COVID-19 briefings and to raise the questions and concerns that were being reported to us by educator members in schools and colleges around the state.

In line with work, health and safety legislation we advocated strongly for the Department of Education (DoE) to eliminate risks where possible, and where elimination was not possible to mitigate risks through introducing reasonably practicable measures.

The health and welfare of school staff and students was our number one priority.

We did not believe that providing only bare minimum protections for schools was acceptable but that appeared to be the general approach of the DoE.

Disappointingly, at almost every turn we were met with an oppositional mindset from the Department - their default setting being to immediately reject or dismiss our concerns and suggestions.

Basic requests such as for centrally provided and freely available masks, air purifiers and RATs were initially either rejected outright or resisted.

Claims that there was a pool of 1700 Relief teachers ready to deploy was downright dishonest.

Perhaps the Department's most egregious position was an attempt to exempt teachers from COVID-19 isolation rules which was in contravention of public health advice.

The result of the DOE's constant oppositional approach was unnecessary delays in implementation of safety measures and support for schools, worsening an already incredibly difficult situation ahead of the 2022 school year.

At the time of writing this submission, the Government still refuses to carry out a ventilation audit of learning spaces to identify remediation works that may be necessary to improve safety.

The Government's 2022 school opening preparations

The AEU has sought to work constructively with the State Government and its agencies at all stages of this global pandemic, recognising it as an unprecedented challenge.

Our focus throughout has been to consistently advocate to improve safety in schools and act in the interests of the health and wellbeing of staff and students.

In preparation for the opening of the 2022 school year, we urged the government to use the 2021/2022 summer break to implement a range of reasonably practicable measures needed to help minimise the risks associated with COVID-19, including:

- A full and thorough ventilation audit of workplaces with results shared with AEU representatives.
- Completion of repairs and upgrades required to achieve ventilation and safe air in all workplaces.
- Provision of CO2 monitors and additional resources required to allow for the measuring and ongoing monitoring of ventilation conditions in all workplaces.
- Provision of adequate N95/P2 masks to all staff and consideration of supply to students.
- Adequate provision of masks for students to ensure a minimum of two per day, per student are available to every student, in appropriate sizes, including primary level students.
- Achieving the highest possible level of vaccination (boosters for staff, initial doses for students).
- Free and accessible Rapid Antigen Tests (RATs)

As of the 17th January 2022, some measures had been taken toward a safe return of students but it was incomplete. Issues for continuing representation and advocacy by us included:

- Rapid Antigen Test (RAT) supplies are insufficient and must be free and accessible to the whole school community (staff, students and families) as needed.
- Promised ventilation audit must be conducted in full (not just windows) and issues rectified.
- All workplaces should be provided with CO2 monitors to measure ventilation.
- P2/N95/KN95 masks should be available for staff.
- Surgical masks are considered preferable to cloth masks.
- Mask requirements for primary school students.

- Surgical mask supplies are for just six weeks and one per day for students and staff, unclear if this includes primary schools.
- Processes and resources to ensure monitoring of ventilation in workplaces.
- Guidelines for staff with students who are symptomatic.
- Recording of student absences where parents/carers choose not to send their children to school.
- Protection of staff who are immuno-compromised or acting as carers?
- Plans for vulnerable students, students with a disability, and support staff, including any additional PPE requirements.
- Plan for Kindergarten students and LiL programs involving children who do not have access to vaccination.
- “Close contact” definition, exemptions, tracing protocols, resourcing and rationale needed to be clarified.

In addition, there were many unanswered questions about staffing which included.

- Relief teachers and support staff:
 - Will the DoE ensure that they are getting all relevant communications and training?
 - Will the Permanent Relief Pool be limited to certain schools or school?
 - Will casual relief teachers be provided with financial support if they have COVID-19, and are unable to work due to isolation requirements or where work is cancelled?
- What are the isolation requirements of COVID-19 exposure in workplaces for students and staff - what is the teaching and learning plan and limits around collapsing classes?
- What is the threshold for school/college closure?
- Are outdoor classrooms being considered, for who and how would they work?
- How will crowded corridors be made safe?
- Guidelines around masks when direct teaching, including meeting needs of students with specific communication needs.

Government and DoE’s lack of preparedness

The AEU attended a COVID-19 briefing in January 2022 where it was obvious that there was an enormous amount of preparation still required from the Department and their contractors, and principals, teachers and education support personnel.

Our concern at the lack of readiness for the start of the school year was such that on the 28th of January 2022 we wrote an urgent letter to the Secretary, Department of Education Secretary, and the then Education Minister.

In the letter we asked that, given the extreme workload pressures on principals and teachers and the lack of progress on COVID-19 safety measures, that the Government consider delaying the start of the school year to allow consultation with staff and time to complete risk mitigation measures.

