



# AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION UNION

Victorian Branch

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Minister Merlino  
Deputy Premier  
Minister for Education  
Minister for the Coordination of Education and Training: COVID-19

Via email:

Dear Minister Merlino,

We write on behalf of AEU Early Childhood teachers and educators about the decision to provide five pupil free days in the school sector next week, whilst expecting Early Childhood centres to operate in a “business as usual” fashion. Our members seek to understand why they are again being treated differently to their colleagues in schools.

In the initial March lockdown, union members provided children with both on-site and remote educational programs and were rightly aggrieved that they were not provided with pupil free days to prepare for dual modes of delivery. It is worth emphasising that Early Childhood centres have remained fully open and accessible throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, unlike schools.

Despite undertaking their duties with great care and diligence, and managing a considerable increase in workload, teachers and educators remained extremely concerned about their health and safety throughout this period. At times they did not have adequate access to hygiene products nor resources for sufficient cleaning.

In the context of our understanding that the approach taken by government in imposing new stay at home orders on residents in metropolitan Melbourne and Mitchell Shire and limiting school provision is to reduce the number of people circulating in the community, Early Childhood teachers and educators find it difficult to understand why it is deemed reasonable that their programs continue on-site, especially given that this is not the case for Prep students and other students in the early years of primary school, among others.

There must be greater consideration of kindergarten teachers’ and educators’ health and safety as it does not appear to be treated with the same importance as their school counterparts. This latest decision by government is perceived by many members as an undervaluing of the Early Childhood profession and a view that they are not part of a single education sector.

The AEU seeks to understand the current health advice from the Victorian Chief Health Officer (CHO) in respect of early childhood education and care, and why different approaches are taken towards children in kindergarten programs and the early years of school. It is reasonable for our members and their union to be provided with a clear explanation of the evidence upon which the current risk analysis and decisions are being made. We seek such an explanation.

Where on-site provision continues our fundamental concerns remain about the adequate management of members’ health and safety. The CHO has previously advised that social distancing with young children although not required, is encouraged. It is challenging at best and generally not possible for our members to implement any reasonable measure of social distancing. On the other hand, physical distancing requirements

apply to all adults in kindergarten environments including parents and carers who need to come on site to deliver and pick up their children. Typically, this involves parents and staff interacting within close confines, with many issues in ensuring the required social distance. Another issue is that in some workplaces the communal spaces for staff are typically cramped.

We note with interest that the Premier has said that one of the reasons that senior secondary students can return on-site is due to their age and ability to socially distance, along with educational reasons. Our youngest students at the other end of the spectrum, aged five and under, do not have this same capacity for social distancing. Whilst teachers, educators, and service providers continue to do what they can to provide a safe environment, this is little comfort at a time when COVID-19 cases are significantly increasing to a point where a further six week lockdown is required.

We seek clarification about what measures our members should take when implementing the CHO's advice is not practicable or possible.

In addition, we request that the school holiday period also be extended by a week for early childhood services, whilst the data is being monitored by the State government, to allow for staff to work in a safer environment and plan for the potential of a return to a combination of on-site and remote learning. If a decision is made for schools to move to remote learning, we know from experience this will lead to a drop in Early Childhood attendance and staff will have to pivot to the dual-delivery approach. Pupil-free days would aid such a transition.

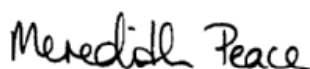
We also request a review of kindergarten funding for this six week lockdown period as reduced attendance may lead to parents withdrawing their children, leaving centres financially vulnerable. Whilst we welcome the recent decision to supplement parent fees at a rate of 50% for Term 3, we note that this decision was made before the new stay at home orders were made.

The AEU considers that it is necessary for 100% funding of parent fees to be made available for Term 3 as it was in Term 2, to support families, services and staff through this challenging period. We know how critical this funding was in Term 2 was for services to remain viable, for families to remain connected with Early Childhood education and for staff to have the comfort of job security.

We enclose a sample of the many hundreds of written comments from union members outlining their concerns for your information and consideration.

As a matter of urgency, we seek a meeting with you to discuss the matters outlined above.

