

11 January 2022

Hon Greg Hunt

Minister for Health

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Hon Alan Tudge

Minister for Education

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Parliament House

CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Ministers,

We are writing to you to raise our concerns about the impact of the latest covid strain on early education and to propose next steps.

Early education is a vital part of the education system and a healthy and safe environment is essential for young children, families, educators and the wider community.

As the omicron variant sweeps through Australia early education is incredibly vulnerable and facing major challenges.

Little children under 5 cannot yet be vaccinated. As a community we need to do everything we can to protect them and the people that surround them.

Educators are being frequently exposed to infection but have little support to get tested or to isolate.

The sector, already facing a chronic staffing crisis, relies heavily on casual workers but these educators face financial insecurity and enormous pressure to return to work, potentially putting themselves and children at risk.

There is an urgent need to develop clear guidelines and protocols about exposure and isolation. Currently they are inconsistently applied across the country with centre directors often having to make decisions that should be directed by consistent public health guidelines.

Centres face losing government funding if they close because they can't find enough staff. The pressure on centres to stay open is enormous and places the community at risk.

Early educators are doing their part. For nearly two years they have kept centres open and kept children safe. They need help.

The following five steps are critical for early education to continue to support our community during this current surge:

1. Early educators to be nationally defined and recognised as frontline essential workers.
2. Early educators should have priority access to PCR testing if required. Rapid Antigen Tests to be free and accessible for all educators, with clear and consistent testing, tracking and isolating protocols and procedures to manage staff shortages.

3. The definition of close contacts must include exposure at work as well as home. Educators need to be financially supported to isolate.
4. Centres that need to close for periods because of staff shortages to have access to financial support.
5. As frontline essential workers, early educators to have priority access to vaccine booster appointments.

As workforce shortages, centre closures and covid exposures are already rife across early education, this situation is urgent and requires a coordinated response from governments. The United Workers Union and the Australian Education Union are ready to work constructively on the plan to support the early education workforce and seeks an urgent meeting to discuss our concerns.

Yours



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