Safe Work Australia guidance states that: *“As an employer, you have a duty under the model Work Health and Safety (WHS) laws to eliminate, or if that is not reasonably practicable, minimise the risks of COVID-19 in the workplace, so far as is reasonably practicable. You also have a duty to consult workers regarding COVID-19 risks and how these risks are to be managed.”*

At the time, the AEU was still awaiting advice on a range of issues, including:

- the installation and use of air purifiers,
- behaviour management issues around COVID-safe requirements,
- the protection of vulnerable staff and students
- indoor density and class sizes,
- relief staffing and coordination,
- contact tracing in schools/colleges,
- close contacts returning to work

In February 2022, days before schools were to open, we remained concerned about several issues which included:

- Density limits based on public health advice that match those applicable in comparable non-education settings.
- Face shields should be provided to staff working in the K-2 sector and those working with students with disability, so staff have the option for extra protection against droplet transmission.
- What COVID measures will be in place for libraries?
- Guidelines and support for managing students who present with symptoms, including students who live in campus accommodation or who live away from home.
- What support will be given to all staff when students refuse to follow the COVID-safe rules in place? For instance, what is the process/protocol for dealing with students who won't wear a mask or who won't go home whilst being symptomatic?
- What happens if someone gets COVID in the upcoming days and can't prepare their classrooms, who will set it up for them?
- How will music lessons and the sharing of instruments be affected? Is there clear messaging about what is expected of our teachers in this space?
- What is the plan for devices when students are not attending schools?

Many of the unresolved issues required more time, planning and preparation. Some of our members, who were already experiencing high workload demands, were requesting more time (student-free days) to finish preparations.

A delay to the opening of the 2022 school year was rejected by the Government.

Areas progressed by the AEU and resisted by the Government

We were pleased that the Government, after much AEU advocacy, did eventually act on a number of our concerns and adopted solutions. However, it was disappointing that our advocacy was met with repeated resistance when our only motivation was staff and student welfare.

- **Ventilation** – at the end of 2021, we requested a state-wide schools ventilation audit, highlighting the need for safe air in learning spaces. It was disappointing that a ventilation audit was not done. Instead, it triggered the DoE to conduct a review of all external windows and a pledge to repair more than 8,000 unsafe school windows. While this was welcome news it remains puzzling why it took a global pandemic for the government to undertake basic school maintenance?
- **Air purifiers** – the DoE initially denied the AEU’s request in 2021 for air purifiers to be provided and placed in learning areas. Finally, the DoE dropped its opposition to this safety measure and agreed that all classrooms without an external window were to have air purifiers fitted to further safeguard learning spaces.
- **Masks** – the Department also initially refused our request in 2021 to supply staff with masks, saying members would have their own masks on-hand to bring to work. We continued to push for a government supply, and it was eventually agreed to supply an initial 1.6 million surgical masks for staff and students who were over 12 years of age. At the time of school reopening on 9 February 2022 there remained a shortage of child-size masks. We continued to advocate for the provision for staff of high-protection P2/N95 mask respirators – a safety measure which has still not been agreed to by the Government.
- **Face-to-Face meetings** – College members in particular returning to work this week and were concerned about scheduled meetings and large staff gatherings, but AEU intervention saw DoE notices that in-person meetings should be moved to online-only formats. There should be no mass face-to-face meetings on return to school, across all sectors.
- **Rapid Antigen Tests (RATs)** – a DoE commitment to provide staff and students with Rapid Antigen Tests also followed a longstanding AEU push for sufficient kit supplies in schools.
- **Close contacts rules apply to educators** – we strongly advocated against the DOE’s initial proposal to exempt educators from close-contact rules which would have been disastrous and contravened public health advice that close contacts of COVID-19 cases were to isolate.

The lack of a ventilation audit (as opposed to the conducted “window audit”) remains a key concern.

2022 school and college reopening

Ahead of the scheduled 9th February 2022 school start date, the AEU surveyed its members on their views about readiness to safely manage COVID-19.

The results were damning for the Government:

- Only 1 in 5 of AEU educator members felt safe returning to work in 2022.

- Just 20% of members were satisfied with Government's COVID plan.
- 70% of members believed high-protection P2/N95 masks should be made available to staff.
- Almost half of members did not have access to an outdoor learning space.
- 38% of members surveyed said their school had inadequate shade/sheltered areas.
- Where outdoor eating and learning spaces did exist, many lacked shade, shelter, seating and tables (35% of members reported no outdoor eating areas or lack shelter/shade).

The concern that we voiced at the time was that the Government's failure to make schools and colleges safe not only presented an unacceptable health risk to staff and students but would ultimately result in disrupted learning for students.

Sadly, our prediction was correct because there were severe disruptions in Term 1 to learning programs because of a revolving door of students and staff away sick with COVID-19 or because they were close contacts and required to quarantine.

Term 1 and staffing

Just after Term 1 2022 began we continued to gather quantitative and qualitative evidence of member experiences managing COVID-19, including directly from principals via surveys. The reports from members were a further indictment of the Department of Education's COVID-19 preparedness.

In April 2020 we reported the key findings from a snapshot of staffing levels in Week 8 of Term 1:

- weekly teacher absences were more than 80 in some schools.
 - one school recorded more than 100 staff absences
- an average of 20.8 staff were absent in the first week of April [Week 8, Term 1] disrupting student learning and severely increasing teacher workload and stress
- schools were collapsing classes to manage staff shortages

Relief teacher shortages

We knew that the spread of COVID-19 would create extreme staffing pressures in schools because of a lack of available relief teachers. The Government again took an oppositional approach and denied there were shortages claiming that there was a pool of 1700 teachers ready to deploy which was untrue.

In fact, the Government would later ask the AEU to agree to temporary changes to teacher employment conditions to allow flexibility for them to volunteer to do paid overtime to help cover chronic staff shortages, an acknowledgment by the Government that it knew there were insufficient relief teachers available.

- Ends -