Yours sincerely,



**Meredith Peace**  
President

09/07/2020

**A selection of comments from AEU Early Childhood sector members, in response to the 07/08/2020 announcement regarding school arrangements**

**Kellie**  
We need time to organise online learning. Please don't make us go through what we did in Term 2 - educating children at kinder, educating children online, educating children with take home packs plus educating ourselves with Covid procedures and policies, online platforms, educating our families with new procedures and all this without extra time to be prepared. In all 26 years I have worked in this industry I have never felt so burnt out as I did in term 2!

**Lara**  
I feel very stressed right now. I don't understand how if we follow state school holidays why we don't also follow school lock ins. I think I will snap in half if I'm asked to run at kinder and remote learning again it was a massive task if school teachers who I have the same qualifications has don't have to then neither should I. At least give us the holidays so we have a week to survey parents on retuning or though I feel this is worse than last time. I just went to the supermarket for two items and it was panic stations people are scared. Great time for the communication app FlexiBuzz to shut down too. Please Dan Andrews and James Merlino treat us the same and respect our health and families.

**Louise**  
We need the same conditions as schools. That includes the extra time to plan and implement programs and online learning, PPE and only children attending whose parents are essential workers (and vulnerable children). Whatever is in-line with schools.

**Emily**  
I just hope that kindergarten is respected as schools are, think of the educators, children and families. The health, safety and well-being of everyone. Last term was exhausting for kindergartens offering both remote and class teaching, but I'm not sure how many people were aware of this unless you worked in the field. Equality for all in education.

**Julie**  
It's very distressing that once again EC are not given the same respect as primary and secondary teachers. It's proven that children are in fact contracting the virus and our safety as educators is in jeopardy. It would be good to hear the reasoning behind sessional kinder going back after the holidays. Last term we had no time to prepare for remote learning and it took a toll on many educators.

**Maria**  
The whole Early Childhood Industry needs support... we should start by stopping to differentiate in between childcare and kindergarten that helps perpetuates inequalities and with a divided force we will never gain the acknowledgement and respect we deserve. Children ALL ages deserve the same: quality education and care provided by a workforce that's more than passionate; a workforce with the right working conditions, where a work/life balance is possible and the wellbeing of everyone is paramount, so the job is actually done properly as ALL Children deserve nothing less than a caring adult that can be fully present!

**Jacqui**  
Early Childhood Teachers in Kindergartens provided on site learning while also providing online learning. Most provided the online portion after a long day engaging with children maintaining wellbeing, cleaning and supporting distressed parents. And this was done in their own time because they are dedicated, professional and inclusive. They also sourced, packed and delivered art/wellbeing packs. Why when we train the same, hold VIT, when in every other aspect we are told by DET we are valued as Teachers and Educators, are we not afforded the same rights, care, protocols and respect?

**Corina**

As has been said many times, Early Childhood Teachers have the same expectations put on us as Primary School Teachers do. Why are we always treated differently then? VIT, Validation, P.D., Educational Planning, report writing, and the list goes on. An extension of term two should be for everyone who is currently on term break. If not, why not?

**Kirr**

The mental health and well-being of all teachers whether they work in secondary, primary or early childhood should be considered in these decisions. As an early childhood teacher with relatives and friends working in the primary sector and I can categorically say I did not do any less work than my peers during the home-schooling period of the first wave. I was working through the evening and weekends in order to support and plan for both my onsite kids and distance learners along with home-schooling my own 3 children. I don't understand where the confusion is around a teacher being a teacher no matter what age group they are working with.

**Michelle**

I think the increased rate of children 5 and under being diagnosed is evidence that EC educators and staff are going to be put at higher risk considering all advice in term 2 seemed to point to children not contracting or speeding the virus. The fact that sessional kinders run our terms in line with the Victorian school terms, should automatically mean we fall under the same category when it comes to online learning and only being open to the same families as per the criteria for schools. If schools are locked down most kindergarten children (in our service at least), will also stay home. This will mean double the workload, additional cleaning requirements and stress upon educators which will surely lead to burn out. It's any wonder there is such a high turnover in our industry. It's about time EC was treated as education, not babysitting.

**Michelle**

Equality is essential for all teachers and educators in the education system. Early childhood teachers matter too! We have the same qualifications as our fellow teachers, same responsibilities, same curriculum preparation tasks and so on .....so please think about us and include kindergarten in the education system.

**Elizabeth**

Please don't forget the teachers, educators, children and families when statements about education are given by the premier. Particularly as we have provided face to face education throughout. Early childhood is education too.